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LSE GROUPS takes place during the final fortnight of the LSE summer term. Undergraduate students are placed in small groups; these are cross-year, interdisciplinary, and group members do not know one another in advance. Each group must then devise its own research question, and carry out every stage of a small-scale research project in less than two weeks.

LSE GROUPS is part of the LSE commitment to students learning through enquiry, and developing the skills for knowledge creation.

The overall theme of LSE GROUPS 2023 was *Connections*.

This paper was submitted on the final Thursday afternoon of the project. Students then presented their work at a conference, on the closing Friday.

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LinkedIn, the New Instagram? Assessing the increasing non-professional use of the social media platform amongst LSE students

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand whether LinkedIn is being used for non-professional purposes at LSE and how using LinkedIn for professional and non-professional purposes is shaping the culture of the LSE. This research sheds light on the degree to which meaningful connections are made on campus and how LinkedIn facilitates or hampers these connections. To do so, a triangulated mixed methods approach consisting of interviews, questionnaires and a digital ethnography was conducted to understand how students at LSE are using LinkedIn. We analysed our samples by discerning the difference between what students say and how they actually use the site. We found that non-professional LinkedIn use amongst LSE students primarily involves messaging and posting personal content, and that non-professional use was positively correlated with professional use of the site. We observed that LinkedIn itself has become more like other social media sites, with many participants claiming the site has the potential to be addictive and that students tend to actively follow the career development of their peers. We conclude that there is limited use of LinkedIn for non-professional purposes amongst LSE students but that it plays a role in shaping LSE culture.

Keywords: LinkedIn, social capital, culture, connections

Introduction

LinkedIn was established in 2003 and its owners describe it as a professional networking site that allows people to build connections and find jobs (LinkedIn, 2023). Academic literature has primarily focused on distinguishing LinkedIn from other platforms due to its predominantly professional use (e.g., Papacharissi, 2009). However, recent news articles have identified trends in LinkedIn's user base, content and features that make it increasingly like other social media sites (see Ball, 2022; Dempsey, 2023; Williams, 2023). For example, a study of chief executives in four countries found that 77% post personal content (Dempsey, 2023). This presents a literature gap in the study of non-professional use of the platform.

Our study focuses on the following research questions:

- How, why and to what extent are people increasingly using LinkedIn for non-professional purposes at LSE?
- What are the impacts of this on the connections people make and the culture at LSE?

We hypothesise that students at LSE are increasing their non-professional use of LinkedIn and that due to its tendency as a professional site for forming weak connections, we believe it has amplified these competitive, career focused cultures within the school.

To test this hypothesis, we use a triangulated mixed methods approach to diminish the limitations of each method used by utilising them in conjunction with each other. Specifically, we will be using interviews, surveys and digital ethnography. We find that people generally do not use LinkedIn for non-professional purposes but that it enhances pre-existing views of the culture at LSE being competitive.

Literature Review

Motivations for LinkedIn usage amongst young people

Understanding the use of LinkedIn for non-professional purposes requires a framework for analysing motivations behind social media usage generally. Uses and gratifications theory explains media usage by considering users as actively making consumption choices based on their needs (Wang et al., 2012). Blumler (1979) identified three recurring reasons for media usage: surveillance, diversion and personal identity, where diversion refers to entertainment (Smith & Watkins, 2023). Several studies have applied uses and gratifications theory to LinkedIn usage amongst young people. For instance, Florenthal (2015) identified interpersonal communication, online identity, information and career development as motivations for LinkedIn usage amongst college students, while Smith & Watkins (2023) found that millennials use LinkedIn for surveillance, diversion and personal identity purposes. Additionally, participants derived hedonic value (fun and enjoyment) from the career information available on the platform (Smith & Watkins, 2023). Thus, studies have demonstrated multiple motivations for LinkedIn usage, including entertainment and enjoyment purposes. Nevertheless, Smith & Watkins' (2023) findings frame entertainment purposes in the context of deriving value from career information rather than non-professional uses, which is the focus of the present study.

Social capital development on LinkedIn

Social capital theory provides a framework for assessing LinkedIn's effectiveness at creating connections and the strength of these connections. Conceptualised by Bourdieu (1986) to analyse resources available as a result of one's network, it is defined by the OECD as "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups" (Cote & Healy, 2001 in Harper, 2002). A distinction is made between bonding social capital and bridging social capital, where the former describes strong relationships, such as between family members, and the

latter involves weaker connections that are useful for "getting ahead" (Poetze & Strauss, 2020). Thus, LinkedIn usage is likely to develop bridging rather than bonding social capital. Weaker ties are likely to play a larger role in communicating job opportunities than close connections (Granovetter, 1973), highlighting the importance of bridging social capital and extending one's network. Peterson & Dover (2014) found that introducing a class exercise to develop students' LinkedIn profiles resulted in job offers, while Banerjee & Reimer (2019) found a positive correlation between the number of LinkedIn followers a founder has and the funding raised for their startup, illustrating a link between bridging social capital and positive career outcomes.

The online portrayal of personal and professional identities

The presentation of self and boundary management between personal and professional identities provides context to the professional and non-professional usage of LinkedIn. Goffman (1959 in Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) theorised that individuals can project a 'mask' which highlights and conceals different aspects of their identity during interpersonal communication. Rather than creating a new self, this mask constitutes part of the same individual (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Thus, it is possible for an individual to project multiple identities across contexts, all of which are aspects of the same person. This projection of different identities extends to the online world (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) and sheds light on the portrayal of professional and personal identities. While some employees exercise boundary management between their work and personal lives (e.g. Ollier-Malaterre & Rothbard, 2009), it is possible to project both identities in the same situation (Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009) and this can increase liking and respect (Ollier-Malaterre & Rothbard, 2009). Nevertheless, much of the literature applied to social media usage attempts to contrast LinkedIn with other social media platforms, often distinguishing it by its predominantly professional usage (see Ryan et al., 2017; Papacharissi, 2009; Van Dijck, 2013). Hence, a literature gap exists in the extent to which personal identities are projected via LinkedIn and the study of LinkedIn specifically for non-professional usage amongst university-level students, which this paper addresses.

Methodology

Why we use a mixed methods approach

The triangulation approach used in our research, which incorporated online surveys, semi-structured interviews, and digital ethnography, allowed us to overcome the limitations of relying on a single method.

Qualitative based methods provide our research with a deeper exploration of the opinions and experiences of our participants as well as providing a holistic view on some wider aspects like how LinkedIn potentially affects the culture at LSE. Equally prominent is utilising quantitative

techniques to obtain precise data that enable us to draw statistically accurate conclusions regarding the extent of non-professional use. The use of the quantitative data in our research helps in determining the significance of relationships, making it possible to establish correlations between explanatory and dependent variables.

Surveys can find the extent of the use of LinkedIn for non-professional purposes due to their quantitative nature, allowing us to construct linear regression models. Additionally, they can be circulated to a wider audience. Semi-structured interviews allow for longer answers than surveys, providing more in-depth responses and more nuanced qualitative data. This is useful for analysing LinkedIn's contribution to LSE because the university's culture is based on each individual's perception and interpretation, which requires a more flexible questioning approach than possible in a survey (Diaz et al., 2013).

Conducting a digital ethnography allows us to directly observe social and career-oriented interactions without relying on the interpretations of interviewees. This firsthand exploration provides valuable insights and a comprehensive understanding of user behaviour of LinkedIn for social purposes (Murthy, 2008).

Online Surveys

Our online survey incorporated both qualitative and quantitative questions. We ensured the reliability of our data by distributing the survey through various academic and cultural societies in addition to our own social networks.

Our survey consists of three sections. The first focuses on investigating students' behaviours on LinkedIn and their professional and non-professional use of the platform, allowing us to quantify non-professional LinkedIn usage and identify the primary reasons for such usage. The second delves into participants' interpretation of LSE culture utilising an open response question and Likert scales to understand how participants perceive themselves within the broader LSE community. The final section centres on the integration of LinkedIn into LSE culture and the platform's role in shaping this culture.

The design of some questions in this section were inspired by (Florenthal, 2015) paper on the uses and gratifications theory to students' LinkedIn usage. By structuring the survey in this way, we are able to strengthen the results obtained from the previous sections and establish connections with participants' responses in the final section.

With the data from the survey, we constructed ordinal linear and ordinary least squares regression models on Stata to assess whether any of the explanatory variables are significantly correlated. A copy of the survey questions can be found in the appendix below.

Interviews

To ascertain whether students are genuinely using LinkedIn for social reasons, we conducted 6 in-person interviews. This method offered several advantages, as it allowed for in-depth discussions on key topics that were not possible within the structured format of the survey. The semi-structured nature of the interviews provided flexibility, enabling us to further delve deeper into interviewee perspectives. This approach allowed interviewees to expand upon their answers and discuss relevant topics that may not have been covered in the structured interviews. A copy of our interview questions can be found in the appendix below.

Digital Ethnography

At the end of our survey, we provided participants with the option to grant us permission to analyse their LinkedIn profiles for our research. Subsequently, we individually contacted participants to seek their consent to use their profiles in conducting our digital ethnography. This process ensured compliance with the ethics and privacy regulation within the research.

To conduct our research, we began with analysing two LinkedIn profiles, where we dissected them into specific sections: headlines, posts, and work experiences. By closely examining these sections, we were able to gain valuable insights into how individuals present themselves on the platform, the type of content they share, and how they showcase their professional or non-professional experiences.

In addition to profile analysis, we delved into a specific LinkedIn post that centred around the topic of "Celebrating the end of exams." This post allowed us to explore the non-professional aspects of LinkedIn usage.

Results and Discussion

Given the results of the survey and digital ethnography, we discovered a general trend that students at LSE do not use LinkedIn for non-professional reasons. Of the 62 participants in our survey, only 22.36% of the students agreed it is appropriate to post non-career-oriented content on LinkedIn. Of 30 LinkedIn profiles randomly selected, only 2 profiles had activities posting non-career-oriented content such as motivational quotes and personal interests.

However, what must be noted is the students are using LinkedIn for non-career reasons at a latent level. The non-career activities include social events, messaging friends, and viewing or sharing memes. Our digital ethnography on LinkedIn also discovered most of the active LinkedIn accounts had liked or reacted to non-professional content such as memes and others' updates on their personal life.

Despite the students showing interests in non-professional content, there is a lack of non-professional content being posted by the students. A reason for this phenomenon can be uncovered when observing a non-professional post made by an LSE student, titled “Celebrating the end of exams.” This post promoted the importance of mental health, and pointed out that “a post like this is not directly academic nor professional, but it is personal...” According to the discourse analysis approach, this rhetorical move is designed to protect an argument from criticism and offers a “preferred reading” in which the language should be interpreted (Gaskell & Bauer, 2000, 187). This shows that it is unconventional for LSE students to post non-professional content on LinkedIn.

This also implies students are not willing to reveal their personal information on LinkedIn. The dichotomous relationship on LinkedIn – either to accept connection or to decline connection – can universalise the users’ behaviours which decreases the variety of posts. LinkedIn uses the People You May Know (PYMK) algorithm which connects users to others that they do not know on a personal level (van Dijck, 2013). As a result of the expansion of these weak ties, there is a lack of trust between users. So, if people make non professional posts, they will be putting themselves at risk on a network level as they will be exposing personal information to unknown third parties (Claybaugh & Haseman, 2013). This precautionary mindset within LinkedIn can translate out of the virtual into the real world on the students’ abilities to form friendships and change the culture at LSE. This is evident from a correlation we found (at the 5% significance level) which demonstrated that the more non career hours people spent on LinkedIn, the less they thought it helped them make friends at LSE, as shown in Figure 1.

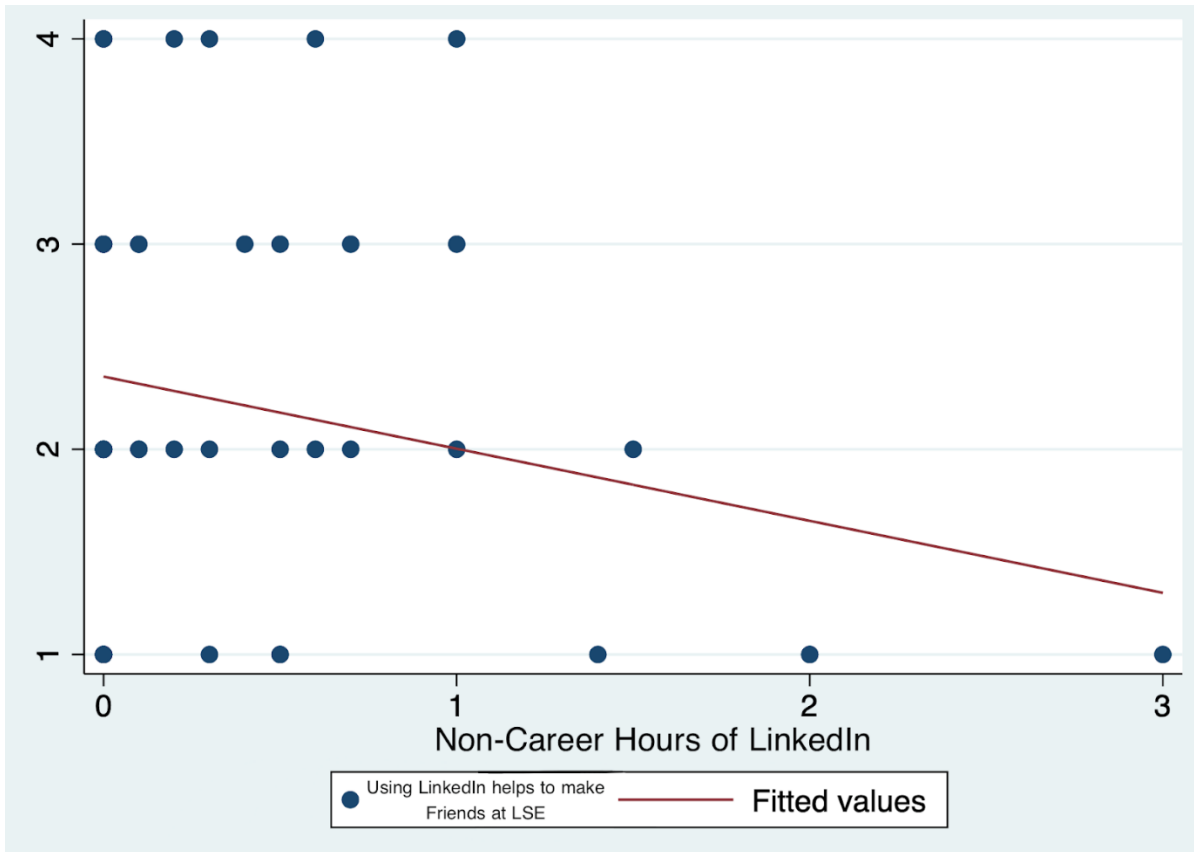


Figure 1: Scatter plot with line showing the relationship between Non-career hours of LinkedIn use and whether using LinkedIn helps to make friends at LSE

Through the conducting of our surveys, we discovered that the culture at LSE was frequently described as toxic, ambitious, professional, career orientated and competitive (as seen in the Figure 2). We then observed that students predominantly voted in favour of the statement, ‘LinkedIn shapes the culture at LSE’ with 62% saying yes, 26% remaining neutral and only 10% disagreeing. From this point onwards in our research, we tried to uncover the degree to which LinkedIn contributed to the competitiveness at LSE.

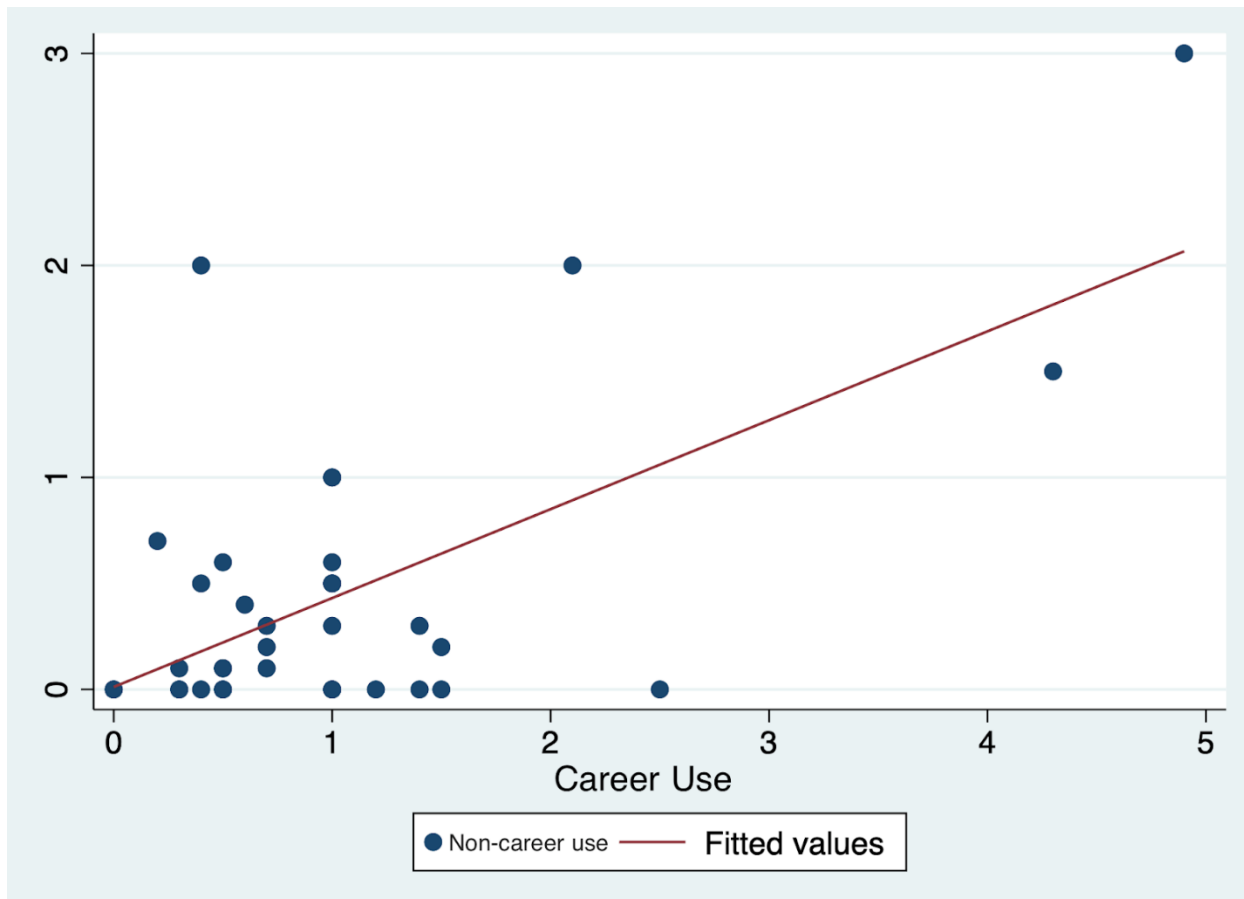


Figure 3: Career vs Non-career use in hours with OLS regression line

However, we discovered that there were variations in people’s individual experiences across different years. One of our first year interviewees commented that LinkedIn displays an objective list of achievements which can demoralise people of their own abilities. Through our discussions however we found these sentiments were dominant amongst first year students whereas second year students did not display a similar mindset. We discovered that the reasoning behind this was that second-year students had more of an ‘existing benchmark and a path’ in regard to their career aspirations (as one of our interviewees put it), thus they had less of a tendency to experience comparisons and competition.

In addition, we discovered that the student body itself contributes to competitiveness. The LSE is a very selective institution and it is naturally composed of hard working and career orientated students. So, in addition to the top down imposition of competitiveness from LSE as an institution, the student body itself fosters the competitive culture on campus through a bottom up approach. Consequently, through further interviews, we found that career-orientated, competitive individuals exist more ‘in pockets’ within ‘isolated areas’ on campus (as one of our interviewees put it), in certain societies and departments, rather than comprising the whole student body. However, the latter is more akin to popular belief and LinkedIn may be contributing to this by providing these career-orientated students with a platform to publicly display their achievements. Their voices can be perceived as overpowering which inflates the extent of competitiveness within LSE. Thus, the

perceived competitiveness is a product of being exposed to the successes of certain groups of people which intimidates students into making fallacious generalisations about the culture on campus. In conclusion, LSE is a competitive institution but LinkedIn fosters and promotes the competitive climate, altering people's perceptions instead of actually carving out the culture at LSE.

Conclusion

This study looks at how LinkedIn is being used for non-professional purposes at LSE and the impact this is having on LSE culture. We used a mixed methods approach of surveys, interviews and a digital ethnography to increase the rigour of our analysis and to ensure one method could counter the weaknesses of another method. Through doing so, we found that people at the LSE generally do not use LinkedIn for non-professional purposes and that those who do, use it because of the PYMK algorithm and the dichotomous nature of connections on the site. We acknowledge that LSE is a competitive institution. We found that LinkedIn plays a role in reinforcing this competitiveness and that it potentially influences people to the point that students have an inflated perception of the actual level of competition on campus. Therefore, we find a self-reinforcing cycle between the site's design and the culture on campus. To further research the increasing competitiveness and online network, it would be beneficial to look into its implications on mental health disorders and social media exposure.

Additionally, we found that the more people use LinkedIn, the more likely it is that they use it for non-professional purposes. Hence, we expect that non-professional use of LinkedIn at LSE will increase in the future and continue to impact its culture. It would be beneficial to study further how students' perceptions of the university can be altered so that they are more aligned with the reality of LSE culture.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

We at LSE GROUPS Group 5 would like to assess whether there is an increasing non-professional use of LinkedIn at LSE, which is why we need your help. Our target audience includes undergraduate and postgraduate students at LSE.

It should not take more than 5 minutes to complete the survey.

We value your privacy. Your responses will remain completely anonymous and will only be used for the purposes of this research.

If you have read all of the above and are happy to participate, please choose "Yes" in the question below.

Thank you for your participation in advance!

I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me.

I consent for LSE groups to process my data in the way explained above

What is your year of study?

Year 1

Year 2

Year 3

Year 4

Postgraduate



What is the name of your department?

Accounting

Anthropology

Data Science

Economics

Economic History

European Institute

Finance

Firoz Lalji Institute of Africa

How often do you use these social media platforms? Please drag and drop each platform to the preferred category.

Items

Instagram

BeReal

Twitter

Facebook

WeChat

LinkedIn

4 hours or more per day

2-4 hours per day

1-2 hours per day

Do you have LinkedIn?

Yes

No



On a day when you use LinkedIn, how many hours do you use LinkedIn for non-career reasons?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Click to write Choice 1



What types of non-career reasons do you use LinkedIn for? Select all the options that apply to you.

Social events

Posting about personal updates (for example achievements) that are not related to career aspirations

Messaging friends

Viewing or sharing memes

Other

On a day when you use LinkedIn, how many hours do you use LinkedIn for career reasons?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Click to write Choice 1



What types of career reasons do you use LinkedIn for? Select all the option that apply to you.

Networking events

Searching for work experience opportunities, like internships

Looking up short courses in specific skills

Application for work experience

Posting about career achievements

Other

I feel it is appropriate to post non-career-oriented content on LinkedIn.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

How many connections do you have on LinkedIn?

Your LinkedIn
Connections

Would you prefer your LinkedIn usage to be lower, higher, or the same as it currently is?

Lower

Higher

The same

In the past 30 days, how often have you posted on LinkedIn?

0 times

1-2 times

3-5 times

6 or more times

I feel viewing other people's LinkedIn profiles demoralises my own abilities/achievements.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

Do you think LinkedIn is a necessity for obtaining career opportunities?

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

In the past 6 months, has LinkedIn helped you obtain any career opportunities?

Yes

No

Have you joined societies that fit into these categories? (Select all that apply)

Career-oriented societies

Academic-oriented societies

Interest-oriented societies

No

I am comfortable asking my LinkedIn connections within LSE for a favour if I need it.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

I am happy to do a favour for my LinkedIn connections at LSE if they need it.

Extremely unhappy

Somewhat unhappy

Neither happy nor unhappy

Somewhat happy

Extremely happy

Using LinkedIn helps me to make friends at LSE.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

Using LinkedIn increases my sense of belonging at LSE.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

I joined LinkedIn because it is a part of LSE culture.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

I know my LinkedIn connections at LSE on a personal level.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

LinkedIn plays a role in shaping the culture at LSE.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

If you are happy to provide your LinkedIn profile for our analysis, please provide the link below.

Interview Questions

- LSE
 - How would you describe the culture at LSE?
 - Definition of culture: ways of life, norms, way people interact with each other, common beliefs, something that is passed down from one cohort to the next
 - Relationships between students and friends, within halls, classrooms
 - What have your observations been when comparing your university experience to your friends at other universities? Have there been any particular things you have identified that are unique to being a student at LSE?
 - Would you say there is a culture specific to LSE?
 - Do you think there are stark differences in your experiences as a student within your own department compared to students in other departments at LSE? If so, can you give me some examples and why do you think this is?
- LINKEDIN
 - Do you believe it is possible to succeed in the job sector as a student, for example getting an internship, if you do not have LinkedIn? Or, do you think LinkedIn is a necessity for such pursuits?
 - In what ways do you think LinkedIn has become similar to social media apps like Facebook or Instagram or in what ways are they different?
 - Can you give me examples of when, if you have, used LinkedIn for other than career orientated reasons?
 - How similar or different is your LinkedIn profile as a representation of you in real life?
 - Would you say you have formed meaningful connections using LinkedIn?
 - Has LinkedIn had any positive or negative effects on your mental health? How so?
- LSE/LINKEDIN OVERLAP
 - Would you say you joined LinkedIn because you are in LSE?
 - Would you have felt out of place as a student at LSE if you didn't have LinkedIn or would you have had a profile anyway?
 - Have you ever been in a situation where you have compared yourself with others within LSE? If so, has LinkedIn played a role in initiating these comparisons?
 - Do you think LinkedIn has contributed to within lse?
 - Do you think there is a similar culture within LSE as there is within LinkedIn?

Non-professional content posted by an LSE Student

CELEBRATING THE END OF EXAMS

Since finishing my first year exams at LSE last week I've had some time to myself to enjoy parts of student life, to 'reward' myself, and work on my mental health. I made time to visit 3 museums/galleries in 3 days over the bank holiday weekend, and then had an amazing time at a concert at the Royal Albert Hall 🎵

A post like this is not directly academic nor professional, but it is personal — and whilst I've gained a lot of connections (25k impressions this past month), I think it's important to encourage everyone to have something to look forward to at the end of exam season and over the summer break — big or small 🍷

P.S. For the next two weeks I will be working full-time on an LSE GROUPS research program. I can't wait to meet my team members and supervisors to work together on a meaningful project ✨

Please reach out by commenting or privately messaging me if you've been selected for LSE GROUPS this year, or are alumni for the project!

