

Uncovering the Promises and Challenges of Social Media Use in the Low-Wage Labor Market: Insights from Employers

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become an effective recruitment tool for higher-waged and white-collar professionals. Yet, past studies have questioned its effectiveness for the recruitment of lower-waged workers. It is also unclear whether or how employers leverage social media in their recruitment of low-wage job seekers, and how social media could better support the needs of both stakeholders. Therefore, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with employers of low-wage workers in the U.S. We found that employers: use social media, primarily Facebook, to access large pools of active low-wage job seekers; and recognize indirect signals about low-wage job seekers' commitment and job readiness. Our work suggests that there remains a visible, yet unaddressed power imbalance between low-wage workers and employers in the use of social media, which risks further destabilizing the precarious labor market.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Social media; Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**; • **Social and professional topics** → *Employment issues*.

KEYWORDS

Social media; low-wage worker; recruitment; workplace studies; impression management; power asymmetries; materiality

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1 INTRODUCTION

Employers, now more than ever, are using social media to search for employees. In fact, 96% of employers used social media in their recruiting process according to reports [33] and over 70% of them used social media to screen candidates before hiring them. However, about 30% of the United States (U.S.) workforce were low-wage workers who earned an hourly wage less than \$14.50 prior to the

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COVID-19 pandemic [22].¹ Past work in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) suggests that low-wage workers, especially those with few offline connections such as friends, colleagues, or other personal contacts, did not find social media helpful in landing a job [67]. Searching for employment is challenging for these workers, especially when the Internet and social media (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook) are involved [20, 36, 49, 57]. In addition, low-wage workers found online impression management to be appropriate for “more professional” job seekers than for themselves [16]. Yet, there are few empirical studies that explain how influential the use of social media is and how employers interpret low-wage job seekers' data from social media. In other words, the benefits and pitfalls of social media for employment purposes in the labor market are unclear. Therefore, this article seeks to investigate the following questions:

- RQ1: What are the promises of social media in low-wage job recruitment?
- RQ2: What kind of information and signals are employers looking for about job seekers in social media?
- RQ3: What are the challenges of using social media in the low-wage labor market?

Through 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews with employers of low-wage workers in Southeast Michigan, we found that social media is beneficial in connecting employers to low-wage job seekers via online groups (e.g., Facebook employment groups) and facilitating direct communication to job seekers (RQ1). Employers searched social media platforms for signals about job seekers' level of commitment and job readiness. In particular, employers were looking for “quality” job seekers who showed up for work on time, had good attitudes, and were consistent and reliable (RQ2). In addition, our interviews revealed that employers faced two major challenges of using social media in low-wage recruitment: finding high-quality applications and maintaining consistent contact with job seekers (RQ3). These challenges reflect a broader power imbalance between employers and job seekers in the low-wage labor market. Overall, social media provides low-wage job seekers opportunities to access social capital by providing access to social ties for employment information. However, these ties are fragile and contingent on how employers surveil and interpret low-wage job seekers' impression management and information disclosure practices.

According to Orlikowski, technologies adopted in organizations embody “particular symbolic and material properties” [52, p.406]. Material properties are aspects and features intrinsic and inherent

¹In this article, we refer to low-wage workers as those receiving an hourly wage that can bring a family of three (one adult and two children) up to 125% of the federal poverty level [22]. For the year 2018, this cutoff was associated with an hourly wage of \$14.50 or an annual income of \$30,160 or lower.

to the technology and artifacts [41]. For example, the “material properties” of help-desk queuing software include the ability for IT support technicians to create new tickets based on customers’ requests [40]. Emphasizing the material properties of technology-in-use allows us to focus on what features and affordances a new technology has and how these features do (or do not) allow individuals to achieve their goals [41]. In this paper, we foreground the material properties of social media platforms to investigate the ways in which these platforms facilitate and constrain the recruitment process in the low-wage labor market. We consider how employing social media in low-wage recruitment disrupt the ways in which employers recruit and engage with job seekers, highlighting how this process is being shaped by and is shaping the social context of low-wage labor markets. We discuss the unaddressed power imbalances between employers and job seekers that are exacerbated in social media, which risks further destabilizing an already precarious labor market. Altogether, this paper aims to understand 1) how designers and practitioners can support low-wage job seekers’ employment process through insights from employers and 2) how to situate and position social media platforms in the structure of low-wage labor markets.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, over 14 million Americans lost their jobs from February to May, 2020 [37]. While this study was conducted before the pandemic, its implications today are perhaps more important to our field now that traditional offline recruitment is less available as an option and that social media is now more essential than before [38]. This study builds on a growing thread of HCI research that seeks to understand and address the needs of those who are disadvantaged as it relates to employment (e.g., low-income, less-educated) [11, 16, 17, 19]. Further, this study is in response to recent calls by HCI researchers to investigate employers’ perspectives on online job search [67]. Given that a great deal of research investigates job seekers’ perspectives on online job search, it is important to compare differences in their use of social media for employment to how employers discern this information. Uncovering these differences could provide valuable insights that allow better support for job seekers and the designers and practitioners who create online tools to support their employment process.

2 RELATED WORK

We begin our related work by reviewing prior HCI literature on employment and the use of social media in job search and recruitment. We conclude by providing characteristics and experiences of low-wage workers to highlight the systematic barriers and challenges that they encounter while seeking employment. The aim here is to provide context into the contributions of this work.

2.1 Employment Studies in HCI

A number of HCI studies have investigated ways to improve the economic conditions and mediate the social inequalities of low-wage workers, revolving around (1) assessing the impact of digital technologies on underserved workers’ situated experiences at workplace [14, 16, 19, 39, 62] and (2) designing tools to facilitate low-resource workers’ job search activities, including improving

résumés and job interview skills [15], supporting long-term career development [17, 43], and facilitating community-based entrepreneurship [29]. For example, Dombrowski et al. examined major socio-technical practices adopted by low-wage workers to address their wage theft and contributed design recommendations to support low-wage workers in the workplace [19]. Wheeler and Dillahunt’s work examined how low-wage workers navigated job opportunities online and found that they took advantage of social media in various stages of job search process [67]. In particular, this study revealed that low-wage job seekers used Facebook to find potential employers’ contact information and to gain insight into potential job opportunities. However, these researchers suggest low-wage job seekers, especially those who lack existing social connections, still question the effectiveness of social media in actually landing a job since they consider information received from social connections more trustworthy. Most of this literature, however, only discussed low-wage workers’ use of technology and social media when searching for jobs. Employer perspectives, which are understudied, are necessary to better support low-wage workers’ job search [67] (RQ1,2,3).

Past HCI research has also examined the use of social media in the job search process. Burke and Kraut investigated Facebook’s role in connecting the unemployed with strong and weak ties to cope with stress and land new jobs [7]. They found that direct communication with stronger ties on Facebook increased opportunities for landing a job. Nevertheless, this study did not explore opportunities for social media to support social capital building between job seekers and employers directly. There is both theoretical and empirical evidence, however, suggesting that having direct access to those who are in positions to hire (e.g., access to vertical capital) is beneficial in the job search and for economic growth [14, 31, 69]. Thus, our empirical investigation will uncover whether and, if so, how employers use social media to build ties with low-wage job seekers and if opportunities exist for low-wage workers to benefit from social media in this way.

2.2 Social Media and Recruitment

The recruitment process is built on attracting, screening, selecting, and hiring “the best employee based on skill, experience, and organization fit” [45, p.33]. In a recent survey, recruiters considered LinkedIn (77%) and Facebook (63%) to be the most popular social media channels for recruitment [34]. Another study found professional platforms like LinkedIn to be a more effective resource than non-professional platforms like Facebook, in the recruitment process [49]. However, the nature of digital technologies and social media make them more effective for recruiting younger individuals [35, 45, 59], educated talent [23, 45], and white-collar professionals [35].

Prior research on employment investigated the advantages of social media recruitment over conventional recruitment where advertising for job openings is done in newspapers, job boards, and television. While conventional recruitment’s main objective is to fill job openings with those who are actively seeking employment [53], social media recruitment allows employers and recruiters to access a wider pool of job applicants [2, 20, 57], including both *active* and *passive* job seekers (i.e., those who are currently employed

but open to new job opportunities) [36, 58]. Social media recruitment is also more cost-effective [57, 58] and enables employers and hiring professionals to provide potential job seekers with long-term personalized engagement throughout the recruitment process [18]. Jeske and Shultz’s recent study, however, raises caution about the ethical and legal concerns associated with using social media in recruitment and hiring [32]. These authors argue that having access to job seekers’ personal post content on social media for employment could lead to biased and discriminatory practices in recruitment and selection. Yet, prior research on social media recruitment is limited to the recruitment of white-collar and higher-waged professionals. Given the large number of low-wage workers in the U.S. and the proliferation of social media among this population [10], our work aims to investigate how social media is used, if at all, by employers of low-wage workers, and their perceived benefits and concerns to do so (RQ1,3).

Another thread of research focuses on the rise of social media for one’s branding and online presentation, particularly among white-collar professionals [24]. Roulin and Bangerter identified social media as a promising way for employers to identify signals of job seeker quality and whether they are a good fit for the position and the organization [54]. However, our study seeks to investigate if employers in the labor market use social media to gather signals of low-wage job seekers, and if so, what signals they pay attention to (RQ2).

2.3 Low-wage Worker Characteristics and Experiences

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, about 38 million people in the U.S. were living in poverty, a number representing about 11.8% of the country’s whole population [56]. In addition, about 30% of the U.S. workforce was considered low-wage workers [22]. Given that employment creates opportunities for social inclusion and life stability [68], low-wage and working-class individuals are often “abandoned by institutions that traditionally promoted inclusion and upward mobility” [55, p.4].

Low-wage or low-income individuals are disproportionately those without college education, racial minorities, women, people with disability and criminal backgrounds [50]. They often face limited access to employment opportunities, education, healthcare, and home ownership as a result of ongoing institutional biases and labor market discrimination [4].

Social capital refers to the social connections and resources that one could use to develop their human and financial capital [42]. While access to social capital is critical to employment, members of low-income groups and communities are rarely embedded in networks and social connections that can provide them opportunities for employment outcomes and mobility [60]. At the same time, many jobs in the low-wage labor market are isolating in nature [55]. Besides the uncertain working schedules and job instability, these low-wage jobs often provide workers with limited opportunities for networking and developing connections for their future job search.

With the growing use of the Internet and digital tools in job search and recruitment, low-wage job seekers are required to submit job applications through online platforms such as company

websites and online job boards [31]. However, due to the low callback rates and the lack of employer contact information, low-wage job seekers are often demoralized and left with no options but to submit more applications to fill the void [55]. As called out by Seefeldt, these online platforms are often “designed for employers to initiate contact” [55, p.69]. At the same time, several recent algorithm audit studies also suggest the data-driven technologies adopted in the hiring process could further disadvantage marginalized job seekers based on criteria like gender [12], race and ethnicity [71], and more.

Overall, the asymmetry of power between institutions and job seekers in the low-wage labor market, together with job seekers’ limited access to social connections, challenges their ability to find employment. However, social media connects individuals in a distributed and decentralized way and supports one’s social capital development [8, 21], which may offset this power imbalance. Therefore, in this study, we examine how employers use social media for low-wage labor market recruitment. Our investigation allows us to explore unaddressed research questions as it relates to whether the use of social media helps to mitigate the power imbalance between job seekers and employers. The results of our study could contribute opportunities for low-wage job seekers to make connections and benefit from their interactions with employers.

3 METHOD

To address our research questions, we conducted an interview study with 15 employers who recruited applicants for low-wage positions. We conducted our research activities between February and July, 2019.

3.1 Study Context

For context, we refer to low-wage work as one paying an hourly wage that can bring a family of three (one adult and two children) up to 125% of the federal poverty level (FPL) [22]. For the year 2018, this cutoff is associated with the hourly wage of \$14.50 [6].² With this cutoff, about 30% of the U.S. workforce (approximately 36 millions of workers) are considered low-wage workers, and they are more likely to be young (age 30 and lower) and less-educated (less than a bachelor’s degree) [22]. Moreover, Chancellor and Counts [11] identified that people from areas with low income and low educational attainment search for significantly more jobs in manufacturing, healthcare, construction, and retail. This provides a point of reference for us to identify common industries for low-wage workers.

3.2 Participant Recruitment

Our participants included hiring professionals, recruiters, and general managers who were recruiting or hiring workers for low-wage positions below the cutoff of \$14.50. Most of these positions were seasonal jobs, entry-level jobs, and temporary jobs. We recruited our participants from organizations and staffing agencies in Michigan. We recruited employers from popular industries in low-wage areas [11] (e.g., manufacturing, healthcare, retail, service, etc.).

²This definition used a 35 hour work week and a 50 week year to account for unpaid break time and time away for sickness/vacation/personal needs

Nickname	Gender	Job Title	Years of Exp.	Major Hiring Positions & Industries
Jane	W	Recruitment Manager	16	General Labor, Clerical
Nicole	W	HR Assistant	3	General Labor
Deena	W	HR Director	21	Production Worker, General Labor
Emily	W	Operations Manager	12	Manufacturing, Healthcare, Clerical
Irish	M	Operations President	5	Manufacturing, Industrial, General Labor
Leonard	M	President	22	Manufacturing, Hospitality, Clerical
Candido	M	Recruiter	4	General Labor, Customer Services
Glenn-Atlas	M	Recruiter	1	General Labor, Production
Kevin	M	Recruiter	5	Light Industrial, Customer Services, Clerical
Kitty	W	Branch Manager	20	Industrial, Manufacturing
Rick	M	General Manager	15	Retail
Lynn	W	Regional Manager	8	Production, Healthcare
Sarah	W	Recruiting Specialist	2.5	Production, Healthcare
Darren	M	Project Coordinator	21	General Labor, Trades
Megan	W	Communication Director	7.5	Education Services

Table 1: Participants’ experiences and their major hiring positions and industries

We received employers’ email addresses and phone numbers through either our local employment agency partner or their offline job fair. We invited participants to our study through email and phone calls, and conducted interviews around their schedules. The first author conducted interviews face-to-face and over the phone. At the end of the interview, we asked participants to choose a pseudonym and randomly assigned pseudonyms for those who chose not to provide us with one. We removed all personally identifiable information upon data collection. The IRB approved our study as exempt and we received oral consent from each participant before their interview.

After 12 interviews we began to see consistency in our data and gained new insights; however, to ensure data saturation, we recruited three additional people and stopped interviewing after reaching 15 participants [28]. Detailed participant information is provided in Table 1. Eight participants were women, and seven were men. Our participants’ average years of experience was 10.9 years ($sd=7.4$ years). Most of our participants were hiring for general labor ($n=7$), manufacturing ($n=4$), clerical ($n=4$), production ($n=4$), healthcare ($n=3$), and industrial ($n=3$), which reflected the low-wage industries identified earlier.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews to understand employers’ experiences of using social media to recruit low-wage workers. We chose a qualitative method due to the exploratory nature of this study. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to an hour (Mean=40.2 minutes); each participant received a \$15 gift card as a thank you and small compensation for their time. Note that although our participants were employed by organizations in various industries, we invited them to participate in the study based on both their personal capacity as hiring professionals and their organizations’ hiring practices.

During our interviews, we first invited participants to introduce their procedure for recruiting low-wage workers. We asked “*Could you talk through your process of hiring for low-wage positions?*” Then we asked employers to discuss their specific use of social media

in the low-wage recruitment process. We asked “*Could you talk through how you use social media in your recruitment process? Could you talk through some successful and failed examples of using these sites in hiring low-wage workers?*” Thereafter, we discussed the signals that employers paid attention to on social media in recruitment. We asked “*How would you weigh job seekers’ online presence in job application and hiring decisions?*” Finally, we asked employers to share the perceived opportunities and challenges in using these sites in recruitment; for instance, “*How would you describe the effectiveness of social media compared to traditional online job boards like Indeed and offline recruitment?*”

We audio-recorded and transcribed all interviews for the analysis. We analyzed the interview data through the process of inductive thematic analysis [3]. This is an approach for identifying and reporting patterns within a dataset without trying to fit the themes into a pre-existing frame. In particular, the first author conducted the first round of open coding by reviewing interview transcripts and had ongoing discussions with the research team. The initial themes included “uses of social media in recruitment,” “social media to attract target job seekers,” “individualized support,” and “offline engagement in recruitment.” Thereafter, we conducted another two rounds of focused coding to pinpoint and develop salient themes related to employers’ use of social media in low-wage recruitment and the benefits and limitations of such tools in this context.

4 RESULTS

We start by providing context around the social media platforms commonly used in low-wage labor markets, and the characteristics of job seekers on social media. We show that employers are drawn to social media due to the large number of low-wage workers they have access to on these platforms. Employers also utilized social media to brand their organizations and to provide low-wage job seekers with job search tips. Thereafter, we discuss our analysis for employers’ perceived beneficial material properties of social media in recruiting low-wage workers (RQ1) and how signals about job seekers’ job readiness and commitment influenced the recruitment

process (RQ2). Finally, we discuss the challenges of using social media in recruiting low-wage workers (RQ3).

The majority of our participants (n=13) indicated that their current organizations had actively adopted social media in recruiting low-wage workers, while the rest suggested that their organizations were transitioning to make social media one of their main recruitment tools. Among participants who actively used social media in low-wage recruitment, all of them agreed that Facebook was the most frequently used social media platform for recruitment. As Jane pointed out, Facebook has been integrated into people's lives, especially among the younger generation. Emily also noted that Facebook had a relatively low threshold for joining:

Facebook is a platform that is for users who are already on social media, they understand it, and it doesn't require [...] using additional apps on your phone or visiting different websites to create an account. [...] it just seems like a natural force for them in terms of job seeking. (Emily)

In addition, most of our participants (n=14) agreed that Facebook allowed them to access a "larger pool" (Glenn-Atlas) of low-wage job seekers, in comparison to other recruitment methods.

Besides Facebook, three participants used Instagram and regarded it helpful for branding their organizations. Participants also described using social media to provide job seekers with tangible job search support. One participant, for example, described using Pinterest to post general tips for job search such as "things to remove on your résumé." However, no participant used Twitter for recruitment purposes. As participants pointed out, the character limit was too short for them to post detailed job information.

None of our participants used LinkedIn when recruiting for low-wage workers because LinkedIn users were often more "experienced professionals" who were seeking "specialized upper level positions" (Deena). Also, they speculated that most low-wage workers did not know much about LinkedIn and what it entailed. Lynn highlighted that their organization mainly used LinkedIn to seek *passive* white-collar professionals:

LinkedIn is the kind of [platform to] grab people from higher level and try to steal them and get them to work for us or work at our environment. So yeah, low wage, you could probably ask most of these people coming to my [office], and they probably don't even know what [LinkedIn] is. (Lynn)

However, as we see later, our participants viewed job seekers who disclosed having LinkedIn profiles positively. Overall, our participants agreed that social media had become an increasingly popular low-wage labor market recruitment tool because of the large number of job seekers on these platforms. However, they were aware that some individuals looking for low-wage jobs had limited digital proficiency, limited access to Internet and digital devices, and thus little social media presence. This also acknowledges that, the most disadvantaged individuals from the workforce and who experienced extreme poverty remained excluded from social media recruitment.

4.1 Beneficial Material Properties of Social Media in Recruitment

We address RQ1 by articulating beneficial material properties of social media platforms in our participants' recruitment work—connecting employers to job seekers and facilitating direct communication among actors.

4.1.1 Connecting Employers to Job Seekers via Groups. Participants identified online employment groups as one of the most effective social media features to support low-wage recruitment. Employers believed that posting job information in multiple local online employment groups allowed them to actively and directly reach a larger and more targeted group of low-wage workers, which was not possible through other online platforms (see Figure 1a). Notably, they could reach workers who were likely to be *actively* looking for local job opportunities. According to Lynn, "people are joining these specific groups for a reason, they expect [to see employment information] in that group." Similarly, Candido told us:

Where I found the most success within Facebook for hiring was actually going into local job listing or hiring groups. [...] There's actually quite a bit of entry-level, low-level employees in those groups that are looking for those starts or they're looking for another job or whatever. So I'm just putting our information out there and put in some current jobs we have and just inviting people to apply. (Candido)

As these quotes suggest, social media platforms group job seekers with shared identities (demographic similarities and geographic proximity) and goals (looking for employment information and opportunities). Participants observed that these employment groups allow low-wage workers to share employment-related messages with each other. For example, Glenn-Atlas described that "people in these groups might tag their little nephew, or they might tag a relative in there [who] they know needs a job in the area."

Also, online employment groups allow low-wage job seekers to disclose information about what kind of jobs they were looking for and what skills they had. Employers could tap into this information and direct potential candidates to matching job openings. For example, one participant told us:

You see a lot of people posting stuff like, "Hey, I'm looking for a job on the bus line, because I don't have a car." If [I] see that and [I] have that opportunity, I can reach out to you. [...] Instead of them responding to me, I can respond to that. (Kevin)

As this quote suggests, unlike online groups with homogeneous members [1, 46], employment groups provide a common space for both job seekers and employers. On the one hand, this common space affords opportunities not only for employers to access the "pool" of low-wage job seekers but also for job seekers to access employers and employment information. On the other hand, when multiple actors are involved, the power dynamics within the online group mirrors these actors' positions in an offline social structure. In our case, employers still have the power to decide whom to approach, when to approach them, and how to approach them based on the information job seekers disclosed in the group.

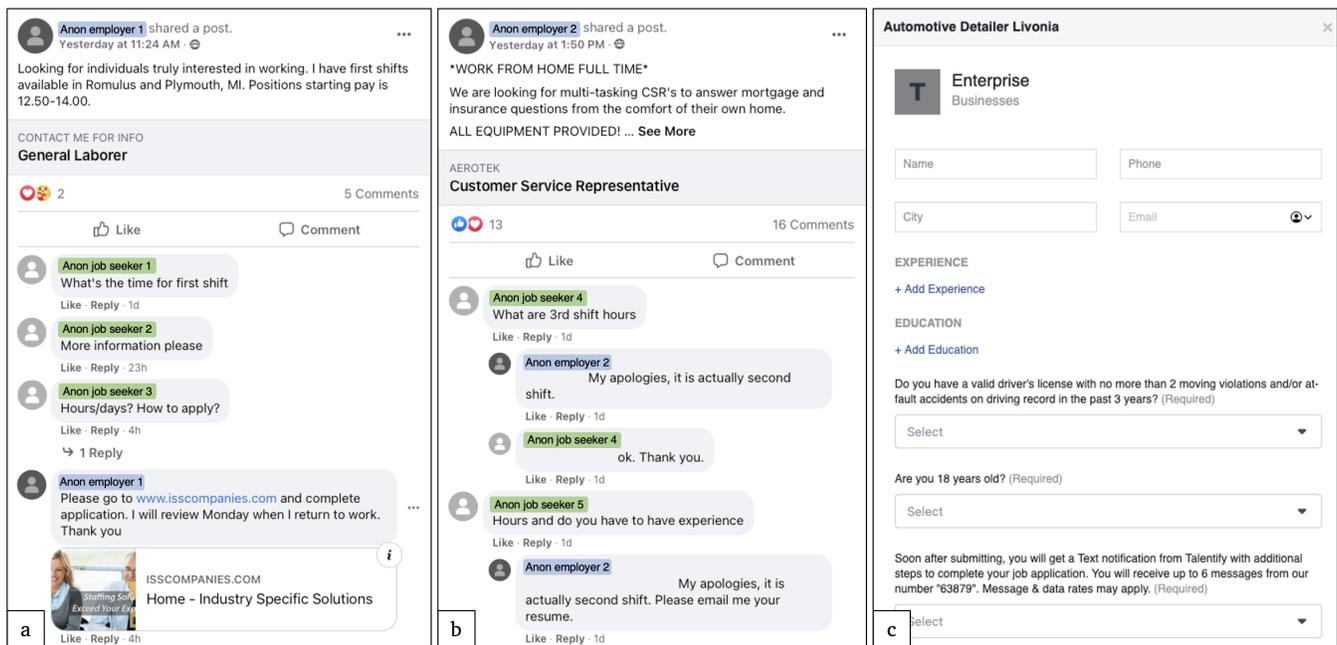


Figure 1: Anonymized screenshots of sample threads in a local Facebook employment group (with over 120k members) and a Facebook job application page: a) Employer posting a job opening in a Facebook employment group and redirecting job seekers to the company website; b) Employer interacting with potential job seekers in a Facebook employment group and clarifying job seekers’ questions; c) Facebook’s “one-click” job application and auto-generated résumé (Note: Personal information such as education and employment history is automatically scraped from the Facebook personal profile. This information was removed for illustration).

4.1.2 Direct Communication Among Employers and Job Seekers.

Direct communication through commenting and messaging enabled employers and job seekers to have two-way interactions with each other, which was not possible on other online employment platforms like Indeed. Our analysis unpacked two major benefits brought about by direct communication. First, direct communication helps employers clarify potential job seekers’ questions about the job post (see Figure 1b). To draw job seekers’ attention on social media, employers often only highlighted the benefits and locations of job openings in their job posts, and they do not include detailed job descriptions that they would normally put in job posts on other employment platforms. For example, one participant shared his recruiting experience of hiring a produce clerk for a grocery store on Facebook:

If I tell you that I’m hiring a produce clerk, [...] you might be like, “What exactly does a produce clerk do? What will my responsibilities be?” [...] You can explain [answers to] job seekers’ questions like this on Facebook. (Rick)

Second, some employers considered direct communication as a channel to offer more personalized engagement with job seekers, per Kitty:

So if you’ve already got a connection going on online, you bring them in, and it’s like, “How’s your child doing, I know he was sick last night.” [...] it’s just an icebreaker.

A lot of people are very intimidated when they come in for interviews. So I think the social media kinda helps with that. It can be the first line of communication. (Kitty)

However, some participants (N=4) acknowledged that early on-line direct communication with job seekers helped them understand if job seekers could meet scheduling requirements, and could access the location. This way, employers do not need to put extra effort in bringing them into the full interview process.

If you [message] me that you’re not available on Saturday and Sunday, for example, or you’re only available at a certain time of the day – if you tell me that ahead of time, I can tell you that I can’t use you. Because we’re a union shop so the people with the highest seniority, they get their pick of the schedule. (Rick)

Again, while direct communication allows low-wage job seekers to develop ties with employers, these ties uphold the asymmetry of power between employers and job seekers. As this quote suggested, employers could end their connection with job seekers if and when their recruitment needs are not met. More importantly, these ties are also conditioned by the broader issues in low-wage labor markets, such as unpredictable schedules and the lack of transportation. Overall, employers’ practices of adopting social media in recruiting low-wage workers are informed by both social media’s material properties (i.e., online groups, commenting, direct messaging) and

the existing context of low-wage labor markets (i.e., the power and interests of employers).

Nonetheless, compared to online interactions through direct messaging and commenting, our participants all considered offline in-person interactions critical to recruiting in low-wage labor markets. Employers utilized in-person interactions to assess job seekers' hard and soft skills and evaluated whether job seekers fit the position. As Kevin suggests, in-person interactions cannot be replaced by online communication. Kitty believed that face-to-face interaction could help her “*get a feel for a person.*” Similarly, Kevin felt that the initial handshake happens online but the real evaluation occurs offline, which involves the assessment of multiple factors. He said “*the résumé, the [offline] conversation, the skill sets they have — that’s all that really matters.*” This way, employers can better assess the candidate through a richer medium. Thus, our result raises an open question, when in-person interaction is no longer an option amid COVID-19, how do employers rely on online tools to evaluate job seekers?

4.2 Unintended Consequences of Second-Order Information

We address RQ2 by discussing how employers pay attention to signals about low-wage job seekers' commitment and job readiness through social media and how one's online presentation can impact their job search outcomes.

4.2.1 Signals about Job Readiness and Commitment. According to Gershon, second-order information is “information that the medium, or form of the message, conveys on top of the actual words or images used in the message” [24, p.150]. Our data revealed that the second-order information communicated through social media allowed employers to pay attention to signals of low-wage workers' *job readiness and level of commitment*.

In terms of signals about job readiness, we found that most employers (N=11) wanted some indication that potential candidates could meet their minimum standards before engaging them. These minimum standards included soft skills like showing up for work on time, having a good attitude, and being consistent and reliable. For example, some (N=5) considered that continuously using inappropriate language or causing arguments in comments and direct messages could give employers a second thought and thus hinder them from scheduling an interview. Irish considered questions like “*Do I need to pass a drug screening?*” as an instant red flag for employers as it indicates that one may not pass the drug screening and thus be an unreliable worker.

We found that employers also paid attention to cues that indicated a job seeker's commitment to the position when receiving one's direct job application through Facebook's job page. Some participants (N=6) reported that Facebook's auto-generated résumé was too simplistic to provide valuable information about the job seekers' qualifications and skills, and these supposedly professional résumés may sometimes include inaccurate or inappropriate information scraped from one's personal profile (see Figure 1c). Also, as Candido described, most low-wage workers “*do not always fill out all of the information fields*” such as phone number and email when they apply for jobs through Facebook, which signals a low level of commitment to employers. Likewise, Megan noted:

They don't put down pretty much any information at all. They might put one or two sentences, but they don't even attach, you know, really any work history. So that's what makes me assume that they're not that interested in the job. (Megan)

While no participant was using LinkedIn in low-wage recruitment, a few participants (n=4) highlighted that disclosing having a LinkedIn profile in the job search could provide a positive signal. To these employers, having a LinkedIn profile provides the second-order information that the job seeker has taken extra effort in their job search. For example, Leonard said that having a LinkedIn profile “*usually shows that they are computer savvy*” and LinkedIn tends to group job seekers “*with a little bit more professional group of people.*” Another participant also stated:

I would say that if a lower-wage job seeker has a LinkedIn page, that might give off a more professional appearance [...] and they might be a harder worker. [...] If they've gone to that extra effort to create more things to help them get a job, then obviously that's something that you might take into account when you're hiring somebody. (Glenn-Atlas)

As suggested in these quotes, employers could construct their impressions of job seekers by capturing the second-order information presented on social media. These online cues could serve as proxies to job seekers' credibility and commitment, and were subject to employers' situated interpretation and judgement. This supposedly equal online communication, however, could actually lead to biases in recruitment and inconsistent use of online information.

4.2.2 The Benefit of the Doubt. Even though employers paid attention to second-order information to identify low-wage workers' job readiness and commitment, our results show that *none* of our participants *actively* utilized social media as a screening tool when recruiting low-wage workers. Employers stated that they would not make hiring decisions based on job seekers' personal profile because they did not consider one's online presentation as an alternative to thorough background checks and face-to-face meetings. In other words, our participants tended to give low-wage job seekers “the benefit of the doubt,” and they showed acceptance towards grammar inconsistencies and other errors on one's social media profile. Per Leonard,

We're pretty open minded. Yeah, we know people in this situation do not necessarily have good writing skills or good communication skills. Even in an interview, for some people, they're not experienced, they don't know how to interview well. (Leonard)

Our participants also noted that low-wage workers often face technical problems when applying for jobs online due to limited digital proficiency, but it should not hinder them from applying for jobs. For example, Lynn pointed out that some low-wage jobs did not require workers to be proficient in handling technology.

We do a lot of manufacturing, which obviously is a very hands-on job, [...] almost anyone can do it. So just because they may not be able to, you know, use the app on their own and understand how to use a computer, we still have jobs that can accommodate them. (Lynn)

Overall, our employers showed a certain degree of tolerance towards how low-wage job seekers used social media. As mentioned earlier, to understand whether the candidate meets the job requirements and evaluates their specific job-related skills, further offline interaction is necessary.

4.3 Exposure to Broader Labor Market Issues

We address RQ3 by unpacking two major challenges that recruiters perceived when using social media that uncovered broader issues of the labor market: (a) few qualified job applications and (b) losing contact with job seekers.

4.3.1 Few Qualified Job Applications. We found that the most frequently perceived challenge was finding qualified candidates and getting qualified applications. However, personal social media sites like Facebook were not originally designed for the purposes of recruitment and job search. Nevertheless, Facebook rolled out a direct job application function in 2017 [9, 47], which allows job seekers to directly apply for jobs with the employer. More specifically, to apply for job openings, job seekers simply click an “Apply Now” button, which can be found on the job opening posted on the organizations’ Facebook page, “Jobs on Facebook” page, or via online employment groups. Then, Facebook will automatically extract the job seekers’ employment and education information from their personal profile to generate a simple résumé (see Figure 1c). As noted earlier, if the job seeker did not include their full professional experiences in their personal profile, the résumé created would have little to no details about their employment history. As a result, participants considered this “one-click” job application process as the key reason for the low quality of the Facebook job seeker pool.

If I go to [Indeed] and post a job, they're going to apply and submit a résumé, I can look at that résumé right away, see if they're [a] qualified candidate. [...] On Facebook, I might be able to reach one qualified candidate, but for every one qualified candidate I find, I'm going to get five or six people who are not qualified. It's quantity more than quality through social media, whereas if I go through a job board, it's less people I'm reaching and talking to, but they have higher quality. (Kevin)

Employers believed that submitting job applications via Facebook required relatively low effort. In turn, nearly half of participants (N=7) raised concerns about the massive number of applications that resulted. Employers felt that low-wage workers applied for a large number of job posts without actually knowing the basic job information and requirements. Compared to job applications through online job boards like Indeed, Facebook’s direct job application required much less effort and therefore, lowered the ratio of qualified candidates to applications.

I feel like when people are applying on social media, it's just like “Oh, yeah, I need a job. And here it is. It's in front of me, let me apply.” But they don't ever actually really want to do anything. So I mean, social media is by far probably the least successful [medium] that we get good qualified candidates from. (Sarah)

As Candido explained, such behavior often gives employers the impression that low-wage job seekers “*might not be as serious*” in the

job search. Such phenomenon raises the question of how to balance job seekers’ basic job search needs (i.e., submitting job applications in an easy way) and employers’ key recruitment needs (i.e., seeing a demonstration of job seekers’ basic qualifications and identifying reliable workers for the business). Meanwhile, this situation may also speak to the broader issue that low-wage job seekers often receive limited feedback from employers in their job search. Such frustrations might lead them to submit more applications off into the void [55].

4.3.2 Losing Contact with Job Seekers. Another major challenge identified by our employers was engaging job seekers from social media in the rest of the recruitment process. Participants noted that it was common to lose contact with potential job seekers, even if they had initial contact on social media. A participant said:

I try and put like, “Please send an up-to-date résumé to this email,” but sometimes you see people that might not if they're looking for a low-wage job. Sometimes, even if you get in contact with them [on social media] and try and set up things to do an application online or something, they might not necessarily always follow up with you after, and you might lose contact with them. (Glenn-Atlas)

Some participants hypothesized that losing contact was associated with low-wage job seekers’ strategies to submit a large number of job applications via social media as noted earlier. From the employers’ perspective, some low-wage job seekers might forget about the jobs they applied to, or might not be motivated to make an effort to *land* a job. This perspective could lead to employers to have a general negative perception of low-wage job seekers’ job search attitudes and skills. As Lynn told us:

I feel like anybody can be sitting on Facebook and think they're looking for a job. But then when they actually are called down here, they don't show up, or they don't even know how to come in and dress for interviews anymore. So I just feel like social media is unfortunately taking away from people learning the skills of how to even land a job. (Lynn)

Beyond this, other participants explained that such behavior was related to the general circumstances of low-wage workers and the nature of low-paying jobs. Kitty observed that losing contact with job seekers might be related to the high turnover rate in the labor market where job seekers often change jobs for immediate benefits (e.g., minor pay increase, more regular working schedule) instead of long-term career development. Similarly, Darren highlighted that various individual and institutional barriers faced by low-wage job seekers “*may prevent them from being consistent and reliable.*”

Taken together, both social media’s material property of “one-click” job applications and the existing challenges in low-wage labor markets co-construct the ways in which job seekers use social media in job search and employers use social media to interpret job seekers’ strategies. Our results suggest that this process could inform employers’ false perceptions that job seekers are not serious or credible in their job search, which runs the risk of further disadvantaging low-wage workers in the labor market.

5 DISCUSSION

Through an interview study with 15 employers who recruited and hired low-wage workers, we draw attention to how social media's material properties and the social context of low-wage labor markets co-construct how employers use social media platforms like Facebook in the recruitment process. Our empirical findings have uncovered how employers are drawn to the popularity of social media platforms to access low-wage working-class individuals. Social media allows these two stakeholders to interact directly, which creates opportunities for job seekers to develop social ties with employers (RQ1). Our results show that even though employers tend to give job seekers the benefit of doubt and don't use social media to actively screen candidates, the second-order information presented on social media allows employers to pay attention to signals of job seekers' job readiness and commitment, or lack thereof (RQ2). However, despite the opportunities to use social media in low-wage worker recruitment, our results indicate that employers face challenges finding qualified job applicants and losing contact with job seekers, primarily as a result of social media not being explicitly designed for job search and employment. This unfortunately leaves employers with a false perception that job seekers are not engaged in or serious about their job search, which risks further disadvantaging low-wage workers (RQ3).

In the sections that follow, we situate our findings into existing literature. Past work identifies the job search challenges that low-wage workers face such as the lack of feedback in using today's digital employment tools, which creates a "black box" in the hiring process. Our findings uncover an unaddressed power imbalance between low-wage workers and employers who use similar tools in the employment process, which has not been identified in past work. We conclude by drawing from Orlikowski's structurational model of technology [51], to discuss how recruiting low-wage workers on social media intensifies the existing power imbalance (between low-wage workers and employers) and risks further destabilizing the already precarious low-wage labor market. We contribute design and policy considerations to mitigate such power imbalance and better support low-wage job seekers' job search efforts.

5.1 Tensions between the Personal and Professional on Social Media

Recall that our employers joined local employment groups on Facebook to identify and follow up with likely candidates. They followed up with job seekers based on job seeker posts regarding their skills to prospective positions and second-order information that signaled job seekers readiness and their level of commitment to the job (via their posts, comments, and direct messages). Adopting personal social media like Facebook for professional recruitment blurs the boundary between one's public and private lives, as well as their professional and personal lives [5, 64]. Such blurred boundaries complicate low-wage job seekers' impression management practices and subjugates them to surveillance and scrutiny by potential employers.

Unlike professional platforms like LinkedIn and Indeed, social media platforms like Facebook were designed to support one's personal connections by helping to connect individuals with their friends and family [8, 21]. Our results highlight that personal social

media platforms have been appropriated in professional recruitment and job search. As such, the use of personal platforms in a professional context embodies the concept of context collapse—"the lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries makes it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts," as defined by danah boyd [5, p.10]. Information intended for certain individuals and groups can leak out to other actors on the network, creating tensions between the boundaries of professional and personal, and work and self. Recall that our employers deemed certain personal information on job seekers' Facebook profiles as inappropriate for populating professional résumés, and that engaging in arguments online could negatively affect employers' opinions of job seekers. This situation requires individuals to switch between codes and norms of personal communication and professional communication [44, 65, 66], which could complicate low-wage job seekers' identity and impression management online.

Meanwhile, the meshing of social contexts and audiences offers opportunities for individuals to develop weak ties and foster bridging capital [13]. Past research shows that collapsed contexts can help individuals to access new information and resources, as well as make new connections [65, 66], which can be advantageous for low-wage individuals in their job search [14]. To make such connections, however, low-wage job seekers have to disclose their personal information in the job search context and make themselves visible and available to employers and other job seekers, which can lead to tensions between the professional and the personal self for low-wage workers. On the one hand, past findings highlight that individuals often refrain from disclosing their resource requests when these requests can be accessed by audiences from different social contexts [65]; on the other hand, our results have shown that disclosing too little personal information can lead employers to conclude that the job seeker is not serious or fully engaged in the job search process. Even though our employers expressed that they tend to give job seekers' the benefit of the doubt, low-wage job seekers were to an extent scrutinized for not disclosing information in their job search on personal social media platforms. "Inappropriate" disclosure strategies and identity management can strip away the opportunities for fostering social capital and making connections and can, therefore, harm their job search outcomes. Given that low-wage individuals tend to have relatively low digital literacy [17], this tension between the professional and the personal can be further complicated in the low-wage labor market.

In this light, our work raises important questions about low-wage individuals' self-presentation in their job search on social media. How do they manage the boundary between work and self under employer surveillance? How do they trade off the benefits and drawbacks between making connections with employers and disclosing personal information? And how can technological tools better support low-wage job seekers' self-presentation practices? Or, should employers be dissuaded to recruit in this way? Could recruiting via social media and platforms not originally designed for employment lead to bias? Future research should empirically investigate and unpack these questions.

Nonetheless, our results and analysis have identified four key design considerations in which social media could further strengthen its unique benefits in supporting low-wage job seekers to communicate with employers, facilitating their professional impression

management, and improving their information accuracy to avoid employers' false impressions.

5.1.1 Providing writing assistance. Future work can look into designing interventions to support low-wage job seekers' communication with employers. For example, Wu et al. designed and implemented "Additional Writing Help" (AWH), a Facebook add-on to proofread text produced by users with Dyslexia before posting and commenting on Facebook, which illustrates its promise in supporting these users' confidence and self-presentation [70]. Similar writing assistance has been used to support novice entrepreneurs in initiating new professional relationships through email and online messaging platforms [30]. Tools like these could assist job seekers' communication with employers, highlight "red flags," prevent them from using controversial language online, and avoid unnecessary arguments.

5.1.2 Assisting boundary and professional impression management. In addition, future designs could assist low-wage job seekers' boundary management between their personal and professional lives on social media. Social media platforms could allow job seekers to create a Job Search profile under the same account. For example, Facebook Dating allows users to create a dating profile, and users' dating activities stay in the dating profile and are not shared with the rest of Facebook [48]. This clear boundary between one's dating profile and main Facebook personal profile help individuals to adjust their interactions and activities according to specific contexts and norms. By allowing space for job seekers to create separate job search profiles like Facebook Dating, employers would not be able to access job seekers' information and posts intended for personal connections and contexts.

5.1.3 Guidance to provide complete information. As noted earlier, Facebook's auto-generated résumés can support job seekers' immediate needs in résumé development [16]. However, such auto-generated résumés can have empty fields, and job seekers often did not fill out all the necessary information (Candido). This left employers with limited information about job seekers' qualifications and skills. To this end, social media sites can provide job seekers with detailed instructions on what information to provide, how to provide complete and useful information, and why such information is important for their job search. Such step-by-step tutorials can help low-wage workers, especially those with limited digital proficiency, to grasp what to expect from the system [17] and the employers in their evaluation.

5.1.4 Detecting potential inaccurate information. Personal social network sites like Facebook were designed to support one's personal rather than professional impression management [64]. Since users are not required to use real and authentic data on their Facebook personal profile, it is possible for Facebook auto-generated résumés to extract users' information (including employment and education history) that was not curated for purposes of job seeking. As such, future designs can better support low-wage job seekers' control in what information is sent to employer by notifying job seekers when inaccurate information is detected in the one's applications. Together with guiding on providing complete job search information, these design considerations can start addressing how

inaccurate and private information could lead to the false impressions that job seekers are not serious about the job.

5.2 Opportunities for Low-wage Job Seekers to Access Employment Information and Social Connections

Traditionally, employment within low-wage labor markets largely relied on referrals from personal contacts [25, 26]. These intermediaries served as a "proxy" for employers to reach low-wage workers, and for job seekers, potential employers and employment information. However, in an interview study with 105 low-wage African Americans, Smith revealed that intermediaries in a low-income context were often reluctant to connect their families, friends, and community members with their employers [61]. Given that the effects of poverty and systemic racism are in many cases interpreted as irresponsible (e.g., the need for accommodations such as transportation resulting in employees being late or not showing up for work), intermediaries were concerned about how their own futures and reputations with employers might be effected based on how their referrals performed. Smith's study reminds us of the critical yet controversial role of social capital and particularly, intermediaries in matching job seekers with employers. Our results show how the use of social media in recruitment eliminates the intermediaries' role. Social media's material properties allow employers and job seekers to *directly* engage with one another.

In fact, our results show that commenting and messaging afforded by social media was helpful for employers to clarify job seekers' questions regarding the position and provides personal engagement. Some participants cited this two-way communication as helpful for employers to understand low-wage job seekers' specific needs identified in the existing HCI literature [14, 17] such as childcare, and employers could offer additional accommodations when possible. Situating our results in prior HCI findings that social media can foster one's social capital [21] and that direct communication on Facebook can effectively strengthen ties and increase the odds of getting jobs [8], one could speculate that adopting social media in one's job search could be beneficial as it enables low-wage job seekers to develop social capital without placing their social connections at risk.

However, our results show that such direct engagement among low-wage job seekers and employers does not make social media especially effective or successful in the recruitment process. While employment information and employers are arguably becoming more visible to job seekers, an underlying issue of limited transparency in the recruitment process remains unaddressed. We find that while ties between low-wage workers and employers on social media offer benefits, such ties are fragile because they are contingent on employers' interpretation of job seekers' job readiness and commitment and could end without notice or explanation. Recall that some questions asked by job seekers could hinder the ties from being developed with employers, leaving job seekers at a disadvantage.

In fact, such ties developed between employers and job seekers embody the same asymmetric *knowledge* and *power* imbalances between employers and job seekers in low-wage labor markets [55]. Ultimately, employers retain the power; the control over which

job seekers to approach and when to initiate and terminate such connections. Job seekers may not be told that tie initiations and terminations are taking place, the source of employers' indirect scrutiny, the information on which the scrutiny is based, or even what the scrutiny is. Such processes could compromise low-wage job seekers' capacity to defend themselves or to fully demonstrate their qualifications in their job search. In other words, the underlying power dynamic and structure in the low-wage labor market recruitment remains unchanged, which we discuss next.

5.3 Reinforcing Power Asymmetry between Employers and Job Seekers in the Low-wage Labor Market

Central to our study is the duality of social media technology in low-wage labor market recruitment. Orlikowski's view of *The Duality of Technology* reminds us of the dialectical relationship between technology and social structure and norms [51], highlighting technology's dual nature as both a socially constructed product and an objective force. Essentially, this structuralist approach advocates for rethinking technology with a combination of both the social construction view of technology and the view of technology determinism [51, 52]. In our analysis, we see that the material properties of social media (e.g., direct commenting and messaging, one-click job application) and contemporary capitalism's socio-historical conditions of selecting credible, committed, and flexible workers [63] co-constructed the practice of how employers use social media in their recruitment effort. The use of social media, in turn, reproduces and reinforces the existing norms and structure of the low-wage labor market.

While the material properties of social media afford low-wage job seekers unique opportunities for employment information and social connections, they enact employers' selective engagement with job seekers based on rules and norms of the low-wage labor market. This is to say, the existing institutional and societal challenges faced by low-wage job seekers are still not addressed and are actually replicated in social media recruitment. Our results suggest that social media recruitment could further disadvantage low-wage job seekers with low digital skills, special needs in scheduling shifts, and limited access to social media and other technologies. In other words, those who need the most support and resources among low-income populations remain isolated from the workforce and are further scrutinized by society.

Another recurring theme that emerged in our analysis was the employers' perceived benefits of "accessing a *pool* of low-wage workers" through social media. Our participants considered social media platforms like Facebook as the supplement to common online job boards like Indeed. As a result, employers may have access to more low-wage workers and more applications. Through the rhetoric of the pool of low-wage workers, we see that social media potentially makes low-wage workers more accessible and in a way, more expendable and replaceable. We speculate that this trend could make the already precarious low-wage labor market more unstable — the notion of measuring workers' values and labor toward addressing employers' needs could be perpetuated. On this note, we argue that the use of social media in the low-wage labor market makes low-wage workers more visible as a group but

less visible as individuals; and thereby the benefits of employment in facilitating one's mobility and life stability [68] can be further stripped away from lower-wage and working-class individuals who are experiencing marginalization.

Taken together, Orlikowski's structuralist perspective cautions us that technology alone cannot address the asymmetry of power embedded into the structure of the low-wage labor market. Policies and legislation should work in concert with technology interventions to mitigate the labor market imbalance in the power between employers and job seekers in the low-wage labor market. Larger policy opportunities are likely those that lead to the empowerment of low-wage workers and, more importantly, regulating the responsibilities of employers. For example, as a starting point, employers should be required to provide job seekers with feedback on whether job seekers' applications have been reviewed [67], why employers decided to end engagement with the job seeker on social media, and more (e.g., number of positions available, number hired in the past week).

6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This work examined the role of social media in the low-wage labor market recruitment through semi-structured interviews with employers. We conducted this research in a single metropolitan area in the Midwestern U.S. Experiences of employers and low-wage job seekers in other parts of the U.S. and the world may vary. Future researchers in different regions and sectors can adopt a comparative approach to uncover more insights with regard to employers' social media practices. While we did not interview low-wage workers directly, we situate our findings into the context of existing literature. However, a deeper investigation of low-wage workers who have engaged with employers via social media could uncover new tensions. In addition, while we stressed confidentiality and ensured employers that there were no right or wrong answers before interview sessions to the best of our ability, employers might have answered our questions in a way that they considered "more socially desirable" [27, p.1], which leads to social desirability bias in our results. Finally, given the qualitative nature of this work, we did not have statistics on how successful each material aspect of social media was in recruitment results. Nonetheless, future work needs to investigate differences in employers' perceptions and experiences across regions and examine what aspects of our findings are generalizable through quantitative investigation.

Our data was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted, people working in the service-oriented labor market were disproportionately impacted by the slowing economy, and the unemployment rate in the U.S. has reached its lowest since the economic depression in 2008 [37]. While our work does directly speak to the employment amid and post COVID-19, the majority of employment activities are currently and continue to be conducted online, and our results uncover key issues with social media use in employment and labor markets.

7 CONCLUSION

We conducted an interview study to investigate employers' uses of social media when recruiting for low-wage workers. We found that

personal social media's material properties (i.e., connecting employers to job seekers and facilitating direct communication among them) and low-wage labor markets' norms of selecting reliable and committed workers co-construct the ways in which employers use social media to approach and recruit job seekers. Although the material nature of social media provides disadvantaged job seekers with opportunities to access employment information and ties to employers, the asymmetry in power between job seekers and employers is embodied in social media recruitment and this asymmetry remains unaddressed. In conclusion, our findings provide insights into employers' use of technologies in low-wage labor markets and the interaction between technologies and social structure. For now, our findings contribute implications for practice, indicating how future designs and policies should work together to mitigate the power imbalance inherent within the low-wage labor market.

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