

Worksheet for Designing a Research Study

Please answer the five questions below about a research study that you are conducting, or that you are thinking of undertaking. We will discuss your answers to these questions during the research proposal class.

1. What is your research problem and question? Address journalist's questions of who? what? where? when? why? & how? the problem exists up close & from afar

Recently, a good friend of mine has re-entered the job market. She has worked for her most recent company for almost seven years before it went bankrupt and she lost her position. Having been out of the job market for a while, she called and asked me for advice on how to approach her job search. Of my many suggestions, one included developing an active presence on LinkedIn. I explained that some of my HR friends have discussed their use of LinkedIn in seeking out job candidates. A week later, she emailed me and asked me to look over her newly-developed LinkedIn profile. It looked great, with the exception that there was no photo included. I pointed out that she should add a professional-looking headshot to complete her profile. She explained that she was uncomfortable doing this because she feared being discriminated against because of her appearance. She believed that being overweight with glasses, flawed skin, and crooked teeth would create a disadvantage for her in obtaining an interview. She felt that if someone gave her a chance for an interview, her warm personality, intelligence, and experience would "blow them away," but getting someone to "give her a chance" was the tough part. I explained recent statistics from LinkedIn describing that profiles with a photo get an average of seven times the views of other profiles, and I think she would be hurting her chances for an interview according to what I have read from professionals in the field. This situation became baffling for both of us: which is the best way for her to proceed? Would including a picture actually hurt her chances for an interview because of her appearance? Would failing to include a photo play to her disadvantage (since many professionals have stated that not including a picture sends a negative signal to many recruiters)? Would it be best to simply avoid LinkedIn in general? (Which some professionals have stated sends a signal of "technological ineptitude" to recruiters.)

Forbes Magazine has recently reported that there are currently over 300 million users worldwide on LinkedIn. It is clear that this social media platform is playing an increasingly large role in recruiting and selection of employees. With such an enormous user base, it is certain that my friend is not alone in her concerns about being discriminated against due to appearance. Although discrimination laws in the U.S. have made it illegal to both make hiring decisions based on protected characteristics or for employers to request photos of applicants (with a few exceptions), LinkedIn users who include a photo on their profile have essentially opened themselves up for discrimination based on appearance, age, sex, race, and other characteristics. To further complicate the issue, while basing decisions on age, sex, race, disability, etc. is illegal, there are technically no laws preventing discrimination based on appearance. Since LinkedIn users have the option of viewing a profile anonymously, the candidate could possibly never know this discrimination occurred. This situation places millions and millions of people in

a bind—should they give in to the pressure of having a LinkedIn account with a photo or is it “safer” to avoid the platform and risk being viewed as “technologically incompetent”?

To better answer these questions, it would be useful to study recruiters’ and hiring managers’ perceptions of and reactions toward various candidates and whether they have a LinkedIn profile, whether the profile includes a photo, and whether the candidate is viewed as “attractive” (either physically or in terms of subconscious assumptions of performance based on physical characteristics).

2. What is your proposed answer to the research question?

*** Is your answer any better than the status quo or a competing plausible alternative answer?**

A great deal of research has shown that people are often discriminated against due to their appearance. Thus, I believe that the image portrayed to recruiters by LinkedIn photos will be strongly influential in decisions regarding who to invite for an interview. Keeping all other characteristics relatively equal, I think that a photo revealing a candidate as “unattractive” to the recruiter will have a negative impact on a recruiter’s likelihood to interview the applicant in certain circumstances. Particularly, this is likely to be contingent upon the job, the industry, and the demographics and appearance of the recruiter. For example, in a customer-facing position, an “unattractive” applicant with a LinkedIn photo may fare less well in gaining an interview. On the contrary, a young, attractive female manager may be *more* likely to hire a less attractive female applicant, since they will be viewed as less of a “threat.” It is difficult to predict the impact of an applicant having no photo or having no LinkedIn account at all, but this is also likely to be detrimental to candidates.

3. How will you empirically study your proposed answer?

*** Outline a research design for gathering data to examine your proposal.**

I will use an experimental design in which real-world recruiters will be asked to make hiring judgments for hypothetical candidates applying for hypothetical jobs. I would create several job descriptions for jobs in varying industries. For each job, one “fake” resume and three “fake” LinkedIn profiles would be created. The profiles would feature either a photo of an attractive female, a photo of an unattractive female, or no photo at all. Each recruiter will be provided information for one candidate applying to each position and will be asked to rate how likely they would be to request an interview with the person for that particular job. The decision will be made based on the candidate’s resume and LinkedIn profile (although some candidates will not have a LinkedIn profile).

This study could also be expanded to examine effects of LinkedIn photos based on age, gender, race, disability, or other protected characteristics.

4. How will you communicate and use study findings to address your research question & problem?

I think this information would be very useful to LinkedIn users seeking employment who possess physical traits prone to invite discrimination. A better understanding of the impact of their participation or non-participation in professionally-oriented social media could guide this group toward making

decisions leading to better employment prospects. Additionally, the findings could be useful to organizations and HR recruiters. Namely, it could potentially identify underlying biases on behalf of recruiters that result in discriminatory hiring practices and failure to interview optimal candidates. As a result, organizations may be driven to adopt policies either excluding the use of professionally-oriented social media in hiring or outsourcing the “fact-checking” task to an unbiased third party to reduce potential discrimination.

Although it would be great to publish this study in an academic journal or present it at an academic conference, this information would be best utilized by dispersing it through more practitioner-oriented mediums such as SHRM publications and conferences (to reach recruiters and hiring managers) and/or mainstream media outlets (to reach LinkedIn users).

5. Background questions:

For whom and with whom are you conducting the study?

The study will primarily be conducted for the benefit of applicants in the job market who are vulnerable to appearance-based discrimination and as a form of information for HR recruiters. I will be conducting the study with my advisor, Betty Zhou.

Who’s point of view will you take in conducting the study?

I will take the point of view of the HR recruiter in this study.

Who will you engage to answer these questions? (Don’t go it alone!)

I will engage the advice of Andy Van de Ven, Betty Zhou, other Carlson faculty, and several friends who work in the HR field.