

A Cross-Cultural Examination of Student Attitudes and Gender Differences in Facebook Profile Content

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines cultural and gender differences in student reports of the likelihood that they would post various types of information on their Facebook profiles and their attitudes regarding non-students accessing their profiles. Significant gender and country differences were found. In general, U.S. students were more likely than German students to report they would post extreme information. Males in both countries (U.S. and Germany) were more likely than females to self-promote and be extreme in the information they would post and less concerned if employers viewed their profiles. Both U.S. and German students reported several items they would likely post on their profiles, but did not want employers to see. Implications of these results and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Cross-Culture, Employee Selection, Gender, Self Presentation, Social Networking

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, online social networking has exploded in popularity as a means for people to post profiles of their personal information and to communicate with one another ("Social Networking Explodes Worldwide," 2008). Facebook had 400 million active users and over 150 million new members added in 2009 alone, making it the world's largest social

networking site (Facebook Press Room, 2010; Sarno, 2009). Although Facebook originated in 2004 as an internet forum for college students, access was extended to the general public in 2006 to generate additional revenue for the company. The age group originally targeted by Facebook (18 to 24 year-olds) now makes up only 35% of all members and the fastest growing group--those who are 35 years old and older—make up 30% of all members (Eldon, 2009; Smith 2009). Global expansion has been another key source of growth for Facebook and

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its introduction of natural language interfaces in several markets has helped propel the site to 153% growth from June 2007 to June 2008 ("Social Networking Explodes Worldwide," 2008). According to recent user statistics, over 70% of Facebook members are outside the United States and more than 70 translations are available on the site (Facebook Press Room, 2010). Membership gains have been particularly strong in Europe, increasing by ten million in 2009 and comprising about one third of Facebook's active monthly users (Eldon, 2009). The growing global popularity of Facebook is also evidenced in recent statistics showing that the growth rate in the North American region (38%) is far less than other regions. For example, Europe had thirty-five million visitors in June 2008, a 303% increase over the same time in 2007 ("Social Networking Explodes Worldwide," 2008). Other worldwide regions have seen even more dramatic growth: Latin America (up 1055%), Middle East-Africa (up 403%), and Asia Pacific (up 458%).

Although Facebook has prompts for different kinds of personal information (e.g. activities, interests, relationship status, political affiliation, favorite music, etc.), users have considerable freedom to post any information or pictures of their choice (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). The result is profile content ranging from very 'tame' such as pictures of one's pets to very 'extreme' information (such as pictures and comments about one's sexual activities, use of alcohol and/or drugs). For instance, according to one study of the Facebook network at Indiana University, a user can find more than 500 groups and over 500 events that contain the search term 'sex' using a basic Facebook search (Brandenburg, 2008). Similar results occur when using search terms like 'drugs', 'porn', and 'alcohol'.

Despite the increasing popularity of Facebook among the general population, it is still used most frequently by college students and recent graduates (Smith, 2009). Employers who hire graduating students have discovered that social networking sites allow them to learn more than they ever could from reading an ap-

plicant's resume and cover letter. Additionally, many employers believe it is important that new hires possess good judgment, discretion, and a sense of propriety, given that employees may have access to a wide range of sensitive materials and information via the rise of the information economy and flattened workplace structures (Brandenburg, 2008). So, how many employers are actually using profile information to screen job applicants? According to the SHRM study entitled *Online Technologies and Their Impact on Recruitment Strategies—Using Social Networking Web Sites to Attract Talent* (2008), 50% of the HR managers surveyed indicated that they spent two or more hours a week screening applicants on social networking sites. Most (88%) of the HR managers used social networking for screening applicants early in the hiring process, either prior to contacting the applicant or prior to offering an interview. At least half of the respondents indicated that social networking was useful in screening applicants because it took little time and reaped large amounts of information beyond what was found through traditional methods.

Similarly, a study by CareerBuilder.com revealed that 26% of 1,150 hiring managers surveyed said that they used Internet search engines in their candidate screening process and 12% said that they used social networking sites. Of this 12%, 63% indicated that they did not hire the person based on what they found (Sullivan, 2006).

It should also be noted that this practice is not limited to the United States. For example, according to a survey of 300 HR managers in German HR consulting companies, 28% use social networks to screen job candidates (job skills as well as leisure time behavior), and 26% reported they found content that resulted in the elimination of job applicants from further consideration in the application process (Beeger, 2007). Likewise, Nesbitt and Marriott (2007) indicated that one in five employers in the United Kingdom use social networking sites as part of their employment screening process.

These actions have prompted questions about student use of social networking, in

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