

The Impact of Social Media in Military Recruiting

Angel Peralta¹ and Nicholas Caporusso²

¹ Department of Informatics, Fort Hays State University,
600 Park Street, 67601 Hays, United States

² Department of Computer Science, Northern Kentucky University,
Louie B Nunn Dr, 41099 Highland Heights, United States
agperalta@mail.fhsu.edu, caporusson1@nku.edu

Abstract. Given the growing success and user base of Social Media websites and, specifically, Social Networks, over the last decade, businesses have transitioned from traditional advertising to digital platforms. Specifically, their audience targeting features make it very easy to promote products and services to defined groups of individuals with specific characteristics. As a result, in addition to standard advertising, organizations, including educational institutions, started using personal and professional Social Networks (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn) as a recruiting tool for reaching potential candidates and interacting with them in a quick informal fashion.

In this paper, we explore the human factors in the use of Social Media in recruiting for the Army and we detail the results of a study in which we compared the perspective of recruiters and prospect cadets, especially in the context of initiatives, such as the Delayed Entry Program (DEP).

Keywords: Social media · Recruiting · Military · Delayed Entry Program

1 Introduction

In the last decade, several Social Network (SN) websites have been developed to provide people worldwide with opportunities to connect with others, share different type of information, and stay informed, mostly for free. As a result, nowadays, the most popular platforms, that is, Facebook and Instagram, have more than 2 billion and 1 billion users, respectively. Traditional methods lack tools for quickly engaging in meaningful conversations between organizations and their audiences, whereas comments, messages, and notifications render Social Media more effective in creating a constant contact with a larger network of potential target users. Consequently, Social Media have been increasingly utilized by businesses as the predominant tool for communicating to their target audience and advertising their products and services to new groups of potential customers. On the one hand, this resulted in a major budget shift from traditional advertising to digital media; on the other hand, Social Networks are a marketing tool that any company can use to reach a broader audience [1].

In addition to traditional advertising channels, recruiting agencies and human resource offices have increasingly started utilizing social media as a way to identify potential candidates and check their background, monitor employees and the appropriateness of their social media profile to the etiquette of the company, and promote the business itself using salient figures among their workforce as the face of the company, to advertise a healthy and productive work environment and, simultaneously, improve their brand reputation in order to recruit better talents. Following more traditional organizations, such as, education institutions, different military branches in the Army, such as, the Department of Defense and the Air Force, have attempted the use of Social Media to advertise their activities, recruit cadets, and engage youth in their programs.

In this paper, we focus on the use and impact of new forms of digital advertising on military recruiting and we present the results of a research study aimed at assessing the role of Social Networks, such as, Facebook and Instagram, in supporting traditional and non-conventional strategies for promoting enlisting in the army and military organizations. In our study, we specifically considered the Delayed Entry Program (DEP), which is designed to prepare civilians for basic military training, and we analyzed different strategies operated by recruiters, including traditional advertising and communication via personal and organization profiles. Moreover, we interviewed both recruiters and prospect cadets to compare their perspectives and expectations in terms of technology adoption, to highlight the role of human factors in influencing decisions to join the service, and to identify how Social Media changed recruiting practices. In addition to measuring the outcome in terms of successful applications, we describe current patterns and future trends in the context of recruiting for the military. Finally, we discuss how the results of our study can be applied in different types of hiring processes and how practices adopted by Army recruiters can offer insightful information for other organizations.

2 Related Work

According to a recent report [2] posting job vacancies and advertising them to potential candidates is among the compelling reasons for companies to use social media, because in addition to making it convenient to create job posts and specify a narrow target audience, communication tools, such as, instant messaging, increase engagement and, simultaneously, renders the recruiting process more informal. Also, as users can easily contact companies, Social Media enables job seekers to spontaneously apply, which helps organizations build a database of potential candidates for future consideration [3].

Specifically, research studies focusing on specific age groups found that users in the Millennials and Gen Z generation spend an average of 2 hours and 43 minutes per day on Social Media, which makes SNs the primary channel they use to stay informed [4], despite the presence of potential risks [5]. As a result, higher education institutions have increasingly used SM to advertise their programs to future students, in the last decade, in addition to incorporating them as learning tools [6]. Also, applications can be built to acquire more information about the user, so that message can be customized accordingly [7]. Nowadays, most universities use SN websites to share information with students and their parents, and to recruit potential candidates. Moreover, as users tend to

migrate from one Social Media to another [8], they simultaneously use multiple platforms. In longitudinal studies on the effectiveness of Social Networks as a recruitment tool [9] [10], the authors interviewed several institutions and measured their improvement over the course of four years. Moreover, they compared the Return on Investment of recruiting via Social Networks to the results obtained by several blogs maintained by the institutions and concluded that while the latter had little impact on enrollment, SN had a significant role in engaging students. Also, their findings showed an increasing trend in the numbers of schools that utilized SM.

While other types of organizations were faster in the adoption of SM technology, the Army did not adjust as quickly to leveraging the dynamics of Social Networks for recruiting. Although the Department of Defense (DOD) created a social media account almost a decade ago, over the last years cadets have been primarily contacted and managed using traditional methods and many recruiters in the United States have acknowledged the struggle to advertise the Army to Millennials and Generation Z. A few early adopters started using Instagram to post their daily operations in lieu of marketing events, others are broadcasting how the hiring process works, and others started using their feed to share motivational posts that can create awareness and aid their recruiting tasks. However, in addition to being a small group, the activity of the most innovative recruiters is the outcome of personal initiatives, rather than the application of a structured framework. Only recently, forced by decreasing budget availability, several branches, such as, the Air Force, started realizing that most recruiters are still relying on outdated procedures and they are not utilizing technology to its fullness, mainly due to security reasons or concerns that its use would invade on their personal time [11]. Therefore, nowadays there is a push towards modernized techniques and, specifically, to the adoption of Social Media as a platform for optimizing the recruitment process.

3 Study

As the purpose of our work is to evaluate the adoption of Social Media as an advertisement tool for the army, we designed a research study aimed on understanding recruiting from the perspective of recruiters and prospect cadets. Specifically, we focused on the Delayed Entry Program (DEP), which is designed to prepare civilians for basic military training. The DEP is one of the largest in terms of enrollment, because it is meant as a screening program for all individuals potentially going into active duty. Also, given the purpose and structure of the DEP, the program results in a higher dropout rate compared to further military training, as individuals can decide not to fulfill their active duty commitment while or after attending their training. This is especially interesting for the purpose of our research, as the dynamics of the DEP exactly mimic the inherent conversion funnel of products and services that involve potentially high churn rate.

A total of 73 subjects were selected for this study, 27 of them were recruiters (36.98%) and 46 (63.01%) were prospect cadets. Participants in the recruiters' group were all in the 28-32 age group, whereas the latter featured 30 individuals (65.2%) in the 17-21 age group, 9 (19.6%) who were 22-27, 4 (8.7%) aged 28-32, and 3 (6.5%) in the 33-39 bracket, which reflects the distribution of applicants to the DEP. 45 of them had a social

media account, whereas the remaining one was considered an outlier because they did not have any active profile on SN; as a result, their data were removed from the study.

In the group of recruiters, participants had different roles: 14 were actively involved in recruitment tasks, 6 were supervisors, 4 were responsible for the operations, and 3 were former recruiters or involved in other tasks of the DEP. Their experience ranged from 1 to 16 years with an average of approximately 5 years \pm 4 years; specifically, 11 of them (40.74%) had 1-2 years of practice in recruiting, 8 (29.62%) had 3-5 years, 8 (18.51%) had 6-10 years, and 3 (11.11%) had 10 years or more of experience.

We utilized two different questionnaires to collect responses about the perspective of recruiters and prospect cadets. As for recruiters, we also included questions that helped us capture their return on investment in the form of an average monthly conversion. The questionnaires were distributed to recruiters via e-mail, whereas they were administered to prospect cadets during events.

4 Results and Discussion

All the applicants were Social Media users, and many of them had multiple accounts: 82.2% were active on Instagram, 62.2% had a Facebook profile, 71.1% used Snapchat, 40% had Twitter, and 8.9% had an account on a different Social Network website. Although the majority of them (63%) reported that SM was the primary information channel for enlisting in the Air Force, 18 individuals decided to apply after a first contact via other sources. Specifically, responses from prospect cadets demonstrated that the organization website has still to be considered as one of the most relevant ways for generating leads; also, the data showed a long and fragmented tail of other methods, such as, word of mouth, personal networks (e.g., family and friends), and schools, which 20% of the applicants mentioned as the primary point of contact. Our findings are consistent with trends in other domains. However, surprisingly, age was not a factor in determining a prevalence for Social Media versus more traditional channels. With small fluctuations, approximately 63% of the individuals in each age group indicated SNs as the first point of contact.

As for recruiters, 85.2% of them utilized the Internet, and 74.1% particularly Social Networks, as a tool for advertising the DEP to prospect applicants. Other methods include the Radio (37%), Newspapers (29.6%), and personal contact or events (37%). Instagram and Facebook were indicated as the main platforms for generating leads, and they resulted in 85% and 80% of preference, respectively. On the contrary, websites, such as, Twitter and Snapchat, were not indicated as a recruitment tool at all. This is consistent with the use of Social Media among applicants, which indicates that recruiters are aware of the websites that are more effective in generating more leads. From our data, we can conclude that 80% of recruiters who rely on Social Networks tend to simultaneously use multiple platforms to contact potential applicants and communicate with them. Interestingly, the use of Social Media did not have any correlation with age, in contrast with published studies. On the contrary, expertise is a factor that influences the use of advertising tools: more senior recruiters (10+ years of experience) showed a tendency to diversify their strategy and communicate over multiple media, including Social Networks, whereas younger recruiters having 1-2 years of experience focused

on one or two channels, only. Specifically, we found strong negative correlation ($r=-.86$) between seniority and media used, which were 1.18 (± 0.98), 1.12 (± 0.35), 1.6 (± 1.35), and 2.66 (± 0.57) for entry-level recruiters (1-2 years), junior (3-5 years) experienced (6-10 years), and recruiters (10+ years), respectively. Furthermore, the number of media utilized by air force personnel showed a very strong correlation ($r=0.97$) with the average monthly leads, which demonstrates that diversifying their strategy enables them to obtain better results. Specifically, recruiters who did not utilize Social Media had an average of 2 leads, whereas the use of Social Networks in combination with other channels resulted in better performances and, particularly, using two, three, and four different types of media increased the average monthly leads to 5, 7, and 7.75, respectively (see Fig. 1). As we found no correlation between age or seniority level and the number of monthly leads ($r=-0.001$ and -0.13 , respectively), we can conclude that although recruiters' experience might be relevant in the subsequent steps of the funnel (e.g., converting leads into enlisted cadets), the use of Social Media is a stronger factor for the lead generation phase.

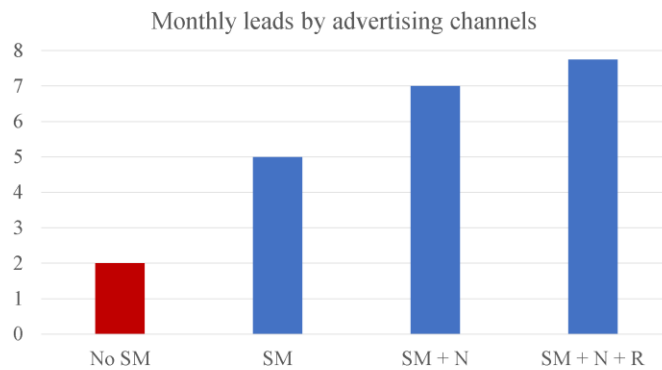


Fig. 1. Monthly leads generated by recruiters when using the Internet without Social Media (left), and when using SM combined with Newspapers (N) and with Radio (R).

Conclusions

In the last decade, Social Media gained increasing attention as the most prominent digital channel worldwide for connecting individuals and distributing information. In regard to the latter, most Social Networks offer the unprecedented opportunity of defining a variety of narrow audiences having very specific characteristics and targeting them accurately with promotional messages resulting in detailed statistics, higher conversion rates, and favorable Return on Investment. As a result, most digital advertising shifted to Social Networks, adapting to their mechanisms. Indeed, this resulted in new forms of promotion for businesses, products, and services: nowadays, brands adjusted their communication strategy and language to Social Media, such as, using influencers as testimonials, embedding their message in viral videos, and creating messages that leverage human factors to trigger social dynamics and generate organic trends.

In this paper, we presented the preliminary results of a study on the adoption of Social Media by military recruiters and potential cadets. We explored the human factors that determine the behavioral intention to use Social Networks with the aim of explaining the role played by aspects, such as, perceived usefulness, perceived effort, facilitating conditions, and personal motivation in the adoption of platforms, such as, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, for recruiting purposes. Also, we detailed how these tools are being incorporated in the daily duties of recruiters (e.g., to generate more leads or to manage communication with candidates) with the objective of sharing common practices and helping define guidelines. Indeed, despite the many benefits in utilizing social media, given the functioning mechanisms of the Army, it is important for high-ranking officials to advocate the use of social networks among all recruiters, and provide them with tools that facilitate their adoption.

References

1. Elena, C.A., 2016. Social Media—A strategy in developing customer relationship management. *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 39, pp.785-790.
2. Mohapatra, M. and Sahu, P., 2017. Optimizing the recruitment funnel in an ITES company: An analytics approach. *Procedia computer science*, 122, pp.706-714.
3. Priyadarshini, C., Kumar, Y.L.N. and Jha, R.R., 2017. Employer attractiveness through social media: A phenomenological study. *Qualitative Report*, 22(4).
4. Desai, S.P. and Lele, V., 2017. Correlating internet, social networks and workplace—A case of Generation Z students. *Journal of Commerce and Management Thought*, 8(4), pp.802-815.
5. Santiago, K. and Caporusso, N., 2018, July. Addressing Mental Health Consequences of Social Networking from the Social Services Perspective. In *International Conference on Applied Human Factors and Ergonomics* (pp. 183-192). Springer, Cham.
6. Lenig, S. and Caporusso, N., 2018, July. Minecrafting virtual education. In *International Conference on Applied Human Factors and Ergonomics* (pp. 275-282). Springer, Cham.
7. Caporusso, N., 2009, October. Personality-aware interfaces for learning applications. In *Proceedings of the 37th annual ACM SIGUCCS fall conference: communication and collaboration* (pp. 189-196). ACM.
8. Xiao, X. and Caporusso, N., 2018, August. Comparative evaluation of cyber migration factors in the current social media landscape. In *2018 6th International Conference on Future Internet of Things and Cloud Workshops (FiCloudW)* (pp. 102-107). IEEE.
9. Sandvig, J.C., 2016. The role of social media in college recruiting. *International Journal of Web Based Communities*, 12(1), pp.23-34.
10. Evans, J.O., 2019. School Resources, Social Media Capabilities, and Recruiting Effectiveness in the National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I Football Bowl Sub-division (Doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University).
11. Pomeroy, B., 2017. Time to Engage in Social Media.