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# Publishing Personal Information Online

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*How Employers Access, Observe and Utilise Data from  
Social Networking Sites in their Selection Procedures*

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The present study examined the use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) in selection procedures. Using qualitative research methods, 15 participants with involvement in selection were interviewed. These were aimed at distinguishing how employers access, observe and utilise data from SNSs in their selection procedures, as well as investigating employers' perceptions of privacy and discrimination. Each participant also deconstructed four Facebook profiles to provide an insight into what employers observe and the interpretation they make about the user.

Of the 15 participants, nine admitted accessing SNS profiles but only two suggested these formed part of the official selection process; one conducted internet screening as part of the process and the other sought candidate permission before accessing their profile. The other seven covertly researched the candidates' profiles. Whether official or unofficial the study sought to understand the value of this research to employers. Facebook and LinkedIn were most prominently used, accessed through Google and the employer's personal SNS account. Facebook was used to understand person-organisation fit and soft skill, while LinkedIn was used to distinguish professional attributes. In relation to the deconstruction of the Facebook profiles, there was consensus and accuracy regarding the personality and attributes of the volunteers providing evidence of the validity of SNS screening. But, when questioned about this, interviewees suggested that: (1) SNS, and in particular Facebook, profiles were not always indicative of the person; and, (2) there was disagreement about whether a candidate's personal life reflected their work persona. Therefore this raises questions about *why* organisations actually utilise SNS and what valuable information they glean.

Employers concerns relating to privacy tended to surround the legality of the access as opposed to the ethical considerations of utilising an unofficial selection tool. Although some were cognisant of potential discrimination issues associated with recognising, for example, age, gender and ethnicity, others were of the view that this would eventually emerge within other parts of the selection process and is therefore was not an issue solely associated with SNSs, rather with the integrity of the selectors and the process. Results emphasise the importance of further research and education in the subject area of SNSs in selection.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

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As a result of the recent global economic recession, organisations must be vigilant with their personnel selection in order to maintain competitive advantage, and ensure successful business operations at maximum efficiency and effectiveness (Bach, 2005). With emphasis on successful personnel selection, selection methods have seen developments over the years, with arguably the most recent and somewhat controversial development being the use of online social networking sites (SNSs) for screening applicant's personal online profiles (Brandenburg, 2007; Kluemper & Rosen, 2009).

SNSs have become increasingly popular in the turn of the decade (Brandenburg, 2007; Greenwood, 2009; Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker, 2009) as the Internet becomes progressively integrated into everyday life (Vossen & Hagemann, 2007). Enabled through Web 2.0 technologies and widespread access to the Internet, SNSs have evolved immensely and an expanding amount of personal information is being published in these forums by individuals. To illustrate the immense popularity of SNSs, three of the most popular SNSs sit in the top 20 of the most visited websites in the world. In New Zealand, Facebook sits at the second most visited, followed by Twitter at number 12, and LinkedIn at number 14 (Alexa, 2011).

In recent years there has been evidence to suggest that employers are using SNSs for screening purposes by examining applicant's personal profiles online (Brandenburg, 2007; Greenwood, 2009; Hayes, et al., 2009). With an array of personal content being posted by SNS users, employers can obtain information about an applicant that may not be sourced through traditional methods of selection. Facebook, in particular, has become a leading tool used by employers, with a growing body of literature supporting this (Brynside, 2008; DeKay, 2009; Haefner, 2009). How and why employers engage in the use of SNSs for selection requires more in-depth research to understand both the potential pitfalls, and strengths of using SNSs within applicant screening.

Whether SNSs are a valid tool for the purposes of selection is unknown. Previous studies have attempted to measure such validity (Kluemper & Rosen, 2009; Vazire & Gosling, 2004), however there remains concerns that have not been investigated. More recent studies examining the extent of users' impression management and how online identity can be manipulated suggest that online profiles may not accurately reflect real-life

identity, in addition to this, the argument of whether one's social life is relevant to how one would behave in a professional context is also raised (Brynside, 2008; Peluchette & Karl, 2009; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). As a result, the appropriateness of SNSs in screening processes needs to be further explored.

Discrimination is a primary concern in the discussion of SNSs in personnel selection procedures (Brynside, 2008; Cotler & Rizzo, 2010). Over recent years action has been taken to reduce the occurrence of such behaviour within selection, through the development of employment anti-discrimination and human rights law, yet indirect discrimination is still occurring (Warning & Buchanan, 2010). With such widespread availability and ease of accessibility to an individual's private information online, employers have the potential to obtain sensitive information such as age, ethnicity, marital status, and even physical appearance of individuals without the knowledge or consent of job applicants (Hayes, et al., 2009). While it is widely contested that the viewing of SNSs in selection is legal, there are concerns in regards to invasion of privacy due to the level of private information that is posted online, and this poses many risks and liabilities to employers who engage with this tool (Greenwald, 2008; Light & McGrath, 2010; Warning & Buchanan, 2010).

It is recognised that further research is required to obtain more in-depth insights from the employer's perspective in regards to their use of SNSs in selection, and this study will do so through the use of qualitative research methods. The structure of the Thesis is as follows; Chapter two will outline the previous literature on this topic in detail, concluding five primary research questions in which this study will focus. Chapter three will describe the methods used for data collection and data analysis, and provide justification for the methods. Chapter four outlines the key results that emerged on completion of the data collection phase. These results are then discussed in full in Chapter five in relation to previous literature; and recognise the limitations to the study. Chapter five will also discuss the practical implications of the findings to both employers and job seekers. Finally direction for further research is recommended.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

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Chapter 2 discusses the literature that surrounds the topic of SNSs in selection. Beginning with the importance of personnel selection for organisations, the significance of the additional tool in selection is explained. Following, the key selection criteria which employers use in selection will be described. The competencies of soft skills, hard skills and most prominently the concept of fit are defined, and previous studies will be analysed to illustrate the extent to which employers are using SNSs to identify these elements.

Prior to discussion on SNSs in selection it is important to understand how Web 2.0 technologies enabled the development of SNSs. SNSs are defined, and the focus on Facebook and LinkedIn is justified. Facebook and LinkedIn are identified as the most prominent SNSs used by employers, and as illustrated each serve very different purposes. Previous studies have identified many uses of these two SNSs in selection, yet the validity of this use is greatly debated. The concept of impression management here is key. Finally this chapter will outline the current examinations of the legalities inherent in the use of SNSs as a selection tool, with a focus on discrimination, EEO, and issues of privacy. Investigation of the previous literature has given cause for further exploration; this study has outlined 5 broad research questions, which a qualitative study will endeavour to answer.

### **PERSONNEL SELECTION**

The use of personnel selection tools ensure the right people are hired for specific job vacancies in the most effective and efficient manner. The hiring of the right personnel is a fundamental part of an organisations on-going success, and as a result requires a high level of investment (Bach, 2005; Leopold, Harris, & Watson, 2005). Poor selection into the organisation can prove to be a liability as they may not meaningfully contribute toward the company, and in some instances can harm the organisation (Newell, cited in Bach, 2005). The selection of high performing and fitting employees has therefore been identified as a crucial process for successful business operations, and it is the use of SNSs that is argued to aid this process (Bach, 2005; Warning & Buchanan, 2010).

Selection processes have been widely researched with many different approaches and applications used by organisations. For years psychologists have been studying the

various methods used for assessing human attributes and future job performance. The focus has been on the accuracy of psychometric testing, and validity of interviews and other selection tools, in predicting job performance (Arvey & Campion, 1984; Cooper & Schindler, 2011). Validity of the varying methods of selection is largely debated, yet it is agreed that the use of selection tools with known poor validity is unprofessional, and in some cases illegal (Macky, 2008; Marchese & Muchinsky, 1993). Validity is defined as “the extent to which the decisions that are made on the basis of candidate performance on a particular selection method are appropriate and justified” (Macky, 2008, p. 227). As discussed in much more detail throughout this chapter, validity is a highly important consideration when using SNSs as a tool in selection.

The importance of reliable and valid selection practices is reflected in the fact that organisations rely heavily on their employees to contribute toward the company and therefore support the company’s operations and growth (Bach, 2005; Bowen, Ledford, & Barry, 1991; Leopold, et al., 2005; Warning & Buchanan, 2010). The cost of hiring the wrong person for the job can result in problems such as low productivity, the need to train/retrain, as well as deviant behaviour such as absenteeism, criminal behaviour, and causation of hostile work environments (Warning & Buchanan, 2010). Therefore employers must follow systematic procedures in order to effectively and efficiently screen applicants, and gain relevant information on their work history, skills and attributes, personality, and predicted future performance (Macky, 2008).

Traditionally techniques such as written applications, Curriculum Vitae (C.V), interviews, reference checks, credit checks, psychometric/ability testing, and medical/drug tests are used to aid the decision making process and weed out the high performers (Brynside, 2008; Kaplan & Saccuzzo, 2009; Macky, 2008). Employers conducting these selection techniques face many legal issues, they cannot ask questions that relate to any of the thirteen grounds of discrimination, and credit/criminal/medical checks can only be made if it is a job necessity, with informed consent from the applicant (Brynside, 2008). With stringent employment legalisation, employers must be vigilant with their selection procedures, however literature on selection has identified that over time selections methods have and will change therefore shifting the way in which employers make selection decisions (Leopold, et al., 2005; Wood & Payne, 1998). This shift has become evident with the development of SNSs. The use of SNSs is now a cutting edge tool in selection, and as a result there is little policy guiding how

employers may use it, this chapter will look at the primary concerns around its legality. Prior to this, key selection criteria will be evaluated.

## **SELECTION CRITERIA**

Important to the study is the recognition of what selection criteria employers observe in order to make a final decision about an applicant. Organisation literature has defined and organised the most common selection criteria into three categories (1) hard skills, (2) soft skills and (3) fit. Hard skills are also known as cognitive, technical, or interactive skills, and soft skills are also known as social or personality skills (Carnevale & et al., 1988; Cooper & Schindler, 2011; Harvey, 2000). Fit is further sectioned into two categories, these being person-organisation fit (P-O fit) and person-job fit (P-J fit) (Kristof, 1996). These three selection criteria will be discussed below, illustrating the significance to this study.

### **Soft/hard skills- key competencies**

The selection process aims to identify the appropriate hard and soft skills of the applicant. Individuals display different attributes and competencies and as part of the selection process it is the role of the employer to distinguish the levels of which the applicant encompasses these.

Soft skills comprise of interpersonal, emotional and organisational skills (Ashbaugh, 2003; Coll & Zegwaard, 2006). They encompass the temperament or disposition of an individual (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). Soft skills are regarded as less measurable and quantifiable due to the subjective nature; however many personality and psychometric tests have been developed to attempt to make a measure of soft skills in individuals. While not limited to this, common soft skills identified are communication skills, attitude, people skills and ability to work in teams. Hard skills refer to the capacity to process verbal, numerical and other kinds of technical information (Ashbaugh, 2003). This can include ability in numeracy and literacy, and specific technical skills and abilities within a field i.e. solving mathematic equations. While hard skills are considered to be ones that are trainable or teachable to individuals, soft skills are said to be more intrinsic to individuals and are harder to teach. For this reason hard skills are more accurately and quantitatively measured through various tests, for example numerical testing.

The various features<sup>1</sup> of SNSs such as Facebook have the potential to show hard skills through their qualifications and technical skill online, and also some level of soft skills such as communication and social skills. As the two selection criteria make up a large portion of what is required in selection, this study will examine if and how employers use SNSs to assess hard and soft skills amongst their applicants.

### **P-J and P-O Fit**

The notion of fit has long been studied in organisational literature. It is considered important as studies have demonstrated that having employees who “fit” within an organisation correlates with high performance, as the interaction between an individual and the organisation is said to impact upon the employees work behaviour (Bowen, et al., 1991; Cable & Judge, 1996; Chatman, 1989; Kristof, 1996).

Traditionally person-job fit was highly desired. This is the practice of selecting the right person who can meet the job needs and skills required (Kristof, 1996). With a greater emphasis placed on ensuring sound organisational culture, employers are now supporting the P-J fit criteria with the enrichment of P-O fit (Bowen, et al., 1991). The concept of P-O fit is broadly defined as the compatibility between an individual’s values and that of the organisations’ (Ballout, 2007; Hoffman & Woehr, 2006; Kristof, 1996). ‘Person-organisation’ fit is therefore exactly that, it is the idea that the personality and values of the job applicant aligns with that of the organisations culture and values, as opposed to the actual job/vocation in question. The congruence between the person and the organisation is suggested as a critical factor when employing personnel for long-term employment, by way of it creating a flexible and satisfied workforce whereby employee personalities are compatible with the organisational culture (Bowen, et al., 1991; Kristof, 1996).

SNSs contain many features that have potential to display ones P-O fit (i.e. personality, interests and hobbies, and values that may be apparent through the content posted online). It is evident that P-O fit is a major consideration for employers in selection and therefore it is important in developing a comprehensive understanding of how SNSs are

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<sup>1</sup> The features of Facebook significant to this study include: **Wall**- a public bulletin board for messages between the users and their friends, and personal status updates. **Info**- a page where the user can publish any personal information about oneself- including age, gender, political/religious views, qualifications, relationship/job status, activities and interests, and groups associated with etc. **Photos**- where users and their friends can upload photos. **Friends**- A list of the user’s friends and networks with whom they are connected with.

utilised by employers to identify P-O fit and whether this identification is accurate. To understand this, a comprehensive overview on the development of SNSs, and the motives behind the use of SNSs is required.

## **WEB 2.0 AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SNSs**

Web 2.0 is largely responsible for the growth of SNSs. Web 2.0 is a concept and ideology that has been widely discussed by scholars and Information Technology experts over the years (Conger, 2009; Deans, 2009; O'Reilly, 2005). It has also been referred to as wisdom Web, read/write Web, and participative Web due to the nature in which the Internet is used today (Hendler & Berners-Lee, 2010; Murugesan, 2007; Vossen & Hagemann, 2007). The concept of Web 2.0 began during a brainstorming conference session between O'Reilly Media and MediaLive International, after having identified the dot.com crash in 2001 as a turning point for the Internet. From this an annual Web 2.0 conference was born and the model of Web 2.0 was quickly embraced. This conference first began in October 2004, and is aimed at uniting the major intellectuals of the web community to discuss the pressing World Wide Web issues (O'Reilly, 2005). The term Web 2.0 has since become a label that has resulted in much disagreement in regards to its meaning, and is accused of being merely a media "buzzword" for marketing motivations (Deans, 2009; O'Reilly, 2005). The broad use and differing understanding of what Web 2.0 is, is best summed up by Shuen, (2008 p xviii} who describes that "you don't have to be a technologist to understand Web 2.0. It's not about the underlying technology but the new ways that it enables large numbers of people to come together to work, share, and build".

Before the concept of Web 2.0, interactive websites were very rare, however with on-going developments, Internet capabilities have been revolutionised. While there is debate over the precise definition of Web 2.0, the technology has made the Internet more dynamic and responsive (Jones, 2008). Since the launch of the Internet in 1993, the generations of users have turned to the Internet as an avenue in which one can express themselves (Vossen & Hagemann, 2007). Traditionally, what was known as Web 1.0 provided a passive experience, and encouraged only downloading (Shuen, 2008). However Web 1.0 served as a platform for development and the Internet is now seen as a medium for communication, socialisation, discussion, business, storage, and an ever growing encyclopaedia (O'Reilly, 2005; Vossen & Hagemann, 2007). As a result, the

social interaction occurring on the Internet is evolving rapidly with the creation of blogs, wikis, instant messaging, photo/video sharing, virtual worlds and social networks (Deans, 2009; Jones, 2008).

It is evident in just seven years since the Web 2.0 conference and the resulting 'awareness' of Web 2.0, society has seen a change in the way in which we communicate online. "The user participation and contribution stream (which we might also call the socialization stream) has changed the way in which users, both private and professional, perceive the Internet, interact with it, contribute to it, and in particular publish their own or their private information on it." (Vossen & Hagemann, 2007, p.65); this activity is said to have 'offline' implications. As described by Shuen (2008, p. 73) "online is a small world. With just a few clicks, users can reach people they want to know. Increasingly, people get their first impressions from online rather than offline encounters". It is these first impressions, created from online profiles that are therefore a concern when used in the context of selection for employment opportunities. As discussed in greater detail, the widespread use of SNSs by individuals and the resulting publication of private and personal information have given rise to applicant screening online.

### **DEFINING SNSs AND ITS USE**

SNS activity is growing at a confounding rate. As the second most visited website according to Alexa.com (2011), Facebook reportedly added 50 million users in a 100 day period in 2009 (Smith, 2009) and currently has 675.4 million active users (defined as having revisited the site in the last thirty days) (InsideFacebookgold, 2011). LinkedIn is said to have over 60 million users and as of last December had grown by five million in less than two months (Owyang, 2010). There are reportedly over 105 million users on Twitter, with 30,000 new users joining a day in 2010 (Owyang, 2010). While these numbers are high, unlike Facebook and LinkedIn users, many Twitter users are inactive (Warning & Buchanan, 2010) . As outlined previously, in the New Zealand context, SNS activity closely matches global statistics (Alexa, 2011). With such high levels of engagement in the media, it is no wonder why SNSs have emerged as such important and topical phenomena in organisational research.

SNSs are a unique platform that are both a result of, and contributor to, Web 2.0 technologies, also they have revolutionised communication and the exchange of

information between two or more parties (Hendler & Berners-Lee, 2010). As illustrated below, broadly speaking the definition of an online social network site is broken down by the primary function of communication.

Literature presents much description that defines a SNS, emphasising the complexity of the phenomenon. A definition provided by boyd and Ellison (boyd & Ellison, 2008) outlines three main features that define SNSs and will be used for the purposes of this research. SNSs are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd & Ellison, 2008 p 11). Similarly, Keenan and Ali (2009) break down the definition of SNS directly in correlation with the acronym SNS, defining it as: (1) Social interaction with others, to create (2) social networks by placing an emphasis on relationships between users, and creating a network of individual users, achieved through (3) Internet technologies (web sites) that promote socialisation online (i.e. Web 2.0). It is the unique interaction within one’s own SNS profile and between users that creates a forum whereby different types of communication and information are put on display. This social interaction and information display has become a boon to employers in selection processes.

Multiple modes of communication occur through instant messaging, private email, public posting forums, and through the means of uploading photos, videos, internet links and the like. SNSs, notably Facebook, additionally allow for users to interact via applications such as games and quizzes, and some even enable mobile interactions (boyd & Ellison, 2008). What makes this different from regular email is that it supports communication on both a person-person level (micro level) to supporting live conversations within entire networks, sometimes up to hundreds or thousands of people at one time (macro level) (Dwyer, Hiltz, & Widmeyer, 2008).

Much focus in SNS literature has investigated why users create SNS accounts, and the gratifications that result from its use (Agarwal & Mital, 2009; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Joinson, 2008; Pelling & White, 2009; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). In particular, the studies have a heavy focus on generations X and Y, and student/undergraduate use and gratifications, due the high level of involvement with SNSs that these demographic groups have (Agarwal & Mital, 2009; Ellison, et al., 2007;

Pelling & White, 2009). In direct correlation with the definitions outlined above, there are several reasons behind such widespread use of SNSs. Main reasons for users to join SNSs is (1) Information exchange, (2) Social support exchange, (3) To establish and continue friendship, and (4) Recreational purposes (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Through this social investigation, and increase of social capital, the gratifications gained from SNSs are said to boost self-esteem, increase life satisfaction, self-identity and a sense of belonging which in turn all contribute to users addiction to social media (Ellison, et al., 2007; Joinson, 2008; Pelling & White, 2009). While these gratifications apply to SNSs in a general sense, it is acknowledged that not all SNSs serve the same purposes. This study will examine how the two dominant SNSs **Facebook** and **LinkedIn** are constructed by users, and consequently used by employers in selection.

## **FACEBOOK VERSUS LINKEDIN**

Facebook was initially designed as an online year book. Founded by USA university student Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, and originally developed as a forum for students to create connections within their college/university network. Facebook has grown immensely and is now used by all demographics worldwide. Today Facebook has developed into an advertising platform that has taken advantage of the popularity of the online SNS. This therefore has created huge value since its creation, with businesses being able to target the 500 million users through the site (Shuen, 2008).

LinkedIn positions itself very differently in the market of online social media. It is designed as a depot where users can post their resumes, work history and skills set online, and open themselves up to job opportunities whether that be actively or passively. LinkedIn sells itself as the “World’s largest professional network” and when simply typed into Google, the following description accompanies the official site link “100 million+ members. Manage your professional identity. Build and engage with your professional network. Access knowledge, insights and opportunities”. LinkedIn prides itself on its connections with business; “as of January 2011, LinkedIn counts executives from all 2010 Fortune 500 companies as members; its hiring solutions were used by 73 of the Fortune 100 companies as of March 22, 2011. More than 2 million companies have LinkedIn Company Pages.” (LinkedIn, 2011). With LinkedIn purposely finding its niche, the adoption of Facebook into these processes has developed much interest due to the very different purpose that the SNS serves.

Facebook has a key objective to encourage socialism and activity between users, and achieves this through the varying features available to users. It is due to the high levels of interaction, that Facebook is perceived as an ideal forum for applicant screening (Keenan & Ali, 2009). LinkedIn does not offer this capability to the same extent as it is focused on creating a community/professional based style of network, and rather than connecting people with similar interests it focuses on connecting those with similar professional achievements (Keenan & Ali, 2009) . Facebook is described as creating profiles that look like a scrap book full of personal details, while LinkedIn profiles look like a resume (Keenan & Ali, 2009; Skeels & Grudin, 2009). As a result professionalism is not an objective on Facebook as it is on LinkedIn. Anecdotal evidence has suggested that it is the casual and social nature of Facebook that has attracted employers to screen through the site. With such different motives behind the use of LinkedIn and Facebook, an investigation is made into how the two compare when used in selection, and the varying the concerns that the more socially directed Facebook creates as opposed to LinkedIn.

## **CURRENT LITERATURE ON THE USE OF SNSs IN SELECTION**

Surveys outlined by Haefner (2009) and Jobvite (2010) showed a high a level of use of SNSs by organisations in their employment practices, and in support of earlier findings, the two surveys found that Facebook and LinkedIn were indeed the most commonly used SNSs. The 2010 Jobvite (2010) social survey indicated that a remarkable 92% of its respondents who were actively hiring in 2010 used, or were planning to use, social media. The social media is used to promote company brand, publish jobs, and advertise jobs, however most important to this study - to research candidates. Jobvite (2010) continued to outline that of those who used SNSs for reviewing candidates, 38.3% did so occasionally, 32% always conducted searches and 13.5% only did so if provided by the candidate. These findings clearly demonstrate that SNSs are playing a role in the majority of organisations.

A study performed by DeKay (2009) disputes the claims that SNSs, even professional orientated sites such as LinkedIn, provide a large pool of job seekers for recruitment, however significant to this study, the data obtained by DeKay (2009) did reveal that the sites had the potential to provide useful information for employers. Careless activity on Facebook has revealed current employee's true agendas such as (1) seeking for new

employment, (2) the posting of derogatory, discriminative comments or simply bad mouthing other employees/managers, and even (3) the revelation of false qualifications or the sharing of confidential information (Brandenburg, 2007; Skeels & Grudin, 2009). Drug use or alcoholism, provocative or inappropriate footage/photos have also been unveiled by employees through their SNSs profiles (Brandenburg, 2007; Genova, 2009; Roberts & Roach, 2009). In some cases users are being dismissed from their current employment due to their online activity (Greenwood, 2009). Greenwood (2009) gives an example of an intern that told his employer he would be away due to a family emergency. After posting photos on his Facebook page of the Halloween party he attended instead, his employer was quick to dismiss him. It is evident that tensions arise when boundaries are crossed between organisational and social networking ties (Skeels & Grudin, 2009).

### **Elimination from selection**

Empirical evidence shows that employers are indeed using SNSs in the **selection** process. The Careerbuilding.com survey (Haefner, 2009) showed that 35% of employers reported they had found content on social networking sites that led them to disregard potential candidates. Of this, 53% said it was due to the applicant posting provocative or inappropriate photographs or information. 44% did not hire due to content regarding the applicant drinking or using drugs, 35% said the applicant had bad-mouthed their previous employer, co-workers or clients, and 29% said the SNSs showed poor communication skills (Haefner, 2009). Other detrimental activity included discriminatory comments made by the applicant, false claims about qualifications, and the sharing of confidential information from the previous employer (Haefner, 2009). A survey conducted by ExecuNet (Brynside, 2008) found that 75% of recruiters use Internet search in their screening process, with a quarter of these admitting to having eliminated candidates based on their online profiles, similarly a survey observed by Davis (2006) found that 63% of employers had rejected an applicant based on the information they had found in their SNSs. The above findings show considerable use of SNSs in selection by employers, with a high level of weighting placed on what is observed. This is a concern given the fact that Facebook is intended to be a forum for 'social' activity, and raises the question as to how relevant the information observed is to the actual job performance of the applicant itself; it highlights the tensions that SNSs are created between social life and professional life.

As summarised by Clark and Roberts (2010, p. 519) “there appears to be a disconnect between how users of SNSs view the purpose and utility of SNSs and how employers view the sites”. If indeed employers are using content observed on SNSs as a ‘make or break’ in selection decisions, it raises the question of whether this is socially responsible, and to what extent do employers believe there are boundaries in the use of SNSs in selection given the intended informal nature of Facebook. Clark and Roberts (2010) suggest that there are harmful implications to society that emerge as a result of the use, as individuals are judged based from what is observed in their online SNS profiles.

As described by Light and McGrath (2010, p.304) “moral dilemmas can arise when users’ personal and professional worlds collide with consequences they did not intend”. This is supported in a study conducted by Peluchette and Karl (2008, p. 96) where comments made by the participants stated, that they would rather employers not observe material of them drinking, it would be none of their business and have “nothing to do with how I would behave on the job”. Peluchette and Karl (2007) found that of 200 profiles examined, 53% had photos involving alcohol use, 20% had comments containing sexual content, 25% had provocative photos, and 50% included the use of profanity, and as outlined earlier, this type of content has resulted in elimination from selection. This clearly displays the collision between social and professional worlds. A concern raised is the level to which users are aware of this collision.

Christofides, Muise and Desmarais (2009) study found that while the participants had acknowledged that they were concerned about privacy, they continued to post more private information online than they would generally. In addition to this, young adults have been found to be highly unaware of the potential dangers of disclosure of personal information (Taraszow, Aristodemou, Shitta, Laouris, & Arsoy, 2010). These studies illustrate the concept of the cross between private and professional worlds due to online activity; however there is little information about how **employers** perceive this relationship. Though users may appear in a negative light on their Facebook page, it does not necessarily imply that they will perform negatively at work (Greenwood, 2009). The extent to which employers are aware of this is unknown, and the present study looks to investigate this issue further from an employer’s perspective.

As shown above, much of the content observed is often in a negative light however SNSs do have potential to display positive elements. In fact the survey conducted by Careerbuilder.com (Haefner, 2009) 18% of employers who use SNS tools found that the content on applicants profiles show encouraging content. Of these, 50% said the applicant displayed the appropriate fit and personality, 39% of the profiles supported the applicants qualifications, 38% said it showed the creativity of the applicant, 35% said it displayed good communication skills. It is also acknowledged that SNSs showed well roundedness, material that provided good references about the applicant, and the awards the applicant had received (Haefner, 2009). These are all examples of both key hard and soft skills, and P-O fit which employers commonly seek in their employees. Despite the potential to find information on the key selection criteria through SNSs, again, the accuracy of this information is not well understood.

The concept of impression management becomes relevant here as applicants may purposely mould their SNS profiles to suit that of the employer, or likewise, of their peers. This asks key questions as to the validity of SNS as a tool as this information may not be accurate. This concept will be examined in the following section.

### **VALIDITY OF SNSs AS A SCREENING TOOL**

As discussed earlier, employers seek employees who display appropriate fit as well as the required hard and soft skills. While it may seem ideal that personnel have P-O/P-J fit, the reality of recognising this in the selection process is not necessarily accurate and the issue of what is perceived in the selection process may not reflect the actual fit of the applicant. As outlined by Kristof (1996, p.24) “perceived, rather than actual fit, is more influential during the selection process. This is understandable because of the short period of time that individuals and organisations have to express their value, goals, and personalities”. Throughout selection processes, employers create a perception of the applicant, however in spite of this, no significant relationship has been found between the perceived fit and the actual levels of fit (Kristof, 1996; Palmer, Welker, Campbell, & Magner, 2001). If this is the case in using traditional methods of testing applicants, how does the adoption of the online SNS screening affect the perception of the applicant?

A study on e-Perceptions showed that what individuals post online can “say a lot about a person” (Vazire & Gosling, 2004, p.130). Participants were asked to rate websites and the associated personalities of the authors, it was uncovered that the observers formed

clear, coherent impressions about the author with consistency between observers, and accurate to the authors true personality. This demonstrates that there is some level of validity in the assessment of online profiles. This validity is supported by studies performed by Kluemper and Rosen (2009) which evaluated SNSs and the feasibility of using applicant's personal information from these sites in employment decisions. Raters were asked to judge a range of personal information available on SNSs, assessing the big-five dimensions of personality, intelligence, and global performance. It was found that across the 63 raters there was a high level of internal consistency and reliability and inter-rater agreement. Overall they were able to somewhat successfully distinguish high performing individuals from low performing individuals suggesting some validity in using SNSs as a screening tool (Kluemper & Rosen, 2009).

From a user's perspective, research conducted by Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2006) surveyed 1440 students about their identity on Facebook. When asked to rate how accurately their profiles portrayed them, and whether this portrayal was positive, the average rating was 4.16 and 4.19 on a likert scale (1-5) indicating that they thought their Facebook portrayals described them accurately and in a positive light. Despite that there is some evidence of validity in e-Perceptions and the use of SNSs as a screening tool, there remain concerns. Studies performed on traditional methods of selection have raised key issues of authenticity of the applicant's portrayal, in particular the practice of impression management by applicants.

### **Impression management**

Impression management refers to the "process by which people attempt to control or manipulate the reactions of others to images of themselves or their ideas" (Palmer, et al., 2001, p. 35). The Internet provides very accessible forums (including SNSs) for individuals to create identities and personas that may not reflect that of their actual self (O'Hara & Stevens, 2006). It is therefore possible that online profiles are purposely manipulated to portray what the applicant may consider to be a desirable impression, and considering this, it is worthy to investigate the extent to which employers consider these factors in their online research.

Many Facebook users are said to deliberately misrepresent themselves in ways that do not accurately reflect their true image, often for humorous or social reasons (Peluchette & Karl, 2009). In wanting to be socially accepted, young users were found to exaggerate

their drinking, and display photos that have sex appeal, express a fun loving personality, or prestige which may not represent their true personality (Peluchette & Karl, 2009). Conversely to this, older users were more likely to present a hardworking intelligent image. Users portraying a friendly, fun loving or hardworking image were significantly less likely to post problematic content than those who portrayed a sexually appealing, wild or offensive image (Peluchette & Karl, 2009). It is therefore evident that impression management is occurring on SNSs, and is variable across different groups of users.

Empirical evidence shows that those who engage in impression management are more inclined to perform better and be hired by employers (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989). However findings by Lampe, et al (2006) argued that the students surveyed, perceived their audience to be their peer group members rather than other organisations or faculty. This raises the concern of students and young adults being largely susceptible to detrimental consequences from online screening as their content is largely aimed at an audience they perceive to be just their peers (Lampe, et al., 2006; Livingstone & Brake, 2010). A weakness evident in current Social Media research shows that the studies are often performed on students. There is little known about adult activity on SNSs. It is evident that the use of SNSs by different demographic groups may differ, and how these groups are perceived by employers could lead to further implications such discrimination, as outlined further.

Impression management in SNSs has not been extensively examined in current literature, yet it is evident that it could play a significant role in the outcome of selection for some applicants. Greenwood (2009) discusses that although universities and colleges were using SNSs as a “vetting tool” there were some that acknowledged they did not trust the authenticity of the content, and Brynside (2008) argues this as a point that many employers may overlook due to the perceived benefits of SNSs as a tool. While some students may be proactively managing their impression on their profile, influence from their ‘friends’, such as their friends postings of photos and comments of and about the applicant, can also cause misrepresentation of the applicant. Perhaps best summarised by Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008, p. 1831)

*“Identity is not an individual characteristic; it is not an expression of something innate in a person, it is rather a social product, the outcome of a given social environment and hence performed differently in varying contexts. Depending on the characteristics of the environment in which they find themselves, individuals will choose to claim identities that can help them better situate within the given*

*social environment. “true-selves” “real selves” and “hoped for possible selves” are products of different situations rather than characteristics of different individuals.”*

As SNS profiles are constructed by interactions between many users, and SNSs (i.e. Facebook and LinkedIn) are used for various motives, the true representation of the user itself may not be apparent. If employers are indeed making judgements of P-O fit and behaviour from SNSs in their selection process, then they could be doing so based on false or misrepresented information. This is a major factor that contributes to the question of validity of SNSs as a selection tool, and also raises some concerns of the legalities behind its use in employment as implications of invasion of privacy and discrimination can arise.

## **LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS IN SNS SCREENING**

Brynside (2008) argues the pitfalls of using social media for recruitment and selection processes. It is speculated that with the addition of Facebook screening, the problem of having access to objective information on the applicant can be harmful as it is suggested that employers are better off not knowing certain things (Brynside, 2008). The risk of knowing the age or ethnicity of an applicant may put them at risk of exposing their discrimination, and in these cases unawareness would be better. Also literature has outlined that ‘invasion of privacy’ is a potential implication for employers; internet technologies today allow the search of applicants private information online that previously was not able to be obtained by traditional methods (Brandenburg, 2007; Joinson, 2008). It is evident that SNSs have potential for illegal behaviours by employers; this section will discuss the relevant components of employment law that must be considered when addressing the issue of SNSs in selection.

### **Discrimination**

New Zealand legalisation covers discrimination in both the Employment Relations Act 2000 and the Human Rights Act 1993. There are thirteen grounds of unlawful discrimination: sex, age, race, colour, ethnic or national origins, religious beliefs, ethical beliefs, family status, marital status, disability, political opinion, employment status and sexual orientation (Employment Relations Act 2000, 2011; Human Rights Act 1993, 2011).

New Zealand Business (2006) shows that 43% of respondents in an international workplace survey say they have experienced some kind of workplace discrimination when applying for jobs in the past five years. Race, gender, disability and age have all been identified as the top forms of discrimination. Indeed it was age that was seen to be a primary concerning factor in employment “ageism has overtaken ethnicity and sexism in many areas as the greatest source of discrimination in employment” (Kennedy cited in New Zealand Business, 2006, p. 5) raising a concern for SNSs prominent group of young users.

Currently the ERA 2000 only permits those people who are already in employment to be eligible to seek remedies for discriminatory treatment. This excludes job applicants, who are largely affected by discriminatory treatment (Employment Relations Act 2000, 2011). Despite this, the HRA 1993 covers a wider range of activities, and in section 22 states that discrimination in employment matters can refer to the recruitment and selection processes (Human Rights Act 1993, 2011).

## *22 Employment*

*(1) Where an applicant for employment or an employee is qualified for work of any description, it shall be unlawful for an employer, or any person acting or purporting to act on behalf of an employer,—*

- *to refuse or omit to employ the applicant on work of that description which is available;*

*... by reason of any of the prohibited grounds of discrimination (Human Rights Act 1993, 2011).*

In addition to this:

*(2) It shall be unlawful for any person concerned with procuring employment for other persons or procuring employees for any employer to treat any person seeking employment differently from other persons in the same or substantially similar circumstances by reason of any of the prohibited grounds of discrimination (Human Rights Act 1993, 2011).*

While arguably much discriminatory data about an applicant can be obtained through other selection methods (i.e. face-to-face interviews can reveal age, gender, and race etc.) access to online personal profiles of applicants provides a platform in which employers are able to gain this information legally, without the knowledge of the individual involved. The information page on Facebook allows users to post their religious and political views, their marital status, sexual orientation, employment,

national origin, age and sex. Other more indirect elements of Facebook can also reveal this, for example photos can indicate ones gender, age, and ethnicity immediately, and this can all be achieved with very minimal effort. SNSs differ from other more traditional selection methods as individuals are more inclined to post these potentially discriminatory, and personal details about themselves online (Christofides, et al., 2009; Taraszow, et al., 2010), however in C.Vs and application forms these details are not prescribed as they are not relevant to job performance and are therefore illegal. There is little literature that has measured the extent to which this discrimination is occurring; this study aims to identify how and if employers consider the exposure to discriminative opportunities when using SNSs in selection, and how this impacts on their use.

### **Equal Employment Opportunities**

In addition to discrimination laws is the widely practised and highly enforced concept of Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO) which is incorporated as part of the HRA 1993 and State Sector Act 1988. According to the State Sector Act 1988 a good employer is an employer whose personal policy contains provision in which they ensure fair and proper treatment of employees in all aspects of their employment (State Sector Act 1988, 2011). This includes the requirement of an equal employment opportunities programme. EEO is about eliminating barriers to ensure that employees are given equal and fair opportunity for the employment of their choice, and are given a chance to perform at their maximum potential, it is also regarded as a diversity practice. EEO places emphasis on hiring based on merit, fairness at work, flexible working options, and promotion based on talent (EEO Trust, 2007). In addition to risk of discrimination due to stated unlawful grounds, unfair practice can occur as Facebook can give indications of factors such as one's physical condition, and any visible disabilities one may have. There is risk that employers may make assumptions of an applicant's ability due to what they may observe in the social media. This poses implications for both the applicants and the job seekers.

### **Demographic differences in use of SNSs**

As outlined earlier in regards to impression management, different demographics are more inclined to publish certain information on their SNSs profile, and this could lead to them being discounted against in selection (Peluchette & Karl, 2009). For example, studies show that students are more liberal with publishing their private information publically, than those who were in employment, it was also found that women were

more cautious with information disclosure than their male counterparts (Schrammel, Koffel, & Tscheligi, 2009; Taraszow, et al., 2010; Thelwall, 2008). Studies performed by Peluchette and Karl (2008) support these discrepancies between genders. 56.5 % of respondents in their study stated that they did not want employers to see alcohol related material (photos/videos and comments) however it was the male students that were less concerned about employers seeing such material than female students. EEO and discrimination factors are therefore of concern as it is evident that different demographic groups display varying attitudes toward their social media activity. In the selection process this could result in groups being negatively impacted upon.

Currently there is no adequate policy in place that specifically protects both job seekers and employers, with the use of SNSs in selection. Literature has shown that discrimination and lack of EEO can arise as a result of such use, and without policies in place employers can be at risk. As argued by Greenwald (2008, p. 1) “employers may be leaving themselves vulnerable to charges that they are using the data available on the Web site to cull minorities”. The present study aims to uncover the level of concern employers have of discrimination and unfair practice through their SNS screening technique.

## **THE QUESTION OF PRIVACY**

An important issue in the investigation in the use of SNSs by employers in employment screening processes is privacy. One may argue that if an individual decides to display their private information in online public forums, then it can be assumed they are not concerned about issues of personal privacy. However, due to the nature of the content that can be displayed on these forums there is a question of whether the information is relevant to the job description in question, and whether the employer has any “business” looking at the information displayed without informed consent (Hayes, et al., 2009).

### **The tensions of privacy on Facebook**

O’Hara and Stevens (2006) raise an important argument in regards to the ever evolving Internet and the issue of privacy:

*“Privacy is a casualty of the information age. It seems that ICT is killing our personal space. Information about many sensitive aspects of our lives is held by all sorts of people and organisations, public and private. It is, as we have argued, easy to set up different identities and personas online, which may seem to aid privacy. However, this is only a veneer, as a sufficiently determined*

*agency can do a lot of tracing and records of online transactions are remarkably difficult to delete” (O’Hara & Stevens, 2006, p. 245).*

While there are privacy settings available to users of SNSs such as Facebook, the issue of how much privacy has been raised and poses the challenge of balancing users privacy concerns with the enabling of users to engage with the site (Joinson, 2008). An article in The Economist argues the tensions between access and privacy “networking sites are based on the idea that people will share information about themselves...if people stop swapping content then the sites will fade away” Lenhart cited in (Anonymous, 2010). Founder Mark Zuckerberg himself acknowledges that people want full access to others information, however they want to be able to have full control of their own (Brandenburg, 2007). The gratification received from “surveillance” of other users has created questions about how Facebook, and its users, define and interpret privacy, and this is discussed further (Joinson, 2008). Most SNSs require users to disclose their basic information and email address, after this, it is up to the user to voluntarily disclose any further personal information. With this in mind, some users go to the edges of decency and legality in terms of personal information disclosure and liability becomes an issue when employers make employment decisions based from this information without the justification or consent from the applicant (Brandenburg, 2007; Greenwald, 2008).

Currently, Facebook’s default privacy settings are set with the intentions of having maximum content available to the public. Despite this, Facebook does have blocking abilities that allow users to block their profiles from unaffiliated users, but at the same time maintaining access to their friends, and in some circumstances, non-friends (Anonymous, 2010; Brandenburg, 2007; Cotler & Rizzo, 2010; Warning & Buchanan, 2010). Facebook provide a clear privacy statement that informs its users about information protection and how Facebook itself uses its user’s private information and subsequent analysis of their activity. The policy covers nine sections in which are all detailed with how information is used, and who is responsible for the content. Facebook clearly state that any information voluntarily posted on the site will be protected as much as possible, however there is no guarantee that the content will not be viewed by a third party or unauthorized person (Facebook, 2010; Warning & Buchanan, 2010). While Facebook does outline the alternative privacy settings to increase protection, interestingly, in one section it is recommended the “friends of friends” settings which opens access to your account to both your friends and theirs (Facebook, 2010). Concerns

of privacy are raised here as users are opening their online profiles to hundreds of individuals they have never met, some of which could be potential employers, or at the very minimum, be connected with a potential employer.

Even when one attempts to strengthen their privacy settings, outsiders can gain access to their information due to posts that may have been made by other users and “tags” linked with the posts. Facebook itself acknowledge the following (Facebook, 2010).

*“Even after you remove information from your profile or delete your account, copies of that information may remain viewable elsewhere to the extent it has been shared with others, it was otherwise distributed pursuant to your privacy settings, or it was copied or stored by other users”.*

*“You understand that information might be reshared or copied by other users”*

*“Certain types of communications that you send to other users cannot be removed, such as messages.”*

*“When you post information on another user’s profile or comment on another user’s post, that information will be subject to the other user’s privacy settings”.*

Therefore it is evident that full online privacy is difficult to obtain. The use of SNSs is extended beyond the simple notion of connecting with other users, and has evolved into a source in which others can “breach” ones privacy and access information that customarily was not on display to outsiders such as employers.

It has been argued that although SNS users voluntarily post private information on their profiles, due to the nature of the default privacy settings many users do not understand how much information they are sharing online, or simply do not understand the somewhat complicated and lengthy process of adjusting ones privacy settings (Cotler & Rizzo, 2010; Light & McGrath, 2010; Taraszow, et al., 2010; Warning & Buchanan, 2010). Users are given the option of joining varying networks (i.e. a specific university network) and without their knowledge have their information open to the entire network. Brandenburg (2007) raises the point that many employers keep their university email address and therefore can gain access to these university networks on Facebook, and if not often have current or fresh graduates who have access. While it is clear that employers have the potential to take more extreme measures to gain access to applicant’s accounts, the actual extent to how far employers are or will go to get access remains unknown. Additionally, the level to which applicants give permission for employers to do so is questionable, and highly concerning. Throughout the selection

process the employer has a right to contact an applicant's referees, and check their criminal history; however this is done with informed consent of the applicant. Should the same consent be required for accessing online information such as SNSs?

### **Permission to observe SNSs**

As evident in the Jobvite (2010) survey, there is little permission being obtained from applicants as employers observe their profiles in the selection process. This aspect is highly important as it raises the question of applicant's rights to privacy. Cotler and Rizzo (2010, p.43) argues this as an ethical issue within the realm of selection:

*“A job candidate generally does not provide informed consent to a potential employer to look at their Facebook profile or related Internet postings. Employers who view this information often do so without the knowledge and/or consent of the candidate they are interested in hiring. Some potential employees never get a chance to be interviewed or hired because of information found on Facebook about them. Future employers can also learn gender, age, sexual orientation, and social habits which often are not legal to ask on a job application or interview. This information is all obtained without (informed) consent of the future employee. Without a clear example of how the profile may be viewed, a potential employee often is not aware of how vulnerable their (perceived private) information is.”*

While this may be a valid point, should such use of SNSs be likened to an employer conducting informal conversations through personal networks? This issue will be explored in depth in the study.

### **Privacy legislation**

From a legal perspective employers are not forbidden to look up applicants online. The New Zealand Privacy Act 1993 purpose is to promote and protect individual privacy and to provide a means in which the Privacy Commissioner can investigate complaints about interferences with individual privacy (Privacy Act 1993, 2011). While SNSs may contain what is considered private information, under the act the content is regarded as *publicly available information*, meaning personal information that is contained in a publicly available publication. In Part 2 Section 6 The Privacy Act 1993 outlines that personal information collected must be used for lawful purposes and continues to state that an agency need collect any personal information form the individual directly, however this does not comply if the information is publically available information (Privacy Act 1993, 2011). As a result employers are not breaking privacy laws by accessing applicant SNSs. Despite this it is plausible that users may be using privacy

settings that they think restrict access to third parties such as potential employers (Davis, 2006). Does an employer breach privacy by accessing the profile in ways unknown to the applicant (i.e. through a connected “friend” of the user)? Should they have this right? It has been stated that courts often support that fact that information that is available on the internet is considered to be in the public domain and therefore an applicant would find it difficult to have a claim of invasion of privacy, particularly as the information is voluntarily provided (Brynside, 2008).

How does the use of SNSs comply with company policies? Warning and Buchanan (2010) performed a study in which they assessed the legal and ethical aspects of pre-employment screening and employee surveillance using SNSs. It supports the understanding that SNSs are becoming a common tool, and that the use of SNSs in screening of employees is not a violation of existing laws. Despite this, employers need to be aware of the potential claims that could be made against them including discrimination and invasion of privacy (Brynside, 2008; Greenwald, 2008; Warning & Buchanan, 2010). The literature strongly contended that employers should offer transparency to both potential and current employees throughout their screening processes; this is also supported by Kolek and Saunders (2008). Employers will be investigated in regards to their concerns with privacy when observing SNSs, and the potential implications of this modern screening tool.

## **CONCLUSION**

Brynside (2008, p. 453) cites that “the more economical it becomes to obtain information about a potential employees private life, the greater the likelihood employers will use it” therefore the economical nature and ease of accessibility to an individual’s private life through social media contributes to the wide use. Social media provides information and insights into aspects of individual’s lives that would not be obtained by traditional means of selection. While there may be many perceived benefits from social media as a selection tool, there are equally many concerns that must be further investigated.

This project aims to understand how, why and what employers’ observe and interpret when examining potential employees’ SNSs and whether this use has validity. Additionally, investigations will be made into the legalities of the use, primarily gaining an employer’s perspective on the issues of discrimination and invasion of privacy.

Findings will build upon the growing body of SNS literature to increase awareness for both employers and job seekers of the potential repercussions of SNSs. The previous investigation has given rise to the following research questions:

**RQ 1:** How are employers currently utilising Social Networking Sites in the selection process?

**RQ 2:** Why are employers interested in potential candidates' online, Social Network Site profile?

**RQ 3:** What do employers observe when viewing potential candidates' Social Networking Profile and how do they interpret and use this information?

**RQ 4:** How accurate and valid are SNSs as a selection tool?

**RQ 5:** How do employers reconcile the issues of privacy and discrimination in SNSs?

## Chapter 3: Methodology

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The following chapter will outline the research approach for this study and the rationale behind the selected methods. The use of exploratory qualitative research will be justified in full, explaining the use of semi-structured interviews, and an exercise involving the deconstruction of Facebook profiles. The methodology for primary data collection is explained in two stages. Stage one outlines the process of inviting Facebook users to be involved in the study, and the subsequent collection of screenshots of their Facebook profile. Stage two outlines the gathering of participants for the interview phase of the study, and the interview and deconstruction exercise protocol. Finally, data analysis through the method of grounded theory will be outlined.

### **RESEARCH APPROACH**

This research takes an exploratory approach due to the contemporary nature of the topic. The use of SNSs in selection procedures has been acknowledged by media and academic sources as a growing tool and as a result is a highly new area observed in organisational theory (Brandenburg, 2007; DeKay, 2009; Pearson, 2010; Roberts & Roach, 2009). There is limited understanding of the issues surrounding the use of SNS in personnel selection and the practical implications from this use. Consequently an exploratory method was best suited to this study as it allowed for the insight of undeveloped and previously unidentified issues and aspects (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2000). The nature of exploratory study allowed for flexibility as the method “concentrates on gathering a wide range of data and impressions” (Hussey & Hussey, 1997, p. 10).

Qualitative research was deemed as the most appropriate method to exploring the use of SNSs in selection. Studies that have been performed on the topic to date prominently used quantitative methods for gathering data. Quantitative research is objective in nature, involving the collection and analysis of numerical data and statistical tests, as a result it fails to address different perceptions and experiences held by the various stakeholders (Hussey & Hussey, 1997). Phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions are difficult to extort from conventional quantitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). While the literature has raised key issues in regards to the topic, it has failed to obtain rich insight into the emergent subject field and gain deep understanding of the key issues. As the research is exploring the use of SNSs by employers, by

definition the qualitative approach is suited as it “is more subjective in nature and involves examining and reflecting on perceptions in order to gain an understanding of social and human activities” (Hussey & Hussey, 1997, p. 12).

Qualitative research through the use of semi-structured interviews was best suited to this study as it gave the employers opportunity to express their views in their own words as opposed to quantitative methods such as surveys which limit personal input and interpretation (Hussey & Hussey, 1997). This method caters to the fact there would be diversity in the interpretations carried by various employers and their utilisation and observation of SNSs in their selection procedures.

Semi-structured interviews were used in order to obtain rich, in-depth responses from the participants, while maintaining a focus on the main subject matters (Saunders, et al., 2000). This ensured that relevant information was obtained in a time effective manner. After a review of previous literature in the field, questions in which had emerged from this were used to form the interview schedule however, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility to probe the participant’s answers further for deeper investigation. Interviews are sensitive to “the unique experiences and subjectivity of the interviewee” (Packer, 2011, p. 47), and therefore are appropriate to the exploratory methodology (Ghauri, Gronhaug, & Kirstainslund, 1995; Saunders, et al., 2000).

Both ‘open-ended’ and ‘probing’ questioning techniques were used to explore the interviewee responses in depth. The use of open ended questions is designed to “encourage the interviewee to provide an extensive and developmental answer and may be used to reveal attitudes or obtain facts. They encourage the interviewee to reply as they wish” (Saunders, et al., 2000, p. 260). Open-ended questions were used in conjunction with probing questions, which were necessary to further explore responses that had potential significance to the research. As described by Saunders, et al (2000, p. 261) the intention of probing questions is to “encourage exploration of the point made without offering a view or judgement on [the interviewers] part”. These questioning techniques allowed the interviewer to steer the conversation in a direction that was relevant and focused to the main research questions. Elaborated responses were encouraged as well as the clarification of answers, and reordering of questions (see Appendix E for interview schedule).

Additionally, each participant was required to deconstruct and analyse four Facebook profiles to identify information that may be useful in job applicant screening processes. This technique focused on research question three, by attempting to replicate the process of observing SNSs in selection processes, and maintaining the exploratory nature. Deconstruction is defined as “a strategy of critical analysis of language and texts which emphasizes features exposing unquestioned assumptions and inconsistencies” in basic terms it is defined as the “taking to pieces” of something (Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 197). This was achieved through an open-ended and probing questioning technique, to encourage the interviewee’s deconstruction and achieve rich, in-depth responses without influencing the interviewee (see Appendix E for deconstruction interview protocol). This method allowed for the interviewee to reveal their opinions of their Facebook profile openly and freely.

## **SAMPLE**

The methodology for this study occurred in two stages. Stage one involved coordinating with volunteers who would provide screenshots of their Facebook profile. Stage two involved seeking interviewees, and conducting interviews. As a result two participant pools were required. The first pool was labelled “Facebook Profile Volunteers” and the second “Employer Interviewees”. Facebook Profile Volunteers were required prior to interviewing as the purpose of the Facebook Profile Volunteers was to obtain a series of Facebook screenshots that would be used in the interviews.

### **Sample Stage One: Facebook Profile Volunteers**

Specifically, the sample sought four Facebook Profile Volunteers over the age of 18, two extroverts and two introverts, one male and female, who would be randomly selected from a pool of interested volunteers. Two male and two female volunteers were sufficient to provide a range of profiles, and allow for detailed deconstruction while remaining time effective.

Using a personal Facebook account, a Facebook “Event” was set up. This event outlined the purpose of the research and a brief description of what would be required from the Facebook Profile Volunteers (see Appendix B). Invitations to ‘join’ the event were sent to all individuals in the accounts network of 483 friends, this method provided a sufficiently large pool to gain a range of volunteers from.

Those who responded were asked to conduct an online personality test accessed through a hyperlink to the website which was posted on the event page. This research used the following online personality test: <http://www.personalitytest.org.uk/> created by Buchanan (2011) who specialises in psychological research. An online personality test was used for convenience as they are easily accessible by all potential volunteers, and efficient as online personality tests are ready to be completed with instant automated results scoring (Buchanan & Smith, 1999). The personality test is based on the Five Factor Model theory (also known as the Big 5 personality traits) which uses five main dimensions of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism to generally describe human personality. Personality was calculated through a 41 Big 5 item inventory where volunteers would rate their personality on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very inaccurate) to 5 (very accurate). These self-rated, Big 5 factors have been shown to have considerable reliability and validity (Cervone & Pervin, 2008; Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987, 1997). The focus of the personality test was to identify the personality types of the Facebook Profile Volunteers in an attempt to increase the variation in the Facebook screenshots and the type of material that may be present on their profile screenshots.

Those who volunteered to participate were instructed to email the test results to the researcher where the volunteers were separated into four categories- male extraverts, male introverts, female extraverts and female introverts. Extraverts were classed as having a relatively high (RH) level of extraversion, and those below that were classed as introverted. A 7.2% response rate from the event invitation was received, with eight female introverts, nine female extraverts, 11 male extraverts and seven male introverts.

Level of extraversion is assessed by the “quantity and intensity of interpersonal interaction; activity level; need for stimulation; and capacity for joy” (Cervone & Pervin, 2008, p. 271). Extraversion is defined by how sociable, active, talkative, and person-orientated one is, while introversion is defined by how reserved, sober, task-oriented and quiet an individual is (Cervone & Pervin, 2008; Olson & Hergenhahn, 2011) . These two extremes deemed suitable to obtaining a variance in the personality of the volunteers and subsequently the type of content seen on the Facebook profile screenshots, and therefore the remaining four Big 5 factors were unnecessary for the aims of this study.

The four volunteers were randomly<sup>2</sup> selected (one from each category) and contacted via email to fully inform them about the project, and explain the extent of their participation. Signed consent was received from each volunteer prior to taking the Facebook Profile screenshots (see Appendix D for a copy of the consent form).

### **Facebook profile screenshots**

In order to attain a range of Facebook activity across the volunteers' social calendars, a total of three screenshots of each volunteer's Facebook profile "Wall"<sup>3</sup> was taken over a period of three weeks: Monday: Week 1; Wednesday: Week 2; and, Sunday: Week 3. On completion of the three weeks, a screenshot of each volunteers' "Info"<sup>4</sup> page was also taken. The purpose of the selected days offered insight into the volunteers Facebook activity over the course of a week as different events (whether it be social or professional) occur in the beginning, middle and end of one's week and therefore a variety of activity may be published. Volunteers were informed that a screenshot would be taken on the evening of each chosen day. Screenshots were taken using the PrintScreen keyboard tool, taking a photo of the maximum amount of the page visible in the one shot. These screenshots were taken by the researcher personally, to ensure consistency in quality. At the end of the three week period all shots were compiled and formatted<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The four groups were put into a Microsoft Excel spread sheet. Using the RANDBETWEEN function formula =RAND () a volunteer from each category was randomly selected. Random sampling ensured that each volunteer had an equal chance of selection from each category, eliminating researcher bias (Cooper & Schindler, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Wall: A bulletin board where the user and their friends can leave messages, notes, good wishes, as well as post links, photos, and videos (Light & McGrath, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Info: A page where the user can publish their work/education history, activities and interests, basic personal information (gender, age, sexual orientation, relationship status, political views etc.) and contact information (Light & McGrath, 2010).

<sup>5</sup>As per ethical requirements, each screenshot required formatting to ensure the privacy of the volunteers 'friends' present on their screenshots. Using image and photo editing software Paint.net, any personal details of the volunteer's friends visible on the profile wall screenshot (primarily their profile photo thumbnail and accompanying name) were blurred to ensure their anonymity, however associated comments and links were kept visible. While volunteers were informed that their identity would be present on the screenshots, the last name of the volunteer was removed from the screenshots. Screenshots were then converted into PDF file format to restrict further editing as some would be emailed to interviewee participants.

## **Sample Stage Two: Interviewee Participants**

This study focused on the use of SNSs by employers in personnel selection processes. Therefore the primary research component of this study required employers, or those who have involvement in recruitment and selection for an organisation.

Fifteen participants were sought for interviewing. Using a convenience sampling technique, people with responsibility for selection were invited to participate in the study via email, this was followed with a phone call to further explain the study and encourage their involvement. Convenience sampling was used due to its easy, simple and affordable nature (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). Additionally, permission was received from the Human Resources Institute of New Zealand (HRINZ) to send out an invitation through the HRINZ database to request members to participate in the research. HRINZ is an organisation that represents individuals interested in Human Resources in New Zealand, providing a range of services, networking opportunities, education, conferences, and publications to their 4000+ members (HRINZ, 2011). As this study is in the subject area of Human Resources and seeks Human Resources managers for interviewing, it was an ideal network to utilise. The invitation (see Appendix C) outlined the research aims, the required participant specifications, and the extent of their potential involvement. An email was sent to the 799 members who are willing to participate in research, receiving five responses to the invitation (a response rate of 0.6%). From these two samples of interviewees, a snowball sampling method was used that successfully increased participant numbers to 15 interviewees. Snowball sampling occurs when participants refer the researcher to others who express similar experiences or characteristics as their own, who are deemed as suitable for the study (Cooper & Schindler, 2011; Kumar, 2005). Snowball sampling was required due to the difficulty in increasing participant numbers. It was thought that due to potential areas of sensitivity surrounding the topic, employers were hesitant to involve themselves in the research.

Following confirmation of participation, a research information sheet for employer interviewees was attached to ensure that they were fully informed about their potential involvement (see Appendix A for information sheet). From this, a suitable interview time was arranged.

The sample size of 15 was sufficient in this study due to information saturation, as no new information emerged in the latter interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Interviewee participants consisted of four males and 11 females, nine of which were involved in Human Resource Management for their current organisation of which six had direct involvement and three had some involvement in recruitment. Four were Managers or Directors who all had direct involvement in recruitment, and two were involved in recruitment agency work. Of the current organisations the participants were employed with, 10 were classed as large organisations, and five were classed as a Small to Medium Enterprise (SME). Organisation industry type ranged greatly including Manufacturing, Consulting, Communications, Local Government, Tertiary Education, Hospitality, Manufacturing, Recruitment, and Not for Profit.

### **Interview protocol**

Before interviewing commenced, a pilot study was conducted to test the interview protocol and the deconstruction exercise. The pilot study was required as the interview and deconstruction exercise had not been carried out previously, therefore it was important to determine the feasibility of both tools (Kumar, 2005). The pilot was successful therefore no changes were made to the interview schedule or deconstruction exercise, and was continued to be used for the remaining interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were used in this research. Of the 15 interviews, 10 were done over the phone, and five were conducted face-to-face. Both phone interviews and face-to-face interviews were used in order to complete the data collection phase in a timely and affordable manner. Interviewees involved in a phone interview were emailed copies of the PDF Facebook profile screenshots prior to the interview<sup>6</sup>. Those involved in a face-to-face interview were handed paper copies of the Facebook screenshots at the interview. All interviewees received a consent form which they were required to read and sign before the interview commenced (see Appendix D for copy of the consent form).

Interviews began with preliminary questions (see Appendix E for interview schedule) identifying the industry of the organisation and their typical recruitment and selection processes, this enabled the participants to ease and relax into the interview. It then

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<sup>6</sup> Interviewees were informed of the ethical requirement to destroy the PDF files on completion of the interview.

proceeded into semi-structured discussion around the research questions 1, 2, 4 and 5 looking at how and why employers use SNSs in selection, and validity and privacy issues. Research question 3, looking at what employers identify in Facebook, was addressed through a deconstruction exercise of the Facebook Profile screenshots (as described below). As mentioned earlier, probing questions were used to explore responses that were of significance to the study, which required further analysis or provided new, unforeseen insight. Both phone and face-to-face interviews lasted on average 50 minutes and were recorded using an audio recording device. On completion of the interview, each interview was transcribed for later data analysis. Transcription gave opportunity to investigate issues further, and uncover common themes and findings for data analysis.

### **Deconstruction exercise**

Interviewees were asked to complete a deconstruction exercise of all four Facebook Profile volunteer screenshots. They were advised of the purpose of the exercise, and to view the profiles in the position of an employer in the selection process. Detail was given on the three week time period in which the shots were taken in order to contextualise the three images, and the information page. After allowing the interviewee approximately two minutes to examine the content of the screenshots, a series of questions were asked (see Appendix E) that were aimed at getting the interviewee to analyse and deconstruct the profile in detail, and provide rationalisation for their examinations. This was repeated for each of the four series of screenshots.

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical clearance, category A, was granted from the University of Otago prior to any data collection. There were many ethical issues to consider throughout the study. First, Facebook Screenshot Volunteers were informed that while their identity would be known in their screenshots, confidentiality of the results obtained in the deconstruction exercise was assured and their screenshots would be destroyed upon completion of the project. The only people able to view the screenshots would be the supervisor of the research, the interviewee participants and the researcher itself. Signed consent was obtained from all four volunteers to permit the use of their personal Facebook screenshots (see Appendix D).

Second, signed consent was obtained from all interviewee participants (see Appendix D), outlining that they would be audio recorded, and that confidentiality would remain throughout the entire project and thereafter. No personal identifying or intrusive information was collected from the interview.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

While there may be little extensive research in the field of Social Media in selection, this did provide some knowledge from which this study could build on and allow for further growth and development. As a result an inductive data analysis method of grounded theory was used. Grounded theory is a highly used method for analysing qualitative data (Glaser, 1998; Packer, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). There are many benefits to using grounded theory, it is argued to offer greater insight, enhance understanding, and provide “meaningful guide to action” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). This is achieved through developing concepts from empirical data by identifying and bringing out ideas that are shared in common, and those that are different (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded theory celebrates individual subjectivity, it assumes that all people are different from one another and therefore ignores context, different personal back ground, and researcher influence (Packer, 2011). Theory for this study emerged from the data collected through the techniques of interviewing and the deconstruction exercise. All interviews were transcribed for ease of data analysis. Once transcribed, analysis occurred through the identification of common themes, and significant findings. Conceptual ordering of this data was achieved through coding. Coding is described as the effort “to organise excerpts from the transcripts into categories” (Seidman 1998 cited in Packer, 2011, p. 58). Strauss and Corbin (1998, p.102) state that “during open coding, data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences. Events, happenings, objects and actions/interactions that are found to be conceptually similar in nature or related in meaning are grouped together under more abstract concepts termed ‘categories’”.

Data from the transcriptions were organised into discrete categories based on the properties and characteristics of the data. Common words, ideas, and responses were identified and coded. Significant findings that were different from other responses were also coded. These codes were categorised and labelled to reflect their nature and

content, acknowledging the importance of keeping the categories well defined (Hussey & Hussey, 1997) Once categorised, the data was placed under an appropriate broad theme. Evidently, themes that emerged in this study directly evolved around each of the 5 research questions.

After familiarising oneself with the responses from each Facebook profile deconstruction, categories were developed to pool the different adjectives used to describe each Facebook profile. Forming a table with these broad categories, responses were tallied for each participant's answers. I.e. if a Facebook volunteer was described as mature based on the content seen in the screenshot then that would tally as one under the broad descriptive of 'character/personality' and so on. It was found that key themes and common words were used to describe each profile and therefore the broad categories emerged from this analysis (see Table 4.2 for examples of the main categories identified). Additionally, common phrases were pulled out when describing specific elements of the screenshots (i.e. drug use, bad language, and extraversion/introversion).

Once data had been collaborated and defined, a degree of theorising was applied. The following definition was used in the data analysis of this study to describe the process of theorising, "theory denotes a set of well-developed categories (e.g. themes, concepts) that are systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some relevant social, psychological, educational, nursing or other phenomenon" perhaps most importantly, this definition also outlines that "the statement of relationship explain who, what, when, where, why, how, and with what consequences an event occurs" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 22). Each key finding was mapped and linked into other findings, as well as making links to findings from previous literature. These theories were developed in relation to the research questions posed at the beginning of the study and additional significant findings.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) contend that from the development of ideas into theories, it is important to outline the practical implications of the theory. Once the findings were developed, clear possible implications were identified. Discussions were made in regards to its relevance to organisational literature, and its significance for individuals involved in selection for organisations, as well as the significance of the findings to job seekers.

On conclusion of the data analysis, limitations of the study and research methods were discussed. This gave rise to areas that require further analysis and potential for improvement in future 'SNSs in selection' research.

## Chapter 4: Findings

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Chapter four outlines the findings from the research. This section will be structured around the 5 broad research questions that had developed from the literature. Quotes from the interviews will be utilised to illustrate the key points, furthermore tables and figures will be applied where appropriate, to demonstrate key trends and relationships. Research questions 1, 2, 5 provide the key findings that had emerged from the interviews. Research questions 3 and 4 are strongly interlinked, with findings incorporated from the deconstruction exercise in addition to the interviews.

### **Research Question 1: How are employers in New Zealand currently utilising Social Networking Sites in the selection process?**

To set the scene for the interviews, participants were first asked about their experiences of using SNSs in the selection process. Nine of the 15 participants were actively utilising SNSs within selection. This is consistent with other studies which suggest an increase in the use of SNSs for selection by employers and human resource managers and underpins the importance of understanding the underlying usages and motivations of people involved in selection.

The extent to which the media is used varies greatly. All interviewees were asked to describe their typical selection process; the use of SNSs was frequently discussed as an **unofficial** part of their process. This variety is represented by phrases such as “*Not formally we don’t*” (P10)<sup>7</sup>, “*Not officially*” (P3), “*Not in such a structured manner*” (P15), and more vaguely “*We often have a look just out of curiosity...you do it without even thinking*” (P7). One had formally introduced it into their selection procedure, while one other was required to do internet background checks (which included SNSs) as part of their selection policy “*It was part of our credential process...it outlined basically that every single applicant that you are ever going to put forward you had to put these searches on*” (P1). Upon analysis of the findings, it is suggested that due to the fact that the use of SNSs in selection is so new, and there are many controversial aspects to the use (validity, invasion of privacy and discrimination risk) employers are hesitant to incorporate SNSs screening as a formal part of their selection process.

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<sup>7</sup> P represents participant ,with each numbered 1-15 to protect their identity within the study

The main tools used by the interviewees to screen applicants were the search engine **Google**, and SNSs **Facebook** and **LinkedIn**. When using Facebook, users tend to log into their personal Facebook account and search the applicants name using the Facebook search toolbar. Likewise, LinkedIn was used for directly searching applicants names, some users paid subscription fees to increase their level of access to users information. On a broader scale Google was used to search applicants' names and key words. This often resulted in their SNSs profiles being returned and therefore Google could also be seen as a gateway to SNSs. The following quotes reflect the participants' most common ways of accessing online profiles.

*"I would often Google their name with LinkedIn, and they might have a profile, if it's on Facebook I'll be in my own account and do a search for their name and if I can't find it I leave it" (P7)*

*"Google searching it, we would put in key words like- misconduct, harassment things like that. Key words that would come up with someone's name." (P1)*

Somewhat controversially, two interviewees accessed applicant's accounts by other means. The first used their own family member's account that allowed them to access a range of specific networks, while the second requested the applicant to access the applicants account personally in the company of the employer.

*"My brother is at university and I might jump on his Facebook page to see if I recognise any names" (P10)*

*"I go through my own personal account, because that to me is part of an openness...I just give them access to a terminal then and there so that they can allow me to view those particular sections of their profile, I take a screen shot and work on through that" (P6)*

Accordingly, three key points of access can be seen. First, employers are searching the web legitimately, however are not incorporating this search as an official part of their selection process. Second, some employers are actively searching applicant's online profiles by using more intrusive methods; and third, some are including the search of SNSs formally in their selection process, with the permission of the applicant.

This raises the issues of **privacy** and **permission**. There were concerns raised about invasion of privacy, this largely came down to the method which people were accessing individual's applicants Facebook profiles and whether they had permission to do so. This will be discussed in detail later in the analysis.

All participants had interviews included in their selection procedures. The screening of SNSs was commonly done prior to the first or second interview in the final shortlist stage due to the **length of time** it takes to manually screen applicants online, and to build a picture of the applicant prior to interviewing often creating **cues** for questioning. Some had no fixed time as to when they used it, while others screened after the interview to **validate** information that had emerged, or to give the applicant an opportunity to disclose any potential detrimental activity (i.e. criminal records).

*“I would use them generally to background someone after I have decided that they are worth a second interview” (P6)*

*“Usually prior to an interview, it would be after an interview if they said something that struck our curiosity we would go hunting.”(P3)*

*“Depends on the role- if I had a large amount of applicants and quite a few short listed then would check them out at that stage, but if I didn’t have many then I would interview them then go and have a look.”(P5)*

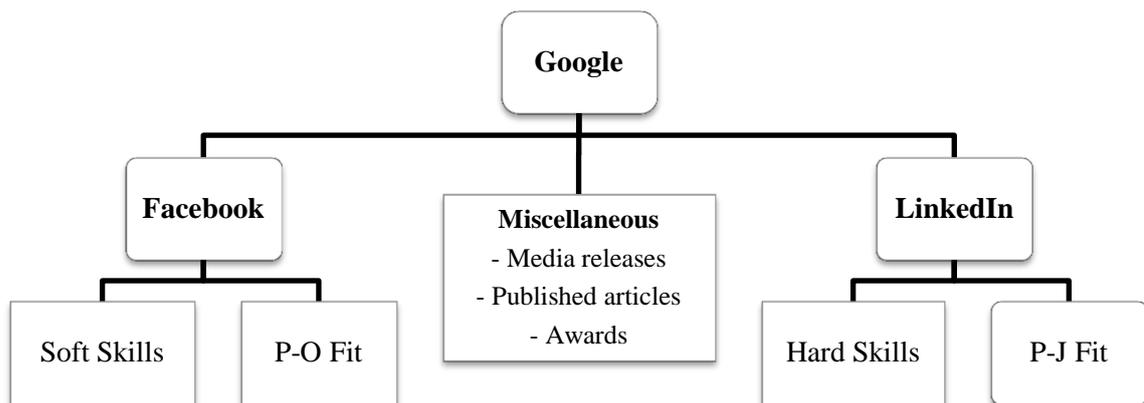
*“We would interview them first, and then fill out a consent and disclosure form and then we would Google them... [If] you Googled them before you have even spoken to them or before they have disclosed it [objectionable behaviour] and then it came up and you thought oh I don’t want to use them, when actually it could be perfectly legit but they haven’t had the opportunity to explain in their way” (P1)*

The **time** at which applicants are screened could have different impacts on the outcome of the decision. There is the potential that candidates might be prejudged prior to the interview due to content seen on their SNS profile. This could, on a negative note, mean they miss out on being selected for an interview or positively may create a favourable view of the candidate. As outlined further in the findings, accuracy and validity of SNS as a screening tool is largely questioned, and therefore good applicants may be missing out on job opportunities while poor applicants may be favoured due to the inaccuracy of the information present on their SNS, and misuse of this as a tool. This leads us to consider what employers themselves feel they can glean from viewing SNSs

### **Research Question 2: Why are employers in New Zealand interested in potential candidates’ online, Social Network Site profile?**

When asked why they use SNSs in their selection processes a variety of answers came forward. These centred on the concept that SNSs provide an additional tool for gathering as much information about the applicant as possible. The three tools, suggested above, which selectors use to search an applicant’s online profile appear to be utilised in

different ways to obtain different types of information (see Figure 4.1). Google is used to access all miscellaneous information about the candidate that is published online, including their SNS profiles. This also provides other sources of information such as Media Releases exposing any criminal behaviour, as well as any indication of awards, publications, and information on previous employment. Broadly speaking, Facebook is used to identify **soft skills** and **person-organisational fit**, while LinkedIn is used to identify **hard skills** and **person-job fit**. Table 4.1 displays examples of quotes which represent the broad trends of what each SNS is used to identify.



*Figure 4.1 Tools used to search competencies of candidates online*

Facebook		LinkedIn
Soft Skills	P-O Fit	Hard Skills & P-J Fit
<p><i>“Our junior roles are often client facing so what’s important is level of appropriateness”</i>(P7)</p> <p><i>“How they communicate with their friends and other people.”</i>(P12)</p> <p><i>“It’s quite often possible to have a look how a person communicates in the written form”</i>(P6)</p>	<p><i>“People, they tend to exert a lot of their personality on Facebook... the information they display in terms of what their interests are, and their photos”</i>(P2)</p> <p><i>“We look at ‘Info’ because we are interested in their interests...Status updates are always quite interesting because you get a sense of their humour”</i>(P7)</p>	<p><i>“LinkedIn gives a great update with some vocational cues”</i>(P2)</p> <p><i>“Examples of people overstating their capabilities, achievements, qualifications”</i> (P6)</p> <p><i>“It talks about what they have been doing in recent times what their key skills are, and what opportunities you are potentially looking for”</i>(P8)</p> <p><i>“Looking at who they were LinkedIn with... Not specifically for their networks, but also for their continuing professional development.”</i> (P12)</p>

Table 4.1 Primary uses for SNSs in selection

It is considered a method of triangulation, whereby employers are **validating** previously known information provided by other tools such as CV, application forms, and interviews, with what is displayed on their social media profiles.

*“I suppose at the very highest level we are looking to make sure they did study at such and such university and do live in this place and that the information they gave isn’t false. A validation”* (P7)

*“It’s just a way of going, oh yup that matches up and that’s what that person sort of looks like, it is a validation”* (P8)

*“It’s also a good way of corroborating or verifying what they have done in the interviews and what they have said on their CV, with what they are actually like in the real world”*(P9)

Reasons for this validation are understandable when considering traditional tools and their perceived pitfalls. Interviewees argued that traditional selection tools create a

**sterile** perspective of the candidate, while SNSs such as Facebook give a view of the applicant's life when not under the microscope of employment processes.

*“People in interview and recruitment exercises, it's a very sterile environment people are not themselves because they are trying to get a job, so whenever you rely exclusively on stuff like that you are always running the risk that you could be employing a sociopath. Facebook is a way you know what they're like in terms of working with people...it's a way of seeing them outside of this and who they really are.”(P7)*

*“It's a triangulation method so you get to know them through the interview process and you get to know them through the CV and from those two interactions you get a job interview perspective of someone so you get a very sterilised view of them, and if you are going to be working with those people for a long period of time you want to know that you can get along with the on a personal level as well” (P9)*

Ultimately, Facebook is thought to offer an insight into the applicant's life outside of work, their personality, and P-O fit. It is argued to provide more context about the applicant.

Unlike previous studies, the interviews uncovered another use for the observation of SNSs; getting **interview cues** on what questions to ask applicant. Cues were taken from the observation of the applicants photos, comments, interests and hobbies, community projects, or any groups they may be involved in that is visible on their SNS profile. Employers outlined that *“we don't use it much to select but we could use it and do look for cues that might give rise to a question we might need to ask” (P2)* and *“often I can use it as a leader in a conversation” (P8)*.

If questionable behaviour (i.e. drug taking, offensive language or remarks) was seen on the profile, rather than discounting it against the applicant, they used the knowledge as an opportunity for the applicant to explain their behaviour in the interview, or outline to them the expectations of the organisation prior to hiring them. In regards to racist or derogatory comments, it was explained that questions would be asked that were aimed at drawing out their opinion on those issues. Where drug taking was seen in a profile; the candidate would be well informed about the strict no drug policy and drug testing protocol. Similarly, with bad language, the candidate is told that as an employer of the organisation they were not to put the company in disrepute on any online forum, emphasising the importance of maintaining a level of appropriateness while in the public eye.

*“I would bring questions up that would make them think and re-analyse [their behaviour]...make them aware that if you put things on sites and you bring the organisation into disrepute we would come down on you like a tonne of bricks” (P3)*

Using SNS to develop cues for the interview was outlined as a way to get the applicant to open up, and to further verify how, and if, an applicant is suited to the job position. It gives selectors opportunity to question applicant’s behaviour, and for that reason could work in the applicants favour if unfavourable content was seen on their Facebook account.

However, as discussed further, selectors are rarely obtaining permission to access applicant’s accounts therefore there is risk here for the revelation of that fact, which could open them to discriminatory or unfair practice accusations.

P-J Fit was also a factor in encouraging the use of screening applicants via SNSs. Applicants applying for a job in marketing were expected to have a prominent role on the internet, they were searched for specific cues as to how technologically savvy they are, and their ability to network (assessed through number of friends).

*“When you are looking for marketing type roles; people who are really active on twitter or Facebook, potentially for some companies, bring a whole new skill set to their business” (P8)*

*“I’m in marketing, so some people do want to see what kind of networks you do have, so if you have 50 friends on Facebook as opposed to 200 in a marketing job...that is in some ways quite a valid tool to see how good you are at networking” (P10)*

Equally, those in professional roles such as doctors, CEOs, lecturing positions, or high level management were searched to assess their level of integrity, any published documents, and any misconduct that may have been reported online.

### **Why do employers withhold from using SNSs in selection?**

Despite there being popular use of SNSs, of the 15 participants, 6 of them did not use them as a tool. A major factor that has arisen from this study is the fact that there is **unfamiliarity** with how to use SNSs among some selectors. While many had personal Facebook and LinkedIn profiles, there was little knowledge about how they worked and some had little consideration of how a Facebook profile could provide any use as a selection tool, one participant states that using SNSs *“requires a level of comfort with computers and with search engines to actually do this”* (P13). This was particularly

evident in the deconstruction exercise where certain aspects of the Facebook screen shots were not fully understood, which therefore created confusion and at times highly skewed observations. This was raised as a key factor against using SNSs as a selection tool by one participant who states that *“like texting it does take stuff out of context...if someone is a brilliant candidate you don’t want to not give them the job because of something that they have said”* (P14). Employers who are unfamiliar with SNS are hesitant to use it.

As mentioned by Brynside (2008) many issues are overlooked due to the perceived benefits of SNSs in selection. A key issue that is considered by employers was **time**. Screening all applications online is a resource intensive process and this may explain why it is not used as an official part of the selection process. This raises the issue of consistency in employment practice, and whether EEO is being compromised in some instances where applicant’s online profiles have been observed over others that have not. One participant from a Small to Medium Enterprise who used the tool officially states *“because I don’t have many [job openings] these days, I can afford the luxury, I can afford the time”* (P6). However, employers from large organisations have argued that while the traditional methods of screening remains sufficient and effective, the addition of SNSs as a tool is unnecessary.

*“We feel that our other selection processes more than meet our needs, also there is a time factor- to be fair we don’t have the resources to research what people will put on Facebook”* (P4)

*“We know that all the applicants would have Facebook pages but for the scale of what we do within the time frame we don’t have time to make that happen.”*(P15)

*“It would also be very much dependant on how many jobs we have going at one time. If it there was a busy period, chances are we are not going to have the time to even go near it.”*(P8)

With this in mind, it is probable that Small to Medium Enterprises with lower turnovers in comparison to Large organisations are perhaps more likely to be using SNS tools extensively in selection processes. More research is required to establish this relationship; meanwhile this study raises questions of accuracy and validity regarding this tool that need to be addressed to reduce any risk that SMEs and other organisations expose themselves to through such use.

**Research Question 3 and 4: What do employers observe when viewing potential candidates' Social Networking Profile and how do they interpret and use this information? How accurate and valid are SNSs as a selection tool?**

When conducting the interviews and deconstruction exercises it became apparent that there are many issues and concerns with the use of SNSs that are not understood by employers, and that have not been fully addressed in current literature. While it is evident that SNSs have become a prominent tool in selection, whether these tools have any level of accuracy is unclear. This raises two questions; (1) Do SNS profiles display an accurate portrayal of the candidate?, and, (2) is this portrayal accurately examined by employers? Additionally, employers attempt to use these tools in order to assess P-O fit however there is a well-recognised dispute regarding whether insight into ones social life is indicative of their behaviour in a professional environment. This research discusses the potential validity of SNSs as a selection tool.

As mentioned earlier, selectors are looking at soft skill, and P-O fit in SNSs. This finding is supported in the deconstruction exercise where most of the description of the Facebook profiles surrounded some element of the volunteer's soft skill, personality and P-O fit. Table 4.2 outlines the specific type of content that was observed over each of the four Facebook screenshots. Broad categories were formed in which common adjectives would fit within, and a frequency was tallied for the number of times observations were made that fit within that category.

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Character/personality	<b>28</b>
Education/qualification	<b>27</b>
Activities/ Interests	<b>22</b>
Sociability	<b>17</b>
Number of friends	<b>16</b>
Communication Style	<b>16</b>
Photos	14
Partying/Drinking	12
Activity Level on Facebook	12
Drug references	11
Responsibility	7
Values	6
Age	6
Geographic Location	3

*Table 4.2 Analysis of Facebook deconstruction*

In the interview, employers indicated that Facebook presented to them P-O fit and soft skills, and in the deconstruction exercise these factors were indeed identified. Comments that related to the Facebook volunteers P-O fit, specific to their character or personality were prominent, examples being “*a really great attitude to life*” (P6), “*Her photos are quite social and quite silly so she has quite a good sense of humour*” (P7), followed by comments on their educational history “*he studied political science and economics that’s hard skills right there*” (P12). Many comments were made to the activities and interests present on the page “*normal interests, quite main stream, interesting taste in music.*” (P7), “*I like that she likes Shortland Street...oh and Glee*” (P11). How social the individual seemed was also commonly described, and this was often correlated with the number of friends they had, i.e. the greater number of friends the more social the individual was considered to be, “*She has 500 friends so she is very popular*” (P3), “*you can safely assume she is a relatively social person and has a good network of friends*” (P9).

There were also observations made in regards to the communication style of the individual, the use of colloquial language, and swear words. Communication styles were compared to that of mobile phone Text messaging “*always hard on Facebook with communication, it’s like text messaging*” (P3), acknowledging the informality of the forum and therefore a greater **forgiveness** for poor language or offensive language. Swear words were not looked upon favourably, however it was indicated by many that this would not reduce their chances of selection, given the applicant performs well in the other selection tools “*yes the language is bad...there is nothing to say that she would use the same language in the work place*” (P13), “*I wouldn’t necessarily not hire her because of the language on her page*” (P14). These findings show that Facebook is indeed providing basic information about the desired aspects of fit and soft skills. The **accuracy** of this information however raises key concerns.

Interestingly, across all four screenshots there was a high level of observer consensus across the four Facebook profiles, but also extraverts were clearly distinguished and identified from the introverts. Each Facebook volunteer was required to conduct a self-personality test, based on the results of the personality test, there is a correlation between the interviewee’s observations and the Facebook volunteer’s self-evaluation of personality and their level of extraversion. This is evident through the expressions used by the interviewees as seen in Table 4.3, the descriptions used to describe Facebook volunteer 2 and 4 were largely related to the characteristics of extraverts. The two extraverts were broadly described as highly interactive, social and outgoing individuals, whereas volunteer 1 and 3 (both introverts) were recognised as having little interaction, were quiet and more conservative.

	<b>Interviewees description of the Facebook profile</b>
<b>Extraverts: Volunteer 2 and 4</b>	Outgoing, social, confident, active, extreme interaction on Facebook, party animal, humorous, high number of friends, fun, passionate, makes a stand, leadership, low regulation on what is published, attitude, positive, rugged, rough around the edges.
<b>Introverts: Volunteer 1 and 3</b>	Somewhat social, caring, many values, low interaction on Facebook, ordinary, low number of friends, serious, nice, quiet, mature, easy going, relaxed, keeps to themselves, conservative, alone in photos, safe, less pronounced personality.

*Table 4.3 Descriptions used for the Extraverted and Introverted Facebook profiles.*

This correlation has suggested that there is some level of validity in using SNSs for assessing broader characteristics of personality in selection processes, and therefore could prove to be a valuable tool for organisations.

The argument of validity links in with the concept of impression management in selection tools. This is a major consideration for employers when examining SNSs. When asked about whether they think applicants present an accurate portrayal of themselves through their SNS profiles, a variety of insightful responses came forward.

Many of the comments were made in comparison to traditional tools. It was commonly argued that tools such as interviewing and C.Vs were no more accurate than what could be seen on a SNS profile. Examples of observations in regards to impression management are illustrated below.

*“I think in the same way as any candidate in an interview presents their best possible impression of themselves to their interviewer...a Facebook profile presents the individuals view of themselves” (P6)*

*“I think it gives a far more accurate portrayal of the candidate then what they will say to you” (P13)*

*“People will build on the C.V or come over extra well at the interview, or falsify stuff” (P2)*

Indeed, regardless of the content, arguments were raised that it was not so much what was seen on the profiles, but what the employer could ‘**read between the lines**’. Two participants raised the fact that if they saw that effort had been put in to presenting a professional SNS then that was perceived positively.

*“If they have formed a persona to make themselves look brilliant in front of employers I would tend to give them more credit for that... they are going the extra mile to impress and at the end of the day it's not what you actually looking for but it's the fact that they have taken the initiative and the time out of their day then it shows that they are very keen on it” (P3)*

Equally, poor construction of a SNS could deliver negative messages they are not necessarily content specific, but express an element of their professionalism or character:

*“I would say 90% of the time, if you are on a Facebook page and your language is not good you declare that you get hammered on Monday night or Friday night...and you just applied for a job, chances are common sense factor is very low” (P3)*

Impression management was considered by users of SNSs in selection and there is awareness of impression management occurring. Extrapolated from the findings is the notion that users believe that Facebook profiles may express the opposite to what the individual’s real personality is.

*“Some people could be very social and they would fit in right with the team and they would never go on Facebook so you would get nothing out of it. Other people may be socially inept so they are always on Facebook and them creating an image of themselves that isn’t a true reflection.” (P1)*

*“Someone who has a really massive personality and really social creatures will tone their Facebook down so people can’t see that” (P8)*

In some cases it was thought that impression management is performed in order for the individual to create a profile that reflected somebody that they wished or desired to be.

*“I know people with who I consider to be very conservative who lead very quiet domesticated lives, have hugely flamboyant Facebook profiles and make outrageous statements, it’s almost as though they’re trying to create a different person, they are almost trying to create the person they would like to be but are too scared to become” (P6)*

*“I suppose to some extent everyone’s Facebook pages are a reflection of who they want to be then who they really are” (P7)*

If there are indeed indications of P-O fit that are sought after in Facebook profiles, then these findings suggest that SNSs would not give a true accurate portrayal and therefore would not be a valid tool.

One participant was very conscious of the risks of false online identities and emphasises the importance of being aware and recognising the pitfalls of Facebook, and the importance of other selection methods:

*“It very quickly becomes obvious if there is a mismatch between what is on someone’s Facebook page and what you are hearing in a face to face interview...it’s a tool it’s not a be all or end all” (P6)*

*This finding highlights the importance of applying a variety of selection tools in a selection procedure to triangulate and validate information about an applicant. SNSs should remain just one tool of many in identifying an applicant’s fit and personality due to the question of its validity.*

Additionally, participants have suggested that other traditional selection tools allow for candidates to manage their impressions also. As SNSs are indeed intended for social use, the concern is that individuals are managing their impression toward the friends in their network and therefore are not presenting how they would behave in a professional environment.

There remains an argument about how representative an insight into ones private and social life is, to how they would behave in a professional environment. The question of whether an individual behaves the same in their professional life as they do in their private/social life was raised in the interviews. It has been argued, namely by participants who were non-users of SNSs in selection, that SNSs are exactly that- social, they are not necessarily reflective of how an individual would perform and behave in a professional environment.

*“I think that people can create or portray a really warped perception of themselves though social media tools, and often it is quite an inaccurate reflection of what they are like, particularly in a professional capacity.” (P1)*

*“In terms of the way that I see other people use Facebook, I see it very much for sharing the wild and wonderful adventures that people have out there, sharing their photographs etc.” (P4)*

*“The intension of what I thought was Facebook was for is a social thing, they don’t call it social media for nothing” (P11)*

*“It’s a use for their personal lives instead of bringing it into work” (P12)*

It was strongly contested, prominently by the non-users that Facebook was inappropriate for gauging how one would behave in a professional environment and that users should be accessing LinkedIn for this information, one participant has a clear distinction that *“LinkedIn is your business profile area, and Facebook is private to you.”* (P5). Another raised the issue that individuals do indeed behave differently in the two contexts, and that information observed in SNS profiles is therefore not indicative of social skill.

*“I think that [employers] should use LinkedIn. LinkedIn is a professional network; Facebook is a social network for their friends...It’s not a good indication of social skills because we are quite different in our social lives compared to our professional lives. LinkedIn would be something more important and I think employers would probably look at them and see at what level are they LinkedIn in their professional networks.”* (P13)

This opinion is also appreciated by some of the users of SNSs in selection, which is evident through the deconstruction exercise where references to drug use were identified. This study found that employers were open-minded, illustrated by comments such as *“that’s outside of his life outside work life as long as it doesn’t affect work”* (P3), *“I wouldn’t care as long as they are not under the influence at work”* (P5), *“We wouldn’t read that in a positive way but we wouldn’t hold that against him.”* (P7). Again employers make references to the fact that what is seen in an individual SNSs is not necessarily going to take effect in the workplace.

Despite the fact that many did not feel the reference to drug use was overly negative, this was not the opinion held by others, *“it’s something that I have always been against personally so I think if I was looking through my opinion of them would change”* (P11), and *“probably the one thing you wouldn’t want to see on someone’s page is anything to do with drugs”* (P10). While there was consensus across the participants in regards to personality type, the deconstruction exercise showed that opposite judgements could also be made in relation to the information displayed in Facebook profiles. Activities performed in the individuals private life was acknowledged to not necessarily represent how they would behave in the professional context by some, however would change the opinions of the applicant by others.

In addition, it is found that the age of the Facebook volunteer meant that there was a lot more forgiveness. It was argued that individuals who were young or a student were excused from their negative behaviour, in fact it was expected that drinking and provocative behaviours would be visible, however if this content was seen on older

generations Facebook profiles it would be viewed in a more negative light, *“we are not under any illusions that [students] are all angels and don’t do that sort of thing. But say a 30 year olds Facebook was only about drinking and parties, it would be quite detrimental”* (P10). This raises concerns of the discrimination against users, based on their age. Further studies need to be performed in order to fully understand the risks that adult users expose themselves to, in comparison to young users.

The battle of professional and social life is evident. Employers are using SNSs in selection in order to get a perception of the applicants fit and personality; however, factors such as impression management mean that what is displayed on the Facebook profiles is not necessarily representative of the applicant’s true self. Additionally, it was argued that the social behaviour observed may not necessarily represent how the individual actually performs and behaves when in the professional environment. How useful are SNS as an additional selection tool is therefore a concern.

**Research Question 5: How do employers reconcile the issues of privacy and discrimination in regards to the use of SNSs as a selection tool?**

This final section will discuss the risk of discrimination and the invasion of privacy from an employer’s perception. Invasion of privacy is largely addressed in literature and the media in regards to employers screening applicants SNSs in selection (Cotler & Rizzo, 2010; Genova, 2009; Skeels & Grudin, 2009). Private information is made available to employers through SNSs and this can lead to the occurrence of illegal or immoral behaviours, in particular discrimination. Findings from this study have unveiled that despite the fact that employers are able to legally access SNS profiles, they are hesitant to either get permission or inform their candidates that they do so and this is likely a result of extensive employment legislation.

The findings from this research show that employers have few issues ethically or legally in accessing SNSs and screening applicants. Twelve of the participants agreed that it was not an invasion of privacy *“it’s not illegal and the individual chooses to do that knowing that”* (P2), *“if you make it public for anyone to be able to access then no”* (P3), *“well if it’s public then it’s not invading.”* (P5), *“if you put any info out there for people to find then people will find it.”*(P7), and finally *“absolutely not, if it’s on Facebook if it’s on the internet it’s essentially public property”* (P9).

However there are grey areas on what is considered an invasion, the nature of Facebook privacy settings have created much confusion for users as they continue to change, and users struggle to secure their personal profiles. Equally a participant in this study commented that *“with Facebook in particular it seems like their privacy settings change every other day”* (P7). Due to these changes made by Facebook, users may believe that their account is secure when in actual fact they are not, this is noted by one participant who states *“my main concern is that people who are using the system don’t know they are not private.”* (P5).

As seen earlier in the findings, whether settings are on private or public can be irrelevant as employers are accessing Facebook profiles via methods unknown to the applicants. This has been raised as a key issue in relation to the invasion of privacy and crossing of the grey line.

*“I think there’s a point where if you are going to all lengths to find details about people then you are going too far”* (P8)

*“If we were to do anything unscrupulous like hack into their account then that would be different”* (P9).

While the access of profiles through the applicant has been labelled as being *“not fair game”* (P3), it was argued that this was a part of the openness of using Facebook for screening as it was not performed behind the applicants back.

*“I ask anyone whose profile I view to sign a disclaimer to say that they have given me permission to do so, and essentially to initial that that screen shot copy so that you know that is from their profile and that they have consented to my using it for job application purposes...I’m not going blind behind their backs”* (P6)

Nevertheless this opinion is not shared by another participant who is strongly opposed to this method of SNS screening.

*“I have heard of people who have attended interviews who have been asked to log onto their Facebook which I think is quite wrong...in an interview, being asked to do that would be an invasion of privacy, if they can’t find you on Facebook that’s their problem”* (P10)

It is evident that there is much controversy over the extent to which the access of SNSs is an invasion of privacy. The dominant argument is that if employers are easily able to access the information then it is not an invasion of Privacy.

Despite the fact that employers were comfortable with using SNSs for screening, 3 of participants raised the fact that they were opposed to the consultation of applicants that they had examined their SNS profile, while others outlined that it was not part of their practice. Participants argue that *“you can’t bring it up with the candidate... I would find that quite inappropriate”* (P1), *“I would never initiate a conversation from it or let them know that I had actually had looked.”* (P5), finally *“we don’t generally go and talk to people about getting consent from that person”* (P8). This lack of consultation and permission may be due to the risks of accusation of discrimination, and will be described later in further detail.

While many explained that they were not comfortable with consulting the job seekers first, one explained that *“I am not able to observe without their permission. If they say ‘look, I have a problem with that’ that is not an issue”* (P6), this is consistent with the belief that to do so without consent is an invasion of privacy. From this perspective it is thought that by letting the applicant know exactly what information is being observed, and giving the employer permission to do so, using SNSs in selection in this way is an ethical and morally sound way of employment practice.

An argument raised in the literature is that by consulting applicants of their use of SNS in the selection process, the employer is putting themselves at risk of being accused of illegal practice such as discrimination, as identified by one participant *“social media is a way of [examining] without having to do it face to face where you have the chance of them saying its discrimination”* (P5). When asked about discrimination there was a clear divide. Approximately half the participants argued that SNS would increase the occurrence of discrimination, *“On a business point of view yea I think it would [increase discrimination] definitely”* (P11), likewise *“yeah that is a very real concern and it’s something that I guess people who have a very easily accessible electronic profile of some descriptions, they need to be very conscious of what they are doing”* (P6).

Conversely, the other half were adamant that if discrimination was to occur, it would happen regardless of the media in which the discriminatory information derived from. New Zealand being such a small country leaves very little degrees of separation, and information about an individual is thought to be easily sourced from a range of tools. SNS is argued as merely an additional tool however it would not necessarily result in an increase in discriminatory activity.

*“Does Facebook add just another opportunity to observe? Yes I guess it does, but I don’t believe that it will change anything in that regard. If someone is going to discriminate I don’t think it will really matter the media in which it is revealed to them discriminatory opportunities.” (P5)*

Obtaining information about an individual through other means, for example, through those who know the applicant, or seeing them personally in the community, is said to be no different from observing content in their online profiles *“information which is in the public domain is open for human judgment and evaluation”* (P5) and ultimately any discrimination occurring because of SNS observation would still fit into the human rights legislation.

Employment anti-discrimination legislation is designed to prevent or reduce discrimination, and to offer protection to job seekers. This research has suggested that while discrimination may occur regardless of the media the information derived from, SNSs can provide an additional opportunity for employers to assess applicants and make discriminatory judgements based on the content seen in the online profiles. All but one of the organisations in which the participants were affiliated with had policies to guide the use of SNSs in selection, and currently there is no state legislation or policy to guide employers on organisational use of SNSs.

When asked whether employers thought that legislation should be created there were mixed reviews. Some believed that some level of education should be provided, however others felt that employers should be aware of their organisations values and their motives for using SNSs in selection procedures rather than require more legislation, on the other hand others were in support of specific SNS legislation.

*“I do think there needs to be some education. I think definitely within provincial New Zealand it is worse, at the end of the day that the employers are actually short changing themselves so they are not taking the best applicants for the job so it’s quite short sited” (P8)*

*“If the employee is going to be discerning about their place in employment and if their employer is also discerning about what’s important for their business or their enterprise, then the framework for that should be able to survive without the bureaucracy” (P2)*

*“It would be consistent to do so. If you look at the constraints around privacy, I am not allowed to ask somebody about their age. I can find out if I poke around on Facebook, and what their gender is...there are definitely some possible inconsistencies there” (P5)*

Arguments against the idea related back to the issue of privacy and the fact that publishing your private information online is voluntary and therefore at your own risk *“it is your personal responsibility to make sure that your information is secure if you are going to use those sites”* (P4). One participant argued that the whole benefit of SNSs to employers was the fact that they are able to see a side of the applicant in an environment where they believe they are not being assessed within.

It is clear that there is conflict between what defines an invasion of privacy and whether permission should be obtained in order to observe online profiles in selection. Reasons for the lack of consent surround the fact that current employment legislation makes SNS an ambiguous tool to use openly due to the potential risks of discrimination accusations. Perhaps this is why employers have not made it an ‘official’ part of their selection procedures.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

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Chapter five discusses the findings from the research in relation to previous literature. It begins by outlining the limitations of the research. Following the discussion of the results, the practical implications of the research are reviewed, identifying how the use of SNSs in selection processes impacts stakeholders, specifically those involved in selection for organisations, and job seekers themselves. Finally suggestions for further research are made.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT RESEARCH**

Inevitably research is impacted by limitations and shortcomings (Hussey & Hussey, 1997). Time and financial constraints have been acknowledged to impact negatively upon research (de Vaus, 2005). As the research formed part of a Masters of Business degree there was a limit of time for completion of the study; in addition there was minimal funding toward data collection. For these reasons, the limitations largely relate to the sample population, interview method, and data analysis processes.

The use of convenience and snow ball sampling was not ideal but necessitated by the difficulty of getting participants within the time frame. Convenience sampling is prone to bias and has a low representation of the sample, similarly snow ball sampling is also not without bias as respondents tend to identify other potential participants who express similar characteristics to themselves (Saunders, et al., 2000). Due to the time constraints, this method of sampling was required as it provided ease in gaining participants, at a low cost. The limitations of sample method were alleviated by ensuring that participants selected met the requirements defined in the research methods.

The interviews were performed through the means of predominantly telephone interviewing, however there were also face-to-face interviews conducted. This resulted in inconsistency in the method of data collection. Face-to-face interviews would have been preferable given the use of the deconstruction exercise. Face-to-face interviews are synchronous in time and place therefore allows for analysis of social cues such as body language, and expression, however are highly expensive due to travel costs (de Vaus, 2005; Rogers, 1976). Despite the fact that social cues are not as easily picked up throughout, phone interviews were necessary as it allowed for contact with employers

across a dispersed geographic location, while remaining time and cost efficient (de Vaus, 2005).

The sample size of both the Facebook volunteers and interview participants were relatively small. The sample size of the Facebook volunteer pool was restricted to four final volunteers. While this may have limited the content and range of screenshots that employers could deconstruct, it was necessary in order to keep interviews running within a reasonable timeframe. Fifteen employers were interviewed in the research. This is considerably small relative to the sample population; nevertheless, unlike much of the SNSs research conducted, this study was qualitative and therefore required in-depth interviews that were time consuming but resulted in rich insights.

The data analysis phase employed a single researcher, therefore only one perspective was used in the interpretation of the findings. The addition of an external individual in the analysis and interpretation of this research reduces risk of researcher bias, misinterpretation and therefore the overall subjectivity of the results (Hussy & Hussey, 1997). Due to the level of study at which the Thesis was required, a second analyst was unfeasible.

In addition, analysis was conducted by hand. It has been acknowledged that the use of specific computer software can prove to be highly beneficial to data analysis (Saunders, et al, 2000). Due to the time investment required to learn specialised qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo, this was impractical. This constraint therefore limited the ability to take advantage of these packages and improve the analyses (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2011; Saunders, et al., 2000). Despite this, all interviews were subsequently transcribed and coded in a consistent and vigilant manner. The discussion is now presented with these limitations in mind.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study centred upon five research questions outlined in Chapter Two. The results indicate *how* and *why* employers are using SNSs in selection procedures as well as *what* employers are observing. Of particular importance was the issue of whether observations of SNSs are *accurate* and therefore the extent to which SNSs are a *valid* tool in selection. Finally, issues surrounding *privacy* and *discrimination* are raised and

discussed in relation to fair employment practices. Discussion begins by identifying how employers are currently using SNSs in selection.

### **Research Question 1: How are employers currently utilising Social Networking Sites in the selection process?**

The findings revealed that nine of 15 (60%) participants had used the internet in screening candidates in selection. Of the nine, only two used SNSs in a formal manner, while the remaining seven had discussed their use as being an *unofficial* element of their selection process. These findings are consistent to the literature, whereby surveys performed by ExecNet.com (Brynside, 2008) and Davis (2006) found that 75% and 63% of employers used SNSs in their selection process respectively. The most common SNSs used for selection purposes in the present study were Facebook and LinkedIn. Google was often used as a gateway into the applicants SNSs profiles, additionally Facebook and LinkedIn were accessed directly by employers. It is suggested that because Facebook is the second most visited site in New Zealand and LinkedIn at fourteen (Alexa, 2011) employers see great potential in the use of these immensely popular SNSs. These findings underpin the importance of conducting the study.

#### **Stage in selection process**

The present study unveiled that employers observed SNSs both prior to, and after the interview. By screening before an interview, the SNS could offer *cues* as to what to ask in the interview. Employers were able to use the information from the SNS profile to guide the interview and lead conversations, particularly if concerning material was posted online. Those who screened after the interview did so to *validate* information that was raised in the previous selection tools such as qualifications. Previous studies place an emphasis on the negative outcomes of SNSs screening, in particular elimination based on content seen (Brynside, 2008; Davis, 2006; Haefner, 2009). However the present research has outlined a constructive use through the development of interview cues, and validation. This finding will be discussed further.

#### **Permission to view SNSs**

Important to the findings, all but one participant who had used SNSs in selection did not obtain official *permission* from the applicants in regards to their use. This supports the findings from the Jobvite (2009) survey that found that there was very little permission being obtained from employers, and as a result applicants may be missing out on

opportunities due to the information they did not know was being observed (Cotler & Rizzo, 2010). While the observations on SNSs may be likened to that of an informal conversation with a mutual acquaintance of the applicant, it is an additional opportunity for employers to discriminate. This issue is significant and will be discussed in relation to Research Question 5.

### **Research Question 2: Why are employers interested in potential candidates' online, Social Network Site profile?**

Generally speaking, participants argued that the use of SNSs was to gather as much information about the applicant as possible. However, more specifically it was illustrated that Facebook gave some indication of P-O fit, and soft skills, meanwhile LinkedIn was used to get indication of professional capabilities and key hard skills. Most prominently discussed by participants was the concept that Facebook provided a 'real world' insight into the applicant, an insight that traditional tools such as C.V.s and interviews could not provide due to its "*sterility*". Facebook's intention is to encourage socialism and activity between users, therefore offering many features that build the "scrap book" style profile (Greenwood, 2009; Keenan & Ali, 2009). Due to this key function of Facebook it gives employers cues on the applicant's personality and interests and direction as to how to steer the conversation in an interview to make the applicant open up and relax.

The findings revealed SNSs are not necessarily used by participants as a tool to eliminate in the selection process. Instead employers were concerned with gaining a rounded understanding about the applicant, and rather than relying on one tool, had incorporated it unofficially with a range of other selection tools. This is evidenced by negative behaviour such as drug use, bad language, and provocative behaviour not necessarily counting against the applicant, rather it offered the employer cues to lead the interview in a way that would allow the applicant explain their behaviour or thoughts on the concerning matter. Given that the applicant performed well in the interview, participants argued that they would have a good chance of the getting the job. This insight is highly important as literature on SNSs in selection has shown significant figures suggesting that employers are vastly eliminating applicants due to negative content seen on their SNS profile (Brynside, 2008; Davis, 2006; Haefner, 2009). A survey performed by Davis (2006) showed that 63% of employers had rejected an applicant based on the information they had found in the applicants SNS. This has

serious negative implications for job seekers, however the findings from the present research provide a more encouraging outlook, as applicants are considered on the basis of a range of selection tools rather than discounted due to a negative performance in just the one.

Reasons offered for not using SNSs in selection centred on the notion that traditional tools were sufficient, and therefore their current selection process was providing the organisation with skilled and fitting employees. Participants were also *unfamiliar* with SNSs and as a result did not understand how it could be incorporated into the selection process. Additionally, *time* was a major factor against using SNSs in a more official sense. A participant employed by a SME acknowledged that due to their size they had the luxury of time to observe SNSs; however those from large organisations expressed concerns of the resource intensiveness required to search applicants online. The rationale behind non-users of SNSs is not widely understood in previous studies, however it is suggested from these findings that Large organisations are less likely to engage in using SNSs in selection regularly or officially in comparison to SMEs due to the time required to both familiarise oneself with the media, and conduct the searches.

**Research Question 3: What do employers observe when viewing potential candidates' Social Networking Profile and how do they interpret and use this information?**

The findings raised two key questions: (1) Do SNS profiles display an accurate portrayal of the candidate? And (2) is this portrayal accurately examined by employers? The present study found that participants had formed a consensus across the profiles in terms of the main features and personality of the Facebook volunteer, as well as successfully distinguishing the two extroverted individuals from the introverts. Elements of P-O fit were indeed recognised across the Facebook screenshots, prominently identified were elements of character and personality, activities and interests, and level of sociability. In terms of soft skills, communication was also acknowledged. The two extroverted Facebook volunteers were described as having extreme interaction with their peers online, outgoing and a large number of friends, while the introverts were described as having a low level of activity online, and conservative. Findings in the present study are consistent to that of Vazire and Gosling (2004) and Kluemper and Rosen (2009) who also found consensus between participant ratings and the personality of the online

profiles author. It has shown that indeed there may be accuracy between what employers observe on applicants SNSs and what the personality of the applicant, or at the very least what they wish to be perceived as. But the validity of SNSs as a tool is highly questionable due to the issues surrounding impression management as will be discussed in greater detail.

### **Perception of Age and their SNS activity**

Some controversial content was also acknowledged across the Facebook screenshots. References were made to drugs, drinking and partying, and poor communication, particularly the use of swear words. As mentioned earlier, this would not necessarily result in their elimination from the selection if they performed well in the other selection processes. A prominent finding that emerged from the observation of this negative content was the impact that the perceived age of the Facebook user was in relation to the content. There was a very high level of *forgiveness* to those who appeared to be students that had a substantial amount of drinking or partying apparent on their Facebook, similarly poor language was also forgiven in the younger generations, in some cases the employers expected to see this type of content. However, it was suggested by employers that older generations would be expected to have professional or low key Facebook profiles, and would be looked down upon if they had provocative content on their profile.

A concern raised in the literature was that young users were more likely to post provocative material on their SNSs and this therefore could be found to be discriminated against in selection (Peluchette & Karl, 2009). However, this study has shown that young users were given more forgiveness for 'reckless' activity visible on their SNSs, while older users were expected to have responsible and disciplined profiles. It is possible that older users who display provocative or negative behaviours would be perceived more negatively than a younger user displaying the same content. This relationship is not fully understood and requires more research, however does suggest risks toward older demographics. Discrimination against age was recognised as the most common form to occur in New Zealand (New Zealand Business, 2006), and it is suggested that SNSs add another component to this whereby applicants may be discriminated against due to their age in relation to the type activity present on their SNS.

#### **Research Question 4: How accurate and valid are SNSs as a selection tool?**

##### **Impression management**

Participants argued that C.Vs and interviews were no more accurate than SNSs as a selection tool. As C.V.s and Interviews are conducted in a *sterile* manner, whereby the audience is the employer, it is thought that the applicant will perform to what they think is expected by the employer. However, while it was thought that SNSs gave insight into their 'real world', and consensus was achieved in the deconstruction of the Facebook profiles suggesting that the portrayal of the candidate can be accurately examined, many contradicting answers came forward when asked directly about whether SNSs do offer an accurate portrayal of the candidate. It was argued by participants that many Facebook users who are outgoing in real life, at times create a conservative profile, while conservative individuals would portray a highly outgoing individual online, creating someone who they would "rather be" than who they are. This is also known as *impression management* and is recognised to be a significant factor in determining whether SNSs are a valid selection tool.

Indeed, participants argued that those who made an effort to portray a professional image online, and displayed a positive P-O fit were looked upon favourably over those who had not. Studies have shown that impression management is commonly performed by job seekers in order to purposely portray a desirable impression toward potential employers (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989, Palmer et al, 2001). However, recent studies have argued that SNSs users are creating images of themselves that are not reflective of their true self, many of them aimed toward their peers, rather than employers, as this is their perceived audience (Peluchette & Karl, 2009; Lampe, et al, 2006; Livingstone & Brake, 2010).

Impression management is known to occur for social reasons, as well as professional (Brynside, 2008; Peluchette & Karl, 2009). This therefore increases the question of how accurate SNSs are at displaying ones true personality and fit for an organisation. Employers using SNSs as a tool may risk making false assumptions about an individual based on what they perceive in their online profiles. They could be missing out on excellent candidates due to a poorly socially directed profile, or at risk of hiring someone who portrays themselves as an ideal candidate but in fact is not. From a job

seeker perspective it is evident that those who are managing their impression poorly may be causing detriment to themselves and their reflection of how they would behave and perform in a professional sense. Employers are in agreement that SNSs do not always reflect an accurate portrayal, yet the majority are still using SNSs in their selection procedures.

### **Private/social life versus professional life**

As outlined earlier, participants of the present study argue that SNSs give a ‘real world’ impression of the applicant. However, the findings have displayed that those who were not engaged with SNSs in selection had concerns over how the observations of one’s private or social life (‘real world’) would have relevance to their performance in a professional environment. LinkedIn was argued to be a valid and relevant tool for employment purposes; however as Facebook is a socially directed medium it would not provide appropriate details as to how they would behave in a professional context. There was disagreement about whether a candidate’s personal life reflected their work persona. Findings from Light and McGrath (2009) suggest that private and professional lives are being blurred and this is indeed something that is acknowledged by only the minority of the participants. It supports questioning of the social responsibility of employers who view SNSs in selection, and the disconnect between the purpose of SNSs in the users view, in comparison to how employers are actually using the sites (Clark & Roberts, 2010). The findings from the present study illustrate that despite the concern from the minority of the participants, the majority of employers continue to use SNSs for selection purposes.

### **Summarising the validity of SNSs in selection**

SNSs may portray an interpretation of the personality of an individual (whether it is a positive or negative impression). This impression can be accurately described and identified by employers however it may not be accurate of how the individuals are in reality. In addition to this, the insight into ones social and private life through SNSs has been argued by employers as not necessarily indicative of how the individual would behave in a professional environment. The findings raise great concerns over the reasons as to why employers continue to use SNSs in selection despite the acknowledgement that they do not necessarily portray an accurate image, and may not be representative of how an individual would behave and perform inside the organisation. While it may be an accessible tool to use in selection, the findings heavily

suggest that screening SNSs is a time waster as it does not add value to the selection process. In addition to questions raised about the validity of SNSs, discussed further is the theory that employers may be further disadvantaging themselves due to the risks posed by discrimination, and unethical practice due invasion of privacy.

**Research Question 5: How do employers reconcile the issues of privacy and discrimination in regards to the use of SNSs as a selection tool?**

Nine of the participants in the study argued that observing SNSs in selection processes is not an invasion of privacy. The employers were aware that legally they are within their right to access online profiles, as publically published information in this regard is no longer covered by the privacy act. However, while this was widely accepted, there were reservations as to the method this information could be accessed before it became an invasion. It was raised by three of the participants that it was “not fair game” if you were to go to lengths to get access on an account, including access through the applicant themselves. Controversially, one participant who did access through the applicant argued that this was ethically sound as the applicant could (A) have the right to decline the observation, or (B) give informed consent to the employer, and have awareness of what was being used in the selection process. This was seen as openness to the process. As described further, there are many implications that can arise from this method.

Where the ethical line is and what is ‘invasion’ is yet to be defined as there is much debate as to what is acceptable and what is not. Invasion of privacy is largely addressed in literature and the media in regards to employers screening applicants SNSs in selection (Cotler & Rizzo, 2010; Genova, 2009; Skeels & Grudin, 2009). The Privacy Act 1993 states that any information that is made publically available is not covered by the Act; this applies to information published on SNS (Privacy Act 1993, 2011). In this respect, viewing applicant information online is not an invasion of privacy and supports the perceptions of the participants.

However there are grey areas on what is considered an invasion, and two participants in the study specifically outlined that they had concerns in regards to the nature of Facebook’s privacy settings, and whether users were aware of their own privacy settings. Consistent to the findings, literature has also raised this conflict and it is acknowledged that Facebook privacy settings have created much confusion for users as they continue to change, and users struggle to secure their personal profiles (Cotler & Rizzo, 2010; Light

& McGrath, 2010; Taraszow, et al., 2010; Warning & Buchanan, 2010). This view was only held by the minority, it is evident that employers concerns relating to privacy tended to surround the legality of the access as opposed to the ethical considerations of utilising an unofficial selection tool.

While the dominant argument remains that observing applicants accounts online through SNSs is not an invasion of privacy (given the access was done through one's own SNSs account), it is apparent that employers are hesitant to inform the candidates, or obtain permission from candidates to do so. Only one of the nine participants obtained informed consent from the applicants. Employment law and privacy law are thought to be contributors toward the lack of seeking permission, as with knowledge that an employer is searching ones online profile, the employer becomes liable to accusations of unfair practices and discrimination (Greenwald, 2008). It is suggested that due to these risks, employers do not incorporate the screening of SNSs as an official process.

It is evident, that employer's use of SNSs in selection gives them opportunity to discriminate due to the level of personal information that can be published in these forums. Half of the participants in the study were not concerned of increased discrimination occurring, and it was argued that, due to the size of New Zealand, it is very accessible to get information about a participant through other means. As mentioned earlier, obtaining personal information from ones SNSs is no different to that of an informal conversation with a mutual acquaintance of the applicant. Participants argued that for these reasons, discrimination would occur regardless of the media. On the other hand, half of the participants agreed that the increase use of SNSs in selection would see an increase in discrimination occurring, and this is somewhat evident through the example of the perceptions of age and SNSs activity illustrated earlier.

While discrimination is not thought to be an issue from the employer's perspective, it is clear that SNSs provide yet another source in which private information can be found without the knowledge of the applicant and therefore employers are not informing the applicants of their observations online or seeking permission to do so. The discussion has outlined a range of concerns that render many practical implications to the key stakeholders, these being job seekers and employers. The following section will outline the practical implications in detail.

## **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

### **Implications to Employers**

The accuracy and validity of SNSs as a selection tool is largely questioned in this study. While studies performed by Vazire and Gosling (2004) and Kluemper and Rosen (2009) expressed similar ideas of accuracy in assessing online profiles, what was failed to be discussed is the underlying processes of impression management, and whether ones insight into their online social behaviour is indicative of their professional behaviour.

Employers may indeed be missing out on good candidates due to negative content observed on their profile, as SNSs such as Facebook are designed for social interaction amongst friends rather than aimed toward employers. Equally, some individuals may be managing their impression in a way that appears desirable to employers, yet is unrepresentative of how the individual performs or behaves in reality. The level to which either of these behaviours is occurring is unknown, however as this study displays, it is something that employers are somewhat aware of yet continue to use SNSs as a tool; they therefore expose themselves to poor selections, as well as the exclusion of excellent candidates.

Due to the inaccuracies that are attributed with Facebook, this study encourages the use of LinkedIn for selection purposes as it is argued to be professionally directed. However, if Facebook is continued to be utilised then it is important that information remains validated through other tools such as interviews and C.Vs in order to reduce any bias created from Facebook observations.

The access to personal information on Facebook, including any of the 13 grounds of discrimination, means that employers are at risk of illegal practice. While this has been argued by participants to not increase the level to which discrimination would occur, it is yet another medium in which exposes such information.

Employers should be vigilant in their motives for using SNSs, as there is no legislation or policy to guide the use. The concept of creating SNSs legislation to address issues of privacy invasion and discrimination could reduce negative impacts for job seekers and employers. Legislation could include the requirement of gaining permission from applicants prior to screening online, or at the very least consultation of such use. Legislation aimed at monitoring how employers use SNSs in selection would be

consistent with the other employment laws. Despite this, participants have argued that legislation regarding the active use of SNS in selection is impractical as the monitoring of this tool would be very difficult, and would impose more bureaucracy around employment.

It is evident that employers who are unfamiliar with SNSs could be increasingly impacted by the outlined risks if they were to use SNSs in their selection, as they would not have a full understanding of the phenomena inside SNSs profiles (as witnessed in the study). At the very least employers should be educated around the issues and use of SNSs in order to increase awareness, and protect themselves and job seekers.

### **Implications to Job Seekers**

Job seekers, who have sensitive personal information available online, expose themselves to many risks. It is evident that employers have little reservations about invasion of privacy and as a result are indeed searching online SNSs for applicants. Previous studies have outlined that provocative behaviour seen on Facebook profiles have caused applicants to miss out on job opportunities. Somewhat conversely to this, the research did outline some level of understanding and opportunity for explanation for negative behaviours (such as swearing, drinking, and drug use), however it was generally not looked upon favourably and much was said about the integrity of the individual. They are therefore at risk of missing out on job opportunities because of their image portrayed in online SNS profiles.

Facebook in particular offers potential for a range of negative consequences. Indeed, some employers are accessing profiles through more intrusive methods, and can access certain networks that may leave the applicant unknowingly exposed. In addition to this, there is the complexity of the seemingly unreliable and ever changing privacy settings of Facebook. As a result, this study emphasises the importance to job seekers of monitoring the content on their online profiles, as complete protection of information is not guaranteed.

It is found, however, that positive impression management can work in the favour of the job seeker. With awareness and effort, job seekers are able to intentionally design their online profiles to suit that of employers. This was recognised as a positive and encouraging element toward successful employment.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study outlines a number of important issues that require further examination and confirmation. It is suggested that more rigorous research is performed examining the validity of SNSs as a selection tool. While this study delved deeper into the issues surrounding the accuracy of SNSs as a selection tool from an employer's perspective (something that the previous quantitative studies have failed to capture), it is suggested that a focused study specifically looking at the validity of SNSs as tool is conducted. By focusing on the core issues of impression management, and the relationship between one's social life as viewed online, versus their behaviour in a professional context, a better understanding of how useful SNSs are as a selection tool can be developed.

Invasion of privacy was found to be a major factor in this study, further study is needed to truly understand employers concerns of invasion of privacy, and why employers are hesitant to consult and obtain consent from applicants when using SNSs in selection. It is suggested that these insights are aligned with the perspective of job seekers, to understand the extent to which invasion of privacy is an issue from a job seekers perspective. Legalities vis-à-vis invasion of privacy should be explored to build on the principals surrounding fair employment practices.

The findings from this study hypothesised that SMEs were more likely to use SNSs in selection due the small level of turn-over and employment in comparison to large organisations. This aspect should be studied further in order to validate this relationship, and ensure that SMEs are not exposing themselves to the risks associated with the use of SNSs in selection.

Finally, findings have revealed that discriminatory factors could have detrimental effects on job seekers, specifically that of age. Testing is required to assess how the age of a Facebook user and the content seen on their Facebook page is judged by employers, and the resulting impacts of this judgement. Additionally, it is also recommended that other potential discriminatory factors such as those outlined in the HR Act 1993 And ER Act 2000 are investigated to grasp the level to which discrimination is occurring through SNSs.

## CONCLUSION

The present research assessed five main elements surrounding the use of SNSs in selection processes. It investigated *how* and *why* employers are using SNSs in selection, and what it was that they were observing inside applicants online profiles. Following these findings, the perceived *validity* of SNSs as a selection tool, and the concept of invasion of *privacy* and *discrimination* were investigated.

A prominent aim in the method of this study was to gain in-depth understandings of these issues from **employers' perspective**. Much of the previous literature surrounding the use of SNSs in selection used surveys and other quantitative measures to build on the research topic. It was also found that previous research often used student samples. However, through the use of semi-structured interviews, and the deconstruction exercise, this study achieved a deep insight into the topic, obtaining at times conflicting, and insightful views in the core issues faced by employers.

It appears that in New Zealand, employers are increasingly eager to use SNSs in selection. However, questions were raised as to the reliability of SNSs as a tool and it is suggested that SNSs are not valid for use in selection. Additionally, legalities that surround the investigations of applicants online, pose risks and liabilities toward employers. As businesses in New Zealand, and the subsequent employment market, improve with a recovering economy, selection will be a top priority for employers. Emphasis is placed on the need to educate employers in order to increase understanding in the benefits and pitfalls of SNSs as a selection tool.

Relatively speaking, the internet is still very young and for every two steps we take forward applying it to our everyday lives we need to take a step back to make sure that the freedoms we take for granted are not abused and misused by both ourselves, and others.

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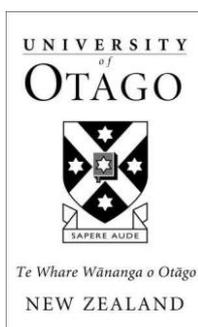
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# Appendices

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## Appendix A: Participant Information Sheets

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Reference Number 11/192  
4 August 2011

### **PUBLISHING PERSONAL INFORMATION ONLINE: DO EMPLOYERS ACCESS, OBSERVE AND UTILISE DATA FROM ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN THEIR SELECTION PROCEDURES?**

#### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR FACEBOOK USER VOLUNTEERS**

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate we thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you and we thank you for considering our request.

#### **What is the Aim of the Project?**

This project will examine the use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) by employers within the selection process. As online Social Networking has become hugely popular, there has been evidence to suggest that employers and Human Resource managers are using SNSs as a tool for screening applicants. The research aims to examine the ways in which organisations are using these, what they are looking at, and how they are using the information. This project is being undertaken as part of the requirement for a Masters of Business thesis.

#### **What Type of Participants are being sought?**

We are looking for volunteers who are active users of the Social Networking Site Facebook. From a pool of volunteers, four individuals (one extrovert male and female and one introvert male and female) will be asked to continue with the project.

#### **What will Participants be Asked to Do?**

Should you agree to take part in this project, in the first phase you will be asked to conduct an online personality test to test which will identify whether you have an introvert or extrovert personality. From those who agree to participate, one male and female extrovert and one male and female introvert will be randomly selected to continue with the project. In the second phase I will take screen shots of your Facebook profile over a period of three weeks. The first shot will be taken on the Monday of the first week, the second on the Thursday of the following week, and the final shot will be taken on the Saturday of the third week. Any personal information relating to “friends” will be removed.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

### **What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?**

In the second phase of data collection we will be undertaking interviews with employers. During these, they will be asked to observe your Facebook screen shots and answer questions relating to how they would interpret these in the selection process. Data obtained from this will be transcribed for analysis purposes. Key findings will be further discussed and written in a thesis document. Other than participants in the interviews, my supervisor Dr Paula O’Kane, and myself will be the only people who will have access to your Facebook screenshots. If desired, you are entitled to full access of the findings of this project. Note that those interviewed will also have access to the findings from the study however will not have access to copies of your Facebook profile screenshots after the interview.

Your Facebook Screenshots will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned above will be able to gain access to it. These will be destroyed upon completion of the research. Data obtained as a result of the research will be retained for **at least 5 years** in secure storage.

Any identifying information from your “Facebook Friends” such as names, photos will be removed. However due to the nature of this project, and the significance that some of your own personal data may have toward the results it will not be possible for **your own** anonymity to be preserved during the interviews. However, your individual screenshots will not be published in any format.

The **results** of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity. Your personal identifying information and the Facebook profile screenshots you have provided will **not** be published or made available to the public.

### **Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

### **What if Participants have any Questions?**

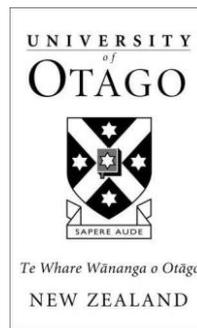
If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Janneke Hoek  
Department of Management  
+64 27 635 6526

or

Dr Paula O’Kane  
Department of Management  
+64 3 479 8181

This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479 8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.



**PUBLISHING PERSONAL INFORMATION ONLINE:  
DO EMPLOYERS ACCESS, OBSERVE AND UTILISE DATA FROM ONLINE  
SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN THEIR SELECTION PROCEDURES?**

**INFORMATION SHEET FOR  
INTERVIEWEE PARTICIPANTS**

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate we thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you and we thank you for considering our request.

**What is the Aim of the Project?**

This project will examine the use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) by employers within the selection process. As online Social Networking has become hugely popular, there has been evidence to suggest that employers and Human Resource managers are using SNSs as a tool for screening applicants. The research aims to examine the ways in which organisations are using these, what they are looking at, and how they are using the information. This project is being undertaken as part of the requirement for a Masters of Business thesis.

**What Type of Participants are being sought?**

We are looking for participants who are regularly in charge of recruitment and selection.

**What will Participants be Asked to Do?**

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. It will start by asking you about your recruitment and selection methods. I will ask you if you are familiar with SNSs, define these if necessary and ask you to explain your experience with the sites. I will then follow with your views on the privacy nature and use of these tools for screening purposes. After the interview I will ask you to deconstruct and analyse four Facebook profiles and identify information that may be useful in job applicant screening processes. This should take up to an hour of your time.

**What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?**

No personal identifying information will be required throughout this study. Data collected will be in relation to the participants' own recruitment and selection processes,

and their use and thoughts on the use of SNSs within these processes. This information will be recorded using an audio recording device, and following this the data will be transcribed for further analysis and interpretation. Results will be published in a thesis style document. Only myself, and if necessary, my supervisor Dr Paula O’Kane will have access to the data.

Quotes and comments made during the interview may be used in the completed research. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity.

After a semi-structured interview, the second half of the project involves an open-questioning technique. The general line of questioning includes asking you to deconstruct Facebook profiles. The precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Consequently, although the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used.

In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s)

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned above will be able to gain access to it. Data obtained as a result of the research will be retained for **at least 5 years** in secure storage. Any personal information held on the participants [*such as contact details, audio or video tapes, after they have been transcribed etc,*] may be destroyed at the completion of the research even though the data derived from the research will, in most cases, be kept for much longer or possibly indefinitely.

### **Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

### **What if Participants have any Questions?**

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

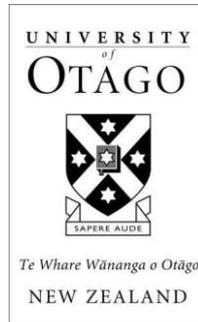
Janneke Hoek	or	Dr Paula O’Kane
Department of Management		Department of Management
+6727 635 6526		+64 3 479 8181

This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479 8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

## Appendix B: Facebook Invitation for Volunteers

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Reference Number 11/192  
4 August 2011



### FACEBOOK INVITATION FOR VOLUNTEERS

Hello

My name is Janneke Hoek and I am looking for volunteers to be part of my research for my Master of Business Thesis. This project will examine the use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) by employers within the selection process. As online Social Networking has become hugely popular, there has been evidence to suggest that employers and Human Resource managers are using SNSs as a tool for screening applicants. The research aims to examine the ways in which organisations are using these, what they are looking at, and how they are using the information.

#### **What Type of Participants are being sought?**

We are seeking volunteers who are active users of the Social Networking Site Facebook. From a pool of volunteers, four individuals (one extrovert male and female, and one introvert male and female) will be asked to continue with the project.

#### **What will Participants be Asked to Do?**

Should you agree to take part in this project, in the first phase you will be asked to conduct an online personality test to test which will identify whether you have an introvert or extrovert personality. From those who agree to participate, one male and female extrovert and one male and female introvert will be randomly selected to continue with the project. In the second phase I will ask you to take a screen shot of your Facebook profile over a period of three weeks. The first shot will be taken on the Monday of the first week, the second on the Wednesday of the following week, and the final shot will be taken on the Sunday of the third week (a prompt will be sent via text or email on the day with a suggested time to take the shot).

For more information please contact me through Facebook or email me at [hoerja448@student.otago.ac.nz](mailto:hoerja448@student.otago.ac.nz) to continue further with the project.

Your involvement would be greatly appreciated!

Thank you for your time.

## Appendix C: HRINZ Research Invitation

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Thank you for agreeing to participate in HRINZ's research option.

You are invited to participate in the research survey that Janneke Hoek, MBus Student, Department of Management, Otago University is conducting in the use of online social networking sites as a tool for screening new employees and the impact of using such tools in recruitment. This research counts towards the completion of her Masters thesis.

### **Research Title:**

*"Do employers access, observe and utilise data from online social networking sites in their selection procedures?"*

### **Background:**

As online social networking has become widespread, a growing body of research suggests increased use of social networking sites as a tool for screening applicants. However, further research is needed to examine the potential consequences of such use for both employers and job seekers. Janneke invites participation from those with experience in the field of recruitment and selection to provide her with invaluable insights into this contemporary issue.

The study involves a semi structured phone interview designed to gauge your views on the use of social networking sites by employers and human resource managers as a screening tool. The interview will take less than an hour of your time, and confidentiality is assured.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact Janneke at either [jannekeh@gmail.com](mailto:jannekeh@gmail.com), or mobile 027 635 6526.

Kind regards,

HRINZ

## Appendix D: Participant Consent Forms

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Reference Number 11/192  
4 August 2011



### **PUBLISHING PERSONAL INFORMATION ONLINE: DO EMPLOYERS ACCESS, OBSERVE AND UTILISE DATA FROM ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN THEIR SELECTION PROCEDURES?**

#### CONSENT FORM FOR FACEBOOK USER VOLUNTEERS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

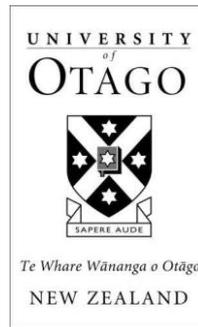
1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. Personal identifying information, specifically the Facebook profile screenshots, will be viewed by participants interviewed in this project. Following this, the screenshots will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for at least five years;
4. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....  
(Signature of participant)

.....  
(Date)

This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479 8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.



**PUBLISHING PERSONAL INFORMATION ONLINE:  
DO EMPLOYERS ACCESS, OBSERVE AND UTILISE DATA FROM ONLINE  
SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES IN THEIR SELECTION PROCEDURES?**

**CONSENT FORM FOR  
INTERVIEWEE PARTICIPANTS**

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. Personal identifying information, specifically audio-tapes and accompanying transcripts, will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for at least five years.
4. This project involves an open-questioning technique. The general line of questioning includes the deconstruction of four Facebook profiles. The precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind.
5. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....  
(Signature of participant)

.....  
(Date)

This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479 8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

## Appendix E: Interview Schedule

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### Preliminary Questions:

1. What sector is your organisation based in?  
What size is your organisation? (*PROBE*<sup>8</sup>- *SME, Large, # of people*)
2. Approximately how many people would you recruit into your organisation per annum?
3. Please talk me through your recruitment and selection processes
  - a. *Application form and CV*
  - b. *Psychometric testing*
  - c. *Formal interview/phone interview*
  - d. *Assessment Centre*
4. In detail can you please explain your screening/shortlisting procedure throughout each phase?
5. What is the typical/most common/most recent role you recruit for
6. For this job role/s please outline the hard skills you are looking for? (hard skills are specific technical skills required to complete the job- IQ related)
7. Please outline the soft skills you are looking for/ what are the most common soft skills you look for in an employee? (these are personality traits, skills related to the emotional intelligence)
8. What do you consider more important- hard or soft skills?
9. Do you look at the 'fit' of the applicant? (P-O –extent to which a person and the org share similar characteristics/meet each other's needs, P-J- match between the abilities of a person and demands of job or the desires of a person and the attributes of a job).
10. How do you assess 'fit'?

**Research Question 1:** How are employers in New Zealand currently utilising Social Networking Sites in the selection process?

1. Do you use the internet to screen potential employees? **YES / NO**

### ***NO- Go to non-users interview schedule***

2. What do you search?
  - a. *SNSs- LinkedIn, Facebook, Bebo, MySpace*
  - b. *Search engines- Google*
3. Why do you use these?
4. When did you start using them? How often do you use them?
5. When in your recruitment and selection process do you use these tools?
  - *Throughout the initial sorting/shortlisting phase.*
  - *After initial shortlist*
  - *Prior to interview or assessment centre*
  - *After interview or assessment centre*
  - *In final selection phase*
  - *Under special circumstances (i.e. to select between close candidates)*
6. What lengths do/will/would you go to, to get access to an applicant's online profile?

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<sup>8</sup> Text in Italics indicate the type of information to probe for

- c. *Join specific networks (i.e. Otago University network)*
  - d. *Seek mutual friends*
  - e. *Attempt to add the applicant (whether it be through a business or personal Facebook page)*
7. Is there a policy/guideline for accessing online profiles?
  8. Can you give me an example of a time you have used them?

**Research Question 2:** Why are employers interested in potential candidates' online, Social Network Site profile? **Research Question 4:** How accurate and valid are SNSs as a selection tool?

9. What sorts of information do you hope to find about candidates through the use of these tools?
10. Do you think these tools give an accurate portrayal of the candidate?
11. How useful do you think these tools are in getting relevant information?
  - a. *Hard skills- IQ, technical skills to complete job description*
  - b. *Soft skills- EQ, people skills, team work, personality traits*
  - c. *P-J / P-O Fit*
12. How much weighting does the information you observe in these tools have in your final decision?
13. Does the use of this tool comply with company policy?

**Research Question 5:** How do employers reconcile the issues of privacy and discrimination in SNSs?

14. Do you think screening applicants through these tools is an invasion of the applicant's privacy? / Or do you have concerns of breaching privacy? Why?
15. Are you concerned of the risks of discrimination against applicants through the use of SNSs? Why?
16. What do you think these tools might reveal that could not be obtained by other selection techniques?
17. What are your thoughts of individuals that have closed/private profiles and those that are inactive online?

**Research Question 3:** What do employers observe when viewing potential candidates' Social Networking Profile and how do they interpret and use this information?

18. Please deconstruct the following Facebook profiles:
  - a. What is your overall impression of this individual?
  - b. What features stand out to you?
  - c. What features do you find are positive?
  - d. What features concern you?
  - e. How much influence would a profile such as this impact your final decision?
  - f. Can you identify the level of the aforementioned soft skills in these individuals?
  - g. Can you identify the level of the aforementioned hard skills in these individuals?

- h. Do you think this individual shows the appropriate 'fit' for your organisation? - What features give you this information?

### **Additional Questions**

19. If you could give advice to job seekers in regards to their online presence what would it be?  
20. Do you have any other comments to make in relation to this study?

### **INTERVIEW SCHEDULE for NON USERS**

**Research Question 1:** How are employers in New Zealand currently utilising Social Networking Sites in the selection process?

1. Do you use the internet to screen potential employees? **NO**
2. Why don't you use them?
  - a. *Moral reasons*
  - b. *Unnecessary – (no benefit, recruitment process doesn't require it...)*
  - c. *Lack the skills*
3. Is there a policy/guideline for accessing online profiles?

**Research Question 2:** Why are employers interested in potential candidates' online, Social Network Site profile? **Research Question 4:** How accurate and valid are SNSs as a selection tool?

4. Have you, or would you consider using SNSs in the future?
  - a. Why/ why not?
5. What are your thoughts of the use of SNSs in selection processes?

*Context- In the scenario of using SNSs to screen potential applicants-*

6. Do you think these tools can give an accurate portrayal of the candidate?
7. How useful do you think these tools could be in getting relevant information?
8. Do you think these tools might reveal information that couldn't be obtained by other selection techniques?
  - a. *Hard skills- IQ, technical skills to complete job description*
  - b. *Soft skills- EQ, people skills, team work, personality traits*
  - c. *P-J / P-O Fit*
9. How much weighting do you think the information observed in these tools should have/be given in a final job position decision?

**Research Question 5:** How do employers reconcile the issues of privacy and discrimination in SNSs?

10. Do you think screening applicants through these tools is an invasion of the applicant's privacy? / Or do you have concerns of breaching privacy?
11. Are you concerned of the risks of discrimination against applicants through the use of SNSs?

**Research Question 3:** What do employers observe when viewing potential candidates' Social Networking Profile and how do they interpret and use this information?

12. Please deconstruct the following Facebook profiles:
- a) What is your overall impression of this individual?
  - b) What features stand out to you?
  - c) What features do you find are positive?
  - d) What features concern you?
  - e) How much influence would a profile such as this impact your final decision?
  - f) Can you identify the level of the aforementioned soft skills in these individuals?
  - g) Can you identify the level of the aforementioned hard skills in these individuals?
  - h) Do you think this individual shows the appropriate 'fit' for your organisation? - What features give you this information?

**Additional Questions**

13. If you could give advice to job seekers in regards to their online presence what would it be?
14. Do you have any other comments to make in relation to this study