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STUDENTS AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES: A MODEL OF INAPPROPRIATE POSTING

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites have become one of the most widely used social media applications, especially among college students. Unfortunately, students often post content on these sites which could be viewed as inappropriate. This is especially true when considering that employers now use social networking sites to perform background checks on job candidates. Although research has shown that students are aware employers may be viewing their profiles, they continue to post inappropriate content despite the possible negative consequences. This “posting paradox” needs to be examined so we can better understand the factors behind the phenomenon. Towards that goal, this paper draws on existing research to propose a new model of inappropriate posting. The model describes how time to graduation, online image concern, privacy concern, and trust in technology affect a student’s decision to post inappropriate content. After developing the model, the paper ends with a discussion of areas for future research.

Keywords

Social networks, inappropriate posting, online image concern, privacy concern, trust in technology

INTRODUCTION

In a surprisingly short period of time, social networking sites have gone from the latest fad to a full-blown Internet phenomenon. Sites such as MySpace and Facebook claim millions of active users in the U.S. and, increasingly, around the world. While social networking users come from almost every walk of life, college students are especially drawn to these sites. College students use social networking sites for a variety of reasons from staying in contact with old friends to connecting with classmates and checking pictures (Miller, Parson, and Lifer, 2010). For many students they have become a necessary part of their day-to-day lives.

Although much of what students use these sites for may seem innocent, there is another side of social networking that is much more troublesome. Specifically, many students don’t appear to consider the fact that their profiles may be viewed by people other than their friends. This causes problems when students post information that is extremely personal and, often times, inappropriate - especially when viewed by potential employers.

As has been widely reported in the press, employers now commonly use social networking sites as an inexpensive way to perform background checks on job candidates. In fact, a recent survey of more than 600 human resources and recruiting professionals showed that 70.3% of respondents always or occasionally review candidate social networking profiles (Social Recruiting Survey Results, 2010). These checks can often give employers access to personal information that they would be prohibited from asking a candidate during an interview. Examples include information about marital status, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, etc. Sometimes the checks even produce eye-opening results about a candidate. An example from the Boston Globe cites a marketing manager who decided not to hire a job candidate after a check of MySpace uncovered photos of the candidate Jell-O wrestling (Aucoin, 2007).

Stories like this are hardly rare. In fact, 35% of employers reported they have found content on social networking sites that caused them not to hire the candidate (Haefner, 2009). Given the extensive coverage of this issue by the press and on many college campuses, students can hardly claim ignorance about the severity of the problem. To the contrary, Miller, et al. (2010) found that students appear to realize that their posts are often inappropriate when viewed by a potential employer. The researchers termed this behavior the “posting paradox” – students know the content they post is inappropriate but they choose to post it anyway. The question remains, why would students continue such behavior when they realize that their actions may have serious negative consequences?

To address this question, it is first necessary to identify the factors which lead students to post inappropriate content. This paper discusses a number of these factors in order to develop a model of inappropriate posting. The paper begins by discussing social networking sites and their astronomical growth. The paper then discusses the issue of inappropriate posting before presenting the research model. The model is described in detail followed by a discussion of areas for future research.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

Social networking sites allow users to create online profiles where they can post photos, music, blogs, etc. Users can also specify a list of other users (friends) with whom they share a connection. Through these friend connections, users can view and post information on each other's profiles. Although the first social networking sites appeared in the mid 1990s (e.g. Classmates.com in 1995 and SixDegrees.com in 1997), they did not become a significant Internet presence until MySpace and Facebook were introduced in 2003 and 2004, respectively.

Since their introductions, both sites have grown substantially. According to TechCrunch, at the beginning of 2009, MySpace had approximately 125 million users (Arrington, 2009). Although Facebook may have gotten a later start, as of July 2010, it was reporting 500 million users (Wauters, 2010).

Given their number of users, and their continued growth, it is easy to argue that social networking sites constitute a significant social phenomenon. Such a phenomenon needs to be examined if we are to understand it better. While social networking sites claim users from almost every walk of life, it is the vast number of college students who are of particular interest to this paper. College students were some of the first adopters of social networking and they continue to be among its most active users.

STUDENTS AND INAPPROPRIATE POSTING

While the sheer number of college students using social networking sites may be impressive, it is the way they use (or misuse) the sites that is particularly interesting. Since students are allowed a great deal of latitude in what they post, their profiles often contain material which is not appropriate for some audiences. Peluchette and Karl (2010) found that students commonly post photographs of themselves with alcohol or in sexually provocative poses. It is also not uncommon for profiles to contain comments about alcohol/drug use, sexual activity, and profanity. If these profiles were only viewed by other college students, the damage to a student's professional image would probably be minimal. Unfortunately, students are not the only people viewing the profiles.

According to a recent survey, 32% of recruiting professionals always review a candidate's social networking profile, while 38.3% do so occasionally (Social Recruiting Survey Results, 2010). Using profiles from social networking sites as an inexpensive background check is quickly becoming a standard business practice. In fact, companies are now being advised to use social networking sites when making hiring decisions (Elzweig and Peebles, 2009). The problem for students is that employers do not like much of what they see in these profiles. Thirty-five percent of employers reported they had not hired a candidate based on content posted on a social networking site (Haefner, 2009). Examples of this inappropriate content (frequency) include:

- Provocative or inappropriate photographs or information (53%)
- Content about the candidate drinking or using drugs (44%)
- Examples of poor communication skills (29%)
- Discriminatory comments (26%)
- Lies about qualifications (24%)

Interestingly, students apparently know when they are posting content that is inappropriate. Miller, et al. (2010) found that students were less comfortable with their profiles being viewed by potential employers as compared with other audiences such as their friends, parents, and professors. Knowing that their profiles might be viewed by potential employers does not, however, appear to be sufficient to keep students from posting inappropriate content.

POSTING FACTORS

In order to better understand inappropriate posting behavior, it is first necessary to examine the factors which act as antecedents to the behavior. While any number of factors could be considered, the model proposed herein (see Figure 1) draws on previous research to identify factors with strong theoretical bases. Specifically, the model examines the factors: time to graduation, online image concern, privacy concern, and trust in technology. The following sections will describe each of these factors and their proposed relationships to inappropriate posting.

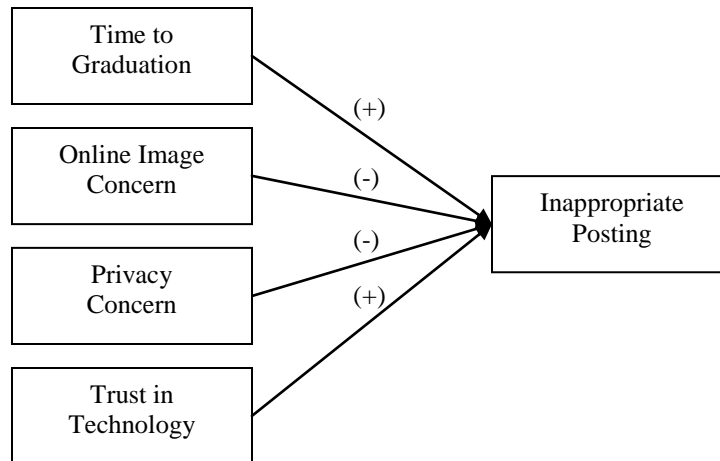


Figure 1. Research Model

Time to Graduation

Of the factors in the proposed model, time to graduation is easily the most straightforward. Time to graduation represents the student's distance from leaving college and entering the job market. This factor was chosen because previous research has shown that the earlier a student is in his/her college career, the more likely they are to post material that they acknowledge to be inappropriate for potential employers (Miller, et al. 2010). In their study, Miller, et al. (2010) found that freshmen (3+ years to graduation) were less comfortable than seniors (< 1 year to graduation) with the prospect of having employers view their profiles. The researchers theorized that this was due to the fact that the freshmen had posted more inappropriate content than the seniors. The researchers further theorized that the seniors may have been more comfortable with their profiles because they had "cleaned them up" in preparation for entering the job market.

This type of temporal-based behavior is in-line with the Construal Level Theory (CLT) as proposed by Trope and Liberman (2000). According to CLT, temporal distance changes the way people respond to future events by changing the way that they mentally represent those events. Specifically, events in the future will be represented in an abstract fashion while events which are closer will be represented in a more concrete fashion. Applying CLT to inappropriate posting, it could be argued that students who are further from entering the job market construe their post-graduation activities in an abstract way with very little detail. They may not consider the interview process that they will be going through or the fact that recruiters may actually search for them on social networking sites. Given these abstract ideas about the future, students may not see their posting behavior as being particularly risky. As these students approach graduation, they begin to view the process of getting a job in a much more concrete way. This may cause them to remove inappropriate content because they now realize their past behavior could put their job search in jeopardy. In line with CLT, Figure 1 proposes that there will be a positive relationship between Time to Graduation and Inappropriate Posting.

Online Image Concern

Online image concern can be generally defined as the level of concern a person has for the way his/her online profile will be viewed by others. In the context of college students and inappropriate posting, online image concern describes the level of concern that a student has for the way his/her online profile will be viewed by a potential employer. All students don't use social networking sites for the same reasons. Likewise, the image that these students portray in their profiles can be quite different. After reviewing a series of Facebook profiles, Peluchette and Karl (2010) identified six types of images commonly portrayed in student profiles. These images included: a) appealing to the opposite sex; b) wild; c) fun and friendly; d) offensive; e) intelligent; and f) hardworking. Obviously, some of these images would be less appropriate for a student entering the job market.

Karl, Peluchette, and Schlaegel (2010) argue that self-presentation is an important aspect of social networking and the image that students choose to portray. Essentially, students who are less concerned about how their profiles are viewed by employers are more likely to present images that are appealing to the opposite sex, wild, fun, and/or offensive. Students who are concerned with the way employers, or other authority figures, view their profiles are more likely to present an image that

is intelligent and/or hardworking. For this reason, Figure 1 proposes that there will be a negative relationship between Online Image Concern and Inappropriate Posting.

Privacy Concern

Privacy concern can be defined as the desire to keep personal information from being disclosed to others. In the context of college students and inappropriate posting, privacy concern describes the desire of a student to keep personal information from being viewed by people outside his/her network of friends. For most people, wanting to keep personal information private may seem like a universal human desire. For many social networking users, however, privacy does not appear to be a major concern. As evidence of this, a recent study by the Ponemon Institute found that 65% of social networking users did not use a high privacy setting (The Truth about Social Media Identity Theft: Perception versus Reality, 2010).

In actuality, researchers have found that privacy concern is a highly subjective measure (Buchanan, et al., 2007). It varies from person to person based on each individual's perceptions and values. This means that student concern for privacy is likely to span the gamut from highly concerned to completely unconcerned. Even those students who are concerned about privacy may have a difficult time securing their profiles. Social networking sites do not make profiles private by default. Since the goal of social networking sites is to connect people, sharing information between users is a fundamental part of the process. As more profiles become private, it becomes harder for users to share information and for the network to grow. Social networking sites, therefore, have a vested interest in keeping privacy at a minimum. Users who wish to make their profiles private often have to go through a number of steps which can be both confusing and time-consuming.

Even when users are concerned enough about privacy to secure their profiles, privacy breaches are still possible. Social networking sites have been breached numerous times revealing information that users thought was secure (e.g., Newman, 2010). Since privacy can't be guaranteed, it can be argued that students with an elevated concern for privacy would avoid posting inappropriate content in case their profiles were breached. In line with this reasoning, Figure 1 proposes a negative relationship between Privacy Concern and Inappropriate Posting.

Trust in Technology

The final factor in the proposed model is trust in technology. According to McKnight, Carter, and Clay (2009), trust can be defined as one's willingness to depend on another party. The party can be a person or, in this case, some form of technology. Trust in technology can be for technology in general or for a specific technology. In the context of college students and inappropriate posting, trust in technology relates to a student's willingness to depend on a social networking site to keep his/her profile secure.

Unfortunately, for social networking sites, trust is not easy to come by. According to a recent survey, more than 60% of users are either not confident or unsure of their social networking site's ability to protect their information (The Truth about Social Media Identity Theft: Perception versus Reality, 2010). Students who don't trust their social network's ability to secure their profiles would be less likely to post inappropriate content because their profiles might be breached. Students who trust their social network would be more likely to post inappropriate content because they would believe that their profiles were secure. For this reason, Figure 1 proposes a positive relationship between Trust in Technology and Inappropriate Posting.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Having proposed a model of inappropriate posting, the next logical step is to validate the model through a field study. Once a measurement instrument has been developed and the model has been validated, a number of research possibilities exist. First, researchers can investigate the relative importance of the factors in different cultures. Social networking is a world-wide phenomenon, as is the posting paradox (Melton, Miller, and Salmons, forthcoming). Will the model's factors apply equally in different cultures? Second, researchers can test factors which may moderate the relationships described in the model. Do factors such as Internet self-efficacy, gender, or age affect the relationships? Third, researchers can use the model to develop and test interventions to change inappropriate posting behavior.

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