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Acting on a hunch: cybervetting and the role of emotions in job recruitment

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The process of recruiting new employees involves the risk of hiring the ‘wrong’ person. Systematic and extensive information gathering is therefore used to support objective and rational decisions. Today, the use of cybervetting is part of the recruitment process, but prior research shows that emotions, contrary to the ideals of ‘objectivity’, are essential for sorting and selection decisions. Based on interviews with 37 Swedish recruiters, this study demonstrates how cybervetting is motivated, restrained and directed by recruiters’ feelings about the jobseeker and the practice of cybervetting. The study findings also emphasise that recruiters believe in a ‘professional’ means of managing emotions, and the notion that certain emotions represent a tacit knowledge with an emotional foundation that is difficult to articulate.

Key words cybervetting • epistemic emotions • job recruitment • professional • rationality

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Introduction

Recruitment and selection are the first steps in finding employees who adhere to employers’ objectives and become productive and compliant. However, hiring new employees generally involves risk taking, especially when the job candidate is previously unknown to the employer. Recruiters may therefore conduct extensive gathering and evaluation of information about the jobseeker to reduce the risk of selecting employees who do not match their ideals. In today’s digitalised work life, various web platforms aid recruiters in finding and selecting candidates. Digital tools are provided to automatically screen applications in a way that is often portrayed as ‘objective’, and internet websites constitute rich sources for recruiters seeking additional information for assessing candidates (for example, Sharone, 2017; Ajunwa and Green, 2019). However, algorithmic specifications of ‘fit’ – used for automatic screening processes – ‘can itself become a vehicle for bias’ (Ajunwa and Green, 2019: 79).
The relatively new practice of cybervetting – that is, searching for information about job candidates online through search engines, public databases and social media – has become an increasingly popular method among recruiters to reduce the risks associated with hiring (Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2014; Hedenus and Backman, 2018). In a previous study of recruiters’ motives for cybervetting, we found that both professional and personal information is evaluated to find indicators of whether the jobseeker is employable – in other words, has the right subjectivity and is promising to be productive and manageable (Hedenus and Backman, 2018). In the digital context, where employers also consider results from internet searches, we refer to this as an interest in the candidate’s online employability.

The picture of recruitment and selection as a rational activity whereby recruiters select the most appropriate and ideal employees is in line with the discourse about decisions in general, and in business in particular, as being objective and rational actions. As Halpin and Smith (2019: 714) argue, however, the logics used to define who fits into the organisation ‘are only partially about technical or cognitive skill; they also are about demographic and subjective attributes that loom large in employers’ minds’. Congruent with this latter description of recruitment processes driven also by subjective objectives, cybervetting is often motivated by a desire to confirm one’s ‘feeling’ about a candidate, or is conducted merely for the fun of it (see also Nikolaou, 2014). Simultaneously, recruiters try to manage ethical concerns about cybervetting and to navigate varying opinions on what types of information are either too intimate, and therefore inappropriate, or relevant to consider (Hedenus and Backman, 2018; Backman and Hedenus, 2019). Data from interviews conducted with recruiters provided a mixture of discussions about professionalism and systematic recruitment processes alongside discussions about acting on a ‘hunch’, or letting one’s ‘gut feeling’ and high ‘sensitivity’ guide one’s work. This led to an interest in determining the part that emotions play in recruitment processes in the digital era.

The aim of this article is to show how recruiters perceive their own emotions, and how this influences the different ways in which their references to emotions justify, restrain and direct their use of cybervetting as a mean to find and select employees. Qualitative analyses are conducted on transcripts from interviews of 37 recruiters in Sweden. The findings contribute to existing knowledge on cybervetting as a recruitment practice. Moreover, our findings shed light on the importance of emotions in the process of cybervetting; findings which may also be applicable to more general discussions on the role of emotions in recruitment and in other processes typically characterised by systematic methods and non-biased ambitions – for example, vocational guidance or the selection of doctoral candidates.

Cybervetting on ‘objective’ grounds

Cybervetting has become an increasingly common part of recruitment processes (Caers and Castelyn, 2011; Kluemper et al, 2016; Stockholms Handelskammare, 2017). Cybervetting changes the recruitment process in several ways, with the most significant impact associated with the access to information about job candidates. As with several other digital technologies used for recruitment, this alters the power relationship between recruiters and jobseekers following from an increased access to information (Ajunwa and Green, 2019; Halpin and Smith, 2019). Previously, information access was restricted by the job applicant (who chose what personal
information to share) and by the time and effort required to gather information. Today, information can be acquired at almost no cost by a quick online search at any time of the day or week. Social media platforms have been launched with the sole purposes of people exchanging information for the platform companies to profit from (Zuboff, 2019). While some, such as Facebook and Instagram, are more targeted for personal use and also more likely coded as ‘private’ by recruiters (Backman and Hedensu, 2019), others such as LinkedIn are tailored for work life (Sharone, 2017; Ajunwa and Green, 2019). These platforms not only make previously inaccessible information available to recruiters, they may also shape and produce certain ways of sharing information. The interface of LinkedIn has for example been shown to stress how the jobseeker looks, and a specific form of writing one’s work history (Sharone, 2017). Thus, the internet has become a rich source of information that could not, for several reasons, have been alternatively attained.

For example, cybervetting results can reveal events or aspects of the jobseeker’s career or life experience that the jobseeker desired to keep secret, for example, conflicts with former employers, media scandals or illegal activities. Finding such information prior to decision making is perceived as advantageous for the employer (Berkelaar, 2010; Berkeelaar and Buzzanell, 2014; Berkeelaar et al, 2015). Companies such as LinkedIn have made it into a business model to provide automated analyses of large numbers of users’ data to recruiters and employers. In contrast, these results alter the power relationship between recruiters and jobseekers as the former can now access information about a candidate without the jobseeker’s knowledge or approval. Since online information often includes photos and social media updates, recruiters can gain deeper insight into private or personal aspects of the jobseeker’s life situation, beliefs, interests and so on. Apart from profiting from jobseekers’ needing to make themselves visible in order to have a chance to secure employment, the design of such platforms may also affect how recruiters evaluate and select new employees (Ajunwa and Green, 2019). Furthermore, social media platforms, websites and digital databases are also created by people or organisations that want to make information about others public, such as arrests, criminal charges or convictions (see for example Lageson and Maruna, 2018; Corda and Lageson, 2019). This has raised ethical concerns related to jobseeker privacy and the risk of discrimination, as well as concerns about the reliability and validity of the sources and information (Hedenus and Backman, 2018).

Previous research has focused on ethical concerns and the question of the methodological reliability of cybervetting as a rational technique for making hiring decisions. More specifically, researchers have been investigating the question of whether reviewing a jobseeker’s Facebook profile or Twitter account reasonably replaces a personality test or the evaluation conducted during an interview. Some of these studies are explorative (for example, Kluemper and Rosen, 2009) or argumentative (for example, Jeske and Shultz, 2016), while others use qualitative analyses of larger samples (for example, Kosinski et al, 2013). The most thorough study to date, and to our knowledge, demonstrated that Facebook profile review is a very poor instrument for measuring a job candidates’ personality, job performance and KSAO (knowledge, skills, abilities, other characteristics) (Van Iddekinge et al, 2016).

Despite existing concerns about the practice, previous studies often suggest that cybervetting is based on rational motives and, thus, fulfils the instrumental function of finding candidates with the appropriate competence, skills and merits for a job vacancy. A Swedish study found that recruiters willingly take responsibility for
choosing to conduct online searches in various ways (Hedenus and Backman, 2018). One specific category of accounts were based on the recruiters’ self-understanding as being professionals capable of discerning what information to consider or ignore. Notably, accounts from these recruiters involved justifications of ethically controversial methods and diminished reliance on sufficiently systematic and objective procedures.¹ The recruiters in the Swedish study either explicitly or implicitly referred to a psychometric recruitment model based on clearly set criteria of measurable skills, merits and competence. The model presumes that the recruiter remains objective throughout the process and endeavours to exclude any stereotypical beliefs or subjective evaluations from candidate assessment (Herriot, 1993; Lindelöw, 2016). The current study, however, explores how such accounts are also rationalisations of processes and decision making that are largely based on emotions. Building on theory and previous research on emotions in decision making and job recruitment, this study adds to existing knowledge by investigating the role of emotions in recruitment processes that include cybervetting.

Emotions, rationality and decision making

The notion that emotions stand contrary to rationality or reason is commonly referred to as the ‘conventional approach’ to emotions (Barbalet, 2001). Objectivity also aligns with rationality, as opposed to subjectivity which aligns with emotions. Demonstrating emotions when practising one’s occupation is, thus, generally deemed to be ‘unprofessional’ due to implications of subjective and irrational decision making and/or behaviour (Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2016). Riabacke (2007: 37) argued that the use of intuition and gut feeling for decision making primarily shows that insufficient analysis was conducted prior to deciding. Therefore, a rational decision is made without any emotional influence, and the decision maker will do best to ignore or exclude emotions.

However, various voices have challenged the conventional approach, arguing that emotional processes can support cognition-based rationality, and that emotion and cognition are inseparably intertwined. These arguments are dubbed ‘the critical approach’ and ‘the radical approach’, respectively (Barbalet, 2001). Barbalet (2001: 60) speaks of ‘facilitating emotions’ that help to motivate rationally based action, such as pride in one’s expertise and skill, satisfaction in one’s work or distaste for waste of materials and time. Similarly, Fineman (2000) claims that emotions unavoidably influence our decision making while fulfilling a positive function:

[F]eelings and emotions lubricate, rather than impair, rationality. They make impossible decisions possible; they help ‘do’ the prioritizing, resolve tie breaks, ease the dilemmas. What is important, worth thinking about, is cued by feelings – including those of the ‘gut’. So let hunches, excitement, fear, unease, or comfort, be your guide. (Fineman, 2000: 19)

Moreover, Fineman (2000: 19) argues that the reasons behind one’s decision making are not always conscious or evident, and so these decisions are reached through emotionalised social processes. Emotionalised processes comprising emotional decisions and actions that manifest in a manner considered acceptable for the objectives, purposes and image of an organisation are generally perceived as rational.
Dreyfus’s description (2004: 178) of the stages of skills acquisition – that is, learning processes – portrays emotions as a characteristic of the ‘competent’ stage, in which the knowledge and awareness of all items for consideration and all tasks for completion, any of which could be missed, becomes overwhelming. He claims that, to cope, one must devise a strategy that involves choosing which items/tasks to ignore and which to prioritise. Recruiters are, similarly, likely to rely on the various rules and lines of reasoning common to the practices and discourses of their professional community. Thus, professional recruitment organisations maintain and propagate certain emotions that are used ‘in the service of predictable means and ends’ (Fineman, 2006: 675).

Therefore, as mentioned by Fineman (2006: 676), emotions may be considered ‘both [a] personal and organizational resource through which different “rationalities” and relationships are interpreted, contested and formed’. Emotions thus facilitate organisational processes and aid in decision making. This perspective on emotions, and the consideration of emotions by organisations as essential, may be observed in writings on ‘emotional intelligence’ (see Lopes, 2016; Khalili, 2012).

However, numerous scholars have considered emotions as entities that should be regulated and inhibited in various ways and for various reasons (for example, Lambie, 2009; Barbalet, 2011). Emotions should be appropriately managed to become a resource, and not a hindrance, to professional performance. Lambie (2009: 276) claims that a ‘rational’ action may require inhibition of an emotional impulse to act irrationally, and connects this statement to a discussion on self-understanding:

On the other hand, with reflective awareness, emotion experience is a tremendous source of self-understanding: it gives us information about our concerns and about what matters to us, and most importantly, about our biases. Reflective awareness of emotion experience makes it clear to us that there is a gap between seeming and reality, between the world and our ‘take’ on the world, between how we want to act and how we should act. (Lambie, 2009: 278)

Ironically, the above statement implies that a lack of emotional awareness makes it more difficult for one to remain objective, since the capacity to self-regulate one’s emotions would be limited, thereby leading to subjectivity.

In this article, we take a critical approach to the discourse on objectivity and professionalism. Our interest lies in the work that emotions do – that is, in the emotionalised social processes that recruiters talk about when they describe their use of cybervetting in recruitment.

### Recruitment, information searches and emotions

As initially stated, recruitment may be perceived as a risk-prone activity, in which the employer must be persuaded that a job candidate comes with low risk. Contrary to the ideals of ‘rational’ decision making, described earlier, various emotions may aid candidate selection decisions and trigger information searches during recruitment processes. The following section discusses the association between certainty and information searches and focuses on the role and status of emotions in recruitment processes.

March and Heath (1994: 207f), in an article about decision making, argue that feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty can be reduced through the accumulation
and retrieval of meaningful information. During candidate selection, assessment of information gathered about candidates enables the recruiter to decide which candidates to move forward with. Information is interpreted and transformed into knowledge and certainty, thus enabling an informed decision. Although the information search may have, initially, been emotionally motivated, the subsequent decision – and sense of certainty – may still be considered rational since it is anchored in ‘hard facts’.

However, decisions could also be based on feelings of trust or mistrust, which are different from decisions based on information or knowledge about someone. According to Barbalet (2011: 41), ‘trust is a means of overcoming the absence of evidence concerning the future behavior of a partner or partners in cooperative activity’. In the absence of evidence, trust can be formed by relying, instead, on the feeling of certainty and wanting to believe in this feeling (Barbalet, 2001: 49). Cybervetting is not necessary for a trust-based decision, but when a trust-based decision is made without external ‘facts’, such as the results from cybervetting, it may be harder to present the decision as objective or rational and, thus, legitimate.

Recruitment is typically presented as an objective practice based on knowledge (Herriot, 1993; Lindelöw, 2016). However, Imdorf (2010: 84) claimed, with reference to Voswinkel (2008) that even ‘the most professionalized personnel specialists’ are guided by emotions when screening job applicants and making hiring decisions. Imdorf believes that the prime reason for emotions playing such a central role in recruitment is that they help recruiters to cope with the uncertainty inherent to the process. Bolander’s (2002) study of the processes comprising hiring decisions among Swedish recruiters illustrates Imdorf’s hypothesis. The study showed that talk of intuition, personal chemistry and gut feeling constituted one of the discursive repertoires used by recruiters when describing their grounds for assessment of, and decision making about, job candidates. Although recruiters never talk of actually disliking a candidate, it is not unusual for them to describe a ‘lack of chemistry’ or not ‘clicking’ with one.

Bolander (2002: 71f) also noted that recruiters described listening to one’s gut feeling as a critical part of the process, helping to legitimise the argument that candidate selection decisions are based on emotions. Imdorf described this ‘gut feeling’ as follows: ‘the colloquial “gut feeling” can be considered as a metaphor for experience-based as well as belief-based and biased organizational forms of judgement, incorporated and naturalized in organizational gatekeepers’.

Gut feelings are experienced by the individual, and as such, are subjective. Yet, they are also considered emotional reflections of previously acquired knowledge or conviction and, thus, become an indicator of what one already ‘knows’. Gut feelings are discussed in the next section which covers the concept of epistemic emotions.

This idea, which celebrate the influence of preunderstandings, highlights more problematic issues involving prejudices and biased judgement. Imdorf’s (2010) study of Swiss employers supports the moral argument against relying on emotions for hiring decisions, illustrating how emotions are sometimes framed as a ‘necessary bad’. The ‘bad’ stems, for instance, from the fact that an emotional assessment of an applicant could be based on stereotypes, power relations and prior experiences (Imdorf, 2010: 101). In accordance, Bolander (2002) found that the emotional repertoire was often used alongside an assertion that recruitment processes could hardly be considered ‘fair’.

Recruiters in Bolander’s (2002: 82) study often stressed the difference between professional decisions and emotional or subjective decisions to manage the partly
unwelcome use of emotions in decision making. Decisions based on one’s own experience (that is, deciding based on trust), was considered professional, while deciding frivolously was deemed unprofessional. Some emotions were seen as subjective and obstructive to the professional practice, but others were apparently believed to facilitate the quest for knowledge or truth – that is, ‘epistemic emotions’.

Emotions related to the lack of, or search for, knowledge may be considered ‘epistemic’ and include feelings such as: certainty or uncertainty; doubt or confidence; surprise; curiosity or interest; or a hunch. According to Terpe (2016: 5), epistemic feelings are ‘thought to inform about the quality of one’s knowledge and beliefs and to influence processes of knowledge acquisition and belief formation’. For example, and with reference to de Sousa (2008: 191), Terpe (2016: 7) stated that if something is perceived as evident or obvious, ‘there seems to be no need to explore or explain it further’. On the other hand, the feeling of uncertainty requires one – in this case, the recruiter – to further examine and inquire about a candidate until one is ready to trust one’s own evaluation and (possibly) the candidate as well. The aforementioned ‘gut feelings’ may be defined as a feeling that something or someone is intuitively right, good, or discomforting or unsettling (Fineman, 2000). As demonstrated by the abovementioned studies, a professional’s gut feeling or intuition may strengthen their confidence and capacity to make decisions.

Method

These analyses are based on qualitative interviews with 37 representatives of various public and private organisations working in: information technology (IT), personnel, transport and logistics, sales, restaurants, legal counselling, education, manufacturing and so on. The interviewees were personnel specialists, employers, managers and recruiters who had all been working in recruitment and had either regularly, or on a single occasion, used cybervetting as part of the recruitment process. The 37 interviewees comprised 21 women and 16 men. Although the interviewees held a variety of job titles, the term ‘recruiters’ is used to refer to them all.

Contact with recruiters was established in various ways. Eleven recruiters participated in a pilot study for which contact was initiated through public presentations delivered by members of the research team. Additionally, we published and distributed a call for participation in this study: on the university website; to human resources alumni from two Swedish universities; to organisations advertising job vacancies; and to all recruiting managers in the public administration of a large municipality. Study participants were selected from recruiters who responded to the call according to the following criteria: 1) all recruiters should have personal experience cybervetting as part of a recruitment process; and 2) the organisations represented should vary in size, sector (public/private) and industry.

During 2013 and through 2015, selected recruiters were interviewed using a semi-structured approach (Mason, 2002). Thirty interviews were conducted with individuals (n = 23) or groups (n = 7), each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. In four cases, the interviews were also combined with observations of recruiters cybervetting. However, as these observations only constitute a minor part of the data, they were primarily used to confirm the impressions we got from the interviews. Central topics for the interviews included: recruiters’ motives for cybervetting; types of information reviewed; justification for cybervetting relative to ethical concerns; considerations...
of the validity and reliability of various search hits; and influences of the results on their candidate assessments. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in detail.

Next, the transcripts were analysed using an inductive approach with open coding, followed by a process of categorisation and comparison of the established codes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Codes that captured emotion were of most significance, and more focused coding was conducted on these codes to analyse instances of descriptive emotional talk as well as expressive emotional language or non-verbal expressions (Imdorf, 2010: 96 elaborates on these concepts). This focused coding analysis evaluated descriptive emotions expressed through participants’ use of phrases such as ‘gut feeling’, ‘hunches’, ‘bad/good vibes’ about someone or something, and ‘fingertip sense’. How such emotional utterances were expressively emphasised, or nuanced, through laughter or the use of irony, were also noted. In this final step of the analysis, the coding of the interviews was developed relative to previous research and theoretical frameworks dealing with similar issues.

Quotes and extracts from the interviews were translated from Swedish to English and rewritten for improved readability. The use of square brackets – [ ] – in text denotes that the original wording was changed either to guarantee confidentiality of a jobseeker or recruiter, or for clarification. An ellipsis – … – indicates a pause in dialogue, while an ellipsis inside square brackets – […] – denotes removal of text from the quote. Parentheses – ( ) – were used for short interjections and for non-verbal, emotional expressions.

**Emotions that motivate, restrain and direct cybervetting**

Analyses of the interviews with recruiters revealed that epistemic emotions (Terpe, 2016) constitute a major group of emotions that impelled the recruiters to cybervet. These emotions include emotions that spur recruiters’ use of cybervetting to find knowledge, or the ‘truth’, about the candidate such as mistrust and uncertainty, but also their antonyms, trust and certainty, which restrain the use of cybervetting by making it seem unnecessary. In addition to the epistemic emotions, interviewees described or expressed several other emotions influencing their work. Feelings of curiosity, guilt, shame, pride, pleasure and discomfort both motivated and restrained, as well as directed, the practice of cybervetting. The subsequent sections discuss the role of epistemic emotions first, followed by the role of other emotions, and conclude with a section on verification of emotions.

**Mistrust, suspicion and the drive for certainty**

Risks associated with hiring were evident in participating recruiters’ reflections on how they develop initial trust in, or mistrust of, the jobseeker. For instance, the recruiters spoke of getting good or bad vibes, of having doubts or suspicions; these are expressions of a latent mistrust also identified in previous research on cybervetting (for example, Berkelaar, 2010). The negative feelings, in particular, are presented in the interviews as motivation to cybervet the candidate:
Ip20: When I feel that ‘Ok, I’m able to evaluate this person based on the information that we already have’, then I usually don’t feel a need to google. But it has happened, that you get this sense that … Well, something isn’t right. … Then I sometimes cybervet, just to get … well, just a little […] ‘I need more. It feels as if I need more info on this person.’ Or, at other times, you might meet a candidate and wonder ‘How come you haven’t got a job at the moment?’ or ‘Why did you leave that employer?’

As illustrated in the excerpt above, the recruiter described how the information submitted by the job candidate may be sufficient for making a decision, and therefore, any perceived need for cybervetting is restrained. The same excerpt also shows that, at other times, the recruiter motivate cybervetting by feelings of suspicion or of something not being ‘right’ with the information provided by the applicant. While cybervetting in these situations is justified by recruiters’ specific suspicions, recruiters also use more general suspicions of jobseekers and their self-presentations as justifications. For example, recruiters are motivated to search for additional information online to ensure that ‘no skeletons [are] left in the closet’. In these cases, recruiters act on a more general emotion of mistrust rather than suspicions raised regarding a specific candidate.

Interviewer: Do you remember how you reasoned, the thoughts that made you google?
Ip24: No, just curiosity, I guess. Well, yes, actually it was like that: ‘maybe one should…’. Or, maybe a fear that ‘what if I missed something?’ Maybe … ‘Because everything else appeared too good’ [laughs]. And everyone was so positive and all, and I guess that … well, that it might have been the fear of … ‘What if there might be something that […]’ And I don’t think that it would have been like that […] I don’t recall ever thinking that it would lead to a rejection or anything, but rather that something might come up that … something that we do not know, that we would like to understand, or ask about, or likewise.

In cases exemplified by the quote above, the justification for cybervetting is the recruiter’s desire to overcome feelings of uncertainty or insecurity. However, one recruiter was generally very critical of cybervetting because it tended to position online information as the ‘key’ and risked undermining recruiters’ confidence in their own competence to evaluate candidates. This recruiter argued that cybervetting led to increased uncertainty, yet deemed it difficult to refrain entirely from cybervetting and voiced several reasons for practising it, including to complement and verify information, to act on one’s gut feeling, and to ensure no negative information about the applicant exists – in other words, to overcome general suspicion:

Ip 32: As of today, we haven’t set a policy on whether candidates should be googled or not. Instead it depends on our meeting with the individual. Sometimes, after meetings and based on our experience, we feel safe. At those times, we feel that ‘this is right’. Foremost, we rely on our 15 years of business experience. We instantly get a sense, based on the information provided during the meeting, that ‘sure, this fits.’ If a person has worked on a
specific project with a certain outcome, then we’ll know about that project. So we can pretty quickly conclude that the information matches what we already know. It is when information is incongruent, or when we get – as we generally call it – a ‘gut feeling’ that ‘I need to find out more’. Then we might do a general google search on that name. Just to see what comes up. […]

Interviewer: So what are the difficulties in choosing not to use [cybervetting] then?

Ip 32: [pauses] You’re asking good questions! Ehm … the knowledge that if I don’t do it, and knowing that there might be something out there, that would make me alter my decision. That feeling. And that feeling is actually so strong that it is hard to resist … at least the google-search. Ehm… it could be a way for me to make amends: ‘At least I did a google search, I did not find anything, my decision is right.’ It could be like that.

The more general motive for cybervetting, as presented in the excerpt above, is to achieve the feeling of safety that comes with knowing all accessible information was considered (cf. March and Heath, 1994); that is, to feel safe, the recruiter must also be able to present a feeling of certainty. The impression that this experienced recruiter would previously form after meeting a candidate is, thus, no longer enough. The awareness that there might be additional information that could be found online, and the fear of missing potentially essential information and, thus, doing a bad job, is expected to result in feelings of uncertainty and thus compels this recruiter to cybervet. Illustratively, this recruiter portrayed cybervetting as a means of easing his conscience.

**Rational ideals, gut feelings and fingertip sense**

The influence and practice of cybervetting and emotions are balanced against notions of appropriate methods for evaluating candidates and managing information and emotions. The benefit of professional use of emotions (for example, Imdorf, 2010) is set against the risk of being misled or biased by them (for example, Riabacke, 2007). This section presents the impact of ideals of rationality and objectivity on the use, regulation and management of emotions such as gut feelings (cf. Dreyfus, 2004; Lambie, 2009; Barbalet, 2011).

Some recruiters confessed that they easily get carried away while cybervetting, spending excess time on searching for what they themselves defined as irrelevant aspects. The interviewee quoted below described how this kind of search – for others more than for herself – may be as equally addictive as a ‘sugar rush’ and, thus, hard to resist:

Ip14: Often, it is kind of dirty, like ‘Now I found something!’ But it can’t be allowed to replace the whole evaluation process. … But there is such a risk. Because it gets […] I believe that the brain is triggered somehow, it’s like sugar.

Participating recruiters argued that this kind of search is problematic because impressions based on cybervetting should not be allowed to dominate the evaluations. This opinion was sometimes based on doubts about the reliability and validity of the sources of online information, and was sometimes based on a critique of allowing
emotionally based impressions to guide decision making (cf. Riabacke, 2007; Bergman Blix and Wettergren, 2016), especially if the impressions were based on the ‘wrong’ kind of emotions and prejudices.

However, cybervetting often challenges the belief that there is a ‘rational’ recruitment method. Most organisations lack policies or guidelines regarding cybervetting practices, including how the information from online searches is to be used for recruitment. Research on reliable cybervetting methods for recruiters is also scarce. Perhaps due to this lack of institutional guidance concerning how to use cybervetting and how to judge online information, the interviewees sometimes talked about their gut feelings as the only available means of guidance (see also Bolander, 2002; Imdorf, 2010). Still, the ideal of rational decision making is visible also in such talk about how gut feelings can guide cybervetting. For example, many stated that cybervetting practices and results require verification by more formal or neutral measures. The recruiter quoted above who likened the irresistibility of conducting information searches to a sugar addiction stressed that use of ‘gut feeling’ is recommended only for the experienced recruiter:

Ip14: And somehow it may also be that this ‘gut feeling’ needs to be quantified in some way, in relation to the customer. And to be verified. And that may not be […] HR [human resources], I believe, may have […] Based on ones’ experience, having done many [recruitments], you can attain this experience, of a gut feeling, and dare to trust that. But if you are new, or if you have not done that many recruitments in your position, then that gut feeling may not be properly founded.

It is interesting that the recruiter just quoted use the expression “dare to trust that” when she talks about experienced recruiters’ gut feelings. This can be connected to the previous section on mistrust and suspicion, where we showed how cybervetting could be presented as a must in order for recruiters to be able to present feelings of certainty. Through the reference to quantification and verification, the rational ideal is present in the quotation. However, a notion of professionalism, as constituted through experience, challenges this rational discourse and enables the use of gut feelings to justify decisions based on cybervetting.

During the interviews, the recruiters often referred to the Swedish concept of fingertoppskänsla [fingertip sense], a term that lacks a clear English definition. Fingertip sense can be used, like gut feeling, when describing intuition or an instinct, but also captures a high level of sensitivity to social situations and relationships. Moreover, it often encompasses the kind of special knowledge that comes with experience from occupational practice. As part of her toolbox, the recruiter quoted above relied on her fingertip sense to restrain a misguided use of gut feeling, and to determine when to consider and when to ignore certain information, when to continue the search and when to stop:

Interviewer: Mhm. So the problem in those cases is that one acts too much on a gut feeling?
Ip14: Mhm. I do believe so. It’s like that. And that one lets it influence the decision that one will make to too high an extent. ’Cause the knowledge gets … the information is open and the knowledge is there, but how we manage the context […] Because it’s hard enough, I think, hard enough to
set up this competency profile, and hard enough to get the managers to stick to it. Not to be carried away by ‘oh what a nice person’, or […] And that is when you need a fingertip sense to know what to consider in the evaluation.

As described by the interviewee in the above quotation, it can be hard to stick to competency profile – that is, the established criteria for the job position, and easy to be “carried away” by positive feelings about likeable candidates. This notion of interfering emotions, and the importance to keep them in check, corresponds with Lambie’s (2009) claim that self-understanding and emotional awareness is necessary for the individual to regulate and inhibit emotions, and thereby, to act rationally. Another recruiter portrayed the gut feeling – being based on lengthy experience in the business – as an incentive to cybervet, describing it (possibly in jest) as ‘science’. This recruiter then laughed and concluded that it is gut feeling:

Interviewer: That is, when something feels unclear [Ip32: Yes] or weird after the interview?
Ip32: [interjecting] Yes, it’s scientific! [both laugh] It is gut feeling. It is when … well, we are not feeling safe with what we know. Then we often do, well, let’s call it a ‘control search’.

This recruiter perceived gut feelings as part of a recruiter’s professional competence. However, he was simultaneously aware that use of emotions is not considered sufficiently systematic and formalised to be defined as science, nor in line with the rational ideals that relies on psychometric methods and objective ambitions (Herriot, 1993; Lindelöw, 2016).

Verification of one’s feeling

The recruiters used cybervetting to verify their emotions and impressions about a candidate. For many study participants, intuition or ‘gut feeling’ were considered appropriate emotions and described as potentially essential to recruiters’ decisions, sometimes even more influential than cybervetting findings. Still, intuition does not hold sufficient weight relative to the ideals of rational decision making, which require the use of more formal, more objective methods. One interviewee expressed this as a need to ‘verify’ one’s emotions:

Ip34: In this business, it all comes down to gut feelings. And one generally wants to have that confirmed, the things you feel and think.

Thus, cybervetting may be used for verification of emotions, but impressions based on cybervetting findings may also require verification. The latter may be verified through offline contacts or additional online searches. The results from subsequent web reviews can then add up to an ‘accumulated gut feeling’, a term coined by one of the recruiters that may be interpreted with the help of March and Heath’s (1994) stance on the accumulation of meaningful information as essential for reducing uncertainty.

Whether the searches provide the recruiter a sense of certainty and safety further depends on that recruiter’s initial impression of the candidate. Several interviewees
stressed that they wanted to find ‘nothing’ – that is, nothing negative – in cases when that first impression provided the recruiter a ‘good’ feeling about the jobseeker. In the following excerpts, HR-personnel from a municipality commented on a survey result. These excerpts demonstrate the opinions of a substantial number of participating recruiters who reported that findings from cybervetting had no effect on their hiring decisions:

Ip21: In reality, it’s a safety belt, really, what you’re doing. [Ip4: Yes, exactly! That’s what it is.] I haven’t expected to find anything, because I don’t want to find anything.
Ip4: [interjecting] I’m content with not finding anything.
Ip21: Yes, exactly, I don’t want to find anything because generally it’s … well, often it’s something negative, and that’s why I don’t want to. And I do think this influences how you respond [Ip4: Exactly], that you […]
Ip4: [interjecting] That: ‘Oh, that’s nice, I didn’t find anything that affected […]’
Ip21: [interjecting] And that’s faulty reasoning, saying that ‘it didn’t add anything’. Yes, it did. It added a sense of certainty, that this is a person that you want to keep in the process.

Use of cybervetting to verify emotions and impressions allowed the recruiters to feel more confident in their own assessments. The aforementioned extracts provide additional evidence that one motivation for practising cybervetting is recruiters’ strong desire for certainty; a feeling that is legitimised through the accumulation of knowledge and by exploring ‘all’ available sources.

Curiosity

Another epistemic emotion that many of the recruiters in this study also acted on is curiosity. In the quest for knowledge and certainty, curiosity both spurred additional searches and directed the recruiter’s interest and engagement in which weblinks recruiters followed and what information they noticed:

Ip19: But now this piques my curiosity [Ip follows the link to a site listing phone numbers and addresses]. And then I think ‘Well, yes, I knew he lived in that neighbourhood.’ […] And also ‘Yes, it seems to be correct. He lives where he himself stated that he lives.’

In the quotation above, the recruiter accounted for her curiosity by stating that the search helped verify that the jobseeker gave correct information. Therefore, the findings helped establish the candidate as a trustworthy person. Yet, while several recruiters find motivation for cybervetting in their experience of it as a ‘fun’ activity, curiosity also fulfilled a different function: inspiring the individual to a self-indulging activity in the form of information searches. This was especially the case when recruiters hit results that were difficult to find, surprising or unexpected, or when managers or clients praised them for their effort:
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Ip29: It guarantees that we actually have a candidate, so I’m happy to spend that extra time. It has kind of become a hobby for me. It isn’t really something I’ve been doing during office hours … I have no stipulated office hours, so I can work whenever. So I’ve been sitting on the couch at home, with the phone, searching … At 10 p.m., you know. So it has not been part of my work tasks, really. I’ve rather been doing it … well, in my free time, I’d say. Just because I find it fun.

This recruiter was not the only one who described cybervetting as a ‘hobby’ or an interest engaged in during free time. Other interviewees also described cybervetting as an opportunity to be ‘working with one’s hobby’ or acting as a ‘recruitment detective’. Based on these descriptions, it appears the personal satisfaction involved in online information searches is integrated with the recruiters’ notions of occupational practice and professional ideals. This integration will be further discussed in the next section.

Guilt, shame and discomfort

As illustrated in the previous section on curiosity, epistemic emotions are not the only emotions that recruiters use to justify cyberveting. Emotions involved in one’s responses to a more social or individual rationality can also be used to motivate cyberveting. This section provides more examples of emotions, other than epistemic emotions, and discusses how these emotions also restrain and direct the use of cybervetting.

Of the recruiters who cybervetted most frequently, some referred to the practice in jest using terms like ‘stalking’, ‘spying’ and feeling ‘sneaky’, indicating a feeling of guilt or shame from breaching the line between work and private spheres. Sometimes, this talk was accompanied by more explicit reflections: on the practice as being controversial, and on how others perceive it. These discussions indicated that the recruiters, in many cases, did not consider cybervetting a fully legitimate or ethical method (Backman and Hedenus, 2019). Whether this was the opinion of the recruiters, or a perception by the recruiters as being the opinion of the public, is less clear. One recruiter who routinely cybervets all candidates expressed confident feelings of entitlement to cybervet several times during the interviews, yet recognised that others may disagree. The following excerpt presents this recruiter’s arguments for feeling entitled and includes a ‘correction’ to her initial, spontaneous statement about being a stalker:

Ip19: Mostly, it’s about my own curiosity. There is some kind of stalker in me, apparently, so that … Ehm … You know, I’m genuinely interested in people and then the interest grows […] So what I said, about finding out stuff about the parents and other things, and to get an idea about that … I believe that is really important for me to know, you know. Because that is what has formed this person.

The excerpt above shows the recruiter first framing her ‘stalking’ as ‘curiosity’, then giving her curiosity a more positive connotation by labelling it as a ‘genuine interest in people’. Moreover, she argues that it is ‘really important’ (for candidate selection) to understand what has made the jobseeker who she or he is by following up on information that ‘appears’. By referring to the epistemic nature of curiosity – since it leads to improved knowledge – the shameful, guilt-burdened act of stalking is
reframed as a professional, decent, thorough work practice. This translative work may be understood in light of Barbalet’s (2001: 42) argument that emotional regulation typically occurs when the emotion conflicts with the prevailing norms of the particular context.

The awareness that others may not share the belief that cybervetting is legitimate, necessary or relevant for the recruitment process affects recruiters’ decisions on whether to inform jobseekers of an online search being conducted or of the findings from those information searches. In fact, in most cases, recruiters preferred to remain silent on having cybervetted the jobseekers. As illustrated in the following extract, the decision to remain silent about cybervetting practices may be based on feelings of guilt or embarrassment:

Interviewer: And when you meet the candidate in person, do you sometimes follow up on things that you have found online? That you say during the interview that ‘I saw this on your Facebook profile,’ or something like that? 
Ip36: No, I’ve never done that! No. Ehm … That feels … I know, I’ve already done [the online search] but it feels like I’m being … intrusive, somehow, I think.

Interestingly, in this excerpt, the interviewee confessed to intrusion, and her guilty feeling of trespassing was, thus, appropriately framed. In addition, discomfort about cybervetting and about receiving too much information was sometimes implicit in the interviews and observations and, at other times, explicitly mentioned by the interviewees. In the following extract from one of the observations, the recruiters start laughing while cybervetting:

Ip12: [The candidate] has posted a comment here […] ‘Super good service and a professional attendance by [NN] who performed tooth bleaching.’ 
IP13: Well, ok … [loud laughter] IP12: [laughter] 
IP13: Yes, then we know! She has fixed her teeth. [choked laughter]

Although laughter may stem from various emotions and can render different functions (for example, Adelswärd, 1989; Billig, 2005), the laughter from the above observation was interpreted to indicate the recruiters’ embarrassment for learning too much information, or simply irrelevant information, about the jobseeker’s private life. Discomfort was also explicitly mentioned in some interviews:

Interviewer: Can you describe that sense of discomfort? 
Ip20: No, it’s like … well, sometimes you get to know things, even if there is nothing wrong or anything, but you get to know things that … Well, it’s not evident that I needed to know that, you know. Like that. 
Interviewer: And what could that be, for example? 
Ip20: Well, it might be that the person is homosexual. But has not told us, or implied it somehow, during the interview. Which means, probably, that he or she does not want … or has not come out … or … didn’t, in this context, want us to know. Well, yes, that is one of those typical issues. How the hell do you handle that? So you quickly forget about it! [laughter] And keep it to yourself.
In the excerpt above, the recruiter’s concern about the jobseeker’s integrity is what makes her want to ‘quickly forget about’ what she had found. An expression of professional pride in the ability to ignore uncovered information that is considered too private or irrelevant for the job can also be discerned from this excerpt.

Concluding discussion

Following the digital development of recruitment practices, cybervetting is a relatively novel yet contested element of many contemporary recruitment processes. In efforts to find a means of integrating the practice into previously applied, more conventional methods of finding, assessing and screening job candidates, recruiters participating in this study spoke of rationality and objective criteria, with supportive emotion-based evaluations. This analysis demonstrated the work emotions ‘do’ in recruiting personnel in the digital era, focusing on the practice of cybervetting. How recruiters feel about the candidate, about the information they obtain, and about the legitimacy of the cybervetting practice, clearly affects whether and how they implement cybervetting in their work processes. Application of emotions during decision making is, however, generally perceived with scepticism. When describing their own cybervetting practices, the interviewed recruiters argued both for and against such critical voices, and discourses of professionalism were used to both justify and to problematise the use of cybervetting.

Emotions put to work

Emotions were used to motivate further online searches, to direct the kinds of information that recruiters look for, or to restrain the use of online searches. To begin with how they motivated cybervetting, the analyses produced many examples of facilitating emotions which, according to Barbalet (2001), help to motivate goal-oriented action. These emotions included pride in one’s expertise and skill (for example, to get praise for their effort from managers or clients) and satisfaction in one’s work (for example, because it is fun), and the fear of missing potentially essential information about a candidate and, thus, doing a bad job.

Most apparent, however, was the use of epistemic emotions, such as curiosity, suspicion or mistrust, which further motivated recruiters’ use of cybervetting. An extensive volume of information used as grounds for decision making was presented as reducing the risk involved with hiring and to provide recruiters with a sense of certainty and safety. Emotions also helped direct the recruiters’ online search processes by offering leads on what to search for and on what information to consider when assessing the candidate. For instance, suspicion or curiosity triggered recruiters’ desire to know ‘more’ about a certain characteristic such as former work performance or events involving the jobseeker. Finally, epistemic emotions like trust and certainty restrained the use of cybervetting by making it feel unwarranted (see also Hedenus and Backman, 2018), aided by emotions such as guilt, shame, discomfort and professional pride.

Professionalism and emotions

Acknowledging the importance of emotions – primarily epistemic emotions – and displaying knowledge of when to act on them appears to be part of recruiters’
professional identity work – in other words, by claiming one’s position as a professional (Hedenus and Backman, 2018). For instance, the professional ‘gut feeling’ may be presented as a trustworthy guide, while the lay equivalent is seen as unreliable (see also Imdorf, 2010). The professional’s fingertip sense is used to distinguish between a lay gut feeling and a professional gut feeling.

Emotions may help recruiters to practise their professional ethics by directing or restricting their use of cybervetting. They may also help recruiters evaluate and manage information discovered online with care and empathy. Yet, to understand the interviewees’ perceptions of their own emotions and the extent to which they allowed emotions to influence their cybervetting, their discourse on cybervetting must be interpreted relative to various notions of emotions and rational decision making.

According to the conventional understanding of emotions and rationality, emotions hinder rational recruitment decision making. This means that the recruiter’s ‘hunch’ about a candidate does not further legitimise the online search. Recruiters must be able to present control of their emotions; preventing themselves being carried away by the possibilities posed by additional information from searches, or by a personal curiosity driving a desire to learn more about a candidate. In other words, recruiters must distance themselves from subjective emotions and the influence of their own prejudices so that they can represent an ‘objective’ mind.

Under the critical or radical approach, emotions are instead framed as a positive or unavoidable element of the recruitment process. From this perspective, emotions facilitate selection processes and aid decision making (cf. Fineman, 2006). Cybervetting is warranted as it offers a means to finding more ‘objective’ proof to verify a feeling. Therefore, emotions are considered guides of the quest for truth that must be complemented, in this case, by online findings. This logic is also based on the assumption that the information available online is truthful.

Recruiters participating in this study either leaned towards one of these approaches to emotions or navigated back-and-forth between them, trying to incorporate emotions into the recruitment process while still making decisions according to professional and rational ideals. As illustrated in the analysis, the interviewees sometimes reframed emotion-based cybervetting – that is, audits driven by curiosity – by ‘translating’ curiosity into an epistemic emotion, thus better aligning with professional logic and recruiter self-presentation as competent and thorough in one’s job practice. Some writers refer to such professional management of emotions and emotional awareness as ‘emotional intelligence’ (Fineman, 2006; Lopes, 2016). However, we argue that the translative work should rather be understood as a way of navigating the conflicting discourses on the roles of emotions in hiring decisions, and as a means of presenting such emotionalised processes as rational by accounting for them in organisational objectives (for example, to find a candidate that socially fits the work group) (see Fineman, 2000).

In making use of emotions, the interviewed recruiters often stressed the significance of experience-based knowledge. Experience was then presented as a professional, tacit knowledge with an emotional foundation that is – because the necessary vocabulary for describing emotionalised processes is lacking – often hard to articulate. Yet explanations of how decisions were made must still be articulated, and emotions, therefore, must be rationalised. This is done by referring to emotions, not as subjective and unfounded, but as based on professional intuition and experience.

In sum, recruiters managed to account for their use of emotions in light of demands for rational, non-emotional, decision making by: acknowledging emotions
as attached to an experience-based knowledge; translating feelings considered to be subjective, such as curiosity, into epistemic emotions; and distinguishing lay feelings from professional feelings.

**Contributions and implications**

Focusing on the use of cybervetting, this study adds to existing research on recruitment and management in a digital era (for example, Ajunwa and Greene, 2019; Halpin and Smith, 2019). The access to information posted on the internet alters the balance of power between employers and potential employees, and challenges the – supposedly objective – selection and decision-making procedures in the field. From these changes, new kinds of emotion work may arise and the findings presented here contribute to our knowledge about such new forms.

Moreover, the findings of this study are also applicable to a more general discussion about the role of emotions in decision making and recruitment. Emotions in recruitment work have largely been neglected, primarily because dominant recruitment models build on the conventional approach in which social aspects oppose the esteemed objective ideals (for example, Herriot, 1993). Our description of recruiters’ use of emotions, along with professional ideals, provides an important empirical contribution to this field, and supports previously voiced critiques of the notion of recruiting as a rational, objective process. The findings of this study lead to the argument that notions of professionalism, experience and emotions intersect and should be further explored, both by researchers and by professional recruiters.

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**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**Notes**

1 On the contrary, cybervetting is generally conducted in an unstructured manner, such that searches are performed as part of some recruitment processes and on some candidates (not all), and at different points during the process (Hedenus and Backman, 2018).

2 Additional reasons to keep the cybervetting practice covert are, as stated in the interviews, that the recruiters do not want to worry the candidates, or that they feel unsure about the reliability and validity of the information. Some also express that it is unnecessary to speak of more openly since it is already ‘obvious’ to everyone that employers cybervet jobseekers (Hedenus and Backman, 2018).

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