

# Hirers scrutinising veterans' social media tend to stigmatise those with post-traumatic stress disorder

*Military veterans are vulnerable to having their post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) discovered on social media by hiring agents. Veterans with PTSD tend to be more stigmatised than veterans without the condition and are less likely to get an interview. They are often judged as more likely to engage in counterproductive behaviours such as saying something hurtful to someone at work, or acting rudely to co-workers. **Wenxi Pu, Philip Roth, Jason B Thatcher, Christine Nittrouer, and Michelle "Mikki" Hebl** offer recommendations to organisations and veterans looking for a job.*

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Millions of military veterans, many of whom suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), are transitioning back to civilian life and re-entering the job market. Veterans increasingly use social media platforms as tools to find social support during the transition. For example, in the United States, the Veterans Administration refers veterans to online communities such as Veterans United, VetFriends, TogetherWeServed, and Iraq & Afghanistan War Veterans to access resources. Simultaneously, organisations are using social media platforms during personnel selection processes because these platforms provide access to new sources of information about job candidates. A significant number of organisations screen job candidates based on information gathered from social media platforms (referred to as social media assessments, hereafter). A recent meta-analysis suggests that, on average, 60% of recruiters conduct social media assessments. Taken together, these trends suggest that military veterans' PTSD is more discoverable during the hiring process than it has been in the past.

In our [recent article](#), we examine military veterans' PTSD disclosures on social media and the consequences in the hiring process. In our first study (in this article), we investigated military veteran social media disclosures of their PTSD status through coding Facebook pages and surveying military veterans. Evidence suggests that 16% to 34% of military veterans included discernible cues related to their PTSD status on social media. Given the prevalence of social media assessments and the high percentage of military veterans posting about their PTSD status, we can likely assume that there can be hundreds of thousands of veterans who are vulnerable to having their PTSD discovered during social media assessments.

In our second and third studies, we used an experiment to examine the impact of military veterans' PTSD status on hiring-related ratings. Based on 290 upper-level business students, Study 2 found that military veterans with PTSD were more stigmatised than military veterans without PTSD, and stigmatisation is associated with more suspicion and lower hiring-related ratings (e.g., performance and intention to interview). Our Study 3 repeated the experiment with 431 working professionals with hiring experience. Results were similar in that military veterans with PTSD were more stigmatised and were associated with higher suspicion and similar lower hiring-related ratings.

Based on 298 working professionals, Study 4 identified peril (i.e., perceptions regarding danger) as an additional challenge (besides suspicion) for military veterans with PTSD. Perceptions of peril (on the part of the hiring agents) were most strongly related to negative reactions such as military veterans with PTSD being judged as more likely to engage in counterproductive behaviours such as saying something hurtful to someone at work, acting rudely to co-workers, or embarrassing co-workers. In sum, we demonstrate that military veterans with PTSD are more likely to be stigmatised and that they are viewed with more suspicion (and/or peril) and are likely rated lower in terms of hiring-related ratings.

Our studies offer significant insights regarding military veteran hiring and social media assessments. First, the studies encourage military veterans to be more mindful in terms of where and how they share their PTSD status. Military veterans may wish to consider whether information such as their PTSD status should appear on their social media pages (e.g., Facebook) or in public online forums. Whereas we encourage military veterans, or anyone afflicted, to seek help for PTSD, our findings encourage military veterans to proceed with caution when seeking to raise awareness on social media of a potentially stigmatised condition, because this information may be discoverable during selection and impact their ability to secure employment. To limit such bias, military veterans, especially those who are looking for jobs, may want to limit access to posts to known audiences or find support in private, password-protected, anonymised forums.

Second, given our results and the negative reactions involved in the current popularity of social media assessments, there are a number of implications of our findings for organisations. Organisations should train observers, recruiters, and operational managers to avoid making hiring decisions based on job-irrelevant (protected) information. In particular, we do not recommend the practice of using social media assessments via “hedonic”/fun platforms such as Facebook. For example, organisations might dissuade hiring managers or recruiters from looking at such social media platforms at all in the selection process or, at the very least, provide training programs for hiring personnel on how to systematically conduct social media assessments.

Third, there are crucial implications that suggest the need for important employment policy or law. Stereotypes about military veterans with PTSD can influence hiring decisions (possibly without hiring managers' awareness) during social media assessments. Employment regulatory policy and law has not yet caught up to technology in this way. Recall that social media assessments can inadvertently identify characteristics of a job applicant that would otherwise remain private and can lead to differential impact on an applicant regardless of the legality of using the discovered information in the hiring process. This can be a significant barrier for military veterans attempting to secure private sector employment. Although a handful of federal employment laws preclude making employment decisions based on stigmatising information, recruiters can still be biased by such information during social media assessments, potentially opening themselves up to claims of disparate treatment or disparate impact (i.e., the discrimination can be intentional or unintentional).

We urge organisations to take action to develop social media assessment policies that procedurally guard against the influence of stigmatizing information; in doing so, organisations might afford more equitable opportunities for employment as well as avoid legal risks associated with discriminating against people with disabilities (such as PTSD). This will allow them to hire military veterans more equitably.



#### Notes:

- This blog post is based on [Post-traumatic stress disorder and hiring: The role of social media disclosures on stigma and hiring assessments of veterans](#), in *Personnel Psychology*.
- The post represents the views of its author(s), not the position of the European Commission, LSE Business Review, or the London School of Economics.
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