

## Exploring Biases in Recruitment through Social Media and Online Searches (SMOS)

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### Abstract

*Many organizations claim to incorporate the idea of diversity, inclusion and equality while making hiring decisions. But why these decisions do not always reflect or support the claim of diversity and equality? The current study aims to answer this question by exploring the biases activated during Cyber-vetting that might account for this contradiction. The study used qualitative research design by conducting semi-structured interviews with 4 Human Resource professionals involved in online recruitment. Thematic analysis was performed using guidelines by Creswell and Creswell (2018). The study's findings suggested that the use of Social Media and Online Searches (SMOS) by recruiters can initiate biases causing candidate's rejection based on images or text discovered, or assumptions made during the cyber vetting process. The study found that there is a need to examine, expose, or even eradicate the influence of implicit and explicit bias when recruiters conduct background checks using online platforms. Interestingly, none of the participants verbalized the feeling that cyber-vetting was an invasion of the candidate's privacy. However, it was seen as a justifiable means to ensure that the candidate would respectively fit the culture and organization. The present study sheds light on the importance that recruiters give to social media profiles, and awareness of biases prompted by pictures and content during SMOS. The study shall help recruiters in spotting these biases and need to design trainings that aim at guiding on eliminating such biases letting hiring process become efficient and bias-free.*

**Keywords: Cyber-vetting, Hiring Process, Recruitment, Biases, SMOS, Human Resource Managers**

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## 1. Introduction

Cyber-vetting is viewed as a great opportunity for organizations to evaluate the individual's personal life and his/her background without having to ask the individual himself/herself, previous employers or references. It is assumed to be an extension of traditional process of history checks of employment for potential candidates (Berkelaar, 2017). Cybervetting, employed as a technological tool for screening people to hire, refers to a process of attaining information about potential candidates through online search engines or social media sites to make decisions of recruitment and selection of people enabling the employer to examine if the candidate fulfils the standards of their organization (Berkelaar, 2014).

At the beginning of year 2022, internet usage in Pakistan increased to 36.5% meaning that around 83 million users of internet exist here with almost 72 million using social media sites actively (Arif, 2022). Social media websites or applications such as Facebook, LinkedIn, twitter or alike have become a source of sharing personal experiences. Such personal information becomes a public source when it is not subjected to privacy settings. Apart from considerable awareness regarding privacy settings, several users might, still, post certain things on social media which could be perceived by employer as favorable for organization or sometimes employer might find something hurtful for the organization such as morally questionable post.

Social media and online searches (SMOS) are a profound factor in the process of hiring even more than a job. The utilization of SMOS like search engines, Facebook, LinkedIn, or some other applications, provide deep insight regarding potential candidates for an employer (Brown & Vaughn, 2011; Curran et al., 2014). It is inevitable to avoid biases such as race, gender, disability or ethnicity when an employer cyber-vets (searches for and finds information on the candidate) through SMOS. The little risk of being sued has broadened the usage of social media sites for gathering background information of candidates to screen them. This, however, may lead to social categorization or biasness in decision making on the part of employer. This is explained by the way recruitment professionals process information during vetting (Derous et al., 2017).

The rise of social media sites like Facebook enabled people to post about themselves, make a profile to show their identity and connect with groups of people from all around the world (Smith & Kidder, 2010). The posts on these social media profiles of people enable not only their family and friends to view but also open door for hiring professionals who look for personal information while screening candidates. The recruiters making decisions for hiring can use SMOS and online internet based sites to acquire information about candidates if users have posted material with no privacy restriction settings. This process of cybervetting can elicit biases, implicit or explicit, towards the people during screening process of resumes before interviews on even sometimes after the candidate has given interview for the job. Accordingly, subconscious biases which include implicit and unconscious bias include biasing factors such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status of an individual (Jones, 2017).

The social media site mostly intended for professional networking and finding suitable candidates online is LinkedIn. Since the purpose of this social media site is to allow organizations to closely “look” into the individual’s profile that represent their cyber-résumé, the privacy settings on LinkedIn are rarely used. Nevertheless, employers seldom use LinkedIn for acquiring informal information about the candidate and other social media sites are perceived to be more useful in this case (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). Grasz (2016) found that around 41% of employers do not proceed with interview of candidate if they find difficulty in extracting information about candidates on online sites or social media platforms.

Apart from potential biases that may occur during the hiring process, there may be a legitimate business reason for looking at social networking sites to discover information about a potential employee that goes beyond the traditional résumé (Roger et al., 2017, p. 153). One reason could be to hire individual based on his/her previous work experience posted on his/her social media profile. In a study by Acquisti and Fong (2019), it was discovered that "discrimination via online searches of candidates may not yet be widespread, online disclosures of personal traits can significantly influence the hiring decisions of a selected set of employers" (p. 4). Since they studied only race, gender and sexual orientation of candidates or the stuff they post on online sites, the current study shall strive to fill the gap in previous researches by focusing not only on the majorly studied discriminatory factors (race, sexual orientation and gender) but other factors as well such as ethnicity, age, women, socioeconomic status etc. as extension to the idea of intersectionality viewing the context of Pakistan.

It often becomes difficult to study underlying biases due to hiring professionals being unaware of their unconscious cognitive biases and thought patterns. Also, when large pool of candidates is generated, deep screening may not be performed attracting employers towards certain candidates and not others leading to biasness due to superficial characteristics of candidates (Hunter, 2007; Maddox & Gray, 2002; Rattan et al., 2019).

Although laws and policies appear to limit inequity, discrimination still lives (Patten, 2020). Discriminatory practices are not only subject to gender or race but also to those people who are disable because it is assumed by employers that physically disabled people may perform less compared with physically fir individuals (Carvalho-Freitas & Stathi, 2017). Therefore, it is very essential to notice that such discrimination is not always with single dimension but covers multiple other factors as well giving rise to intersectionality.

Effective and efficient approaches to participant recruitment in research have historically been fraught with difficulties. The simplicity of recruiting participants has been revolutionised by the exceptional expansion of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, in contrast to more conventional approaches like radio or newspaper adverts. Even if these recent developments appear to improve recruitment performance, they are not without drawbacks and shortcomings of their own (Oudat & Bakas, 2023). The drawbacks can be serious when such informal way of hiring candidates and gathering background information using SMOS is performed. It can be severe not only for the one who is hiring candidate but the candidates themselves. So the problem that organizations need to consider is that cybervetting using

SMOS may activate biases that influence hiring decisions against candidates and they need to be eliminated.

This study shall be focusing on the use of SMOS by hiring professionals/recruiters during hiring processes and explain how biases might occur during this process.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Hiring Patterns**

Organizations consider their prime responsibility to conduct due diligence screening before hiring any candidate on a vacant position. Traditionally, reference checks appeared to be useful for companies to safeguard themselves from offering jobs to unsuitable people and provided opportunity to crosscheck the information showed by candidate on their forms ensuring validity. A study by Beason and Belt (1976) performed on a sample of recruiters found that 77% of 150 respondents offered job after obtaining reference checks through calls or letters. Similarly, 68.85% of hiring professionals pursued references after interview but before offering the job (Beason & Belt, 1976). In recent times, using SMOS for hiring decisions have become far more pervasive in making decisions regarding recruitment and selection.

Another paper critically examines the increasing influence of social media (SM) or social networking sites (SNSs) on various human resource management (HRM) practices. The study reviewed 87 published papers from the Web of Science Database, specifically from 2010 to June 2020, using VOSviewer software. The analysis reveals that the use of SM information for HRM practices is growing, particularly in talent search and recruitment & selection (Hosain, 2021). Facebook and LinkedIn are the most popular platforms among hiring professionals, with Facebook providing behavioral information and LinkedIn offering job-related information. Additionally, the presence on SM can help organizations develop strong corporate branding.

### **2.2 Reference Checks and Predictability**

Cyber-vetting (the use of SMOS for hiring) today and traditional method of obtaining reference checks are somehow similar. They both intend at finding the best suitable person for the job. Previously, candidates' data was crosschecked through resumes, telephonic calls to relevant references or through mail letters to avoid any misleading information that may hamper the decision making process and harm the organisation afterwards (Carr, 2016). It helped the recruiters to gain access to candidate's background information about his/her attitudes and behaviours or accomplishments from the prior employers of candidates (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). But, since this is too old a research, it is seen that there is possibly weak validity of using reference checks in selection process that might generate the need in recruiters to use SMOS to dig deep into applicants' life practices becoming an indiscriminately tool for scrutiny.

### **2.3 Cybervetting**

It has created a new spectrum in the field of hiring in organizations giving an opportunity to conduct reference checks on social media profiles without having to ask anyone

or even candidate himself. According to Berkelaar's (2010) definition, cybervetting refers to a process whereby hiring professionals extract data about applicants from informal online resources such as social media profiles to gain ease in making hiring decisions. Since SMOS are a snapshot of applicant, it sometimes may overturn which may be associated with a résumé potentially hurting the applicant. The videos and images posted by people may not be much significant to them but they certainly appear as a great concern for those who are looking candidates for job through online platforms. In a study by Zschirnt and Ruedin (2016), ethnic minorities were found to be less educated and had rare means needed to become successful employees which gave birth to negative feelings in hiring professionals towards them. Therefore, it affects the evaluation process of these minorities' ability to outperform by recruiters.

Analysis of 45 hiring professionals and 44 applicants by Berkelaar (2014) assessed how these professionals and applicants made sense out of cybervetting. The findings reported that recruiters were of the view that cybervetting is inevitable for transparency matters and acquiring information from social media to decide if the candidate is fit for organization or not. On the other hand, Ghoshray (2013) stated that, "an employer making employment decisions based on such information could erroneously draw inferences on the suitability of an applicant, which may expose the employer to liability for discriminatory employment practices"(p. 652). Thus, SMOS' use for making employment decisions can be subjected to questioning its validity.

Another study examines the influence of potential employees' social media accounts (SMAs) on hiring decisions made by human resource (HR) professionals. It involves 38 HR professionals responding to 16 open-ended questions. The study found that HR managers in the tourism sector generally favor reviewing candidates' SMAs over traditional references. This preference stems from the perception that SMAs provide a more efficient and cost-effective method for screening a large number of applicants (Demir & Günaydın, 2022). This paper underscores the increasing significance of social media in the recruitment process, filling a gap in HR management literature by offering empirical insights into how job applicants' SMAs influence hiring decisions.

#### **2.4 Discrimination, Bias and Stereotyping**

It is normal for companies to seek and utilize different sources for screening candidates to hire on a vacant position. Discrimination, however, is still a widespread practice. The applicability of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 brought changes in many hiring practices but it still needs more work to be performed to completely eliminate the discriminatory issues. Even in 1991, when discrimination was considered to be a practice of past, its relevance is still prevalent in the workforce (Antwi-Boasiako, 2008; Bennett-Alexander & Hartman, 2014).

With increasing usage of SMOS by recruiters, engagement with candidates is made more smooth without any legal retributions. Due to this, the laws have yet not caught the technological practices to safeguard applicants from facing discrimination as a result of cybervetting (Ghoshray, 2013). Stereotyping is also common assumed to be a process of

separating ‘them from us’ irrespective of candidate’s competences and experiences. According to a study by Derous et al. (2017), although irrelevant but recruiters may look unto the ethnic names or pictures and affect the hiring decision hurting the candidates. Similarly, Uhlmann and Cohen (2007) conducted a study and identified that such discriminatory practice on the bases of ethnicity is increasing not only due to ambiguous circumstances but due to the decision maker’s self-objectivity or imperviousness regarding bias. Such discriminations still prevail in workplaces despite increasing importance in eliminating such practices while making hiring decisions (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013; Jolls & Sunstein, 2006).

The studies focusing on identifying the underlying factors in hiring discrimination, the doors to review how recruiters are likely to discriminate candidates open up. It leads to an opportunity to devise interventions for hiring professionals to ensure the transparent processing of hiring and for candidates to get informed on how to avoid eliciting biases against them (Uhlmann & Cohen, 2007). Lee et al. (2018) performed a research study and explored emotions of recruitment personnel that how certain emotions of fear impact attitudes of recruiters towards applicants. They found that, “Participants primed with fear demonstrated the greatest risk perception, but only if they also experienced the negative affect induction” (p. 3).

Thus, cyber-vetting is all up to the organizations and their hiring managers to perform a thorough analysis of all online resources important to make an educated hiring decision about the candidate. Nowadays, acquiring valid and credible information from prior employers of applicants becomes harder, internet and online sources come in handy enabling employers to access valid information about candidates before calling them for interview or offering job (Grasz, 2016).

Another article deduced online platforms and social networking sites have revolutionized candidate attraction, while cybervetting and applicant tracking systems have introduced both opportunities and challenges in screening. Emerging methods like asynchronous digital interviews and gamification-based assessments are transforming the selection phase, with a critical focus on how candidates respond to these innovations (Nikolaou, 2021). Additionally, technological developments in onboarding and socialization are improving the integration of new hires. The article calls for further research to explore these evolving technologies' impact and effectiveness, ensuring that they continue to enhance the recruitment and selection process while addressing any associated risks.

The intended study assumes, as supported by the implicit bias literature, that biases exist and are a prevalent feature of human thinking, behavior, and interaction. Thus the idea is to address the gaps in the literature regarding the biases that are triggered and formed when social media profiles, including text and images, of job candidates are viewed during social media and online searches as part of the hiring or cyber vetting process.

### **3. Research Questions**

1. Are hiring experts aware of the conscious and unconscious biases that emerge while cyber-vetting candidates for the job?

2. How do hiring professionals apply biases to candidates when conducting social media and online searches (SMOS) during the cyber-vetting of applicants?
3. Does using social media for screening candidates lead to loss of potential candidates in respective organization?
4. How can these biases be avoided or minimized while using SMOS ?

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

A structure or a design is imperative for a research work as it lays the foundation for the flow of the research process (De Vaus, 2001). The study used a qualitative design to explain the use of SMOS by recruiters and how it brings forth biases when online platforms are used to screen candidates. Qualitative analysis incorporates interpretation of interviews taken, observations and any documented data available relevant to the question under study to extract substantive meanings, patterns and themes existing in the studied phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Thus, qualitative data analysis followed by thematic analysis was performed for current study to gain in-depth insight into the subjective experiences of people on the concepts under study.

This study employed a constructivist approach that aims at understanding how individuals make knowledge of the world through their reflection on life experiences; personal as well as professional (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### 4.2 Sampling Strategy

The foremost step of data collection is to identify the people or organization that will help you answer your research questions. Population is also defined as the group of people who share similar features (Creswell, 2013). Target population is the group for which the researcher wants to generalize a study (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The target population for this research are hiring professionals.

Nonprobability purposive sampling technique is used to recruit the participants. A purposive sample of 4 hiring professionals were recruited from the population of managers, HR personnel, recruitment personnel who have active participation in the process of cyber-vetting and making decisions for hiring.

The demographics of participants are shown below in a table;

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age(years)</b>	<b>Designation</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Industry/Organization</b>
<b>1</b>	Male	33	Assistant Manager HR	5+ years	Healthcare Industry
<b>2</b>	Female	25	Talent Acquisition Head	2+ years	Growth Levers
<b>3</b>	Female	25	Recruitment Officer	2 years	Tameer Constructions
<b>4</b>	Female	29	Recruitment Officer	4+ years	Retail Sector

### **4.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The qualitative data for the current study was collected through online interviews using Zoom and Google Meet. The participants were approached through LinkedIn. Prior information was obtained from the participants on whether they do online recruitment or not. Those who agreed were asked for an interview.

### **4.4 Interview Guide**

The interview guide was created such that it aimed at gaining a rich comprehension of the process of cyber vetting used by hiring professionals and the occurrence of possible cognitive biases in screening candidates. The guide was based on three major questions. These questions inquired about the demographic information of participants including their professional experience in hiring process, their recruitment and selection process experience, and screening candidates using SMOS or through online platforms. Open ended questions were made to cover the participants' practices, values, thoughts, and beliefs associated with cyber-vetting, selection, or use of SMOS while hiring people. The interview guide is attached in appendix.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1 Cybervetting; A Known Phenomenon or Not?**

Participants were asked about their understanding, awareness and use of cyber-vetting when looking to hire and performing background checks. This question aimed to assess participants' understanding/awareness of cyber-vetting as a tool (using SMOS to view personal pages on Facebook, Instagram, or any other SM platforms or online, public sources of information). Each participant displayed a grave awareness of what cyber-vetting was and the websites that could be used to vet a candidate.

Participants freely answered questions regarding their understanding of cyber-vetting, and the processes used when reviewing candidates either prior to or before hiring. Participant C stated that his first steps are to,

*"...if some resume fulfils our criteria, we discuss with team members to decide for first screening interview. Sometimes it happens that we check other profiles linked to that candidate as well to start background checks or to verify the description he has mentioned in his resume. And then we call that person for interview..."(Participant C)*

Another participant, when asked about same question, said,

*"...cyber-vetting is usually done when we want to have some background checks for the candidate to make sure if he/she is what he/she portrays to be. For senior positions and more managerial positions, we go for looking into some social media profiles of candidates..."(Participant A)*



One of the Participants continues talking about the process of cyber-vetting acknowledging that she looks to social media during cyber-vetting process for how the person brands themselves or presents themselves like he said,

*“...they are a source from where you can know how a person presents himself. Like, if we are hiring a candidate who needs to be proficient in interpersonal relationships, or in socializing... we would go for checking his networking status. We can get an insight through his social media accounts...”(Participant A)*

The major themes identified after grouping the categories and codes found common in responses of participants were: Social Media use; SM red flags; Biases elicited due to SM use; Observable characteristics on SM; Awareness and Management of biases. Where needed, some themes were further broken down into subthemes representing unique concepts within the theme.

## **5.2 Social Media (SM) Usage**

SM was a main category where the SMOS platforms used by participants to cyber-vet candidates were identified. All four participants (100%) noted the use of SM to be both relevant and essential in the cyber-vetting of candidates. Some of them felt that it was helpful to not only use SMOS to examine candidate’s employment history, lifestyles, and business and personal connections, but also to look for any other information on SMOS that could be deemed as significant in making a hiring decision (e.g., general behavior on SM). One of the participants claimed not to utilize SM in a formal capacity to vet candidates or make decisions; however, the researcher found inconsistencies and contradictions in some interview responses that could suggest some hiring decisions could be made or influenced by informal peeks at a candidate’s profile page.

One example of this was Participant A who when asked about SM use to cyber-vet first stated:

*“Right now, we, as a professional, we only use LinkedIn. Once the person has, you know, is selected, we go for a reference check as well, but we don't go for their personal social media accounts immediately to find in-depth details...” (Participant A)*

However, when asked about the aspects of social-media and cyber-vetting later in the interview he said,

*“...it can be beneficial for a recruiter that if we do a check on their personal social media account and we see that there is a hate speech...there's some explicit content or what kind of language he or she used. So it can be a breakthrough for the recruitment process...” (Participant A)*

All of the hiring professionals that participated in this study agreed that their organizations used SM, either formally or informally, as a way to cyber-vet applicants. A study by Kluemper and Rosen (2009) supports the notion that employers that use SM platforms to assess personality are able to predict high and low performers based on images identified on SM networking sites. As an example, participant A stated,

*“...for senior positions and more managerial positions, we go for looking into some social media profiles of candidates... It helps us to know his/her previous reputation at work as well as give some hints regarding that person’s personality as well...” (Participant A)*

Participants reported the most common SM platforms used to cyber-vet are LinkedIn and Facebook. Other sites not as commonly used were Instagram, Twitter, and Google Search (engine). Only one participant reported the use of Google search engine as a part of Boolean search.

### **5.2.1 LinkedIn**

The interviews suggested that participants utilized the LinkedIn platform as a business resource to determine certain aspects of candidate viability from a business point-of-view. Those who use LinkedIn as a platform to cyber-vet, all of them stated that they put great importance on making sure that candidates résumé matched with what was on their LinkedIn page. The following quotes illustrate this sub-category:

*“We check LinkedIn to preview their previous job records...” (Participant C)*

*“...we focus on their professional portals, which is LinkedIn and we do preview their LinkedIn profiles. So that's what we do. After selection, we can have a reference check. Through LinkedIn, we are more towards like, if we found someone that was suitable and who was already been working in that domain, so, we go for like, we check their mutual connection, which is in our mutual friendship, so we contact them, we ask them about their profile, we ask if they know that person, their personality etc...” (Participant A)*

*“...as I told before, if the position demands a certain characteristic in candidate, like appearance, social network, extroversion kind of things so we view for these things on LinkedIn...” (Participant B)*

### **5.2.2 Facebook**

Facebook is a site that individuals use on a casual basis for communication and sharing pictures and updates with friends and family. For some, it provides a way of creating an alternate persona, somewhat different than what people may see face-to-face. These styles of posting to Facebook can at times hurt a candidate especially when hiring professionals look at Facebook for verification of character and potential red flags that may be brought into question. The following participant's excerpts give examples of how they use Facebook as a cyber-vetting tool:

*“Sometimes Facebook is used too...Like, if we are hiring a candidate who needs to be proficient in interpersonal relationships, or in socializing... we would go for checking his networking status. We can get an insight through his social media accounts... I, at personal level, try to search more about that candidate. His previous history regarding work, like you know, his reputation or how he is in terms of behavior. So having this in mind, I just went into his Facebook profile...” (Participant A)*

Therefore, SM was used to verify a résumé, to see what a person looks like prior to an interview, for informal assessments that sometimes come from others (comments on a page),

for attempts to identify inappropriate information, and to get a personal look at the candidate and his or her life.

### **5.3 Biases Elicited by Using Social Media and Online Searches**

As the use of SM allows individuals to share information, the participants acknowledged that some items shared on SM platforms might open the door to both implicit and explicit biases. Following sub-themes highlight the very aspect.

#### **5.3.1 Images on Social Media**

Images substantially contribute to how employers paint a picture of the person to be hired. Conventional background checks typically focus on reaching out to previous employers to gain information; however, use of the Internet, specifically SM platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn, provide opportunities to reach deeper into the life of a candidate to identify if there is a fit. Exposure to pictures of the candidates, as well as their personal and work life, expressed through pictures and posts on their SM profile, opens the door for implicit and explicit bias to occur. One participant discussed his thoughts on how images can bias employers by emphasizing:

*“...it has become a trend that we don’t take anything serious. We joke about our political conditions, law and order or even what usually happens in our society. So such posts or images which represent these kind of traits or acts of people are sometimes not perceived as good by recruiters...” (Participant C)*

Another participant expressed his views when asked about the same thing in such words,

*“...if I talk about myself, if I see some questionable stuff or posted images, you know, it will give some red signal to me. What if that candidate is not ethically up to the mark? You can’t simply take risks like these.” (Participant A)*

Examining images on SM provides employers the opportunity to make observations of a candidate, through the lens of the hiring managers. The hiring manager is likely to have some preferences, biases (implicit or explicit), and triggers (red flags) for what they do not want to see when looking into a candidate (e.g., political imagery).

One participant said,

*“...Like if we are hiring a position that needs to be presentable, we will look into the profiles and see how the person posts about himself, how he or she posts images about their self...If they are showing themselves in a way not acceptable by our company’s moral code or the company for which we are hiring, then we do not proceed with that candidate...” (Participant B)*

However, the content of posts, in terms of words and language used, also were clearly featured in many of the interviewee’s comments. However, it seems pictures were more influential.

### **5.3.2 Observable Characteristics on Social Media; Gender and Age**

Almost all participants held the belief that the ability to see gender, more specifically for women, was an observable characteristic that could lead hiring managers to become biased or make decisions based on being a woman. Participant C remarked,

*“...as I have experienced it much in my surrounding as well. Females are mostly neglected in technical jobs or the ones that include going on sites. I am also the only female here at my organization. They do not prefer females for outside field work even if competent females come up for interview...”(Participant C)*

One of the participant considered gendered perspective towards hiring to be very fine which reflects how gender discrimination is not even considered a discrimination. As that participant remarked,

*“...if a position is like the requirement of that job is to, you know, go outside and you have to deal with hundreds of corporate clients and you have to do the stuff, so there is a specific need for that job, and there would be specific requirements. So, that's fine if the job role, which we are looking for is, you know, is required for specific gender...” (Participant A)*

Other characteristics that were mentioned as possible factors in SM-generated bias were the ability to observe age, especially older candidates. One of the participant mentioned,

*“...age does matter a lot. If we are hiring for a start-up or if somebody is hiring an HR person in their own company so they see if the candidate is aged or like 45 years old, the recruiter might assume this person would not be that flexible and would be used to, like, working in a structured organisation for years and years so this candidate might not be a good fit...and at the same time if we are going for a Seth culture company where older people might be a good fit because there is this thing with Seth culture that young people who might come up with innovative ideas are a threat to senior management ...so here we hire aged people or prefer aged people...” (Participant B)*

One of the participants, even though aware of her bias towards age, mentioned that she cannot resist this. She said,

*“...age thing is concerned. So age is the one thing I will be probably making my decisions on, because it's my issue here with like it's not that easy to stereotype career and it's not right but again for software houses, IT positions would be interesting and they need a youngster...”(Participant D)*

### **5.3.3 Ethnicity**

In western context, race appears to be generally a SM-generated bias but in the context of Pakistan, ethnicity appears to a discriminatory factor. It was evident through response of one of the participants when she said,

*“...as we are a construction company, we hire labour which mostly belong to KPK and Baluchistan. They have a very strong point of view about Punjab and some even have deep hatred for Pakistan, as you know our history with Afghans...I don't want anyone like that in*

*my company who does not have good intentions. So candidate's views matter a lot. We cannot have groups in our organizations who would create conflicts...*” (Participant C)

#### **5.3.4 Cultural Fit**

All participants were concerned with a new hire and compatibility with other employees in the company. However, participants felt that cultural fit was important prior to hiring, and again, SMOS provided information on what a candidate could be like if hired. Participant C remarked,

*“...I, then, see about what type of views and believe that person has. Are they aligned with our organizational policy, culture or moral code or not. I mostly observe that candidate might not be having a history of something that might harm our organisation's image...”* (Participant C)

This was the general consensus of the majority of participants, with Participant B also adding, *“... if I'm hiring for a startup and he has worked for Maple, that is a Seth culture company then he would not be culturally fit...so we also need to research on the current company that he's working in or what nature does, you know, that company has, what kind of culture that companies have in order to give the best people to our clients...”* (Participant B)

Participants overall felt that it was important to use SM sites like Facebook to observe everyday life or the perception that the candidate chooses to share. By examining, insight can be gained to the type of behaviors that could be expected if hired.

#### **5.3.5 Organizational Fit**

Organizational fit proved to be necessary for all participants. When assessing if the candidate will be a good fit for the company, recruiters are looking at the values, characteristics of the candidate and comparing them to that of the organization. Participant C stated that,

*“...previous experience is also a contributing factor...if we once had bad experience with an employee coming from a certain company, we generally hesitate in hiring candidates from same organization. Like, they would not fit into our organization.”* (Participant C)

Organizational fit for some of the participants went hand-in-hand with the candidate having the skills to match the job. As participant A said,

*“...For senior positions and more managerial positions, we go for looking into some social media profiles of candidates...as the recruiter, the most important points are their job responsibilities, which they are currently performing... other factors like in which company they are working, or are they industry based like can that candidate perform his current industry practices to our requirements or not?”* (Participant A)

Additionally, Participant B laid strong emphasis on job hopping as one of the biggest red flag for their organization. They considered it to be unfit for their organization. As the participant remarked,

*“...so if they have stood there for less than one year and they have job hopped from one company to another, then that is a huge red flag and we don't usually take that person no matter how good the skill set is, no matter how good the education and everything else, or the company*

*that they're working in...If that is not an issue, then obviously, the skill set and the nature of company matter..." (Participant B)*

#### **5.4 'Institute' Matters**

When speaking of being qualified for the job, one of the participants emphasized on qualification and educational institute to be important factors which might bias a recruiter based on previous experience from same institute or same educational background. It was stated by that participant as,

*"...education, degree, years of experience, again the kind of companies etc. Like if there is a candidate who has studied from NCA so it is generally believed that they are non-serious in terms of working, they are more like freelancer stuff...so if someone with this background comes up, the recruiter does not go for him/her. That person is not usually taken up for shortlisting, you know. In such case, recruiter can be biased based on these predefined assumptions..." (Participant B)*

Finding the right candidate with experience in the field was important to the participants, as was the ability to use LinkedIn to validate résumés being equally as important. The ability to examine job experience as well as references by colleagues or former employers that validated skills and performance aided in making the connection that the candidate had viable skills to fit the needs of the job. Additionally, it was observed that personal institute of recruiter appeared to bias the hiring process as well. It was evident from the response of one of the participant. She mentioned;

*"...if somebody is from ( institute name) and if the person and the other candidate is from different universities and they both appeared in my interview, so I'll definitely be more affiliated with the person who's from the (institute name) because of my affiliation with my institute..." (Participant D)*

#### **5.5 Social Media Red Flags**

All participants (100%) felt that while using SM as a tool to vet potential hires, red flags would halt them from either interviewing or making a job offer to an interviewee. Participant B felt that using SMOS as a tool was important to establish what kind of person they might be. He said,

*"...things that matter during cyber-vetting using social media is totally dependent on existing doubts...we see social media profiles only when we have certain doubts about the candidate...if they are showing themselves in a way not acceptable by our company's moral code or the company for which we are hiring, then we do not proceed with that candidate." (Participant B)*

Another participant said,

*"...the candidate can post stuff on personal profiles that might not be appropriate like if their posts show some personality issues which might interfere with organizational rules, so we generally do not hire such candidates..." (Participant C)*

### **5.5.1 Negative Attitudes and Posts**

Negative attitudes were another area of concern for participants as well. Participant C remarked,

*“...on social media we check that if they have posted anything troubling or which can create problems like culture misappropriation, gender discrimination or some content about their previous workplace. Through all this we can at least have an idea that what type of person we are hiring...once I was going through a candidate profile and he had posted something about “Aurat March”, I know there are many controversies about it but how you present your view is important. He had used some very harsh words in one of his post, and that was not acceptable for me. Similarly, if someone had constantly complaint about his/her workplace that also does not leave a good impression...” (Participant C)*

The participant while answering another question in an interview also expressed such thing in words as,

*“...also, some people who post about their previous organizations and discuss their experiences openly, it is also a point of concern for me...” (Participant C)*

Another crucial red flag factors for the participants was an unprofessional content, posting negative complaints about previous employers or job related issues, and discussing organization related experiences on personal social media profiles or on a page. For instance, one of the participant shared an instance from his past experience while mentioning about some negative attitude of candidate on social media,

*“...I just went into his Facebook profile. The post I encountered was something related to his past organization and his work experience there. It had some, like, hate content...which I think is a threat to the reputation of organization you work at...I did not pursue that candidate as organization’s reputation and its supremacy is important...” (Participant A)*

Another participant also highlighted this aspect while sharing his views. He stated that,  
*“...If the candidate has a history of writing or discussing issues related to work on online platforms, it goes against our policy so we are reluctant towards hiring that person...” (Participant C)*

These candidates came to individual conclusions that negativity in posts could lead to a cancerous behavior being transferred to an organization and also other employees. SM provided a path to examine context on a webpage that would allow the hiring professional to make decisions based on what was read.

### **5.5.2 Online Persona vs. Reality**

Another sub-theme found under SM Red Flags was online persona vs. reality, in other words, a fictitious persona that an individual wants other to see or identify with. One of the participant stated,

*“...If someone is behaving differently on their professional account and their personal account this can create a bias. It can alert the recruiter that why discrepancy exists in both profiles. It*

*is a concern that what is original. Is the person portraying himself right on his professional account or on his personal profile?”(Participant C).*

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

The previous section discussed the results of the analysis, linked the analysis to the research question, and illustrates consistency in the analysis. Four participants were interviewed, and the results were described in depth according to major themes and sub-themes that were guided by the research question. A need exists to examine, expose, work to reduce, or even eradicate the influence of implicit and explicit bias when hiring managers conduct background checks using SM platforms, especially when such behaviour results in the exclusion of potential candidates or candidates who belong to a protected class. Given that people are inherently biased in how they perceive the study areas and thus report their actions in a different way than the actual practise (Steiner et al, 2011), it is reasonable to assume that recruiters are aware of the limitations and do not consider cybervetting to be a reliable, valid, or objective method. However, because recruiters are often driven by mistrust (Berkelaar, 2010), they wind up spending more time cybervetting in order to get as much information as possible.

SM use provides the opportunity for users to post images which in turn allows recruiters to use those pictures to help determine whether the candidates appear like they might fit the organization. These types of pictures combined with (sometimes negative) images portrayed through the media can influence recruiters to make off-based ethnic generalizations leading to job rejections for the minority candidate as people from KPK and Baluchistan or “Afghans” faced discrimination and job opportunity in Punjab based office in one of the 4 conducted interviews. The findings of the study indicated that how certain prejudices may arise against or for a candidate based on the content available through social media platforms as evident from the themes described above. They also suggested that how images and text found on social media can alter the perceptions and decisions of recruiters. These findings were consistent with previous research study by Derous et al. (2017) where they stated that although irrelevant but recruiters may look unto the ethnic names or pictures and affect the hiring decision hurting the candidates. Similarly, Uhlmann and Cohen (2007) conducted a study and identified that such discriminatory practice on the bases of ethnicity is increasing not only due to ambiguous circumstances but due to the decision maker’s self-objectivity or imperviousness regarding bias. Participant A’s lingering negative emotional response (If I talk about myself, if I see some questionable stuff or posted images, you know, it will give some red signal to me) demonstrates how emotions are central to moral assessments (Hitlin, 2011).

Consistent with previous literature and agreeing with the theory of attribution and theory of Implicit Bias as Greenwald et al. (1998) explained, the findings provide essential insights into the hiring process using online platforms where certain biases were activated during screening of candidates without conscious awareness of participants and flaws were attributed to the minority status (ethnicity, gender, age) of some candidates instead of their individual characteristics. Additionally, stereotypes about certain groups were also found to appear as a discriminatory factor while making hiring decisions.



Interestingly, the findings of the study also explained how participants, by taking a moment to dig deeper into candidate's background after finding contradictory content on their social media profiles, led to conclusions that candidates were worth interviewing and even selected for hiring.

Increasing diversity and inclusion is challenging at times, and it takes a commitment from the organization, the HR management team, and overall leadership to break the barriers and look beyond what may be displayed about a person on SM. The goal of the recruiter or hiring professional should be to hire the most qualified person for the job regardless of gender, age, or any other category of discrimination. It is up to that recruiter to find out who the candidate is on paper, as well as online, and if there is an organizational fit that warrants an interview or ultimately an offer of employment. Decades ago, a résumé and background check backed by a previous employer was standard. However, in today's technology-driven society, searching online sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and others have allowed not only friends and family, but recruiters to have a peek into the lifestyle that is portrayed in pictures and postings over time for almost anyone to see. Despite recruiters' proclivity to hunt for material online, the information they gather from various work settings might influence their judgement on whether a candidate is fit (Putnam & Jablin, 2001).

Stereotypes about certain categories (age, gender, and ethnicity) often lack any basis in reality, but once invented, are often carried over from generation to generation. In this way, SM can be used to vilify and sometimes confirm the perception of what a person is, based on an image. Inclusion should not mean forcing organizations to hire applicants that would not fit the job or organization just because of minority status. However, proper diversity training must ensure that hiring professionals are aware that information on SM is not always correct and can be tainted by implicit biases against people who are members of specific groups.

## **7. Practical Implications**

The results of the study imply that organizations need a well-defined hiring policy and should require diversity training that is inclusive of SM use during the hiring and cyber-vetting process, and how to overcome biases.

- First, training should be based on self-awareness of biases and taking responsibility to identify areas where personal growth is needed through awareness of biases that each manager may encounter during the cyber-vetting process.
- Secondly, this research also shows a need for policy and guidelines in organizations surrounding the use of SM during the hiring process as well as required documentation of the use of SM during the cyber-vetting process.
- Thirdly, screening process shall not only be limited to online checks on social media profiles, some further tests shall be performed such as psychological assessments to hire the best possible candidate or to validate the information found doubtful on personal profiles of candidates.

A practical application of the research findings could be training workshops that include the mechanics of privacy settings explaining how users can choose options on their social media accounts to prevent recruiters or strangers from seeing anything more than a basic profile.

At the organizational level, by employing social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram during cyber-vetting, employers are engaging in proactive vetting of posted images and text that might contribute to biases against some potential candidates. As a result of this growing trend of informal and formal cyber-vetting, employers must be able to recognize any area for biases (implicit or explicit) that will allow for the denial of employment or interviews based on materials that have been identified on SM.

At the societal level, by addressing the awareness of how images found on SM might allow for biases to impede applicants from attaining employment, steps can be taken to alter how searches are completed, what information should be identified on SM, and what information is off limits.

## **8. Limitations and Future Recommendations**

- The study employed only four participants for doing analysis. Limited sample size leads to low external validity so the results may be limited to organizations that currently use the Internet as a cyber-vetting tool with similar demographics to those described in methodology. For example, smaller organizations without hiring professionals might have different patterns of use of SM information in hiring practices. Therefore, future research could incorporate more sample of HR recruiters to obtain deep insights into this study area.
- Another limitation to the study could be volunteer bias, the error that results when volunteer participants respond differently than the general population would respond (Demir et al., 2017). Future studies can avoid this bias and perform random sampling to enhance the accuracy of results.
- Based on the demographics of the participants, factors such as participant gender, and location of the organization could bias and ultimately influence the study. To increase generalizability, sample participants could be employed from different cities and organizations in future.
- The results may also not apply to organizations that rely solely on standard background checks that contact candidates' prior employers for information on performance.
- Assistants who may help vet candidates were not interviewed for this study, which also may exclude additional perspectives or influences on hiring. Future research can focus on interviewing assistant HR recruiters as well.
- To enhance the credibility of HR organizations, future research could investigate the impact of organizational reputation, trustworthiness, and transparency on the use of social media in hiring practices.
- To enhance the credibility of HR organization, a research should examine how HR organizations' credibility influences the perceived validity and reliability of social media information in hiring decisions.

- Investigate the role of certifications, such as SHRM or HRCI, in enhancing the credibility of HR professionals and their use of social media in hiring practices.
- Explore the impact of HR organizations' social media policies and guidelines on their credibility and the use of social media in hiring practices.

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