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Jessica M. Kolkmeier

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Look Who's Searching Now:

Impression Management and College Students

Awareness About Employers Viewing Facebook Content

Jessica M. Kolkmeier

University of Portland

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Abstract

The research investigates the level of awareness of college students have about employers viewing their facebook content and impression management behavior. The study tested whether senior college students will have a higher awareness than freshman about their facebook content being looked at by future employers and that seniors will engage in more impression management. The study also tested whether level of awareness and level of impression management were related. A questionnaire was designed for the study and distributed to students at a private university. The study found no relation to year in college and levels of awareness or impression management. The study did find a relationship between levels of awareness and impression management.

Social networking has become an online phenomenon and grown in popularity among the general population (Brandenburg, 2007). The most frequent users of this technology are college students and recent graduates (Brandenburg, 2007). Today college students and recent graduates are realizing their social networking activities are coming back to haunt them (Brandenburg, 2007). Brandenburg (2007) identified that employers are utilizing social networks to learn more about their job candidates and they find the information very useful in making their hiring decisions. The popular career website Careerbuilder.com performed a study of 1150 managers and 12% of them admitted to searching social networks for more information about applicants (Grasz, 2007). Of those managers, 63% said they did not hire the candidate based on the content they viewed (Grasz, 2007). Due to this new practice college students need to be aware of the impressions they make and manage these impressions because content on their profiles can cost them their chances at getting hired. Tom Tong et al., (2008) identified the problem of impression management and the evolution of computer mediated communication into different forms as a

fairly new area of study. Facebook in particular is a new phenomenon and has been constantly evolving since its creation in 2004 (Facebook, 2008).

A facebook page contains many forms of personal information entered by the user in addition to information and photographs posted by friends (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tom Tong, 2008). The differences in awareness that freshman and senior college students have in regards to employers seeking information about them from their facebook profiles needs to be studied. According to Ralston and Kirkwood (1999) impression management is the certain behaviors an individual exercises to control the impression that they have on others. Impression management poses another issue about whether a college student will engage in impression management behaviors regarding their personal information and photographs on facebook.

As a facebook member a user can see how their network has grown from close friends, to family members, and even to previous bosses. The user's profile supplements a professional resumé very nicely and gives an employer a 360° view of who the user is. A profile is a virtual resume of someone's personal life and hundreds if not thousands of people can look at it. Several articles have been published in both academic and popular media about employers searching social networks for information about potential hires (Grasz, 2007; Sherman, 2008; Brandenburg, 2007; Tufekci, 2008a). College students and recent graduates make up the largest percentage of facebook users and are willing to post content that can be considered questionable or even illegal (Brandenburg, 2007). Facebook went public in 2006 and anyone can join now, including potential or current employers, professors, and even parents (Stern & Taylor, 2007, p.9). With more and more people participating in online social networks the awareness students

have about the impression their profile can have on future employers needs to be examined (Tom Tong et al., 2008, Brandenburg).

Current scholarship does not address the level of awareness that college students have about employers seeking information about them online. The research also does not explain whether users are even concerned with the impressions they make on others and the findings of this study will help to close those gaps. Tufekci (2008a) acknowledged that research does not show whether students are concerned about who sees their profile. Tufekci (2008a) also identified that no research exists on how recent media coverage may affect the content on students' profiles. Tidwell and Walther (2002) identified that little research exists that looks specifically at the details of how interpersonal knowledge is gained in an online setting. Tidwell and Walther (2002) also identified the need to study impression development and the extent of impression formation in an online setting. This study will be especially significant for college students because Facebook has become one of the most popular means of communication for college students (Stern & Taylor, 2007).

The study will explore how aware students are of employers seeking information about them on social networks. A variety of literature exists that will help to understand the implications of social networking, facebook, impression management, and future employment. Computer mediated communication as a method of uncertainty reduction will be explained and how social networks have become a popular form of communication (Stern & Taylor, 2007). Specifically the social network of facebook will be discussed and how users modify the content of their profiles for the purposes of impression management. Material from social information processing theory and uncertainty reduction theory will be necessary to understand information processing in an online social network (Walther; 1992; Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). Literature

concerning current recruiting practices and information seeking strategies of employers will also be useful in understanding the relationship between facebook and future employment.

The results of the scholarship will be useful for both educators and students in order to address the issue of social networks and the affects they can have on a student's professional life. The goal of the study is to identify whether students are aware they could loose an opportunity they have been working towards for four years because they engaged in one of today's most popular forms of communication.

Literature Review

Several theories have already been used to examine the use of computer mediated communication, impression management and uncertainty reduction in regards to facebook content. The theories that will be most useful in understanding how a college student needs to be aware of the impression their profile makes on a potential employer include social information processing theory, uncertainty reduction theory and impression management theory (Walther, 1992; Berger and Gudykunst, 1991; Ralston & Kirkwood, 1999). These theories provide useful information to draw from, but several gaps exist. Berger and Gudykunst's (1991) uncertainty reduction theory ties in with social information processing theory and explains that communicators are always trying to reduce their uncertainty about others through any means of communication. Walther's (1992) social information processing (SIP) theory looks at how CMC users decode text based messages in order to manage relational changes. Impression management theory, as identified by Ralston and Kirkwood (1999), examines the behaviors that a person engages in to control the impression they make on others.

Computer Mediated Communication: The changes and effects.

Computer mediated communication has been constantly evolving and has resulted in a variety of new research initiatives (Walther, 1993). Walther defined CMC as communication of text-based messages between senders and receivers through computers (1992). The continuous expansion of the internet provides for a variety of new communication methods (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001). CMC is also utilized by increasing numbers in the personal, academic and business domains (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001; Walther, 1993). Some common forms of CMC currently include communication through chat rooms, instant messaging, email, virtual communities, and online social networking (Stern & Taylor, 2007).

Computer mediated communication lacks verbal elements of face-to-face (Ftf) communication and also the cues that occur in Ftf communication (Walther, 1993). Due to the lack of cues such as facial expression, gaze and physical appearance communicators are said to be more likely to become more self-absorbed in CMC (Walther, 1993). The level of disclosure in computer mediated communication is much higher than that of FtF (Joinson, 2001). Researchers have found that the younger generation will post high levels of personal information online much to the bewilderment of parents and educators (Tufekci, 2008a). This higher level of disclosure can be attributed to the sheltering effects CMC has compared to Ftf (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). In CMC the communicator feels less self conscious and will disclose more intimate information (Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

Computer mediated communication is also more likely to result in negative interpersonal social relations due to negative effect the absence of verbal cues has on the information exchange (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001). Messages received through CMC take longer to process than messages received in other forms of communication (Walther, 1992). The current research

observes the effects of the medium that CMC occurs through and how it differs from other forms of communication (Walther, 1993).

Social Networking: Will you be my friend?

Social networking is a relatively new form of CMC and has become very popular in recent years (Tom Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). A social networking site (SNS) is the specific category of website and the website itself consists of a network of profiles (Boyd, 2007). The profiles have public commentary and social network that can be viewed by others in the network (Boyd, 2007). Profiles in a social network individually contain a variety of personal information and have the capability of linking with other profiles (Boyd, 2007). A standard social network profile will have a list of the friends of the user, comments from friends and a private messaging option (Boyd, 2007). Some social network sites have photo and video sharing options, blogging and instant message capability (Boyd, 2007).

The rapid development of social networking sites has spurred new research and scholars are attempting to keep up with the rapid growth by trying to understand the social consequences of SNSs (Tufekci, 2008b). Social networking websites are specifically for forming and managing impression of others and allow users to quickly expand their social networks by accepting others as “friends” (Tufekci, 2008b). A “friend” occurs when one profile links with another profile (Tufekci, 2008b). The most popular social networking websites are listed as Friendster, MySpace, Facebook (Tufekci, 2008b).

Facebook: Learn just about anything about anyone.

A facebook profile allows the user to display personal information about themselves including birthday, hometown, hobbies, relationship status, contact information, and anything else the user feels like disclosing (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tom Tong,

2008). Profile owners also can choose a profile picture that is posted next to the personal information they put in their profile (Walther et al., 2008). A profile owner expands their social network by requesting friends and accepting friend requests from other users (Tom Ton, Van Der Heide, & Langwell, 2008). Facebook profiles each have a “wall” where the profile owner’s friends can post public messages and all other viewers linked to that profile can read them (Walther et al., 2008). In addition to public message postings facebook allows users to post pictures of others and then “tag” or link that picture to that person’s profile (Walther et al., 2008).

A facebook profile is unique compared to other social network sites because the user added information and friend added information has a “news feed” (Tufekci 2008b). This feature displays what other friends are doing on their profiles and allows users to see who left a comment on someone else’s page (Tufekci, 2008b). Another unique feature is the facebook user can list his or her “status” for others to view (Tufekci, 2008b).” The “status” and “news feed” features contribute to the constant evolving environment that facebook creates (Tufekci, 2008b). Tom Tong et al., (2008) identifies that research is just beginning to look at what the authors identify as machine created information like the news feed. Tom Tong et al., (2008) state that information posted by friends affects judgments made about the profile owner. Tom Tong et al. (2008b) also suspects that the combination of user added information, friend added information, and now machine generated information provide the means to make true impressions of the owner.

According to the “Facebook Company Timeline” (2009), facebook did not always have the status and news feed features and since its creation in 2004 has constantly been adding to the features of their original design. When facebook first began users were limited to Harvard, Yale,

Stanford, and Columbia. The profile format during 2004 was very basic and the main features were the ability to join groups and write on users' walls. By the end of 2005 facebook added the photo upload application and began to allow other colleges, international schools and high schools to join. By the end of 2006 facebook was now allowing anyone to join and setup the capability for companies to create networks which brought the total number of users to about 12 million. In 2006 facebook added the news feed and the note writing application which allowed users to write anything they want it and post for all to see. By the end of 2007 facebook had over 50 million users and continued adding features such as the facebook marketplace where users can post classifieds. The major facebook change in 2008 was the website redesign and the creation of a chat application that allows you to chat live by instant message with those in your network. (Facebook, 2009)

Impression Management: How do users present themselves?

The use of a social network like facebook, results in the user engaging in impression management and presentation of self (Tufekci, 2008b). Ralston and Kirkwood (1999) identify that impression management can also be understood as self presentation because the individual exercises certain behaviors to control the impression that they have on others. People generally will have two types of social identities and modify their behavior for specific situations (Ralston & Kirkwood, 1999). When in a social situation individuals engage in either composite identity or situated identity in order to manage their impressions (Ralston & Kirkwood, 1999). Composite identity is concerned with managing a long term impression and situated identity is focused on short term impressions (Ralston & Kirkwood, 1999).

Impression management in CMC is unique because impressions are less detailed but are more intense (Hancock & Dunham, 2001). Impressions formed in the CMC environment are

formed without cues usually found in Ftf communication (Hancock & Dunham, 2001).

Researchers became interested early on about the differences between CMC and other mediums of communication and how impression development is affected by the lack of cues found in Ftf communication (Walther, 1993). Users of CMC tend to only provide others with positive information and users tend to minimize other physical cues that could not be minimized in Ftf (Hancock & Dunham, 2001). An example of minimizing physical cues would be somehow minimizing the effect of personal appearance on the interaction (Hancock & Dunham, 2001). Walther (1993) identifies the use of asynchronous communication in CMC which allows the communicator to edit and plan communication to create more positive impressions.

Social Information Processing Theory: Making sense of others personal information.

Walther found that users of CMC form impressions of one another through social information processing (1993). The theory is based on the assumption that humans communicate because they want to get to know one another and build relationships with each other (Walther, 1992). The theory also assumes that any changes in the relationship between the communicators will be dependent on forming an impression of the other communicator (Walther, 1992). The theory of social information processing states that relational motivators will result in communicators forming impressions of others by decoding text based cues and understanding information about that person (Walther, 1992). Ramirez (2007) found based on SIP theory, senders will present themselves in overly positive ways resulting in receivers forming an idealized impression of a person from using text based formats of communication. The individual will gain what Walther identifies as “psychological knowledge” about the other person to continue developing the relationship (Walther, 1992).

Walther simplified the theory by specifically identifying each contributing factor to the SIP theory. Walther (1992) explained relational motivators as affiliation with others, social rewards from others, and interpretation of the communicators external environment. The impression formation process occurs through decoding where users of CMC make impressions based on the textual information they receive (Walther, 1992). Psychological knowledge as Walther (1992) identified it, also referred to as “interpersonal epistemology”, which is when people are able to make up specific representations about another person’s psychological framework. Once an individual gains this social information and forms their impression of the sender the receiver will want to engage in uncertainty reduction behavior to further develop the relationship (Ramirez, 2007).

Uncertainty Reduction: Wanting to know more.

The process of gaining information about an individual in social information processing is identified as uncertainty reduction by Berger and Gudykunst (1991). The original work on uncertainty reduction was done by Berger and Calabrese in 1975 (Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). Berger and Calabrese (1975) identified several axioms and theorems regarding uncertainty reduction theory. Berger and Gudykunst (1991) used these axioms and theorems from the previous studies to further examine uncertainty reduction in communication.

Berger and Gudykunst (1991) identified that in initial interactions people have cognitive and behavioral uncertainty. Cognitive uncertainty is the lack of knowledge an individual knows about another and behavioral uncertainty is not knowing how to behave around a person in the situation (Berger and Gudykunst, 1991). Berger and Gudykunst’s (1991) theory assumes that in the beginning of an exchange the uncertainty is high, but as more information is disclosed the

uncertainty decreases. A high level of uncertainty will encourage high levels of information seeking and the level of uncertainty will be reduced (Berger & Gudykunst, 1991).

Berger (1979) argued that communicators do not always have uncertainty reduction as their main goal. Berger identifies three conditions that provide for uncertainty reduction to become the main goal of a communicator. Uncertainty reduction becomes the main goal if a person thinks they will have to interact with the person they are communicating with in the future, the other person controls punishments or rewards for them or the other person is engaging in expected or deviant behavior (Berger, 1979).

Employer Information Seeking through CMC: Digging up the dirt.

When an individual expects future interaction with someone they seek to reduce their uncertainty and this motivates them to look online (Walther, 1994). Employers have found that social networks provide them with a plethora of information about a potential candidate, especially a graduating college student (Brandenburg, 2007). Seeking information in CMC is a goal driven activity where the communicator pursues information to satisfy a specific goal (Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank, 2002). The information is then evaluated and the behavior that is taken next depends on how well the information found achieves the goal (Ramirez et al., 2002). Communicators seek information by conducting a search online and the consequences of these searches results in impression formation and relational development (Ramirez et al., 2002). Based on the information found the individual will formulate an impression of that person and decide whether or not to proceed with an interaction (Ramirez et al., 2002).

Employers are finding the information on social networks to be very useful in their hiring process because they learn things that are not on the applicant's cover letter or resume

(Brandenburg, 2007). A social network provides insight into what a candidate is really like and employers can make conclusions about whether that person will fit in based on their profile (Sherman, 2008). Employers attempt to reduce their uncertainty about a job applicant by utilizing all resources including social networks (Brandenburg, 2007). Some companies are even hiring current students in order to gain access to various networks that a potential hire is a member of (Brandenburg, 2007).

The information on social networks may not be representative of that person, but becomes representative when an employer views it (Tufekci, 2008a). Tufekci (2008a) identifies that pictures of behavior that is appropriate at a birthday party is not appropriate behavior for a job interview, but the two now intersect when an employer finds these photos online. In Sherman's (2008) article about social networking and job searching, one professional mentioned that she told two of her interns to clean-up their facebook profiles before she would recommend them to any of her contacts. Tufekci (2008a) found that companies may not hire students simply based on their political preference or favorite books because they may not fit the culture of the organization. We no longer know who or when someone is searching information about us online and the information is making impressions on people we may never even meet (Tufekci, 2008a).

Hypothesis

Based on review of the literature a college student's facebook profile plays a role in some employers' hiring processes (Brandenburg, 2007; Sherman, 2008; Tufekci, 2008a). The employers seek to reduce their uncertainty about the candidate by performing an online information search to supplement the information learned from the applicant's resume and cover letter (Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank, 2002; Berger & Gudykunst, 1991). The

employers gain an impression of the applicant from their profile and may essentially base their decision on the content (Brandenburg, 2008). The question arises whether freshman students will differ in awareness to senior students about how the content of their facebook may affect future employment. Current literature does not detail how the level awareness may differ between the two groups and these hypotheses hopes to close these gaps. The study will explore how aware students are of employers seeking information about them on social networks and the engagement of students in impression management.

I propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Senior college students will have a higher awareness than freshmen about the their facebook content being looked at by potential employers

H2: College students who have a higher awareness of the negative effects of Facebook content on potential employment will engage in higher levels of impression management.

H3: Freshmen in college will participate in less impression management on Facebook than seniors in college.

Method

Participants

Participants are students at a private university and will participate voluntarily. The survey will be distributed in freshman introductory communication, upper level business and upper level communication courses. The population of college students the research will target is easily accessible to the researcher due to existing relationships with professors of the introductory and upper level courses. The survey was distributed to six classes and a sample was obtained that consisted of 34 freshman and 36 seniors. The surveys were distributed to all students and only freshman and senior survey data were analyzed.

Measures

The independent variable that will be studied is the year of study of the college student. The dependent variables are the level of awareness regarding facebook content and the effects on future employment and the amount of impression management the student engages in. The independent variable will be defined as students in their first year of college will be considered “freshman” and those in their fourth or fifth year of college will be considered “seniors.” The reason for considering both fourth and fifth year students as “seniors” is due to the different time requirements of degree programs. The survey will be distributed to all members of the class and the students will then identify their year in school on the survey.

The dependant variable of awareness will be defined as acknowledging the uncertainty reduction tactics that employers are currently using. The variable will be observed in the survey as indicating “aware or highly aware” to the questions regarding current information search tactics. An example of a question testing for awareness is, “Employers look online for information about job candidates.” The dependent variable of impression management will be defined as behaviors of self presentation that an individual engages in to control their impression they make on others (Ralston & Kirkwood, 1999). This variable will be observed by the survey as any modifications the individual acknowledges making to their facebook profile in order to create a more positive impression on others. An example of engagement in impression management would be an “agree” or “strongly agree” response to, “You like to maintain a positive image on facebook.”

A Likert scale survey was developed to measure levels of awareness and impression management behaviors regarding facebook content. A new instrument was necessary due to current surveys focus mainly on forming impressions of others and not impression management

specifically on facebook. The Likert Scale survey consisted of twenty questions that ask respondents to agree or disagree on a scale of 1-5 or rate their awareness on a scale of 1-5. A scale of awareness and a scale of agreement were used. The scale of awareness was structured as; Not aware (1), Slightly Aware (2), Neutral (3), Aware (4) and Highly Aware (5). The scale of agreement was structured as; Strongly disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neither disagree or Agree (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5). The survey was developed by asking questions designed to learn if respondents are aware that employers may search their facebook content and whether respondents alter content on their facebook profile for the purpose of managing impressions.

The questions in the survey were designed to analyze the respondent's awareness that their facebook content may affect future employment and the level of impression management a respondent engages in on facebook.

Brandenburg (2007) states that college students and recent graduates need to be aware of the content they have on social networking websites. Employers are utilizing the internet to search for information on potential job candidates (Brandenburg, 2007; Tufekci, 2008a). Questions 1-10 will measure the awareness the students have about employers engaging in uncertainty reduction by viewing student facebook profiles.

1. One in 4 hiring managers uses the internet to screen job candidates.
2. Managers have admitted to checking facebook profiles of potential hires.
3. Over 60% of hiring managers surveyed said after checking a candidate's facebook profile they did NOT hire the candidate.
4. You should make your profile "employer friendly".
5. You are aware of the privacy setting options on facebook.

6. The use of privacy settings to ensure only people you know see your profile is important.
7. Employers look online for information about job candidates
8. Employers have been known to hire students at universities in order to gain access to student facebook profiles.
9. "Googling" yourself is important to see if unwanted content exists.
10. An employer may not hire someone based on their facebook content.

Ralston and Kirkwood (1999) stated that an individual will exercise specific behaviors of presenting themselves in order to control the impression they make on others. Impression management will be measured with questions 11-20.

11. You think your profile is a representation of yourself.
12. Your profile photo accurately depicts you.
13. You remove negative photo comments
14. You remove wall posts from your wall that have negative connotations.
15. You would feel comfortable with an employer viewing your page.
16. You constantly monitor your profile for any questionable content.
17. You like to maintain a positive image on facebook.
18. You think it is important to list all of your accomplishments on your profile.
19. You remove pictures others post of you.
20. You "clean-up" your profile and remove certain posts and photos

Reliability & Validity

The reliability or the extent to which the survey produces consistent and dependable data will be determined based on the validity of the survey by limiting the possibility of instrumental

error (Hocking, Stacks & McDermott, 2003). The instructions at the beginning of the survey are clear and concise to avoid any confusion that respondents may have in how to complete the survey. Questions in the survey were reviewed extensively to ensure no double barreled (questions asking two things at once) or other confusing questions are asked (Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003).

Data Analysis

The survey data will be analyzed using a *t*-test because of the compatibility the test has with data gathered using a Likert scale (Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003). A *t*-test works with an independent variable that has two discrete categories and a dependent variable that is continuous (Hocking, Stacks & McDermott, 2003). The independent variable that will be studied has two categories of students identified previously as “freshman” and “seniors” (Hocking, Stacks, & McDermott, 2003). The dependant variables of level of awareness and level of impression management will be measured using a Likert scale which utilizes a continuum to measure respondents’ attitudes of agreement (Hocking, Stacks & McDermott, 2003).

Results

A *t*-test was used to test H1: Senior college students will have a higher awareness than freshman about their facebook content being looked at by future employers. The test revealed no significant difference between the two groups, freshman ($N = 34, M = 35.38, SD = 7.01$) and seniors, ($N = 36, M = 36.67, SD = 6.033$), $t(68) = -.819, p = .415$. The hypothesis was not supported.

A correlation was used to test H2 which studied that students who have a higher awareness of their facebook content affecting employment opportunities will also engage in higher levels of impression management. The two variables (awareness $N = 70, M = 36.04, SD =$

6.54) and (impression management $N = 70$, $M = 33.34$, $SD = 6.19$) are positively correlated, $r(68) = .433$, $p < .01$. The hypothesis was supported.

A t -test was used to test H3: Freshman in college will participate in less impression management on facebook than seniors in college. The test revealed that between the two groups (freshman $N = 33$, $M = 33.03$, $SD = 5.95$) and (seniors $N = 37$, $M = 33.62$, $SD = 6.46$), $t(68) = -.397$, $p = .693$ the t -test was insignificant. The hypothesis was not supported.

Discussion

The rise in popularity of online social networking and computer mediated communication in general has initiated a wide variety of research topics. The present study expanded on previous research concerned with uncertainty reduction, CMC, online social networking, and impression management. Computer mediated communication was identified by Tidwell and Walther (2002) as a means of communication that has become as common as Ftf. Also, online social networking raises issues about levels of disclosure, impression management, privacy, and relationship development, just to name a few (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Ramirez 2007; Tufekci 2008a). The use of an electronic channel to communicate is thought to alter communication behaviors, communication methods, and relationship development (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Social networking sites such as facebook provide an excellent environment for uncertainty reduction by employers. Uncertainty reduction theory identified that uncertainty reduction becomes the main goal of a communicator if they know they will have to interact with the other person in the future (Berger, 1979). The present study sought to expand on the above and how college students may or may not alter communication behaviors in regards to facebook content and knowing employers are searching online for them.

Brandenburg (2007) found that students and especially recent graduates were discovering that entering the workforce meant some of their social networking content may come back to haunt them. The study did not support the hypothesis that seniors in college will have a higher awareness than freshman about employers seeking information about them online. Seniors and freshman in college have nearly identical levels of awareness that employers are searching the web for information about them. The insignificance of this hypothesis suggests that college students as a whole are becoming aware that potential employers are searching for their information. Uncertainty reduction theory states that high levels of uncertainty about an individual encourage high levels of information seeking and we see this theory play out in the hiring process (Berger & Gudkykunst, 1991). Hiring managers need to reduce levels of uncertainty about applicants by engaging in high levels of information seeking which occurs in the form of searching online content.

Another possibility exists for why seniors and freshman have nearly identical levels of awareness of employer's information seeking habits. The similar levels could be attributed to the current seniors learning from those who have graduated before them. Facebook became accessible to 800 universities by May 2005 (Facebook Company Timeline, 2009). Those who are currently seniors in college who followed a four year plan for graduation would have graduated high school in 2005. Graduating high school in 2005 allowed the students to learn about the possible negative effects of facebook on a job search directly from their peers who have graduated college before them. The insignificance of the hypothesis also raised the possibility that recent media coverage about facebook could be influencing college students as a whole.

Employers are viewing the content of users and forming impressions based off the content they find (Brandenburg, 2007). Employers are seeking to reduce their cognitive and

behavioral uncertainty before the applicant even walks through their office door (Berger and Gudykunst, 1991). (Tufekci (2008a) found that most students do not regulate their profiles or feel that privacy was of importance to them. The study supported H2 and found that the more aware students are about facebook content being viewed by employers the more impression management they will engage in. This finding suggests that students are becoming more aware of the need of privacy control and regulation of their information because they know people are looking.

The findings of H2 support social information processing theory which states that communicators will form impressions of others by decoding text based cues to understand information about that person (Walther, 1992). Students who know that employers are looking will manage the content and expressed agreement on the survey to questions like “You like to maintain a positive image on your profile” or “You constantly monitor your profile for any questionable content.” The finding also agrees with previous research on uncertainty reduction behavior which occurs after social information is processed and an impression is formed by the receiver (Ramirez, 2007).

Considering again that previous studies have found in general most users of CMC will engage in higher levels of disclosure and also tend to disclose more intimate information (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). The study did not support H3 and found that a student’s level of impression management on their facebook profiles did not vary by year in school. Freshman and seniors engaged in nearly identical amounts of impression management on their facebook profiles. According to other impression management theories any changes in a relationship between communicators will be dependent on forming impressions (Walther, 1992). The findings suggest students in general are engaging in impression management behaviors. The

findings can also be attributed to the same factors that possibly contributed to the insignificance of H1. The situation being that current seniors who graduated high school in 2005 and have learned from their peers' negative experiences from disclosing too much information on facebook.

The insignificance of H1 and H3 show that the student's year in college does not dictate their impression management behavior or levels of awareness about employers seeking information online. The insignificance of the two hypotheses brings the focus to the college population as a whole and not to one specific sector of the college population. The reason perhaps why H1 and H3 were insignificant is because as a whole college students are learning that their facebook content can come back to haunt them and they must take measures to avoid retribution. The insignificance of H3 can be attributed to the findings of H2. The assumption can be made that impression management is not related to year in college, but to the level of awareness that employers are looking to learn more by searching facebook and other online content.

Limitations

The study had several limitations including the sample size, cross sectional design, and unknown reliability and validity of the survey. The survey utilized a cross sectional design by sampling two groups of students at the same time (Hocking, Stacks & McDermott, 2003). The ideal scenario would have been to use a panel design and survey the same student as a freshman then as a senior. A panel design is much more expensive, but allows the researcher to study the same person over time (Hocking, Stacks & McDermott, 2003).

The survey instrument had never been previously used and may need to be altered in order to be more valid and reliable. The questionnaire was designed by the author and has not

been tested for reliability. A factor analysis should be performed in order to understand the reliability of the instrument. Each item on the survey was developed by the author based off a search of current job applicant screening tactics and common facebook behaviors of her peers. Using an instrument with unknown validity or reliability could have greatly influenced the results.

The sample used was fairly small ($N= 70$) and only consisted of freshman and seniors. The sample was also limited to business and communication students at a small private university. Communication students tend to have a higher awareness about how social networks function and this may have influenced the results. The study was also under severe time constraints due to deadlines imposed for the purposes of completing graduation requirements. If more time were available individual examination of facebook profiles and interviewing of students could possibly have produced better results in place of a questionnaire.

The ever changing environment students are currently in provides for a challenge with any research concerning CMC or SNS's. In addition to the rapid change a lot of uncertainty exists about how to behave in CMC and on SNS's. During the writing of this study facebook gained even more media attention regarding the need to control content for privacy, especially if you are searching for a job. The author attended a career jumpstart event for the Public Relations Society of America and speakers mentioned several times about the need to control content on facebook. Local news channels, magazines, talk shows and other media have been talking a lot about facebook and privacy controls. Students could have viewed some of this coverage in the recent months the coverage could have affected the sample. The increase in media coverage about facebook and privacy controls however does provide an excellent base for future research.

Future Research

Future research spurred by this study includes several possibilities. The study showed that a relationship exists between awareness of employers searching for information and the amount of impression management engaged in. The study does not answer the specific behaviors that college students engage in and during what situations. The study also does not answer how college students utilize the privacy controls facebook offers to users.

The discovery that the level of awareness of employers viewing facebook content and amount of impression management behavior is not related to year in college raises several questions. What do the levels of awareness of junior high and high school students look like compared to those in college? Several events have occurred where young SNS users are injured, abducted or even take their own lives due to the sharing of private information. Do the younger students have less awareness of the privacy controls or do they simply not care? Further investigation into impression management behaviors of junior high and high school students is necessary. Another area to investigate is junior high and high school students' awareness that their information and photographs are on the internet which is essentially a public place. Do these students understand what they are doing when they post questionable content and do they even care?

What does influence a college student's awareness about employers seeking more information about them online? What else besides knowing employers search online content may effect a student's impression management behaviors on facebook? Future search should help to indentify the specific behaviors students need to engage in for employers to gain a more positive image of them. Once more is understood about self presentation on social networks universities could help to better prepare their students. Career centers at universities provide advice to

students on presenting themselves in resumes, cover letters and portfolios, but what about online social networks?

Future research could look at the media coverage of facebook and how the coverage affects students' levels of impression management and awareness of employers seeking information. The research could look at the current economic situation influencing how facebook ties into the job search for both employers and job seekers. Job seekers are turning to other social networking websites such as LinkedIn, Twitter and even MySpace to view job postings. Employers are more selective than ever as the pool of applicants is larger than ever before as unemployment rates soar.

With more research and investigation into the social networking phenomena hopefully more can be discovered about how to protect one's image. Tufekci (2008a) identified that online content must be addressed and as a society we must dialogue about where we wish to draw the boundaries between public versus private. Getting fired from a job or not even hired due to content on an online profile that may not be a true representation of that individual is a sad reality. Simply not having a profile or a presence in a social network is not an option for many so we must learn how to successfully present ourselves in online environments (Tufekci, 2008a).

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