



To Network or Not To Network

Is LinkedIn a Career Builder or a Comparison Trap?

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ONE TAB REMAINS among the many that cycle through a college student's browser. It crouches in the upper right corner of the screen, watching over the surrounding tabs as they come and go. The omnipresent square blue icon is a constant reminder that the working world is approaching. It beckons you, offering professional connections and a successful career, if you just give it one, single click...

Next thing you know, you're doomscrolling LinkedIn, passing by the most recent accomplishments of your network. They all have either been accepted into some academic program or joined a new organization. They also somehow all have internships.

The internship search is a scary and uncertain time in many college students' lives, and adding LinkedIn to the picture can make it even more intimidating. LinkedIn is meant to open up new career opportunities through interacting with company profiles and adding friends to your professional network, known as "connections." These connections

should technically expand your reach to employers, but reaching as many connections as possible often stresses the competitive nature of the job market, putting even more pressure on college students.

The mythic conquest that is 500+ connections becomes the first checkpoint in the game of LinkedIn. Anyone and everyone with UCSB in their bio is followed, including long-gone alumni and campus celebrities who have no idea who you are. Gaining the connections is one thing, but leveraging them in the climb to the throne—your adult career—is a much harder feat. The app's strategic contortion of who can get the most connections and profile views leaves many students questioning how they measure up to others around them, and if it's even worth applying for the positions LinkedIn lays out for them.

This platform pushes a type of competition that is especially prominent among Isla Vista's residents. Primarily made up of college students attending the

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number one party school in the country, according to a survey by Niche, many of us are driven by the Fear of Missing Out and the work-hard-play-hard mentality. We spend long days on campus or at work, so we deserve the long nights out in IV. Our competitive spirits linger in the back of our beings, even in the transition from the library to Del Playa.

With over 930 million users, LinkedIn is the most widely used professional social network online. While this not only amps up the pressure to make an account, it also creates a standard within the workforce.

Brandon Hernandez, a career counselor within UCSB's Career Services Department, considers LinkedIn profiles as a sort of “business card” for recruiters. “I wish it wasn't necessary, but it definitely helps recruiters confirm your personal identity,” said Hernandez. More importantly, he mentioned, it distracts from activity on other non-professional platforms, from Instagram to Venmo.

Your LinkedIn profile becomes the go-to reference in background checks by potential employers. Their first impressions are driven by rigid headshots, brief taglines, and if you are #opentowork.

Fourth-year Religious Studies major Coby Mendelson completely disagrees with this reliance that recruiters have on digital profiles. “There is so much fabrication,” said Mendelson. “People play up what they have done on LinkedIn.”

This deceptiveness is comparable to social media platforms like Instagram. The app is effectively the Instagram of the corporate universe, with its interactive components of profile-building, following and being followed by connections, posting content, direct messaging—the list goes on. The growing presence of

university students on LinkedIn provides yet another outlet for social media stalking.

Mendelson attributes much of his refusal to use LinkedIn to this very similarity. He notices a tendency to wean off excessive social media use as college students graduate. “I feel like as an adult, you are socially able to escape the realms of social media,” he said. This tendency is disrupted by the popularization of LinkedIn among young adults.

“I think LinkedIn is framing itself as an application that is going to further your professional career, when really, they are just trying to hit on social media addiction,” Mendelson said. “They are really targeting an audience that craves validation,” Mendelson said.

These aspects effectively bridge the gap between the social and the academic. And when the line between the two is already so blurry in IV, it shows in the obsessive and often neurotic use of LinkedIn among students.



“I have had plenty of times where I stayed up long nights scrolling LinkedIn to see what my peers are doing, just to compare myself and gauge where I’m at,” said Alvin Wang, a third year Computer Science (CS) major. Wang primarily used LinkedIn during his first two years at college, and has since regressed his use.

As a CS student with law ambitions, Wang has rather niche goals for his career, and used LinkedIn as a key tool for working toward it. “I could search a certain school, like Harvard Law School, and I could type in computer science, and see how many students graduated from HLS with a CS degree,” he said. “I could see their background, their technical skills, the journey they took to get to where they are, and I could emulate that sort of lifestyle.”

Despite his good intentions, Wang still fell victim to the paradox that professional comparison on LinkedIn surfaces. “The first purpose is to explore for yourself what kind of career path you want to build by

seeing what other people are doing,” Wang said. “But, that leads into the second one, which is seeing what other people are doing who are maybe not ahead of you, but right beside you.”

“They’ve done all this stuff and I’ve done nothing with my life, so I needed to step it up.”

Similarly, UCSB Career Services Counselor Jake Castellanos claimed that LinkedIn can be an important learning opportunity and a major step in the career-building process. “It is important to understand that every professional had a starting point in their career,” Castellanos said. “They started in their career looking to learn.”

Changing mindsets from negative social comparison to learning is crucial in reaping the benefits of LinkedIn, but actually getting there is difficult and uncertain. Focusing on LinkedIn learning means committing to adaptive uses of the platform: frequent searching and networking, connecting with career figures you look up to, and upholding those connections over time. LinkedIn learning is not wallowing in your connections’ achievements, giving your profile its tenth makeover, or passively scrolling when you should be writing papers or lab reports. “You get what you put into it,” said Castellanos.

Keep this in mind the next time the blue squared tab lures you into its jaws. Enter bravely past the 500+ connections and internship acceptances, and with a mission. Strike down the toxicity of LinkedIn. It will only be as dominant as you allow it to be. **W**

