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The Digital Footprint Effect:
A Grounded Theory on the Influence of Social Media on
Human Resource Managers' Hiring Decisions

by

Tanya Pawlowski

A Dissertation Presented to
The Halmos College of Arts and Sciences of Nova Southeastern University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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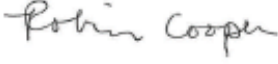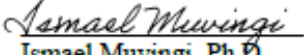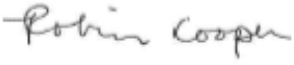
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Nova Southeastern University
Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

This dissertation was submitted by Tanya Pawlowski under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the Halmos College of Arts and Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University.

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_July 6, 2023_____
Date of Final Approval

Robin Cooper

Robin Cooper, Ph.D.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation research to my beloved mother Etchica Alvarez, who instilled in me the greatest value of education. Thank You Mom for always supporting and believing in me. I am forever grateful that you brought me into this world.

I also would like to dedicate this research study to my husband Lukasz Roman Pawlowski. Thank you love for being by my side throughout this entire journey. Your unconditional love, patience, and consistent support has allowed me to fulfill my academic purpose and destiny.

Lastly, to my precious daughter and legacy Viviana Lukrecja Pawlowski: I dedicate this research study to you my precious angel, who was sent to me during the Covid19 global pandemic. Thank you for redefining my life purpose by teaching me unconditional love and for confirming that majestic beings absolutely exist on earth.

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Abstract

For over a decade, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has reported the increasing practice of hiring managers accessing social media profiles to screen job applicants (Bates, 2008). This qualitative research study investigated the role of social media in organizational hiring practices and what factors may influence human resource hiring managers' decisions. A grounded theory methodology was applied to interview 21 human resource hiring managers with open-ended structured questions. Based on the researcher's data collection and grounded theory data analysis, the findings showed that social media profiles play a crucial role in organizational hiring decisions when a human resource hiring manager reviews an applicant's social media. The findings of the study resulted in the digital footprint effect theory. Whether an organization has a formal policy in place or not, the majority of participants confirmed they habitually review applicants' social media profiles to make hiring decisions. The study contributes to research on organizational conflicts and multidisciplinary studies by providing recommendations and suggestions for hiring practices. Lastly, the study's findings also confirmed and supported several of the most common biases that tend to influence hiring decisions: affinity bias, the horns effect, gender bias, ageism, and name bias.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

During the past few decades, the creation of social networking websites such as LinkedIn and Facebook have changed traditional hiring practices for many organizations by providing broader access to information about applicants. Today's organizational hiring practices no longer rely exclusively on an applicant's resume, cover letter, and references; many now also include reviewing the applicant's social networking profiles as a part of the hiring process (Black & Johnson, 2012). The use of social networking sites (SNS) for recruiting seems to be widely accepted because of its close relation to posting a job advertisement online. Using social networking sites poses a particular problem for screening and selection. The challenge presented using these sites relates to how well they provide reliable job-relevant information. Little is known about the accuracy of the information provided within social networking profiles or the prevalence of faking on web pages, and research should investigate the potential impact of such distortions on hiring decisions. The prevalence of inaccurate information on web pages is also in question. Employers assume that the information posted will be more accurate than what candidates provide in a cover letter, resume, and interview because job applicants do not expect employers to view their web pages (Davison et al., 2011).

According to Swallow (2011), a study conducted over 10 years ago showed that even at that time, 68% of employers had hired or rejected applicants based on information found on the individuals' social networking sites (SNS), and 69% had rejected an applicant based on content found on SNS. The practice of reviewing SNS has only increased. In 2012, employers had asked some job applicants to provide information enabling full access to personal SNS (Black & Johnson, 2012). Conversely, if an

individual has strong privacy settings and an employer illegally accesses online information, that employer may be violating privacy rights. While employers may have the right to look at a public website, they may not legally decline to select an individual based on a review of the contents of a site if they are utilizing information to screen individuals based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or other protected classes by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Black & Johnson, 2012).

A recent trend in employment law is using unconscious bias to prove unlawful discrimination. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employers from intentionally discriminating based on sex, race, color, national origin, or religion but also precludes employers from making decisions that have a disparate impact on members of a protected class. Plaintiff attorneys have argued more frequently that unconscious bias leads to disparate impacts and can impact employment decisions. We often see this as a tactic in cases without direct evidence of discrimination (Borchelt & Smit, 2019). Moreover, employers may unintentionally violate privacy laws by accessing social networking sites and delving into areas that are not relevant to the application process. Academic research should address employers' use of social networking sites in the selection process since using this information in human resource decisions has implications for organizations and job applicants. The outcomes of this research should bring about greater awareness of using online information in hiring decisions and a deeper understanding of the use of online information in hiring practices. The findings of this study will inform organizational hiring practices and expand knowledge of the impact of workplace biases at a time when corporations are becoming increasingly invested in creating diverse and inclusive work cultures and environments.

Human resources vice presidents of Fortune 100 companies identified social media in a corporate context as an organizational conflict due to the influential impact of unconscious biases embedded in the hiring process allowing potential legal pitfalls of discrimination accusations to arise from applicants under the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This research study will examine and analyze social media in a corporate context as an organizational conflict due to the influential impact of unconscious biases embedded in hiring processes, allowing potentially legal pitfalls of discrimination accusations to arise from applicants, which would directly impact the bottom line due to disputes brought to a court of law.

Background

As of 2019, Facebook was the largest social networking website, with over 2.4 billion users worldwide. Considering there are an estimated 7.7 billion people in the world, social networking websites are being used by one-third of the world's population. Social networking websites have changed how people communicate and interact with each other within an online virtual space. Most social media users subscribe to at least one of the various social networking websites, and the number of users will grow continuously since this global phenomenon has become deeply rooted in the social construct of our lives, personally and professionally (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019).

According to a 2018 CareerBuilder survey, 70% of employers check out applicants' profiles as part of their screening process, and 54% have rejected applicants because of what they found. Social media sites offer a free, easily accessed portrait of what a candidate is really like, yielding a clearer idea of whether that person will succeed on the job or so the theory goes (Wong, 2021). Research suggests that hiring officials

who take this approach should use caution: Much of what they dig up is information they are ethically discouraged or legally prohibited from taking into account when evaluating candidates and little of it is predictive of performance (Wong, 2021).

According to the Harvard Business Review (Wong, 2021), during the first of three research studies, researchers examined the Facebook pages of 266 U.S. job seekers to see what they revealed. Some of the information that job seekers had posted such as education, work experience, and extracurricular activities covered areas that organizations routinely and legitimately assess during the hiring process. A significant share of profiles contained details that companies may be legally prohibited from considering, including gender, race, and ethnicity (evident in 100% of profiles), disabilities (7%), pregnancy status (3%), sexual orientation (59%), political views (21%), and religious affiliation (41%). Many of the job seekers' profiles also included information of potential concern to prospective employers: 51% of them contained profanity, 11% gave indications of gambling, 26% showed or referenced alcohol consumption, and 7% referenced drug use (Wong, 2021). One of the researchers Chad Van Iddekinge, a professor at the University of Iowa, discussed during an interview "You can see why many recruiters love social media as it allows them to discover all the information they aren't allowed to ask about during an interview. But that's a problem, because one of the hallmarks of legal hiring practices is that they focus on behaviors within the work context. There should be a clear distinction between what people do during work and what they do outside of it." (Wong, 2021).

Recruiting applicants online has become an increasingly trendy source to fill job positions for Human Resource hiring managers, who now also screen applicants' social

media profiles to gather personal information to determine whether or not to hire. This conflicted hiring practice gives applicants a considerable disadvantage because the hiring decision may be influenced by the individual worldviews of the Human Resource hiring manager, thus allowing unconscious biases to formulate and influence the decision.

Unconscious Biases

Unconscious bias can affect workplaces and organizations. It can introduce unintentional discrimination and result in poor decision-making. Unconscious bias can be a major setback to creating a diverse and inclusive workplace. Such biases can impact recruitment, mentoring, and promotions. Unconscious bias, even at the recruitment level, can hamper an organization's attempt to achieve diversity (Pragya, 2018). Unconscious bias is a social stereotype about a group of people formed outside of one's conscious awareness. Unconscious bias can be influenced by background, social environment, and experiences. It often results in feelings and attitudes, which can be positive or negative, of which one may not be cognizant, towards others based on their race, ethnicity, gender, or age (Borchelt & Smit, 2019). Unconscious biases in decision-making processes allow unfavorable underlying attitudes, judgments, stereotypes, and prejudices to be made about the individual, thus affecting how they are perceived.

Studies suggest that unconscious bias affects our decision-making, including in the workplace for recruitment, hiring, promotions, and feedback. For instance, a National Bureau of Economic Research study found that, even when candidates' resumes were nearly identical, prospective employers returned calls from job applicants with stereotypically Caucasian names 50% more often than for applicants with stereotypically African American names. Similarly, taller people tend to earn more money on average

than their shorter counterparts, and some studies suggest that individuals perceived as being more physically attractive also tend to have an edge over those perceived as unattractive in the workplace. All humans have an innate ability to possess unconscious bias tendencies, including those trained to be objective. Ultimately, these biases can affect hiring, promotion, and termination decision-making (Borchelt & Smit, 2019). Unconscious biases can exist within every level of an organization's structure. They can play a crucial role in whether or not a candidate is hired for the position.

According to a recent article released by *"Built In,"* which was founded in 2011, as one of the most emerging social networks and blogging platforms designed to unite tech talent and the tech industry for recruitment solutions, diversity, and inclusion, are critical elements in the recruitment and retention strategies for organizations. There are 12 types of unconscious bias in the workplace that commonly affect candidate hiring (Reiners, 2020).

1. Affinity bias: Also known as similarity bias, the tendency to connect with others with similar interests, backgrounds, and experiences.

2. Confirmation bias: The tendency to look for information that supports, rather than rejects, one's preconceptions, typically by interpreting evidence to confirm existing beliefs while rejecting or ignoring any conflicting data (Noor, 2020).

3. Attribution bias: A phenomenon in which one tries to make sense of or judge a person's behavior based on prior observations and interactions with the individual.

4. Conformity bias: Tendency people have to act similarly to those around them regardless of their personal beliefs or idiosyncrasies; also known as peer pressure.

5. The halo effect: The tendency to place another person on a pedestal after learning something impressive about them.

6. The horns effect: People's tendency to view another person negatively after learning something unpleasant or negative about them.

7. Contrast effect: Comparing two or more things either simultaneously or one-after-another, causing an exaggerated opinion of the performance of one in contrast to the other.

8. Gender bias: Tendency to prefer one gender over another gender.

9. Ageism: Tendency to have negative feelings about another person based on age.

10. Name bias: Tendency to prefer names that are of English – British origins.

11. Beauty bias: Social behavior where people believe that attractive people are more successful, competent, and qualified.

12. Height bias: Tendency to judge someone who is significantly shorter or taller than the socially accepted human height (Reiners, 2020).

I will discuss the research on these forms of bias in Chapter 2.

Employers may unintentionally or intentionally violate privacy laws by accessing social networking websites (SNS) and delving into an applicant's personal life, which may not be relevant to the hiring role. There is not much legal precedent regarding social media in selection practices. Additional academic research should address employers' use

of SNS in the selection process since using this information in human resource decisions has implications for organizations and job applicants. This research should bring about awareness of the practice of using online information in hiring decisions and define boundaries for the use of online information in hiring practices (Black & Johnson, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

For over a decade, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has reported an increasing practice of hiring managers accessing social media profiles to screen job applicants (Bates, 2008). The trend in reviewing social networking websites to make hiring decisions will increase as millions of people subscribe to sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. Although there has been limited research on the topic, there is a lack of understanding of how hiring managers in the United States use social media, including digital profiles, in employment decisions without specific guidelines (Lawheren, 2016). Additional research is required to examine hiring managers using social media profiles to make hiring decisions and to explore how personal biases potentially influence the decision to hire or not.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative grounded theory research study examined organizational hiring practices and accessing an applicant's social media profiles. This research study explored what information influences Human Resource Hiring Managers when accessing a job applicant's social media profiles. The study formulated a theory to explain the factors influencing human resource hiring managers' decisions. The study examined how a job applicant's social media profile may influence hiring decisions by interviewing 21 Human Resource Hiring Managers and conducting virtual interviews with 11 open-ended

structured questions.

This exploratory research contributes to research on organizational conflict and multidisciplinary studies in understanding the implications of unconscious biases and social media within hiring practices. Moreover, the study results provide organizations and hiring managers with recommendations on organizational hiring practices to avoid potential discriminatory lawsuits from job applicants and implementation of unconscious bias training programs for Human Resource Hiring Managers to develop strategies and techniques to minimize biases in the hiring processes.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- What role do social media profiles play in business organizations' hiring decisions?

- What factors in social media profiles do human resource hiring managers consider in hiring decisions?

Context of the Researcher

I derived the topic for this qualitative research study from a Master of Business Administration Human Resource Management Advisory Board meeting for the curriculum development for the degree program. The board members consist of faculty and the Vice Presidents of Human Resources of Nova Southeastern University H. Wayne Huizenga College of Business and Entrepreneurships Educational Corporate Partners of Fortune 100 companies. One of the identified organizational conflicts discussed in the advisory board meeting is the influential impact of social media within a corporate context. Several of the Vice Presidents of Human Resources openly admitted their

organizations began to implement a review of applicants' social media profiles to make hiring decisions, uncertain whether the practice was legal or not. Potential disputes brought to court for employment discrimination claims from applicants not hired remain a significant concern, as they can directly impact organizations' bottom lines due to settlement payouts.

The Advisory Board meeting resulted in my qualitative research interest in investigating the impact of unconscious bias on hiring managers when accessing an applicant's social media from an organizational perspective by drawing directly from the narratives of Human Resource professionals making hiring decisions. The researcher has served on numerous hiring committees at Nova Southeastern University, evaluating candidates' qualifications and interviewing applicants for various professional roles during the last 10 years.

Moreover, I have interned with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) for Miami Dade, which is now known as the Commission on Human Rights for Miami Dade County and worked as an Intake Officer processing discriminatory cases for alleged violations of the protected categories under Title VII of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964. Most discriminatory disputed cases were within employment, housing, and public transportation. The researcher also has experience working as a co-mediator for the agency, co-facilitating mediation sessions between disputing parties to reach monetary settlement agreements. Lastly, I have been an active member of the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) since 2015 and currently work for Nova Southeastern University H. Wayne Huizenga College of Business and Entrepreneurship as the Senior Business Development Specialist managing educational corporate partnerships for

Fortune 100/500 companies. The researcher works closely with Human Resource Management departments to establish educational partnerships as an added benefit for employees interested in pursuing a Graduate Business degree, such as the master's in business administration (MBA) with a concentration in Human Resource Management, the Master of Science in Human Resource Management, or the Graduate Certificate degree program. I also have served as a corporate educational consultant for the last decade and overseas sponsorships for several Human Resource Management Chapters in Florida: H.R. Miami, Human Resource Association of Broward County (HRABC), HR Collier, SuncoastHR, Florida Public Human Resources Association (FPHRA) and HR Florida.

Contributions to the Field of Conflict Analysis and Resolution

The study addressed organizational hiring practices and the perceived impact of biases on accessing a job applicant's social media profiles to make hiring decisions. The research study explored and gained an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing hiring managers' decisions. This qualitative grounded theory research study contributes to the field of conflict analysis and resolution by informing organizations on how to adopt unbiased hiring practices without accessing an applicant's social media profiles. An exploration of conscious or unconscious biases in hiring decisions impacts the progressive approach of corporate responsibility toward diversity and inclusion initiatives. The research examined and analyzed social media in a corporate context as an organizational conflict due to the influential impact of unconscious biases embedded in hiring processes, allowing potentially legal pitfalls of discrimination accusations to arise from applicants, which would directly impact the bottom line due to disputes brought to a

court of law. Moreover, the research study aimed to develop an emerging theory as a phenomenon to explain what factors on social media influence human resource hiring managers' decisions to hire or not. Lastly, the study contributes to research on organizational conflicts and multidisciplinary studies by recommending strategies and techniques for hiring practices and implementing unconscious bias training programs for Human Resource Hiring Manager's professional development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The impact of technological advances on business functions is evident in multiple areas. One recent change has resulted from social networking, which has impacted organizational recruitment and hiring practices. The standard practice for job candidates entailed applying for a position with a resume and cover letter and waiting for a telephone interview. Candidates who passed the telephone interview were invited to conduct face-to-face interviews. Each candidate's personal information was limited to the interview process. Social networking sites have drastically changed the level of accessibility to candidates' personal information. The plethora of information on social media networking sites extends into every aspect of one's personal life; photos, videos, and microblogging with content related to one's world views, political opinions, sexual orientation, social preferences and habits, financial accessibilities, and religious preferences.

Social Media and Hiring

According to Eddy (2012), of the H.R. professionals who conduct background checks, 45% reported using SNS to screen job candidates in order to evaluate candidates' character and personality outside the confines of the traditional job interview process, to see if, among other things, (a) candidates present themselves professionally (65%), (b) candidates are a good fit for the company culture (51%), (c) candidates' background information supports their professional qualifications (54%), and (d) the candidate is well-rounded (35%). Consumers, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, have grossly underestimated the data mining H.R. professionals and recruiters conduct in hiring decisions. For example, Crosstab (2010) reported that 70% of U.S.

recruiters and 41% U.K. recruiters have rejected candidates based on information they found online; only 7% of U.S. consumers and 9% of U.K. consumers believed that online data affected their job search (Evuleocha & Stevina, 2018).

CareerBuilder (2014) reported the following reasons why employers may choose to reject candidates after evaluating their profiles on SNS: posting of inappropriate or provocative photographs or information (45%); information about drug use and/or drinking (41%); bad-mouthing previous employer or coworker (36%); poor communication skills (32%); discriminatory comments related to race, gender, religion, etc. (28%); lying about qualifications (25%); and sharing confidential information from previous employers (24%). Particularly troubling is when H.R. professionals and recruiters use candidates' photos and videos posted on SNS to reject candidates because they consider such materials "unsuitable" (Cross-Tab, 2010). Brown and Vaughn (2011) cautioned that when H.R. professionals and recruiters use information from SNS to make hiring decisions, they are vulnerable to potential discrimination issues because such information may allow easy identification of an applicant's protected class membership. Of the employers that do not research candidates on social media, 15% said their company prohibits the practice. Employers primarily use Facebook (65%) and LinkedIn (63%) to research candidates; 16% use Twitter (Eddy, 2012).

Despite the widespread use of SNS by applicants and H.R. professionals (Society for Human Resource Management, 2011; Stopfer & Gosling, 2013), research has not yet explored salient issues related to using SNS to screen job applicants. Given the expanding number of employers using SNS to gather data on applicants, it is reasonable to expect

this practice to affect various H.R. decisions, including hiring, training, promotion, and termination (Evuleocha & Stevina, 2018).

Social Media Screening and Artificial Intelligence

Social media screenings are not new and they are catching on with more employers. A 2020 survey of hiring decision makers, commissioned by Express Employment Professionals, revealed that 70% of respondents think companies should screen potential candidates' social media profiles when considering them for a position, and 67% of them already screen applicants (Kazakian, 2022). Social media screening offers a deeper level of behavioral insight than background checks, driving records, or any other traditional method. Information found on social media offers Human Resource professionals a current snapshot of a person's attitude, habits, and behaviors. "HR leaders all around the world have started to look at social media as one of those hiring steps, but the problem is that they're all doing it manually," said Joe Gagliese, co-CEO of Viral Nation. VN Secure, he added, can streamline the process by allowing technology to do the work for the recruiter. "They're seeing that a single tweet can have a massive financial repercussion not only on the brand identity, but even financially," he added. (Parisi, 2022)

Employers are now relying on Artificial Intelligence (AI) powered social media background screening software to assist in identify candidates that have exhibited undesirable behavior by analyzing both text and images from a subject's social media profiles. Social media screening is an automated Artificial Intelligence (AI) driven pre-employment smart background check. It is based on the candidate's digital profiles found

on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as other online public forums.

Ferretly is known as one of the most comprehensive platforms for social media screening on the market, which is designed to empower organizations on how to align candidates' character to corporate values by surfacing online conduct. The elimination of these digital blind spots help improve workplace culture, reduce turnover, create a safer environment, and mitigate risk to the company's brand. Ferretly takes social media screening to the next level by combining human analysts with advanced machine learning we can deliver the most comprehensive analysis of social media in record time. Ferretly's social media screening solution identifies more risks, covers more social media platforms, analyzes more posts, and delivers a report faster and more insightful than any other competitor. When used as part of the recruiting process, Ferretly offers recruiting teams a more complete idea of who the candidate really is. Ultimately, helping determine if a candidate is a right fit for the organization, or not. Ferretly incorporates artificial intelligence (AI) to analyze posts and images across 14 distinct risk classifications, by using advanced machine learning and natural language processing to flag posts for specific risk factors. Ferretly processes thousands of posts from a single subject in seconds to provide a thorough analysis than a human could achieve in hours analyzing the same set of posts.

While social media vetting is legal in the US, the ethics of doing so is murky at best. "It opens up a million additional sources of bias that aren't supposed to be there," Keller explained, such as marital status, sexual orientation, and political beliefs, which aren't relevant to a candidate's ability to do a job or are illegal to ask about (Parisi, 2022).

Forms of Bias

Despite companies' efforts to eliminate bias in hiring and promoting, many managers are not aware of the hidden biases they have when it comes to clothes, hairstyles, headwear, height, weight, age, race, gender, disability, and even marital status, said Sara Taylor, a diversity expert and founder of DeepSEE Consulting. Hidden bias often convinces people of what is "good," "right," or "professional." For instance, some cultures value tasks over relationships, while others do the opposite. James Wright—a diversity and inclusion strategist, trainer, and speaker— had witnessed hidden bias when managers interviewed gay, lesbian, or bisexual applicants. Because it is human nature for interviewers to seek something in common with a job applicant, he said, "Sometimes the question comes up, 'Do you have a spouse and kids?'" (Wilkie, 2019).

Most people have some type of hidden bias, according to the NeuroLeadership Institute. Such biases often surface in the workplace when people are drawn to others who share the same hobbies or pursuits, creating an affinity bias that can affect resume screening and career advancement (Gurchiek, 2019). Such hidden bias can have legal repercussions. In October 2013, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) sued a Mobile, Alabama-based insurance-claims company, alleging the company discriminated against a black applicant based on her race when it rescinded her job offer after H.R. staff met her and told her she must cut off her dreadlocks, which she refused to do. "The EEOC will not tolerate employment discrimination against African-American employees because they choose to wear and display the natural texture of their hair, manage and style their hair in a manner amenable to it, or manage and style their hair in a

manner differently from nonblacks," said Delner Franklin-Thomas, district director for the EEOC's Birmingham office (Wilkie, 2019).

In 2019, Dollar General agreed to pay a $6 million settlement for alleged racial bias discrimination in their hiring process. Dollar General paid $6 million into a settlement fund for Black job applicants who lost employment between 2004 and 2019. The lawsuit was brought by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) as reported by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) employment law. The EEOC alleged that the discount retailer violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by using a broad criminal background check that led the company to deny jobs to Black applicants at a much higher rate than white applicants. Dollar General agreed to the $6 million dollar settlement without admitting any wrongdoing (Nagele-Piazza, 2019).

Several identified unconscious biases can influence hiring recruitment at the interview level, such as personal similarity bias, also known as affinity bias, which is the tendency to connect with others with similar interests, backgrounds, and experiences (Reiners, 2020). Individuals tend to favor people who are most similar to them. So, if an interviewee is or acts similarly to the interviewee or has things in common with the candidate, such as city of origin or school, the interviewee is more likely to hire them (Agarwal, 2018).

One of the most commonly identified biases in the hiring process is name bias, which is the tendency to judge and prefer people with certain types of names—typically of Anglo origin (Reiners, 2020). A field experiment to measure racial discrimination in the labor market was conducted with fictitious resumes to help-wanted ads in Boston and

Chicago newspapers. Each resume was assigned either a very African American or White sounding name. The results showed significant discrimination against African American names; White names received 50% more interview callbacks. The findings also concluded that race affects the benefits of a better resume. A higher quality resume for White names elicits 30% more callbacks, whereas, for African Americans, it elicits a far smaller response. Equivalent resumes with African American names have a 6.70% chance of being called back, for a difference in callback rates of 3.35 percentage points, or 50 %, solely attributable to the name manipulation (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003).

Beauty bias remains at the forefront of an unconscious bias in social behavior, where people believe that attractive people are more successful, competent, and qualified than their counterparts allowing looks and not merit to often rule (Reiners, 2020). As a comprehensive academic review summarized: "Physically attractive individuals are more likely to be interviewed for jobs and hired, they are more likely to advance rapidly in their careers through frequent promotions, and they earn higher wages than unattractive individuals." Common manifestations of appearance-based discrimination may include bias against obese, oddly-dressed, or tattooed candidates, or any people who don't fit a society's dominant aesthetic criteria (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019).

Unsurprisingly, the beauty bias transfers into the workplace, with scientific studies showing that less attractive individuals are more likely to get fired, even though they are also less likely to be hired in the first place. For example, in an experimental study, researchers sent 11,000 CVs to various job openings, including identical CVs accompanied by candidate photographs of different levels of attractiveness. Attractive women and men were much more likely to get a call back for an interview than

unattractive (or no-photograph) candidates were (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019).

Furthermore, there is also a well-established association between attractiveness and long-term income, with above-average beauty translating into 10% to 15% higher salaries than below-average beauty. In the U.S., this beauty premium is similar to the one found for race or gender. Note that this effect is found even among highly successful individuals. For instance, attractiveness ratings of Fortune 500 executives predicted their companies' profits (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019).

Another identified bias frequently apparent in the hiring process is ageism, which is the tendency to have negative feelings about another person based on age (Reiners, 2020). A recent American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) New York survey (2022) found that nearly half of voters age 50 years or older said they were subjected to or witnessed at least one type of workplace age discrimination. Twenty percent said they were passed over for a job because of their age, and almost 10 percent said they were fired due to their age. A national AARP poll found that 78 percent workers age 50 or older said they have seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace. Age discrimination against Americans ages 50 and over robbed the U.S. economy of $850 billion in 2018 (Tileva, 2022).

Additionally, a large study of 5,000 workers and managers in seven countries by the global nonprofit Generation offers some rather grim statistics: People who are age 45 or older make up a high share of the long-term unemployed. Hiring managers tend to view job applicants who are 45 or older negatively, even though employers' rate highly the job performance of the older people they do hire. The challenges and experiences of

job seekers who are 45 or older, this study found a display of striking consistency around the world (Tileva, 2022).

Social scientists have documented various implicit biases against people with short stature. A tall individual is perceived as more competent and dominant than his shorter peers, and tall people seem more apt for leadership positions. The bias against short people is so ingrained in our brains that we unconsciously add a few inches to their height when we know someone is successful or in a leadership position (Kimhi, 2020). Height bias is the tendency to judge someone significantly shorter or taller than the socially accepted human height (Reiners, 2020).

According to Kimhi (2020), socio-psychological research shows that people hold implicit biases against short individuals. I associated a host of positive qualities with those above average height and belittled those born a few inches short. Using height manipulation in the applicant's CV, they showed that height significantly influenced the recruiters' evaluations. When an applicant appeared taller on the CV, he also received significantly higher marks for general competence, physical health, and job competence. In addition, as a result of the better evaluations of the general qualities, recruiters were much more willing to hire tall applicants for specific jobs. The findings resulted in implicit biases, leading to outright discrimination (Kimhi, 2020).

Confirmation bias is the tendency to look for information that confirms a belief one has about a candidate and to filter out or ignore evidence to the contrary subconsciously. "It's the tendency to make up a story to fit what you believe to be true about a candidate," explained Gail Tolstoi-Miller, CEO of Consultentworx and an unconscious bias, diversity, and inclusion strategist (Stevens-Huffman, 2020).

Confirmation bias can be particularly dangerous when it involves making negative assumptions about groups of people that fall under the federally protected categories: religion, national origin, race, color, sex, age, and disability (Echevarria, 2020). On the other hand, contrast bias occurs when a manager compares interviewees or résumés to each other instead of objectively comparing everyone to the job description or standard. When the standard is ignored, a candidate may seem more or less competent than the others but still be "off the mark" (Stevens-Huffman,2020).

Attribution bias affects how we assess other people and their achievements. It can be particularly impactful during recruitment. When assessing ourselves, we tend to think our achievements are direct results of our merit and personality; while our failings are the result of external factors, including other people that adversely affected us and prevented us from doing our best. When assessing other people, however, we often think the opposite is true. We are more likely to consider the achievements of others as a result of luck or chance; and their failings as a result of their personality or behavior (The H.R. Source, 2018).

The halo effect is a cognitive bias that affects how we perceive others. It refers to the tendency for impressions of a person in one area to influence one's opinions and feelings in other areas. For example, we often believe that good-looking people are more intelligent or competent than they are. The interpretation of the first signals (a person's air and manner, dress, or physical appearance) influences the perception of the other signals. We tend to give too much weight to a few characteristics to the detriment of others. The halo effect was first brought to light empirically in 1920. In 1946 it was demonstrated scientifically by Solomon Asch, a pioneer of social psychology. In the

1970s, several studies revealed that teachers deemed better-looking children more intelligent (Vitaud, 2019).

Vitaud (2019) argued that the halo effect harms recruiting efforts and explains why recruiters have already decided on a candidate within the first few seconds of an interview (or even before the interview begins, especially if the effect concerns a candidate's name or address). It leads to discrimination and damaging recruiting errors. For example, when a recruiter reviews the CV of an Oxbridge graduate, they may become overwhelmed by this factor, leading them to assume that they meet all other job requirements. This can damage the hiring process and lead to a well-qualified ideal candidate from a less prestigious university being ignored (Mortimer, 2020).

In contrast, horn effect bias refers to the tendency to attribute negative characteristics to an individual due to perceiving one known negative or undesirable quality. This bias is also common in recruitment, especially in preliminary interviews where candidates give first impressions. For example, everyone has preferences in grooming and dress. However, someone's long hair or salmon shirt will not likely impact how that candidate performs in a finance role (Mortimer, 2020).

Preferring one gender over the other in the hiring process is known as gender bias. Gender bias arises from gender stereotypes, which are simplified judgments about the characteristics of jobs and the ideal candidates for them. For example, people may think that dominance and emotional toughness are typical characteristics of CEOs and are typically male traits. Then, during the selection process, these expectations come into play as hiring managers unconsciously look for male candidates for CEO roles. These expectations may also lead to biased thinking that "women are not dominant or

emotionally tough, so they cannot be good CEOs" Biased thinking leads, in turn, to biased decisions (Wietrak, 2018).

Blatant gender bias might stand out and be questioned if a non-recommended female candidate was more qualified than a recommended candidate. Gender bias is likely more subtle (and perhaps unintentional) but highly damaging, given the limited resources constraining many organizations. For instance, when women and men are equally qualified, women may be rejected more frequently. The bias may go unnoticed because both candidates are equally qualified (Marlowe et al., 1996).

Implicit Social Cognition Theory

Implicit social cognition theory assisted in explaining the cognitive process of one's unconscious biases and provides an in-depth dimension in explaining how traces of past experiences affect the cognitive process that occurs outside of one's conscious awareness or control. During this process, unconscious awareness occurs and biases emerge, constructing attitudes, stereotypes, and self-concepts of others. Implicit social cognition was a theory introduced by Banjii and Greenwald (1995). The term "implicit social cognition" can be applied as a broad theoretical category that integrates and reinterprets established research findings, guides the search for new empirical phenomena, prompts attention to presently underdeveloped research methods, and suggests applications in various settings (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995). Implicit Social Cognition will be the theoretical framework applied in this qualitative research study to examine and analyze the constructed hiring process and attitudes of Human Resource hiring managers as a social behavior and whether they are operating with an unconscious bias when accessing applicants' social networking profiles.

According to Banaji and Greenwald (1995), the signature of implicit cognition is that traces of past experiences affect some performance, even though the significant earlier experience is not remembered in the usual sense; it is unavailable for self-report or introspection. Moreover, the empirical phenomenon of implicit social cognition involves the introspectively inaccessible effect of current stimulus or prior experience variations on judgments and decisions. These effects often result in subjects making judgments regarded as nonoptimal if made aware of the source of influence. These effects are likely to occur in situations that involve economically and socially important decisions, such as hiring, educational admissions, and personal evaluations (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995).

Banaji and Greenwald (1995) also discussed how social behavior is ordinarily treated as being under conscious (if not always thoughtful) control. However, considerable evidence now supports the view that social behavior often operates implicitly or unconsciously. Decisions that affect people for example, personnel evaluations and admissions decisions comprise a large and critical class of situations in which implicit cognition can intrude on deliberate judgment, producing unintended discrimination. The decision maker who intends to maintain a nonprejudicial course in these judgments may have little basis for knowing whether or how a specific cue implicitly intrudes on judgment (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995).

Implicit social cognition theory provided the researcher with an in-depth framework in understanding the cognitive process to explain how Human Resource hiring managers' past lived experiences can unconsciously shapes an individuals' worldviews, influencing their perceptions of others, and most importantly, impacting the hiring decision of an applicant. Biases and stereotypes are unconscious social behaviors,

in which Human Resource hiring managers are unaware that the consciousness of a social cognitive biases has been applied towards an applicant due to a past lived experiences. The importance of understanding the stimulus of implicit social cognition theory in decision making, is to assists in explaining how judgments and behavior are guided by one's attitude simultaneously lacking conscious awareness. Per Banaji and Greenwald (1995), much social cognition occurs in an implicit mode, which derived from a reinterpretation of many findings that indicate the importance of implicit operation of attitudes, and of the self-esteem attitude in particular, and also from existing and new evidence for the implicit operation of stereotypes. By adding this conception of the implicit mode to existing knowledge of the explicit mode of operation of social psychology's basic constructs, the scope of those constructs is extended substantially. In addition, many possibilities for application in decision making settings are suggested by interpreting social judgment in terms of an interaction of implicit and explicit social cognition. This qualitative research will apply implicit social cognitive theory to the data analysis of participants individually to support the development of a new theory to explain what influential factors on social media impact Human Resource hiring managers decisions.

Screening social media profiles poses a particular problem for screening and selection. Almost no research has been investigated using social networking websites for personnel screening. The challenge presented using these sites relates to how well they provide reliable, valid, job-relevant information. Little is also known about the accuracy of the information provided within social networking profiles or the prevalence of distinct types of faking (e.g., ''fake good'' vs. ''fake bad'') on web pages, and research should

investigate the potential impact of such distortions on hiring decisions. Research is needed to determine what information is collected, how employees feel about this information being collected, and whether quality decisions are made with this information (Davison et al., 2011). Additional relevant research could also focus on the social media content being reviewed by hiring managers and how applicants feel about whether the information being reviewed is fairly assessed.

Lastly, implicit social cognitive effects have been demonstrated most clearly in experimental studies in which a group of subjects is uniformly exposed to cues that influence their subsequent responses on indirect measures; the implicit effect is sought in comparisons between averaged performances of groups exposed to different cues. Although such experimental designs effectively demonstrate some basic properties of implicit social cognition, they do not allow assessment of individual differences. The many existing individual-difference measures of attitudes, self-esteem, and stereotypes primarily assess introspectively accessible self-knowledge (and, sometimes, deliberately managed self-presentations). To measure individual differences in introspectively inaccessible implicit social cognition, sensitive indirect measures are needed (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995).

Discrimination in the Workplace

The phenomenon of workplace discrimination remains evident across occupations and industries. Despite Federal contractors and employers who list "Equal Opportunity Employer" as a part of their job advertisements, many are still plausible towards discriminating during the hiring process. Moreover, the most significant gap appears in the finance, insurance, and real estate industries, where the callback ratio was 2.44. In

contrast, the smallest (outside of transportation) appears to be in health, educational and social services, where the ratio is 1.35. These results suggest that racial discrimination is still a prominent feature of the labor market (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003). An experiment conducted in Chicago was designed to manipulate perceptions of race via the name of fictitious job applicants. Caucasian names such as Greg Backer and Emily Walsh were applied to half of the resumes, and the other half were given very sounding African American names such as Lakisha Washington and Jamal Jones to the other half. Researchers sent nearly 5,000 resumes to 1,300 employment ads in sales, administrative support, clerical, and customer service jobs. The findings resulted in a sizeable racial difference in callback rates, as Caucasian names needed ten resumes to get one callback, whereas applicants with African American names needed about 15 resumes to get one callback. This 50% callback gap is statistically significant (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003).

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has taken a firm stance on unconscious workplace bias, at least regarding race. The EEOC includes in its definition of discrimination the "unconscious" stereotypes about the abilities, traits, or performance of certain racial groups" (EEOC, 2006). Most courts have not yet explicitly adopted this view. However, they are increasingly considering employment cases involving claims of unconscious bias and giving credence to the fact that unconscious biases do exist. The Supreme Court, for instance, held in Watson v. Fort Worth Bank & Trust, 487 U.S. 977 (1988) that even if discrimination could be "adequately policed through disparate treatment analysis, the problem of subconscious stereotypes and prejudices would remain." The Sixth Circuit and Ohio courts have not published case law

addressing how unconscious bias interacts with Title VII, but courts in other circuits are increasingly permitting this argument that unconscious bias is evidence of disparate impact. In any event, employers and their counsel should be prepared to face scrutiny in employment cases questioning whether decisions resulted from unconscious bias. In other words, the decision-maker was discriminating against an individual or group of individuals, even though he or she did not know they were doing it (Borchelt & Smit, 2019).

According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employers with at least 15 employees from discriminating based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. It also prohibits retaliation against persons who complain of discrimination or participate in an EEOC investigation. Everyone is protected from race and color discrimination Whites, Black people, Asians, Latinos, Arabs, American Indians, Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, persons of more than one race, and all other persons, whatever their race, color, or ethnicity (EEOC). The EEOC's Compliance Manual defines "racial discrimination" as "discrimination based on ancestry or physical or cultural characteristics associated with a certain race, such as skin color, hair texture or styles, or certain facial features." It defines "Color discrimination" as occurring

> when a person is discriminated against based on his/her skin pigmentation (lightness or darkness of the skin), complexion, shade, or tone. Color discrimination can occur between persons of different races or ethnicities, or even between persons of the same race or ethnicity. For example, an African American

employer violates Title VII if he refuses to hire other African Americans whose

skin is either darker or lighter than his. own. (EEOC, 2006)

Additionally, Title VII prohibits race and color discrimination in every aspect of

employment, including recruitment, hiring, promotion, wages, benefits, work

assignments, performance evaluations, training, transfer, leave, discipline, layoffs,

discharge, and any other terms, conditions, or privileges of employment. Title VII

prohibits intentional discrimination and practices that appear neutral but limit

employment opportunities for some racial groups and are not based on business needs.

Intentional discrimination occurs when an employment decision is affected by the

person's race. It includes racial animosity and conscious or unconscious stereotypes about

the abilities, traits, or performance of individuals from certain racial groups (EEOC,

2006).

Impact of Social Media on Hiring

Over the past decade, social media use has exploded. Today, more people than

ever carry access to various Social Media profiles (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram,

LinkedIn). From 2009 to 2016, Facebook has seen users jump from 197 million to 1.86

billion. LinkedIn has witnessed worldwide membership rise from 37 million to 467

million. Alongside the increase in social media users, hiring managers have intensified

social media use in the hiring process. According to CareerBuilder, 60% of employers

used social media to research employee candidates in 2016; in 2006, only 11 percent of

employers agreed to the same statement (Anderson, 2017). Social Networks, although

traditionally used to stay in touch with family and friends, have emerged as a tool for

employers and applicants to connect for employment opportunities. The Statistical Brain

Research Institute (2017) estimated that 79% of employers conduct an online search for applicants. Social Networks are opening the door for employers and applicants to learn more about each other before a resume is submitted or an interview is conducted. The information is public, free, and easily accessible (Carpenter, 2017).

Today, millennials account for 36% of the U.S. workforce, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and will account for 75% of the global workforce by 2025. Given that this group of employees has grown up actively communicating via myriad social media sites and devices, using social media is a workplace trend with staying power. Employers can use social media in two ways when hiring: to recruit candidates by publicizing job openings and to conduct background checks to confirm a candidate's qualifications for a position (Segal, n.d.)

In a human resources (H.R.) department's search for top-rate talent, two major concerns are cost and time. Searching Facebook or a Twitter feed is fast, easy, and free. As the wealth of information job candidates post online increases, using social media to screen applicants becomes a more viable option for employers. However, using social media for applicant screening opens up additional potential for legal action compared to traditional hiring methods (Anderson, 2017).

Society for Human Resource Management contributor Stephen Bates has encouraged employers to use social networks as long as it is done carefully (SHRM, 2013). Viewing a social network is not the issue; what is done with that information is difficult to regulate. How can an applicant prove it has been viewed; how can an employer "un-see" what has been seen? As a hiring manager, I had to question my bias: "Have I ever used a social network unethically? (Carpenter, 2017). Corporations view

social networks as a means to recruit both passive and active candidates personally and professionally. For example, Ernst & Young and Sodexo are building employer brands on social networks to position themselves as the best place to work and interact with potential candidates. Aside from passively marketing their companies, recruiters are messaging prospects directly, getting introduced through connections, and posting jobs in groups. They use these networks to fish where the fish are (Schawbel, 2012).

Hiring managers access candidates' social media profiles looking for any information or behavior that could lead them to conclude that their candidate would be a poor or good hire. When a piece of information is learned from social media and that information is used to decide on a candidate, social media has been used as a step or hurdle in the hiring process, so it is subject to the same scrutiny as other decision-making tools. We all have unconscious biases that come into play when we make decisions, being privy to personal, non-job-related information, can seep into our consciousness and affect our judgment without our knowledge (Lawrence, 2017).

What is posted or tweeted can positively or negatively impact recruiters' opinions of candidates. Four out of five recruiters liked to see memberships and affiliations with professional organizations on a candidate's profile, and another 66% reacted positively when a profile mentioned volunteerism efforts. On the other hand, references to illicit drugs, posts of a sexual nature, and mentions of alcohol consumption were likely to be viewed negatively by 78%, 67%, and 47% of recruiters. Interestingly, poor grammar and spelling mistakes are worse social networking sins than writing about binge-drinking adventures: 54% of recruiters had a negative reaction to grammar and spelling mistakes,

compared to 47% of recruiters who had a negative reaction to alcohol references (Schawbel, 2012).

A more immediate problem with using social media—particularly the most popular sites, LinkedIn and Facebook—is that subscribers do not represent the U.S. or global job-applicant pools. Recent surveys show that social media sites have lower percentages of Latino and Black users than are in the general population (Bates, 2013). Discrimination may be the biggest concern with using social media in hiring. Social media provides employers with information they might not obtain otherwise or obtain until they conduct a face-to-face interview. "In both the recruiting and screening process, you run the risk of learning and utilizing protected information," said Eric Meyer, a partner in Dilworth Paxson's labor and law practice in Philadelphia. "The pitfall is using it to make an employment decision" (Bates, 2013).

Discrimination. The first major legal pitfall of using social media in hiring is the immense potential for discrimination accusations. Traditional resumé layouts limit the amount of demographic information available and include only job-relevant information. Social Media screening acts directly against the precaution of limiting the information available to evaluators. Viewing Instagram photos or a Facebook profile opens a wealth of information, and most of this information places candidates in protected statuses, e.g., race, gender, age, religion, disability, national origin, and pregnancy. Anderson (2017) has raised concerns regarding the possibility of attractiveness bias. Even the most objective manager is open to subconsciously applying personal bias.

Landers et al. (2016) discussed the in-depth practice of incorporating information acquired via social media into the selection process. This practice is now common due to

social media's ease and attractiveness as information sources. In the selection context, people provide a great deal of information about themselves via their online behaviors within such software, and these online behaviors can be observed, captured, and acted upon by employers. What remains unclear to researchers and practitioners is what that information truly represents and how it is exploited. While personal information is easily accessible on social media profiles, several issues have been identified pertaining to the reliability, validity, ethics, and legality of a candidate's information.

Landers et al. (2016) also noted that job applicants may not represent themselves honestly, even going so far as to create false identities. Job applicant profiles may be contaminated with the behaviors of others; for example, other people may post information that appears within the social media content of a job applicant, contaminating it. When those making hiring decisions view social media posts, they are observing a person-situation interaction. Although information posted on the Internet is generally considered "public," many legal systems bar the consultation of particular types of information by those making hiring decisions. Even if information can be acquired legally and ethically, it is unclear how it should be included in selection decisions. Currently, social media is included in selection systems generally at the discretion of the person making the decision (Landers et al., 2016).

There are no problems with advertising an organization's brand and culture on social media. Many employers also use social media to post jobs and receive more applicants. However, making social media the only source of recruiting may be problematic as that may bring on new problems. For example, if social media is the only means of recruitment for an organization, those who do not have profiles would not be

aware of or able to apply to the open positions, potentially limiting the selection diversity, particularly in age, with younger individuals dominating social media platforms (Potier, 2019).

Organizational Implicit Biases

Over time, an organization's culture gradually builds through the repetitious reinforcement and normalization of beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions. This process occurs individually, as well as interpersonally, through daily conversations and interactions. On an organizational level, bias gradually becomes infused within an organization's collective culture and belief system, often incrementally, without explicit awareness or acknowledgment. Consequently, bias is challenging to hold in check and address because it is a normalized function of the organization's broader culture (McNutt, 2021).

Implicit biases may particularly damage people within organizations because they lie below consciousness. For example, hiring and promotion decisions less favorable for marginalized group members may be evidence of discrimination. However, it is more difficult to confidently identify such biased outcomes as discrimination because the source of the discriminatory behavior is the decision, which may not include explicit or intentional bias. These biases are harder to recognize because individuals are not deliberately attempting to be discriminatory and may not even realize that they are making biased decisions or engaging in behaviors that unfairly disadvantage individuals based on group membership. Thus, it often takes a more comprehensive examination of behaviors or decisions to find patterns suggesting implicit biases lead to disadvantages (Ruggs et al., 2018).

Unconscious biases have a critical and "problematic" effect on our judgment, says Francesca Gino, professor at Harvard Business School. "They cause us to make decisions in favor of one person or group to the detriment of others." In the workplace, this "can stymie diversity, recruiting, promotion, and retention efforts" (Knight, 2017). Unchecked biases can also shape a company or industry's culture and norms, according to Iris Bohnet, Director of the Women and Public Policy Program at the Harvard Kennedy School and the author of *What Works: Gender Equality by Design.* Regarding biases and hiring, managers must "think broadly about ways to simplify and standardize the process," says Bohnet (as cited in Knight, 2017).

The existing research on how human resource hiring managers access social media profiles to make hiring decisions has identified limitations that include the lack of companies surveyed, as most of the research has been conducted on a micro-level with tiny sample sizes of participants/hiring managers: an average of six. Additional research has been recommended to provide a broader understanding of the determining factors of when and why a Human Resource hiring manager chooses to access a job applicant's social media profile. The research should also examine why hiring managers choose not to access social media profiles to decide whether to hire or eliminate an applicant. Continued exploratory research will contribute to understanding the implications of social media within hiring practices and expand on the existing knowledge within a digital society and social capital.

Chapter 3 will discuss the grounded theory methodology applied to this qualitative study to construct a theory using the data collected and analyzed from the 21 research participants. I also discuss the steps from recruiting participants and

demographic information, conducting the virtual interviews, transcribing and sorting the data, and the coding process. Lastly, I will discuss the process for data analysis and the coding I used to develop categories and theoretical coding to identify emerging themes toward a theory explaining the phenomenon of social media influencing human resource hiring managers' decisions.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

This research study applied a qualitative grounded theory methodology approach, as it was best suited for developing a new concept or theory designed to investigate the "Why" and "How" of a social issue. A grounded theory methodology also allows researchers to use a diverse interpretive and theoretical framework to guide and further shape the study. Furthermore, a qualitative grounded theory methodology allows for the researcher's assumptions and world views to be applied to formulate a theoretical perspective as it pertains specifically to understanding the influences of social media's impact on hiring decisions. A key idea in grounded theory is that this theory development does not come "off the shelf" but is generated or "grounded in data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, as cited in Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory provides a procedure for developing categories of information – open coding, interconnecting the categories – axial coding, and building a "story" that connects the categories – selective coding, an ending with a discursive set of theoretical propositions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

During the open coding phase, I sorted and analyzed the data, which consisted of open-ended interviews with 21 human resource hiring manager transcripts. The ground theory research process is guided by the practicality of testing the development of the emerging theory as the framework to explain the central phenomenon of human resource hiring managers' professional experiences accessing social media profiles to make hiring decisions for their organizations. The research interview questions were structured to gather participant data and understand how social media profiles influence hiring decisions. Additionally, a qualitative grounded theory is the methodology applied to this research study applying the systematic procedures of Strauss and Corbin to develop a

theory explaining a process, actions, or interaction of the topic. This process enabled me to conduct interviews and collect data by saturating the categories to represent a unit of information composed of events, happenings, and instances (1990, 1998). A detailed description of these procedures is provided next.

Recruitment of Research Participants

The participants in this qualitative research study were all human resources (H.R.) management professionals who actively hire in their current and previous roles for organizations with 100 employees or more. The initial recruitment process entailed identifying and recruiting participants, specifically human resource hiring managers who work for companies with a minimum of 100 employees within their respective corporate organizations. Participants were vetted and recruited via the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) local chapters, the Human Resource Association of Broward County (HRABC), and Human Resource in Miami (H.R. Miami). The latter is located in South Florida.

I used the LinkedIn social media platform to recruit and communicate with prospective participants for the study. The duration to recruit participants, conduct the virtual interviews, and transcribe all of the interviews took approximately 7 months to complete. Many prospective participants were hesitant to participate in the research study due to uncertainty about the process and how the data provided in the interviews would be applied. I reassured all the participants that their company information and personal names would remain anonymous. Additionally, I reassured all participants by providing the approved Institution Review Board (IRB) consent form in writing, which clearly

outlined and reiterated that company names and personal details would remain anonymous.

Participant Demographics

This study's human resource management participants came from manufacturing, information technology, insurance, transportation, healthcare, accounting, Unites States federal government, food service and supply chain, hospitality and tourism, and commercial construction. The majority of the participants were women (18) who identified as either Hispanic/Latin (8), African American/Black (7), and Caucasian/White (3). Three males participated in this research study: a Black male (1) and White males (2). Participants had a range of 2–40 years of professional experience as Human Resource Hiring Managers. This research study had a total of 21 participants.

Ethical Consideration and Consent

All participants and the organizations in which they are employed are anonymous throughout the research study. I provided informed consent forms to all participants agreeing to participate. Research participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. All data collected from the interviews have been digitally stored and protected in an Apple iCloud service with a secured two-factor authentication. iCloud secures information by encrypting it in transit, storing it in iCloud in an encrypted format, and using secure tokens for authentication. Apple uses end-to-end encryption, ensuring only I can access the data and encrypted information (Apple Support, 2020).

To protect the identities of the participants of the study, I used pseudonyms (e.g., Participant 1), and the names of the organizations remained confidential. The audio

recordings of the participant interviews will be destroyed 3 years after the study's completion to remain in compliance with Institution Review Broad (IRB) protocols.

Data Collection

To best examine and understand how organizations use social media and what factors influence hiring decisions from Human Resource Hiring Managers, the research study entailed virtual interviews with semi-structured open-ended questions. The research study participants were all human resource (H.R.) hiring managers or employees of the recruitment team, identified as talent acquisition managers within corporate organizations that employ a minimum of 100 employees. Twenty-one human resource hiring managers participated in the study.

Grounded theory research is a challenging and time-consuming methodology as the researcher is at the mercy of research participants to obtain the necessary data from their lived experiences. One of the biggest challenges encountered by the researcher in conducting the virtual interviews with Human Resource Hiring Managers was the availability of the participants. All of the participants are working professionals managing an array of responsibilities both professionally and personally. Moreover, many prospective participants did not have the availability to conduct a virtual interview due to work-related or personal life issues and rescheduled several times based on prioritized responsibilities. Several participants who initially agreed to conduct the interview later decided not to move forward when it was time to coordinate and schedule the Zoom meeting. As a result, I had to recruit additional participants for the study.

I conducted the interviews via Zoom, a digital video software platform for teleconferencing and meetings. I recorded all of the interviews with the permission of all

participants. This format accommodated many of the participant's hybrid work schedules and ensured safe participation in the research study to discuss their professional experiences as Human Resource Hiring Managers comfortably. Two participants agreed to do the interview virtually but declined to be visually recorded due to their professional positions. These interviews were not video recorded; instead, voice recordings were allowed, which I transcribed into text for data analysis. Moreover, I transcribed all the interviews into text and took observational notes during the recorded live sessions.

Most participants displayed enthusiasm, interest, and excitement to discuss and share their professional experiences as Human Resource Hiring Managers. The average duration of the virtual interviews ranged between 15–40 minutes, as some participants elaborated more than others, especially participants with diversity, inclusion, and equity organizational initiatives. Only one participant experienced technical issues with her computer and Zoom, resulting in a 15-minute delay in starting the interview. No unusual circumstances arose while I conducted the interviews.

Interview Questions

What is your organization's policy and practice regarding the review of the social media profiles of applicants before making a hiring decision?

1. How has your organization's policy on accessing applicants' social media profiles for the hiring process been developed and evolved?

2. How do you review social media profiles to make hiring decisions within your current organization, if you do?

3. Do you disclose to applicants that their social media profiles are being reviewed as part of the hiring process?

4. What information on an applicant's social media profile is the most relevant to your organization?

5. How important is the outcome of the applicant's social media profile review in the hiring review process?

6. Can you share some examples of how an applicant's social media profile affected a hiring decision?

7. Do you know what unconscious bias is?

8. How does your organization handle unconscious bias training for hiring managers, if it does?

9. What types of unconscious bias training have you participated in, if any?

10. Should organizations consider implementing unconscious bias training and continuous professional development for human resource hiring managers? Why or why not?

Memoing

In keeping with the grounded theory methodology, I wrote memos throughout the research process to capture insights and questions, note important concepts and factors, and build the foundations of the emerging theory. The following notes are examples of memoing reflections on the data collection process:

- All of the participants were very relaxed and engaged throughout all of the virtual interview sessions. Only one participant experienced frustrations with the technology for 15 minutes, which was resolved, and the interview moved forward.

- Out of all the participants, only 2 out of the 21 could not define unconscious bias and provided a vague response.

- I asked whether participants were uncomfortable, and everyone verbally confirmed they were comfortable with the questions and interview process.

- At the end of the interviews, all participants unanimously displayed a positive attitude and expressed their interest in the relevance of the research topic.

Data Analysis

Data Preparation

I conducted virtual interviews individually with each participant. After each interview, I rewatched the video recordings to transcribe them into text. I began analyzing the first transcript to identify relevant concepts for the initial coding process. After identifying the six codes, I took excerpts of the transcript related to each code. I moved on to the second interview and followed the same steps as the first one, including the line-by-line constant comparisons of the first two transcripts that identified similarities in the participant responses and grouping concepts for each code. I continued this process with the third participant and created the first cluster of three interviews. I continued this process each time I completed three interviews, resulting in seven clusters of transcripts. Each cluster represented three participants, for a total of 21 transcripts.

Open Coding

During the initial open coding phase, the researcher started the process by rewatching each interview to transcribe and analyze. After completing the first three interview transcripts, I began a line-by-line analysis of the texts while constantly comparing the participant responses. I created the following codes, which derived from

developing concepts from excerpts of the data that summarize the responses, not based on any existing theory but solely on the meanings that emerged. I labeled excerpts of the text with a code descriptor and identified relevant words and significant concepts related to the research questions. The following initial codes emerged from categorizing the data:

- Organizational Policy

- Social Media Profiles

- Digital Footprint Influence

- Disclosure of Social Media Review

- Unconscious Biases Awareness

- Unconscious Bias Training

Table 1

Open Coding Data Analysis

Open Coding	Properties	Participants Words	Notes
Organizational Policy	Participants without a policy	No, we do not have a formal policy. We have never discussed establishing a policy.	None of the participants have a policy—the first three interviews -Cluster 1
	Participants with a policy	Yes, we have a policy in place 1 yr. ago when I joined the company.	Fourth interview has a policy—Cluster 2
			Eleventh interview has a policy—Cluster 4.
Social Media Profiles	No reviews of social media	No, I don't review because it is difficult enough for me to fill positions. Time is essential in the role. Participant 3 does not review social media personally	Participant 3 does not review social media personally.
			Inquired if she did not have difficulty filling positions. Perhaps she would review social media
	Yes, reviews social media	I realize that a lot of people have a professional and personal life, but I do check for professionalism and someone who carries themselves well.	Majority of the participants reviewing social media. LinkedIn primarily. Secondly, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat

Open Coding	Properties	Participants Words	Notes
Digital Footprint			
	No Influence	No, it has not had any influence on the decisions I have made in the hiring process. It has been such a challenge to fill positions that we do not put too much importance on social media.	Participant # 1 does not have time to review social media N/A
	Yes, it is influencing	I think it can be significant in a negative way because the information will most likely influence in a negative sense if someone is not lined up. Whether my colleagues talk about it or not, I know it happens in the hiring process.	Participants confirm that colleagues on the hiring team review social media profiles.
Disclosure of Social Media Review	No disclosure	Does not review social media.	Not applicable if you do not review social media profiles.
	Yes, disclosure.	Yes, I know my F.B. account was reviewed for my Senior VP H.R. role. The hiring manager disclosed this information to me during the final interview.	Major hospital system - H.R. was upfront about reviewing his social media profile, such as his Facebook account.
Unconscious Bias Awareness	Unable to provide a clear explanation.	Yes, I do know and would define it as unconsciously correlating an infinity or an event relatable to you to give someone an advantage over another person.	Mumbled around a bit on definition— only two participants.
		Yes, I know what it is. Not sure how to explain it. Unconscious bias is when you make decisions about someone without realizing you are doing it.	
Unconscious Bias Training	Never attended.	I have never participated in unconscious bias training.	Forty years of H.R. experience—never received training.
	Able to define & articulate an example.	Yes, it's an inherent bias that everyone has, which they develop unconsciously; generalizations we make about a particular group of people. e.g., someone graduated from my school and is from my town, so they will be just like me. You have to be aware of these biases so they do not affect how you view a candidate and not generalize about a particular group over the years.	Eighteen gave a definition with examples.

Diagramming

I initially attempted to utilize MAXQDA, the Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA)

software used to manage the data from the coding. The software assisted me with

organizing, coding, analyzing, and visualizing the research data. Unfortunately, the

software had several compatibility limitations on a MacBook Pro IOS system, which the

researcher used. Instead of the QDA software, I created a data analysis chart as a diagram

utilizing Microsoft Excel. The diagram data analysis chart provided a visual framework

to organize and sort the data. Moreover, the researcher used the diagram chart to track

and record themes emerging from the constant comparisons of the descriptive narratives.

Axial Coding

I utilized the diagram chart using Microsoft Excel to sort and organize the

excerpts for the first round of axial coding. This step involved reviewing excerpts based

on the first cycle of open coding to determine if they could be grouped into categories. I

applied the constant comparative method, comparing excerpts of the data from one

interview to another using the diagram chart and then sorting excerpts into groups of

categories corresponding to similar attributes. I grouped excerpts into the following

categories through this axial coding process:

- Organizations with a social media policy
  - Yes, reviews Social Media Profiles
  - No reviews of Social Media Profiles
- Organizations without social media policy
  - No reviews of social media
  - Yes, reviews social media
- Digital Information Influencing Decisions/Biases
  - Positively

- Negatively
- Unconscious Biases
  - Acknowledged unconscious biases in hiring decisions
  - No unconscious biases in hiring decisions
- Unconscious Bias Training
  - Participants agree that training is required for H.R. hiring managers
  - Participant does not think training is needed for H.R. hiring managers.

Table 2

Axial Coding Chart

Axial Coding	Categories	Participants Words	Notes
Organizations <u>with</u> social media policies prohibiting the review.	H.R. has a policy forbidding the review of social media—still adding the review of social media profiles.	As far as recruiting, we are encouraged to add social media to the file we are screening. We check LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.	Three participants have a policy and do not adhere to the policy and still check social media.
	Yes, formal social media policy—confirmed not checking social media.	No, I do not review social media because I do not have time for that. I am focusing on your resume and cover letter, which have all the information I need to decide if we will schedule an interview to move forward.	Policy in place. Will not check social media—three participants—minority group.
Organizations <u>without</u> a social media policy - *Not Reviewing*	No formal policy and confirmed not checking.	No, I do not review social media because I do not have time for that. I am focusing on your resume and your cover letter.	Two participants do not check social media profiles—Minority group.
	No policy and confirmed that social media profiles are being reviewed.	In my last company, the company CEO looked at all of the applicant's social media Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. He would print out photos and content for me to review as part of the hiring process. I feel it is inappropriate if it is not social media related. The CEO is appearance-driven and wanted to ensure the applicants were the right image for the brand. That is how he reviewed our	Thirteen participants confirmed they are reviewing social media. The majority confirmed they are checking or a colleague on the hiring team is reviewing the social media (two participants)

Axial Coding	Categories	Participants Words	Notes
		applicants, no exceptions. Appearance matters 100% in the hiring process. It was a very controversial process for me as an H.R. Hiring Manager. We did not have a policy in place for the organization.	
Digital Information Influencing Decisions/Biases	Information influencing positively.	My experience is that recruiters hire people who look like them and usually have no idea they are applying unconscious bias.	Hiring recruiter reviews social media to identify candidates based on similarities—affinity bias.
	Information influencing negatively.	Amazing resume. Everything was so perfect for this applicant. CEO checked the social media and said, "We are not hiring this person. Have you looked on the social media?" The Instagram account was filled with pictures of nudes from the back in the woods and deserts. He said he would not hire the candidate. Social media has impacted the hiring process in this situation. I realize social media accounts need to be reviewed, very much on the social scene, which is what I am looking for.	Personal information on social media influences the perception of the H.R. Hiring manager—horn effect.
		Example: New hires are African American, and the leadership team came to talk to us in H.R. about the hiring process to ensure there was diversity in the building, and the candidates were not reflective. I have also seen biases in genders, where it is very male- or female-dominant. Another example: My current company prefers females, and I had to speak with them about opening their eyes to unconscious bias.	Name and Gender Biases
		Participant 14 confirms her personal biases against Baby Boomers in hiring decisions and will not hire.	Ageism.

Axial Coding	Categories	Participants Words	Notes
Unconscious Biases	Acknowledged unconscious biases in hiring.	When I am with a White Male colleague, for example, despite a wide variety of candidates, they always like the white females with blonde hair. People tend to like the person that looks like them. I do not think they consciously know they are choosing people more relatable to them. It is the halo effect. I sit in a lot of interviews and always notice biases because the Recruiter always hires the person that looks like them. I see the halo effect the most frequently in my hiring experiences as an H.R. professional.	Halo effects and affinity biases. Most participants acknowledge unconscious hiring biases, including the two who provided vague definitions.
	No Unconscious Biases in hiring	I make decisions based on your professional experience. I do not look at anyone's social media to make hiring decisions.	Only three do not check social media; therefore, no biases in decisions.
Unconscious Bias Training	Participants Positively Impactful/Useful	100% absolutely, yes, they should! People need to know and understand unconscious bias and how their perception of others can affect and impact their livelihoods. Leaders need to implement this training to avoid issues such as litigation.	All 21 participants have similar sentiments regarding training, which they all strongly agree that training is.
		No, we do not have an unconscious bias training. We discussed it briefly, but they did not think they needed such training. It was difficult to implement training. They did not want to bother employees since we are an I.T. industry. Company does not encourage training.	Tech company—Only 1 participant confirmed her company is not interested in establishing training, etc. CEO deems training is not useful or applicable to their orgs.

Selective Coding

I completed an additional round of analysis by reviewing the data again to

identify any new categories emerging from the transcripts. I actively engaged with the

data by using the diagram chart to constantly compare and contrast excerpts of the

transcripts to identify patterns revealed through the properties and dimensions identified through the open coding and axial coding stages of analysis. This process is the roadmap I applied to generate a theoretical explanation of why human resource hiring managers access and review a job applicant's social media profiles and what factors influence hiring decisions. Selective coding identified patterns that led to the development of the following themes:

- Organizational Policy on social media

- Digital Information Influencing Hiring Decisions

- Common Biases Presented in Hiring Decisions

- Unconscious Bias Training and Development

Table 3

Selective Coding

Themes	Concepts	Notes
Organizational policy on social media	Most participants in the study do not have a formal policy on social media. Additionally, most participants confirm that social media profiles are habitually reviewed in the hiring process, whether or not they have a social media policy. Lastly, whether or not the organization has a policy, the majority confirmed that social media is being reviewed before making a decision.	Even if the H.R. Hiring Manager may not review the social media personally, others within the hiring committees do review social media.
Digital information influencing hiring decisions	Various information influences decisions, such as photos, personal lifestyle choices, how they portray themselves, and their affiliations online.	Most participants think your digital footprint can influence more negatively than positively due to unconscious biases—the main reason three participants will not review social media by adhering to the existing formal policy prohibiting the review. Majority of participants confirmed that the digital footprint is significant.
Common biases presented in hiring decisions	Affinity bias, gender bias, beauty bias, name bias, the horns effect, and the halo effect.	Most common biases identified from the participants' collective shared experiences.

Themes	Concepts	Notes
Unconscious bias training		All 21 participants agreed they need and want to have unconscious bias training to identify how to minimize it in hiring practices. Several confirmed that the interview opened their eyes to the importance of the training and its impact on the hiring process to avoid any potential legal pitfalls. One participant is currently dealing with the EEOC with an alleged discriminatory complaint. Her company has been fined several times in the past 20 yrs. Since the interview participant called to inform me she quit working as the HR director due to the numerous issues with discrimination within the orgs and does not want to be involved with a very controversial org. Companies with DEI initiatives in this research have a formal social media policy

Theoretical Saturation

Theoretical saturation is the endpoint when the researcher has not identified any new information or findings relevant to the research study. After analyzing all the data from 21 virtual interviews, I determined that theoretical saturation had been met. The themes and theories developed through the analysis process are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter will focus on thematic analysis to discuss the emerging themes from selective coding supported by the transcript excerpts from research participants. The thematic analysis process is the roadmap used by the researcher to develop a theory to explain what influential factors Human Resource Hiring Managers consider on social media influencing their hiring decisions. The thematic analysis will focus on the following formulated themes:

- Organizational Policy on social media

- Digital Information Influencing Hiring Decisions

- Common Biases Presented in Hiring Decisions

- Unconscious Bias Training and Development

Organizational Policy on Social Media

Most companies in this research study do not have a formal organization policy prohibiting the review of social media accounts, and many never discussed establishing one before the interview. Organizations must develop and create a policy on handling social media within the hiring process to avoid potential legal pitfalls of alleged discriminatory practices with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The EEOC investigates discrimination allegations to ensure organizations comply with federal law, as it is illegal to discriminate against the protected categories of job applicants. 15 of the 21 research study participants did not have a formal policy on accessing social media profiles as part of the hiring review process. Despite companies not having a formal policy, it did not prevent HR Hiring Managers or Senior Leaders

from encouraging the review of applicant's social media, as one HR Hiring Manager discussed:

> No, we do not have a formal policy in place. As far as recruiting new hires, we are encouraged to add social media to the hiring file we are screening. We check LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. (Participant 5)

One research participant discussed the lack of a formal policy for the review of social media despite working for a large-scale hospital system with over 24,000 employees. He discussed his experience as an applicant for his current role as a Senior Leader in Human Resources for the hospital system where his social media profiles were reviewed as part of the hiring process stated,

> We do not have a policy in place at the organization. I am, however, aware that my social media was reviewed when I recently got this current job last year. However, I have never known for an applicant to not get the job because of social media. Both my Facebook and LinkedIn were checked, and LinkedIn provides a notification when someone views your page, which is how I became aware that it was reviewed.

Another research participant discussed the lack of urgency in creating a formal policy despite potential legal pitfalls with the EEOC occasionally checking applicant's social media profiles, which is contingent upon the industry in which she is hiring:

> We do not have a formal policy in place. I am interested in implementing one. Level of urgency 1–10. I give it a 4. Yes, I review social media profiles. No, I do not disclose that information. If they provide a LinkedIn profile on the resume, I am invited to take a look at their profile. Sometimes I let them know if it was

provided. If not, I will mention to them that I attempted to look up their social media. I have reviewed social media depending on the industry. (Participant 10)

Six out of the 21 research study participants have a formal organizational policy that prohibits the review of hiring applicants' social media profiles. One of the HR Hiring Managers elaborated on her organization's policy, which is directly aligned with the EEOC guidelines preventing the review of social media profiles as a part of the hiring review process and works for a large-scale technology company with over 25,000 employees, stated,

> We comply specifically with the EEOC guidelines as it pertains to discrimination and biases, so we do not check social media due to this very strict compliance which we adhere to as an organization. We have a policy in place which prevents hiring managers from reviewing the social media of any applicants or existing employees. Our policy is updated per the Office of Federal Compliance and EEOC, which is usually every 2–3 years. It is reviewed and updated as needed. Due to the digital era we are living in, social media was not as accessible in the past, which is why we have annual trainings regarding the company's prohibited policy. (Participant 17)

Another research participant who works for a non-profit professional organization with over 20 years of HR professional experience discussed the significant importance of having a formal policy to prevent accessing social media in the hiring process. She discussed how social media provides direct access to an applicant's personal information, such as lifestyle choices, which may influence the hiring decision stated:

Yes, we have a policy in place in regard to not checking anyone's social media. I am the Leader of HR, and I make it a practice to not check social media profiles, with the exception of LinkedIn. I am very aware checking social media gives access to lifestyle, choices, and opinions, and I do not want that to be a part of the review process. The policy was last updated this past year—we updated the verbiage with specifics, but we do not have a need to check social media profiles. (Participant 15)

According to one of the HR Hiring Managers in the Hospitality and Tourism industry, social media is a part of the process for hiring candidates to ensure the applicant reflects the company's brand. Despite having a formal social media policy in place prohibiting the review of an applicant's social media, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is adamant that the team should reflect the culture of the brand by determining which candidates reflect the image they are seeking to convey commercially stated,

In my last company, the CEO was looking at all of the applicant's social media Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. He would print out photos and content for me to review as a part of the hiring process. I felt it was inappropriate and should not have been social media related. The CEO was very appearance driven, and he wanted to ensure the applicants were the right image for the brand. That is how he reviewed our hiring applicants no exceptions. Appearance matters 100% in the hiring process. It was a very controversial process for me as an HR Hiring Manager. We did not have a policy in place for the organization. I created a policy for accessing the social media of applicants and new hires, and the CEO would disregard it and still review social media profiles. (Participant 19)

Reviewing an applicant's social media profiles, which can influence hiring decisions, is potentially a legal pitfall for organizations. The process allows for one of the most common biases to emerge in decision making: affinity bias, also known as similarity bias, which tends to connect with others who share similar interests, backgrounds, and experiences. Furthermore, because appearance is a crucial component of the organization's culture, ageism can potentially reflect negative feelings on a job applicant based on their age.

In conclusion, whether or not an organization has a formal policy prohibiting accessing an applicant's social media, most Human Resource Hiring Managers in this study confirmed they review social media profiles as a part of the hiring process. Most organizations that do not have a policy are at risk of potentially facing alleged employment discrimination charges violating Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 for the protected categories of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, and genetic information.

Digital Informational Influencing Hiring Decisions

The participant's answers to the research questions suggest that it is imperative to identify specific information on an applicant's social media profile that influences HR hiring managers' decision on whether to hire. Digital footprints appear to be the current norm in the era of social media, which is accessible to anyone with access to the internet. An applicant's digital footprint provides an in-depth insight into their lifestyle, the people and sites they follow, the content they have posted, liked, or shared, and comments made. This digital information can influence Human Resource Hiring Managers' perceptions of a candidate. An applicant's digital footprint creates a digital reputation that may have a

long-lasting impression that can be perceived as both positive and negative, with the potential to impact employment opportunities. One of the research participants shared his experience as an applicant interviewing for his current new role as the Senior Vice President of Human Resources for a Hospital Healthcare System. He discussed his experience and perception of social media while interviewing for his current new role:

> We do not have a policy in place at our organization. I am, however, aware that my social media was reviewed when I recently got this current job last year. However, I have never known for an applicant to not get the job because of social media. Both my Facebook and LinkedIn were checked, and LinkedIn provides a notification when someone views your page, which is how I became aware that it was reviewed. When I check an applicant's social media profile, it is really to ensure the information on the resume is accurate and matches the employment information on their LinkedIn profile page. The most relevant information on the applicant's social media is the employment history and educational background. We ensure the information matches and that there are no gaps within the employment history. (Participant 7)

All of this study's Human Resource Hiring Managers participants collectively emphasized that their primary focus on applicants is their professional experience and educational background. When social media profiles are reviewed as a secondary focus for applicants, one of the research participants discussed the potential negative impact one's digital footprint has on hiring decisions and acknowledged its significance for many of the HR Hiring Managers on her team stated,

I think it can be significant in a very negative way because the information will most likely influence it in a negative sense. I know it happens in the hiring process, whether my colleagues talk about it or not. I have seen examples of HR hiring managers checking social media profiles and dismissing candidates based on personal information such as one's lifestyle choices. My colleague checked every single social media profile before inviting a candidate for an interview. She made decisions on absolutely everything she saw on an applicant's social media profile account and was very bold about it. (Participant 3)

They should be aware that the digital information they display on social media can unconsciously influence decision-makers on whether or not they get the job. One HR hiring manager who does not have a formal organizational policy regarding social media is encouraged by her company's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to review the social media profiles of all applicants. The research participant discussed the most relevant information she is seeking from an applicant's social media, which is included in the hiring file for the CEO's review:

I would say confidence and an outspoken person who carries themselves well— someone who would be an asset to the organization. We do not rely on the social media profile. My organization promotes diversity, inclusivity, and belonging. We do not make decisions based on people's appearance. We truly focus on the professional experience and whether they are a fit for our culture. Yes, we do background checks for certain roles. There was a candidate we were ready to move forward with, and unfortunately, the candidate's social media revealed he

was on trial for murder, but the case was exonerated. We decided not to move

forward with the new hire. (Participant 6)

Moreover, it is also crucially imperative to point out how an applicant's digital

information on social media will always be inclusive of photos, which can influence an

HR hiring manager's perceptions of an applicant either positively or negatively. One of

the research participants discussed the importance of an applicant's physical perception

of confidence and how they carry themselves, which alludes to assessing someone

visually to measure potential effectiveness for a position. Moreover, another HR hiring

manager elaborated on how one's digital information can influence biases after exposure

to an applicant's photos on social media. The participant and her entire hiring team

believe photographs tend to activate unconscious biases that can negatively influence an

applicant's hiring decisions. The hiring team unanimously protects the images of

applicants by not including any photos that might reflect poorly on an applicant to

prevent unconscious biases:

> If we feel the photo is not a good reflection of the candidate, we will omit that
>
> information in the hiring packet for review. For example: If a candidate has on a
>
> hoody and it is not appropriate, we will remove the photo. If there is a low-cut
>
> shirt on a female candidate, we will crop it to only include her head. (Participant
>
> 6)

Another research participant heavily justified why reviewing an applicant's social media

profile was highly relevant in her organization's hiring process. She also shared what

digital information was pertinent to her organization to determine if an applicant would

fit the company's culture well. Digital information can influence hiring decisions as the

HR Hiring Manager is vested in discovering as much as possible on social media stated:

> Reviewing social media helps us see if you fit the company culture well. If they
>
> are social, do they post often? What exactly are they posting? We just say we are
>
> doing a very deep background check. We had an instance when a temporary
>
> worker was involved in a drug bust, and it was on her social media—she was very
>
> attractive, and so they were a bit forgiving of her actions. The men of the
>
> company looked her up because there was a lot of interest. We look at the nature
>
> of their posts. Are they lewd, violent, and divisive? If the content they are posting
>
> is problematic. For Example: If you are the head of legal, we do not want a loose
>
> cannon, just writing what they have on their social media—behavior is very
>
> important. Are you posting questionable content—such as smoking marijuana or
>
> taking other drugs? (Participant 8)

Additionally, another research participant discussed the information most relevant to her

organization when reviewing social media for applicants. Despite not having social media

personally, the participant believes she should have the right to post whatever she

chooses on her social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, which is an international

freeware, cross-platform for instant messaging, and voice-over-IP for telephone calls

globally, with video calling features owned and operated by Facebook also now known as

Meta. The app also gives users the ability to post content that the participant herself

admitted could be perceived as questionable to her employer but emphasized her privacy:

> We are looking for inappropriate content, such as if an applicant is getting drunk,
>
> partying a lot, their behavior, or visually doing drugs. I do not have social media,

but I have WhatsApp, and sometimes I might post questionable content, which is sometimes silly as an HR Manager, but this is my personal cell. No one can tell me what I can put since the company is not paying for it. Example: I put a meme about no one taking pictures of you working, but the pictures of people partying is also posted. So, I think this is the information HR hiring managers are looking for—your personal information. What else could they be looking for? (Participant 2)

Lastly, the lack of a social media profile is a bias that can be categorized with ageism, as older folks such as Baby Boomers currently in the workforce can be perceived as inept with technology. Despite not having a formal policy prohibiting the review of an applicant's social media, one of the participants raised a red flag about candidates who do not have digital footprints. The participant discussed how her organization would perceive this negatively, as they would be reluctant to hire applicants without social media platforms.

The information most important is professionalism. Depending on the industry, social media can be very relevant. Example: Our clients wanted to ensure our new hires were not stalking celebrities, so we checked their social media profiles and informed the applicant of any discrepancies that required clarification. Currently seeking a new hire—if someone does not have a LinkedIn account, I am cautious about how that individual is developing themselves professionally. If there are no social media profiles, absolutely zero, that indicates they are not very serious about their career. I will not hire someone without a digital footprint. (Participant 10)

In conclusion, the digital information on social media profiles is relevant to many organizations that review applicants' profiles as a part of their hiring process. The information most pertinent to organizations varies from an applicant's lifestyle choices, self-portrayals, and affiliations online. Moreover, problematic content, such as violence, drug usage, and nudity, are all influential factors preventing an organization from hiring an applicant. Nonetheless, reviewing an applicant's social media profiles remains a potential legal pitfall for organizations. This process allows for unconscious biases and stereotypes to potentially emerge into the hiring process and influence HR hiring managers' perceptions. Reviewing social media profiles is a gray area that can create discriminatory allegations to surface in the hiring process because professional and educational experience is no longer the only assessment used to make decisions.

Common Biases Presented in Hiring Decisions

Mostly, all of the participants of this research study were able to define unconscious biases and, most importantly, understand how they can influence hiring decisions. It was essential for me to inquire with the Human Resource Hiring Managers about their experiences with unconscious biases in the hiring process to explore which biases are the most prevalent. Participants did not hesitate to discuss how unconscious biases present themselves in numerous ways, such as an applicant's name, gender, age, or race, which can determine whether or not they get the job. One participant discussed how name and gender biases could either prevent an applicant from moving forward in the hiring process or assist an applicant in securing a new role, as opposed to measuring professional experience solely.

Unconscious bias is about me looking at an applicant's name and immediately

associating a stereotype from a particular race as opposed to looking at the work

experience. Example: Previous job, all applicants and new hires were African

American, and the leadership team came to talk to us in HR about the hiring

process to ensure there was diversity in the building and the candidates were not

reflective. I also have seen biases in genders—where it is very male or female

dominant. Another example: My current company prefers females, and I had to

speak with them about opening their eyes to unconscious bias and have a

conversation to bring it to your attention. Nine-to-ten, most people do not realize

it. (Participant 19)

A male research participant with over 40 years of human resource hiring

experience discussed why he does not review social media profiles because of the

unconscious biases that project stereotypes about an applicant. The participant admitted

his experience with biases such as the horns effect, in which a person is viewed

negatively after learning something unpleasant about an applicant, such as a personal

lifestyle choice like hunting or pregnancy. He believes reviewing social media profiles

would negatively influence his perception of an applicant, which is why he chooses not to

check social media:

No, I do not review social media to make decisions because I think it opens up to

biases quite a bit. An example would be you see someone's LinkedIn photo, and

that automatically activates your conscious or unconscious biases. I can also see

biases emerging if they are part of organizations I personally do not like, and that

is another form of bias. If I review someone's profile and they are a hunter, for

example, that is going to turn me off, which is a bias. I can review a women's

profile, and she is pregnant and ready to have a baby in 3 months, and I would be

biased in making a decision on hiring her, I have to be honest. I think it's a bit of

noise, and personal life should be separate from professional life, and that is why I

choose not to review applicants' social media. (Participant 3)

Another HR Hiring Manager further elaborated on her experience with

unconscious bias within her team of hiring recruiters and the process of selecting new

candidates for her organization. The participant discusses how affinity bias—or similarity

bias—is the most common bias her hiring team encounters, as hiring recruiters tend to

connect with applicants with similar interests and backgrounds. The participant also

shared that the most common bias she has experienced in the hiring process is the *Halo*

Effect, which is the tendency to place someone on a pedestal after learning something

impressive about them.

My experience is that recruiters have a tendency to hire people that look like them

and usually have no idea they are applying unconscious bias. When I am with a

white male colleague, for example, despite a wide variety of candidates, they

always like the white females with blonde hair. People tend to like the person that

looks like them. I do not think they are consciously aware they are choosing

people more relatable to them. It is the halo effect. I sit in a lot of interviews and

always notice biases because the Recruiter always hires the person that looks like

them. I see the Halo effect the most frequently in my hiring experience as an HR

Professional. (Participant 13)

Research participants were candid in discussing how biases often emerge after reviewing an applicant's social media and its ability to influence hiring decisions. Unconscious biases can supersede an applicant's professional experience, creating a negative personal opinion that is certainly not in their favor. One participant confirmed that biases impact hiring decisions stated,

> Can it impact hiring decisions? Yes, how? Because people look at an applicant and can form a personal opinion about them as opposed to what they bring to the organization as a professional. Perhaps using social media to determine if they are a cultural fit can impact the hiring process. (Participant 13)

Ageism was another bias prevalent in this research study, as one HR hiring manager admitted how it influenced her decision to hire an applicant. The participant openly discussed how she prefers to work with Generation Z instead of Baby Boomers, who have a more traditional approach to business and are not adaptable to change nor interested in enhancing their work styles with new strategies and techniques. Having personal preferences in applicants due to their age group, as opposed to professional and educational experience suitable for the position, is a potential legal pitfall, as age is one of the protected categories under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

> In the hiring process, ageism sometimes affects my own personal bias. When I was looking at the professional experience, if it was beyond certain years, I was not eager to move forward with older professionals. I know this was a bias towards ageism because I favored wanting to hire Generation Z, who are easier to train and adaptable to change. Baby Boomers are not open to thinking outside the

box and finding new ways to do old things. This is obviously one of my biases.

(Participant 14)

Unfortunately, these case scenarios could have legal ramifications for an organization if an applicant files a discrimination claim for unlawful employment practices due to their age or any of these biases. These biases are lawfully protected categories under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Unconscious biases are challenging to avoid when HR hiring managers lack professional training to reduce bias and develop strategies and techniques in the selection process. One of the HR hiring managers with over 20 years of professional experience with extensive training over the past 2 decades in unconscious bias, sharing the following perspective on biases:

Everyone has an inherent bias, which they develop unconsciously, generalizations we make about a certain group of people. Example: Someone graduated from my school, and they are from my town, so they are going to be just like me. You have to be aware of these biases, so they do not affect how you view a candidate and not make generalizations about a particular group over the years. I always tell my team, "Let's get the facts. Do not go to the assumptions." You have to have a process of consistency for all candidates, no exceptions. If you are checking transcripts, you must do it for everyone. (Participant 15)

In conclusion, all of the Human Resource Hiring Managers that participated in this research study discussed their personal experience with biases in the hiring process. Many of the research participants provided examples of how biases can influence one's perception of a candidate when deciding to hire. Furthermore, participants provided insight into the most common biases influencing hiring decisions: gender bias, beauty

bias, name bias, the horns effect, and the halo effect. Lastly, one of the research

participants discussed her ageism bias, which influences hiring decisions based on an

applicant's age. Half of the research participants in the study have never completed

unconscious bias training and may not have recognized the possibility of an applicant

filing a discriminatory complaint with the EEOC. Unconscious bias training would

benefit HR Hiring Managers to learn strategic techniques to avoid biases in the hiring

process.

Unconscious Bias Training

Ten of the 21 human resources (HR) hiring manager research participants in this

study have had unconscious bias training either offered within their previous or current

organization as a part of onboarding as a new employee or mandatory for their hiring

role. This training has also been offered via annual HR professional conferences or

workshops through local HR chapters. The training was compulsory for some

participants, but not all. The significant importance of unconscious bias training allows

HR Managers to gain in-depth knowledge on identifying unconscious biases within their

decision-making. Unconscious bias training provides HR hiring managers with strategies

and techniques to minimize and avoid bias in recruiting and hiring. Research participants

discuss the significance of the training, which is designed to assist people in self-

analyzing their unconscious prejudice bias, and most importantly, how that can

unintentionally influence hiring decisions.

Additionally, participants discussed the essential tools provided in the training,

designed to teach and develop an alternative approach to cultivating new and positive

attitudes about others. Three research participants also revealed their completion of anti-

discrimination training for professional development offered by their organizations and facilitated by in-house legal counsel. The training has proven effective, as the following research participants elaborately discussed:

> It is a training that is extremely crucial for all hiring managers. How I conduct my training for my staff on unconscious bias is really focusing on actions that can be perceived as biases to others. It's about bringing forth words or actions during the hiring process, which can be biased. Over the years in my career, it has become even more relevant based on how society has developed. In the 80s and 90s, it was not as prevalent, but it has changed in the 2000s decade for the growth and development of HR managers. Things happening in our society have manifested . . . shedding light on how bias can be pervasive both consciously and unconsciously. (Participant 10)

> We have mandatory training on selecting candidates and handling biases and new hires from a selection. It is a 1-hour session. It also includes legal. I recently attended the training for my new company. LinkedIn also offers unconscious bias trainings, which I have completed several sessions. (Participant 13)

> Yes, we do have annual training for all supervisors and managers, and staff, including anti-discrimination training. The program is offered virtually with a formal training and is facilitated by a legal in-house counsel. I have participated in the anti-discrimination and unconscious bias trainings. HR Miami offers topics and workshops that we provide as part of continuing professional development. (Participant 15)

Only seven research study participants worked for organizations actively engaged in Diversity Inclusion and Equity Initiatives, including unconscious bias training for Human Resources professionals and staff. Some of the organizations presented in this group mandate unconscious bias training and attach it directly to performance reviews, and there are incentives for employees who complete the training. Organizations with a robust in-house Chief Diversity Officer prioritized unconscious bias training as a part of the onboarding process, along with continuous professional development offered annually, as discussed by the participants who had completed the training. HR hiring managers with extensive experience with unconscious bias training are well equipped with the tools and resources to guide them toward implanting this training in the organization for all employees.

> Yes, I have done several unconscious bias trainings with HR conferences and trainings at work. I implemented trainings using vendors for trainings company-wide per the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) bias trainings. We also have a more robust program for higher-up leaders and hiring managers. The trainings were very effective. We have had instances when racially motivated problems occurred, but very low—only once a year we had to address an issue. We do not have a formal training in the current tech role—we have a very inclusive culture in the company in which diversity is very apparent. For each interview, we have standard questions for all applicants we hire—we ask the same questions across the board—we focus on the requirements. We focus on culture and personality—it's a structured interview process with a very diverse background of hiring committees—various races, genders, cultures, etc. In

previous roles, we had trainings for hiring managers to ensure we are

understanding the EEOC—learning where the biases come from and how to

overcome them when they manifest. We all have a natural tendency to gravitate

towards people that look like us and sound like us— which is why it is so

important we have representation from all backgrounds. (Participant 8)

I have participated in several unconscious bias trainings 10 years ago; the training

was amazing and truly brought to light the concept and how to identify it in

various situations. All hiring managers are expected to be a part of this training

curriculum. I know we have a series of trainings under our DEI umbrella. We

have Better Management Training, and the unconscious bias training is a part of

the session. (Participant 18)

Several of the HR hiring managers discussed the impact of the techniques learned

in the unconscious bias training, which has been implemented in their hiring process to

mitigate personal biases. The hiring process entails two different departments

interviewing the applicant with a diverse questionnaire, followed by a third party from

another team conducting an additional interview. After all the interviews are completed, a

debriefing is done by the parties who interviewed the applicant to discuss the candidate

and make a decision. This process has proven to be very effective in avoiding

unconscious biases within the hiring selection process.

We have a process in my firm in which the hiring team will interview the

candidate, but another department will also interview the same candidate, and

then a debriefing will occur with everyone involved in the interview to discuss the

feedback on the candidate. This is to avoid biases in the hiring process. We use a

very diverse questionnaire for the hiring interviews picked by the executive

leadership team—to avoid bias, we have a third party from another team and

department that gives their perspective on hiring an applicant. This is to remain

aligned with our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiative. I think having a third

party to interview the candidate is great. We interview with five specific

dimensions we focus on in the hiring process: I. Business Acumen—II. Global

Acumen—Technology Acumen—Diversity Acumen. I think this process is

effective for hiring and onboarding but questionable for promotional

opportunities. (Participant 12)

Despite not offering unconscious bias training, several HR research participants

acknowledged its importance and confirmed its influence on hiring decisions. Many

participants expressed interest in attending sessions to learn strategies and techniques to

avoid bias in the hiring selection. An HR hiring manager discussed presenting the

importance of having unconscious bias training to the executive leadership teams within

their respective organizations.

We do not offer any unconscious bias training. I have brought it up in the past

year to my senior leaders, as it certainly does impact the hiring process. They

were very receptive and open to integrating necessary training, especially since

we are launching our Diversity Equity and Inclusion initiatives. (Participant 7)

No, I have never attended, but I am very interested. We do not have that training,

but it would be very interesting to offer our hiring managers, as we need training

because there could be a very good candidate in front of you, and you are not

focusing on the important information such as qualifications but instead personal

attributes to make a hiring decision. I have seen this happen many times when I have made 20 references for a position we are hiring, and I am told none of the candidates are viable, which I find impossible since many have the professional qualifications for the role. If you are a hiring manager and do not have unconscious bias training, you will not have the skills to focus on qualifications instead of irrelevant information preventing you from hiring the candidate for the role. (Participant 2)

One of the HR Hiring Managers discussed the legal implications of not having unconscious bias training within her organization and the continued cases her company litigates due to unlawful discriminatory claims for several years, including a current EEOC discriminatory case under investigation. She believes one of the main reasons her organization continues to encounter discriminatory allegations and lawsuits is the HR hiring manager's obvious unconscious biases when hiring. The HR hiring manager's lack understanding of how unconscious biases influence their hiring decisions because they have never attended training to learn techniques to avoid biases in the hiring selection process.

We currently do not have unconscious bias trainings. The company has been around for 20 years, and this is the first time they have an actual HR professional and have gotten into legal trouble with the EEOC and have been sued several times, including an active case that is currently being litigated pertaining to discrimination. It is something that is now on the table, but we will have something moving forward soon. I only took one for a previous company training as a General Manager call as it pertains to creating situation examples to get them

to understand how to train your brain and base it off experience as opposed to how people look and sound like the person they are interviewing. Most people are not aware they are engaging in unconscious bias until it is brought to their attention. All of the HR professionals thought the training was very beneficial and truly learned how to begin examining how they were perceiving others and applicants. (Participant 19)

People need to know and understand what unconscious bias is and realize how their perception of others can affect and impact their livelihoods. Leaders need to implement these trainings to avoid issues such as litigation. (Participant 4)

At least one out of three participants in the research study represented organizations in the initial stages of addressing potential biases in the hiring process. Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity (DEI) initiatives have brought to the surface discussions on equitable opportunities for increasing workplace diversity. Most importantly, organizations are legally obligated to ensure all employees have access to fair and legal employment practices. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives within organizations are slowly gaining momentum to address unconscious biases and foster a sense of community belonging for all employees.

We have recently implemented a DEI section for the organization to take a step forward in addressing these issues. We have implemented new processes in the hiring interviews – we have decided to remove personal information on names, addresses, and schools they attended. Because this causes someone to have favor over others. We block out that information in the review process to eliminate biases and give everyone a fair chance.

I have attended several recently in the last 2 years, especially since the climate has changed in addressing DEI initiatives. (Participant 1)

One of the participants, a Senior Level Human Resource Vice President for a hospital healthcare system, was eager to bring forth unconscious bias training in his new role as an initiative for his organization to consider implementing. The participant admitted that this research study interview sparked his interest in reviewing current employee training and, most importantly, taking a closer look at how the existing hiring process could benefit from implementing unconscious bias training for the organization moving forward.

> We do not offer any unconscious bias trainings currently. I have brought it up in the past year to my senior leaders, as it certainly does impact the hiring process. They were very receptive and open to integrating necessary trainings, especially since we are launching our Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. In my past role, our DEI did offer unconscious bias training annually. Actually, this interview has really sparked my interest to take a look at our internal trainings that we offer or how we navigate our hiring process with unconscious bias trainings— thank you. (Participant 7)

> The organization has started to slowly address bias in a formal way by having it on the meeting agendas this past year as a part of our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusions initiatives to determine what types of trainings to offer employees, managers, etc. Nothing has been implemented thus far. (Participant 3).

In conclusion, research participants who have experience taking unconscious bias training discussed how extremely beneficial the training is for Human Resource Hiring

Managers. All the HR hiring managers in this research study agreed that implementing unconscious bias training and continuous professional development is crucial for all organizations. These trainings inform strategies for implementing policies that address institutional bias towards marginalized groups that are systematically underrepresented. Moreover, the trainings have proven effective in increasing awareness of one's unconscious prejudices and stereotypes and teaching individuals how to manage their biases. The trainings have demonstrated an increased awareness of biases to change behaviors about the perceptions of others, which can influence hiring decisions.

This qualitative grounded theory research study was designed to investigate organizational hiring practices and the perceived impact of unconscious biases that may influence hiring decisions when accessing an applicant's social media profile. The research study explored and gained an in-depth understanding of the role of social media in the hiring process by interviewing 21 human resources (HR) hiring managers to identify what factors on social media profiles they consider when making hiring decisions, which were guided by the following research questions:

- What role do social media profiles play in business organizations' hiring decisions?

- What factors in social media profiles do hiring managers consider in hiring decisions?

The thematic data analysis was formulated using the following themes that emerged:

- Organizational Policy on Social Media

- Digital Information Influencing Hiring Decisions

- Common Biases Presented in Hiring Decisions

- Unconscious Bias Training and Development

Based on the researcher's data collection and thematic data analysis of the participants, the findings confirm that social media plays a key role in organizational hiring decisions when a Human Resource hiring manager reviews an applicant's social media profiles. The findings resulted in the formulation of the Digital Footprint Effect Theory. An applicant's overall digital footprint plays an integral part of the hiring process and is unavoidable, as one's online presence has the ability to influence hiring decisions, regardless of if an organization has a social media policy in place or not. Additionally, the construction of the Digital Footprint Effect Theory is also supported by Implicit Social Cognition Theory, to assist in explaining the cognitive process that occurs unconsciously in the minds of Human Resource hiring managers simultaneously activating attitudes and stereotypes once exposed to digital content on an applicant's social media profiles. Whether a candidate's digital footprint is perceived as positive or negative, it is a significant factor influencing hiring decision, depending on the information reviewed on the candidate's social media profiles. Whether an organization has a formal policy in place or not, most Human Resource hiring managers and their hiring committees in this qualitative research study confirmed they review applicants' social media profiles. The most prevalent social media platform used by most HR hiring managers was LinkedIn, which is used to verify employment history, gaps in employment timeline, and educational background. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are the second most viewed social media platform of applicants.

The HR hiring managers acknowledged reviewing applicants' social media profiles, which gives them access to information as indicators of personal conduct influencing hiring decisions. The most common biases emerging from the research study

affecting applicants from getting hired, which were all listed biases presented in Chapter 2 are the following:

- Name bias: the tendency to prefer names that are of English or British origin.

- Gender bias: the tendency to prefer one gender over another gender.

- Ageism: the tendency to have negative feelings about another person based on their age.

- Affinity bias: also known as similarity bias, is the tendency to connect with others who share similar interests, backgrounds, and experiences.

- The horns effect: the tendency people have to view another person negatively after learning something unpleasant or negative about them.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter will discuss how this qualitative research study developed the digital footprint effect theory to explain the role of social media profiles in organizational hiring practices and what factors may influence human resource hiring managers' decisions. A discussion of the literature review will compare the researchers' findings to determine if they are both accurately aligned. The chapter will also discuss the limitations encountered during the research study. Additionally, I will offer recommendations to human resource hiring managers for alternative hiring practices to prevent potential illegal discriminatory allegations from applicants and for the implementation of training and professional development for organizations. Additionally, I will suggest future research areas to investigate social media and employment practices further. Lastly, the researcher will discuss how this study contributed to conflict analysis and resolutions focusing on organizational conflicts.

Discussion of Findings

The study's findings answered both research questions which were designed to explore how organizations use social media in hiring decisions and what factors in social media may influence human resource hiring managers' decisions. The four themes that emerged from the meticulous grounded theory coding process of reviewing, constantly comparing, and analyzing the transcripts data are the following: organizational policy on social media, digital information influencing hiring decisions, most common biases presented in hiring decisions, and unconscious bias training. The four emerging themes from the study resulted in the formulation of the Digital Footprint Effect Theory, which has been developed to explain how a job applicant's online information has the ability to

influence a Human Resource Managers hiring decisions.

Mostly all organizations are prone to checking social media profiles whether or not they have a social media policy. The study's findings revealed that 1 out of 3 organizations do not have a formal policy on social media and still review applicants' social media profiles. The results also showed that organizations with a social media policy are also reviewing social media profiles. I explored the digital information on social media influencing HR hiring managers' perceptions of an applicant and the unconscious biases that occur unknowingly during that process. The findings revealed a wide range of digital content that could potentially influence hiring decisions, such as an applicant's age, gender, name, drinking, illegal activity, violent language and content, partying, drug usage, personal affiliations, images, and lifestyle choices. The research findings confirmed that an applicant's digital footprint has the ability to unconscious influence an HR Managers hiring decisions.

Additionally, applicants that appear to share similarities with an HR hiring manager due to their background, interests, or experiences may have a positive advantage over another applicant. I also explored the most common biases that tend to be prevalent when reviewing the social media profiles of an applicant, which aligned with the literature review in Chapter 2, which discussed the 12 most common biases in employment practices.

One of the most surprising revelations of the research study was that most organizations do not have a formal policy on how social media is used in employment practices. Companies do not realize how vulnerable they are to potentially receiving discrimination allegations from an applicant based on hiring practices. An applicant can

claim they were not hired based on any of the protected categories of the Title VII Civil Rights Act of 1964, which are visually exposed when reviewing an applicant's social media profiles. Despite knowing the legal pitfalls with the Equal Employment Opportunity of Commission (EEOC), HR hiring managers candidly discussed their personal biases once they reviewed an applicant's social media profile, which exposes all of the protected categories such as race, name, gender, and age. I was also surprised that the Human Resource hiring managers were openly candid about their perceived biases and how reviewing an applicant's social media profiles has influenced their hiring decision. Unconscious bias trainings could be a practical resource that HR hiring managers can use to develop strategic techniques towards minimizing biases in the recruitment and hiring process. All of the study participants agreed that they could benefit greatly from the trainings.

In the past year (2023), Diversity Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts have increasingly come under threat, and the Court's ruling against affirmative action in higher education only provides credence to leaders and organizations who are uninterested in more inclusive and equitable workplaces. Leaders who have quietly dismantled or scaled back their DEI initiatives cited reasons ranging from a lack of immediate return on investment to financial pressure due to the pandemic. As this new legal precedent reverberates throughout the business landscape, companies must grapple with its implications and strategize on maintaining workplace diversity and equity (Rae, 2023). Nearly 70% of HR professionals and over 70% of DEI leaders are white women. By leveraging their positions and influence, white women in these key roles can advocate for equitable hiring practices, implement inclusive policies, and foster an environment where

everyone's voices are heard and valued. It is only through collective efforts and support

for DEI that organizations can truly thrive and create spaces where everyone has equal

opportunities to succeed (Rae, 2023).

Lastly, this qualitative research was conducted in Florida, and mostly all of the

Human Resource participants of this study reside in the state. Many of the unconscious

bias training programs are frequently offered within the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

(DEI) initiatives which is under political attack from Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

According to the National Public Radio (NPR), Governor Ron DeSantis signed

legislation that largely bans Florida's public universities and colleges from spending

money on diversity, equity and inclusion programs. "If you look at the way this has

actually been implemented across the country, DEI is better viewed as standing for

discrimination, exclusion and indoctrination," DeSantis said during a news conference at

New College of Florida in Sarasota. "And that has no place in our public institutions."

Many institutions across the U.S. have DEI offices aimed at diversifying staff and to

promote inclusivity for faculty and students (Diaz, 2023). The offering of unconscious

bias training programs has the potential of being at risk in corporate sectors and

experiencing a domino effect, due to the new law banning Diversity, Equity, and

Inclusion programs in Florida's public universities and colleges which goes into effect on

July 1, 2023.

Comparison with the Literature

The findings of the research study and the literature review aligned with

comparable similarities regarding assessing applicants' social media profiles and the most

common unconscious biases that influence hiring decisions. The research study's findings

provided confirmation directly from the participants that organizations are habitually reviewing social media profiles, such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, during the hiring process. The literature review acknowledged that many companies face challenges in eliminating biases in the hiring process because many hiring managers unknowingly make decisions regarding clothes, hairstyles, headwear, height, weight, age, race, gender, and disability.

According to a 2018 CareerBuilder survey, 70% of employers check out applicants' profiles as part of their screening process, and 54% have rejected applicants because of what they found. Social media sites offer a free, easily accessed portrait of what a candidate is really like, yielding a clearer idea of whether that person will succeed on the job or so the theory goes (Wong, 2021). Research suggests that hiring officials who take this approach should use caution: Much of what they dig up is information they are ethically discouraged or legally prohibited from taking into account when evaluating candidates and little of it is predictive of performance (Wong, 2021). Recruiting applicants online has become an increasingly trendy source to fill job positions for Human Resource hiring managers, who now also screen applicants' social media profiles to gather personal information to determine whether or not to hire. This conflicted hiring practice gives applicants a considerable disadvantage because the hiring decision may be influenced by the individual worldviews of the Human Resource hiring manager, thus allowing biases to unconsciously develop and influence the decision to hire..

Most people have some type of hidden bias, according to the NeuroLeadership Institute. Such tendencies often surface in the workplace when people are drawn to others who share the same hobbies or pursuits, creating an affinity bias that can affect resume

screening and career advancement (Gurchiek, 2019). James Wright, a diversity and inclusion strategist, trainer, and speaker, witnessed a hidden bias when managers interviewed gay, lesbian, or bisexual applicants. Because it's human nature for interviewers to seek something in common with a job applicant, he said, "Sometimes the question comes up, 'Do you have a spouse and kids?' (Wilkie, 2019).

Studies suggest that unconscious bias affects our decision-making, including in the workplace for recruitment, hiring, promotions, and feedback. For instance, a National Bureau of Economic Research study found that, even when candidates' resumes were nearly identical, prospective employers returned calls from job applicants with stereotypically Caucasian names 50% more often than for applicants with stereotypically African American names. Similarly, taller people tend to earn more money on average than their shorter counterparts, and some studies suggest that individuals perceived as being more physically attractive also tend to have an edge over those perceived as unattractive in the workplace. All humans have an innate ability to possess unconscious bias tendencies, including those trained to be objective. Ultimately, these biases can affect hiring, promotion, and termination decision-making (Borchelt & Smit, 2019). Unconscious biases can exist within every level of an organization's structure. They can play a crucial role in whether or not a candidate is hired for the position.

According to a recent article released by "Built In," diversity and inclusion are critical elements in the recruitment and retention strategies for organizations, and there are 12 types of identified unconscious bias examples in the workplace that commonly affect candidates in the hiring process (Reiners, 2020). The research study's findings confirmed and supported several of the most common biases influencing hiring decisions.

Participants in the study discussed the following most common biases affecting human resource hiring managers: affinity bias, the horns effect, gender bias, ageism, and name bias. Lastly, the research study's findings revealed that only half of the participants had taken unconscious bias training, which is consistent with the lack of unconscious bias training offered to HR hiring managers, which would undoubtedly assist in minimizing unconscious biases. Unconscious bias is a social stereotype about a group of people formed outside of one's conscious awareness. Unconscious bias can be influenced by background, social environment, and experiences. It often results in feelings and attitudes, which can be positive or negative, of which one may not be cognizant, towards others based on their race, ethnicity, gender, or age (Borchelt & Smit, 2019). Unconscious biases in decision-making processes allow unfavorable underlying attitudes, judgments, stereotypes, and prejudices to be made about the individual, thus affecting how they are perceived.

Theoretical Context of Implicit Social Cognition Theory

Implicit social cognition theory provides a dimension explaining traces of past experiences that affect some performance, even though the influential earlier experience is not remembered in the usual sense; that is, it is unavailable to self-report or introspection. The theory explains the cognitive process outside one's conscious awareness or control. During this process, unconscious awareness occurs, and biases emerge, unknowingly constructing attitudes, stereotypes, and self-concepts of others. Moreover, the empirical phenomenon of implicit social cognition involves the introspectively inaccessible effect of current stimulus or prior experience variations on judgments and decisions. These effects often result in subjects making judgments

regarded as non-optimal if made aware of the source of influence (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995).

Applying implicit social cognition theory provided me with a context of understanding how biases begin to formulate unconsciously in the minds of human resource hiring managers. The theory informs how past lived experiences, although one might not remember them, can unconsciously shape one's worldviews and perceptions of others. The theory informed the cognitive process on how biases can permeate Human Resource Hiring Managers unconsciously constructing stereotypes and opinions, which tends to occur unconsciously when accessing an applicant's social media profiles. The theory aligned with the research findings in which Human Resource Hiring Managers confirmed how accessing one's social media profiles can inadvertently trigger unconscious biases affecting an applicant's perception and influencing their decision to hire. Overall, implicit cognition can intrude on deliberate judgments, producing unintended discrimination.

Limitations

One of the limitations I encountered was due to difficulties scheduling the virtual interviews in light of their busy schedules. The participants may not have taken as much time to fully develop their answers as needed, which might have impacted the quality of the data collected. Their privacy concerns may also have prevented them from answering the interview questions thoroughly. Moreover, I encountered limitations during the recruitment process because most human resource hiring managers who chose to participate in the study were women. Despite reaching out to an equal number of male prospects for the study, only two men chose to participate in this research study. The vast

majority of the participants in the study were women representing 19 out of 21. This may have impacted the findings of the data analysis considering the lived experience of the Human Resource Hiring Manager is primarily from the perspective of women as opposed to men.

Human Resource professional roles are primarily dominated by women across industries. According to HR Dive (2019) a leading industry publication operated by Industry Dive, Seventy-one percent of HR professionals are female, according to Namely's HR Careers Report. The HR platform for mid-sized companies said its 2018 Workplace Diversity Report revealed women represented 67% of the HR workforce. The company said it used its database of over 1,000 companies and 200,000 employees to glean its demographic insights for the HR profession (Burden, 2019).

Recommendations

I recommend the following strategic techniques to assist in minimizing human resource hiring managers' unconscious biases in the hiring process. The first strategy would be the complete removal of applicants' social media profiles, except for LinkedIn, a digital professional platform, to avoid developing stereotypes that has the ability to activate unconscious biases. I would also recommend companies prohibit the practice of social media screening as a part of the hiring process and focus on the most crucial information of an applicant such as professional experience, technical skills, and educational background.

An alternative strategy to assist towards reducing unconscious biases in hiring decisions is by conducting panel interviews. This type of hiring interview consists of several committee members from various departments within the organization facilitating

interviews in a group setting, with the same questions prepared for all job applicants. This process also prevents potential allies from being formed amongst committee members towards the selection process, which is designed to focus solely on the applicants' professional qualifications. This technique ensures a fair and equitable hiring process for all applicants.

Blind recruiting is another alternative strategic technique that can be applied to avoid unconscious biases in decisions making by omitting job applicants' demographic information such as name, address, headshot photo, and the removal of the dates attended school or previous employment. This action will assist Human Resource hiring managers to focus on the position's professional and educational requirements and not viewing an applicant through unconscious bias lenses.

Lastly, Human Resource hiring managers and committee members should take unconscious bias trainings as all of the participants of this study collectively agreed that the trainings would be extremely useful and beneficial in learning how to self-identify one's own personal unconscious biases. Most importantly the trainings will help individuals understand the social judgments and behaviors that guide attitudes and stereotypes unconsciously activating implicit social cognition.

Areas for Future Research

Suggestions for future research include investigating how human resource hiring managers address unconscious biases when reviewing social media profiles. The study would explore how human resource hiring managers apply strategies and techniques to minimize biases and measure their effectiveness in recruitment and hiring. An additional area of study also includes the implementation of the Implicit Association Test (IAT) for

Human Resource hiring managers onboarding. The test is designed to measure attitudes and beliefs that people may be unwilling or unable to report. Research would be measuring the test's effectiveness in identifying opportunities for professional development for HR hiring managers.

Contributions to the Field of Conflict Analysis

The study was designed to explore organizational hiring practices and the perceived impact of biases pertaining specifically to accessing a job applicant's social media profile to make hiring decisions. The research study examined and gained an in-depth understanding of factors influencing hiring managers' decisions. This qualitative grounded theory research study contributes to conflict analysis and resolution by informing organizations on the importance of having a formal policy on social media. The research study investigated the influential factors impacting hiring decisions and the most common biases that emerge while reviewing an applicant's social media profiles. Moreover, the research examined and analyzed social media in a corporate context as an organizational conflict due to the influential impact of unconscious biases embedded in hiring processes, allowing for potential discrimination accusations to arise from applicants with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). Unlawful discriminatory disputes and charges would directly impact the organization's bottom line and reputation. The research study informs organizations on strategies and techniques to adopt in the hiring process to avoid potential legal pitfalls of unlawful employment practices and discriminatory allegations from applicants. Lastly, the study contributes to research on organizational conflicts and multidisciplinary studies by providing suggested recommendations for implementing and continuous training on unconscious bias for

human resource hiring managers and all levels of employees within the organizations towards initiatives on professional development.

Conclusion

This qualitative grounded theory research study examined organizational hiring practices, the role of social media profiles, and what factors influence human resource hiring managers' decisions. This research study entailed interviewing 21 Human Resource hiring managers with 11 open-ended structured questions. The research study's findings resulted in the thematic data analysis and the emergence of four themes: Organizational Policy on Social Media, Digital Information Influencing Hiring Decisions, Common Biases Presented in Hiring Decisions, and Unconscious Bias Training and Development, applied towards the formulation a new theory named; The Digital Footprint Effect Theory developed to explain how the role of social media and one's online information has the ability to unconsciously influence and impact a Human Resource hiring managers' decisions. Furthermore, the findings of the study revealed that whether an organization has a social media policy or not, the majority of Human Resource hiring managers review social media profiles such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to make hiring decisions. The study also revealed the practice of reviewing social media profiles as a part of the hiring process is often not disclosed to the applicants. Study participants discussed the most common biases influencing their decisions: Name Bias which is the tendency to prefer names that are English and British origins. Gender Bias as a tendency to prefer one gender over another gender. Ageism, a tendency to have negative feelings about another person based on their age. Affinity Bias also known as similarity bias, which is the tendency to connect with others with similar

interests, backgrounds, and experiences. Lastly, the Horns Effect people's tendency to view another person negatively after learning something unpleasant or negative about them. All of the aforementioned biases were identified as the most commonly in the workplace and discussed thoroughly during the literature review in Chapter 2.

Lastly, this exploratory research study developed the Digital Footprint Effect Theory, which will contribute to research on organizational conflict and multidisciplinary studies in understanding the impact of reviewing social media within hiring practices. The findings can provide organizations and Human Resource hiring managers with recommendations on alternative techniques and strategies towards organizational hiring practices to avoid potential legal pitfalls such as discrimination lawsuits. The findings also provide an emphasis on the importance of corporations retaining and establishing the implementation of unconscious bias training programs for the self-awareness and professional development of Human Resource hiring managers.

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