



Digital Networking for Career Success; Exploring the Benefits and Barriers of LinkedIn Utilization among Undergraduate Students

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Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-2025-J-068

Subject: English

Received : 15.06.2025

Accepted : 25.07.2025

Published : 28.07.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bijri.v9n4.25.JL068

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Abstract

LinkedIn serves as a platform for professional networking, tailored for career-focused interactions. This research explored the usage patterns, benefits, and barriers of LinkedIn among undergraduate students at Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka, with an emphasis on how they use the platform to boost their career opportunities and professional development. The study primarily utilized a survey to gather data, involving 120 undergraduate students from the Faculty of Communication and Business Studies and the Faculty of Applied Science at Trincomalee Campus. The theoretical framework for the study was based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). The results indicated that most undergraduate students perceive LinkedIn as a crucial tool for obtaining internships and then entering the workforce once they graduated. They utilize LinkedIn to network with industry professionals and companies and to join groups that align with their career interests. Furthermore, the study identified barriers faced by undergraduate students, such as difficulties in creating a professional profile and maintaining the regular engagement. These findings imply that universities should incorporate LinkedIn training into their career services to better equip undergraduate students for the competitive job market. Improving digital literacy and offering guidance on effective LinkedIn strategies could greatly enhance students' employability and professional growth.

Keywords: linkedIn, linkedIn utilization, undergraduate students, social networking platforms

Introduction

LinkedIn has emerged as a vital platform for career development and professional networking in the digital age. According to Basak & Calisir (2014), LinkedIn is one of the most popular social networking sites that is used for professional purposes and it is the world's largest professional network as well. Among the various social networking platforms available today, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, LinkedIn especially stands out as one of the platforms providing users with the most opportunities to build professional networks (Larsen, 2020). LinkedIn, as the leading professional networking platform in the contemporary world, offers undergraduate students valuable opportunities to build their professional identity, connect with industry experts, and discover

employment prospects. Yet, despite its potential, many undergraduates students face several barriers in making the most of what LinkedIn offers from feeling unsure about how to present themselves professionally to lacking confidence in their digital skills. Therefore, this study explores both the benefits LinkedIn offers and the barriers that prevent its wider use, aiming to better understand how digital networking is shaping students' early career journeys.

LinkedIn for Networking

Boyd and Ellison's paper, "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship," defines social network sites as "web-based services that allow individuals to create a public or semi-public



profile, articulate a list of other users with whom they share connections, and view and traverse their list of connections and those of their friends” (2007). Prior to the rise of social networking sites (SNS), job searches were typically conducted through job search websites. Even earlier, the most common approach involved walking into a chosen office and applying in person (Weiner, 2016).

Networking in the 21st-century workplace requires the use of the social networks to support career advancement. LinkedIn specifically, is a platform that primarily connects users to other working professionals for building and maintaining friendships and also for seeking employment. LinkedIn was founded on May 5, 2003, with the goal of becoming the largest professional community in the world and developed by Reid Hoffman, Jeff Weiner, and a team of entrepreneurs and investors, mainly from PayPal and Social net. (LinkedIn website) (Center, 2014). LinkedIn defines itself as a ‘business-oriented social network designed to be a modern solution for recruiters to discover talent and new employees, with the goal of connecting professionals globally’ (LinkedIn website). This platform has over 277,002,436 registered members worldwide, with more than 2.10 million members in Sri Lanka in 2024 (Data Reportal, 2024). According to data of Social Media in Sri Lanka-2023 Stats & Platform Trends, 2023, male users (57.0%) are higher than females users (43.0%), but the percentage is noteworthy. Figure 01. Indicates that the largest demographic users is the 25-34 age group.

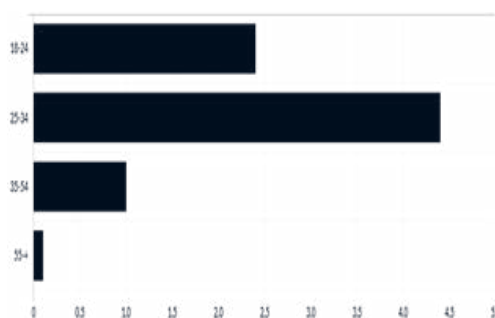


Figure 1 LinkedIn Users as a % of Population in Sri Lanka (Age group)

Source: Social Media In Sri Lanka-2023 Stats & Platform Trends, 2023.

Wijesingha et al. (2021) found that remarkably,

many students in Sri Lanka use multiple platforms strategically-promoting their business on Facebook while maintaining a professional LinkedIn profile. According to Wijesingha, LinkedIn helps students to find job opportunities and to understand how different companies operate, making it a crucial tool for career development and self-growth. LinkedIn has become a vital recruitment tool at a time of digital transformation and heightened competition for top people. For undergraduate students, navigating the complexities of career planning and employability in a competitive job market requires leveraging tools like LinkedIn effectively.

The platform is structured to serve both individuals and businesses, offering opportunities for networking between them. Users create profiles to share work-related information and connect with relevant individuals and companies in their industry. Profiles can include details such as skills, work experience, achievements and education, while LinkedIn allows users to post updates, share content, and engage with others’ posts through likes, shares, and comments. Additionally, LinkedIn helps users find job opportunities that match the information on their profiles. For businesses, LinkedIn offers the option to create a company page, which followers can engage with through updates and news posted in the feed. This helps users become more familiar with businesses and their employees. LinkedIn also supports smaller, closed groups where users can connect with others who share similar educational backgrounds or work in the same field. (LinkedIn, 2020).

Literature Review

The undergraduate students in Sri Lanka maintain a professional LinkedIn profile in order to find job opportunities and to get information on different companies, making it a crucial tool for career development and self-growth (Wijesingha et al., 2021). Thevananth (2024) found that undergraduates in Jaffna University, Sri Lanka considered LinkedIn as a valuable tool for job search and opportunities. Factors such as acceptability, ease of use, and the availability of reliable and accurate information



significantly influence their decisions to utilize LinkedIn for job searches. Basak & Calisir (2014) provided a better understanding of the factors identifying the uses and gratifications of LinkedIn among users in Turkey and categorized as self-promotion, group activities, job and job affairs, finding old and new friends easily, follow up, profile viewer data, and professional networking.

Fountain (2005) argued that new communication technologies, like LinkedIn, help job seekers by facilitating informal strategies such as using personal contacts like friends, relatives, or colleagues who provide inside information about job openings. This method reduces search costs compared to formal channels like newspaper ads. LinkedIn, by connecting users with a broad network, provides access to valuable resources and unique job information. Weiner (2016) suggests that online networking platforms and digital resumes, such as LinkedIn, may eventually replace traditional methods like the regular CV and cover letter, urging job seekers to be prepared for these shifts. LinkedIn itself advocates for early adoption of the platform, with their statistics showing that 24% of users aged 18 to 24 are already utilizing the network (LinkedIn, 2020).

According to Gerard (2012), networking can lead to potential first jobs and professional growth, and platforms like LinkedIn can further enhance these opportunities, increasing the chances of successful career progression. De Ven et.al. (2016), found that the key personality traits of people like extraversion and self-presentation can be identified through profiles on LinkedIn. Davis (2020) also in his study, *Networking via LinkedIn: An Examination of Usage and Career Benefits* explored how personality traits, career interests, and networking skills relate to LinkedIn engagement. He found that individuals who scored higher in extraversion, have a flexible approach to their career (referred to as a protean career orientation), and possess strong networking abilities tend to use LinkedIn more actively. This higher level of engagement often leads to tangible career benefits, such as finding job opportunities and gaining mentorship through professional

connections.

Utz (2015) found that the users of LinkedIn and Twitter reported higher informational benefits than non-users, whereas the Facebook users reported lower informational benefits. Posting about work and strategically selecting ties consistently predicted informational benefits. The network composition mattered most on LinkedIn; strong and weak ties predicted informational benefits. The results demonstrate the usefulness of the social capital framework.

Utz, & Breuer (2019) found interesting finding that people scoring high on external networking (but not internal networking within their organization) are also more likely to use LinkedIn. External networking was also positively correlated with active and passive use as well as the number of strong and latent ties on LinkedIn. However, in a mediation model the direct effect of networking on informational benefits was not mediated by actual social media use and network composition; instead, the number of weak ties had a direct effect on informational benefits. The results thus indicate that networking is a major driver of informational benefits from LinkedIn use.

Al-Badi et al. (2013) highlighted a number of usability problems, 1) confusing or unfamiliar terminology such as 'friends' being referred to as 'connections'; and 2) the unexpected location of components or links. It was also found that there was some variations in opinion between novices and experienced users regarding the user interface usability of LinkedIn, as the novices had difficulty in performing some of the tasks.

According to Literature available, it is observed that limited research conducted on how undergraduate students utilize of LinkedIn for networking, career planning, and skill development in Sri Lanka.

Material & Methods

This study utilized a survey method to collect data directly from participants through a structured questionnaire developed using Google Forms. The questionnaire was designed with a combination of closed- and open-ended questions, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative data collection.

The qualitative data gathered from the open-ended questions were examined to gain insights into the participants' attitudes and experiences with LinkedIn and its role in their professional growth and career planning. The decision to use a survey as the primary method of data collection was based on its effectiveness in gathering extensive, measurable data from a defined population.

a. Sampling Method

The research focused on a target population of 120 undergraduate students from the Faculty of Communication & Business Studies and the Faculty of Applied Science, Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. A random sampling method was employed to select the participants. The students were equally distributed across four departments within the faculties: Department of Languages & Communication Studies, Department of Management Studies, Department of Computer Science, Department of Physical Science.

b. Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was administered online, ensuring easy accessibility for undergraduate students. It was designed to assess the undergraduate students' usage of LinkedIn in relation to career development, networking, and job search activities. This method facilitated a smooth and efficient data collection process from the student population. The data collected from the closed-ended questions were analyzed quantitatively using Microsoft Excel, with descriptive statistics such as frequencies, and percentages, being applied to interpret the data.

Findings & Results

The analysis of the participants' ages revealed that a significant majority, comprising 76%, fell within the age group of 24-28. This suggests that older undergraduate students who are in year 3 and 4 are increasingly engaging with LinkedIn. In contrast, 24% of participants were aged 20-24 years, indicating that while the primary users are older students who study in Year 3 and Year 4, there is still a notable presence of slightly younger undergraduates (Year 1 and Year 2) who utilize LinkedIn for professional networking.

According to figure 02, it is revealed that 100% of students from the Faculty of Applied Science use LinkedIn regular basis. This suggests a strong inclination among these students to leverage the platform for career development and networking opportunities. Conversely, the Faculty of Business and Management Studies exhibited a slightly lower utilization rate, with 73.33% of its students actively using LinkedIn. Notably, 26.6% of students from this faculty reported that they do not use the platform, highlighting a potential area for intervention to encourage greater engagement with LinkedIn.



Figure 2 LinkedIn usage across faculties

When combining the data from both faculties, an overarching trend emerges: 86.66% of participants reported using LinkedIn. This high percentage indicates a general awareness and acceptance of the platform among undergraduate students, suggesting its growing importance as a professional networking tool within the student community. The variations in usage rates between faculties may reflect differences in curriculum focus, career aspirations, and the level



of institutional support for utilizing LinkedIn in career development.

Figure 03 shows that 46.66% of students reported using LinkedIn daily, while 26.66% engaged with it weekly. Additionally, 8.33% used the platform on a monthly basis, and 5% indicated usage of less than monthly. A total of 13.3% of participants reported that they never use LinkedIn though they have an account. These results indicate a strong inclination towards frequent usage among a significant portion of the student population.

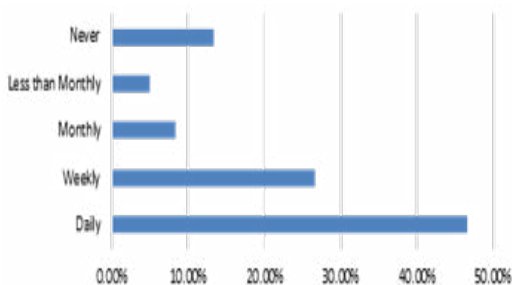


Figure 3 Frequency of LinkedIn usage

When inquired about the timing of their LinkedIn usage, the majority (76.6%) indicated that they access the platform whenever needed. In contrast, 0% of participants reported using LinkedIn in the morning or during the day, while only 3.33% used it in the evening and 6.66% before sleep. This suggests that students prioritize their LinkedIn activity based on immediate needs rather than following a specific routine.

Participants were also asked about their sources of awareness regarding LinkedIn. Figure 04 indicates that 28.33% became aware of LinkedIn through social media, while 31.66% attributed their knowledge to friends. 20% of users learned about LinkedIn from senior students, and only 3.3% reported learning about LinkedIn from professors or lecturers. Additionally, 13.33% were unsure of how they became aware of the platform. These findings highlight the significance of informal channels, such as social media and peer influence, in raising awareness of LinkedIn among undergraduates, indicating a potential gap in the role of formal education in promoting the platform.

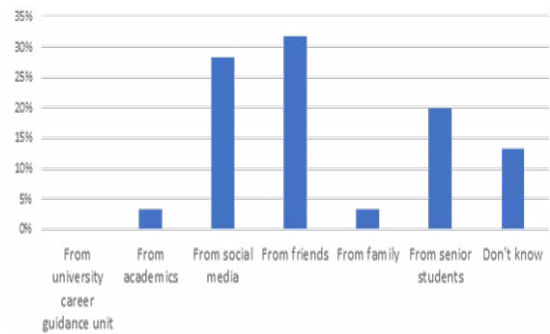
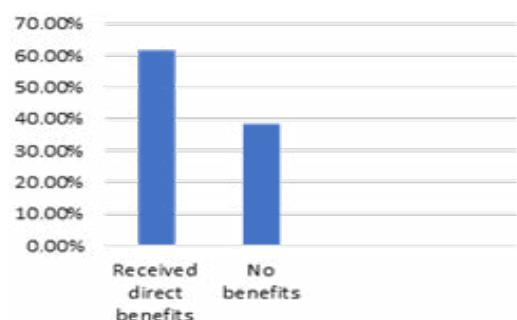


Figure 4 Sources of Awareness about LinkedIn

In response to open-ended questions regarding the benefits of using LinkedIn for career development, participants identified several key advantages; building professional connections, finding internships and job opportunities, gaining awareness about companies and industries, showcasing skills and experience to a wider audience. The most frequently mentioned benefits were securing internships and finding their first job, indicating the platform's significant role in their career journeys.

When asked if they had directly experienced benefits from LinkedIn, 61.66% of participants answered "yes," while 38.33% responded "no." Among the 61.66% who reported benefits, an analysis based on their academic departments revealed the following: 32.43% of students from the Department of Physical Science found jobs through LinkedIn, 40.54% of students of Department of Computer Science students secured internships, and 27.02% of students of Department of Business and Management reported secured internships in companies. Notably, no students from the Department of Languages & Communication Studies indicated that they had received any benefits from using the platform.



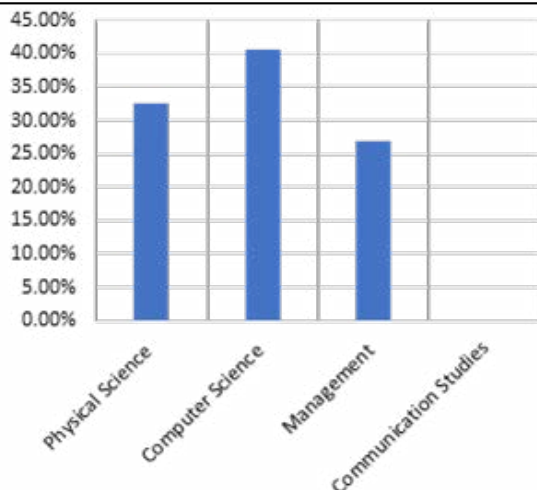


Figure 5 Benefits of LinkedIn

Participants were also asked to assess the importance of LinkedIn for career success. A significant majority (80%) regarded it as “very important,” while only a small fraction considered it “somewhat important” (3.33%), “neutral” (3.33%), or “not very important” (8.33%); and 5% deemed it “not important.” This overwhelming acknowledgment of LinkedIn’s importance stresses its role as a critical tool for professional advancement in today’s job market.

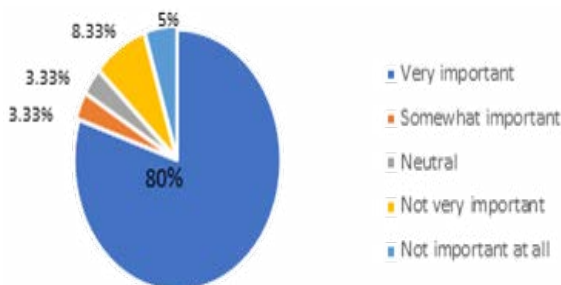


Figure 6 Importance of LinkedIn for Career Success

When inquired about challenges faced while using LinkedIn, 58.33% of respondents indicated that they did encounter difficulties, whereas 41.66% reported they did not. The challenges cited included the following: 46.6% found it difficult to maintain a professional demeanor on the platform, 13.33% expressed low awareness of how to utilize the application effectively, 10% of them faced limitations in their network connections, 18.33% struggled with

keeping their audience engaged, and 10% mentioned being overwhelmed by professional news feeds. Additionally, a small percentage (1.66%) noted the lack of interaction as a challenge to their daily usage of LinkedIn.

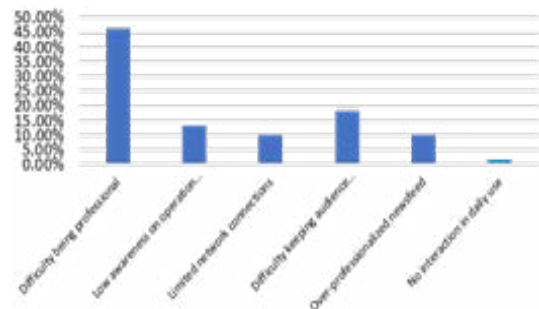


Figure 7 Barriers for Maintaining the Account of LinkedIn

Finally, participants were asked how universities or career centers could better support students in utilizing LinkedIn effectively. A predominant suggestion (82%) was to arrange practical workshops with experts, while 10% of undergraduates recommended organizing career guidance sessions for them. Only 5% suggested raising awareness during lectures, and 1% during orientation period. This feedback indicates a clear preference for hands-on, practical training over theoretical knowledge, emphasizing the need for universities to take a more active role in guiding students on how to leverage LinkedIn for their career development.

Interpretation & Discussion

Based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), this study found that undergraduate students hold a positive attitude toward LinkedIn, recognizing its usefulness for securing internships and employment. This attitude shaped their behavioral intention to use the platform, primarily for networking and career exploration. However, challenges such as creating a professional profile and maintaining consistent engagement affected their actual use. These insights suggest that universities should offer targeted support, such as LinkedIn-focused workshops and digital skills training, to help students build confidence and better navigate the transition from education to employment.



Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role LinkedIn plays in the professional lives of undergraduate students, revealing both its benefits and the challenges users face. The majority of students access the platform daily, indicating a strong commitment to using it for career development. The benefits identified by participants include finding internships and job opportunities, building professional connections, gaining insights into companies and industries, and showcasing their skills and experiences. Notably, the participants acknowledged LinkedIn's critical importance for career success. However, challenges remain. Over half of the respondents faced difficulties in using the platform, primarily due to the challenges of maintaining professionalism and limited network connections. This indicates a need for greater support in navigating the intricacies of LinkedIn. Students suggested that universities could enhance their LinkedIn utilization through practical workshops with experts, which aligns with the desire for actionable guidance rather than theoretical knowledge. By implementing such initiatives, universities can better equip students to harness LinkedIn's full potential, ultimately facilitating their career success and professional development.

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