

A Mixed Methods Examination of 21st Century Hiring Processes, Social Networking Sites, and Implicit Bias

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Abstract

General U.S. hiring practices have evolved with the emergence of online social networking sites (SNSs) despite a lag in formal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission mandates. This mixed methods study examines hiring professionals' use of SNSs in hiring determinations across a

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variety of industries as well as within advertising agencies specifically. The latter of which focuses primarily on hiring procedures for account executives. Online survey data from 300 hiring professionals demonstrate reliance upon SNSs during various stages of the hiring process for candidate hiring and rejection, and interview data from 12 agency hiring professionals across the U.S. reveal similar findings in the ad industry. Within the ad industry, which is actively trying to recruit and retain a diverse workforce, a shift appears to have occurred away from hiring professionals' explicit biases to implicit biases against racial and ethnic minority candidates whose demographic information is often publicly displayed via their digital footprints. Managerial implications for impression formation, implicit bias, and third person effects in the hiring and retention of minority employees in the ad industry are discussed.

The process of applying for and securing a job has evolved rapidly with digital technologies (Kluemper, 2013; Zide, Elman, & Shahani-Denning, 2014). A process that once entailed browsing a newspaper's classifieds or emailing a résumé to a Monster.com listing has grown in intensity and complexity, even as the value of résumés has been called into question (Schawbel, 2011; Silverman, 2012; Zide, et al., 2014). Pundits posit that hiring professionals' reliance on résumés has shifted to an increasing dependency on candidates' digital footprints, including professional online social networking sites (SNSs) such as LinkedIn (Gross, 2012; Nisen, 2013). This study explores the magnitude of these hiring process changes across a variety of U.S. in-

dustries, then specifically within advertising.

In the U.S., ad agencies represent a paradox. Advertising is a \$177 billion industry (eMarketer.com, 2014) tasked with influencing an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse American populace. Yet, its employee base has not kept pace with ongoing demographic shifts. In 2006, 16 of New York's top agencies signed agreements with the NYC Human Rights Commission to recruit and retain minorities, diversify senior management, and let city officials monitor progress for three years (Texeira, 2006). In 2009, the NAACP and attorney Cyrus Mehri announced the *Madison Avenue Project*, another campaign specifically designed to improve agencies' minority hiring and retention (Elliott, 2009). Although most prominent on Madison Avenue, concern also spread to agencies nationwide and spawned additional diversity efforts including the industry-created film, *Pursuit of Passion* (Rose, 2007; Watch, 2010).

Given a history rife with allegations of discriminatory hiring practices (Chambers, 2008; Elliott, 2009), ad agencies now face an additional challenge: Avoiding implicit biases against candidates whose demographics are visible on SNSs. Conversely, civic and legislative pressure, along with ongoing nationwide demographic shifts may lead agency hiring professionals to embrace SNSs as a means of recruiting a more diverse workforce. Existing scholarship has yet to pinpoint agency hiring professionals' SNS usage or motivations, however. Accordingly, this study investigates SNSs in U.S. hiring processes overall, then narrows to an in-depth examination of the ad industry.

Literature Review

The Internet, especially in terms of social media, has become irrevocably interwoven into many U.S. consumers' lives. More than one billion unique users log onto Facebook and YouTube monthly (Newsroom, 2014; Statistics, 2014); approximately 284 million use Twitter (About Twitter, 2014); and LinkedIn, the world's largest online professional social network, has approximately 330 million users (About LinkedIn, 2014).

With a significantly smaller membership than Facebook, LinkedIn's growing influence in hiring makes it an SNS of no small consequence. LinkedIn boasts that its membership includes "executives from all 2013 Fortune 500 companies" and that "its corporate talent solutions are used by 94 of Fortune 100 companies" (About LinkedIn, 2014). Candidates also actively use LinkedIn, evidenced by the hundreds of thousands of job applications submitted through 'Apply With LinkedIn.' The plugin requires members create profiles highlighting their professional experience. However, LinkedIn considers profiles incomplete should members' photos not be uploaded. Hence, a once faceless application process has evolved into one revealing applicants' physical characteristics.

Prior to the emergence of SNSs, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) advised employers not to request photos of potential employees and suggested applicants not supply one to remove explicit racial/ethnic bias from the hiring process (U.S. EEOC, 2012). No clear guidelines exist today for how hiring professionals are to handle SNS information, though the EEOC convened in March 2014 to discuss the impact of social media on today's workplace (Social Media, 2014).

For candidates, not participating in or disclosing information on SNSs, including one's photo, is considered something of an aberration. SNSs have become so prevalent that employers increasingly 'red flag' candidates who do not have at least a Facebook account, and some psychologists deem individuals without any social networking accounts abnormal (Fox, 2012; Petri, 2012).

Accordingly, hiring professionals' impressions of candidates today may be more easily forthcoming and comprehensive than ever. Candidates' physical attributes, personalities, humor, and digital aptitude are exposed through their online profiles. Thus, employers can evaluate them across numerous dimensions using information from their digital footprints – often unbeknownst to candidates (Swallow, 2011).

Ultimately, the impact of SNSs on hiring processes can be both beneficial and detrimental to all involved. Employers can streamline searches for passive and active applicants across an entire SNS, such as LinkedIn, and applicants may benefit from increased visibility and connectedness by learning about unannounced opportunities. But applicants may be at higher risk for earlier elimination from candidate pools on account of disclosing personal and professional information that hiring professionals deem inappropriate. Employers suffer by potentially losing great employees due to premature assessments from incomplete non-work related information.

In light of the potential impact of SNSs on hiring, it is not surprising that pundits have heavily debated SNSs' role relative to résumés. Gross (2012) argued that résumés are a relic of the past, contending that hiring professionals will not make decisions solely based on one document

when they can browse candidates' online profiles.

Silverman (2012) asserted that résumés are still the first step in the hiring process, and that résumés and SNSs complement each other during the hiring process, as opposed to the latter replacing the former (Keitel, 2012). According to Keitel (2012), companies regard résumés as the most thorough, accurate, and authoritative representation of candidates.

Despite numerous assertions, minimal scholarship exists about how hiring professionals' use SNSs in their hiring processes (Caers & Castelyns, 2011; Davison, Marast, & Bing, 2011). Few empirical studies have examined if and when hiring professionals use SNSs and whether candidates are being hired or rejected explicitly based on their digital footprints. Additionally, studies incorporating elite interviews with agency decision makers are rare but necessary (Kluemper & Rosen, 2009). Before exploring the ad industry specifically, precisely because of its long-standing issues of minority underrepresentation, a cross-industry understanding of hiring professionals' SNS usage was pursued. Accordingly:

RQ1A: How prevalent is hiring professionals' SNS usage, and when are SNSs used in the hiring process?

RQ1B: What criteria, if any, do hiring professionals use to hire or reject candidates based on their SNSs?

Agencies' SNS Usage in Hiring

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that today's racial and ethnic minorities will comprise the majority of the American population by 2042, moving the U.S. toward

‘majority-minority’ status (Roberts, 2008). The composite effect of demographic changes, socioeconomic shifts and technological advancements, have led to marketers’ increasing interest in non-traditional consumer segments (e.g., ethnic minorities, LGBTQ individuals, etc.) (Grier & Brumbaugh, 1999; Humphreys, 2013). To effectively target an increasingly multicultural population, agencies’ workforces should reflect the consumers they seek to persuade.

However, minority employees remain grossly underrepresented at virtually every agency position (Boles, 2006), including account executives (AEs). Although the industry’s current composition is more diverse today, advertising is considerably less racially/ethnically diverse than other U.S. professions (Bendick & Egan, 2009). Moreover, when employed by traditional agencies, people of color are often pigeonholed into working with brands targeting ‘ethnic markets,’ and are only 62% as likely as Whites to be hired for creative or client contact positions, such as AEs (Bendick & Egan, 2009).

As defined by the American Association of Advertising Agencies (4A’s), AEs are liaisons between clients and the agency, managing clients’ accounts to ensure overall satisfaction. Both internal and external managers, AEs run interference between clients and agency creatives. Arguably, one of the stronger indicators of agencies’ commitment to diversity is not just targeting minority consumers but also a willingness to hire minority AEs who act as the face of, and often clients’ main point of contact with the agency.

AEs personify the agency’s spirit and are more likely to be highly scrutinized for their physical attributes, communication skills, and potential cultural fit, which

now can be assessed via SNSs – presenting a number of opportunities and challenges in their hiring. In an attempt to rectify past transgressions, including paying minority employees less than their White counterparts, recruiting them for menial positions or not hiring them at all (Chambers, 2008), agencies' hiring professionals could use SNSs with the goal of addressing underrepresentation. On the other hand, implicit biases could contribute to the sustained lack of industry diversity. One theoretical framework that can provide a conceptual outline to delineate agencies' roles in promoting or limiting biases in hiring is impression formation.

Impression Formation & Implicit Bias

Impression formation as a theoretical framework explores humans' innate need to form an impression of another person, with visual cues being key (Bar, Neta, & Linz, 2006; Lampel & Anderson, 1968; Van Der Heide, D'Angelo, & Schumaker, 2012). Regarding hiring processes, researchers have primarily conducted field experiments in the form of faux candidate profiles or applications, with multidisciplinary scholarship showing that employers can form impressions of candidates based on merely names alone (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Marlowe, Schneider, & Nelson, 1996; Weichselbaumer, 2003). Regardless of industry, 'White-sounding' names on résumés lead to more interviews than 'minority-sounding' names (Employers, 2014).

Facial features are also an important cue when categorizing individuals, which may have unintended consequences for ethnic minorities (Blair, Chapleau, & Judd, 2005; Cloutier, Mason, & Macrae, 2005; Macrae & Martin,

2007; Martin & Macrae, 2007). Blair et al. (2004) found that Afrocentric features result in negative evaluations and more severe court sentences, while watching news programming leads to views of Blacks as intimidating, violent, and/or poor even among individuals who believe themselves to be prejudice-free (Dixon, 2008). In short, individuals' perceptions can be developed by non-conscious, automatic processing that is impossible to resist even by those who consider themselves immune. In instances of implicit attitude activation, favorable or unfavorable dispositions toward others are activated by subliminal stimuli outside of conscious attention (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Greenwald, Klinger, & Liu, 1989).

Given both an AE's client-facing role and knowledge that a person's attractiveness strongly influences how others see them (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Miller, 1970), agencies may look for qualified candidates who they believe are visually representative of their business and culture. However, hiring based on facial attractiveness can result in liability, as the effects that create a 'neutral' basis could be a result of racial stigmas (Bello, 2004). With that in mind, photography and other identifying information within an SNS profile has the potential to create heightened awareness of group memberships and differences. How then are hiring professionals handling candidates' digitally displayed demographic information? Moreover, are hiring professionals aware of the impact imagery might have on them? Certainly, most agencies today refrain from the flagrant discriminatory hiring practices of the past, but scant scholarly research exists about agencies' AE hiring processes in an increasingly digital world filled with candidate information. Thus:

RQ2: What do agencies' AE hiring processes consist of today?

RQ3: What role, if any, do SNSs play in today's AE hiring processes?

RQ4: Do agency hiring professionals consider SNSs potential facilitators of bias?

RQ5: What changes, if any, have occurred in the AE hiring process over time?

Method

Survey and interviewing methods were combined to form the study's exploratory sequential design, whereby quantitative data collection and analysis preceded qualitative (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2010). The study received Institutional Review Board exemption in November, 2012. First, hiring professionals responded to an online survey conducted by social media monitoring service TrustedID's *Reppler* assessing if, when, and how they use SNSs in hiring. *Reppler*, a free service, helps users manage their digital footprints by showing them "how they are perceived across social networks, the makeup of their social network connections, and any potential issues and risks" (About TrustedID, 2013).

Reppler recruited survey respondents through Lab42, a full-service market research firm that placed the survey across a variety of e-commerce, social media, and gaming sites where hiring professionals frequently visited. To qualify, respondents had to work full-time and play an integral role in their companies' hiring processes. The authors were granted complimentary access to a portion of this secondary dataset. While the survey findings cannot be extrapolated to all hiring professionals based on the

non-random sample, it was invaluable for learning more about SNSs in today's hiring processes to develop the interview protocol.

Next, data were collected from Skype and telephone interviews for **RQ2-RQ5**. The authors conducted 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews with 'elite' agency hiring professionals (Yin, 2012), which is the preferred method when seeking explanatory information about sensitive topics such as employee diversity (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Initially, 60 agencies were selected randomly from the 4A's member list to avoid regional biases and contacted via email and telephone on multiple occasions. A very low response rate necessitated employing a snowball-sampling frame, and interview participants were asked to recommend colleagues at other agencies to add to the study's sample. No pre-determined number of agencies was set initially; rather, data collection concluded when ongoing analysis revealed saturation.

Interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes each, and with the exception of one interviewee who declined, all interviews were recorded and later transcribed by the authors. Following the tenets of semi-structured interviewing, participants were probed for additional information outside of the predetermined protocol, when feasible. Open coding was used to develop data categories, their descriptions, and sub-categories found within them (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Data from each participant were compared against one another and used to construct the overall narrative.

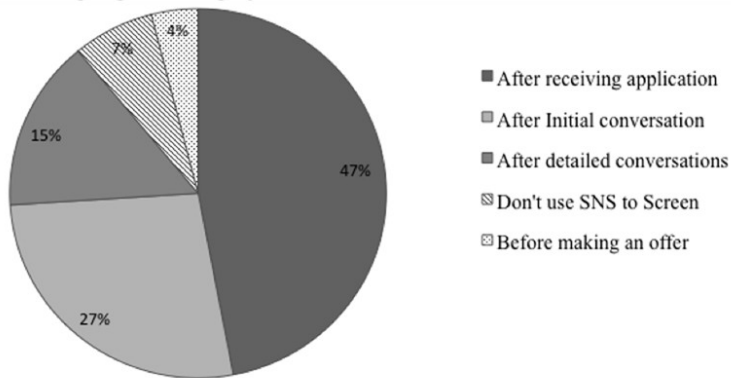


Figure 1. During which phase of the hiring process do you MOST OFTEN look at SNSs to screen prospective employees?

Findings

Three hundred hiring professionals across multiple industries (marketing, finance, engineering, information technology, etc.) completed the survey. **RQ1A** assesses the prevalence of hiring professionals' SNS usage in hiring processes and *when* SNSs are used. Results revealed that 91% use SNSs to screen prospective candidates. Of the 9% that do not use SNSs to screen prospective candidates, 52% indicated they planned to in the future. Among those who did use SNSs, 47% of respondents use SNSs to screen applicants immediately after receiving applications, 27% after an initial conversation, and 15% after a detailed conversation (See Table 1).

RQ1B concerns hiring/rejecting candidates based on their SNSs. Sixty-eight percent of hiring professionals indicated having hired candidates based on their SNSs. The most common reasons were because the candidate's profile: 1) gives a positive impression of her/his personality

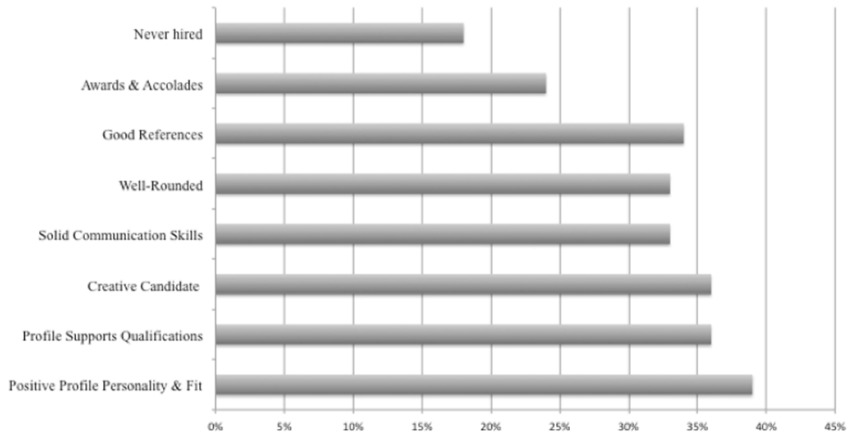


Figure 2. If you have hired candidates because of what you saw about them in a SNS, what have been the reasons?

and organizational fit (39%); 2) supports her/his professional qualifications (36%); and 3) reveals creativity (36%) (See Figure 2). Conversely, 26% of respondents indicated not hiring candidates based on their SNSs, and 6% did not use SNSs for screening. In contrast, 69% of respondents indicated they had rejected candidates for their SNS content. The most common reasons included: 1) falsification of information (34%); 2) inappropriate comments (31%); 3) posting negative comments about a previous employer or co-worker (30%); and 4) demonstrating poor communication skills (30%) (See Figure 3). The study's focus then narrowed to the ad industry, explicated below.

Interview Participant, Agency, and AE Profiles

As a function of agency size, interview participants had varying titles and responsibilities, but all played similar, integral roles in the hiring process. Those titles ranged

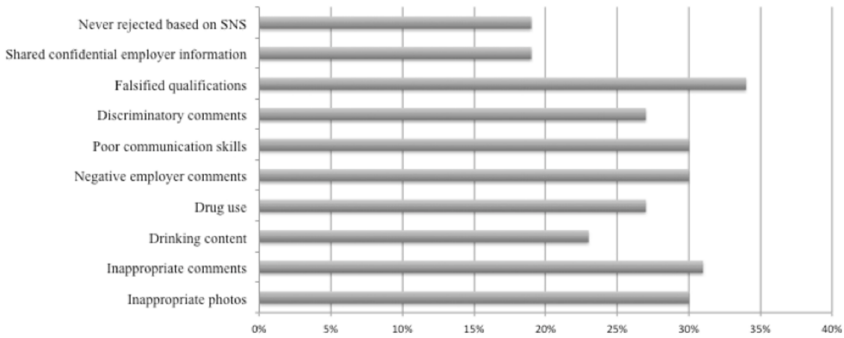


Figure 3. If you have rejected candidates because of what you saw about them in a social networking site, what have been the reasons?

from agency CEO or founder/president to the head of human resources to hiring manager on one team within a large, multi-department agency. Eight women and four men held these roles, and they ranged from 5 to 20+ years' experience, averaging 12 years.

The agencies represent a mix of traditional, full-service and niche ad agencies, PR agencies with sizable ad billings, and marketing communications firms – all of which have AEs. Included are small, midsize, and large agencies on both coasts and in the South and Midwest, ranging from five U.S.-based employees to more than 15,000 employees worldwide, with billings between \$1.5 million and \$400 million annually. Independent agencies as well as agencies comprising part of international holding companies are represented. Demographically, women dominated the workforce at participating agencies, representing upward of 60%, and the bulk of employees at seven agencies skewed younger (under 35 years old). With the exception of two Hispanic-targeted agencies in the sample,

all employees were predominantly non-Hispanic Whites, and two general market agencies disclosed having a 100% Caucasian staff.

AEs tended to be women at nearly all agencies and skewed younger and less racially/ethnically diverse than the agencies' overall employee-base. Four agencies had 80% or more women in AE roles and two were 50/50 or 75/25% men to women. If there were multiple AE roles, such as account coordinators, AEs, and senior AEs, junior roles tended to have younger employees (mid-to-late twenties) whereas more senior roles skewed older (thirties to early forties). The average age for AEs was mid-thirties. With few exceptions, AEs tended to be non-Hispanic Whites.

RQ2 queried what agencies' AE hiring processes consisted of today. A number of related categories and sub-categories emerged from the data, specifically: 1) steps involved in the hiring process; 2) where jobs are posted and AEs are typically found; and 3) qualifications and qualities sought in AEs.

The hiring procedures for all agencies largely followed the same seven steps: 1) using a previous AE job description, tweaking it, or drafting a new one; 2) posting it across multiple channels; 3) gathering and sifting through applicants' cover letters and résumés; 4) narrowing the pool to 3-5 interviewees; 5) conducting phone screenings, then multiple rounds of interviewing; 6) checking candidates' references and running background checks; and 7) offering the position(s) to preferred candidate(s).

Notification of all openings started internally, with the exclusion of Agency 4. Each hiring professional asked employees to share openings through their various online

and offline SNSs. Agency 11, in particular, divulged relying almost exclusively on personal referrals because of its ‘family-like’ culture and focus on the U.S. Hispanic market.

Regardless of agency size or location, all participants indicated finding many AEs through employee referrals. Agency 6 asserted, “the most important way to find candidates is through word-of-mouth,” and Agency 7 stated that whom you know is the most important reason AEs get hired. Reliance upon referrals at Agency 5’s subsidiary and Agency 11, both of which target the U.S. Hispanic market, was exceptionally high because of additional skillsets needed: bilingualism and specialized market knowledge. Previous employees, including interns and individuals laid off due to downsizings, were also contacted by hiring professionals about returning to the agency and/or for referrals.

Externally, agencies posted jobs on their websites as a starting point. Agencies also used LinkedIn to announce openings, with Agency 4 proclaiming that LinkedIn had been “such a rich source of qualified résumés that there was no reason to try anything else!” LinkedIn was used by approximately three-quarters of the agencies sampled. Facebook was the second most commonly used SNS for posting jobs, used by approximately half of participants, followed by Twitter at one third. Unanimously, participants deemed LinkedIn the most valuable SNS for finding and later screening AEs. Moreover, in descending order, participants posted on Craigslist, Facebook, and Twitter, and one third of agencies posted on local, state, and national advertising or PR organizations’ forums. Unanimously, general employment

websites (i.e., Monster, HotJobs, and Careerbuilder) were declared useless for AEs and other agency positions, and less than half of participants used recruiters to fill AE positions, almost exclusively relying on them for senior level positions.

The AE role varied by agency, as did the AE qualifications and qualities sought. Five agencies mandated that AEs have or be working toward a bachelor's degree (preferably in advertising, marketing, public relations, or communication), whereas other hiring professionals declared that experience and skillsets trump degrees today. At a minimum, all agencies required AEs have 2-3 years' experience in account management. At agencies with multi-level AE teams, priority for junior positions was given to recent college graduates who have had multiple relevant internships. Smaller-to-midsized agencies were more likely to outright refuse hiring recent graduates because of the multiple hats their AEs must wear.

In addition to education and experience, AEs need to be excellent communicators, and mistakes in application materials were an immediate red flag. Varying levels of creativity in applicants' cover letters and résumés were appreciated, with some hiring professionals preferring traditional, "clean-cut, easy-to-read" (Agency 7) documents and others divulging that they "always respond to creative writing" (Agency 10). Agency 6 expects creativity from everyone in the agency, including AEs.

Almost all participants revealed that their AEs were overwhelmingly thirty-something Caucasian women. Yet, when asked about AE demographics, hiring professionals declared that "age, gender, race, and attractiveness" don't factor into the hiring process (Agency 2) be-

cause “we always look for the candidate best-suited for the role” (Agency 1). When asked if any physical characteristics were sought in AEs, most avowed they did not look at physical characteristics during the hiring process or they “don’t think any physical characteristics make somebody a better AE” (Agency 6). Rather than physical characteristics, Agency 8 assessed the impression candidates’ left, such as how well put together and professional they appeared, as did Agency 4:

The same [physical characteristics] you’d want in any business environment: eye contact, a smile. The same traits you’d want in an accounting firm. These [AEs] are the front lines; they’ve got to make our clients feel comfortable and confident that [Agency 4] is in control of their marketing communications! (author, personal communication, Agency 4)

Alongside referrals, LinkedIn was also a fruitful channel for finding qualified candidates resulting in AE hires and was thus deemed the most valuable. Although the number of online SNSs continues to increase, participants referenced just a few during the interviews, namely LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Overall, participants discussed SNSs in reference to the following three categories: 1) Job postings (discussed previously); 2) AE required skillsets; 3) applicant recruitment and candidate screening (RQ3).

Despite variations in how much client work hiring professionals deemed ‘digital,’ agencies expect AEs to be digital natives and excellent communicators in all realms, including face-to-face and computer-mediated communica-

tion. Hiring professionals' first indication of candidates' digital fluency was if their social media screen names/profiles were included on cover letters, résumés, and/or emails.

The depth and breadth of incorporating candidates' SNS information varied widely from not being included at all to incorporating SNSs usage throughout the hiring process. SNS usage varied according to agency size as well as how long hiring professionals had been in their current roles. Hiring professionals who had been in their roles longer often relied upon evaluative processes exclusive of SNSs. Additionally, participants' philosophies on looking at candidates' digital footprints and the depth to which that was done represented both ends of the spectrum: Belief that viewing candidates' SNSs is an invasion of their privacy compared to finding it foolish not to include SNSs in candidate assessments. What was unanimous among all participants was their use of LinkedIn, which was the only SNS participants used throughout the multiple stages of AE hiring processes.

In addition to posting AE jobs via online SNSs, half of participants disclosed using LinkedIn to attract either passive or active applicants when they did/not have a job opening, and typically recruitment was done through hiring professionals' personal LinkedIn accounts. Some disclosed using LinkedIn for competitive analyses and/or blatant poaching, but others were fervently against the latter: "I don't want my people poached, so I don't like to poach" (Agency 6). Exclusive of LinkedIn, no other SNSs were used for recruitment.

Beyond postings and recruitment, all but one participant used SNSs alongside other online tools to screen

applicants throughout the hiring process. At several agencies, screening applicants via online tools was done before telephone or in-person interviews. LinkedIn was the most commonly used SNS for screening applicants, followed by Facebook, Google, Twitter, Instagram, and Flickr. Often, participants used Facebook to get a broader understanding of candidates' personalities, with a particular focus on potential red flags. A few noted that over time candidates were getting smarter about their SNS privacy settings. Others declared that looking at applicants' Facebook profiles was "not our style" (Agency 1) or, according to Agency 6, conducting Facebook searches had negative consequences because "you open yourself up to a lot of issues." By doing Facebook searches, you may find out that an applicant is gay or that a woman is pregnant, neither of which is legal to ask under EEOC guidelines because of potential biases. Still, Agency 6 does look at candidates' digital footprints, opting to do so after candidates have interviewed and notifying them of these intentions.

Participants were evenly split between whether they used a Google search or images to assess candidates' digital footprints. After receiving applicants' résumés, Agency 8, among the smallest in the sample, described a three-step online screening process: 1) a general Google search to assess applicants' digital footprints; 2) reading the entirety of candidates' LinkedIn profiles, specifically looking for divergences between their résumés and profiles, group memberships, and shared connections; and 3) combing through all available information on other social media accounts. Technological advancements have made it "almost too easy not to immediately jump on Google and look somebody up as soon as you get a résumé," and

there's value in multi-platform candidate assessment:

When you're getting a résumé, you're getting exactly what they want to show you. When you go outside of that and find what they're saying when they don't think you're looking, you might get a truer picture of who the individual is and be a little better prepared for who you're going to meet during the interview. Much like the résumé, the interview is often just the face they want to put forward in order to impress you and be what they think you want them to be, as opposed to being genuine – whereas in the privacy of our own Facebook page, we think we can say whatever we want. (author, personal communication, Agency 8)

Participants rarely scanned candidates' tweets or photo sharing sites, almost exclusively relying on LinkedIn and Facebook for assessment.

When probed for more information about what constituted “red flags,” the discussion turned to Facebook and Twitter. Red flags were defined as inappropriate Facebook photos (i.e., drunk, illegal activities, scantily clothed/naked, etc.). To a lesser extent, “outrageous political statements” or profanity on Twitter (Agency 8) or having an unprofessional LinkedIn photo or email address were additional red flags because they were indicators of “poor decision-making” (Agency 10). Applicants' SNS information was scrutinized more heavily than non-client facing roles, including their potential internal and external fit. Although some red flags were not cause for automatic pool dismissal, hiring professionals had varying opinions on the matter. Some drew a line between personal and profes-

sional lives while correlating the presence of red flags with age. Nonetheless, unanimously candidates' digital footprints were equated with how they would represent the agency, including fears that clients would find candidates' information through their own Google searches that, worst-case scenario, could lead to lost business.

With a wealth of applicant information available online, the potential for that information – especially demographics – to play a role in implicit biases has increased significantly. Accordingly, hiring professionals were asked first about the extent to which they were familiar with and followed current EEOC hiring regulations and more broadly, the possibility of SNSs contributing to hiring biases (**RQ4**).

All participants indicated familiarity with current EEOC regulations, though to varying degrees due to differing roles. When asked about the extent to which they abided by EEOC regulations, the conversation centered on: 1) diversity trainings; 2) keeping all submitted résumés on file; 3) evaluating applicants strictly on the basis of experience, skillsets, and abilities irrespective of demographics; 4) legal interview questions; and 5) acceptable actions during onboarding, ongoing employment, and termination.

When discussing SNSs' potential for contributing to biases, participants' answered according to their own behaviors, by making assertions about others' behaviors, or in combination. Most stated that SNSs *could* contribute to candidate bias because of the additional information provided, extending well beyond the résumé. Participants' answers ranged from: 1) how they avoid letting SNS information bias their decisions; to 2) proclaiming that because

they did not heavily rely on candidates' SNS information now that it *could not* contribute to biases; to 3) how fears of bias caused them to refrain from looking at candidates' SNSs altogether. Illustrating the first point, Agency 1 stated:

I try not to have any kind of bias when looking at the pictures. I tend to open up the LinkedIn profile and I immediately look to see where they're currently working, and then I scroll down. Obviously you can't avoid looking at the picture, but I try not to use that as any kind of gauge as to whether or not I would ask them in for an interview. (author, personal communication, Agency 1)

Comparatively, Agency 7 explained, "we're not too heavy into that yet [reviewing candidates' LinkedIn profiles]. Possibly in the future. I try to keep any bias out of the equation."

When pressed for additional information about deterring bias, participants disclosed prevention strategies, such as solely relying on résumés and not forwarding candidates' LinkedIn profiles to decision makers, or paying for 'LinkedIn Recruiter,' which strips out photos. One hiring professional acknowledged that SNS information *did* contribute to biases, which was intentional and acceptable:

I don't think we made any effort to deter bias at all. I think the goal of looking at the SNSs was to establish a bias based on what we saw there. People open themselves up to those biases by what they choose to make available for the world to see. (author, personal communication, Agency 8)

When describing their own strategies for preventing or overcoming bias, a few participants instead referenced how others could – and do – fall prey to letting candidates’ SNS information impact their judgment. Others acknowledged that the potential for bias was there for everyone, including themselves: “Because of the pictures, you can make a predetermined judgment about someone before you have a conversation with them” (Agency 11) and “We’re all human. I think we all have certain filters” (Agency 5). Some asserted that people are inherently discriminatory and SNSs are an additional but not distinct component, symptomatic of a larger issue:

Whether it’s a conscious or subconscious decision, as humans we make judgments all the time based on how someone’s dressed, what they look like, how many tattoos they have. I don’t think it’s a conscious thing; I think it’s just built into our DNA. I hope it wouldn’t sway anybody one way or another, but I’m sure it does. (author, personal communication, Agency 7)

Participants were also asked what changes, if any, have occurred during their tenure (**RQ5**), with answers ranging from “nothing” (Agency 3) to “all of it” (Agency 7); “it’s changed dramatically” (Agency 8). Their responses varied in length and complexity but fell into two categories: 1) technology (to include résumés) and 2) the economy.

Technological advancements have changed the hiring process in numerous ways. Job openings are now posted almost exclusively online, exponentially expanding the number of potential applicants reached. Today’s AE

applicants almost exclusively apply for jobs through emails with PDF attachments or directly through LinkedIn, and when applicable, they provide links to their digital portfolios. Yet, there has been an influx of candidates at Agency 6 using what is now considered an unconventional approach: Hand-delivering résumés to stand out from the digital crowd. How applicants and hiring professionals primarily communicate has also changed as a result of new technologies: email is the main form of communication; VoIP-based services are used for interviews; and occasionally SNSs function as additional communication channels. By far, LinkedIn was the tool referenced most frequently and deemed of greatest value, and the advantages of it far outweighed any disadvantages. LinkedIn provides participants the opportunity to learn more about a larger number of candidates, and for some, it affords higher ROI as compared to using recruiters. Agencies' technological infrastructure has also evolved rapidly, such that agency bandwidth now allows for all the abovementioned.

Although a crucial component of today's advertising hiring processes, SNSs *have not* replaced résumés. All hiring professionals still rely on cover letters and résumés. Résumés are viewed as trustworthy, traditional documents that provide a necessary but concise version of candidates' experience and skillsets. Yet, some contend that they can be disingenuous, representing a carefully curated list of only what candidates want you to see. When asked if they thought LinkedIn would replace résumés altogether, all responded no and could not imagine that in the near future, with the exception of one. Agency 10 said while she had not received one yet, she could foresee – and

would accept – a candidates’ cover letter with a link to her/his LinkedIn profile in lieu of a résumé. Comparatively, Agency 8 would not:

No, never for us. They [résumés] are in addition to [SNSs]. If someone would have emailed me and said, “Hey, I’d really like a job; here’s a link to my LinkedIn page,” I don’t think that would’ve gone over very well with me. It would have been a lack of demonstrating their commitment to the process. I would’ve felt like if you’re not even going to take the effort to put together a résumé and send it to me, then I’m not going to follow your LinkedIn link and use what you already have put together there. (author, personal communication, Agency 8)

The economic downturn has impacted the AE hiring process as well. Some participants referenced having wider but not necessarily deeper applicant pools with desirable skillsets and/or realistic salary expectations. Agency 7 explained that people who might normally be looking to switch agencies were staying put due to economic uncertainties, whereas at Agency 10, a part-time position posting resulted in numerous overqualified applicants, including MBAs. Comparatively, more applicants have caused Agency 9 to search for the “perfect candidate,” rendering the interviewing process more time-consuming. Collectively, technological advancements and the economic downturn affected the ad industry’s bottom line and correspondingly many agencies’ hiring processes, in ways expected and unexpected.

Discussion

Overall, study results indicate incorporating SNSs into hiring determinations is increasingly commonplace across industries. Candidates can and have been hired based on their ability to digitally communicate credibility, creativity, positivity, and organizational fit. Conversely, applicants with profiles portraying poor communication skills, dishonesty, and inappropriate commentary – especially negative comments about previous employers and/or colleagues – are often rejected. Study data also delineate the importance of cover letters and résumés and the *complementary* role candidates' SNSs play today throughout the hiring process.

Additionally, advertising hiring professionals strongly advocated using their own and employees' SNSs to find candidates then used LinkedIn to cast a wider net when necessary. Hiring professionals believe SNSs have minimal drawbacks for their agencies when hiring. Several participants indicated using LinkedIn exclusively because of its reach – and to avoid (sub)conscious biased evaluations based on candidates' less professionally-oriented SNSs. The majority of participants allude to circumventing ethical issues, such as judging candidates based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, etc. by using LinkedIn instead of Google, Facebook, and/or Twitter. Participants believe LinkedIn is an all-inclusive employment hub, full of diverse, qualified individuals. The reality, however, is that LinkedIn lacks a significant minority presence. Hampton and colleagues (2011) found that of those on LinkedIn only 2% are Black and 4% are Hispanic, while 85% are white. Unfortunately, agencies that heavily utilize LinkedIn may not be aware that one of their primary

talent pools is so homogeneous. Assuming that all professional applicants use LinkedIn primarily is incorrect and ignores usage disparities between race and ethnicity for it and all SNSs (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Thus, it is inadvisable to rely heavily – or *solely* – on one channel, as many participants have done, to create a diverse applicant pool.

Furthermore, finding AEs that “make clients feel comfortable” (Agency 4) may inadvertently negatively affect agencies’ proactive efforts to establish a diverse workforce. While hiring professionals may not explicitly reject AE candidates based on demographics, they may implicitly seek attractive candidates they think may best fit the organization’s culture and/or please clients. Inherent in these assumptions are predetermined, societal definitions of attractiveness that skew Caucasian, young, heterosexual, and feminine. Accordingly, applicants differing from current agency employees could be unjustly overlooked, albeit unknowingly.

People of color make up just 2% of the workforce at ad agencies and historically have been discriminated against in hiring, assignments, pay, and performance appraisals (Chambers, 2008; NAACP, 2010). Such little racial and ethnic diversity exists that it is a significant deterrent for retaining minority ad professionals (Target Market, 2012). The reality of these disparities was reinforced by demographic information obtained through interviewing, particularly in client-facing AE positions. Excluding two niche (Hispanic) agencies, minorities accounted for just 5% of AEs, with Blacks accounting for less than 1%.

Debatably, few would contend that ad professionals today are inherently racist or biased against minorities.

However, gross disparities in minority hiring and retention remain firmly intact. As the data indicate, the causes of these discrepancies are no longer explicit but rather implicit. As Kluemper and Rosen (2009) found and this study supports, hiring professionals are sensitive to industry diversity issues but have not yet adopted official practices or policies – incorporating SNSs – that might reduce these discrepancies.

Data indicate a lack of diversity could be based partly on unconscious cognitions and sentiment clouding evaluations and categorizations (Morris & Fiske, 2009). When asked to describe their AEs, participants seemed genuinely surprised about the homogeneity – though a few were quick to acknowledge the lack of diversity within the industry overall. Among the latter, several participants blamed systemic issues beyond their control (i.e., few students of color majoring in Ad/PR/marketing; few applicants of color; losing top talent to multicultural agencies; etc.). None acknowledged that individual efforts, such as posting jobs on minority-targeted media outlets, could help overcome long-standing underrepresentation.

Contemporary impression formation models assert that when individuals encounter others and categorize them into groups, stereotypes will exert influence on these interpretive processes (Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Hamilton, Sherman, & Ruvolo, 1990; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). Repeated and frequent stereotype activation leads to cognitive structures that can be activated and used automatically (Devine, 1989), hence stereotypes can impact impression formation without conscious intent (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995). Individuals can think, feel, and act in ways contradictory to their explicitly ex-

pressed views (Bertrand, Chugh, & Mullainathan, 2005), including during hiring.

Ad professionals are subject to time pressures and elevated stress levels, which have been shown to stimulate greater automatic and implicit mental processing (Chugh, 2004; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Greenwald, Klinger, & Liu, 1989). In this study, participants used a variety of tools to find and assess candidates while trying their best not to be influenced by candidate visuals. Nonetheless, every hiring professional stated they rarely, if ever, hired anyone whose SNS-based visuals were less than ideal, although participants' definitions of "ideal" never explicitly referred to race or ethnicity.

Some participants mentioned looking up candidates' SNSs while willfully avoiding stereotypical thoughts, instead focusing on candidates' skillsets and personalities. These included assessing behaviors such as candidates' email signoffs or novel approaches to delivering résumés. Although well intentioned, hiring professionals' attempts to avoid their own prejudicial reactions by attending to individuating information is less than optimal if they have strong, implicit negative associations and candidates' actions are ambiguous. When unwanted thoughts are suppressed, these thoughts likely reappear with even greater insistence (i.e., 'rebound' effect) (Macrae et al., 1994; Monteith, Sherman, & Devine, 1998; Wegner, Schneider, Carter, & White, 1987). Additionally, when two individuals engage in identical behavior, viewers often do not identify the same act; rather, the exact same action may communicate different connotations when applied to members of different groups (Gawronski, Gelske, & Banse, 2003; Kunda, Sinclair, Griffin, 1997). Thus, racial/

ethnic minorities and Caucasian candidates engaging in the same online behavior could be categorized differently based on implicit biases. Hiring professionals' implicit associations may taint their interpretation of available information, thereby leading them to see what's already in their minds. Moreover, whether individuals gain advanced notice that information about another is inaccurate and should be ignored, or whether they are told information is false after, they still tend to integrate it into ensuing judgments (Thompson, Fong, & Rosenhan, 1981; Wegner, Coulton, & Wenzlaff, 1985).

Finally, an additional finding of this study was the discovery of a "third person effect," which refers to individuals' tendency to see media as more likely to affect others than themselves (Brosius & Engel, 1996; Davison, 1983). Rarely did interview participants believe they were negatively influenced by minority candidates' visual information, but they were sure that others *could be and/or definitely were* affected. By assuming oneself is not affected while others are, individuals preserve a positive, superior sense of self (Cohen & Davis, 1991; Perloff, 2009). Despite the pervasiveness of candidates' SNS information that does influence their decisions, hiring professionals perceived no need to alter their hiring processes. Hiring professionals want to appear resistant to persuasion and less susceptible to negative outcomes – despite the fact they are equally susceptible to implicit biases based on decades of research.

Implications

The ad industry faces significant challenges in developing and maintaining a diverse workforce, requiring a

major paradigm shift. This shift should start with hiring professionals' awareness of implicit biases and increased mindfulness that bias takes different forms. Hiring professionals may act with explicit or implicit bias toward groups they think or feel positively about in some ways (Morris & Fiske, 2009). As this study demonstrates, awareness of implicit biases has not yet changed either mandated hiring processes (via the EEOC or trade organizations) or agency-established processes. Instead of waiting for governmental or industry intervention, hiring professionals must be cognizant of implicit biases in *all* facets of the hiring process, including but not limited to handling candidates' SNS information.

Beyond awareness, drafting a cohesive, agency-wide hiring process that addresses implicit bias (and how SNS information should be handled moving forward) is strongly recommended. Another step toward creating a diverse workforce involves hiring professionals devoting more time to assess the merit of each résumé, as that may limit the potential for unconscious processing (Bertrand et al., 2005). Furthermore, the presence of a positive minority figure during cover letter, résumé, and profile screenings would be ideal. Having a person of color involved may serve as a positive exemplar, minimizing the impact of unconscious responses and bias (Bertrand et al., 2005), though tokenization remains a concern. However, given the challenges of recruiting and retaining people of color in agencies, some agencies may need to rely on positive mental exemplars in lieu of employees of color. To solve a problem as colossal as the ad industry's lack of racial and ethnic diversity, a concerted effort to increase diversity must

permeate *every* aspect of the hiring process, at all levels.

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