**'The kids are alert': Generation Y responses to employer use and monitoring of social networking sites**

**Authors:**
**Dr. Scott. A. Hurrell (University of Glasgow)**
**Prof. Dora Scholarios (University of Strathclyde)**
**Dr. James Richards (Heriot-Watt University)**

## Abstract

Employer monitoring of employees' and job applicants' social networking site (SNS) data is widespread and growing, but remains ethically, legally and efficaciously controversial. Examining this emergent source of tension in the employment relationship, this paper explores how Generation Y employees experience and perceive employer use and monitoring of SNSs, and whether employer-related concerns influenced their on-line behaviour. A survey of 385 employed students revealed widespread SNS engagement amongst respondents, with many experiencing some form of employer SNS use. Employer SNS use was, however, generally perceived negatively. Negativity took the form of procedural justice violations based on issues such as invasion of privacy. Nevertheless, many students displayed alertness through actively managing online profiles which, in turn, marginally yet significantly increased their justice perceptions. The study has ethical and practical implications for employer monitoring and use of SNSs, as well as contributing to our understanding of young people's on-line behaviour.

# Introduction

Employers increasingly make use of social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook or LinkedIn, to attract and screen job candidates, manage current employees), and even discipline or fire employees for information posted on private SNSs (Smith and Kidder, 2010; Broughton *et al.*, 2011). This article explores the reactions of young workers to employer use and monitoring of SNSs.

Our approach builds on current knowledge in two respects. First, the article contributes empirical evidence supporting the notion of SNSs as a potentially new source of conflict in the employment relationship. McDonald and Thompson's (2016) recent review of SNSs in employment presents several areas of tension created by employer attempts to profile potential employees and monitor current employees. Our study explores such tensions, considering whether individuals feel fairly treated by employers and how they may respond in their use of SNSs. Fair treatment can be understood as the satisfaction or violation of a set of specific procedural justice rules relating to employer practices (Gilliland 1993). For SNSs, justice rules may include whether employer practices invade privacy or allow employee voice (McDonald and Thompson, 2016).

Second, research tends to emphasise the benefits for employers to attract and retain employees, mostly from Generation Y (Tenwick, 2008; Martin *et al.,* 2009). Less attention is paid to the effects on applicants or employees who are subject to these practices. Critics warn against the use of unreliable information posted on SNSs (Doherty, 2010) and the ethical implications of employer incursions into private lives (Clark and Roberts, 2010). This article builds on these critical perspectives by empirically exploring not only individual experiences and perceptions of employer practice, but also their reactions, thereby considering the two-way dynamics involved in employers' and individuals' use of SNSs in employment contexts. The paper does not make direct comparisons of the behaviour of Generation Y employees with other generations and therefore does not offer a controlled test of differences across groups. Nevertheless, it provides an example of behaviour within a Generation Y sample, which remains highly pertinent given this group's relationship with

social media technologies.

Relevant literature draws from a wide range of research aimed at theorising 'new' new technologies (Howcroft and Taylor, 2014). We begin with a consideration of the characteristics of Generation Y and their relevance for the research. We also summarise research on employer monitoring of SNSs; the perceived procedural justice of management practices; and the potential for conflict arising from employer and employee use of SNSs. The review allows us to propose three research questions: (1) To what extent do Generation Y employees report employer use and monitoring of personal SNSs in relation to recruitment, selection screening, and management of current employees; (2) What are the procedural justice perceptions of Generation Y job applicants/employees with respect to employers' use of SNSs; and (3) to what extent and how are Generation Y applicants/employees active agents in managing their SNS activities? The aim is to explore workers' experiences and perceptions of employers' SNS use, and their adaptation to employer practice, as an illustration of potential emergent conflict in the employment relationship.

The empirical data is drawn from a survey of Business/Management undergraduate students currently or recently in employment. The findings suggest that many 'kids are alert' to the potential injustices that may emerge from employer use of SNSs, and demonstrate this alertness through agency in managing their SNSs with employers in mind. We discuss the implications of these findings for employer use of SNSs and the possible impact that such practices may have on employees and the employment relationship.


**The case of Generation Y**

Generation Y is generally described as born from approximately 1980 to 2000 (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008). Research has established a range of work-related characteristics for this group. For instance, compared to other birth cohorts, Generation Y employees have been seen as more motivated by extrinsic rewards (Krahn and Galambos, 2014), technology (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010) and work life balance (Ng et al., 2010). Of course,

generalisations across and between generations remain problematic. Whilst, for example, Ng et al. (2010) highlight those who posit the centrality of ethical concerns to Generation Y job seekers, others divide Generation Y into two groups - relativists that tolerate ethical violation and idealists who are less tolerant of such violations (VanMeter *et al.*, 2013).

Despite debates over the distinctiveness of Generation Y's work values (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008), the group has a particular relationship with technology. As the birth of this generation coincided with the birth of the Internet, it is unsurprising that research has shown their widespread consumption of SNSs (Anantatmula and Shrivastav, 2012). The process of developing an online profile appears to be a defining factor in Generation Y's social identity formation (Cheung, *et al.*, 2011). Given this focus on their non-work identities, Generation Y may be unconcerned about sharing private content online, even to a wider audience than originally intended (Peluchette and Karl, 2008). Young people's expectations of '24/7 connectivity' might, therefore, make the blurring of the work/private-life boundary an 'irrelevant' concern (Chesley, 2005: 1246). Others have highlighted a contradiction in the willingness of Generation Y to share information on line whilst simultaneously wishing to maintain a boundary between work and non-work lives (Sánchez Abril *et al.*, 2012) Whatever their views on sharing information on line, as prolific users of SNSs Generation Y may be at most risk of poor employer practice over this medium and/or employer sanction for their SNS data.

The literature makes it far from clear if and how Generation Y employees display agency in difficult and turbulent times. Given that contemporary work-related conflict is likely to take less obvious forms than in the 1970s and 1980s (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999), it has been suggested that when (or if) Generation Y protest in relation to employment, this will be noticeably different from previous generations (Williamson, 2014). Such differences may be especially apparent in the face of ever declining trade union density for young employees (BIS, 2015). The importance of SNSs to Generation Y, and their growing use by employers, therefore makes this an ideal domain in which to examine workers' reactions to employer practice.

**Employer use and monitoring of social networking sites**

SNSs are changing the way employers communicate with employees, and how employees communicate with management and each other (Syed, 2014). Employers are also increasingly using SNSs for 'cultural' purposes such as collaboration (Martin *et al.*, 2009). However, it is with recruitment that employers seem most keen to experiment with SNSs. The CIPD (2013) estimate that just over half of UK employers use SNSs, in some form, to recruit new employees. SNSs are thought both to build a positive employer brand during recruitment (Martin *et al.*, 2009) and engage candidates on a more informal level, developing on-going relationships and increasing candidate loyalty (Doherty, 2010). SNSs are seen as especially useful for attracting 'passive' candidates – those not actively job searching (Nikolaou, 2014) - and members of Generation Y (Tenwick, 2008).

SNS information used for selection screening is controversial, legally, ethically and with respect to its validity. Employers themselves acknowledge that such practices introduce new avenues for discrimination, including adverse impact on groups less likely to use SNSs (such as the over 40s) (Verhoeven and Williams, 2008). There are many further concerns about employer misuse of SNSs such as invasion of privacy and making decisions on information that is not consistently available across all candidates (Davison *et al.*, 2011; Kluemper *et al.,* 2015; Sánchez Abril et al., 2012). Employer misuse of SNSs also relates to the questionable job-relatedness of public, non-professional information for hiring decisions (Caers and Castelyns, 2011). Inaccuracies in tags and posts mean decisions could be based on erroneous and decontextualised information (Smith and Kidder 2010). Yet, there is little legislation or guidance to prevent or help employers viewing public pages (Sánchez Abril et al., 2012).

Potentially more invasive monitoring of SNSs for current employees (rather than applicants) may occur over issues such as suspected illegal activity, defamation of the organisation, or inappropriate conduct. The popular press increasingly reports employers taking disciplinary action against employees for their SNS activities (Conway, 2008; Watt, 2011) with courts both supporting the employer (Neuburger, 2008) and the employee (Armour, 2011). The legality of employer intervention in SNSs is contextually dependent (Sánchez Abril et al., 2012). In Germany, for example, employers are bound by strict laws that only allow the gathering of employee SNS information after the employer has informed

the employee of their intentions (Pearson, 2013). In the UK, by contrast, employers have greater rights to monitor employee use of SNSs and are typically successful in disciplining employees for alleged misuse (Simpson 2013). Whatever the national context, it is nevertheless rare to hear current or prospective employees' versions of such events.

## Theorising conflict around employer SNS use: A procedural justice approach

It has been suggested that employers are adopting new forms of participatory culture which increasingly encroach upon employees' social activities (Fleming, 2014). The rapid development and uptake of SNSs reflects the most contemporary of such forums. However, SNSs have become contested terrains, as evidenced by the legal disputes referred to above. This has sparked an interest in theorising these growing tensions as employers seek to control employee use of SNSs (Pedersen et al., 2014; Upchurch and Grassman, 2015; McDonald and Thompson, 2016).

Theories of procedural justice have been widely used to interpret employee fairness reactions to workplace procedures, providing a relevant lens through which to examine the tensions noted above. Regarding personnel selection, Gilliland (1993) proposed that fairness could be understood as the satisfaction or violation of a set of specific procedural 'justice rules'; e.g. invasion of job applicant privacy, degree of two-way communication between applicant and employer, and job relatedness of information. Employees may feel violated if, for example, procedures are deemed to invade privacy, but may be satisfied if procedures are deemed to be valid and/or allow two-way communication. Most evidence relates to e-recruitment and web-based assessment (Konradt et al., 2013), although research on applicant perceptions of SNSs is emerging (Roth *et al.*, 2016). For instance, users who are aware of employers accessing their profile for screening purposes and who consider this an invasion of privacy are motivated to alter their online profiles and re-direct their job pursuit (Madera, 2012).

Employee reactions to electronic monitoring can also be evaluated in terms of procedural justice. As with selection, the job-relevance of the monitoring procedure and the opportunity for participation and feedback, reduce perceived invasion of privacy (violation) and increase perceived procedural justice (satisfaction) (Alge, 2001). Where procedural

justice is violated, negative outcomes include loss of trust with the employer (McNall and Roch, 2009). Further research is required, however, on employees' perceptions of the reliability and appropriateness of SNS information for workplace purposes (Davison *et al.*, 2011).

Our first research questions, therefore, are aimed at identifying the extent to which Generation Y employees report employer use of SNSs for various monitoring purposes, and the reactions to such employer practices framed through procedural justice. (The operationalization of procedural justice violation and satisfaction is discussed further in the methodology).

*Research question 1 (RQ1)*: To what extent do Generation Y employees report that employers use and monitor personal SNSs in relation to recruitment activities, selection screening, and management of current employees?

*Research question 2 (RQ2)*: What are the procedural justice perceptions of Generation Y job applicants/employees with respect to employers' use of SNS? Specifically, do job applicants/employees view such procedures as violating justice rules (e.g. through invading privacy) or satisfying justice rules (e.g. through being valid and allowing two-way communication)?

## Responses to conflict: Agency and resistance

As previously implied, it is widely accepted that the employment relationship is an asymmetric 'contested terrain' with structured antagonism forming the basis of employment relations (Edwards, 1986). Within workplaces, information and communication technologies are recognised vehicles for management control, with the potential to elicit negative psychological reactions (Jeske and Santuzzi, 2015) and resistance (Bain and Taylor, 2000) from employees. Mobile and Internet technologies are also associated with negative outcomes for employees; e.g. spill-over into non-work life (Chesley, 2005) and threats to privacy (Golden and Geisler, 2007). Surveillance through SNSs may be even more pernicious. If, as argued above, job candidates or employees view this surveillance as an inappropriate invasion of privacy, then we may expect some resistance, especially if individuals have no

control over how and when such monitoring occurs (Jeske and Santuzzi, 2015). Research on work blogs, for example, already indicates that employers monitor employees and take a largely dim view of online 'venting', whether conducted on or off work-time (Richards, 2008).

Violation of procedural justice may thus be a manifestation of conflict between employees and employers, with the most likely reaction to surveillance being employees actively managing their use of SNSs. This includes managing privacy settings or the removal of inappropriate content from online profiles (Roulin and Bangerter, 2013). This argument extends models that propose adaptive dynamics where conflicting interests arise between employees and organisations. Conceptualising the employment relationship as being antagonised by employer monitoring of SNSs frames the exchange in terms of resistance and agency. Our final research question, therefore, explores employees' agency through both their perceived procedural justice and online behaviour.

*Research question 3 (RQ3)*: To what extent and how are Generation Y employees active agents in managing their SNS profiles with respect to prospective and current employers? Specifically, (a) are they proactive in their use of SNSs for job search and in employment; (b) do they manage their online profiles with employers in mind; and (c) does online management of profiles with employers in mind improve satisfaction with employers' use of SNSs/reduce perceived violation of procedural justice?

## Method

*Sample and data collection*

A non-random survey sampling approach was used to gather data from working students. Non-random samples are acceptable when access to a specific population of interest is required, in this case Generation Y employees with experience of SNS use and employment (Hammersley, 2011). An online survey invitation was sent to all registered business/management undergraduate students in three UK Universities, with an incentive of prize draw entry on survey completion. The use of students in such studies is a known strategy (e.g. Sánchez Abril et al., 2012; Jeske and Santuzzi, 2015). The total student e-mail

addresses numbered 3,705. We received 482 responses, a response rate of 13 per cent. Response rates may have been affected by the survey overlapping with the National Student Satisfaction (NSS) survey targeted at all final year UK undergraduate students; students not accessing their university e-mail addresses/only intermittingly using them; and/or any students that had withdrawn from or suspended their studies since the project began.

Excluding those with no work experience and who had not used SNSs, provided 385 usable responses. Sixty-nine per cent of participants were female. Prior research - including a survey of UK undergraduate business school students (Rowbotham, 2009) - has highlighted that females are more likely to participate in on-line surveys, possibly due to preferences for engaging in on-line activities which encourage information sharing and communication (Smith, 2008). Further details of participation rates revealed 70 per cent of participants were aged 18-21; 80 per cent were UK nationals; 98 per cent studied full-time; 30 per cent were in their final year; 78 per cent worked part-time and 22 per cent, despite studying full-time, claimed to be working in a full-time capacity. Current or most recent work experience was mainly in customer service (55 per cent) and elementary occupations (e.g. waiting/bar staff) (20 per cent), consistent with the most common types of jobs undertaken by UK students (Rowbotham, 2009). Some were employed in managerial/professional (8 per cent) or administrative and personal service (e.g. leisure assistant) (15 per cent) roles. Twenty-six per cent had supervisory responsibility (these crossed occupational groups and were more likely to be over 21 ($\chi^2$ (1) =10.26, p<.001) and male ($\chi^2$ (1) =6.46, p<.01)). There were no other significant demographic distinctions across occupations (e.g. by gender).

The respondent sample was not intended to be representative of the Generation Y population as a whole. Rather, it provides meaningful insight into the experiences, perceptions and behaviour of full-time university students at all stages of their studies during job search and employment.

*Measures*

Reported use of SNSs by employers: Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had experienced SNS use by current or previous employers in seven areas ('yes'/'no' responses): (a) recruitment (2 items; whether they/others were recruited through a SNS); (b) screening job applicants (2 items; awareness that employers were screening either themselves or others); (c) encouraging work-related social events (1 item); (d) encouraging employee collaboration (2 items; eliciting suggestions and sharing information); (e) communicating with employees (4 items; e.g. use of forums and communication of organisational goals); (f) assessing performance (1 item); and (g) expressing disapproval/discipline of SNS activity (3 items; e.g. for negative posts about employer). Seven variables were formed (variables 1-7, Table 1) by coding 1 if at least one item for each kind of employer use received a 'yes' response. In addition, two aggregated variables were created (variables 8-9, Table 1) for any experience of recruitment/screening (sum of variables (a) and (b)) and culture/management (sum of (c)-(e)). Respondents were asked to elaborate on any experiences in free text boxes.

Student use of SNSs/online behaviour: Respondents were asked if they used publicly available SNSs (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn) and, if so, how frequently they used them for work purposes (1-5 scale; 1=never use site for work, 5= only use site for work). All but one of the sample reported using Facebook, with 82 per cent using it multiple times daily. Fifty-nine percent of the sample reported using Twitter, and 25 per cent LinkedIn. Sixty-eight per cent of LinkedIn users reported that they used the site predominantly or only for work purposes, whilst only approximately 4 per cent of Facebook and Twitter users reported the same usage pattern. LinkedIn was most widely used for work purposes by students in their final year ($\chi^2$ (1) =16.66, p<.001). Myspace, Bebo and 'other' SNSs were rarely used.

Five variables were created to represent students' use of SNSs for work (variables 10-14, Table 1): (a) arranging social events with colleagues outside work (1 item); (b) personal job search (2 items); (c) job search for others (2 items); (d) whether they had secured a job through the use of SNSs (4 items); and (e) discussing work with colleagues (1 item). Each variable was coded 1 if at least one of the items received a 'yes' response. Respondents were again invited to elaborate in free text boxes.

Two items captured management of online profiles with (a) potential employers and (b) current employers in mind (variables 15-16, Table 1, 'yes'/'no' responses).

Procedural justice perceptions. The Selection Procedural Justice Scale (SPJS) of process favourability (Bauer *et al.*, 2001) was adapted to capture perceptions of employers' use of SNSs in recruitment/selection (10 items) and to manage current employees (nine items). Consistent with the theoretical basis of the SPJS, each set of items represented several procedural justice 'rules' (Gilliland, 1993). These rules cover the job-relatedness, propriety, transparency, consistency and fairness of procedures as well as the opportunity they allow for two-way communication. We dropped Bauer, *et al.*'s dimensions of treatment during 'testing' and 'feedback' as the implied process for SNSs is different from how these are normally used in selection. Items were worded in order to reflect either violation (e.g. 'Applicants can't show their skills') or satisfaction (e.g. 'SNSs allow two-way communication between applicants and employers').

Given that the items reflected a validated theoretical model of procedural justice reactions (Gilliland, 1993) which has been subsequently refined by Bauer, et al. (2001) we did not perform confirmatory factor analysis. However, in order to confirm the expected satisfaction and violation elements when applied to employers' use of SNSs, we performed a principal components factor analyses with varimax rotation, first for the 10 recruitment/selection items and second, for the nine employee management items. Each analysis confirmed two distinct violation and satisfaction factors. One item from the employee management set ('SNSs allow two-way communication between employees and employers') did not load on either factor and so was dropped. This allowed us to create four composite variables: (a) job applicant perceived violation reflecting inequity/invasion of privacy (5 items, $\alpha$=.82); (b) job applicant satisfaction that SNSs are an effective and valid attraction and hiring strategy (5 items, $\alpha$=.73); (c) employee perceived violation reflecting inequity/invasion of privacy (5 items, $\alpha$=.79); and (d) employee satisfaction that SNSs are effective job-related aids for HR decisions (3 items, $\alpha$=.63). All except the latter variable reflect Cronbach alpha reliabilities above .70, indicating, perhaps, the fewer items and less robust application of the last variable to SNSs. Alphas above 0.6 are, however, acceptable within exploratory research and so the scale was retained (Hair et al., 1998). Table 2 shows each composite variable with its relevant component items (1-5 scale of agreement; 1='strongly disagree', 5='strongly agree', with higher scores reflecting either high satisfaction or high perceived violation).

<u>Control variables</u>. We included the following as control variables: gender, occupation; supervisory responsibility; and year of study (as the issues covered may have been more salient for students closer to the graduate labour market). We also compared those using LinkedIn for work purposes vs. other respondents, given LInkedIn's predominant focus as a professional networking SNS.

*Analytical strategy*: Descriptive statistics based on the full sample (N=385) were used to establish levels of reported employer use of SNSs (RQ1); mean ratings of perceived procedural justice violation and satisfaction (RQ2); extent of students' use of SNSs (RQ3a); and extent of online management of profiles with employers in mind (RQ3b). Chi-square tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to establish group differences.

For RQ3c, four separate equations regressed each composite violation or satisfaction dependent variable on whether students managed their online profiles for potential or current employers.  If the effects of agency were evident, online management of profiles would be associated with decreased perceptions of procedural justice violation and/or improved perceptions of procedural justice satisfaction. Each equation included control variables for students' use of SNSs. Intercorrelations (Table 3) show that LinkedIn use was related to reduced job applicant violation (r=-.11 p<.05), increased job applicant satisfaction (r=.16 p<.001), and increased likelihood to manage one's profile for potential (r=.11 p<.05) and current (r=.18, p<.05) employers. All equations controlled for work-related LinkedIn use and use of SNS for job search, as these may be equally relevant for applicants and current employees. In the employee violation/satisfaction equations, we additionally controlled for SNS use for arranging social events with colleagues and for work collaboration, given both were related to managing one's profile (r=.16, r=.11, p<.05). The other control variables were not significant (see below) and were excluded. Accounting for missing data, the valid sample size for the regressions reduced to N=286 for the job applicant violation/satisfaction equations and N=265 for the employee violation/satisfaction equations. Multicollinearity was not an issue as relationships between variables in the same equations were +/-.18 or lower.

TABLE 1 here.

**Findings**

*RQ1: Reported employer use and monitoring of social networking sites*

Respondents reported that employers used SNSs for encouraging social events (37 per cent); recruitment (32 per cent); work collaboration; disapproval/discipline of employees' SNS use (each 27 per cent); communicating with employees (22 per cent); and screening job applicants (21 per cent) (Table 1). Under a third reporting employer use for job screening reported that candidates were made aware of this. Assessing performance was reported only by a small percentage (3 per cent). There were no significant differences across the most common occupational groupings, across gender, or by supervisory responsibility. Only one difference was found related to year of study; final year students were less likely to report employers expressing disapproval or disciplining them for using SNSs during working time (32 versus 20 per cent) ($\chi^2$(1)=.33, p<.05). Those using LinkedIn for work purposes were more likely to report experiencing employer use of SNSs for recruitment, screening, or culture management; to have used SNSs for their own job search and to manage their online profiles with employers in mind (Table 1). As final year students were most likely to use LinkedIn for work purposes, observed differences in experiences and/or behaviour thus appear due to a transition to this SNS, rather than as a direct result of students' year of study.

Of the students who reported employer disapproval for using SNSs during work, almost one third had been formally warned or disciplined. Ten per cent of the total reported that activities *during working time* displayed on SNSs had attracted disapproval, with half reporting formal warnings. Only eight per cent of the total sample reported a sense of employer disapproval of SNS activities *outside* working time (with small numbers formally disciplined), whilst seven per cent reported objections to postings about the employer. As with those reporting objections to SNS activity within working time, this latter group were more likely than the average to be formally warned or disciplined.

Open-ended comments reported instances of witnessing others being disciplined for SNS activities. In every instance, these were work-related. Examples included: a friend who had referred to herself as an 'underpaid slave' on Facebook; colleagues discussing work

negatively and/or posting negative comments about the employer; a large pub chain giving formal warnings for pictures of employees wearing uniforms whilst socialising; and employees being 'caught out' for being out the night before and not 'showing up' to work the next day. Twelve respondents reported employers having explicit policies on SNSs. Some employers had held meetings with staff or had written clauses into their contracts regarding SNS use. One employer's policy was instant dismissal if anything was posted on Facebook about work, even if positive. Another commented that their employer had 'a specialist team that deal solely with employees mentioning their name on SNSs – we are then disciplined for doing so.'

*RQ2: Procedural justice perceptions*

Table 2 provides mean ratings of agreement for the four procedural justice composite variables representing either violation or satisfaction, and for each individual item. Overall, the violation ratings tended towards agreement, indicating perceived violation (M=3.70, SD=.77; M=3.71, SD=.68). Composite satisfaction ratings were below neutral, reflecting low satisfaction (M=2.65, SD=.72; M=2.51, SD=.81). Examining the individual items, strongest violation ratings were for job applicants/employees being unable to show job-relevant skills if SNS data is used for selection (M=4.0, SD=.94; M=3.84, SD=.89) and applicants/employees being unable to discuss their SNS postings with potential employers/supervisors (M=3.94, SD=.93; M=3.87, SD=.86). Satisfaction was only above neutral for allowing two-way communication between job candidates and employers (M=3.31, SD=1.05), but was below mid-scale agreement for all other statements.

Univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) tests shown in Table 2 for the composite variables found those using LinkedIn for work purposes reported lower violation and higher satisfaction as job applicants, as well as lower violation as employees, compared to others. However, even amongst these work-purposed SNS users, violation ratings remained above neutral and satisfaction ratings below. The effects of occupation, year of study, gender and supervisory experience on the composite ratings were not significant and were excluded in further analyses.

TABLE 2 here

*RQ3: Employee agency and SNSs*

At least half the sample showed proactive work-related use of SNSs (Table 1). Most common was arranging social events with colleagues (64 per cent), searching for a job for oneself (55 per cent) and discussing work with colleagues (47 per cent). Twenty-four per cent had secured a job using SNSs.

Over half managed their profile with potential or current employers in mind, indicating adaptive behavioural responses to employers. Examples in open answers were: avoiding posting photos of nights-out; controlling which posts managers/colleagues could see; grouping work friends on Facebook separately; and not 'friending' managers. The intercorrelations in Table 3 show that online management for potential and current employers was more common for those who used SNSs for their own job search (r=.13, p<.05; r=.17, p<.01) and for arranging social events (r=.13, p<.05; r=.16, p<.01).

TABLE 3 here

Equations 1 and 2 in Table 4 estimated job applicant violation/satisfaction in the recruitment and selection context; equations 3 and 4 estimated employee violation/satisfaction in employment. There were no significant effects in the job applicant violation equation; however, there was a significant positive effect of managing one's profile with respect to potential employers on levels of job applicant satisfaction (β=.19, t(282)=2.13, p<.05). For current employment (equations 3 and 4), managing one's profile was inversely related to employee violation (β=-.18, t(259) =1.91, p<.05) although the F statistic for the overall model was not significant (F(5,259) =1.72). Dropping the non-significant control variables resulted in a significant F statistic for the overall model (F(1,267)=3.91, p<.05) although the $R^2$ remained the same. There was a significant positive effect of managing one's profile on employee satisfaction (β=.28, t(259)=2.63, p<.001) with a significant overall model (F(5,259)=2.21, p<.01). Thus, exerting agency over the availability of one's SNS data reduced perceived violation and improved attitudes towards use of this medium within employment.

TABLE 4 here

## Discussion

This article provides the perspective of the employee which has been lacking, until recently, in much extant research on SNSs in employment. The article first scopes the range and extent of employer use of SNS experienced by a sample of Generation Y workers. Using the concept of perceived procedural justice, it then explored SNSs as a new source of potential conflict in the employment relationship and how agency may be exerted to resist or minimise this conflict. Given the centrality of technology to Generation Y employees (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010), the experiences of students in employment are especially germane. Whilst it was not our intention to make direct inter-generational comparisons, the data, nevertheless provide evidence from a substantial sample of Generation Y workers who are soon to enter the graduate labour market.

For Research question 1 it was found that many students had experienced employer use and monitoring of SNSs. In terms of the potential for conflict, 27 per cent reported employer disapproval of their SNS activities, providing some evidence of employers attempting to influence employees' SNS activities (Upchurch and Grassman, 2015). Final year students were less likely to face discipline or disapproval of their SNS use, possibly reflecting greater naivety and potential for conflict in younger workers. Formal disciplinary action, following disapproval, was more likely if activities had occurred during work or specifically mentioned the employer. Employers thus seemed more concerned with material posted on SNSs that may bring them into disrepute, rather than employees' non-work activities more generally. This latter finding casts some doubt on employers using SNSs as a more insidious form of cultural control, creeping into employees' private lives (cf Fleming, 2014). However, a significant proportion reported that employers used SNSs to encourage work-related social events or for collaboration, and communication. Whilst these may ostensibly reflect a more anodyne use of SNSs, the potential for this to cause the creep identified by Fleming (2014) remains.

Of perhaps greater concern is that under a third of those reporting employers using SNSs for selection screening said that applicants were made explicitly aware of this. This lack of transparency has implications for applicant privacy and control over SNS information (Trottier and Lyon, 2011) and the potential for 'dystopian' employer technology use in

accessing personal data (Golden and Geisler, 2007). Overall, the extent of employer use and monitoring reported by our sample is revealing when considered that it involves socially-purposed websites. This raises concerns about data validity (Caers and Castelyns, 2011) and reliability; e.g. the heavier weighting employers may give negative information (Roth *et al.*, 2016).

When examining the second research question, perceptions of procedural justice provided an indicator of the degree of acceptance of such practices. The strongest agreement was with violation of procedural justice; i.e. the potential for invasion of privacy and inequitable treatment of applicants and employees. These findings contribute to knowledge in several ways. Firstly, students across all years of study appeared concerned about misuse of their data, supporting the work of Davison *et al.*, (2011) and Sánchez Abril et al. (2012). Procedural justice violation ratings also countered suggestions that privacy or transparency are unimportant for younger/Generation Y employees (Roth *et al*., 2016), or that this group is unconcerned by technology's role in blurring the work-life boundary (Chesley, 2005).

Second, the findings affirm the value of examining employer SNS use and monitoring in terms of procedural justice. This approach contributes to the research needed to understand both employee perceptions of SNSs in personnel decision-making (Roth *et al.*, 2016), and emerging tensions in the employment relationships introduced by SNSs (McDonald and Thompson, 2016). We show the salience of violation rules concerning privacy and equal treatment for both job applicants and current employees across the demographic groups in our sample. Selection research on SNSs already highlights the importance of such elements for perceptions of fair treatment, and has shown the influence of applicant perceptions on outcomes, such as job pursuit intentions (Madera, 2012) or intention to recommend employers (Konradt *et al.*, 2013). Third, although all respondents displayed generally negative attitudes towards employer use of SNS, those using LinkedIn for work purposes held marginally more positive perceptions than other respondents. This suggests that employer practice is more accepted where respondents' SNS use is directed towards employment matters. Employers may, therefore, experience least resistance when using sites such as LinkedIn.

Perceptions of justice and fair treatment are, certainly, of growing relevance for employers given that SNSs offer opportunities for employees to express conflict over the employment relationship (Schoneboom, 2007; Richards, 2008; Upchurch and Grassman, 2015). Indeed some of the open-ended responses indicated employees doing just that and sometimes being disciplined for it. Our third research question, therefore, considered students as active agents in resisting the potential surveillance efforts of both prospective and current employers.

Over half the sample reported that they used SNSs to search for jobs themselves or for others (RQ3a) and that they managed their online profiles with potential or current employers in mind (RQ3b). This proactive use was apparent in students at all levels of study and across demographic variables. Those arranging social events using SNSs or who used SNSs for job search were also more likely to manage their online presence with employers in mind. Many respondents, therefore, appeared alert to the potential of employers accessing their personal SNS information. Open-ended responses provided some detail in how this management occurred, and included being discerning over what was posted, restricting who could see posts and not having managers in SNS contacts. The remainder who did not manage their SNSs may be more typical of Curran *et al.*'s (2014) college students, who planned few changes to webpages, as they did not believe employers would find them useful. The latter group may also reflect VanMeter et al.'s (2013) conceptualisation of some members of Generation Y as 'relativists' who tolerate ethical violation – in this instance in regard to their own SNS data. These findings also reinforce how behaviours may differ within generational groups (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008).

Further analysis of the effects of individual agency explored how students' own proactive online behaviour influenced their procedural justice perceptions (RQ3c). Those who managed their profiles for potential employers reported significantly higher procedural justice satisfaction scores for employer use of SNSs as an effective attraction and hiring strategy, although it must be noted that the increase remained small (Table 4). This is consistent with a two-way signalling effect in the selection process (Bangerter *et al.*, 2012) and highlights one way in which employers could use SNSs to mutually benefit themselves and job seekers. Given that those using LinkedIn for work purposes reported higher

satisfaction with SNSs in recruitment/selection, such two-way signalling would appear most suitable if done over work-focussed SNSs. This behaviour had no effect, however, on perceived violation for applicants. The violation items were, however, more specifically concerned with (mis)use of applicants' information. Any incursion into using non-job related information for selection, rather than recruitment, could, therefore, lead to negative applicant reactions, even where applicants actively manage their SNSs.

The results relating to current employers in Table 4 (equations 3 and 4) found that managing one's profile was inversely related to perceived justice violation and positively related to perceived justice satisfaction, although, again, effects were relatively small. This proactive behaviour reaffirms the importance of employee agency in moderating negative views on employers' SNS use. Those who were active in using SNSs to arrange work-related social events were, however, less satisfied with employer use of SNSs. This could indicate a concern over employers blurring the boundary between SNS use for social and work purposes.

## Conclusions

This study contributes to literature regarding the use of technology at various stages of the employment relationship, how employees and job applicants may react to such technology use and the potential for technology use to elicit conflict and resistance. By considering the specific case of SNSs, the study extends current debates into technologies that may transcend the work-life boundary. Employers, however, appeared less concerned with controlling employees' general non-work activities and more concerned with SNS activities that directly mentioned them. A significant minority were, however, screening employees' SNS data prior to hiring, with the majority not informing candidates of this. This behaviour could lead to conflict with job applicants as procedural justice rules are violated.

The primary contributions of the study are to show Generation Y employees' concerns regarding perceived violations of procedural justice, and the link between active management of online profile information and justice perceptions. These findings were not just apparent in final year students most proximal to the labour market, but across the sample. Many of this young sample, displayed alertness to the potential for employers to

blur the work-life boundary via SNSs and exerted agency to manage this potential incursion. Generation Y employees could, therefore, be avoiding conflict situations by actively managing their SNSs with employers in mind.

The high levels of awareness shown within this study suggest that many Generation Y employees and job applicants are attuned to the potential for employer misuse of their data and take appropriate action. It is also notable, though, that a significant proportion of the sample appeared unconcerned. Given rapidly shifting SNS technology and continuing legal ambiguity on data protection/misuse, individual job applicants and employees should be aware of the visibility of their online data and develop strategies to manage this information. We would argue, however, that given the predominantly non-work nature of the SNSs investigated here, responsibility for employer incursion into employees' lives should not simply lie with the individual user.

This latter point raises the question of whether we should take it for granted that employers are using all data available to them, especially given that the UK context seems supportive of them doing just that (Simpson, 2013). In the absence of clear legal guidelines this question takes on an ethical dimension, complicated further by the fact that much SNS data is public. Employee data on socially focussed SNSs, such as Facebook, is generally not meant to be consumed by employers. Our findings regarding different kinds of SNS suggest that employers may wish to limit their use to work-focussed sites such as LinkedIn to avoid potential resistance. Of course exceptions may be made in extreme circumstances, such as where employees' posts legally compromise the employer.

In terms of managerial implications the findings confirm ethical concerns regarding the transparency of employer action (Clark and Roberts, 2010) and the validity of using information that may lack job-relatedness for personnel decisions (Roth *et al.*, 2016). The potential for data misuse points to the wider need for policy advice regarding how employers should use SNSs. In this vein, if employers are seen to be using personal data in an unethical and/or inappropriate way, the results suggest that negative reactions from job applicants and/or employees may ensue due to perceived justice violations. The analysis does suggest that employers may be able to ameliorate such negative feelings by paying attention to the procedural justice of their SNS practices; e.g. ensuring transparency and

opportunities for genuine two-way communication, especially during recruitment. Even the use of work-focussed sites such as LinkedIn needs to conform to procedural justice rules, as users of such sites also believed that employer SNS use violated procedural justice.

Future theoretical elaborations could better explain the perceived violation-behaviour link in reactions to employer practice; e.g. whether subjective norms concerning the acceptability of employer practice act as moderators (Hausknecht *et al.*, 2004). Additionally, as the study design did not allow any inferences about causal chains, further research is required to understand the process through which perceived justice develops in relation to employer monitoring of SNSs and how this then shapes individuals' own online behaviours. In-depth qualitative research would also help to uncover in greater detail how employees/applicants perceive employer SNS use, the strategies that may be engaged in to resist employer monitoring of SNS data and whether these strategies differ by SNS platform. Such intensive data would add depth to how we understand Generation Y's SNS behaviour, complementing this study.

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**Table 1.** Employer and student use of SNWs

| | N | % | LinkedIn users v others | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | $\chi^2$ | Sig. |
| **Reported employer use of SNSs** | | | | |
| 1. Encourage social events outside work | 144 | 37% | .37 | .546 |
| 2. Recruitment | 124 | 32% | 7.35 | .007 |
| 3. Collaboration at work | 105 | 27% | .02 | .896 |
| 4. Disapproval/discipline | 105 | 27% | 4.03 | .134 |
| 5. Communicate e.g. fora, news | 85 | 22% | 2.85 | .091 |
| 6. Screened for a job | 81 | 21% | 8.28 | .016 |
|     Candidates made aware of screening? | 25 | 31%[a] | -- | -- |
| 7. Assess performance | 10 | 3% | -- | -- |
| **Reported employer use of SNSs (aggregated)** | | | | |
| 8. Recruitment/screening | 170 | 44% | 9.48 | .002 |
| 9. Culture management: social events, collaboration, communication | 188 | 49% | 4.65 | .031 |
| **Student use of SNSs** | | | | |
| 10. Arrange social events | 247 | 64% | 2.49 | .114 |
| 11. Job search (self) | 197 | 55% | 13.89 | .001 |
| 12. Job search (others) | 130 | 36% | .51 | .474 |
| 13. Secured job | 92 | 24% | .41 | .531 |
| 14. Work collaboration | 82 | 21% | .01 | .993 |

**Student online behaviour**

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 15. Manage profile (potential employers) | 203 | 56% | 8.21 | .004 |
| 16. Manage profile (current employer) | 202 | 52% | 9.01 | .003 |

**Note.** Total N=385

*Note:* Missing cells represent insufficient data points for Chi-square test.

[a] percentage represents valid proportion of those answering prior question about awareness/experience of SNW use for screening job applicants

**Table 2:** Procedural justice perceptions: mean violation and satisfaction ratings

| | | | | LinkedIn user? | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *Mean* | *SD* | *Yes* | | *No* | | *F* | *Sig* |
| | **Job applicant perceived violation (composite)** | **3.70** | **.77** | **3.52** | **.80** | **3.75** | **.76** | **4.50** | **.035** |
| 1. | Applicants can't show skills | 4.00 | .94 | | | | | | |
| 2. | Applicants can't discuss information use with employers | 3.94 | .93 | | | | | | |
| 3. | Applicants not treated equally | 3.66 | 1.04 | | | | | | |
| 4. | Invades privacy | 3.54 | 1.16 | | | | | | |
| 5. | Too impersonal | 3.37 | 1.00 | | | | | | |
| | **Job applicant satisfaction (composite)** | **2.65** | **.72** | **2.86** | **.75** | **2.58** | **.70** | **7.16** | **.008** |
| 1. | SNSs allow two-way communication between applicants/employers | 3.31 | 1.05 | | | | | | |
| 2. | Employers are able to attract people who fit better with the org. | 2.68 | 1.07 | | | | | | |
| 3. | Employers have the right to obtain information about applicants | 2.60 | 1.12 | | | | | | |
| 4. | SNSs are effective for identifying people who perform well on the job | 2.40 | 1.01 | | | | | | |
| 5. | SNSs gather information about applicants that is job-relevant | 2.23 | 1.00 | | | | | | |

| | | LinkedIn user? | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *Mean* | *SD* | *Yes* | | *No* | | *F* | *Sig* |
| **Employee perceived violation (composite)** | **3.71** | **.68** | **3.55** | **.61** | **3.75** | **.71** | **3.96** | **.048** |
| 1.   Employees can't discuss information use with employers | 3.87 | .86 | | | | | | |
| 2.   Employees can't show skills | 3.84 | .89 | | | | | | |
| 3.   Employees treated unequally | 3.69 | .92 | | | | | | |
| 4.   Invades privacy | 3.59 | 1.04 | | | | | | |
| 5.   Too impersonal | 3.55 | .92 | | | | | | |
| **Employee satisfaction (composite)** | **2.51** | **.81** | **2.60** | **.72** | **2.48** | **.82** | **1.01** | **.317** |
| 1.   Effective way of identifying people who are not doing their job | 2.55 | 1.09 | | | | | | |
| 2.   Identifies people who don't fit in the org. | 2.54 | 1.05 | | | | | | |
| 3.   Supervisors/employers have right to obtain SNS data about employees | 2.45 | 1.00 | | | | | | |

**Notes.** N=385; Scale for all items 1-5 (1='strongly disagree'; 5='strongly agree')

**Table 3.** Intercorrelations between study variables

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Job applicant violation | --- | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Job applicant satisfaction | -.47** | --- | | | | | | | |
| 3. Employee violation | .71** | -.46** | --- | | | | | | |
| 4. Employee satisfaction | -.41** | .54** | -.49** | --- | | | | | |
| 5. Manage profile (potential employer) | -.10 | .18** | -.16** | .17* | --- | | | | |
| 6. Manage profile (current employer) | -.04 | .06 | -.12* | .15* | .54** | --- | | | |
| 7. Use SNS for job search | -.06 | .07 | -.04 | .02 | .13* | .17** | --- | | |
| 8. Use LinkedIn for work purposes | -.11* | .16** | -.12 | .06 | .11* | .18** | .17** | --- | |
| 9. Use SNS to arrange social events with colleagues | .09 | -.02 | .06 | -.10 | .13* | .16** | .10* | .06 | --- |
| 10. Use SNS for work collaboration | .06 | -.03 | .02 | -.04 | .05 | .11* | .14** | .02 | .15** |

**Notes.** N=286 or N=265. Correlations between dependent variables and dichotomous predictor variables are point-biserial correlations

* p<.05  ** p<.001

**Table 4.** Effects of managing online profile on procedural justice perceptions

| Predictor variables | Recruitment/Selection | | Employment | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | *1*<br>*Job applicant violation* | *2*<br>*Job applicant satisfaction* | *3*<br>*Employee violation* | *4*<br>*Employee satisfaction* |
| **Equations 1 & 2** | | | | |
| Manage profile (potential employer) | -.11 | .19* | --- | --- |
| Use SNS for job search | -.03 | .06 | --- | --- |
| Use LinkedIn for work purposes | -.21 | .23* | --- | --- |
| **Equations 3 & 4** | | | | |
| Manage profile (current employer) | --- | --- | -.18* | .28* |
| Use SNS for job search | --- | --- | -.04 | .01 |
| Use SNS to arrange social events with colleagues | --- | --- | .12 | -.22* |
| Use SNS for work collaboration | --- | --- | .05 | -.07 |
| Use LinkedIn for work purposes | --- | --- | -.17 | .08 |
| N | 286 | 286 | 265 | 265 |
| F | 1.25 | 4.06** | 1.72 | 2.21** |
| (df) | (3,280) | (3,283) | (5,259) | (5,259) |
| $R^2$ | .02 | .04 | .02 | .04 |

**Notes.** Values are standardised regression coefficients. Significance tests are based on the *t*-statistic for each parameter estimate.