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The hunt for red flags: cybervetting as morally performative practice

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Abstract

Cybervetting refers to screening job candidates by evaluating information collected from internet searches and social media profiles. Relatively little is known about how organizational actors use this practice in hiring decisions. Interviews with 61 human resource (HR) professionals reveal that they cybervet in order to minimize hiring risks and maximize organizational fit. Their judgments are deeply rooted in assessments of job candidates' moral character and how it might affect workplace interactions. Because it involves the construction of moral criteria that shape labor market actions and outcomes, we describe cybervetting as a morally performative practice. HR professionals express enthusiasm for cybervetting, but also concerns about privacy, bias and fairness. Importantly, cybervetting practices and policies vary substantially across different types of organizations. These findings deepen our understanding of how organizational actors define and regulate moral behavior and how their actions are moderated by market institutions.

Key words: labor markets, morality, valuation, employers, technology

JEL classification: Labor economics

1. Introduction

The internet has revolutionized job searching and hiring. Job seekers' access to information about employment opportunities has expanded dramatically through the growth in online job posting boards and aggregators like Monster and Indeed. Social media websites also offer referral networks and job finding support (Caers and Castelyns, 2011; Burke and Kraut, 2013). At the same time, the growth of employment websites and especially social media have generated a vast data source for organizations to use in recruiting and screening

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job candidates (Caers and Castelyns, 2011; Davison *et al.*, 2016; Landers and Schmidt, 2016). These developments have had multiple, divergent social and economic consequences, leading Sharone (2017) to describe internet proliferation as a 'double-edged sword' for job seekers. Benefits of online job markets include lower search costs, reduced information asymmetries and increased worker empowerment (Autor, 2001; Freeman, 2002; Fountain, 2005; Autor, 2009; Clark and Roberts, 2010). The costs, however, include the potential for expanded surveillance and discriminatory profiling of job candidates by employers (Ruggs *et al.*, 2016; Sharone, 2017), as well as increased competition for certain types of jobs (McDonald *et al.*, 2019).

The use of the internet to obtain information is an increasingly common part of hiring processes. This often takes the form of 'cybervetting', which Berger and Zickar (2016) describe as 'performing supplemental background checks in prescreening and selection by 'Googling' job applicants and reviewing their profiles on Social Network Sites like Facebook' (p. 43). Survey results from the Society for Human Resource Management (2016) show that 43% of organizations in the US engage in some form of cybervetting, though other surveys suggest that the figure may be as high as 70% (CareerBuilder, 2018). According to SHRM (2016), 36% of organizations claim to have disqualified an applicant because of the information they found online. There are few laws to restrict cybervetting (Schmidt and O'Connor, 2016) and nearly 60% of organizations have no relevant formal or informal policies (Society for Human Resource Management, 2016).

Despite the growing prominence of cybervetting during recruitment and hiring, systematic study of this practice is rare. Previous research has explored how job seekers manage their digital footprints (Gershon, 2017; Sharone, 2017), but employers' perceptions and practices remain under-studied. Understanding the phenomenological foundations of cybervetting is especially important given literature linking it to discrimination (Acquisti and Fong, 2015) and to infringements on privacy (Clark and Roberts, 2010). To address these issues, we conducted in-depth interviews with 61 human resource (HR) professionals in two metropolitan areas in the southeastern USA. HR professionals routinely engage in cybervetting as part of their efforts to identify ('source') job candidates and to screen applicants for open positions. Our data allow us to examine several questions. How do HR professionals obtain job candidates' online information and what types of content are they looking for? How do they assign meaning to that content and use it to judge candidates? Is online content simply used as additional information, or has it spawned new criteria of worth? Our findings reveal that HR professionals mine online profiles in order to minimize risks associated with hiring and maximize fit to organizational culture. Using judgments deeply rooted in moral frameworks about candidate deservingness, they parse digital signals for insights into who a job candidate is 'as a person', how their online behavior might translate into workplace interactions and what their online self-presentation says about their character.

At the same time, our interviewees enunciated several concerns associated with evaluating candidates based on their digital footprints. We describe these dilemmas, but also show how organizational actors navigate them, for instance, by taking action to limit potential biases or by using rhetoric to reduce their own responsibility for the negative consequences of cybervetting. Finally, we examine how these practices, dilemmas and justifications vary across organizational contexts. Our results suggest that enthusiasm/skepticism for cybervetting is associated with organizational capacity, organizational goals and field-level institutions. As such, this study enhances theory about how organizational actors contribute to the moral regulation of the economy (Fourcade and Healy, 2007) and how institutional context shapes these market dynamics (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

2. Digital self-presentation and moral adjudication

We view online content as digital traces of self-presentation. For example, the pictures and comments that people post on social media sites like Facebook represent performances of self that are designed (implicitly or explicitly) to influence how they are viewed by others. In this way, digital performances are 'idealized' presentations of self, where people 'incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does [their] behavior as a whole' (Goffman, 1959, p. 35). Because online platforms have distinct logics and audiences, individuals may engage in multiple presentations of self (Papacharissi, 2009). Further, because some performances are unintentional, online information may reflect both 'governable' aspects of self-presentation (i.e. what individuals deliberately express) and 'ungovernable' aspects (i.e. expressions unintentionally 'given off'; see Goffman 1959, pp. 6–7).

The resulting digital signals are mined by employers who use cybervetting to evaluate potential job candidates (McDonald and Thompson, 2016). First, many employers use cybervetting as a form of risk management, a way of 'reducing uncertainty' about job candidates. For instance, they look for evidence of problematic behaviors (Carr, 2016) and report eliminating job candidates based on online content revealing provocative behavior, substance abuse and expletive language (Zide *et al.*, 2014; Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015; Ruggs *et al.*, 2016). Second, employers use online content to infer the extent to which candidates fit well with organizational goals and 'culture' (McDonald and Thompson, 2016). They look for evidence of 'professionalism' online in the form of broad interests, creativity, good communication skills and high status network connections (Zide *et al.*, 2014; Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015; Ruggs *et al.*, 2016). Content deemed 'unprofessional' negatively affects applicant ratings, as well as hiring and salary recommendations (Harrison and Budworth, 2015; Becton *et al.*, 2019).

Cybervetting practitioners—usually HR personnel or other hiring agents—often take its purported organizational benefits at face value and interpret online content as accurately reflecting mental ability and personality (Caers and Castelyns, 2011; Stoughton *et al.*, 2013; Berger and Zickar, 2016). In actuality, correlations between online content and personality scoring are modest (Kluemper *et al.*, 2012; Stoughton *et al.*, 2013; Davison *et al.*, 2016) and personality assessments of online content offer little predictive value for subsequent job performance and turnover (Van Iddekinge *et al.*, 2016). Likewise, practitioner enthusiasm for the benefits of assessing candidate fit is undercut by the fact that pre-hire person-organization fit scoring is only weakly associated with employee outcomes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Barrick and Parks-Leduc, 2019). Furthermore, calls for job seekers to develop better signals of 'digital career capital' (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015) ignore the discriminatory potential of cybervetting. Evaluations of online content are subject to biases that seriously disadvantage underrepresented groups (Ruggs *et al.*, 2016) and tend to map onto the ascriptive characteristics of candidates such as race, gender, age, family status and religion (Bohnert and Ross, 2010; Acquisti and Fong, 2015; Van Iddekinge *et al.*, 2016). Gaps between practitioners' enthusiastic embrace of cybervetting and its problematic consequences suggest the need for a better understanding of how cybervettors perceive online performances and translate those perceptions into judgments about job candidates.

This process is thoroughly shaped by cultural institutions. Culture operates not only as a toolkit for individual behavior (Swidler, 1986), but also as a categorical boundary marker between groups (Lamont, 2002). Cultural signals—in the form of 'inter-subjectively shared meaning structures (e.g. scripts, narratives, repertoires and symbolic boundaries)' (Lamont *et al.*, 2014, p. 580)—provide an opportunity for distinguishing between people who are and are not 'like us'. Previous research has revealed the importance of cultural matching in job candidate evaluation. For example, Sharone's (2013) research shows how hiring in the US operates largely as a 'chemistry game' in which employers seek to hire workers whom they can connect with on a personal level. Rivera's (2016) study of hiring among elite professional service firms highlights the importance of cultural matching for candidate selection. Her findings demonstrated how hiring authorities preferred candidates who were similar in interests, experiences and forms of self-presentation. Likewise, Gershon's (2017) research reveals how job finding in contemporary job markets requires workers to develop a 'personal brand' online that reflects positive cultural assets that are likely to connect with recruiters and hiring agents.

Further, narratives of cultural distinction are imbued with moral content (Lamont, 1992) or 'understandings of good and bad, right and wrong, worthy and unworthy that vary between persons and between social groups' (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2013, p. 55). Moral judgments can be applied to behaviors, goals and attitudes (Smith, 2003). For example, terms like 'professionalism' encapsulate broad notions of ideal worker norms. Because of its moral basis, the process of adjudicating between in-group and out-group status has long been recognized as crucial to the distribution of societal resources and the justification of unequal distributions (Weber, 1922; Tilly, 1999). We argue that organizational actors interpret digital content as a reflection of individual dispositions and choices, while coding those dispositions and choices through a lens of moral deservingness (cf., Fourcade and Healy, 2017). Individuals who provide ideal displays of moral character and behavior are likely to be considered as more deserving for open positions.

A recent study offers a useful example of this process. When employers review credit history reports for job candidates, they engage in 'moral storytelling', whereby the information provided in the credit report (e.g. default on a student loan) allows them to construct narratives about the moral character of the candidate (Kiviat, 2019). Likewise, hiring agents might review social media images or posts in search of content that facilitates moral adjudication. However, cybervetting differs from credit report assessments in a number of ways. First, social media content offers (in most cases) data posted directly by individuals rather than content that is filtered and coded by financial institutions. Moreover, data obtained through social media are presumed to reflect intentional acts of self-presentation (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015). This adds a further evaluative dimension: cybervettors not only assess where people stand in relation to moral boundaries, but also how they conform to or flout those boundaries in their presentation of self. These features of social media result in greater variance in the forms of information that may be evaluated and how that information may be interpreted.

As Sharone (2017) and Gershon (2017) have shown, awareness of cybervetting encourages job-seekers to limit controversial expression, producing homogenized 'marketable' selves. It 'disciplines' the workforce in Foucault's (1977) sense: its moral criteria have prescriptive and even coercive effects. However, cybervetting is not merely regulative, but also productive of new ways of judging moral worth. Cybervetting is therefore performative in that it 'create[es] the phenomenon it describes' (MacKenzie and Millo, 2003, p. 108).

Financial theories and devices have been described as performative because of their ability to frame certain objects and actors, disentangling them from others that will not be taken into account, and in so doing make them calculable (Callon, 1998). Actors then use these devices as guides and modify their market actions accordingly, ultimately bringing the empirical reality of the market into line with devices originally intended to observe and predict them (MacKenzie and Millo, 2003). This process does not merely discipline actors' behavior; it creates new regularities and rules. Similarly, the practices and devices of cybervetting frame and disentangle particular traces of job candidate behavior—posts, pictures and profiles—in a way that suggests new forms of moral judgment for consideration in hiring decisions.[1] In particular, they are used to judge job seekers' adeptness in deliberately cultivating an online personal image, which has become a moral virtue distinct from whatever job qualifications that image might convey. Thus, cybervetting practices 'contribute powerfully to shaping, simply by measuring it, the reality that they measure' (Callon, 1998, p. 23). Because the reality shaped and measured is candidates' moral character, cybervetting is an instance of *moral performativity*. Cybervettors do not simply apply existing standards, but construct and reinforce new moral criteria.

The resulting shift in the moral dynamics of the labor market has produced ambiguities for organizational actors. As Jackall (1988) has shown, people's understandings and decisions about how to do their work are often shaped by the need to navigate moral dilemmas. Dilemmas are heightened in instances where moral standards are in flux and few formal rules guide behavior. This is certainly the case with cybervetting, a highly contested practice among practitioners (Segal and LeMay, 2014) and academics alike (Davison *et al.*, 2016; Wilcox et al., forthcoming). Thus, individuals who engage in cybervetting are not merely subjects who deliver moral judgments, but also objects of judgment—by others and by themselves, reflexively—about the acceptability of such practices.

3. Organizational variation in cybervetting

Cybervetting establishes various definitions of moral behavior, which leads to multiple moral economies (Fourcade and Healy, 2017). Each of these economies reflects a set of practices, judgments and rhetorics which coalesce among organizational actors situated in similar institutional fields. Several institutional factors moderate how these moral economies and their embedded moral storytelling are enacted. Below we propose three examples of how organizational forms and contexts may shape cybervetting practices.

First, organizational capacity affects a firm's ability to effectively manage activities (Meyer *et al.*, 1987). Workers in organizations of varying size and degree of bureaucratization are likely to have unique cybervetting practices. Some may lack the personnel to cybervet, whereas others might have specialized positions capable of devoting significant effort to the task. Highly bureaucratized organizations are likely to have more restrictions on whether and how cybervetting should take place. Second, organizations tend to operate differently based on their mission or motivation (Chua, 2011; Cobb, 2016). Members of for-profit companies that emphasize efficiency and revenue generation are likely to approach cybervetting criteria differently than public, non-profit and higher educational organizations, especially those that are more committed to equity, universalism and transparency. Third, institutional fields impact how people engage in strategic action (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). Tendencies toward isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) imply that organizations operating in similar institutional fields should engage in similar cybervetting practices. Furthermore, legal institutions help shape employment and personnel issues (Edelman, 1992; Hirsh, 2009). Consequently, organizations that are subject to legal sanctioning (e.g. public sector, large private firms and government contracting firms) are likely to approach cybervetting practices in unique ways.

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[1] One major difference between cybervetting devices and those of finance markets is the types of information and rationalization they produce. Both Preda's (2006) stock ticker and the Black–Scholes–Merton model elucidated by MacKenzie and Millo (2003) are calculative agents which predict and communicate quantities, contributing to rationalization based on price, quantity, volatility, and time. That is not the case with social media and search engines, which procure, organize, and transmit primarily *qualitative* textual and visual information. This information is interpreted through the lens of cultural distinctions and boundaries in order to distinguish between job candidates who are and are not worthy of organizational membership and rewards. Their role is not calculative but judgmental.

Much remains unknown about how organizational actors engage in cybervetting or about the meanings they attach to these practices. Our study extends previous research by examining both the moral underpinnings of cybervetting evaluations and how these judgments are morally performative—generating new moral criteria that shape definitions of acceptable behavior in the labor market and workplace. We also address the moral dilemmas associated with cybervetting as a contested work practice, heightened by a lack of clear principles or guidelines. Finally, we examine variation in cybervetting across organizations, revealing how these moral evaluations are contingent on organizational capacity, constraints and incentives.

4. Data and methods

Our analysis is based on data from 61 semi-structured interviews with HR professionals conducted between April 2014 and July 2016 in two southern US metropolitan areas: Raleigh, North Carolina[2] and Atlanta, Georgia. The study was designed as a multi-site qualitative case study (Gray and Silbey, 2014). The first two authors collaborated on research design, but conducted the two sets of interviews separately. Interviewees were recruited through attendance at HR meetings, events and functions, supplemented with respondent-suggested referrals. Interviewees were eligible to participate if they were ever involved in employee recruitment and screening practices. The interviews centered on these practices and averaged just over 1 hour. They were audio recorded (in all but one instance) and transcribed. These data were supplemented by observational notes from over two dozen HR events attended by the researchers.

Data collection and analysis proceeded reflexively using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). Initial interviews led to a more focused set of inquiries. Our analysis began with the first two authors open coding to assign categories to segments of the data separately for each site. As data collection proceeded, we shared open codes, discussed emergent themes and engaged in several rounds of focused coding across the complete dataset. Analytic memos allowed us to elaborate on the themes, which we explored in greater detail through additional data collection. Via an abductive approach (Timmermans and Tavory,

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[2] This includes outlying areas in the Research Triangle in NC (Durham and Chapel Hill).

Table 1 Interviewee characteristics

Sample Characteristics	*N*	%
City		
Atlanta	29	48
Raleigh (research triangle area)	32	52
Sex		
Female	44	72
Male	17	28
Race		
White	41	66
Black	15	25
Other	5	8
Approximate age		
20s	7	11
30s	21	34
40s	20	33
50s	9	15
60s	4	7
HR role		
Generalist	32	52
Consultant	2	3
Recruiter	27	44
Organization type/size		
Non-profit, Govt., Higher Ed	18	30
For profit, large	13	21
For profit, small-medium	17	28
Third-party recruiting/staffing	13	21
Total	61	100

2012), we compared our empirical findings with various theoretical insights which allowed us to adapt and refine our conclusions as new data were collected. We ceased data collection upon theoretical saturation (Small, 2009). Our comparison of data between the two sites allowed us to explore potential differences in meanings and practices, but ultimately we found little to distinguish one set of interviews from the other.

Our data reflect the subjective experiences of our interviewees and are not broadly generalizable. However, we employed theoretical sampling strategies to reveal the diversity of categories and experiences among HR professionals (Small, 2009). Details of the final sample are included in Table 1. Seventy-two percent of our respondents identify as female, which reflects the feminization of the HR management industry (Scarborough, 2017). Interviewees range in age from their 20s to their 60s, with two-thirds being in their 30s and 40s. They are employed in a variety of settings: non-profit organizations, large private corporations, small/medium private corporations, private staffing agencies and colleges/universities.[3] The sample also represents a broad range of industries such as real estate, law, finance, health care, engineering, manufacturing and private services. Respondents served as recruiters for part-time and full-time jobs; temporary, permanent and 'temp-to-perm' jobs; low-, middle- and high-wage jobs. The results discuss prominent themes that emerged from the interviews. All names are pseudonyms.

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[3] Our interviews include respondents from both public and private universities (but not for-profit universities). The interview responses were comparable in terms of their cybervetting behaviors and the dilemmas expressed, leading us to keep them in the same analytic category when making comparisons across different types of organizations.

5. Finding

'I Want to Know the Person'

About 70% of the HR professionals were engaged in some form of online screening. They looked at a variety of online sources, including resumes on job boards, social media profiles on sites like Instagram and Facebook, Twitter feeds and even Craigslist posts. The majority of respondents reported reviewing information about actual or potential job applicants via LinkedIn, followed by Facebook profiles and information that could be gleaned through a Google search. LinkedIn was favored as a way to easily find and screen candidates. Nearly a quarter were highly enthusiastic and claimed to frequently use cybervetting to source and screen job candidates. They often explained that they engaged in this practice because it yields valuable information beyond what can be obtained through traditional procedures. Heather, who frequently hired managers for a fast food chain, offered the following explanation.

> Heather: A resume . . .is the best professional version of you . . . Facebook is the reality—or Instagram, or whatever—that is the reality of you. My reality is that I am going to be working with you for hopefully the next five or ten years, so I want to know the person, not just the best professional version, but the person.

Heather explains that resumes reveal professional selves and social media reveals personal selves. Her comment suggests that traditional application materials are insufficient for making effective hiring decisions. While social media content provides authentic insights into personal selves, resumes are inauthentic or even misleading. Sonny, a recruitment supervisor for a staffing agency, concurred: 'You get a piece of paper [a resume], it doesn't tell nothing about the person. We wanna know the person'. The premium placed on 'knowing the person' was echoed across interviews and is consistent with findings from other research (Zide *et al.*, 2014; Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015). Our interviews confirm that developing ostensibly authentic accounts of job candidates is perceived as useful for (a) managing potential risks and (b) maximizing 'cultural' fit.

Assessing risk: red flags versus professionalism

Risk management is pursued through the search for two types of signals: 'red flags', which indicate a potentially risky employee, and 'professionalism', an indicator of positive qualities and low risk. Red flags include signs of immaturity, lewdness, criminality or dishonesty; they generate uncertainty about a candidate's character or judgment. Candid photos, usually found via Google searches or on Facebook profiles, are the most common source of red flags. HR recruiters referred to 'red cup' photos as online pictures of job candidates at parties holding red, Solo-brand cups which are widely associated with drinking alcohol and heavy partying. Another 'red flag' was online blog and status posts where candidates 'badmouthed' their employers. HR professionals interpreted this information as evidence that candidates are 'troublemakers' whose employment might lead to problematic client interactions or even litigation.

The hunt for red flags is, fundamentally, an exercise in moral character evaluation. HR professionals discriminate between digital signals that are 'right' or 'wrong', 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate'. Kimberly, unemployed at the time of her interview, discussed her experience using social media to screen job candidates at a previous job in the high-tech industry. 'If it's someone who is posting angry rants that are misspelled, then chances are they're someone who might be passive aggressive'. Her comment shows how negative character traits can be inferred from inappropriate online content. Likewise, Betty, a recruiter at a staffing agency, reported that she looks for inconsistent information across older resumes she finds online: 'if they differ at all [from the submitted resume], don't even call them'. Reflecting a broader concern among HR professionals that job applicants commonly misrepresent themselves on their resumes and job applications (Roulin and Levashina, 2016), Betty interprets inaccuracies in employment start/end dates as a signal of a candidate's questionable moral character. These assessments are highly subjective and emotionally charged, as Alicia, an accounting firm recruiter, recounted:

> Alicia: Honestly, the thing that scares me away more than anything is just somebody who looks mean. If you have a mean photo, because I'm kind of a softie, I don't like that. It doesn't make me feel good. I won't not send [the job candidate] on to the hiring manager because of that, but it will linger with me.

Alicia's lingering negative emotional response ('doesn't make me feel good') to a job candidate who 'looks mean' in an online photograph demonstrates how emotions are central to moral assessments (Hitlin, 2011).

In order to assess the risk of a red flag, HR professionals translate their inferences about personal character to workplace contexts. Take for example the story recounted by Donna, a recruiting consultant:

> Donna: This was a young man, great resume, articulate, bright—several people wanted him. And, on his Facebook page, he had pictures of a girl laying down and he was licking beer off her stomach . . .He goes to a business dinner and has a few too many, what's he going to do?

Donna draws a contrast between this job candidate's professional self ('great resume, articulate, bright') and his personal self, as revealed through a picture posted on Facebook. While this candidate has the requisite skills and professional profile to be hired, the picture reveals a person who is lewd and lacks self-control. She presents a brief hypothetical scenario that imagines the job candidate as an employee and speculates how he would respond to having 'a few too many [alcoholic drinks]'. The implication is that he would likely act as he had in the Facebook picture. Donna later asked, 'if this is what he or she is doing on weekends, again, what are they going to do in front my client?' Donna, therefore, justifies her moral evaluation as crucial for determining professional behavior. The candidate was denied a job not simply because of his flawed moral character, but because he would bring that character to the workplace. This insight is consistent with research showing that hypothetical scenarios are used to extend moral assessments of character to other contexts (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2013; Kiviat, 2019).

While red flags signal morally objectionable material and hence risky candidates, indications of professionalism represent the obverse. Accordingly, interviewees such as Betty define a professional digital footprint by an absence of red flags.

> Betty: I don't post anything on my Facebook, hardly, unless it's a cute picture, like my dog or something, but I don't blow it up with pictures of going to the beach and drinking—even if it's innocent, people do it. I just don't put it on there.

Well-versed in the types of red flags that recruiters look for, Betty exercises restraint and self-censorship in her online postings. She implies that *all* real professionals should, and perhaps do, meticulously monitor their social media profiles. Her comment also suggests that some types of photos posted online are consistent with a professional image (e.g. cute pictures of her dog), whereas others are not (e.g. pictures of drinking on the beach).

A common way to signal professionalism, according to our interviewees, is to post a 'high-quality' profile picture to LinkedIn in which they are 'professionally dressed' and 'well-groomed'. 'Pay the money to have a good picture', advised Linda, a generalist in a non-profit organization in the energy industry. 'Use Photoshop. Do something to make it look professional. I think that's really important'. In essence, pictures that convey professionalism in this way imply that job candidates will comply with ideal worker norms (McDonald and Thompson, 2016) and not disturb the organization's moral order.

Online signaling of professionalism and a lack of red flags have become new criteria for gaining employment, criteria that are in many ways detached from explicit job qualifications. For example, Celine (who worked for a large professional services firm) explained that she 'would definitely take note' if she saw an online photo of a candidate with a drink in their hand.

> Celine: I mean, our company loves to do happy hours…But for someone to just, if they're job searching, and they're putting that out there, is that someone we want representing our company?

The moral standard being applied here does not condemn drinking; it is the pictures that are faulted. Though cybervettors claim to seek 'real' people, they ultimately focus on the images job seekers present, often deeming these more important than their substantive behaviors. Additionally, the contradiction that arises in viewing online information as both authentic and contrived seems to go unnoted.

Assessing fit: look and feel

Beyond professionalism, photos are also vital to the assessment of 'fit' between a job candidate and an organization. Our interviewees described 'fit' as evidence of correspondence between a candidate's personality or interests and the culture of the employer organization. Mary, who had nearly thirty years of HR experience, discussed how she used online information to find candidates who fit her employer's culture.

> Mary: I kind of look and you kind of have a feel, is that our type of person? Do they volunteer for any charitable groups? Is that important to them? If it is, usually it's on their Facebook. We're really big on philanthropy, so I like to see things like that. …We're very family-oriented. We like to see people—not that they have to be married to be here. But, if they've got pictures of them with their mom and dad or, "here is [sic] my siblings at Christmas." Or, "here we're at my brother's wedding," …you just kind of get a feel that they're the stablish type of person that we like.

Mary defines her real estate company's culture as 'charitable' and 'family-oriented'. New employees, consequently, would fit best into that culture if their social media profiles include posts about volunteer work and pictures of family events, which Mary sees as signals that they are 'our type of person'.

Cultural fit is also inferred in online photos through dress and presentations of self. According to Sonny, personal styles should align with company culture—workers in 'traditional' companies, 'need to be well-dressed…suit and tie', whereas workers in 'laid-back' companies 'can walk in with shorts and flip-flops'. Job candidates who display online evidence of active physical and social lifestyles are viewed as good matches for company cultures described as 'energetic', 'fun' and 'social'. Betty stated that she looks favorably on the online profiles of job candidates where 'you see them going on hikes and they're camping, something like that and they just seem kind of down to earth'. Mary provided similar examples: 'They went to a ballgame this night and then they went to a car race this day. I want to see people who have a lot of different interests and are active—not like, just have to be physically, but active with things'. In both cases, online photos of physical and social activity were viewed as positive signals of cultural fit.

Sharon, an early career recruiter in a non-profit organization, described a scenario where a mismatch between online presentation in a photograph and company culture impacted the hiring process:

> Sharon: There was someone one time that, the way they were dressed. I don't want to say Goth, because that's probably not the right word. But it was just a little more dark. [The hiring manager] asked more not of, "Why are you dressed that way," – it was more like, "Well I noticed that it was that and we actually do a lot of volunteering and have a lot of things [sic] reaching out for the community. Is that something that is uncomfortable for you?" Or, "what's your vision as far as volunteering and that kind of way?" It was still somebody who was hired, because it was actually a Halloween costume that they had put as their profile picture. But, it's just a way to make sure that when people are coming in here that they're going to fit culturally.

Sharon and her hiring manager questioned a candidate's fit with the company culture because of a 'Goth' or 'dark' online image which they saw as incompatible with values of volunteering and community outreach. The job candidate was hired only after revealing that this was not an authentic representation of self. This example demonstrates how signals of fit (like red flags) are simultaneously seen as moral performances and used as tools of moral discipline and gatekeeping. In the former sense, the Goth picture allowed evaluators to construct a story about a person's life and make moral assessments about their character (cf., Kiviat, 2019). In the latter sense, the picture raised questions about how this individual might conform to or upend the established moral order.

Practical dilemmas, moral qualms

Despite its widespread use, nearly 60% of our respondents expressed serious concerns about cybervetting. The 30% who did not engage in cybervetting at all generally cited concerns about its moral, ethical and practical ramifications, not technical or skill impediments.[4] The majority who did cybervet also openly discussed their reservations about the practice. Many claimed they tailored their cybervetting practices to avoid online information that they deemed sensitive, irrelevant or likely to create implicit biases. The top concern was that information obtained from social media and Google searches could easily lead to misperceptions about job candidates. Sarah, a recruiter at a small private college, explained that the potential for misinterpreting 'red cup' photos led her to carefully monitor her own online footprint. She explained that a friend 'tagged' her on a Facebook photo from a party she did not attend. Despite her non-attendance, she was so concerned about potential employers seeing it and perceiving her as a heavy drinker that she asked to be 'un-tagged'.

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[4] While some interviewees mentioned a lack of time to cybervet, this was only an issue among individuals who were already cybervetting and wanted to do more.

In addition to doubting the veracity of online information about job candidates, some interviewees also questioned its relevance. Joe, an HR professional at a large public university, stated that candidate evaluation should focus entirely on job-relevant skills, which were not usefully assessed with information gleaned online, especially from social media such as Facebook:

> Joe: If I were hiring someone to work around my house, I wouldn't check their Facebook page or anything there either. . . .I would rely primarily on my evaluation of the work that they're going to be doing as well as the references they provide.

Vera, an HR generalist from a software firm, likewise explained that she often has to remind the hiring managers to focus only on job-relevant criteria: 'They're like, "Oh, the picture is so out of date". I'm like, "it does not matter what the candidate looks like. Can they do the job?"' This comment implies that job evaluators commonly focus on esoteric visual aspects of online content that are unlikely to be relevant to job performance.

Others claimed that collecting online information is unnecessary. For example, Patricia, a recruiter at a large private medical company, chose not to use online information sources because she trusted her employer's established offline vetting practices. She said, 'During that whole process, I think we vet them pretty well, but it shouldn't matter what they have out there [online]', indicating that standard background checking procedures were sufficient to identify job-related red flags. Tanya, an HR generalist from an engineering firm, similarly explained that cybervetting is often superfluous. Rather than looking on Facebook to investigate an applicant's personal history, 'you can do a background check and get that same information'.

Many HR professionals also recognized that cybervetting could result in hiring discrimination. Stephanie, who worked in a manufacturing company, confided that cybervetting makes her nervous, 'because you can learn a lot of information about people that I might not want to know. . .their gender, their race, maybe [if] they have kids or not'. Stephanie was aware that reviewing online information can reveal whether candidates fit into legally protected categories and knowing this information could potentially bias the hiring process. Rick, an HR professional at a private university, articulated this concern more comprehensively:

> Rick: There's conscious prejudices that you'll have and then there's also just subconscious prejudices. That's a major pitfall of having all that information out there. Whereas before, it used to be that people would attach their pictures to their resume. Then that all stopped because there was a million different ways of discrimination. Well now, your picture is not attached to your resume, but your whole life is basically attached to your resume on Google.

Rick's statement points to both the conscious and subconscious ways that information about race, age and other characteristics can influence hiring decisions. The internet increases access to such information and makes discrimination easier and more likely than when employers rely solely on resumes for evaluating job candidates (Sharone, 2017). The creep of bias into cybervetting evaluations is evident in some of the early examples ('very family-oriented'; 'going on hikes and they're camping'; 'here are my siblings at Christmas'), which reveal implicit preferences for age, ablement, marital status, religion, race and social class.

Black HR professionals, like Barbara, talked openly about their concerns that cybervetting might disqualify them from jobs:

> Barbara: It did cross my mind. "Would they want someone that looks like me?" I do have a friend that's an HR manager and she's looking for work and she took her picture off of LinkedIn. She doesn't have her picture. So, I do know a lot of people that do that. . . .I did make the decision to [put a picture of myself on LinkedIn]. I do question my decision. I don't know if it was the right thing to do or not.

Barbara faced the dilemma of whether or not to present an image of herself online, knowing that it could be used to discriminate against her based on her gender, race, or age. While she opted to do so, she claimed to have friends who did not post pictures on LinkedIn because they were concerned about discrimination. Barbara's comments are consistent with previous research which finds that racial minorities are less likely to use professional social media (Ruggs *et al.*, 2016).

This dilemma is complicated by the fact that some HR professionals view a lack of a professional picture as a 'red flag' (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015). The vast majority of recruiters (75%) look at profile pictures when reviewing social media websites (Caers and Castelyns, 2011). In fact, more than one-third of US employers stated that they are less likely to hire a job applicant with no digital footprint (Frantz *et al.*, 2016).[5] Donna, a private consultant with 15 years of recruiting experience, explained that LinkedIn profile pictures 'tell me something' about the candidate. In the absence of a picture, she questions that person's suitability for employment.

> Donna: Why can't you put a snapshot of yourself [on LinkedIn]? Are you afraid of discrimination? Do you not have a professional look about you? I just wonder, why? Why would you not? If you're going to go to the trouble of putting a profile together, why don't you put a snapshot there, because that's the first thing that somebody's going to look at.

Donna recognizes that potential discrimination is one reason for omitting a picture. At the same time, she wonders whether this might be an attempt to 'hide' visual characteristics that fail to convey 'a professional look'. Donna is vexed by such a decision. For her, posting a photo is an important step to getting hired because it is 'the first thing that somebody's

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[5] Whereas the lack of any digital footprint is considered to be a major red flag, the application of privacy controls to social media profiles was perceived positively by HR staff because it suggested that candidates were protective of their online profiles. Beyond these issues, our interviewees generally considered online candidate information to be easy to access through multiple platforms and searches.

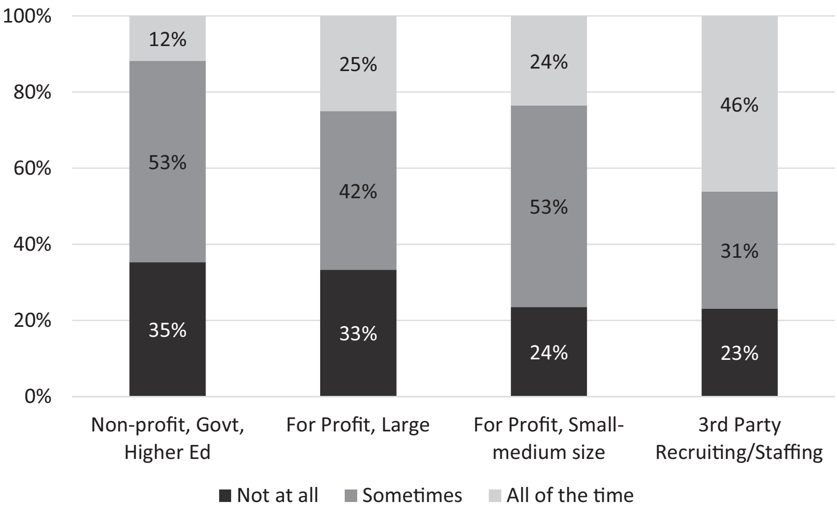

Figure 1 Frequency of engaging in cybervetting by organization type ($N = 59$).
Note: Rounding error may lead to percentages that do not total to 100.

going to look at'. And yet, this was precisely the reason that people who are subject to gender, race or age discrimination (such as Barbara) are reluctant to include pictures on their profiles.

Organizational variation in cybervetting

Cybervetting attitudes and practices vary substantially by the types of organizations in which our respondents worked. Figure 1 shows that HR professionals from non-profit, government, and higher education organizations were least likely to engage in cybervetting, whereas those in third-party staffing and recruiting agencies were most likely to do so.[6] Likewise, 76% of the respondents from non-profit, government and higher education organizations expressed serious concerns about cybervetting, compared to only 23% of respondents from third-party staffing/recruiting agencies. In the middle are for-profit organizations, with larger firms expressing more concerns about cybervetting (67%) than smaller and medium-sized firms (59%). This is likely due to formalized bureaucratic structures within larger firms and public sector organizations. Several interviewees working in larger firms reported that their companies had contracts with federal agencies. These bring higher standards of equal employment opportunity reporting, which could lead them to avoid cybervetting.

Our interviews revealed an important difference in cybervetting attitudes and behaviors between 'in-house' HR staff (i.e. HR professionals employed by the hiring firm) and third-party consultants. Many of the 'in-house' HR personnel, like Helen, expressed concerns about managing the cybervetting practices of their fellow employees:

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[6] A few cases were not classified in our estimates due to ambiguity or insufficient detail in the interview responses.

> Helen: What you'll find is that you'll learn that after the fact that a lower level supervisor just took it upon themselves to Google somebody or to search Facebook or do whatever and didn't like whatever they saw. And, as an HR person, you're going like, "Ahhh!" [imitates screaming]

Helen took steps to try to limit cybervetting by members of a hiring team to avoid bias and legal jeopardy. By contrast, third-party consultants and staffing agency recruiters conduct their own cybervetting of potential job candidates before forwarding their resumes to employers and had little to say about possible cybervetting within employers' hiring teams. For example, when asked about companies who may cybervet clients of his staffing agency, Brian stated: 'We work with companies that we trust to do the right interview process and we'll follow-up with the employee [asking] "what did you think of it?"' Rather than inquiring about a company's screening procedures, he asks the job candidate ('employee') whether they perceived any problems with the process. Those candidates, however, are unlikely to know whether and how cybervetting might have occurred. In general, the contrasting experiences of 'in-house' versus third-party HR professionals suggest that the latter's laissez-faire approach to cybervetting is partly due to their being external to employer firms and thus more removed from the hiring process.

Few HR professionals (17%) that we interviewed reported having a clear organizational policy on cybervetting. The differences across organizational types were dramatic—none of the representatives from small/medium firms or third-party agencies had a cybervetting policy. Only 27% of respondents from larger, for-profit firms explicitly discussed organizational policies on cybervetting, whereas 36% from non-profit, government and higher education organizations mentioned explicit policies about cybervetting. In fact, we found only one instance of an employer including explicit information on the use of internet data to evaluate job candidates as part of their standard training materials. Many companies have explicit social media policies, but these apply exclusively to current employees and not to cybervetting practices. The lack of policies and training materials on cybervetting is curious given their widespread use for other aspects of the hiring process. For example, HR professionals routinely provide trainings on which types of questions to ask in interviews and appropriate strategies for reference checking.

HR staff rarely took proactive steps to head off potential bias in cybervetting, and when they did, their efforts were haphazard. For instance, Ruth summarized her approach as follows: 'I would just run across an article online or in a journal or whatever and just email it to all the managerial staff and say, "Good information. Let me know if you want to talk about it"'. HR professionals generally dealt with problems only after they occurred. Similar to Helen's case described above, hearing about questionable use of online materials in the vetting process sometimes prompted HR professionals to seek informal meetings with hiring managers to explain why this was problematic, but rarely led to proactive regulations or trainings.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Cybervetting is an emergent organizational practice that involves evaluating online searches and social media content as part of the job candidate selection process. It is a contested practice with few clear rules or guidelines for whether or how it should be carried out (Schmidt and O'Connor, 2016; Society for Human Resource Management, 2016). This leaves much discretion to organizational gatekeepers. Our analysis shows that HR professionals believe that online information is essential for understanding candidates' authentic selves. While formal application materials are deemed untrustworthy and liable to misrepresentation, social media postings are accepted as valid indicators of who people 'really are'. Further, HR professionals use online pictures and posts to make fundamentally moral judgments about job candidates' characters. They attribute positively-valued 'professionalism' to candidates whose online profiles lack 'red flags', or signs of morally questionable behavior (e.g. alcohol consumption), and exhibit cultivated polish, notably by including 'professional' pictures. Organizational 'fit' is signified by the absence of evident deviant lifestyle choices (e.g. looking 'Goth') and the presence of content indicating morally valued qualities of maturity, physical activity and social engagement. Signals of mainstream lifestyles such as heteronormativity and religious conformity also tend to elicit positive evaluations.

These findings are consistent with Lamont (2002), who argues that moral worth operates as the underlying criteria for assessing in-group versus out-group status. The HR professionals we interviewed deployed 'repertoires of evaluation' (Lamont and Thévenot, 2000) to assist in defining the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Embedded in these repertoires are discursive tools that help to translate notions of moral worth into practical application. The results presented here suggest that this operates in several ways.

First, online performances are understood to reveal moral character traits. The relevance of those traits to employment is established by means of hypothetical scenarios that link them to potential workplace experiences (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2013). For example, a person in a drinking photo might be interpreted as lacking of self-control, which raises questions about how they might act when entertaining a company client.

Second, moral performances can be interpreted as value orientations. These value orientations are compared against socially constructed notions of organizational culture to determine candidate alignment or 'fit'. For example, if someone dresses in a 'laid-back' fashion, they would be a good fit for an organization with 'start-up' culture, but might disturb the moral order of a more 'traditional' corporate setting.

Third, cybervetting can be seen not only as an evaluation of moral performances, but also as an instance of moral performativity. In addition to applying existing moral criteria, it also generates new moral boundaries. Job candidates who possess a deliberately polished, self-censored online presence are deemed as safe, 'professional', and worthy of admission to the organizational fold. In contrast, those with 'red flags' are suspected not only of problem behavior or mismatched values, but also of lacking the intelligence, ability, and willingness to play by widespread but largely silent rules of organizational and personal image-making. This, more than actual drinking or 'Goth' lifestyles, places them beyond the pale. In making these evaluations, many cybervettors feel that they are merely applying reasonable criteria to all available evidence of candidate behavior. However, the expansion of social media and easy access to personal information, coupled with the development of cybervetting as a routine practice, have contributed to the proliferation and normalization of moral judgment—and not merely assessment of job qualifications—as a major focus of hiring decisions. This entails a moral reframing of labor market action: cybervetting redefines what could be seen as unwelcome snooping or privacy invasion as legitimate 'risk management' and assessment of fit.

To the extent that its criteria are shared in multiple settings, cybervetting disciplines the workforce toward alignment with these standards (Gershon, 2017; Sharone, 2017). Indeed, we find striking consistency in HR professionals' evaluations across the two Southern US metropolitan contexts. Further, when an actor's digital footprint conforms to conventions of ideal moral performances, they accrue what has been referred to as 'digital career capital' (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015) and may contribute to even more general 'übercapital' (Fourcade and Healy, 2017). These serve as accessible resources that can be mobilized for economic gain, usually across multiple organizational fields. Recent research suggests that recruitment and selection of job candidates based on these types of signals contributes to an increasingly bifurcated, winner-take-all job market (McDonald *et al.*, 2019).

At the same time, the boundaries of moral deservingness are continually negotiated and contested (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2013). Moral contestation can arise from unique experiences, such as an HR professional who has encountered discrimination. It can also occur when online performances are deemed 'nonmoral' (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2013). For instance, failure to post a profile picture on LinkedIn is rarely judged as 'wrong' *per se*, but may lead a candidate to be seen as 'inappropriate' for the hiring organization. Nonmoral performances are problematic because they contribute to ambiguity regarding how to judge a person's behavior and value orientation. Ambiguity and inconsistency are enough to elicit negative emotional responses or feelings of discomfort, which are crucial aspects of evaluation and resource allocation (Jackall, 1988; Lamont, 2002; Rivera, 2016). HR professionals also struggle to delineate moral boundaries around cybervetting. Paired with this internal struggle is an external one in which HR professionals negotiate cybervetting standards among themselves, co-workers and other organizational actors (Segal and LeMay, 2014).

Our findings suggest that cybervetting is implicated, directly and indirectly, in discriminatory hiring outcomes. Overt, unapologetic references to protected classifications, such as religion and marital status, as selection criteria suggest a direct link between moral evaluations and categorical inequality. More often, links between moral evaluation and discriminatory outcomes are indirect. The importance placed on the availability of profile pictures can result in biased evaluations of workers who are concerned about discrimination. Preferences for physically active candidates imply an advantage for younger and able-bodied workers. Furthermore, the types of activities mentioned as ideal examples of digital content (like hiking or bicycling) tend to reflect white and upper middle-class lifestyles. In this way, cybervetting has the potential to operate as a 'category-blind' assessment in which ostensibly neutral judgments may result in discriminatory outcomes (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2017). While HR professionals justify cybervetting by citing their own training and ethical codes, sociological literature shows that simple alignment with the meritocratic goals featured in such training is insufficient to produce meritocratic outcomes (Castilla and Benard, 2010). Finally, the lack of transparency about cybervetting practices and criteria means that job seekers may never know that their online information is being accessed at all or how it is being used. This leaves them with virtually no means to prove discrimination if it occurs and no inclination to alter their online footprint to improve their future chances of being hired.

Findings presented here also have implications for organizational theory. First, they highlight the salience of moral evaluations and dilemmas as part of organizational decision-making. Moral deservingness and moral contestation are central to understanding how organizational claims are made and resolved (Jackall, 1988), yet these aspects have yet to be fully incorporated into existing theories of organizational inequality (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt, 2019). Second, substantial variation in how cybervetting occurs shows that the capacities, constraints and incentives of different institutional fields shape meanings and practices.[7] The fact that public, non-profit and higher education HR staff express more concerns about, and place greater limitations on, cybervetting is likely due to a greater commitment to equity, universalism and transparency in these types of organizations (Chua, 2011; Cobb, 2016). Also, when HR staffs are in-house, they are able to and have greater interest in securing the integrity of the hiring process. When operating as third-party consultants, they are less critical of cybervetting, as they are reluctant to jeopardize their client relations and are buffered from the consequences of hiring practices. These patterns are consequential given recent trends in management. 'New governance' reforms that have helped to bring a business logic to public sector organizations are likely to reduce restrictions on cybervetting practices (Wilson and Roscigno, 2016). Continued outsourcing of hiring functions to third-party consultancies would seemingly have a similar effect. Increasingly, particularistic bureaucratic principles (Hodson *et al.*, 2013) are consistent with fuzzy assessments of cultural fit. These organizational and institutional developments are crucial for considering the future of cybervetting.

Finally, cybervetting is useful for understanding several broader societal trends. For example, it reveals how organizational actors are contributing to the redrawing of boundaries between public and private spheres (McDonald and Thompson, 2016). What workers do in their private lives is becoming increasingly consequential for their employment prospects. Also, because the internet provides a near-permanent record of online actions, cybervetting threatens to make the moral categorization of individuals immutable and moral growth impossible to substantiate.[8] Furthermore, we view cybervetting as part of a broader trend toward 'platform authoritarianism' (Ajunwa and Greene, 2019), whereby technological advances have led to the expansion of employer information and negotiating power relative to workers and consumers. This trend includes new forms of job candidate vetting, such as using machine learning algorithms to develop rankings based on massive amounts of social media data (Philip *et al.*, 2019). While these new techniques are promoted as objective evaluation tools (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2016), many of the same biases that are central to cybervetting find their way into algorithmic specifications (O'Neil, 2016; Ajunwa and Greene, 2019). More research is needed to better understand how moral judgments are baked into the algorithmic cake and what these developments mean for the future of employment opportunities.

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[7] Despite the general patterns reported across institutional fields, we also observed considerable variation in cybervetting practices among organizations within similar fields. This speaks to the considerable latitude that organization agents have in addressing the moral dilemmas of cybervetting.

[8] We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer who offered this insight.

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