

THE HASKAYNE REPORT



The Dark Side of LinkedIn: Professional Social Networking Platforms & Emotional Distress

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The Rise of Professional Social Networking Platforms

As of 2022, the use of professional social networking (PSN) has increased year after year (Dixon, 2022).

At the forefront of PSN is LinkedIn, now connecting over eight hundred million users in more than two hundred countries. LinkedIn is the primary social media tool used by recruiters to gather information about candidates, as its public nature grants recruiters access to more information with less time and effort than ever before (Elman & Zide, 2014).

The rise of PSN has transformed the recruitment process: what was once the responsibility of a recruiter to locate talent is now the responsibility of candidates to market themselves. In contrast to a traditional paper resume, the LinkedIn profile is dynamic: it should be consistently

updated, detailed, and personal, to include photographs, hobbies and interests, and increasingly, personal information. Additionally, LinkedIn profiles make visible the number of connections one has in their network, which are of particular importance in certain careers such as sales, marketing, and public relations (Elman & Zide, 2014). Competitive job markets highlight the importance of candidate differentiation through personal branding. LinkedIn provides users an outlet to address this market demand; the various profile tools allow users to conform to the present society emphasis on passionate, emotionally driven marketing and invoking connections that would have otherwise been made naturally (Vitelar, 2019).

According to the average recruiter, a profile on LinkedIn is more favorable than a traditional resume (Elman & Zide, 2014). As a result, post-secondary students and recent graduates are the fastest growing demographic of users

(Carmack & Heiss, 2018). Given this, it is unfortunate that increased use of LinkedIn has been directly associated with higher instances of emotional distress, such as depression and anxiety (Jones et al., 2016).

PSN and Emotional Distress

Despite LinkedIn's 2003 inception making it the first online networking platform, compared to other online networking platforms, LinkedIn is under-researched (Head & Mashayekhi, 2022), especially as it relates to mental health outcomes (Jones et al., 2016). Prior research disregarding focus on the examination of PSN can be explained by the attitudes surrounding PSN use (Jones et al., 2016): time spent on PSN platforms may be seen as productive for that it may increase career opportunities and business connections (Kim & Malek, 2017).

The first literary exploration of the relationship between PSN and emotional distress was by the *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking Journal* in 2016. It was hypothesized that, with years of literature proving the negative mental health outcomes of increased social networking (SN) platform use, it is reasonable to infer that increased use of PSN will yield similar negative mental health outcomes. The main explanation for this hypothesis centers on social comparison: frequent users may experience increased emotional distress, due to "feeling guilty for time wasted," and feeling unable to measure up to the accomplishments of others. Users are also susceptible to declines in mood when searching for employment, making connections with other users, and communicating with employers (Jones et al., 2016).

In a cross-sectional and nationally representative study of young adults in U.S., the results demonstrate a positive, linear association between time spent on LinkedIn and

instances of emotional distress (Jones et al., 2016). One explanation of these findings is that those spending more time on LinkedIn are especially susceptible to distorted beliefs that all others lead more successful and fulfilling lives. This interpretation is consistent with previous findings of other SN platforms, where envy and social comparison have been determined as key mediators in the relationship between SN use and emotional distress. Facebook, more specifically, affects people's perceptions of others - the longer an individual spends on Facebook, the stronger their belief is that others are happier than themselves, and the less they agree that life is fair (Chou & Edge, 2012).

Increased use of both SN and PSN platforms have been correlated with emotional distress, but attitudes surrounding SN and PSN vary significantly. Students perceive no benefits and several drawbacks with Facebook use but perceive several benefits and no drawbacks with LinkedIn use (Kim & Malek, 2017).

Are These Varying Attitudes Justified?

Ten years ago, the main distinction between LinkedIn and Facebook was the intimacy of knowledge shared - Facebook was more self-expressive and personal, whereas only professionally relevant information was shared on LinkedIn. However, in 2023, the newsfeeds of many are resembling that of Facebook. Some hypothesize that the COVID-19 pandemic has softened the boundaries between personal lives and work, causing users to share increasingly intimate information over time (Kelley, 2022).

Additionally, students on LinkedIn have been found to avoid the active networking features of the platform. Students primarily engage in passive search behaviours on LinkedIn as they are most concerned with creating and

seeing who viewed their profiles (Hood et al., 2014). Use behaviours of PSN platforms are increasingly resembling that of SN platforms, demonstrating how the gap differentiating the two spheres is lessening.

Navigating LinkedIn Healthily

Users of LinkedIn are not inherently susceptible to emotional distress. As with SN platforms, its use can be managed to practice healthy behaviors. Healthy use of both PSN and SN platforms revolves around making egotistical use tendencies less tempting and alleviating a distortion of beliefs by reducing information imbalances.

First, redefine the purpose of LinkedIn and use it as such. LinkedIn's mission is to connect the world's professionals (LinkedIn, 2023), but young people have been found to be more interested in updating minor profile details and investigating who has viewed their profile. LinkedIn yields optimal career outcomes when used as it is intended: initiating connections with and subsequently making efforts to build deeper relationships with these connections (Hood et al., 2014).

Second, make a rule of only connecting with others on LinkedIn that you have met, or intend to meet in person. In-person interactions alleviate the information imbalances that exist online, where profiles function as a highlight reel of one's professional life. The more information one learns about their online connections, the less likely they are to agree that others live happier, more fulfilling lives (Chou & Edge, 2012). Careers are characterized just as much by setbacks as they are with accomplishments, but that this is the reality of most professionals is difficult to grasp through a screen.

Although technological advancements are constantly

reinventing decade-old business practices, it does not need to reinvent what it means to connect.

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