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Whom do you know? Recruiters' motives for assessing jobseekers' online networks

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ABSTRACT

Network recruitment has become an essential part of the modern labour market. However, there are significant research gaps: 1) the development of social media has been crucial to the growth of social networks, yet we know little about its influence on network recruitment; 2) studies on network recruitment generally focus on employees' rather than employers' perspectives; 3) the context of most research is the US labour market, which then identifies a need for contributions relating to other countries. The aim of this study is to analyse and discuss recruiters' use of SNS to evaluate the networks of potential candidates. To understand how and why recruiters assess online networks, we used qualitative data from a Swedish study. Our analysis showed that recruiters search the internet either to find information that helps them ascertain the candidate as trustworthy, or to evaluate the candidate's social capital through the size and composition of their networks. For certain job positions especially, active management of one's online networks thus becomes crucial. Finally, this study illustrates how network connections may undermine rather than build trust, and thereby challenges a belief in the positive impact of networks.

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Introduction

It is well established that networks affect employment opportunities and that both creating and maintaining networks involve the integration of private and work-related social life (e.g. Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 1993, 2000). For example, the people you meet at a Friday night party or at a Parent–Teacher Association meeting may hold central positions in

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firms that are planning to recruit new employees. Conclusively, over the last half century, network recruitment has been a well-researched area (see Andersson, 2017; Kramarz & Skans, 2014; Marsden & Gorman, 2001). As the vast amount of research on network recruitment point out, one motive for using networks for recruitment purposes is to reduce the risks associated with hiring.

However, the development of digital communication has led to changes in how networks function. In particular, the emergence of social media has facilitated the construction of networks and decreased the cost of their maintenance (cf. Donath & boyd, 2004). In this way, social network sites (SNSs) have become an important platform for recruitment. Its use is efficient from a recruitment perspective, since information costs (search costs) decrease when information about both vacancies and available labour can be shared online or directed to specific groups of potential candidates or employers. Moreover, SNSs are also used to collect information about jobseekers.

The use of search engines and SNS to retrieve information about candidates, i.e. *cybervetting* (Berkelaar, 2017; McDonald, Thompson, & O'Connor, 2016), is often seen as a time-efficient and helpful strategy in the selection and evaluation process. Although the practice of cybervetting concerns information searches over the internet, jobseekers' online networks are often of special interest to cybervetting recruiters since employers thereby 'access a rich knowledge of users [i.e. job candidates] when those individuals are bound to a network of colleagues to whom they wish to remain transparent and trustworthy' (Trottier, 2012, p. 161).

Even though there are myriad studies on real life networks and network recruitment, there are major research gaps. First, we know little about SNS and their role in recruitment processes. Second, most studies on network recruitment take the employees' perspective, and relatively few the employers' perspective. A third research gap is that a vast majority of studies on network recruitment in general, specifically the most influential studies, is in the US context (see e.g. Granovetter, 1973; Holzer, 1988; Rees, 1966). There are some exceptions that we will discuss later, but none of these studies investigate the role of SNS or the employers' perspective. There are huge differences between the institutionalized welfare states of Scandinavia and the market-oriented society of the US. Sweden, for example, has had an established public employment office since the beginning of the 20th century with a high job market share up until recently, while this notion of a public agent has had less influence in the US (Håkansson, 2011). These identified knowledge gaps are the motivation for this study, conducted in a

Scandinavian context, focusing on cybervetting in employers' evaluations of jobseekers' networks.

Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to analyse and discuss recruiters' use of SNS to evaluate the networks of potential candidates. We used qualitative interviews with recruitment personnel to investigate the following research questions:

- How do recruiters motivate their interest in jobseekers' online networks and on what grounds are those networks claimed as being significant?
- What consequences can the assessment of jobseekers' networks have for hiring organizations and for jobseekers?

Before proceeding, it should be noted that we are interested in the evaluation of jobseekers' online networks (specifically LinkedIn and Facebook) rather than their real life social networks, even though these often overlap.

Previous research and theory

Numerous studies have investigated network recruitment and recognised the importance of networks in getting a job (e.g. Battu, Seaman, & Zenou, 2011; Bentolila, Michelacci, & Suarez, 2010; Bramoullé & Saint-Paul, 2010; Calvó-Armengol & Zenou, 2005; Håkansson, 2011; Håkansson & Tovatt, 2017; Hällsten, Edling, & Rydgren, 2017; Tovatt, 2013). Although consideration of networks has for a long time been a crucial part of recruitment practices in countries outside Sweden (e.g. in the US, see Granovetter, 1973), network recruitment has, since the beginning of the 1990s, also become common in Sweden. The most important and probable reason for this change is that by this time, the Public Employment Service – due to a paradigm shift from highly regulated recruitment practices to more deregulated approaches – had lost influence, and unemployment had increased drastically (Lundin, 2011; Olofsson & Wadensjö, 2009).

While previous research on offline networks is extensive, studies of online networks have naturally only been conducted in the last decades and generally build upon theoretical frameworks similar to that utilized in studies of offline networks. As Smith and Kidder (2010, p. 492) point out, SNS evolved shortly after Putnam published *Bowling Alone* (2000)

and we 'are now faced with considering how, and to what extent, social networking sites such as Facebook represent new forms of social capital.' For example, it has been claimed that the public display of connections is a core characteristic of SNS (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Donath & boyd, 2004). Moreover, Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe (2007, p. 1144) claim that even though early research on SNS acknowledged an interaction between offline and online networks, it was assumed to have a primarily online to offline directionality, i.e. contacts made online led to offline meetings. Here, the networks themselves may function as a signalling device where a jobseeker with an extensive and interesting network may be considered trustworthy, co-operative and overall a better employee than someone without a network. Few studies, however, have directed attention towards the relationship between online and offline networks.

The most common approach in the literature on offline as well as online networks is to show how a network is used as a channel or tool to find either potential job candidates (by the employer) or vacancies (by the jobseeker) (see Holzer, 1988; Pissarides, 1979; Smith & Kidder, 2010). Another theme in the literature is how networks are used to attain references for a person or a workplace by assessing publicly available information (see Lievens & Harris, 2003; Stopfer & Gosling, 2013). While network recruitment has been studied with a focus on how recruiters evaluate jobseekers based on their online network (Stopfer & Gosling, 2013), this aspect has received the least attention in previous research and is the focus of this study.

In relation to these different strands of research on networks and recruitment, we believe that SNS can be strategically used in recruitment processes in several ways. It can be used: 1) to attract jobseekers through employer branding; 2) to announce job vacancies on the employer's Facebook or LinkedIn site; 3) to enable employees to share information about job vacancies on their own sites; 4) to search for and make contact with potential employees; and 5) to search for information about candidates as part of the screening process (e.g. Hedenus & Backman, 2018; McDonald et al., 2016; Melanthiou, Pavlou, & Constantinou, 2015; Roth, Bobko, Van Iddekinge, & Thatcher, 2016; van de Ven, Bogaert, Serlie, Brandt & Denissen, 2017). Even though the use of informal contacts still constitutes the most common recruitment strategy, surveys conducted by the Swedish Chamber of Commerce (2017) show that the use of internet and social media in recruitment seems to be increasing.

If we focus on the use of SNS to search for information about potential employees (points 4 and 5 above), previous research on this topic exists. In one of the studies conducted by the Swedish Chamber of Commerce (2014), 32% of the responding companies used SNS,

including LinkedIn and Facebook, as part of their background checks. The study also showed that the frequency of such vetting varies with the type of job position and sector, as they are more commonly used in the private than the public sector. This method is also frequently used in various other European countries and the US (Berkelaar, 2017; Caers & Castelyns, 2011; Chang & Madera, 2012; Kotamraju, Allouch, & van Wingerden, 2014; Nikolaou, 2014; Melanthiou et al., 2015).

Berkelaar's (2010) study of recruiters in the US is definitively the most elaborate and thorough analysis of the phenomenon. From her findings, she concludes that:

[R]elationships and social networks remain important criteria for employment decisions since online sources make visible a larger part of an individual's network, something that can be leveraged by job candidates to find jobs, and by employers to find candidates and to verify or evaluate career capital claimed by applicants. (Berkelaar, 2010, p. 146)

By inspecting, for example, a candidate's number of connections, or whether the candidate and the recruiter have any connections in common, relational information is used to assess and verify the jobseeker's reputation and trustworthiness, as well as to evaluate the jobseeker's social capital (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014). Often, a candidate's contact list or the references that she or he has received on sites such as LinkedIn, also functions as 'implied' or 'replacement references' (Berkelaar, 2010, p. 158). A significant difference between this phenomenon to relational information that is searched and found through offline networks is that, Berkelaar (2010, p. 146) argues, SNS 'make visible relational connections that might previously have remained hidden.' Another difference that Berkelaar (2010, p. 159) emphasizes is in how online and offline networks may be construed:

...the criteria by which individuals determine who or who not to consider as connections is not visible and may not operate analogously to their choice of social connections offline.

Hence, relational information found on SNS can be a less reliable indicator of how candidates might perform in a job and among their professional networks.

According to Berkelaar (2014), recruiters' evaluations of jobseekers are also based upon common beliefs about what constitutes appropriate online social behaviour. These beliefs form the foundation for a 'digital social contract' which regulates online values and conduct. In this way, knowing how to act and present oneself, and the extent to which one should be visible online, involve both general social competence and specifically, digital social competence. Similarly, Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard and Berg (2013, p. 659) stress that:

[E]mployees need *online boundary management capabilities*, which consist of the time, effort and technical skill required to avoid the accidental disclosure of too much or inappropriate content to professional contacts.

Jobseekers are thus increasingly expected to adjust presentations of their online selves in order to improve their *online employability* (Hedenus & Backman, 2017). This is reflected in discussions on the significance of constructing a digital personal brand (e.g. Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011) to building and displaying one's network.

Berkelaar (2010) builds upon Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital (knowing how) and social capital (knowing whom), and illustrates how attention to online networks can provide information about candidates' practical knowledge as well as their online (and potentially offline) networks and relationships. Furthermore, Berkelaar – without reference to Putnam – discusses recruiters' evaluations of candidate's online networks in terms of their effects on trust formation. Therefore, we now direct attention to Putnam's and Bourdieu's theories on trust, networks and social capital.

Different notions of social Capital

The origin and definition of the concept of social capital has been debated, and, according to Putnam, it constitutes 'a classical case of multiple inventions of the same concept' (Borgatti, 1998, p. 46). Putnam himself, along with Bourdieu, are among those theorists whose interpretation and use of the term are most frequently referred to. There are, however, some noteworthy differences between their approaches (see e.g. Adam & Rončević, 2003; Siisiäinen, 2000; Tzanakis, 2013).

According to Bourdieu (2007), *social capital* is one of three different forms of capital alongside *cultural capital* and *economic capital*, and constitutes a resource that distinguishes and stratifies individuals in a hierarchical society. Social capital is 'linked to possessions of durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 88). Social capital is not the network itself, but rather the potentialities of the network for the individual. Social capital is thus a scarce resource, the value of which is highly context-specific (Tzanakis, 2013).

In addition to memberships in groups and social networks, social capital as a resource depends on mutual cognition and recognition of social stratification. It is through this mutual recognition that different forms of capital become influential (Siisiäinen, 2000). Here, Bourdieu (2007) describes how different forms of capital can be converted into other forms of capital. For example, for the owner of a newly opened restaurant, an extensive network may be the difference between success and

failure. Similar to Bourdieu, Putnam also acknowledges that social capital may be transformed into other forms of capital:

At the individual level, social connections affect one's life chances. People who grow up in well-to-do families with economically valuable social ties are more likely to succeed in the economic marketplace, not merely because they tend to be richer and better educated, but also because they can and will ply their connections (Putnam, 2000, p. 319).

Social capital, in Putnam's work, is primarily presented as a collective, rather than an individual, resource (Tzanakis, 2013). His writings focus on civic traditions and active citizenship in regional and national contexts, and are strongly related to trust (Adam & Rončević, 2003). While Bourdieu highlights conflicts of power and domination, Putnam's approach has been described as functionalist, dealing with social integration but neglecting the vertical dimensions that can exist in modern associations. Trust, in Putnam's view, has no place in Bourdieu's theories (Siisiäinen, 2000).

In summarizing, there are clear differences between the two theoretical frameworks. In our study, we take advantage of both these different approaches. Based upon Putnam's notion of social capital, we analyse how information about a jobseeker's network is used to form trust and to build and strengthen relationships. Bourdieu's understanding then becomes the basis for an analysis of how information about an individual, drawn from SNS, is interpreted as an individual resource carried by a jobseeker. In our analysis, we also apply the theory of translation of capital and a combination of the two perspectives represented by Putnam and Bourdieu: the interconnection between trust and networks, and the possibility of using and translating social capital as a resource.

Network as indicator of trustworthiness

Putnam offers four explanations for why networks and affiliations have such strong effects on the formation of trust and trustworthiness. The first explanation is that *networks increase the costs of defection*. Opportunistic behaviour would put at risk other transactions an individual might want to engage in later. This tells us that a person is unlikely to be disloyal because it would jeopardize his or her investments in the network. In our analysis, we will show that this explanation is relevant when we focus on professional SNS such as LinkedIn, where members often spend significant time and effort to produce an informative and attractive profile.

Furthermore, Putnam asserts that *information concerning who is trustworthy and who is not spreads through the network*. This explanation relates to the use of publicly displayed networks for information and

identity verification. As the online identity is not anchored to the body, identity deception is prevalent. One way of punishing deceivers is to disseminate negative information about them in the network that will make it increasingly difficult for them to find others to interact with in the future. Compared to information through offline networks, information in most online networks are more public, easily spread and accessible. Publicly displayed networks thus 'place the individual within a social context that fosters co-operation through the structure of reputation maintenance' (Donath & boyd, 2004, p. 73).

Further explanations for why networks have a strong effect on trust are that networks *foster norms of reciprocity* and *embody past co-operation success*. Putnam proposes that people learn the essential rules of co-operation and reciprocity by participating in different forms of affiliations and networks. The fact that a network has survived proves that its members are able to collaborate and have acquired the skills to do so. Being a member of a network hence implies that the individual is capable of collaborating with others. On SNS, a person may be blocked or denied access if they act deceitfully or behave in an unacceptable way on the web.

Social capital as an individual resource

During interviews, the recruiters often emphasized social competence as a required characteristic of the jobseeker. Therefore, before moving on to the analysis, we would like to make a short digression and turn to social competence in relation to social capital.

According to Bourdieu (2007), the value of an individual's social capital is the sum of the assets of the three forms of capital (economic, social and cultural capital) held collectively by members in the network. This means that the more capital held by the members in a jobseeker's network, the higher the value of that jobseeker's social capital. The conclusion is that it is not only important *how many* people there are in a jobseeker's network, but also *who* those people are.

As knowledge of appropriate behaviour (i.e. cultural capital) is generally acquired when forming social relations, the concepts of cultural and social capital are closely related. The relationship between *social competence* and social capital is however not clarified by Bourdieu. Intuitively, it may seem reasonable to put these two concepts together, and some researchers do. Leonard (2005, p. 619), for example, defines social capital as a form of social competence. According to Siisiäinen (2000), however, Bourdieu saw the ideology of competence as justifying stratification of the labour market into competent and incompetent individuals. On this basis, social competence constitutes a form of cultural capital that

consists of the individual's knowledge and skills. Similarly, Baron and Markman (2003, p. 42), who do not build on Bourdieu's work, describe social capital and social competence differently:

While entrepreneurs' social capital (as based on their reputation, social networks, etc.) often helps them gain access to persons important for their success (e.g. venture capitalists, potential customers), their social competence then plays a key role in determining the outcomes they experience (e.g. whether they obtain financing, attract key employees, etc.).

Social competence, however, also influences social capital as it conditions the individual's capacity to form relationships. We will follow Baron and Markman's example and talk about social competence as an aspect of cultural capital that involves the appropriation of, and capacity to act upon, context-specific social codes.

Method

We analyse qualitative data from an ongoing study on recruiters' use of internet searches. The study, conducted by Christel Backman and Anna Hedenus, was initially a pilot study in 2013 and later extended to a four-year project. For this study, 37 Swedish human resources (HR) professionals, hiring managers and employers were interviewed on 31 separate occasions. 21 of the interviewees were women and 16 were men. The interviewees represent both public and private organizations and work in different industry sectors such as, for example, information technology; staffing and recruitment; transport and logistics; food and beverage; telemarketing; manufacturing; and fast-moving consumer goods. Most of the views and quotes presented in the text, however, are from recruiters in private recruitment companies and consulting firms who explicitly expressed interest in jobseekers' networks during their interviews.

The interviewees were approached and selected with the help of an online survey on the project website. A link to the survey was advertised at various public presentations and discussions with HR professionals and hiring managers on the topic of cybervetting, and disseminated through newsletters and email lists distributed through HR associations and HR alumni. The link to the survey was also sent to all hiring managers of one Swedish municipality and to organizations advertising for new employees using the Swedish Public Employment Service website. We estimated that the link to the survey should have reached approximately 3000 recipients.¹ The online survey served to make contact, but also provided basic facts about the potential interviewees which served as criteria for the selection process. Most importantly, respondents who never used cybervetting were excluded from the study. We contacted everyone who

fulfilled this initial criterion and asked for an interview. At a later stage, we also used information about the size and type of organization to maximise variation in our interviewee sample.

The interviews were semi-structured and based on an interview guide that covered ten themes. They were conducted either individually or in groups of two or three participants. The group interviews were initially spontaneous arrangements, initiated by our contacts who invited one or two of their colleagues whom they thought would also be able to contribute to the study. During the group interviews, participants discussed the themes in the interview guide, with each other and the interviewer. When we realized that the group format positively added to the interviews, we routinely encouraged our contacts to invite additional participants to the interviews. What the group format primarily adds is the stories, the evaluation discussions of cases and examples that the recruiters recollect during our conversations, and the sense-making around cybervetting that takes place in organizations (Flick, 2002). Although these group discussions proved important for capturing organizational discourse around cybervetting, it was not possible to have a group format for the majority of the interviews. There was often a lack of (cybervetting) colleagues or the interviewee preferred an individual interview due to time constraints. The anonymity of individual interviews can, however, allow more room for critical self-reflections, and facilitate acknowledgement that the practice of cybervetting may involve unethical or non-professional aspects. We therefore believe that the combination of group and individual interviews has provided us with a broad spectrum of arguments for why cybervetting is used in recruitment, as well as ethical aspects of the practice.

The majority of the interviews took place at the interviewee's workplace, while a few – for the interviewee's convenience – were conducted at a café, the interviewee's home, or via Skype or telephone. The few interviews conducted on Skype or telephone were somewhat shorter in duration. All interviews – each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes – were recorded and later transcribed.

The transcripts of the interviews were analysed from an inductive approach using an initial, open and line-by-line coding of a few interviews, while in a parallel process, these codes were used to create categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process was followed by a focused coding of the remaining interviews. In this case, the coding of sentences or paragraphs was based on categories that we found significant and interesting in relation to the focus of this article: *networks*, *social contacts* and *social capital*. Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 111) describe this approach as 'moving between inductive and deductive thinking'.

Furthermore, driven by theoretical interest and what we believe to be a gap in previous research, the analysis was restricted to codes concerning the evaluation of a jobseeker's online networks. Therefore, the views of organizational representatives and codes that primarily relate to the use of one's own networks to find potential candidates (i.e. searching or headhunting) play a minor role in this article.

When considering the role of SNS in job recruitment, the use of Facebook and LinkedIn appeared to be specifically interesting to evaluate. These sites are well known and have a large user base. Furthermore, they constitute two different cases of SNS, as they can be positioned on opposing ends of a private-professional scale. The Facebook profile of most people reveals information about their private lives; however, because it is more or less public, private life and working life can overlap. Recruiting personnel have been reported, on occasions, to check a candidate's Facebook profile during evaluation, and there are several examples of employees being dismissed or reprimanded for their conduct on Facebook (Larsson, 2015). Other recruiters seem to prefer to use LinkedIn, since it is more focused on professional matters; however, this SNS can also reveal private aspects of an individual (e.g. how much private time they spend building their network), which may – as we will show in this paper – influence the recruitment process.

Finally, the work of Putnam and Bourdieu has been used to 'stimulate theoretical sensitivity' and provide 'supplementary validation' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:50ff). Because of frequent reference to their work by researchers of cybervetting and networks, we have used their concepts – in addition to our own codes and categories – to see their applicability to our data, and to show how our results may corroborate or contradict their theories. To keep an open mind in relation to these theories, as well as to enhance our theoretical sensitivity in general, we also used some techniques suggested by Strauss and Corbin, such as the 'flip-flop technique', which involves turning concepts and ideas upside down to make comparisons with the extreme opposite of a studied notion or phenomena.

Analysis

Many employers utilize SNS in various ways during a recruitment process; SNS can be a tool to access, activate and utilize their own networks to find potential candidates, or a means to find information about candidates who are already being considered for a position. This latter use can be categorized by their several different aims or outcomes, but in this paper, we focus on the two that relate to the evaluation of jobseekers'

online networks: first, inspecting a candidate's network may aid the recruiter's *formation of trust* in the candidate. Second, the candidate's network can be evaluated as *an indication of the candidate's social and cultural capital*. In the following sections, we will illustrate these distinct aims and describe how social capital can be capitalized into economic capital through active networking and strategic profiling online.

Online networks as a foundation for trust formation

Interviewees talked about online networks as something that provided insight into who the jobseekers are connected with, helped them to find references and provided a source of information that was assessed as more reliable than the candidate's curriculum vitae. Inspections of online networks aid recruiters' trust formation in relation to candidates, and help them to rely on the jobseekers' assertions about their competencies and potential job performance.

By inspecting a candidate's contact list, the recruiter can both get a picture of the jobseeker's network and find out if it includes someone they can easily turn to for a reference call. The identification of a mutual contact is often viewed as working in the jobseeker's favour, by signalling that the candidate is *connected with trustworthy people* and *facilitating references*; both facilitate trust formation. This corroborates Berkelaar's (2010) findings among US organizations. It can also be understood in accordance with Putnam's (1993) explanations for why networks and contact lists affect evaluations of trustworthiness: being affiliated with 'trustworthy' people imply that jobseekers themselves are trustworthy and capable of co-operating and participating according to the norms of a network.

Also in line with Berkelaar's (2010) results, the Swedish recruiters on occasions use information on SNS *as a reference* in itself. Network members' comments about, or conversations with, a jobseeker can be helpful to evaluations of the jobseeker. In order for the network to function as an information channel for recommending people or upholding their reputation, communication among network members is key. The following quote from an HR manager of a consulting company demonstrates that SNS has changed this need for direct contact by enabling more passive forms of information collection (cf. Putnam 1993, 2000). Such information is, however, no less interesting, and what others have written about a jobseeker constitutes, according to this interviewee, 'a form of informal reference':

Interviewer: How significant do you consider the context, where the information is found, to be? I mean, if something is posted on LinkedIn, or if it's published on a website, or on some other social network?

Ip13: The context... I don't know really if it matters what site they are on. But it does matter who the author is. I mean, if it is stuff that you have written yourself, or if it is things that someone else has written about that person. Because then... That's almost more interesting, what others have written. Really. It constitutes a form of informal reference.

Positive information provided by other members of the online network thus warrants successful recruitment.

In this context, it should be noted that the online networks displayed on SNS also function to *verify the jobseeker's identity* and vouch for the jobseeker's trustworthiness (cf. Donath & boyd, 2004). Corroborating Berkelaar's (2010) findings, one of the interviewed recruitment consultants argued that information found on SNS can, by the integration of online and offline networks, be assessed as a relatively reliable source of information:

Somehow, I believe that [information on] LinkedIn is relatively reliable. Because it depends on the fact that you, in your own personal network, know a whole bunch of people, and that you know the professionals you have a relation with. What I said previously: you can exaggerate your own ability, mostly when you write about what you have done, education and so on... But then, in established relations, there you have a higher degree of honesty, because you don't want to lie to your friends, to your business associates. [If you do] Then you're done. (Ip26)

As suggested in this quote, individuals are unlikely to risk lying online when they know that someone in their (online or offline) network can discern their lies. That is, the 'cost of defection' is too high, as lying online may lead to exclusion from the network (cf. Putnam, 1993). Therefore, the online self that is presented is validated by acceptance within the network.

By adapting what Strauss and Corbin (1990) label 'the flip-flop technique', the effects of having contacts who do *not* signal those positive aspects that the recruiters look for, become evident. The identification of contacts in a candidate's network who have affiliations with criminal elements or controversial interest groups, is interpreted as a risk because these contacts may influence a candidate's decisions. Furthermore, certain contacts can indicate that a candidate has values that may conflict with those of the organization. Such relationships may be problematic not only within the organizational environment, but can also damage an organization's public reputation. Thus, the inspection of a candidate's online contacts can be used as trust formation by ensuring that the candidate has *no relationships that can be potentially compromising*.

Furthermore, mutual connections can, as we showed earlier, be beneficial for the candidate; however, this presumes that the recruiter has a positive association with the identified mutual connection. The following

quote shows that a negative assessment of this third person may disadvantage the jobseeker:

Also, in other contexts, people have shown up, people who, apparently, know other people. And typically, this may be people who know former employees of ours, employees who did not perform that well in their roles. And that has also been that kind of, which has made us ... Some warning bells in the process, where we feel that ... But then that doesn't mean that you're necessarily similar to the people you know ... (Ip19)

Thus, inspection of a jobseeker's network is a strategy for forming trust and reducing the risks involved with hiring. In relation to Putnam's (1993) unconditional belief in the positive impact of networks, the quote above is interesting because it demonstrates that connections with the wrong kind of people or networks may undermine rather than build trust.

Finally, the recruiters were critical towards candidates who are not members of SNS. This should be understood in relation to a general suspiciousness that arises when an online search generates no hits. Consequently, the recruiter cannot use network information to determine whether the candidate is perceived to be trustworthy by other members (cf. Putnam, 2000), and is offered no clues about the candidate's online identity (cf. Donath & boyd, 2004). The following quote, from an interview with the HR manager of a large consulting firm, provides an example of such suspiciousness:

Sometimes you can't even find where [the person] lives. Not even on hitta.se [Swedish site offering addresses and a telephone directory] [...] It's that kind of thing that makes you wonder, 'What kind of social hermit is this?' (Laughs) 'How is it even possible to isolate oneself from that world, not to even have a Facebook account?' (Ip19)

As cybervetting is used to check a candidate's trustworthiness and thereby reduce risk, a non-result does not contribute towards this goal. On the contrary, it may raise questions about the jobseeker's online employability, which we will discuss in the next section.

Online networks as a resource

The *in vivo* code '*having an exciting network*' (Ip23) relates to both the size of the network and having the right kind of contacts in the network. As illustrated above, this is important for forming trust and reducing the risk involved in hiring. It is also significant as indicator of how the job seeker's networks can be put to use. The following section will therefore focus on how recruiters assess a candidate's social and cultural capital, based on the networks identified from their SNS, and how they

constitute an asset for both the individual and the employing organization.² For example, some positions and lines of business require that candidates have a global network. However, even employers in locally-oriented companies wish to see that a candidate's contact list contains certain contacts who are professionally relevant:

A seller without a network on LinkedIn is hardly a big shot in my world, if you put it like that. (Ip15: No.) That parameter is rather a minus, while with a large network it is a plus. And preferably also the right kind. So that it's not only aunts and uncles and cousins and the like ... (laughs) (Ip16)

Here, Bourdieu's (2007) notion that the value of social capital differs between individuals, should be highlighted. It is not just the size of a network that is important; also important are who the network members are and what social, cultural and economic capital they possess.

Although the importance of a candidate's network was repeatedly emphasized in the interviews, the underlying reasons for recruiters' interest are often vaguely formulated or contain several different components, as seen in the following extract:

Well, in some positions it may be very important to have a network in order to not get stuck in a rut. Because it also shows, if you have many business contacts or ... Do you have a large network on LinkedIn? Because you *must* be there [in LinkedIn] today, if you're working in the positions that I am recruiting for. Are you? 'Yes' Ok, 'check'. Then it's, do you have a large network showing that you're actually networking? Because I'm always asking, 'What networks do you have?' Because if you're an engineer without being active in networks, and don't really have any, how do you develop? (Ip16)

As this group interview revealed, these recruiters use LinkedIn to attain information about what can be summarized as the candidate's *digital and professional competence*. Having an active account – preferably with a large network – is here perceived as a requirement – a 'must' – to be considered for a position. This can be theoretically explained by Bourdieu's (2007) idea that cultural and social capital can be transformed into other forms of capital that are potentially profitable for the firm.

The conversion of social capital into economic capital is implicit in the last sentence of the above extract, containing the interviewee's reference to engineers without opportunities to develop. When a candidate is a member of a SNS, this indicates to recruiters that they have an interest in lifelong learning and professional development through participation in networks and therefore, is less likely to get 'stuck in a rut'. However, the capitalization of social capital into economic capital in this case also involves cultural capital. Meetings between network members, either on- or offline, facilitate learning processes and enable the spread of knowledge and information. When a jobseeker does not participate in SNS

and seeks an occupation where such participation is considered the norm, signals a lower level of digital competence; such limited competence (cultural capital according to Bourdieu's terminology) will lead to lower profits for the firm (lower economic capital).

For qualified or executive positions especially, as well as positions in sales and marketing, the recruiters stressed that active membership in SNS is vital and signals digital and professional competence. Recruiters associate such membership with the candidate's knowledge of how the business world works (cultural capital), recognition that networking is important, and that their social capital and competence have value. In an interview with a copartner of a small consulting firm, the interviewee strongly emphasized the importance of SNS membership in their evaluation of candidates:

Yes, if you're not on LinkedIn, we consider that a weakness... Is it because you haven't grasped the value of LinkedIn, or because... My experience tells me that there is, when you *are* a senior and not on LinkedIn, then it's a signal that you're maybe not that competent in marketing yourself, in networking, in the social dimension. That could be a disadvantage, because working with us *is* a social job. You must have social competence. (Ip32)

This view points to the significance of both social and cultural capital, with the latter expressed as the candidate's social and digital competence, competence in 'marketing' oneself. As the interviewee developed his argument, he stressed that digital incompetence does not necessarily mean the candidate lacks social capital or competence. However, any indication of digital incompetence needs to be followed up to ensure the candidate does have sufficient levels of digital and social competence.

For executive or senior positions (Ip32), or positions in sales and marketing (Ip19), the link between social capital (networks) and cultural capital (context-specific social competence and business sense) is quite clear.³ If candidates lack an extensive social network they are often suspected to have less social capacity, incompetent at marketing themselves, have weak co-operation skills and lack knowledge of human nature. Such a link between social and cultural capital is connected to both Putnam's idea that participation in networks signals social capability that may facilitate trust formation, and the Bourdieuan approach that capital is transformable: drawing upon one's social competence to build networks may also lead to increased opportunities for employment or economic achievements.

Of course, not all employers expect their employees to have an online, publicly visible presence. The lack thereof can be understood and excused by reason of, for example, personal integrity, public visibility not being a requirement for the position. Another reason may be age, which

was identified, for example, in an interview with a HR manager of a private sales company:

I think that people who are older may not be as visible because you're not as active on social media when you have kids and family, your own company and some other things on your mind. No, that's... But it would still give me something to think about. (Ip34)

Mostly, however, a candidate's invisibility on online networks raises a red flag for recruiters, indicating a lack of social and/or digital competence that needs to be accounted for.

Non-authentic display of networks

When jobseekers use their networks and personal branding to attain employment, the capitalization of social capital into economic capital is thus made possible at the individual level. Donath and boyd (2004) argue that a publicly displayed network contributes to the individual's constructed identity and self-presentation as a trustworthy and employable person. The periodic updating of a profile and active use of available SNS features (e.g. including recommendations from others on their LinkedIn profile) are often perceived as professional use of SNS. Previous research has shown that, especially for certain job positions, active management of one's online networks – managing one's 'personal brand' (Trottier, 2012) – is crucial for positive self-presentation. This can be done, however, at the expense of blurring the boundaries between private and professional roles.

In order for network membership to produce positive outcomes for the jobseeker, the association with the network needs to be trustworthy and authentic. In an interview with the chief recruiter in a recruitment company, the interviewee presented an openly sceptical attitude towards profiles that were strategically constructed with displayed networks:

Ip02: A phenomenon in corporate business is that you're working hard to get people to write recommendations about you on LinkedIn [...] And *some* are very elaborate. It's obvious that they have *asked* someone to write about them [...]

Interviewer: How do you relate to that?

Ip02: Well, I don't really care. For me it's very ... Well, you can't control this stuff, but it's easy to start thinking that this person is very occupied with himself, a little vain, or very desperate to get a new job.

This view demonstrates that simply being a member of a network is not sufficient for a positive recruitment evaluation. Interestingly, it can be compared with the quote by Ip16 who was sceptical of contact lists consisting of the member's aunts and uncles. From the employer's

perspective, a job candidate's networks need to be *both* authentic and comprise trustworthy members who have entrusted the candidate with both social and cultural capital, which can, in turn, be capitalized into economic capital for both the future employee and employing organization. When a candidate lacks the social and/or cultural capital needed to present themselves and their networks 'correctly', then their attempts at personal branding or strategic profiling, are likely to fail.

Concluding discussion

In this paper, we have contributed to understanding *why* and *how* jobseekers' online networks are evaluated by recruiting personnel, a topic that has received limited attention in previous research on network recruitment. The assessment of jobseekers' activities on SNS is, however, becoming more common in recruitment practices. Hence, it is increasingly relevant to investigate what kind of information is being collected, why networks are evaluated as a signalling device for various competencies and assets held by jobseekers, and what consequences such a new recruitment practice may have for hiring organizations and jobseekers.

We found that online networks not only serve as a resource for recruiters who use SNS to search for potential candidates or mutual connections who can be referees, but also as a source of information about job candidates. To start with, the interviews showed that recruiters assess jobseekers' trustworthiness based upon their connections and interactions with other members on SNS. Many recruiters routinely inspect a candidate's SNS contact list to check whether the candidate is connected with people who are trustworthy or who have compromising interests. Moreover, a jobseeker's publicly displayed interactions with other network members also function as an informal reference.

A second motive for why recruiters check candidates' profiles on SNS is identified as the evaluation of jobseekers' social competence and online employability. Such evaluation is done through interpretations of the use and member composition of jobseekers' networks. An active use of SNS and an awareness of how to use it for constructing a professional identity and a personal brand, are signals of such competencies. In addition, recruiters prefer the candidate to have an extensive and 'exciting' network – i.e. social capital of high value – involving members with high social and cultural capital.⁴ The valued social capital of a candidate can then be converted into economic capital for both the organization and the individual.

We should, however, point out a couple of caveats regarding the interpretation and generalisability of these results. To begin with, we should

note that the evaluation of a jobseeker's activities on SNS is neither a necessity nor a sufficient requirement for being hired. Being absent from online networks can be contextualised and accounted for in various ways. Moreover, the evaluation of SNS is primarily conducted by organizations that often recruit for socially demanding positions (e.g. sales, consultants, managers, directors). In comparison, interviewees who work in other industry or professional sectors did not express an interest in evaluating a jobseeker's online networks as often or as explicitly. Finally, we should stress that while these findings have provided us with some ideas of how job candidates' SNS profiles are evaluated, they say little about how common these practices or assessments are, or the extent to which employers require social capital and curated digital profiles.

The results presented here also raise some questions that can be addressed in future studies. First, to what extent, and in what ways, can SNS be defined as networks? How do the use and nature of SNS contribute to previous notions of network recruitment? Do online networks contribute to trust formation and reciprocity in the same way that offline networks are assumed to? We believe that these questions, as well as the limitations of our study, should be considered and addressed in the planning of future research on this topic.

What are the implications of an increased interest in jobseekers' online networks? In line with the previous work, the creation and maintenance of online networks, i.e. social capital, appear to be vital for identity construction as a digitally competent professional (cf. Donath & boyd, 2004). Strong social capital may facilitate valued job openings for the jobseeker, resulting in the transformation of social capital into economic capital for the individual. Successful self-presentation, however, also depends on the individual's level of cultural capital. The value of a candidate's knowledge of appropriate network behaviour affects his or her social capital, and can influence the extent to which their displayed contact list and SNS profile is interpreted by recruitment professionals as authentic and advantageous, rather than reflecting the candidate's vanity.

Furthermore, previous research has demonstrated that the interaction between social networks and the use of cybervetting in recruitment processes has strongly modified the work/non-work boundaries (e.g. Berkelaar, 2014). Informing one's employer that one is a member of an X network, on the Y board and that NN and NN can be contacted for references, do not reveal who one's former classmates, neighbours and distant relatives are. However, SNS can and often do, suggesting that the value of a candidate's network is now not only defined by its professional contacts but also by its private relations. This overlap of private and public spheres makes online information appear reliable and

candidates trustworthy, as their online personas are anchored in ‘real’ relations with people whom the recruiter may know or can contact. This conclusion corroborates the findings of Batenburg and Bartels (2017) study showing that integrating personal and professional audiences on Facebook frames the individual as more likeable than with segmented audiences. The increased expectation that a jobseeker will have a curated digital identity (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014), and the potential gains from having *the right kind* of network in one’s private and offline life, has further blurred the line between private and working life. In this way, spending private time on networking has become commodified where the overall aim is to develop one’s personal brand. To make sure you do not have the ‘wrong’ kind of network, this development involves increased restraints on people’s private contacts online. To be strategic in their job seeking, candidates ought to remove improper contacts such as politically active family members or friends. It is also assumed that how you act privately online correlates with how you will act professionally, which further shrinks the possibility for individuals to use SNS for social life.

These findings illustrate how the wrong kind of network may undermine rather than build trust, which challenges Putnam’s (1993) unconditional belief in the positive impact of networks and provides an important theoretical contribution. The online self, and its value for indicating future job performance by the offline individual, is validated by the network. This requires, however, that the members of the network is trustworthy (e.g. not criminals), unbiased (e.g. not family) and authentic (not merely strategically made contacts on the network site). A network built on the ‘wrong’ kind of contacts may, instead, undermine the effect of the network as a ground for social capital.

A final theoretical contribution of this article is its illustration of how different social capital frameworks can be combined: Putnam’s outline of trust in networks and Bourdieu’s perspective on the three different forms of capital, where one form of capital can be transformed to another. By combining both these frameworks, we can improve understanding of cybervetting and, specifically, why recruiters check and evaluate jobseekers’ online networks. To put it simply, without trust, social capital, also in a Bourdieuan sense, has no value. If there is trust, the jobseeker can increase their online employability, and their social and cultural capital can be transformed into economic capital for the employer. A condition for this capitalization to occur, however, is that the candidate’s *online* networks is interpreted as indications of their *offline* networks. This is the reason why some recruiters keep a sceptical attitude about *too* curated profiles on LinkedIn: the contacts have to be ‘real’ and their

references about the jobseeker have to stay honest. Otherwise, the network is just an illusion, and its potential to produce economic value for the organisation is reduced.

Notes

1. Since the total response rate was very low (the total number of respondents as of 29 June 2016 was 309), it is not clear how common this practice is on a national basis.
2. The interviewees mostly mentioned LinkedIn when discussing a jobseeker's networks, but some interviewees also stressed that contact lists on Facebook may indicate whether the candidate has an 'exciting' network or not.
3. Berkelaar (2010) also noticed this entangled relation between cultural and social capital, leading her to combine both these forms of capital into one, which she called 'career capital'.
4. Although we have not made use of the terminology here, Granovetter's (1973) distinction between weak and strong ties, as well as Putnam's (1993) concepts of bridging and bonding capital, are useful to explain the different values given to various networks and connections. These concepts, often used in studies of network recruitment, are relevant to analysis of information transfers (e.g. in job referrals). They are less adequate, however, for explaining how connections are assessed and perceived by others.

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