



## Full Length Article

## Predictors of job seekers' self-disclosure on social media

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## ABSTRACT

Social media-based screening is a well-known practice to both recruiters and job seekers. Little is known, however, about how job seekers present themselves on social media, i.e. 'self-disclosure', for employment purposes. This study builds on the theories of hyperpersonal computer-mediated communication, self-efficacy and social exchange to examine job seekers' professional online image concerns, social media self-efficacy, and perceptions of social media effectiveness in the job search as predictors of inappropriate and career-oriented self-disclosures on these media. Findings from a sample of 3374 Italian respondents showed that career-oriented self-disclosure was predicted by all three factors, whereas inappropriate self-disclosure was only predicted by social media self-efficacy. Furthermore, the relationship between professional online image concerns and inappropriate self-disclosure was moderated by age, education and work experience, but not by gender. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed, and directions for future research are suggested.

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## 1. Introduction

Social media and the Internet are widely used in the recruitment process, including for applicant screening. Recruiters use social and Internet technologies to access large amounts of information about job applicants with the purposes of avoiding negligent hiring (Slovensky & Ross, 2012), and discovering the applicant's real person instead of the excessively managed or deceptive self presented in conventional communications such as résumés and job interviews (Berkelaar, 2014). Recruiters continue to use social media in recruitment despite the perception of this practice as being socially irresponsible (Clark & Roberts, 2010) and a violation of job seekers' privacy (Miller, Parsons, & Lifer, 2010); its negative repercussions on organizational attraction and job seekers' intentions to litigate (Stoughton, Thompson, & Meade, 2013); its association with several legal and ethical issues (Brown & Vaughn, 2011; Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011; Davison, Maraist, Hamilton, & Bing, 2012; Ebnnet, 2012; Elefant, 2011; Smith & Kidder, 2010); and the questionable reliability and validity of information obtained from social media (Davison et al., 2011). On the other hand, job seekers know that their social media profiles are likely to be checked by prospective employers (Curran,

Draus, Schrage, & Zappala, 2014; Root & McKay, 2014), and many even believe that recruiters have the right to check applicants' social media profiles in the recruitment process (Vicknair, Elkersh, Yancey, & Budden, 2010). Despite this awareness, many job seekers commit a 'posting paradox' by sharing content they know is inappropriate to be viewed by potential employers (Miller et al., 2010). This paradoxical behavior raises a key question about the factors that predict job seekers' social media self-disclosing behaviors, whether appropriate or inappropriate, especially in light of their awareness of their exposure to potential recruiters.

This study is aimed at examining the predictors of job seekers' self-disclosure on social media. Drawing on the theories of hyperpersonal computer-mediated communication (Walther, 1996), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and social exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), we examine the predictors of both inappropriate and career-oriented self-disclosures of job seekers on social media. The integration of these three theories is in line with existing self-disclosure models (e.g. Omarzu, 2000; Misoch, 2015), which present this practice as a decision-making process dependent on a number of key factors. Among these factors, the present study takes into account three predictors in particular from the job seeker's perspective: (1) the motivation to keep a professional online image in the situational context of computer-mediated communication on social media, with the goals of developing one's online identity and gaining a recruiter's approval; (2) the personal trait

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of social media self-efficacy; and (3) the perceived effectiveness of social media in the job search, as a channel-related characteristic. Additionally, gender, age, education level, and work experience are all examined as moderators.

The present study fills several gaps in the literature. First, scholars have called for research on gender-based behavioral differences in self-disclosure on social media (Bateman, Pike, & Butler, 2011; Chang & Heo, 2014), and on the impact of professional online image concerns on posting behavior (Miller, Salmona, & Melton, 2012). Second, there has been a particular need to operationalize self-disclosure as an identity co-creation process (Hollenbaugh & Ferris, 2014), a multidimensional construct (Chang & Heo, 2014), and in a qualitative way (Attrill, 2012). Third, research seems to be lacking on self-disclosure behaviors of job seekers in particular. The findings of this study provide practical insight regarding social media-based screening for recruiters, and on self-presentation and impression management for job seekers.

## 2. Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is defined as turning the unknown about oneself into shared knowledge (Joinson & Paine, 2007). This practice has become a fundamental communication phenomenon on the Internet (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011), and a primary characteristic of computer-mediated communication (Joinson, 2001). Self-disclosure can be performed between pairs of people, within groups, or between an individual and an organization (Joinson & Paine, 2007); and it can be voluntary on social media (Lee, Im, & Taylor, 2008), elicited in marketing contexts (Moon, 2000), or imposed in commercial transactions.

Many antecedents are associated with self-disclosure on social media. This practice is positively associated with the need for popularity (Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009; Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2012), limited awareness of the consequences of disclosure (Christofides et al., 2012), online profile visibility, online personal network size (Young & Quan-Haase, 2009), and increased social media use (Chang & Heo, 2014; Chang & Hsiao, 2014). Empirical evidence also showed that bloggers, for example, voluntarily engage in self-disclosure for several reasons: maintaining self-presentation, managing relationships, keeping up with trends, storing and sharing information, seeking entertainment, and showing off (Lee et al., 2008). As a result, self-presentation and self-disclosure on social media can enhance the subjective well-being of their users (Kim & Lee, 2011; Ko & Kuo, 2009), and increase their feeling of connection (Utz, 2014).

Self-disclosure on social media is a co-creation process. This process involves the individual as well as his or her connections, as it includes both content disclosed by the user, and third-party contributions allowed by him or her to be viewed on his or her online profile. This co-creation results from the fact that identity is inherently a social process rather than a mere individual possession, and therefore comprises the individual's announcements in addition to placements made by others (Jackson, 2010). Content disclosed by a user includes explicit identity announcements such as self-provided autobiographic descriptions, and implicit identity announcements in the form of impressions given off by the user (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Identity claims, on Facebook for example, can further be categorized in three groups: (1) visual claims in the form of photos uploaded by the users themselves, or posted on their pages by others, and aiming to display the self as a social actor; (2) enumerative claims in the form of interests and preferences, and aiming to display the cultural self; and (3) narrative claims in the form of users' verbal descriptions of themselves (Zhao et al., 2008). Content posted by third parties includes comments and photo tagging (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011).

On Facebook, for example, friends shape one's online reputation (Trottier, 2012), and may even act as part of one's extended self (Belk, 2013).

Existing research on self-disclosure on social media seems limited. Previous studies seem often narrowly focused on a single website at a time, and primarily quantifies this practice by enumerating the number of items revealed on an online profile (e.g. Chang & Heo, 2014; Special & Li-Barber, 2012; Young & Quan-Haase, 2009). Other studies, like Attrill's (2012), investigated self-disclosure with a qualitative approach, by examining individuals' beliefs, relationships, personal matters, interests and intimate feelings, across different Internet arenas. Given the need for further examination of not only the quantity, but also the quality, of disclosed information (Attrill, 2012), we will examine job seekers' self-disclosure on social media with a particular focus on two aspects: (a) one negative, with content deemed inappropriate for professional endeavors, referred to herein as 'inappropriate self-disclosure'; and (b) one positive, consisting of postings that are appropriate for professional audiences, referred to herein as 'career-oriented self disclosure'. These two facets of self-disclosure in the job-seeking context are further defined below.

### 2.1. Inappropriate self-disclosure

Defining inappropriate self-disclosure on social media is a challenging task. In a survey of medical schools, responding deans of student affairs reported unprofessional postings by students to include profanity, frankly discriminatory language, depiction of intoxication, and sexually suggestive material (Chretien, Greysen, Chretien, & Kind, 2009). In an evaluation of public Facebook profiles of surgical residents, content deemed unprofessional included items displaying binge drinking, sexually suggestive photos and profanity, whereas making polarizing political and religious comments, wearing questionable attire, and holding guns while hunting were considered only potentially unprofessional (Langenfeld, Cook, Sudbeck, Luers, & Schenarts, 2014). In other recruitment contexts, some recruiters pay attention to spelling and grammar mistakes, and unprofessional email addresses (Zide, Elman, & Shahani-Denning, 2014). Other postings that are deemed inappropriate for professional contexts include any information that would be considered socially deviant in an employment interview setting (Newness, Steinert, & Viswesvaran, 2012). Cognizant of the co-creation process involved on social media, some studies (e.g. Langenfeld et al., 2014) examined two components of unprofessional content on a person's profile: self-disclosed content by the individual, and viewable content on the individual's page even if submitted by others (e.g. photo tags, and comments made by friends). In the present study, inappropriate self-disclosure is defined as artifacts about an individual, shared on social media by himself/herself or his/her connections, and which would be considered unsuitable for a professional audience. These items can be thought of as the content that one would not normally include on a curriculum vitae.

### 2.2. Career-oriented self-disclosure

Social media can be used for several professional purposes, such as personal branding, self-promotion and impression management (Chen, 2013; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Zhao et al., 2013). In asynchronous exhibition spaces, such as social media, users submit different pieces of data or artifacts to engage in self-presentation (Hogan, 2010), and construct their personal brand identity (Labrecque et al., 2011). Some of the artifacts that social media users display as part of their branding and self-promotion are education, work experiences, abilities, personal achievements and

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