



Understanding how qualifying-year accounting students construe potential employers when making employer-choice decisions

Masters in Organisational Psychology

February 10, 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family and friends for their unwavering support and motivation throughout this Master's degree. I am forever grateful for their words of encouragement, the endless cups of coffee and for trying to understand what the repertory grid technique is.

I would also like to thank my supervisor, Jeff Bagraim, for his patience and his support, for believing in me and for pushing me when I needed that extra nudge.

I would like to thank the participants of this study, as well as Riley Carpenter, who provided access to the participants.

Lastly, I would like to thank Ulrike Hill at The Word Company for her meticulous editing that provided much peace of mind.

ABSTRACT

This study explores how Postgraduate Diploma of Accounting (PGDA) students at the University of Cape Town consider potential employers when making employer-choice decisions. Kelly's Repertory Grid technique was employed during structured interviews with twelve (N = 12) PGDA students. Perceptions about potential accounting employers varied across the participants. Investec and Nedbank, both of which are Banks, were construed similarly for 11 out of 12 participants. On average, three of the Big Four auditing firms were mostly construed similarly, namely EY, PwC and Deloitte, with KPMG construed differently by the majority of participants. Nolands and Mazars were construed similarly for 8 participants. Transnet was perceived distinctly from the other firms by most participants. The most frequently elicited constructs were regarding progression opportunities, international exposure and ethical reputation. The following themes emerged from a thematic analysis of the participants' interview responses: (1) organizational attractiveness, (2) exposure gained during training, (3) work environment, (4) progression opportunities, (5) diversity policies, (6) brand awareness, (7) workplace flexibility and work-life balance, (8) the recruitment process, (9) corporate social responsibility, and (10) a felt moral responsibility to the employer. This study proposes that by understanding how students construe and perceive different sets of potential accounting employers, employers could improve their attraction and retention strategies. The findings of this study could also be of benefit to career counsellors and others tasked with advising and guiding accounting graduates.

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A pressing issue facing South African employers is understanding millennials' perceptions as they enter the workforce. Employers are grappling to comprehend millennials' unique values and expectations because employers have limited experience working with, hiring and managing these young professionals (Ng & Gossett, 2013). As such, employers do not fully comprehend how young people find meaning in today's world, nor do employers fully understand how young people think about employers (Montgomery & Ramus, 2011). Millennials are an enigma to employers - millennials' distinct perspectives make it difficult for employers to attract them (Gladen & Beed, 2007; Ng & Gossett, 2013).

In addition to an insufficient understanding of millennials, many employers have not updated their recruitment and attraction strategies. These traditional strategies are outdated and are no longer effective with this new cohort entering the labour market (Branine, 2008). Tech-savvy millennials place greater emphasis on employers' digital presence and thus rely on social media and online platforms when forming their perceptions of employers and determining where to work. Millennials' affinity with technology has, therefore, modified the recruitment landscape to harmonise with the digital age, yet some employers are yet to shift from their traditional ways (Forbes, 2018). With traditional recruitment strategies and an insufficient understanding of millennials' perspectives, employers might have difficulty attracting the best talent.

Millennial characteristics

Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, constitute 24% of the South African population and will comprise the largest component of the global workforce by 2020 (Statistics South Africa, 2019; Williams, 2015). Despite constituting the majority of the workforce, millennials are still vastly misunderstood by employers. Research has shown that millennials have been stereotyped as narcissistic, entitled, lazy and uncommitted (PwC, 2019). However, millennials have also been shown to be eager to learn, to bring fresh perspectives, and to use digital platforms in bringing about change (Forbes, 2016).

Moreover, in recent work culture, millennials tend to *love* their jobs and then promote their jobs on social media platforms, thereby merging their identities to that of their employers. Given that millennials view their identity as one with their employers, organisational values and attributes have become increasingly important (Moroko & Uncles, 2008; PwC, 2019).

Millennials also tend to engage in self-promotion via social media, thereby normalising what may be seen by older generations as boastfulness. Millennials' tendency to push themselves forward to receive affirmation extends to the workplace. In a culture of hyper feedback, resulting

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from the instantaneous nature of social media and the internet, millennials are accustomed to receiving feedback and validation in real-time (PwC, 2019).

Another characteristic of millennials is that they tend to place greater emphasis on work-life balance due to their need for independence and autonomy. Millennials are shifting away from the traditional five-day working week. Flexibility and remote working have thus become a requirement for many millennials. (Jain & Bhatt, PwC, 2019; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman & Lance, 2010).

Additionally, given the changing nature of work and the fact that 27% of millennials expect to work past the age of 70, millennials tend to seek constant, iterative skills development in their careers. As such, millennials view continuous skills development as the solution to a longer working life, as opposed to tenure or seniority. Millennials' career progression, therefore, is not always linear in the sense that millennials tend to prefer more variability in their careers. Hence, millennials tend to job-hop, which is often misconstrued by employers as being disloyal or uncommitted. Instead, millennials are just trying to remain relevant throughout their careers (PwC, 2019). One specific cohort of millennials is the focus of this study, namely, graduate accountants.

Graduate accountants' employer-choice

In an address by Francois Groepe, Deputy Governor of the South African Reserve Bank, to The Independent Regulatory Board for Auditors Public Practice Examination function in 2013, South African Chartered Accountants are held in high regard around the world. The CA(SA) designation is highly respected amongst South Africans and the CA(SA) route is quite popular amongst students interested in commerce.

Given the high regard for the profession, the demand for chartered accountants (CAs) in South Africa is increasing. This increased demand has prompted CAs to apply their skills across a range of functions, such as financial accounting, taxation, management accounting, auditing, finance etc., thereby making them an asset to any employer (Ng, Lai, Su, Yap, Teoh & Lee, 2017). As such, the recruitment market for young professional accountants has become increasingly challenging and competitive (Gladen & Beed, 2007). Given the range of employers graduate accountants can now work for, employer-choice decisions have become more intricate.

Insight into employer-choice decisions can be gained from understanding how graduate accountants perceive employers (Turban & Cable, 2003). Previous research has shown that graduate accountants are more likely to perceive an employer more favourably if the employer has a prestigious reputation and a positive corporate culture, and offers superior quality training, work-

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life balance and opportunities for career progression (Bagley, Dalton, Ortegren, 2012). Additionally, graduate accountants tend to perceive an employer as attractive if the employer values its employees, provides task variety, has a dynamic and forward-thinking approach, promotes diversity and compensates appropriately (Terjesen, Vinnicombe & Freeman, 2007). Therefore, the rationale for this study is based upon the following premise: by understanding South African accounting graduates' perceptions of the ever-increasing pool of accounting employers, employers can adapt their recruitment and selection strategies accordingly to attract appropriate talent.

Answering calls for further research

This study will answer two research calls by Collins and Stevens (2002) and Jain and Bhatt (2015). Collins and Stevens (2002) called to future researchers to adopt different techniques to understand how individuals evaluate multiple employers at the same time. Most empirical studies concerning the employer selection process utilise between-subject designs, which means that participants are required to evaluate a single employer (Collins & Stevens, 2002). These between-subject designs fail to capture the complexity of the decision-making process when evaluating multiple employer options. Quite significantly, Hsee, Loewenstein, Blount, and Bazerman (1999) argued that decision-makers exhibit preference reversals when considering the options one at a time rather than simultaneously. Collins and Stevens (2002), therefore, called to researchers to utilise other techniques to appropriately assess how job seekers evaluate multiple employer options simultaneously.

Jain and Bhatt (2015) also recommended that further research is needed to uncover the processes which underlie applicants' employer-choice decisions. Thus, this research study will utilise Kelly's Repertory Grid technique (RGT; Kelly, 1955) to uncover the implicit perceptions of various employers at which candidates can potentially work.

Note that this study will use personal pronouns to avoid ambiguity, as the practice of writing in the first person is accepted by the American Psychological Association (APA Manual, 2010). The term "employer" will be used to represent any employer that offers Chartered Accountancy articles.

Research Aims

This research study has the following aims:

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1. To identify and understand Post Graduate Diploma of Accounting (PGDA) students' underlying individual cognitive perceptions of accounting employers.
2. To determine the factors that PGDA students perceive to be important when considering different accounting employers.

Research Question

Drawing on the issues raised, the central research question was formulated as follows:

How do PGDA students construe potential employers when making employer-choice decisions?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section seeks to provide clarity regarding the various dimensions of how PGDA students construe accounting employers. Three streams of thought will be considered. First, the literature on employer brand is presented. Employer brand is a unique and identifiable employer identity (Backhaus & Takoo, 2004). Second, the literature on employer knowledge is considered, which consists of employer familiarity, reputation and employer image. This is followed by employer brand equity, which combines employer brand and employer knowledge. Third, the literature on employer attractiveness, the degree to which an employer is viewed as attractive, is reviewed in general and with regards to demographics, employer sector and accounting employers specifically. These streams of thought provide the theoretical underpinning of the ways in which PGDA construe accounting employers when making employer-choice decisions.

In addition, literature on the appropriate research methodology will be presented. Literature on the Repertory Grid technique, based on personal construct theory, will be presented.

Stream 1: Employer Brand

Ambler and Barrow (1996) define employer brand as “the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company.” Jain and Bhatt (2015) maintain that the underlying concept behind the employer brand is the notion that the desirability of an employer depends on potential employees’ perceptions of the employers’ attributes. Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005) and Collins and Stevens (2002) concur, but further propose that the general attitude towards an employer also impacts employer branding (Tanwar & Kumar, 2019).

Employer brand is formed by the company’s marketing mix: the company’s branding effort, word of mouth, or other information sources like social media (Ruchika & Prasad, 2019). This information is perceived according to candidates’ values and subsequently shapes candidates’ attitudes of the employer and their beliefs about the employer’s attributes (Foldy, 2006; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). These attitudes and beliefs form a mental map in the minds of candidates and strengthen the associations between the company’s attributes and its brand. This results in anonymous perceptions about the employer, and these perceptions are what ultimately determine candidates’ employer choice (Rynes & Barder, 1990).

It is important to distinguish between employer brand and the employer brand process, or employer branding. Employer branding is the process of creating an identifiable, unique and

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attractive identity as an employer (Backhaus, 2004). Marketing principles, such as communication campaigns, are applied during this process to manage employers' employment offerings. Doing so strengthens the associations between the brand and desirable employer attributes (Collins & Stevens, 2002). While employer brand acts as an identifier, such as a logo or a name, all brand-related information is stored under a construct called employer (brand) knowledge (Theurer et al., 2018). This will be elaborated in Stream 2, below.

Stream 2: Employer Knowledge

Employer knowledge is a function of employer familiarity, employer reputation and employer image (Cable & Turban, 2001). Employer knowledge is a construct utilised by potential employees to form an initial understanding of the potential employer (Cable & Turban, 2001). Such knowledge shapes potential employees' attitudes and perceptions surrounding the employer, thereby influencing how these potential employees process and react to information about the employer. The three dimensions of employer knowledge will be explained in more detail below.

Employer familiarity. Employer familiarity describes the level of awareness that the potential employee has of the employer. Collins (2007) and Turban (2001) found that potential employees perceive familiar employers more positively compared to unfamiliar employers. As such, it can be argued that exposure to an employer can impact how potential employees construe an employer.

Employer reputation. Corporate reputation is the "perceptual representation of an employer's overall appeal compared to other leading rivals" (Fombrun as cited in Turban & Cable, 2003, pp. 734). Signaling theory, social identity consciousness and expectancy theory can help explain how reputable employers are positively appraised by potential employees and are outlined below.

Signaling Theory. Signaling theory (Rynes, 1991) can be used to explain why employers with more positive reputations are perceived as more attractive employers. The theory posits that available information about employers is interpreted as signals about the employers' working conditions. This is because the lack of available information about employers makes it difficult for applicants to acquire knowledge about what it may be like to work at a certain employers. Yu and Davis (2017) found that potential employees use employer reputations as signals for what it would be like to work at that employer. Thus, for those with little experience with or exposure to an employer, employer reputation would be especially important when appraising an employer (Turban & Cable, 2003).

Turban and Cable (2003) conducted a study on 435 undergraduate students in the College of Business at the University of Missouri. It was found that employers with stronger reputations received 50% more applicants than employers with weaker reputations, indicating that reputation impacts the attractiveness of an employer.

Social Identity Consciousness. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) postulates that having a reputable employer allows one to be positively evaluated by his or her social environment, leading to a high social standing (Turban, Forret, & Hendrickson, 1998; Turban & Greening, 1997). This is because corporate reputation also reflects applicants' and employees' social status when affiliating with that employer (Turban & Cable, 2003). Thus, when individuals classify themselves based on their employer membership, their self-concepts are influenced by how their employers' attributes are perceived by others. Based on this, employers with positive reputations provide enhanced self-esteem to those who affiliate with that employer, accompanied by attractive feelings like prestige and pride, resulting in positive perceptions about the employer (Turban & Cable, 2003; Yu & Davis, 2017).

Highhouse, Thornbury and Little (2005) expanded on social identity theory and Lievens and Highhouse's (2003) instrumental vs. symbolic classification of corporate attributes to explain why certain employers are perceived as more attractive than others. Highhouse et al. (2005) developed the social-identity consciousness measure, which measured two social identity needs, namely the social-adjustment need and the value-expressive need. Social adjustment concerns represent applicants' desire to impress family, friends and strangers through their affiliation with an impressive employer. Value-expressive concerns, on the other hand, represent applicants' desire to work for an employer that invokes a sense of pride, respectability and dignity.

Using the social identity consciousness measure, the researchers studied 111 undergraduates' attraction to employers either identified as impressive or respectable according to undergraduates. It was found that people high on the social-adjustment dimension perceived impressive employers as more attractive than those high on the value-expressive dimension. Similarly, people high on the value-expressive dimension perceived respectable employers as more attractive than those high on the social-adjustment dimension. Overall, it was found that social identity consciousness moderates the relationship between symbolic judgements about employers and employer attraction (Highhouse et al., 2003).

Expectancy theory. Expectancy theory posits that individuals will be motivated to behave in a certain way when they know that their effort will lead to a certain performance level, which will result in an expected outcome that will be rewarded (Vroom, 1964). As suggested by Rynes

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(1989), expectancy theory can be applied to employer-choice decisions in that applicants are more likely to perceive an employer as attractive when the employer is perceived positively (high valence) and when the employer is perceived as accessible (expectancy; Turban & Cable, 2003). Thus, while applicants may be attracted to employers that are perceived positively, if the employer is perceived as highly selective and applicants do not expect to receive a job offer, they are less likely to pursue a position at that employer and may subsequently perceive the employer as less attractive.

Based on expectancy theory, Turban and Cable (2003) investigated whether the reputation of an employer influences the quality of applicants who are attracted to that employer. In a sample of 435 undergraduate students, the researchers found that applicants who had higher grade point averages, spoke a foreign language and had higher overall ratings were more attracted to employers with positive reputations. Thus, it is evident that when higher quality applicants perceive an employer positively and expect to receive a job offer, they are more likely to be attracted to that employer.

Employer image. This final component of employer brand regards potential employees' beliefs about an employer's attributes in terms of the employer itself, the job, and the people involved with the employer (Cable & Turban, 2001). Cable and Turban (2001) draw on Keller's (1993) marketing theory to understand the impact of employer image on potential employees. Keller (1993) postulate that a unique and favourable brand image increases the likelihood that a specific product will be chosen over others. Cable and Turban (2001) argue that this process can be applied to job seekers in their decision to join a specific employer. More specifically, Collins and Stevens (2002) propose that inexperienced job seekers, like students, rely on brand images to guide their decision making because many attributes of employers are not explicitly known. As supported in the employer choice literature (e.g. Cable & Judge, 1996; Kristof, 1996), potential employees judge an employer based on their perceived match between their values and needs, and an employer's attributes. Thus, it can be argued that the image an employer portrays, coupled with the extent to which that image fits the potential employee's values and needs, impacts how that employee evaluates the employer. In this context, employer with strong employer images are preferred over those with weak employer images (Collins & Stevens, 2002).

In summary, employer knowledge consists of employer familiarity, reputation and employer image, and is drawn upon by potential applicants to develop employer perceptions. Applicants' positive responses to employer knowledge and the development of a sense of loyalty to an employer is known as brand equity.

Bringing Employer Knowledge and Employer Brand together: Employer Brand Equity

Employer brand equity (EBE) brings employer knowledge and employer brand together. Alshathry and Goodman (2017) consider EBE as (1) the positive responses to employer knowledge, and (2) the loyalty to an employer brand due to positive experience with the employer. Based on this conceptualisation, Alshathry and Goodman (2017) argued that employer brand equity is roughly synonymous with employer brand. ‘Positive responses to employer knowledge’ encompass the positive attitudes toward an employer and the positive perceptions of an employer’s attributes, which are both dimensions of employer brand (Collins & Stevens, 2002). As such, EBE consists of employer brand and loyalty to the employer (Alshathry & Goodman, 2017).

Applicants who respond positively to employer knowledge and who develop a sense of loyalty to the employer will most likely perceive the employer as attractive during the appraisal process. This is known as employer attractiveness, which is discussed in Stream 3.

Stream 3: Employer Attractiveness

An outcome of employer brand equity is employer attractiveness (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Theurer et al., 2018). Cable and Turban (2001, p. 148) define employer attractiveness as “evaluative reactions to organisations”. It is thus dependent on how organisational attributes are perceived by students (Ruchika & Prasad, 2019). These general positive feelings and attitudes are a function of employer brand too, as mentioned above, yet employer attractiveness as a stand-alone concept has received significant attention by researchers (Berthon, Ewing & Hah, 2005). Table 1 provides a summary of empirical studies on employer attractiveness.

Table 1

Empirical studies on millennials and employer attractiveness

<i>Studies</i>				
Authors	Jain & Bhatt	Mencl & Lester	Terjisen et al.	Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman & Lance
Year	2015	2014	2007	2010
Sample	239 Indian business school students	505 employees at a US mid-western community's Chamber of Commerce	Phase 1: 32 students from UK universities Phase 2: 862 students from UK universities	16, 507 high school graduates from three generations
Data collection method	Online questionnaire	Online survey	Phase 1: Repertory Grid interviews Phase 2: online survey	Survey
Findings	Private sector was preferred over the public sector; attributes like stability of company, work-life balance and job security were perceived as important.	Career advancement opportunities, diversity and immediate recognition and feedback are valued more by millennials than other generations.	Men rate a higher starting salary as more important than women; women rate employee support, variety in work, diversity, standard working hours, friendly culture, stress-free working environment and fit in with colleagues as more important than men.	Millennials value work-life balance and leisure time, as well as extrinsic rewards more than other generations.
Limitations	Results may reflect commonly held stereotypes as the sample consisted only of inexperienced job seekers.	Findings should be interpreted with caution, due to unequal group sizes.	Although perceptions do not necessarily indicate applicants' employer preferences, the sample consists of future applicants and is geared towards understanding the applicant attraction phase.	Given the longitudinal nature of this research, generational values may have changed over time due to maturation, additional training or socialization.
Recommendations	Future research should expand the scope of the sample to be representative of a wider population. Future research should also uncover the processes which underlie applicants' organisational choice decisions.	Future research should examine workplace characteristics in more detail. Further insights could be provided by exploring behavioural outcomes.	Future research should be conducted to understand students' perceptions of employers other than large multinationals, for example, entrepreneurial employers.	Future studies should explore the causes and consequences of generational differences in work values.

Various approaches. Ng and Gossett (2013) highlighted that researchers have adopted different approaches to understanding employer-related attributes. First, Berthon et al (2005) understand employer attractiveness via various value scales. Second, Lievens and Highhouse (2003) separate employer attractiveness attributes into symbolic or instrumental attributes. Third, Srivastava and Bhatnagar (2010) divide attributes into (1) what an employer “offers” and (2) what an employer “is” to understand employer attractiveness. These approaches will be discussed in detail below.

Employer attractiveness scale. Berthon et al. (2005) developed a 32-item Employer Attractiveness Scale and tested it on 683 university students. The underlying structure of the scale was identified through principal components analysis and then confirmed using confirmatory factor analysis. Through this process, five factors were found: Interest Value, Social Value, Economic Value, Development Value and Application Value. Interest Value describes the extent to which an applicant perceives an employer with an exciting work environment as attractive. Social Value describes the extent to which an applicant perceives an employer with a fun and happy work environment as attractive. Economic Value describes the extent to which an applicant perceives an employer that provides above-average salary, job security and opportunities for promotion as attractive. Development Value describes the extent to which an applicant perceives an employer that provides recognition, confidence and career development as attractive. Lastly, Application Value describes the extent to which an applicant perceives an employer with the opportunity to apply their learnings and teach others as attractive.

Reis and Braga (2016) applied this scale to the responses of 937 Brazilian professionals to determine a ranking of employer attractiveness factors for various generations. Development Value and Economic Value had the highest mean scores, followed by Social Value, Interest Value and Application Value. The ranking of employer attractiveness factors indicates, therefore, that employers who emphasise career development, opportunities for promotion and attractive compensation are often perceived as more attractive than employers that do not.

Instrumental vs. symbolic. Lievens and Highhouse (2003) separated employer-related attributes into instrumental and symbolic attributes based on the symbolic-instrumental framework in marketing. Instrumental attributes refer to job-related attributes that are tangible, such as salary, location, flexible working hours, etc.

Symbolic attributes refer to subjective and intangible attributes such as culture, innovation, prestige, etc. (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Slaughter et al. (2004) refer to these symbolic attributes as organisation personality trait inferences, in the sense that human personality traits can

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be associated with an employer. Highhouse et al. (2007) maintained that applicants are attracted to employers that allow them to express their values and impress others, as posited by social identity consciousness theory. Being able to express one's values is more likely when the values of the employer are aligned with the values of the individual, resulting in a person-organisation fit (P-O fit). P-O fit theory suggests that applicants are more attracted to employers with values that are consistent with their own (Gardner et al. (2012).

Lievens (2007), Lievens and Highhouse (2003) and Slaughter and Greguras (2009) found that although instrumental attributes explain the most variance in job seekers' attraction to employers, symbolic attributes explain incremental variance over instrumental attributes. Additionally, symbolic attributes are more generalisable than instrumental attributes (Lievens, 2007, Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

What it is vs what it has. Srivastava and Bhatnagar (2010) divided attributes into (1) what an employer offers and (2) what an employer is. Factors comprising 'what an employer offers' include caring organisation, career growth and global exposure. These factors account for 43.4% of the variance. Factors comprising 'what an employer is' include credible and fair, flexible and ethical, and positive employer image. These factors account for 27.8% of the variance. This is in congruence with the Lievens and Highhouse's (2003) symbolic and instrumental attributes, whereby 'what an employer offers' can be considered as symbolic attributes, and 'what an employer is' can be considered as instrumental attributes.

Employer attractiveness and demographics. Despite the approach adopted to categorise employer attractiveness attributes, perceptions of organisational attractiveness are ultimately influenced by contextual characteristics. As Newbury, Gardberg and Belkin (2006) found, "organizational attractiveness is in the eye of the beholder." Employer attractiveness will be discussed below with regards to gender, age and ethnicity.

Employer attractiveness and gender. Terjesen, Vinnicombe and Freeman (2007) identified the organisational attributes perceived as attractive by male and female millennials when evaluating an employer. The findings suggest that men and women are more similar than different regarding traditionally masculine stereotypes when evaluating an employer. For example, it was found that men place greater importance on a high starting salary, while women display a greater preference for a friendly culture, standard working hours and diversity (Terjesen et al, 2007). Jain and Bhatt (2015) found similar results. In their study, a significant difference was found between men and women in terms of how they perceived transfer policies, leave structure, location, flexible

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working conditions and work-life balance. Berthon et al. (2005) concurred and found that women appreciated Development Value and Social Value more than men.

Clearly, employer attractiveness is significantly influenced by the gender of potential employees. Given the fact that women are the fastest-growing section of the labour force, Terjesen et al. (2007) and Jain and Bhatt (2015) asserted the importance of understanding women's preferences in the workforce.

Employer attractiveness and age. Reis and Braga (2016) propose that there are generational differences in terms of which attributes are perceived as important. Twenge and Campbell (2008) concurred and found in their review that because millennials value instant outcomes and rewards, they regard quick job promotions higher than baby boomers (Mencl & Leister, 2014). They further added that millennials seek meaning and purpose in their work. As a result, millennials perceive ethics and corporate social responsibility as important when appraising a potential employer (Moroko and Uncles, 2008). Moreover, Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod (2001) found that millennials perceive employers more positively if they have fun and innovative working environments and provide training opportunities.

Jain and Bhatt (2015) and Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman and Lance (2010) found that young employees place greater importance on flexible working arrangements, regarding location, schedule and tasks. This tendency might be due to their need for independence, autonomy, work-life balance and personal enjoyment. This preference for flexibility is aligned to millennials' preference for working in a positive and stimulating work-environment, which fosters variety in their work (Terjesen et al., 2007). Interestingly, although preference for international assignment is clear for millennials, after the age of 32, the need for stability is displayed. This can be attributed to the preference for work-life balance and job security, despite high career aspirations (Jain & Bhatt, 2015).

Terjesen et al. (2007) compared the results of their study to that of a meta-analysis of 242 studies on job attribute preferences (Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb & Corrigall, 2000). Konrad et al. (2000) found attribute preferences that were not identified by Terjesen et al. (2007), such as benefits, physical work environment and feedback etc. This highlights the fact that the youth of today may consider slightly different qualities when appraising a potential employer in which to work. This suggests the need for further research into the next generation joining the workforce to understand these preferences in more detail. This research study will begin to understand these preferences and perceptions. Table 1 provides a summary of the empirical studies on employer attractiveness and age.

Employer attractiveness and ethnicity. Kim and Gelfand (2003) and Gushue (2006) proposed that ethnicity impacts how prospective employees perceive employers. Linnehan, Konrad, Reitman, Greenhalgh, and London (2003) studied 326 undergraduate business students in the United States. They found that Asian Americans who identify strongly with their ethnicity tend to value diversity within an organisation more than those who do not. Griffith and Combs (2015) conducted a similar study on 404 students in the United States and found that African American students tend to value opportunities for development, meaningful employment experiences and social impact/meaning in their work, more than their white counterparts. These studies highlight that ethnicity may impact judgements and motivations regarding employer-choice behaviours (Griffith & Combs, 2015). However, it must be noted that both these samples consist of American students, therefore these findings might not be representative of the sentiments of South African students.

Importantly, Gomez (2003) warns against assuming differences in work values based solely on racial categories. Instead, Gomez (2003) suggests understanding levels of acculturation in terms of organisational attribute preferences. In this vein, Gomez (2003) found, in his study on Hispanic MBAs, that those with higher acculturation to American culture preferred task-related, as opposed to contextual, job attributes. For example, highly acculturated Hispanic MBAs valued autonomy and enjoyed work that is meaningful, interesting and challenging. Conversely, poorly acculturated Hispanic MBAs place greater emphasis on benefits, working conditions, access to training and job security (Gomez, 2003).

Employer attractiveness and sector of employer. In addition to contextual characteristics, employer attractiveness is also influenced by sector. Jain and Bhatt's (2015) found that there was a significant difference between those who preferred public and private sector employers, based on stability and leave structure. The results showed that those who preferred public sector gave more importance to the stability of the employer and the leave structure offered, compared to those who preferred private sector. This indicates that the public sector is perceived as more structured due to governmental support and regulations, compared to the private sector employers (Jain & Bhatt, 2015).

Employer attractiveness and accounting employers. Little research has been conducted on employer perceptions of accounting students. One study on accounting students, conducted by Liu, Robinson and Xu's (2018), found attributes such as the degree of work difficulty, the perceived prestige of the employer, the level of training offered and the available opportunities for advancement impact the extent to which employers are perceived well. As such, accounting

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students tend to perceive employers more favourably if the job is more demanding, the employer has a prestigious reputation, superior training is offered, and opportunities for career development are provided. Employer attractiveness, employer knowledge and employer brand can be understood via personal construct theory and the Repertory Grid Technique, which will be discussed below.

Personal Construct Theory and the Repertory Grid Technique

Personal construct theory. Kelly (1955) proposed that “people act like scientists in the way they evaluate the world around them: formulating, testing, verifying and updating hypotheses about the world and its relationship to themselves” to guide their future behaviour (Gains, 1994, p. 52). In this sense, personal construct theory (PCT) postulates that people make sense of the world by developing personal construct systems as lenses through which they can perceive objects of reality (Smith, Hartley & Stewart, 1978).

A personal construct system consists of a finite number of dichotomous constructs, or categories of thought, which represent an individual’s past experiences; their attitudes, beliefs and values; and their long-term expectations and goals (Marsden & Littler, 2000). According to PCT, personal construct systems allow individuals to generalise their experiences in an orderly and meaningful way by (1) making initial interpretations of an event, (2) recognising patterns, contrasts and similarities and (3) attaching meaning and structure to the event based on those patterns, resulting in personal construct systems (Hjelle & Ziegler, 1976).

For example, when construing the culture of Employer A and Employer B, an individual may (1) make initial interpretations of both Employer A and Employer B, (2) consider whether there are any patterns in their perceptions and (3) create a personal construct system to understand these employers better. Following this thought process, an individual’s personal construct system may construe the culture at Employer A as “warm and friendly” and the culture at Employer B as “competitive and strict.”

Given that each person perceives reality in a different way, each person has their own unique set of constructs with which they interpret events. This philosophical assumption is known as constructive alternativism (Hjelle & Ziegler, 1976). Continuing with the example above, another individual may construe Employer A as “competitive and strict” and Employer B as “warm and friendly.” As such, people can perceive, or construe, similar events in different ways (Kelly, 1955).

Applicability of PCT. PCT was originally developed for and applied to clinical psychology and psychotherapy. However, the flexibility of the theory has resulted in it being

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applied to a variety of fields, such as consumer behaviour, decision making, tourism and more (Pike, 2007; Whyte, 2018).

Given the adaptability of PCT, the theory provides a theoretical framework for exploring students' personal constructs regarding their employer-choice decisions. PCT suggests that to understand an individual's behaviour or choice, it is relevant to understand what makes one alternative better than another for that individual (Edmonds, 1979). In this sense, PCT provides a useful and insightful framework for understanding students' perceptions of alternative employers.

Repertory grid technique. In addition to providing the theoretical framework as mentioned above, PCT also provides a methodology for understanding these personal constructs, namely, the Repertory Grid Technique (RGT; Whyte, 2018).

RGT provides participants with a structured method to evaluate multiple employers simultaneously. This is beneficial for this study as this method allows students to consider more than one employer at a time, thereby providing a more robust analysis of students' perceptions of the potential employers in which they can work.

Moreover, the grid allows the interviewer to understand the participant in their own terms without laying their own thinking on to them and without constraining their responses as in a structured questionnaire. The grid provides the platform to go beyond the obvious, to probe and to discover exactly what the participant is trying to say. The grid, therefore, will enable me, the interviewer, to form a precise and unbiased understanding of the way participants perceive accounting employers, uncontaminated by my views (Whyte, 2018). The RGT will be elaborated upon in the next section.

Empirical studies using the RGT. After an extensive literature search, only one study, which utilised the RGT to explore employer-choice decisions, was found. Terjesen et al. (2007) conducted a two-phase study to identify the organisational attributes perceived as attractive by male and female millennials when evaluating an employer.

Phase one involved 32 Repertory Grid interviews, in which each participant rated nine top graduate employers in the United Kingdom (known as 'elements' in RGT) against a set of perceived organisational attributes (known as 'constructs' in RGT) elicited during the interview. The goal of phase one was to determine the participants' most common constructs regarding the elements. 545 constructs were developed across the 32 interviews and were reduced to 84 common constructs by coding the constructs and seeking common meaning. A shortlist of 20 constructs was then created based on the frequency of the constructs (number of mentions across interviews) and their relative importance. These constructs formed the basis of phase two.

Phase two involved 862 surveys, in which participants were required to rate the 20 constructs in terms of importance. Thereafter, participants were required to evaluate three employers regarding the perceived presence of these constructs and their likelihood to apply to these employers. The findings suggest men place greater importance on a high starting salary, and women display a greater preference for a friendly culture, standard working hours and diversity (Terjesen et al, 2007). The findings further suggest that participants are more likely to apply to employers when they perceive the employer to employ people who are like themselves, to offer opportunities to travel and to display support for their employees.

Terjesen et al.'s (2007) research, therefore, provides a useful example of an empirical study that employs RGT to understand how participants perceive organisational attributes. However, given that this research was conducted more than 10 years ago and was based on a sample of UK students, its findings might be slightly outdated and cannot be generalised to South African accounting students. This presents a need for this current research study to apply RGT to understand how South African accounting students perceive various accounting employers.

METHOD

This research aimed to explore how students perceive accounting employers when making employer-choice decisions. The repertory grid technique (RGT), completed via structured interviews, was used to fulfil this aim. This section will discuss the research design, the sampling strategy, the participants, and the data collection procedure used in this research. The section will conclude with an outline of the data analysis procedure, as well as a discussion of reliability and reflexivity.

Research Paradigm

Personal construct theory (PCT) suggests that every individual's personal construct system differs, resulting in varying constructions of accounting employers. As such, this research tends towards a subjective epistemology, given that perceptions of accounting employers are relative to each student and are based on participants' subjective experience. Moreover, PCT provides a concrete analytical basis, namely, the RGT, for understanding the meaning participants attach to their perceptions of employers (Marsden & Littler, 2000). Given the subjective epistemology of this research, the RGT filters knowledge through an interactive exercise in the form of a structured interview, which interlocks the researcher and participant in the participants' natural setting (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Employing the RGT, PCT provides a platform against which to interpret an individual's mental map of reality and offer a holistic understanding of the process of meaning-making (Marsden & Littler, 2000). As such, Reason and Rowen (1981) and Marsden and Littler (2000) proposed that personal construct theory is embedded within the interpretive paradigm, which seeks to find meaning frameworks and knowledge structures. Furthermore, the interpretive paradigm seeks to explain a participant's subjective experiences within the realm of individual consciousness, using the participant's frame of reference, as opposed to that of the observer (Burrell and Morgan, 1979).

Research Design

To explore how students, perceive accounting employers during their employer-choice decisions, an exploratory research design was utilised within the interpretive paradigm. An exploratory research design is adopted when the problem is not very well understood and there are raised levels of uncertainty (Biggam, 2008). Due to the changing nature of work and the

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transformation of the accounting sector, the ways in which graduate accountants evaluate employers is not clearly understood (Baliyan & Baliyan, 2016). As such, an exploratory study was used to uncover new insights surrounding this phenomenon, using an open, flexible and inductive approach (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2014).

Sampling Strategy

This research study aimed to understand how accounting employers are perceived by students in their job selection process. By “students”, I am referring to students currently enrolled at UCT, completing their Postgraduate Diploma in Accounting (COMG10). These students comprised the sample of this study.

Homogenous purposive sampling was appropriate for this study because I am interested in the perceptions of people within a specific programme (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). After I gained ethical clearance, I asked a senior lecturer in Accounting to advertise my study in an email to the class. The email entailed the sign-up link on Google Forms, a brief explanation of the aims of my study, as well as information regarding the incentive involved, namely R 500 cash prize via a raffle. Sign-ups opened in the second week of August.

The research study gained more credibility by being advertised by the accounting department, as well as Riley Carpenter, who is well-liked amongst students. Thus, I believed that students were more likely to sign up to participate. If I had accessed the sample myself via people that I know, there was a chance that the sample would be biased.

Participants

17 students agreed to participate in the research via Google Forms. 14 students responded to direct communication. Two participants subsequently withdrew; thus 12 students formed the sample for this research. A breakdown of the participants’ demographics is presented in Table 2.

Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest a sample size of 10 to 20 participants to capture a range of students’ perspectives without being repetitive. Data saturation was reached after 12 interviews, indicating that no new insights would be revealed from conducting further interviews (Creswell, 2003).

Table 2

Participant demographics

	Male	Female
Black	1	3
White	2	2
Coloured	2	0
Indian	2	0

Accounting context

Young trainee Chartered Accountants (CAs) are rapidly entering the workforce to complete their articles. Since 2014, the number of CAs has increased by 8247 (SAICA, 2019), illustrating the influx of graduate accountants entering the profession. SAICA (2019) believes that a further 22000 CAs are required to meet the demand gap. Given that the CA qualification in South Africa is considered one of the best in the world, the profession is regarded highly and is thus remunerated very well.

To become a CA(SA), individuals need to complete a Post-Graduate Diploma in Accounting (PGDA) after completion of a SAICA-accredited undergraduate programme. Currently, there are roughly 440 students in the PGDA course at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Upon graduating from the PGDA program, students are required to complete their training articles as the final part of their registration as a CA(SA). Two options are available to students as trainee CAs, namely Training Inside of Public Practice (TIPP) and Training Outside of Public Practice (TOPP). TIPP is the auditing route, while TOPP is the financial management route.

By following the TIPP route, trainees are likely to specialise in either commerce or financial services, which tends to pave the way for trainees' future career. TIPP can be completed at institutions such as the Big Four, which includes Ernst & Young (EY), PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), Deloitte and KPMG, as well as medium- and small-tier employers. Working for a corporation, such as one of the Big Four, will grant trainees exposure to a wide range of large commercial clients. Medium- and small-tier employers, on the other hand, will provide less exposure to listed companies but will provide trainees with hands-on, practical experience by working closely with clients. Conversely, the TOPP route emphasises financial and business management principles as opposed to auditing skills. Trainees in this route will typically experience exposure to companies in the banking, insurance, manufacturing and mining spheres.

The TOPP route can be followed at large organisations in both the public and private sectors, such as Investec, Eskom, MTN and other corporates.

Data Collection Procedure

To collect data on the perceptions of accounting employers, Kelly's (1955) Repertory Grid Technique in the form of an interview was used. Using the grid in an interview form was appropriate, as the interview encouraged meaningful responses from students, thereby allowing the discussion of the various factors driving their perceptions of employers. I was also able to probe to gain a richer understanding of what factors are important to them when considering various employers. After the grid was completed, participants were free to raise issues that I had not previously considered, which cannot be done as easily with other techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Repertory Grid Technique. A grid is a set of ratings of elements (accounting employers) against a set of constructs cast on a grid (Jankowicz, 2013). According to Stewart and Stewart (1981, p. vii), "grids provide a way of doing research into problems - almost any problems - in a more precise, less biased way than any other research method." Repertory grids provide the freedom to the participant to express their viewpoint on a phenomenon while maintaining a structured method of gathering data.

The repertory grid was appropriate for this study because it allowed for exploration into how students make sense of alternative employers and how they establish individual bases for evaluating employers. In doing so, the grid heightened students' awareness of the factors that might impact his or her perceptions. As a result, implicit factors were made explicit so that these factors could be discussed, modified or used in deliberation (Cochran, 1980).

It is important to distinguish that other methods, such as focus groups or qualitative surveys, could not provide as much detail and depth into the processes and reasoning behind students' perceptions and evaluations of employers. This is because in the interviews, I, the interviewer, could "ladder" down constructs by probing to ensure clear and operationally defined constructs of accounting employers, which would not be possible in a survey.

Preparation for the interview. An email was sent to the class to advertise my study. Those who were interested in participating could sign up on Google Forms. I then contacted these people and asked them to indicate possible interview time slots on a platform called Doodle. Thereafter, interview logistics were confirmed. The interviews took place in a quiet, relaxed and comfortable setting on campus between 26 August and 6 September and lasted approximately one hour.

Additionally, I prepared the grid sheets and element cards before the interview could commence. One sheet was prepared for each participant, with a few spares in case they were needed. The sheet contained the topic on the top left corner (perceiving accounting employers); the elements (accounting employers) along the top row; had space for the left and right pole of each on either side of each row of the grid; and had space for the rankings (developed in the interview) inside the grid (Jankowicz, 2013). An example of a blank grid is provided in Appendix A.

Selection of elements. I used a nomothetic approach to develop a common set of elements that defined the scope of the analysis (Wright, 2004). A nomothetic approach was used because I am interested in understanding the perceptions towards a specific set of employers across a range of relatively homogenous students; a nomothetic approach enabled a comparison of individual results (Hussey, 2007). Thus, it was more relevant to provide the elements so that they remained constant and comparisons could be made (Jankowicz, 1990).

To generate these elements, I first conducted a process of literary analysis and consulted various PGDA students thereafter. Based on my research, it was clear that various types of accounting employers can be grouped into four categories of employers, namely (a) public-sector employers - government-owned enterprises, (b) the Big Four - the four biggest professional services networks in the world, (c) banks - financial institutions, (d) mid-tier employers - just below the big four with a slightly smaller client base but with considerable international presence and (e) boutique employers - focus on a highly specific area of accounting offering a much more personal customer experience. However, despite the various categories of employers, most of the literature on accounting graduates and the perceptions of accounting employers is limited to Big Four and non-Big Four employers (e.g. Bagley, Dalton, & Ortegren, 2012), as well as to the differentiation between public and private sector employers (e.g. Stolle, 1977; Liu, Robinson and Xu, 2018). Thus, to provide a more holistic analysis representative of the South African accounting landscape, each element of the grid represented an employer from each of the aforementioned four categories.

To determine which employers would represent each category as elements, I consulted a group of five PGDA students to provide a typical example of an employer that fell into each category. By using employers directly elicited from PGDA students themselves, I could ensure that these employers would be familiar to students and within their range of awareness. In selecting the elements, I followed the criteria set out by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Holman (1996), which suggest that each element must be homogenous, representative, unambiguous and as short as

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possible to encourage meaningful use of the grid. The chosen elements were Transnet, Ernst & Young, KPMG, Deloitte, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Investec, Nedbank, Mazars and Nolands. Table 3 outlines the employers provided for each category. The chosen elements meet Easterby-Smith et al.'s (1996) criteria, as they are all drawn from the pool of employers in which participants can work; they are representative of their associated category of employer; they are readily understood by the participants; and the number of elements chosen are sufficient for a comprehensive analysis (Easterby-Smith et al., 1996; Jankowicz, 2004).

Table 3

Examples of each category of accounting employer

Employer Category	Employer name
Public Sector employer	Transnet
The Big Four employer	Ernst & Young KPMG Deloitte PricewaterhouseCoopers
Banks	Investec Nedbank
Mid-tier employers	Mazars
Boutique employers	Nolands

Conducting the interview. I commenced the interview by explaining the ethical considerations of the study and the purpose of the interview. I provided a thumbnail description of the grid and I explained that I am trying to understand the participant in their own terms and that there is no right or wrong answer. This developed rapport, which was essential in conducting a successful interview. Following this, I asked the participants a few open-ended questions about what their intentions were for articles and what they look for when evaluating a potential employer. Thereafter, we began the construction of the grid by eliciting the relationship between the various

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employers they could work at (elements) and the ways in which the student differentiates between these employers (constructs).

Elicitation of constructs. The participant was presented with a set of nine cards - each of which had a different element (employer) written on it. The participant chose three element cards and was asked which two of the employers were the same in some way, yet different from the third. Then, I asked what those two employers had in common, as opposed to the third. The similarity was written down in the first row on the left-hand side of the grid (emergent pole), while the difference was written down in the same row on the right-hand side of the grid (implicit pole). Here, I ensured that I had obtained a bipolar expression. This bipolar expression, representing the similarity/difference between the employers, is known as a construct in Repertory Grid terms (Jankowicz, 2013).

Linking constructs to elements. The next step required the participant to rate each element along the construct. A 5-point rating scale was used, with 1 representing the emergent pole and 5 representing the implicit pole. The emergent pole is on the left-hand side and displays the “similarities” while the implicit pole is on the right-hand side and displays the “differences” (Jankowicz, 2004). Using a 5-point scale was most appropriate in that it allows participants greater freedom to sort the elements and the participant was not forced to make fine discriminations between elements that do not exist. Although seven- or nine-point scales exist, Stewart and Stewart (1981) suggest that these tend to be too difficult to examine visually, which may hinder the analysis.

Participants were required to choose another three cards and this entire process was repeated for all remaining combinations of elements. The method of using cards to develop constructs has been found to be beneficial because having something physical to move around on the table helps with thinking about and clarifying constructs (Jankowicz, 2013).

Once all possible combinations of elements were arranged to develop constructs, and each element was rated along each construct, the grid was complete. Following the completion of the grid and the interview, I conducted a debrief with the participant in which I reflected on the interview with the participant. This reflection will be elaborated towards the end of this section.

Data Analysis

Data from the repertory grid interviews were analysed to understand how students perceive accounting employers. Principal components analysis was used to identify the spatial relationships

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between elements, and thematic analysis was used to provide rich insight into how students perceive accounting employers.

Principal components analysis. I employed Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) to conduct a principal components analysis (PCA), as done by Chang and Mak (2018), Clauss and Doppé (2016), Hoffman, Abraham, Skippon and Whyte (2018), and McNair, Woodrow and Hare (2015).

This analysis indicates how the elements are related to each other by analysing the spatial distances between elements. Cognitive maps were drawn from these results to highlight participants' construct systems and the importance of constructs relative to specific elements (Easterby-Smith et al, 1996).

Thematic analysis. I conducted a thematic analysis, as done by Keshavarzian and Wu (2017), Pike (2003) and Whyte (2018). Thematic analysis provides insight into the subjective meaning of the constructs by analysing the wealth of narrative content generated by the repertory grids. A thematic analysis method is a flexible tool that summarises key features of the data with sufficient richness and detail and is particularly useful for areas that have been under-researched (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Easterby-Smith et al. (1996) maintained that a schematic representation of a grid does not produce meaning in itself. Rather, the grid offers a structure from which interpretations could be made. While statistical analyses make the grid easier to understand, highlight obvious findings and provide useful insights into various relationships, quantitative findings need to be considered in conjunction with the rich detail from the grid and the interviews. Thus, thematic analysis was employed to uncover the semantic properties of the grid and to further understand how participants construe various accounting employers (Easterby-Smith et al, 1996). Table 4 provides an outline of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process and is elaborated upon below.

Table 4

Thematic analysis process

Example
1. Familiarising yourself with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining themes
6. Producing the report

I began the qualitative data analysis by familiarising myself with the data. This involved transcribing the interview recordings, reading through the constructs multiple times and highlighting key words or phrases using Nvivo 12. Notes on initial impressions of participants were added to the end of each participants' transcription.

I then systematically organised the data into smaller chunks of meaning using the 'code' function on Nvivo 12. Codes are interesting features of the data, such as commonalities or differences in perceptions of employers across participants, that can be assessed in a meaningful way in relation to a phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These codes were analysed to identify the overarching themes using the 'node' function on Nvivo 12. Themes are broad patterns within the data that capture something significant about the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thereafter, I reviewed these themes, or 'nodes' on Nvivo 12, to ensure that all themes were supported by the data; were clear; and did not overlap with other themes. I also identified the amount of non-repeated constructs across all 12 interviews and determined the frequency of each construct in each theme. Following this, the themes were defined in terms of their essence and how they relate to one another. These themes provide an in-depth description of students' perceptions of accounting employers.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this research study can be evaluated using Guba and Lincoln's (1985) criteria of vigour, namely confirmability, dependability, credibility and transferability. According to Guba and Lincoln (1985), confirmability describes the extent to which the findings answer the research question and is not a product of the researcher's bias. Given the nature of the repertory grid and the underpinning of personal construct theory, it is important to recognise the

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researcher's subjectivity in the interpretation of the data. Thus, the process of reflexivity is emphasised to minimise bias. Hence, a journal was kept throughout the research process, in which all notions of subjectivity were recorded.

Dependability refers to the extent to which the study can be repeated (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). This has been achieved in this study through an audit trail that kept track of the dynamic and creative data analysis process. Details of the entire repertory grid process, in terms of eliciting elements and constructs and the interview in general were kept in a research journal. This audit trail enables researchers to repeat this study by providing guidance in terms of what can be expected during the process.

Credibility regards the degree to which participants believe the findings; in other words, the degree to which the findings are true (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). By engaging with a variety of accounting students until the point of saturation, conducting multiple peer debriefing sessions to test out insights, and consulting a wide range of prior literature on the topic of employer choice and accounting employers in general, this study ensured that the findings are representative.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied in other contexts or to other participants. Although it is not the aim of a qualitative study to generalise findings to other settings, this research study provided rich, thick, descriptive data on how accounting students perceive accounting employers so that other researchers can determine whether these findings can be applied to different sectors. The onus falls on other researchers who might apply these findings to determine transferability. Therefore, based on the above analysis, it is clear that trustworthiness has been achieved in this study via confirmability, dependability, credibility and transferability.

Reflexivity

Certain personal factors may have influenced my positioning in relation to this research and the participants. It is therefore important that these factors are highlighted. Firstly, having done prior research might have caused preconceived ideas about what students may consider when evaluating between employers. This might have impacted my attempts to refrain from leading the participants during the interview. However, acknowledging this helped ensure that this would not occur.

Secondly, the fact that I am a young white female researcher might bring its own set of power dynamics to the interview. Consequently, participants might have felt a sense of hierarchy and spatial distance between us. By acknowledging this, I made a conscious effort to maintain rapport during the interview and to make participants feel as comfortable as possible. This was

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made easier given the fact that I was a similar age to the participants, and I might have been in the same class as some participants in previous years at UCT. Thus, I also had to ensure that the interview dynamic did not become too informal.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore PGDA students' underlying individual cognitive perceptions of accounting employers. It further examines the factors that these students perceive to be important when evaluating various accounting employers. This section will provide the results of the principal components analysis and thematic analysis to provide an in-depth exploration and understanding of how students perceive accounting employers and the factors that they consider important.

Identifying the spatial distances between employers

Using PCA, the section below will explore each participant's component map, which spatially clusters elements, to visually depict how employers were construed by participants. Each component map is explained and discussed in relation to the participant's grid and interview transcription.

Each grid was analysed individually, as suggested by Fransella et al. (2004) and Jankowicz (2004). Analysing the grids individually was more appropriate than aggregating the results into a composite grid. Aggregating the results might distort the personal structure of repertory grids and goes against personal construct theory (Fransella et al., 2004; Jankowicz, 2004). The repertory grid represents participants' personal interpretations and perceptions of employers, therefore by combining the grids, meaning might be lost. Additionally, the number of constructs varies across grids, rendering the grids unsuitable for aggregation (Hoffman, Abraham, Skippon & White, 2018).

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis; all KMO values for each grid were greater than the acceptable limit of .50 (Kaiser & Rice, 1974). Correlations exceeded .30, there was no evidence of multicollinearity and communalities were greater than .70.

Participant 1. As evident in Figure 1, Participant 1 construed Mazars and Nolands as similar, as these employers are clustered together. Nedbank, Investec and Transnet were also construed similarly. The Big Four employers, KPMG, Deloitte, EY and PwC, are also clustered together and hence construed in the same way. However, Deloitte and KPMG are slightly further away from the remainder of the Big Four, illustrating that Deloitte and KPMG are perceived differently to EY and PwC.

Given that Nedbank and Investec are both banks, their clustering makes intuitive sense. The fact that Transnet was perceived similarly to the banks is interesting. Based on the interview transcription and the participant's grid, both the banks and Transnet were perceived to provide exposure to business functions; to encourage diversity; to provide face time with the client; to allow trainees more responsibility; to provide fewer opportunities for promotion, and; to provide reasonable pay. Therefore, although Nedbank and Investec are very different employers to Transnet, they are perceived similarly by Participant 1.

The clustering of Deloitte and KPMG away from EY and PwC might be attributed to the fact that this participant perceived Deloitte to have a weak ethical reputation and a culture that does not emphasise continuous learning compared to PwC and EY. Furthermore, this participant perceived KPMG to offer less face time with clients; to have a weak ethical reputation; and to offer less exposure to government business, compared to PwC and EY, illustrating why KPMG is perceived differently.

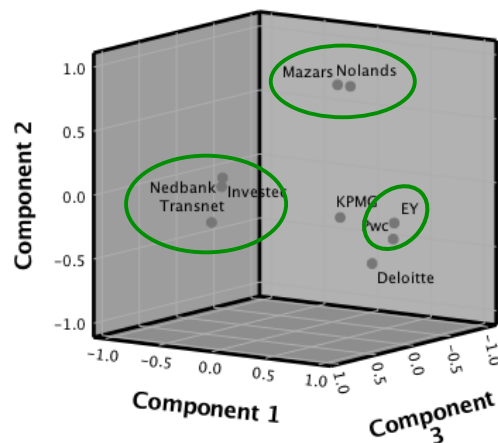


Figure 1: Participant 1's Component Plot

Participant 2. As evident in Figure 2, Mazars and Nolands are clustered together, therefore they are construed similarly. Transnet is situated in a different quadrant and is not spatially close to any other employer. In this sense, Participant 2 did not perceive Transnet in the same way as any of the other employers. Interestingly, the banks and the Big Four are clustered quite close together in quadrant 2. However, KPMG is not as closely clustered compared to the rest of the Big

Four employers. As such, Participant 2’s personal construct system construes KPMG differently to the other Big Four employers, Investec and Nedbank.

As with Participant 1, it is likely that because Nolands and Mazars are from the same category of employer, namely boutique employers, the employers have been construed in the same way. Based on the participant’s grid and interview transcription, Participant 2 perceived Transnet to offer less international exposure; to offer below-average pay; to have a weaker ethical reputation; to have less interest in corporate social investment; to not challenge trainees in their learning; to not understand employee needs; and to promote less social activity, compared to other employers. This might explain why Transnet is situated away from the other employers. Lastly, in comparison to EY, Deloitte and PwC, Participant 2 perceived KPMG to have a poorer ethical reputation; to have less interest in corporate social investment, and; to disregard employee needs. Consequently, KPMG is spatially distant from the other Big Four employers and is thus perceived differently.

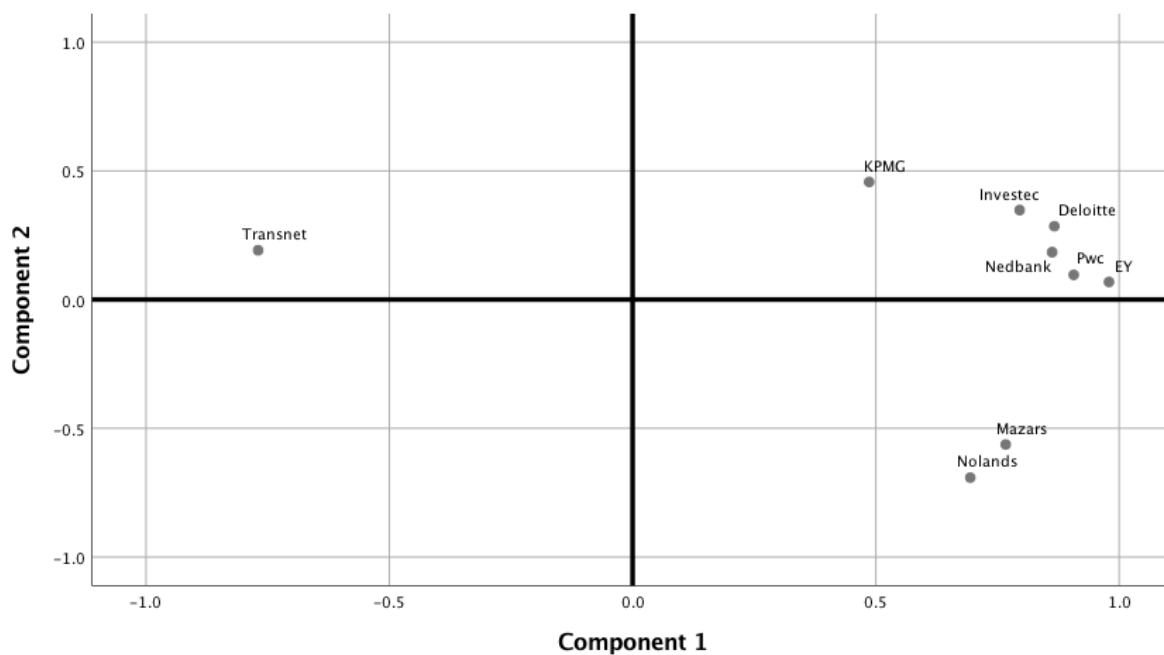


Figure 2: Participant 2’s Component Plot

Participant 3. As seen in Figure 3, this participant construed Nedbank and Investec, similarly, given that they are clustered together. The Big Four are clustered together yet separate from the rest of the employers. Transnet is clustered together with Nolands and Mazars, thereby highlighting that Transnet, Nolands and Mazars are construed similarly.

The fact that Nedbank and Investec are both banks might explain why Participant 3 construed these employers similarly. In fact, the participant’s perceptions of these employers differed in only two constructs, namely, ‘unpredictable working hours - predictable working hours’ and higher pay - lower pay.’ Investec was perceived to have more unpredictable working hours and lower pay compared to Nedbank. Despite these two differences, Participant 2 construed these employers in the same way.

Regarding the Big Four, although this participant perceived KPMG and Deloitte to have a weaker ethical reputation and less focus on gender equality compared to the rest of the Big Four, all the Big Four employers were generally perceived similarly.

As with Participant 1 and 2, the clustering of Nolands and Mazars is understandable, given that these are both boutique employers. Transnet, however, was perceived to be similar to Nolands and Mazars based on the following dimensions: Transnet, Nolands and Mazars were perceived to be less prestigious; to place less focus on gender equality yet have more racial diversity; to be less willing to accommodate employees; to offer less social interaction; and to allow employees less autonomy, compared to the other employers. As such, Transnet was perceived as similar to Nolands and Mazars, despite being a very different employer.

Except for Transnet, the component plots of Participant 1 and Participant 3 are very similar. Therefore, these participants, both of whom are black and between the ages of 22 and 24, clearly have very similar personal construct systems.

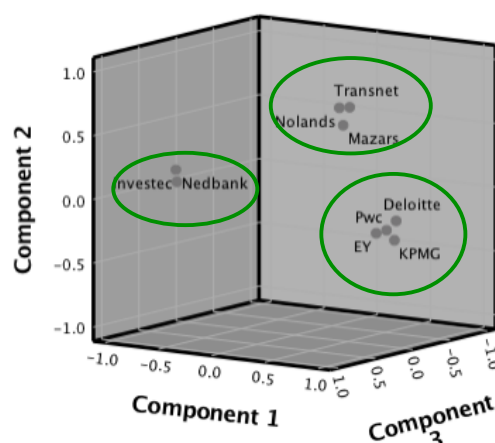


Figure 3: Participant 3’s Component Plot

Participant 4. As evident in Figure 4, this participant construed Nedbank and Investec similarly due to the fact that these employers are clustered together. Nolands and Mazars are also construed similarly. EY, PwC and Deloitte are clustered together, apart from KPMG. This depicts that KPMG is not construed in the same way as EY, PwC and Deloitte, despite KPMG being a part of the Big Four.

The participant’s personal construct system construed Nedbank and Investec in the same manner, given that the ratings for these employers on the repertory grid are identical. The fact that these two employers are both banks might explain why this is the case.

Regarding Nolands and Mazars, Participant 4 construed these two employers similarly for most constructs, with only two constructs indicating differences in perceptions, namely ‘greater awareness of programme - less awareness of programme’ and better-quality programme - poor-quality programme.’ In this sense, Participant 4 perceived Mazars to offer a better-quality programme that is more widely known by students, compared to Nolands. Despite these differences, Nolands and Mazars are still construed similarly based on the component map.

In terms of the Big Four, Participant 1 and Participant 2 also perceived KPMG differently. Based on the ratings of the Big Four employers, it is evident that this participant perceived KPMG to have a poorer ethical reputation, a worse brand image and a poorer programme reputation compared to the rest of the Big Four. As such, Participant 4’s personal construct system perceived KPMG differently to EY, PwC and Deloitte.

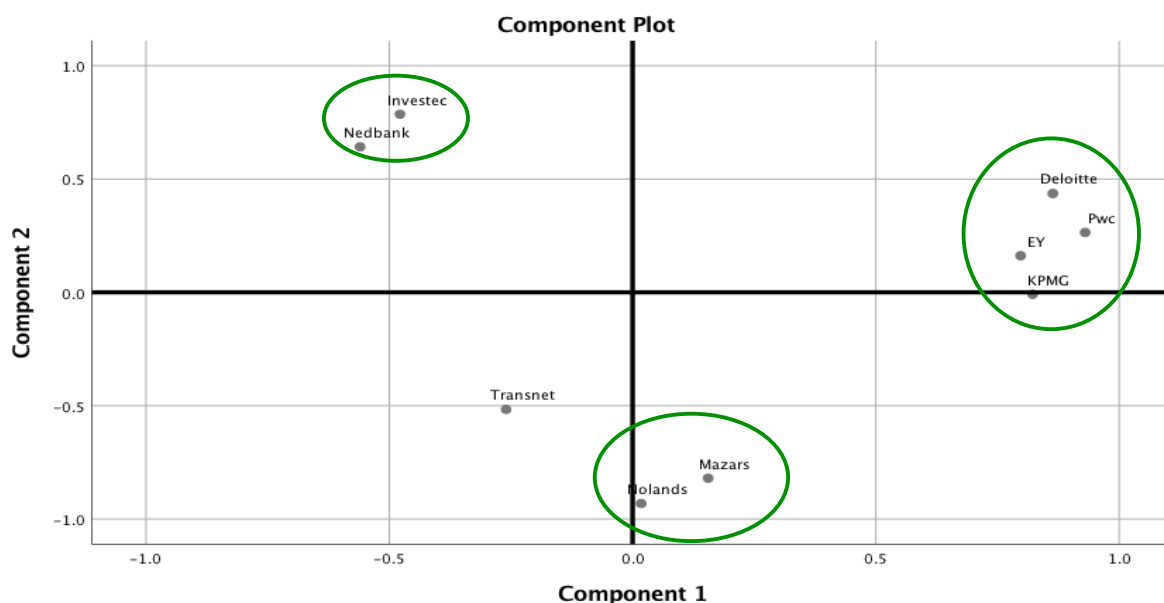


Figure 4: Participant 4’s Component Plot

Participant 5. According to Figure 5, this participant construed KPMG differently to EY, PwC and Deloitte. Nedbank and Investec were perceived similarly, evident in the clustering of these employers together. Although not as spatially close, Mazars and Nolands were also construed somewhat similarly. Transnet is not clustered with any other employers, therefore Participant 5 construed Transnet unlike to the other employers.

Based on Participant 5's repertory grid, KPMG was perceived to have lower-tier clients; to have a poorer ethical reputation, and; to hinder trainees' post-articles marketability, yet provide more opportunity for progression, compared to EY, PwC and Deloitte. As such, KPMG is spatially distant from EY, PwC and Deloitte. In terms of Nedbank and Investec, these employers received extremely similar ratings, indicating that this participant construes these employers similarly. Regarding Nolands and Mazars, although Mazars was perceived to have a more positive brand image and to bolster trainees' post-articles marketability more than Nolands, these employers were considered as very similar by Participant 5. Transnet was perceived to have a poorer brand image and ethical reputation, and to offer less flexibility and social events. As such, Transnet was perceived differently to the remaining employers.

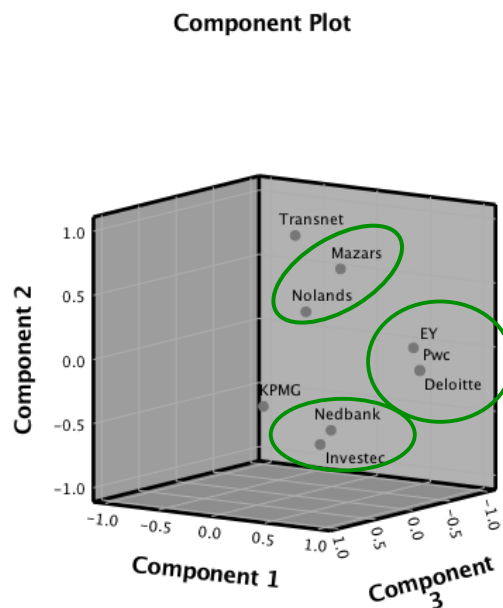


Figure 5: Participant 5's Component Plot

Participant 6. Figure 6 shows that this participant construed Investec and Nedbank similarly. Mazars and Nolands were also perceived somewhat similarly, given the loose clustering of these employers on the component map. Interestingly, the remainder of the employers are

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somewhat spread out across the loading plot. Distances between the Big Four employers are quite large compared to other participants, indicating that this participant did not construe the Big Four as similarly as other participants. Transnet, however, was perceived somewhat similarly to PwC and Deloitte.

Not only are Nedbank and Investec from the same category of employer, but both employers were also perceived to have greater brand awareness, an ‘obnoxious’ corporate culture, high barriers to entry, a good ethical reputation and to be employee-centric. This supports the clustering of these employers on the component map.

In terms of Mazars and Nolands, Mazars was perceived to have more vibrant employees, greater racial and cultural diversity and more employee benefits than Nolands. Thus, although there were differences in perceptions regarding these two employers, it can still be argued that the two employers were perceived similarly to some extent, given that both employers are from the same category.

EY, PwC and Deloitte are relatively close. Compared to KPMG, these three employers were perceived to have an “obnoxious” corporate culture; to be less racially and culturally diverse; and to offer less opportunities for progression. It follows that KPMG was perceived to have vibrant people, a humble culture, to be more racially and culturally diverse, and to offer more opportunities for progression. This explains why KPMG is situated slightly further away from EY, PwC and Deloitte on the component map.

Regarding the clustering of Transnet, PwC and Deloitte, all three employers were perceived to have an “obnoxious” corporate culture, to be demanding of employees, to offer less autonomy and opportunities for career progression. This might explain why these employers were construed relatively similarly.

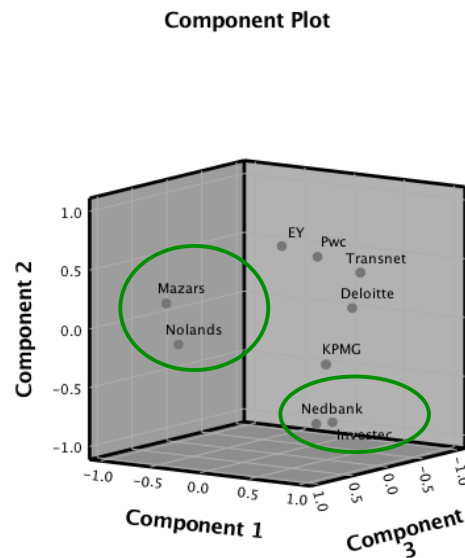


Figure 6: Participant 6's Component Plot

Participant 7. Figure 7 shows that this participant construed Investec and Nedbank, as well as Mazars and Nolands, similarly, as did Participant 5 and 6. Interestingly, PwC and EY are clustered together, while KPMG and Deloitte are clustered together. As such, Participant 7's personal construct system construed PwC and EY similarly, and KPMG and Deloitte similarly. As with Participant 2, Transnet is not spatially close to any other employer, and was therefore construed in a unique way.

The fact that both Investec and Nedbank, as well as Mazars and Nolands, were construed similarly to each other further illustrates that employers from the same category are likely to be perceived similarly. In terms of the Big Four, EY and PwC were both perceived to offer a smooth recruitment process, a strong ethical reputation and a better brand image. KPMG and Deloitte, on the other hand, were both perceived to have a work-intensive, fast-paced and intense organisational climate. This might explain why EY and PwC were construed similarly, yet different from KPMG and Deloitte, which were perceived similarly to each other. Lastly, Transnet was perceived to offer limited learning opportunities to trainees; to have a poorer brand image; and to have a poorer ethical reputation, compared to the rest of the employers. As such, Transnet is not clustered with other employers because it is not construed in the same way as any other employer.

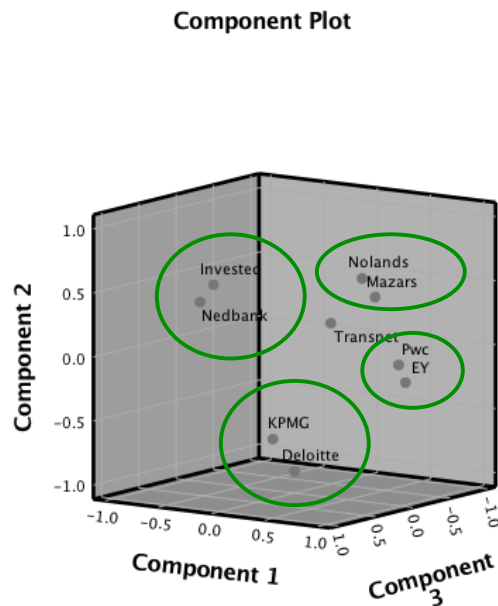


Figure 7: Participant 7's Component Plot

Participant 8. As seen in Figure 8, this participant construed Nedbank and Investec similarly, as these employers are clustered together. Likewise, Nolands and Mazars were construed in the same way. Participants 5, 6 and 7 also perceived these employers similarly. The distance between KPMG and the remainder of the Big Four show that KPMG is not construed in the same way as PwC, EY and Deloitte. Participants 1, 2 and 4 also perceived KPMG differently to the other Big Four employers. Transnet, as with Participant 2 and Participant 7, was not construed in the same way as any other employer, given the spatial distances between Transnet and the other employers.

Clearly, the fact that Nedbank and Investec are from the banking category and Nolands and Mazars are from the boutique category shows that employers from the same categories are often construed the same way. Regarding the Big Four, KPMG was perceived to have a weaker ethical reputation, a smaller impact on the economy and a lower calibre of applicants, compared to the rest of the Big Four employers. As such, Participant 8's personal construct system construed KPMG differently to the other Big Four employers. Transnet was perceived to be less well known; to have a greater impact on the economy; to have a lower calibre of employees; to place less value on employees; to be less diverse; and to have smaller and less appealing clients, compared to other employers. Based on these dissimilar perceptions, Transnet was perceived differently to other employers.

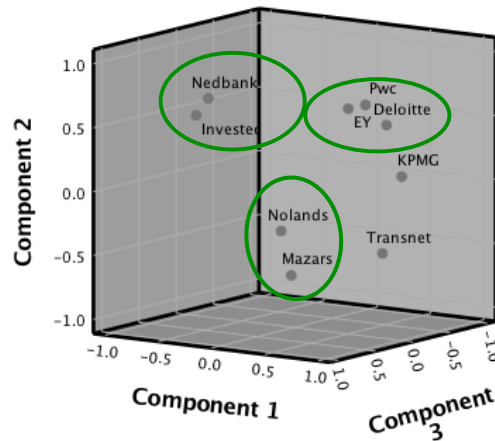


Figure 8: Participant 8's Component Plot

Participant 9. Figure 8 shows that this participant construed EY and Deloitte, similarly, given that they are closely clustered together. KPMG and PwC are slightly further away from EY and Deloitte, indicating that these two employers are perceived differently to EY and Deloitte. Nolands and Mazars, as well as Investec and Nedbank, were perceived similarly, given that Nolands and Mazars are clustered together, and so are Nedbank and Investec. This was also the case for Participants 5-8. Transnet, as with Participants 2, 7 and 8, was construed differently to other employers.

EY and Deloitte were perceived to have a more visible culture; to offer promotions more easily; and to offer greater exposure to a variety of industries, compared to KPMG and PwC. As such, Participant 9's personal construct system construed the Big Four employers differently. Given that Nedbank and Investec are from the same category and so are Nolands and Mazars, Participant 9's cognitive map perceives Nolands and Mazars similarly, and Investec and Nedbank similarly. Regarding Transnet, Participant 9 perceived Transnet to have much less presence on campus, a brand image that is "a bit shaky", a tarnished ethical reputation, and fewer opportunities for promotion, compared to other employers. This participant, therefore, perceived Transnet differently to other employers.

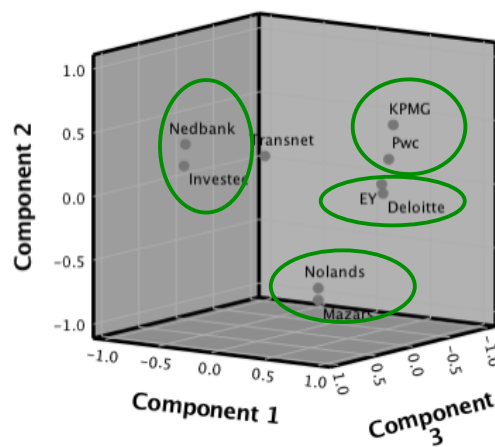


Figure 9: Participant 9's Component Plot

Participant 10. Based on the clustering of KPMG and PwC in Figure 10, Participant 10 perceived KPMG and PwC similarly. The remaining Big Four employers, EY and Deloitte, are spatially distant, and were thus construed differently to KPMG and PwC. As with Participants 3 and 4, Mazars, Nolands and Transnet are clustered together, highlighting that these employers were construed in the same way. Unlike other participants, Nedbank and Investec are not clustered together, thereby indicating that this participant did not construe the banks similarly.

Regarding the Big Four, EY and Deloitte were perceived to offer trainees more responsibility compared to KPMG and PwC, as well as greater international experience. Thus, the varying perceptions highlight that this participant's personal construct system construed the Big Four employers dissimilarly.

In terms of the clustering of Mazars, Nolands and Transnet, Mazars and Nolands were perceived identically, based on the participants' ratings for each construct. However, this participant did not feel comfortable rating Transnet for most of the constructs, given her limited knowledge of the employer. As such, Transnet's clustering with Mazars and Nolands does not have any specific meaning and it should be interpreted with caution.

The fact that Nedbank and Investec are not clustered together is an interesting finding, given that the other participants perceived these employers identically. Importantly, this participant had already signed her trainee contract with Investec and had been made an offer from Nedbank. As a result, this participant had spent a considerable amount of time differentiating between these

two employers to form her perceptions. Differences in perceptions stem from the constructs ‘gender-neutral - male-dominated’ and ‘genuine desire to develop employees - developing employees is a sales pitch’. In this sense, Investec was perceived to be extremely male-dominated yet with a genuine desire to develop employees. Conversely, Nedbank was perceived to be more gender-neutral, yet their desire to develop employees came across more like sales pitch than a genuine desire. As a result, Participant 10’s personal construct system construed Nedbank and Investec quite differently.

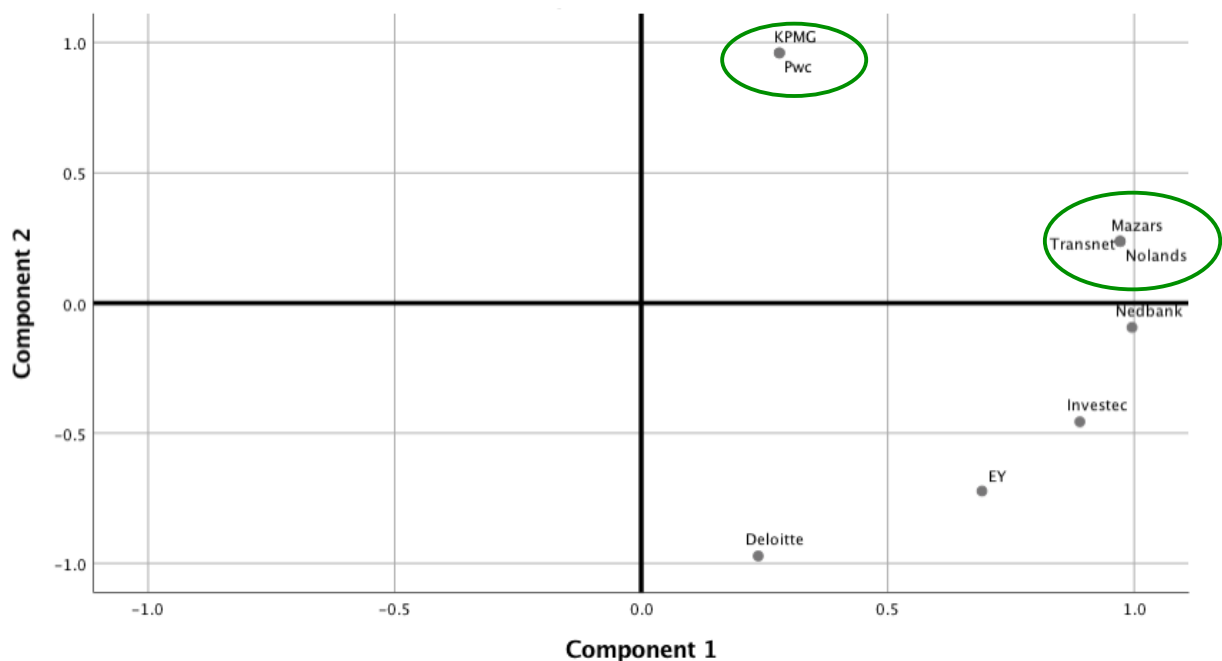


Figure 10: Participant 10's Component Plot

Participant 11. Like Participant 1, Participant 11 perceived PwC and EY in one way, and KPMG and Deloitte in another way. PwC and EY are closely clustered together, yet spatially apart from KPMG and Deloitte. Nedbank, Investec and Nolands are loosely clustered together, highlighting that these employers are to some extent construed similarly. It follows that Nolands and Mazars are not construed in the same way, unlike with other participants. Rather, Mazars is construed similarly to Transnet.

Participant 11 perceived Deloitte and KPMG to have a poor ethical reputation compared to EY and PwC, as well as a good fit between him and PwC and EY. Participant 11’s personal construct, therefore, construes Deloitte and KPMG similarly, and EY and PwC similarly. Nedbank, Investec and Nolands were perceived to offer less flexibility, fewer trainee spaces, and less diversity amongst employees, which might explain why these employers are loosely clustered

together. Regarding the clustering of Transnet and Mazars, both employers were perceived to offer more opportunities for career progression and higher pay compared to Nolands. As such, Transnet and Mazars were perceived similarly.

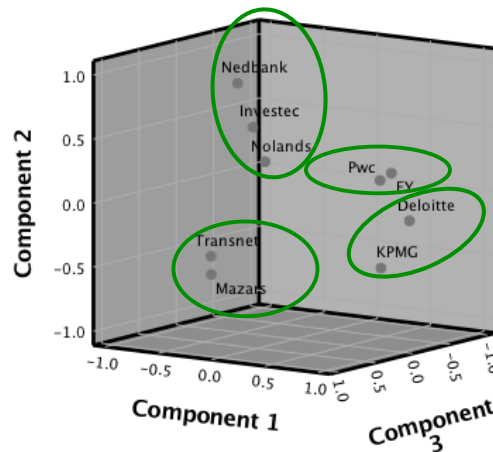


Figure 11: *Participant 11's Component Plot*

Participant 12. Nedbank and Investec are clustered together on the component plot. EY, PwC and Deloitte were also construed similarly to each other and dissimilarly to KPMG. Mazars and Nolands are spatially distant from one another, as with Participant 11, highlighting that these employers were not construed in the same way. Transnet is also spatially distant from the other employers, indicating that Transnet is construed uniquely.

Even though Participant 12 perceived Nedbank's programme as slightly more well-known than Investec's, Participant 12's personal construct system construed the banks similarly.

Regarding the Big Four, EY, PwC and Deloitte were perceived identically; all three employers were perceived to be well-known, to have a good reputation, to offer more career progression opportunities and to have a global presence. KPMG was perceived to have a poorer ethical reputation, a lower retention rate, and lower barriers to entry, compared to EY, PwC and Deloitte. As such, KPMG was construed differently to the rest of the Big Four.

Mazars was perceived to be more well-known than Nolands, to have a better reputation than Nolands and to have a greater global presence than Nolands. As such, Participant 12's personal construct system construed Nolands and Mazars differently.

Participant 12 perceived Transnet to be less well-known, to have lower barriers to entry and a lower retention rate compared to the other employers. As such, Transnet was construed quite distinctively and dissimilarly to the other employers.

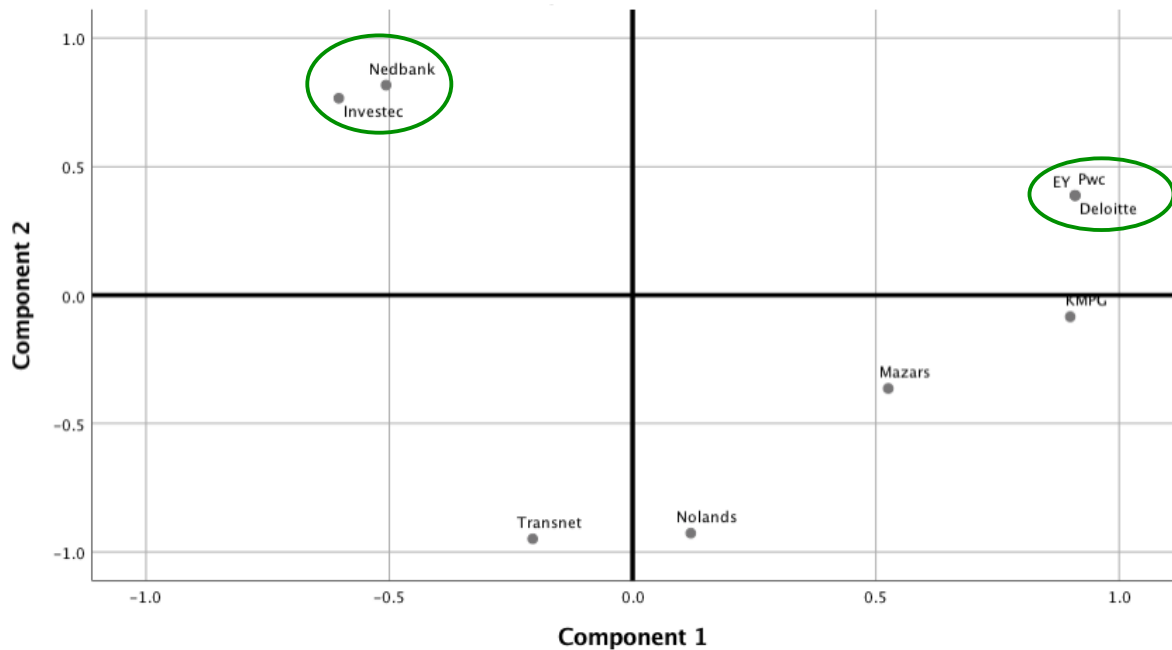


Figure 12: Participant 12's Component Plot

The PCA has displayed the spatial relationships between the various employers to explain how the employers relate to one another in each participant's mind. The section below will explain these spatial relationships in more detail by analysing various themes that emerged in the data.

An in-depth understanding of the themes in the data

This section will explore each theme in detail by drawing on the repertory grids and the interview transcriptions and discussing each theme in relation to previous literature. In addition, the frequency of each theme will be discussed. Table 7 displays each theme in order of frequency, as well as sub-themes and extracts from the interview transcriptions.

Table 7

Themes with extracts

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency of constructs constituting the theme	Extract
Employer's perceived organisational attractiveness	a) Perceptions of remuneration packages	7	"I've been talking to people who were like, no, we get paid less at EY but we haven't, like, we really enjoying our auditing time, whereas chatting to people at Deloitte with where they say we're being paid more than EY but we are not having a good time."
	b) Employer's brand image	11	"I've heard EY is a fantastic company to work for."
	c) Employer's ethical reputation	10	"KPMG's ethical reputation is not so good in terms of what KPMG went through with the Gupta's case. Like every time I tell people I'm signed with KPMG, they look at me funny and I have to remind them, KPMG Namibia, hello. So that thing like you also now become stained and I haven't even worked there yet, but already I'm being looked on as you know, I don't know what."
	d) Perceptions of employer's culture	12	"From a people's perspective, I found Deloitte to be just very unexciting and like people weren't excited about their work. They didn't seem passionate about it or particularly open to discussing it..."
Perceived exposure gained during training	a) Exposure to big clients	6	"Deloitte is a big firm, so they are going to get really big clients. And I think from the perspective of a prospective trainee, you want to know that you're going to be working on big entities because I feel that maybe those are the ones you'll have aspirations to work in afterwards and those are the ones maybe you're more interested in. Um, so it's more appealing"
	b) Exposure to industry leaders	3	"So for instance, working with people at Investec and Nedbank, I would think that you can get a lot in more out of those people and I can learn a lot more from those people because they might be more clever, more accomplished and whatever it is compared to a place like Nolands and Mazars, which just have people who have been in the small and medium industries."
	c) Exposure to a variety of clients & industries	9	"So, I know for instance, EY Cape Town, they have in your portfolio, you can have financial services clients and other retail clients. You can have different clients across sectors, something which a lot of the other companies don't necessarily offer."

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Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency of constructs constituting the theme	Extract
Perceived progression opportunities	d) International exposure	10	“Nedbank, I think would spread across Africa. I think maybe even just southern Africa and Nolands is just South Africa. Deloitte is all over. I think you are limited in that sense. Like if you wanted to have like exposure to another environment or like another country.”
	a) In-house promotion opportunities	8	“I think my perception is that it is highly likely that you will be promoted at EY and Nolands as opposed to Nedbank. And I think I speak more for, I guess me as a black woman. Um, in that, just that category. Um, Nolands because it's small and from what they sold to me is that once you're done with your traineeship, you are a junior manager and then you become manager, then you can be a senior manager and it's not that difficult to become the partner. So, it is easier to be promoted at Nolands and EY as opposed to Nedbank. And I don't know why it wouldn't be more easier than a bank. But I think maybe, I really don't know. But I just think that it is.”
	b) Post-articles career progression	3	“Marketability in terms of the fact that because these big four are recognised, you can kind of walk into any company anywhere in the world. Once I've completed my articles at the big four, if I'm trying to find another job, I can go in and be like, this is where I got my training. They're going to see Mazars and they are going to be like, I don't know what that is. But if they see a big four firm, they'll be like, hey, okay.”
Employer's perceived diversity policies	a) Perceived gender diversity	3	“PwC has awarded bursaries to black women, so they're trying to move towards empowering disadvantaged people who are worse off.”
	b) Perceived racial diversity	3	“Nedbank Bank is definitely more BEE focused. They take 15 people and like 1 white guy. Whereas at PwC and Deloitte, the ratio is definitely a lot better than that. It's so funny because they actually market themselves as the most diverse kind of place, but diversity includes everyone and that's not what they do.”

when making employer-choice decisions

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency of constructs constituting the theme	Extract
	c) Perceived cultural diversity	4	“But like it's kind of contradicting the fact that Investec is a Jewish company in terms of the fact that it is very heavily Jewish run. So, of all the people that applied in my year, of the four or five people I knew got in, four of them were Jewish. So, they kind of made me feel like it doesn't really matter what you said in the interview. The Jewish community is infamous for kind of looking out for each other and kind of keeping the community close, so it wasn't any surprise. Um, but that's why people kind of get defeated by the interview process.”
Level of brand awareness	a) Information about employer not readily available	5	“I still feel like a lot of my peers or younger peers, like they generally not, they don't get a lot of the information. It's very sad that like even like this year, I remember when we all got into like banking, people didn't know you could do your articles at a bank.”
	b) Employer's presence on campus	2	“PwC and them always flash the cash when it comes to like representation and they always sponsoring things like formals and they have signs everywhere. You can go to any lecture in the commerce faculty, any faculty actually, and you'll see a PwC pen. You won't see someone with a Transnet pen.”
Perceived flexibility and work-life balance		5	“At KPMG I know they just strained for employees at the moment, so I know people who are doing their articles, they're like, we literally just do overtime all the time. Like there's no kind of like time for ourselves at all because they just overworked basically.”
Perceptions of employer's recruitment process	Ease of recruitment process	2	“I mean it's a little easier to get into the audit firms and they're more accessible, like, yeah, to get in. Compared to Investec, which is more prestigious.”
	Recruitment requirements	2	“I personally felt that Investec was more like “prove yourself to us,” like “what makes you special?” They didn't test anything. EY and PwC was more concerned whether you know what's going on in the world at the moment and seeing if you actually know what you're studying... At Investec, it kind of feels like the interview is about what kind of person you are.”

Theme	Sub-theme	Frequency of constructs constituting the theme	Extract
Student's moral responsibility towards the employer		3	"Um, the thing that really shifted it for me was that I found, I discovered that I had, uh, an almost an emotional attachment to Investec because they had been paying for my tuition from first year. They're paying for me this year as well. Um, and they stepped into my, my life in first year at a time when I sort of really needed the funding so that there's that aspect to it where you kind of want to repay that, uh, the, the, the efforts that they, you know, and the faith and the confidence, confidence that they placed in you at that point in your life."
Perceptions of employer's work environment	Fun/mundane work	2	"I think at Investec and Nedbank you're going to have more fun at work."
	Fast-paced/laid-back environment	1	I think banking is kind of similar in a lot of ways like across different banks. Like it's a very fast paced environment. There's a lot going on. It's a very intense environment, whereas I don't consider audit to be as intense."
Employer's perceived corporate social responsibility	Emphasis on corporate social investment	1	"EY has like a thing where they actually like take students from schools and then like educate them better and like mentor them through university. Like, and then they come work for the firm. So, they're taking someone who actually is underprivileged and bring them in."

Exploration of themes. Themes are patterns of meaning in the data that provide a rich understanding of how students perceive accounting employers. In order of frequency, each theme is presented below: (1) employer's perceived organisational attractiveness, (2) exposure gained during training, (3) perceived progression opportunities, (4) employer's perceived diversity policies, (5) level of brand awareness, (6) perceived flexibility and work-life balance, (7) perception of employer's recruitment process, (8) student's moral responsibility towards the employer, (9) perceptions of employer's work environment, and (10) employer's perceived corporate social responsibility.

Theme 1: Employer's perceived organizational attractiveness. The theme of organisational attractiveness can be divided into sub-themes: (a) perceptions of remuneration packages, (b) employer's brand image, (c) employer's ethical reputation, and (d) perceptions of employer's culture.

(a) *Perceptions of remuneration packages.* The consensus among participants was that Investec and Nedbank pay trainees more than the auditing employers. Participant 1 believes that this is a societal issue that we face in South Africa.

It also shows a culture of compensation in South Africa. I don't think we pay people for what they're really worth. We kind of tend to really underpay people, you know. And there's just a general problem across the board, you know, in South Africa. So, it's just a reflection of who we are and what we do.

Although the mismatch of compensation between banks and auditing employers reflects a “culture of compensation in South Africa,” employers are still responsible for remunerating fairly. Auditing employers are not acting on this responsibility, according to Participant 1. By working at an auditing employer, he would “have to rely on [his] parents and other people,” while at Investec or Nedbank, Participant 1 believes that he would be “paid a decent amount of money to survive.”

Participant 2 differentiates between the remuneration packages at the Big Four. According to her, EY pays the least, while Deloitte pays the most. However, the differences in pay do not significantly influence her perceptions of these employers because she is more concerned with other factors, such as working environment and company culture. She maintains that at EY, where she is signed, she is more likely to enjoy her auditing time even if she is paid less, compared to Deloitte.

In terms of Transnet, Participant 2 believes that the salaries would be extremely low, “unless you're involved in the corruption.” Conversely, Participant 7 believes that “state-owned enterprises generally remunerate pretty well,” thereby insinuating that the salaries at Transnet are “probably a little bit better than everyone else.”

Reis and Braga (2016) found that salary and compensation were factors that millennials value and consider when determining whether to pursue a job at an employer, and ultimately influences employer attractiveness. Schlechter, Hung and Bussin (2014) found similar results in their study on 169 South Africans, whereby remuneration was found to be a significant job attraction factor. Zacher, Dirkers, Korek and Hughes (2017), however, found that younger employees tend to consider pay as less important than whether a new job is interesting, challenging and important, as expressed by Participant 2. Thus, these conflicting results provide an opportunity for further exploration in the future to determine the impact of pay on employer attractiveness and perceptions in more detail.

(b) *Employer's brand image.* Participant 4 maintained that Nedbank and Investec have a better brand image based on the perceptions of the programmes. The limited spaces offered by these banks make the programmes more sought after, but this does not necessarily mean that one programme is better than the other, according to Participant 4. Participant 12 concurs, believing that Nedbank has a “great reputation,” and Participant 5 felt that Investec is an industry leader in

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the private sector. Interestingly, Participant 5 went on to discuss that Investec offers a “social image” as well; “flashing your Investec card” supposedly increases one’s social standing, according to Participant 5, and adds to the “prestige” of the programme.

PwC’s brand image is also perceived as somewhat prestigious, according to Participant 5. Participant 5 maintained that he signed with PwC because they are the biggest auditing employer in America, which is potentially somewhere he would like to work. Moreover, the fact that PwC has attractive office spaces influences the way Participant 5 perceives PwC’s brand image.

PwC has just recently renovated their offices so they’re the most beautiful offices in Midrand. So that's also a swaying factor if you've got this company that's been brought out to the Mall of Africa - they’re taking the lead in this because all the Big Four firms are moving to Midrand.

In terms of other auditing employers, EY is perceived to have a positive brand image. Participant 11 has heard that “EY is a fantastic company to work for.” In contrast, Participant 4 believes that Nolands does not have a brand image at all. According to him, “to have a brand image, you need to actually put yourself out there and I mean Nolands, I don't think Nolands does that.” As such, Nolands’ brand image is not being well perceived by applicants.

Transnet is perceived to have a “shaky” brand image by participants. “As soon as you hear government, you just hear trouble,” according to Participant 5. Participant 4 agrees and admits that the state of South Africa’s public-owned enterprises makes him worry about doing articles at a public employer. He argues that the Government should first stabilise Transnet as a company, and then think about offering a traineeship.

Highhouse et al.’s (2005) social identity consciousness theory posited that associating with an impressive employer allows employees to convey status and prestige, and to obtain approval from others. As such, job applicants tend to consider the impact of associating with an employer on their social standing (Thornbury & Brooks, 2010). This echoes the sentiments of Participant 5, who expressed the impact of Investec’s and PwC’s prestige on employees’ social standing. Moreover, Agrawal and Swaroop (2009) found a significant relationship between a favourable impression of and high regards for an employer, and intention to join an employer. Collins and Stevens (2002) also found that applicants tend to prefer employers that are perceived favourably, and thus have positive brand images. This also implies that when an applicant perceives an employer unfavourably, the applicant is less likely to want to join that employer.

(c) *Employer’s ethical reputation.* Transnet has a poor ethical reputation, according to participants. Based on the employer’s association with Government, trainees “place less

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confidence” in the employer because there is so much corruption and “they fail so much in corporate governance and ethics itself”, according to Participant 9. As such, “a lot of doubt [has been placed] on them” and their ethical reputation has been tarnished.

Like Transnet, KPMG’s tainted ethical reputation has caused most participants to perceive KPMG in a negative light. Although they might be “back on the right track, ... they’re still not perceived as ethical[ly] as they should be”, according to Participant 4. Participant 9 and 11 maintained that the issue arises through the association of the KPMG’s reputation with the trainee. Participant 9 explained that when she tells people she is signed with KPMG Namibia, she receives “funny looks” and she must remind them that the Namibian office was not involved in the scandals. This is frustrating for her, as she feels like her reputation has also become “stained”. The issue of association has extended so far that, according to Participant 11, many existing trainees at KPMG have resigned and started their articles again elsewhere to avoid tarnishing their own reputations as CAs. KPMG’s tarnished ethical reputation has clearly influenced the way in which participants perceive KPMG.

Regarding the remainder of the Big Four employers, Deloitte has also “had its issues” and has “been under some fire recently,” according to Participant 8 and Participant 2. Participant 9 maintained that although Deloitte has had ethical issues in the past, “their ethical reputation is not tarnished in the way that KPMG’s reputation is tarnished.” Sentiments around PwC are mixed. Participant 2 believed that PwC “has a squeaky-clean record as it stands,” yet Participant 1 expressed that PwC has “had incidents all over the world but not in South Africa.” EY, on the other hand, is “the only firm who's pretty much clean for now, compared to the other ones,” according to Participant 4. Participant 8 agrees and argues that EY is the cleanest of the auditing employers. He maintained that although he had not had as much interaction with EY, “the mere fact that you don't hear as much about them on the news is already a good thing for an auditing firm.”

In terms of Nolands and Mazars, participants had not heard of any unethical behaviour. As mentioned by Participant 8 above, Participant 9 argued:

Just because there hasn't been much on the news about [Mazars and Nolands] doesn't mean that they are not doing things. I can't say that they are, I can't say that they not, but I definitely know that there's just been such a wave of unethical behaviour within the auditing body.

Participant 4 felt that even if Mazars or Nolands were behaving unethically, the fact that these employers are small- to medium-sized means that the public is not necessarily going to hear about

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it. Thus, potential trainees might think that Mazars and Nolands' ethical reputations are good just because they haven't heard anything bad.

Nedbank was perceived to have a good ethical reputation, given that "Nedbank has had very few of those ethical dilemmas", according to Participant 8. This participant felt that Nedbank is playing a crucial part in "driving this economy in the right way forward". As such, Nedbank was perceived positively by Participant 8.

Strobel, Tumasjan and Welppe (2010) found that when the leaders of an employer are perceived as ethical, the employer is perceived as more attractive. This is in line with Turban and Greening's (1997) findings, which discovered that an employer's ethical activities promote employer attractiveness, indicating favourable working conditions. Moreover, Highhouse et al (2005) found that applicants want to be proud of where they work and want to work for employers that are scandal-free and have an honourable reputation in society, as suggested by social-identity consciousness theory. This might explain why employers' ethical reputations have such a key role in determining whether an employer is an attractive place to work or not.

(d) Perception of employer's culture. Participant 6 considers corporate culture to be the main differentiator between employers. These findings will be structured according to employer.

Deloitte's corporate culture was not perceived positively by most participants. According to Participant 5, employees at Deloitte were unexcited and unenthusiastic during his vacation work, which was indicative of a poor corporate culture.

From a people's perspective, I found Deloitte to be just very unexciting and like people weren't excited about their work. They didn't seem passionate about it or particularly open to discussing it... I mean I was at an internship program. The one thing you would expect is that the employees there are making it seem like it's the place to be, that you really want to be here, that you've got so much room to grow and meet people in the, in the entity itself. Um, and I just didn't get that feel from Deloitte.

Moreover, Deloitte's top-down management style was not perceived well by Participant 5. Additionally, Participant 11 maintained that the culture at Deloitte gave him "the sense that [he] didn't belong." As such, participants felt that Deloitte "doesn't have the best corporate culture," as perceived by Participant 4. Participant 12, on the other hand, had contrasting views. Rather, he "felt really included" at Deloitte, and thus perceived Deloitte's culture more positively.

EY's corporate culture was perceived very positively by participants. Participant 4 believed that EY "works nicely," and Participant 7 felt that the people at EY were "a little more relaxed and just a bit more open and warm". EY also has a "big culture on learning". according to Participant

1. Participant 2 expressed that trainees have personal relationships with partners, such that trainees are supported and understood when they need to take a day off.

Participant 5 perceived PwC's corporate culture as supportive and inclusive, and Participant 11 felt that PwC was "a better fit," as "it was more diverse than Deloitte." However, other participants disagreed. For example, Participant 9 expressed that the supportiveness and inclusivity that PwC tries to convey "does not convince [her]".

PwC I think is so big in its structure that it's hard to sometimes, um, even with the open-door policy or being all together on one ground, even with that, it's hard to breakthrough in terms of, um, organisational structure. Not to say that you disrespect your manager or whatever, but just that approachability.

Additionally, Participant 7 perceived PwC to have "an air of Afrikaans culture, which [he] didn't really feel that [he] fitted into too well". Also, Participant 12 "scratched [PwC] off the list" because his sister was "having a bad experience" being consistently overworked as a trainee and "being taken advantage of" regarding her work effort.

Due to KPMG's recent ethical scandals, KPMG's corporate culture was perceived extremely negatively by participants. According to participants, KPMG's corporate culture condones unethical behaviour, thereby making participants feel as though they would not fit in. This is neatly summarised by Participant 2 when she expressed, "With all the nonsense that goes on there, I don't think I would fit in there at all actually."

In terms of Nolands and Mazars, Participants expressed that because there are fewer trainees at these employers, trainees are likely to receive more support from their managers. Participant 9 agreed and perceived these employers to have "more of a tight-knit culture." For example, some employees at Nolands are studying through Unisa and working at the same time, and Nolands provides sufficient support to those employees. Unlike PwC, Participant 9 felt that at Nolands, "you can feel it, like it's actually being implemented. You actually feel that breakthrough of like my manager is actually approachable and I can approach them with any kind of problem that I have." In addition to the supportive culture emanating at these employers, Participant 2 felt that Mazars was "very Afrikaans."

Regarding Investec, Participant 5 perceived Investec to have a competitive corporate culture. He gave a scenario as an example of this.

When I went up for my final round Standard Bank interview, they all had an inter-bank soccer day at the one five-a-side soccer thing. But the Investec people were all so competitive in terms of the fact that they all rocked up in Investec attire, like wearing like

shorts and Investec shirts. They all sat together, like it was meant to be a socialising event and they were like you can't sit with us kind of thing.

This competitive culture also seems to emanate in the culture around dress code. According to Participant 1, “looks are very important, and you get the perception that you have to look a particular way”. Participant 1 explained that during his interview, the executives commented on the fact that he should be wearing zebra-striped socks, in line with the Investec logo. While this shows how invested employees are in the company culture, it also shows that people are noticing things that are not meaningful, according to Participant 1. Although Investec has changed their policy around dress, Participant 1 does not think anything will change, “because it's inherent in the culture in a way, no matter what it might say in the policy”.

Investec was also perceived to have a culture of retention, as trainees are often offered full-time positions after their articles. In this sense, trainees are “pretty much set for life,” according to Participant 5. However, this participant went on to say that his dad, who used to work at Investec, warned him that “people will always be gunning for your job, no one is there to help you and everyone is there to make you fail”. Participant 8 had a similar perception, in that he perceived Investec to have a more “hands-off” culture, allowing trainees to try and do the work and providing support if needed.

Investec was also perceived to push boundaries in terms of innovation and creativity, according to Participant 1. This participant sent his CV to Investec in the form of a puzzle that when put together, resembled a Takealot order, with the participant being the product for sale. Investec received this extremely well and even played along by sending the package back to the participant with chocolates and gifts inside the package. In contrast, Nedbank was quite taken aback by the idea and still requested a traditional CV. As such, Participant 1 perceived Investec’s culture as more innovative and creative.

Nedbank was perceived to have a “hands-on” corporate culture, unlike Investec, according to Participant 8, in that “they’re very particular on how they want to rear you within your articles”. Consequently, Nedbank tends to be quite rigid and traditional in their approach, according to Participant 1. During the articles period, trainees “kind of just have to stick to what they tell you to do ... And only after that, do you have the freedom to kind of think out the box”. Nedbank was also perceived to place value on relationships. Participant 8 discussed that even though he decided not to pursue Nedbank, he still feels comfortable seeking advice from some of the current trainees at Nedbank with whom he has built a good relationship with.

Transnet was perceived to have a “solitary” corporate culture in that trainees are more likely to work in silos, according to Participant 3. Participant 5 concurred and perceived Transnet to have an anti-social culture with less social events compared to the employers of the Big Four. Participants also perceived Transnet to have a more “laid back” culture, in the sense that employees can “get the work done when they can,” according to Participant 2. Transnet was also perceived to lack a learning culture, resulting in things being done more traditionally, without innovation or creative thinking. Moreover, given the state of government-owned enterprises, Transnet was perceived to have an unethical corporate culture.

As discovered by Lievens and Highhouse (2003), corporate culture, as a symbolic attribute, significantly influences how attractive an employer is perceived to be. Results from this study show that an employer with a learning-oriented, warm, supportive, diverse, ethical and innovative corporate culture is more likely to be perceived as attractive. These results are mostly consistent with the literature.

First, Sutherland, Torricelli and Karg (2002) found that a corporate culture of career growth and learning is considered the most important employer of choice factor. As such, it can be argued that employers that promote learning and development through their corporate culture are likely to be perceived as attractive.

Second, Catanzaro, Moore and Marshall (2010) and Van Vianen and Fischer (2002) found that supportive organisational cultures were preferred over competitive organisational cultures. This implies that employers with more competitive cultures are less preferred, however, it does not necessarily mean that these employers are perceived as less attractive, as this is a matter of working styles and personality types.

Third, Bonaiuto et al. (2013) found that when an employer has an inclusive culture that values diversity, it is more likely to attract talented candidates. Thus, when an employer has a diverse and inclusive culture, it is likely to be perceived as attractive by potential employees.

Fourth, Turban and Greening (1997) found that when an employer’s environmentally and socially conscious way of being translates into each employee’s natural behaviour and becomes embedded in the employer’s culture, an employer’s corporate reputation is likely to be perceived more favourably. As a result, potential employees may perceive the employer as attractive.

Last, Arachichige and Roberston (2011) studied the preferred employer attributes of Sri Lankan and Australian graduate students and found that an innovative culture was not as important for students compared to other factors. This is inconsistent with the results of this study, whereby Investec was perceived more positively due to its innovative culture. Thus, more research is needed

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regarding competitive and innovative corporate cultures to provide insight into the impact of these cultures on perceptions of employers.

Theme 2: Perceived exposure gained during training. The theme of exposure during training can be understood in terms of the exposure trainees get to (a) major clients, (b) industry leaders, (c) a variety of different industries, as well as the (d) international exposure trainees get.

(a) *Major clients.* Deloitte, EY and PwC are perceived to have “higher class clientele”, or “bigger brands”, according to Participant 5 and Participant 8, because they are larger auditing employers. These auditing employers appealed to participants because their major clients are possible employers in which they could work in the future. Therefore, the exposure to high-class clientele inherent to large auditing employers may be beneficial for trainees.

KPMG, although a large auditing employer, was not perceived to have higher class clientele because of the effect of the scandal on their client base. Mazars and Nolands were also not perceived in this way, as these employers serve smaller entities as clients, which is not as attractive for trainees. Clearly, the type of client base associated with the size of the employer had an impact on the way in which employers are perceived by participants.

Turban and Cable (2003) found that an employer’s reputation is influenced by its size. Bigger corporate employers tend to service larger clients; therefore, it can be argued that reputation is also influenced by the size of an employer’s clients. As such, employers with major clients are often perceived more positively.

(b) *Industry leaders.* Investec and Nedbank were perceived to host “some of the brightest minds in South Africa”, enabling trainees to learn more. These industry leaders “might be more clever [and] more accomplished ... compared to a place like Nolands or Mazars, which just has people who have been in the small and medium industries” according to Participant 4. Moreover, Participant 8 expressed that due to Investec’s flat structure, trainees work very closely with the CFO. Likewise, Nedbank, although it has more of a hierarchical structure, provides trainees with assistance from business coaches and top executives, allowing trainees to learn from a variety of people.

Conversely, Participant 5 perceived Transnet as incapable of “holding on to industry leaders,” as there is “not a lot of money in their field and no one with good expertise is [going to] go work as hard as they do at a company like Transnet”. As such, the calibre of executives at an employer tends to influence whether participants view the employer as attractive.

Grupp and Gaines-Ross (2002) found that the reputation of an employer’s leader is an essential part of an employer’s reputation. In fact, Burson-Marsteller, a global public relations and

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communications employer, found that 48% of an employer's reputation can be attributed to the employers' leaders' reputation (Burson-Marsteller, 2003). These findings highlight how industry leaders can impact the way in which the employer is perceived, as is evident in this research study.

(c) *Variety of industries.* Participants expressed that completing articles at a bank tends to focus trainees into a specific area, thereby limiting one's exposure to the financial sector. At Investec, trainees learn the processes specific to Investec, as "their model is to retain their trainees", expressed Participant 11. Albeit at Nedbank, trainees are likely to gain more exposure than at Investec because Nedbank has "six divisions ranging from corporate investment banking to retail banking, so they're a lot bigger", according to Participant 11. Participant 8 feels that "the reality is ... Nedbank have a better programme than Investec". These perceptions are echoed by Participant 2, who has heard that "some people at Investec have not felt challenged in terms of what they've been exposed to so far in their articles".

In contrast, at some of the auditing employers, exposure is directed towards a variety of industries and businesses. An example is EY, according to Participant 4, where trainees "can have financial services clients and other retail clients across sectors" in their portfolio, which is "something which a lot of the other companies don't necessarily offer". PwC, according to Participant 9, is one of those companies. Participant 9 claimed that at PwC, trainees only rotate industries after six months, "which doesn't give you much exposure into how different industries work." At other auditing employers like Nolands and Mazars, trainees are constantly rotating, granting them exposure to a variety of industries, according to Participant 9. Hence, the scope of industries that trainees are exposed to may affect how the employers are perceived.

This is apparent in Humphrey, Nahrgang and Morgeson's (2007) findings, whereby jobs with higher task variety were assumed to be more pleasant than jobs with lower task variety. In the context of this research study, task variety can be understood in terms of the variety of industries in which trainees can complete their audits. Moreover, Truxillo, Cadiz, Rineer, Zaniboni and Fraccaroli (2012) found that younger employees value task variety more than older employees, as younger employees may benefit more from the exposure and experience afforded by task variety, compared to older employees who have already acquired the necessary skills. Indeed, task variety is more attractive to younger employees, thus employers that service a broad range of industries are likely to be perceived more positively by young trainees.

(d) *International exposure.* Participants perceived local employers to limit trainees in their exposure to international clients and locations. As such, employers like Nolands and Nedbank were viewed as less attractive than Deloitte by Participant 9. Participant 4 agreed and expressed

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that the “opportunities are a lot greater in an international firm”. Even though Nedbank is perceived to have roots in Africa, exposure to European, American and Asian markets is limited, according to Participant 4. Thus, whether an employer offers international exposure is likely to impact the way in which prospective trainees perceive the employer.

Srivastava and Bhatnaga (2010) found similar results regarding international exposure. The researchers found that global exposure is a dimension of employer image, in that a greater amount of foreign assignments offered by an employer leads to an enhanced employer image. Consequently, international exposure impacts the way in which an employer is perceived by others.

Theme 3: Perceived progression opportunities. The theme of progression can be divided into sub-themes: (a) in-house promotion opportunities and (b) post-articles career progression. In-house promotion opportunities can be operationalised as the opportunity for advancement at the trainee’s current employer. Post-articles career progression can be operationalised as the opportunity for trainees to progress in other employers after articles.

(a) In-house promotion opportunities. Most participants agreed that the chances of being promoted are higher at smaller employers like Nolands and Mazars. At smaller employers, there are less trainees in the programmes, therefore trainees tend to “gain more exposure and growth early in their careers” and “deal with bigger things early on...”. As a result, Participant 8 argues, a trainee’s career progression is likely to be quicker at a smaller employer. This is apparent at Mazars, according to Participant 8, who was surprised by the young age of a partner at Mazars with whom he interacted in Strategic Thinking last year. As such, Participant 8 perceived Mazars, which evidently provides opportunities for advancement, more positively.

On the other hand, Transnet was perceived to have less room for promotion. Participant 4 attributed his perception to the fact that a state-owned enterprise has “a lot more boundaries ... [and] politics flying around”. Participant 8 concurred in that a young trainee entering the employer is likely to remain in their current position for a considerable amount of time before being offered a promotion. This is not attractive for Transnet, according to these participants, resulting in less than positive perceptions of Transnet.

Like Transnet, the Big Four employers were also perceived to offer less opportunities to be promoted. When referring to EY and Deloitte, Participant 8 expressed that because “they take so many people in, to be an audit partner is difficult...”. As such, “progression is a little more difficult and ... most people leave the employer after they’re done with articles.”. Participant 5 shared the same perceptions regarding PwC and KPMG, where each trainee is “a dime a dozen,”

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resulting in less opportunity to progress within the employer. Therefore, the fact that it is more difficult to get promoted at the Big Four may impact the way in which participants perceive these employers.

Findings by Reis and Braga (2016) and Mencl and Lester (2014) echo these results. Reis and Braga (2016) used Berthon et al.'s (2005) Employer Attractiveness Scale to identify an employer attractiveness factors ranking for different generations. They found that the scale Economic Value (including promotion opportunities, amongst other factors) had the highest mean scores, and that the millennial generation appreciates this scale more than others. Mencl and Lester (2014) found similar results using a different scale, namely, Perceptions of Work Factors in the Organisation. The researchers found that the millennial generation values career advancement opportunities, in terms of the number and speed of promotions, more than other generations. Thus, given that millennials value opportunities for promotion, trainee accountants are likely to perceive employers more positively if they have room for promotion.

(b) Post-articles career progression. The Big Four employers were perceived as tickets to secured CA positions in the future. As Participant 5 expressed, “because the Big Four are recognised, you can walk into any company anywhere in the world ... if [future employers] see Mazars, they are not going to know what that is.” Participant 2 agreed that working at a Big Four employer is a ticket overseas, as these employers all have offices in locations abroad, thereby providing an opportunity to relocate. The Big Four employers were, thus, positively perceived by participants given the ease of post-articles progression inherent to the Big Four employers.

In terms of Nedbank and Investec, Participant 9 strongly felt that “once a trainee has completed their articles, [they] are not allowed to sign off on audits as a CA.” When asked about the validity of that statement, the participant could not verify whether this was true, but claimed that this was what she had heard from other people. Regardless of the truth of the statement, this is a significant perception held by students regarding the way in which these banks set up their future career, which may impact whether students chose to work at Nedbank or Investec.

Based on these findings, it is evident that the reputation and prestige of an employee's current employer has an impact on how prospective employers view him or her, or in other words, one's future marketability. Indeed, the way in which an employer appears to others, including future employers, is significantly related to the reputation or prestige of the employer itself (Ruchika & Prasad, 2019). This is in line with social-identity consciousness theory, indicating that these participants are perhaps high on the social-adjustment measure and are thus more attracted to impressive employers (Highhouse et al., 2003). As such, trainee CAs tend to consider how a

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certain employer may appear to prospective employers for future job attainment. This is supported by Tuzuner and Yuksel (2009), who found that when an employer is considered as a good reference for one's future career, the employer is perceived more positively.

Moreover, perceptions about Nedbank and Investec highlight the implications of incomplete or unreliable information on the way in which prospective employees construe accounting employers. Once again, the importance of employer familiarity is foregrounded; without sufficient brand awareness, employer brand and organisational attractiveness weaken, resulting in poor perceptions of employers (Ruchika & Prasad, 2019).

Theme 4: Employer's perceived diversity policies. The theme of diversity can be divided into sub-themes: (a) perceived gender diversity, (b) perceived racial diversity, and (c) perceived cultural diversity.

(a) *Perceived gender diversity.* Participant 3 believed that Investec and Nedbank have a strong focus on growing women in the bank, while "audit firms don't really have those kinds of initiatives." Conversely, Participant 10 noted that her first impression of Investec was that it was very male-dominated, which "affected [her] opinion a lot going in". However, as time unfolded, she realised that Investec is taking steps to empower women in the workplace, as Participant 3 noticed. Participant 8 echoed Participant 3's sentiments regarding Nedbank in that "they care a lot about their gender diversity." In terms of diversity in the auditing employers, Participant 12 shared the same views as Participant 3 and recalled that at his interview at Deloitte, there was one female applicant out of roughly 40 applicants. On the other hand, Participant 10 noted that "PwC has awarded bursaries to black women, so they're trying to move towards empowering disadvantaged people..."

Ng and Burke (2005) concluded that diversity management practices make employers more attractive, which is in line with the findings of this study. However, Ng and Burke (2005) also found significant differences between the perceptions of men and women. In terms of gender diversity, women, being the disadvantaged gender in employment, rated the importance of diversity higher than men when accepting employment. Terjesen et al. (2007) and Jain and Bhatt (2015) also found that women perceived diversity as more important than men. Thus, although it is clear from the findings of this study that a gender-diverse employer appears more attractive, it is unclear whether there was a significant difference between the perceptions of men and women, as both male and female participants tended to perceive diverse employers as attractive.

(b) *Perceived racial diversity.* Participant 3 believed that at PwC and Deloitte, most the executives are white, and black people have less of a voice, compared to Investec, which is "more

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about inclusion.” Participant 5 disagreed and proposed that PwC and Deloitte are more diverse, in his view.

Participant 5 further perceived Nedbank to be less diverse, as “they take 15 people and one white guy.” Participant 12 disagreed and felt strongly that “Nedbank is very white.” Regardless of the precise ratio of race, both participants felt that the ratio of races across employees at Nedbank is skewed. As such, Participant 5 remarked that Nedbank tends to “market themselves as the most diverse kind of place, but diversity includes everyone and that's not what they do.”

Based on these findings, it is evident that participants, regardless of race, perceive racial diversity as important when considering an employer. This is inconsistent with Ng and Burke’s (2005) findings, which discovered that applicants of a minority race perceived diversity to be more important than white applicants. However, Ng and Burke’s (2005) research was conducted on a sample of Canadian students, therefore the findings cannot be generalised to a South African sample. Perhaps given South Africa’s sensitive history, racial diversity and affirmative action is a topic that is of heightened importance for all applicants, regardless of race.

Interestingly, Participants 3 and 12, who are black and coloured respectively, had contrasting views to Participant 5, who is white. This illustrates that there are differences in how diversity is perceived. While the white participant perceived certain employers as diverse or not diverse, black and coloured participants disagreed. Thus, while it is evident that diversity is a key factor influencing how employers are perceived, more research is required to uncover whether race influences how racial diversity is considered by South Africans applicants.

(c) Perceived cultural diversity. Participant 12 perceived Investec to have a strong Jewish culture and to lack cultural and religious diversity. Participant 5 had similar perceptions. In Participant 5’s experience in applying to Investec, four of the five people that he knew who received an offer from Investec were Jewish. As such, he felt that because he is not Jewish, the interview was “useless” and that he never stood a chance. As a result, he felt “defeated by the interview”.

Participant 7 felt that “PwC was very Afrikaans” in the sense that most employees came from an Afrikaans culture and background. This led him to perceive PwC as not very inclusive or diverse. Clearly, this lack of cultural diversity resulted in negative perceptions of Investec and PwC.

Ehrhart and Ziegert (2005) found that when an employer is perceived as less culturally diverse and an applicant does not feel as though they would belong or fit in, they are likely to perceive the employer as less attractive. This illustrates that diversity practices shape prospective

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employees' perceptions of employers and ultimately impact their employer-choice decisions (Ng & Burke, 2005).

Theme 5: Level of brand awareness. The theme 'level of brand awareness' can be divided into sub-themes: (a) information about employer not readily available and (b) employer's presence on campus.

(a) *Information about employer not readily available.* Based on the interview responses, participants felt that information regarding the various options for articles was not readily available. Most participants were not aware of the company Nolands, and in a similar vein, most participants were not aware that Transnet or Mazars offered a CA traineeship. Quite significantly, it was found that most PGDA students only became aware of the fact that articles could be completed at a bank once they had already applied to auditing employers. Clearly, there is a dearth of information available to these graduates entering the workforce, thereby hindering these employers' brand awareness.

(b) *Employer's presence on campus.* It was found that few of the elements have a considerable presence on campus. Participant 8 mentioned that Mazars had a significant presence on campus through their joint sponsorship of the hoodies with Investec. Additionally, their involvement in a course called Strategic Thinking provided an opportunity to learn about what Mazars has to offer. Participant 12 felt that the career expos were a great way to interact with various employers, such as the Big Four, the banks and other consulting employers. In particular, Participant 12 believed that PwC made a substantial effort to market themselves on campus, make themselves known, and "flash the cash," thereby attracting students. On the other hand, participant 5 maintained that another Big Four employer, EY, made little effort on campus to offer their services and attract students. Similarly, participants felt Nolands had limited presence on campus. For example, participant 9 contends that the last time she saw Nolands on campus was three years ago, resulting in her shifting her attention to other employers who had a greater presence. Based on these results, it is apparent that employers' presence on campus is an important determinant of whether students are aware of the employers' brands and are subsequently attracted to the employers.

These findings are supported by those of Moroko and Uncles (2008) and Ruchika and Prasad (2019) and reflect the 'employer familiarity' dimension of employer knowledge. Moroko and Uncles (2008) maintained that an employer is perceived as attractive when levels of brand awareness are high. Similarly, Ruchika and Prasad (2019) proposed that the more an employer is spoken about, the stronger the employer brand. The fact that information regarding the options

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available to PGDA graduates is not widely available, and that many employers do not have a sufficient presence on campus, suggests that levels of brand awareness need to improve so that they are spoken about more and their employer brands can strengthen, as well as employer attractiveness. For example, Transnet's limited presence on campus, coupled with the fact that their traineeship is largely unknown, dampens Transnet's brand awareness and ultimately their employer brand. As such, it is unlikely that Transnet is perceived favourably by PGDA students.

Theme 6: Perceived flexibility and work-life balance. Participants' sentiments around flexibility and work-life balance varied from employer to employer. While EY and Investec were perceived as flexible and with good work-life balance, KPMG was not, and perceptions of Deloitte and Transnet were mixed.

Overall, EY was perceived to be "more flexible than other firms," as expressed by Participant 1. Participant 2 concurred and maintained that EY was more flexible in terms of location. This participant, who is currently signed with EY in Cape Town, expressed that if she had preferred to be based in Johannesburg, EY was willing to accommodate the change in location. Moreover, Participant 11 perceived EY to be flexible in terms of mobility within the employer across industries.

Investec, like EY, is perceived to be more flexible than other employers. Participant 5 mentioned that "Investec is implementing a work from home policy," allowing employees to complete their work without being stringent about where the work is completed. This, according to Participant 5, allows a great amount of freedom and work-life balance. Moreover, Investec's new policy regarding their dress code also informed Participant 5's perception of flexibility in that employees have more freedom to dress how they choose.

Unlike EY, PwC does not offer internal mobility, according to Participant 1. Once a trainee has chosen an industry, the possibility of changing industries is slim. As such, PwC was perceived to be extremely inflexible and immobile. KPMG was also perceived as inflexible. Participant 2 believes that because "they are strained for employees at the moment, ... [employees] literally just do overtime all the time. There's no time for [themselves] because they are just overworked." As such, KPMG is perceived to be inflexible, with a skewed work-life balance.

Views on Deloitte and Transnet were varied. In terms of Deloitte, while Participant 2 believed that Deloitte are "sticklers for the rules", Participant 9 noted that employees can arrive at work early and leave once they have finished their work; an example of flexi-hours. As such, Participant 2 perceives Deloitte as inflexible, while Participant 9 perceives Deloitte to offer good work-life balance. Similarly, Participant 5 viewed Transnet to be inflexible, such that employees

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may only take “very few days off, need to be in all the time and must do all the work that [they] can”. Participant 4 disagreed, however, and expressed that as a Transnet employee, “you could leave and no one would even know that you’d left”, thereby insinuating that Transnet is indeed flexible.

Despite the inconsistency in perceptions of flexibility and work-life balance offered by some employers, it is still evident that the notions of flexibility and work-life balance play an important role in how participants view the employers. This is illustrated in Ng and Gossett’s (2013) research, which found that millennials prioritise work-life balance over other factors, such as pay, when evaluating an employer. Moreover, Ruchika and Prasad (2009) found that participants perceived employers as more attractive when they offered flexible working hours and the ability to work from home.

Theme 7: Perceptions of employer’s recruitment process. The theme of recruitment process can be divided into sub-themes: (a) perceived competition amongst applicants, (b) perceived ease of getting into articles and (c) perceptions of programme entrance requirements.

(a) *Perceived competition amongst applicants.* Nedbank and Investec were perceived to offer the most difficult programmes to get into, to the point where Participant 7 did not even consider applying because he “knew [he] wouldn’t get in”. These employers are known for “prestigious” programmes that attract top students. Nedbank, in particular, attracts “candidates who are top of their class”, according to Participant 1, making it slightly more difficult to get into than Investec.

In contrast, Participant 12 believed that “Mazars would take anyone and [he] thinks Nolands would be the same”. Participant 8 concurred and expressed that because these employers are “out of sight and out of mind, the candidates that will tend to gravitate towards them aren’t those who would have been able to get into bigger auditing employers, by and large, although there are some exceptions to that rule”. Participant 3 agreed, believing that getting into auditing employers is easier, as they are more accessible compared to the more prestigious Investec and Nedbank.

Participants also perceived Transnet to be more accessible. According to Participant 4, Transnet is “pretty easy to get into”, as “not many people want to go there”. As such, the low levels of competition make it easier to get into Transnet. These sentiments are echoed by Participant 8, who believes that many smart people at UCT “do not see a role for themselves in government, and that’s just based on their perceptions of the entities themselves”.

Turban and Cable (2003) found that employers with more positive reputations tend to attract larger applicant pools and higher-quality applicants. As posited by expectancy theory, they further found that if an employer is seen as highly selective, applicants tend to perceive difficulty obtaining a job at that employer. This echoes participants' sentiments in this research study, whereby highly selective employers like Nedbank tend to make applicants wary of applying, and less positive employers like Transnet do not have such a large applicant pool.

(b) Perceptions of application process. Sentiments were mixed regarding the application process at various employers. In terms of EY, Participant 5 battled using the online system to book an interview. Participant 4 and Participant 7 disagreed and said that the application process went smoothly and the EY recruitment personnel were very helpful.

Participant 4 contrasted the straightforward application process at EY with that of Investec's, which required cover letters and three rounds of interviews. While EY required a Curriculum Vitae (CV), this participant still perceived EY to be a smoother process compared to Investec.

Deloitte's application process was also perceived to be a simple and straightforward process, which required applicants to "go click, click, click", and the application was finished, according to Participant 12. The process was also relatively fast, as per Participant 12. Participant 7, on the other hand, did not perceive Deloitte's application process in the same way as Participant 12. When Participant 7 was applying, the online system rejected him because his courses were structured differently, as he had extended his degree. As such, the system automatically rejected him because it thought that he did not meet the minimum requirements. Consequently, Participant 7 perceived the Deloitte application process less positively than Participant 12.

Sylva and Mol (2009) conveyed the importance of first impressions gained during the recruitment process. Sylva and Mol (2009) found that perceived efficiency and user-friendliness were the most important predictors of applicant satisfaction with the online application process. These impressions strongly influence how applicants perceive the employer. This is consistent with Rynes' (1991) signaling theory, which suggests that information gathered in the recruitment process is used by applicants as signals for the unknown job and organisational attributes. Thus, as found in this research study, the recruitment and application processes are likely to influence how the employer is perceived.

(c) Perceptions of programme entrance requirements. The main distinction regarding entrance requirements for the programme is in terms of how "individualised" the process is,

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according to Participant 8. In other words, whether the recruitment process is task- or personality-based.

I think the main distinction here is sort of how almost individualised the process is because I think for prospective employees you just would love to know that these people really care about you and that your, that your application is an important one. And they're going to take you seriously and they're going to get to know you through the process. You're not just a number submitting some random application form.

Investec's application process is focused on understanding trainee's personalities and values, according to Participant 8. This makes it feel like the recruitment personnel really care about who the applicants are.

While this "individualised", and slightly personality-based process at Investec appealed to Participant 8, Participant 5 preferred the competency-based process used by PwC. This is because of how the rejection from Investec made the participant feel.

At Investec, it kind of feels like the interview is about what kind of person you are. So, when you don't get the job it kind of makes you feel like, "Oh, I'm clearly not good enough to work for you." Whereas at PwC, and I might be biased 'cause I obviously got the offer maybe, but um, you know, they were kind of like, "Do you understand what you're doing, okay cool this guy is clued up so let's offer him a job".

The fact that PwC is more focused on academics and task-based competencies and is less focused on the type of individual the applicant is, made Participant 5 perceive PwC more positively than Investec.

Gardner et al. (2012) found that job applicants are more attracted to employers that are consistent with the applicant's core values and personal attributes, thereby supporting Participant 8's views. Indeed, using an individualised recruitment approach would allow applicants to gain insight into whether there is a fit between the applicant and the employer, and when such a match exists, the employer is likely to be perceived more positively. This is in line with person-organisation fit theory (P-O fit), which is defined as the compatibility of an individual and an employer (Gardner et al. (2012). The literature on P-O fit shows that job applicants are attracted to work settings that are consistent with the applicant's personal attributes, and with their core values in particular (Amos & Weathington, 2008). Applicant perceptions of fit with an organisation's culture can be key determinants of organisational attraction, job choice, job satisfaction, and retention (Cable & Judge, 1996; Van Vianen, 2000; Van Vianen et al., 2008).

Despite this, Participant 5 still appreciates the task-based recruitment approach, even though this approach might result in a weaker or short-term match, which could ultimately lead to negative perceptions in the future (Soderquist, Papalexandris, Ioannou and Prastacos, 2010). Nevertheless, the type of recruitment approach is likely to influence how the employer is perceived.

Theme 8: Students' moral responsibility towards the employer. Three participants displayed a sense of moral duty to certain employers given that they had covered their costs of tuition. Extracts are provided in Appendix C. Participant 9, originally from Namibia, signed with KPMG Namibia in the first year of undergraduate studies. The employer paid for her tuition at UCT and the opportunity to complete her articles there. Although her employer of choice is Nolands, she felt a duty to give back to KPMG. KPMG covered her tuition and had supported her since the start of her university career. Participant 6 had a similar experience. She is signed with KPMG in Cape Town and despite the scandals that have tainted their reputation, she still feels committed to KPMG. Similarly, Participant 8 received a scholarship from Investec, yet was debating whether to do his articles at Nedbank or stay with Investec. He decided to remain with Investec, given his emotional attachment to the employer.

The thing that really shifted it for me was that I found, I discovered that I had, uh, an almost an emotional attachment to Investec because they had been paying for my tuition from first year. They're paying for me this year as well. Um, and they stepped into my life in first year at a time when I sort of really needed the funding so there's that aspect to it where you kind of want to repay the efforts that they, you know, and the faith and the confidence that they placed in you at that point in your life.

These three participants clearly felt a responsibility to give back to the employers with whom they first signed, despite the scandals and the fact that other employers might have been their first choices.

These findings illustrate the second dimension of employer brand equity, namely, "loyalty to an employer brand due to positive experience with the employer" (Alshathry & Goodman, 2017). For these three participants, the fact that their respective employers covered their tuition can be considered as a 'positive experience' with their employers, thereby resulting in a sense of loyalty.

Theme 9: Perception of employer's work environment. Participants considered the work environment to be an important factor when evaluating employers. This theme can be divided into sub-themes: (a) fast-paced work-environment, and (b) fun work environment.

(a) *Fast paced work environment.* The banking sector as a whole was considered to have a “very competitive” and “very fast paced” work environment by Participant 3 and 7. Participant 12 agreed and described the environment at Nedbank as “very, very hard core,” and Participant 2 “assume[d] that there’s a lot more work at Investec.” As such, Participant 7 perceived the work environment at Investec and Nedbank to be “more work oriented and performance driven,” compared to auditing employers, which are “not as intense.”

(b) *Fun work environment.* Despite the challenging work environments, Participant 4 believed that “at Investec and Nedbank, you’re going to have more fun at work ... than you would have in audit.” Participant 7 agreed in that work at auditing employers is “a little bit more mundane” compared to work at banks. At Transnet, Participant 4 perceived the work to be “exciting.” In terms of the working environment at Mazars, Participant 7 expressed, “I don’t know much about Mazars, but my guess is it’s probably not as hectic as PwC or Investec.”

An employer’s work environment is an important consideration for young applicants, as found by Ruchika and Prasad (2019). Workplace fun was found to be a significant predictor of applicant attraction, more so than compensation and opportunities for advancement (Tews, Michel & Bartlett, 2012). Additionally, Arachichige and Roberston (2011) found that a fun working environment was preferred over an exciting working environment. In terms of competitive work environments, Reis and Braga (2016) found that challenging work environments are preferred by more experienced employees compared to younger employees. This is understandable given that young trainees entering the workforce might be more attracted to employers where they can ease into the employer and transition smoothly into the world of work, without the stress that comes with a competitive environment.

However, it is important to note that while these results provide insight into how participants perceive these employer’ work environments, it is not clear whether these work environment perceptions influenced participants’ overall perceptions of the employers as entities. For example, the fact that Participants 3 and 7 perceived Investec and Nedbank’s work environments as competitive does not necessarily imply that they perceive Investec and Nedbank negatively overall, as these participants may thrive in challenging and stimulating environments, and could therefore be attracted to these employers. Similarly, Participant 7’s perception of mundane work at auditing employers does not necessarily imply that this participant perceives auditing employers negatively, as this participant may enjoy routine tasks, and could therefore also be attracted to auditing employers.

Thus, in hindsight, more probing questions should have been asked during the interviews to determine the impact of these work environment perceptions on perceptions of the employers in their entirety. This provides an opportunity for future research to determine the specific impact of work environments on how employers are perceived overall.

Theme 10: Employer's perceived corporate social responsibility. Participant 2 strongly believed that corporate social responsibility (CSR) was important when considering whether to work at an employer. Participant 2 expressed that the promotion of social diversity through Black Economic Empowerment policies is not enough to make a meaningful impact on the socio-economic issues that South Africa faces. Participant 2 believed that “with BEE, it's like you could have gone to Bishops and gone to UCT but because you're black you get a tick, which doesn't really help people who are actually in need.” As such, Participant 2 was drawn to companies like EY and Deloitte who are more invested in developing and growing the youth, in her opinion.

EY has a thing where they actually take students from schools and then educate them better and mentor them through university and then they come work for the firm. So, they're taking someone who actually is underprivileged and bring them in ... I know Deloitte has a similar program with some school girl thing. Um, but I don't know about any of the other firms if they have extra policies in place.

Participant 2, therefore, perceived employers that emphasise CSR more positively than employers.

For the remaining 11 participants, CSR was not a factor that influenced their perceptions of employers. The fact that only one participant considers CSR when thinking about employers contradicts the findings of Ng and Gossett (2013). Ng and Gossett (2013) maintain that millennials tend to prioritise employers' contribution to society. Employers involved in CSR initiatives are perceived to be better employers due to the respect and reputation earned through these initiatives (Albinger & Freeman, 2000). This is reflected in the first dimension of social-identity consciousness theory (Highhouse et al., 2003), whereby individuals high on the value-expressive dimension were more attracted to respectable and responsible employers. As such, employers with higher corporate social performance have a competitive advantage in that they are perceived as more attractive to potential employees than employers that do not participate in CSR initiatives (Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Greening & Turban, 2000). Thus, the fact that only one participant perceived employers with higher corporate social performance as more attractive indicates that further research, particularly in the accounting sector, is required to determine whether CSR is still an influencing factor for millennials, as found by Ng and Gossett in 2013.

Frequency of themes. A total of 151 bipolar constructs were elicited across the 12 grids. The number of elicited constructs per participant ranged from 10 to 15, resulting in an average of roughly 13 constructs per participant. 151 constructs were narrowed down to 48 non-repeated constructs. 10 themes were generated from these non-repeated constructs. In order of frequency, these themes were: (1) employer's perceived organisational attractiveness, (2) exposure gained during training, (3) perceived progression opportunities, (4) employer's perceived diversity policies, (5) level of brand awareness, (6) perceived flexibility and work-life balance, (7) perception of employer's recruitment process, (8) student's moral responsibility towards the employer, (9) perceptions of employer's work environment, and (10) employer's perceived corporate social responsibility.

The three most frequently elicited constructs indicate that the most common attributes considered by participants when making employer-choice decisions are the employer's ethical reputation, international exposure and opportunities for progression. The fact that ethical reputation, international exposure and career progression were the most popular attributes considered by participants is supported in the literature (Highhouse et al., 2005; Ng & Gossett, 2013; Srivastava & Bhatnaga, 2010; Terjesen et al., 2007). As social identity consciousness posited, Highhouse et al. (2005) found that applicants want to work for employers that are scandal-free and therefore have good ethical reputations so as to maintain their social identity. Given that millennials desire to find meaning in their work and lead more purposeful lives, Ng and Gossett (2013) maintained that millennials have high expectations for ethical behaviour on the part of their employers.

Moreover, Terjesen et al. (2007) found that one of the most important attributes considered by millennials is the opportunity for long term career progression. Ng and Gossett (2013) proposed that this is due not only to a combination of millennials' sense of entitlement, ambition and high self-esteem, but also millennials' desire for stability and job security. As such, millennials feel empowered to achieve and to be successful, therefore long-term career growth is a prominent concern for millennials (Ng & Gossett, 2013).

Additionally, Srivastava and Bhatnaga (2010) found that applicants are attracted to employers that offer greater global exposure. The advances in technology and the benefits of globalisation have enabled millennials to work in any country, allowing millennials greater flexibility and work-life balance, enriched learning experiences, as well as the opportunity to find meaning and purpose. As such, millennials value international exposure in their work.

These findings, therefore, explain why the three constructs regarding ethical reputation, international exposure and promotion opportunities were most frequently elicited.

Limitations and Recommendations

This research study has some limitations regarding (1) the sample, (2) the repertory grid technique, and (3) socio-economic background information. This section will outline these limitations and provide recommendations for future research to mitigate these limitations.

Sample. Three limitations arose regarding the sample. First, all the participants were from UCT. This means that the results of the study cannot generalise graduate accountants from other universities. Therefore, the way that UCT graduate accountants perceive accounting employers is not necessarily representative of how other university graduates perceive accounting employers. It is recommended that future research includes participants from other universities to explore whether there are differences across universities in how graduate accountants think and perceive accounting employers.

Second, some participants had already been made offers or signed with certain employers for their articles in 2020. As a result, certain participants, such as those signed with KPMG, rated employers more favourably to positively reinforce their decision. As such, some of the participants might have been somewhat biased in their responses. Nevertheless, the aim of this research study - to explore perceptions of employers - was achieved, despite some inflated responses. It is recommended that future research only includes participants who have not yet signed with any employers in their sample to mitigate against these biases.

Repertory grid technique. The RGT gave rise to two limitations specific to the elements provided, as well as the interactive nature of the grid arose. First, the fact that I provided the elements may have constricted participants. This is because many participants had not heard of Nolands, nor had they considered Transnet as a potential employer. As such, it was difficult for participants to comment on their perceptions of these employers, as they had no information to draw on to create these perceptions. Other participants who were aware of all the elements could provide insightful information regarding their perceptions. However, it was still appropriate to provide the elements rather than elicit them from each participant. Providing the elements enabled a comparison of the ratings of each grid and the personal construct systems of each participant. It is recommended that future research includes Binder Dijker Otte (London branch) and the Auditor General as elements, instead of Nolands and Transnet, as some participants maintained that these employers were better known.

Second, the interactive nature of the grid might have influenced participants. Given that this was the first time that I had administered the repertory grid technique, there is a chance that I may have led the participants unduly. I practised the technique thoroughly before commencing interviews and made a concerted effort to ensure that all constructs were in participants' own terms and represented their thinking. However, there is still a slight chance that my novice administration of the technique somewhat biased the participants, more so with the first few interviews. It is therefore recommended that future researchers pilot this study to practise the technique extensively to ensure that participants are not biased.

Socioeconomic background information. Unfortunately, I did not collect information regarding participants' socioeconomic backgrounds. This information would have provided additional insights into any correlations between the ways in which participants perceived employers and their socioeconomic backgrounds. Despite the lack of this information, useful insights can still be drawn from the repertory grids and interviews regarding how participants perceived the employers.

Practical implications

It is important to consider that the results of the repertory grid interviews are merely participants' perceptions and are not necessarily the realities of Investec, Nedbank, Mazars, Nolands, PwC, EY, Deloitte, KPMG and Transnet. For example, the fact that Nedbank was perceived to be more traditional, to lack diversity, and to provide insufficient career progression opportunities does not necessarily mean that Nedbank is indeed that way.

As such, it is imperative that employers fully understand what graduate students think about them. Doing so would enable employers to highlight important issues and put measures in place to address them. Such measures could include enhanced reputation management, whereby employers market themselves fully to future employees regarding issues such as career progression opportunities. This would allow future employees to gain accurate perceptions of employers. Additional measures could address issues that need improvement, for example, diversity practices. Thus, having an increased understanding of graduate accountants' perceptions will allow employers to make adaptations to better attract these millennials and gain a competitive advantage.

CONCLUSION

This research study explored how qualifying-year accounting students construe accounting employers when making employer-choice decisions. Using the Repertory Grid Technique, this research study employed principal components analysis, content analysis and thematic analysis to provide insights into how students perceive various accounting employers.

Despite some limitations regarding the sample, the Repertory Grid Technique and socioeconomic background information, this research study answered both Collins and Stevens' (2002) and Jain and Bhatt's (2015) calls for further research. Collins and Stevens (2002) called to future researchers to adopt different techniques to understand how individuals evaluate multiple employers at the same time. Jain and Bhatt (2015) called to future researchers to uncover the processes that underlie applicants' employer-choice decisions. Thus, by applying the repertory grid to understand how students construe potential employers, this research study utilised an alternative method to understand how job seekers evaluate multiple job options simultaneously, as called for by Collins and Stevens (2002). In doing so, the findings of this study highlight the processes which underlie applicants' organisational choice decisions, as called for by Jain and Bhatt (2015).

The findings of this study highlighted that the majority of participants construed firms similarly if the firms were from the same category. As seen in the component maps, Investec and Nedbank, both of which are Banks, were construed similarly for 11 out of 12 participants. On average, three of the Big Four auditing firms were mostly construed similarly, namely EY, PwC and Deloitte, with KPMG construed differently by the majority of participants. Nolands and Mazars, although from two different categories, were construed similarly for 8 of the participants, indicating that Mazars and Nolands were perceived in the same way as each other, yet distinctly from other firms. Transnet, being the only Public Sector firm in the study, was perceived distinctly from the other firms by most participants.

The findings further presented 10 themes that provide deeper insight into the spatial distances portrayed in the component maps. In order of frequency, the following 10 themes emerged in the data: (1) organizational attractiveness, (2) exposure gained during training, (3) work environment, (4) progression opportunities, (5) diversity policies, (6) brand awareness, (7) workplace flexibility and work-life balance, (8) the recruitment process, (9) corporate social responsibility, and (10) a felt moral responsibility to the employer. These themes thus provide

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insight into the factors considered by qualifying-year accounting students when making employer-choice decisions.

Based on these findings, this research study offered key contributions to the literature on employer-choice decisions. This research study expanded the literature on employer brand, employer knowledge, employer brand equity and employer attractiveness, as well as signalling theory (Rynes, 1991) and expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964). Importantly, this research study applied personal construct theory to understand perceptions of employers, thereby enhancing the somewhat limited literature that currently exists on the repertory grid technique.

Moreover, this research study enriched the current literature on millennials, and, on graduate accountants. Findings of the study highlighted what graduate accountants value when making employer-choice decisions and how graduate accountants perceive the Big Four, Nedbank, Investec, Mazars, Nolands and Transnet. As such, this research study provided practical considerations for these employers going forward to ensure that future employees form accurate perceptions and employers can maintain their competitive advantage.

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APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Table A1

Summary of empirical studies on Employer Attractiveness

Author and year	Sample	Data collection method	Findings	Limitations	Recommendations
Aiman-Smith et al. (2001)	72 undergraduate business students	Questionnaires	Ecological rating, lay-off policy and pay have the biggest impact on employer attractiveness	The use of scenarios instead of real-life situations may limit the findings	Further research is required on employees who have greater working experience
Albinger & Freeman (2000)	79 graduate students, 91 undergraduate business students, 30 low-income residents	Surveys	As job-choice increases, the relationship between an organisation's corporate social performance and perceptions of employer attractiveness strengthens	The study used the organisation as the unit of analysis, which may limit the findings	Future research could discover whether individual perceptions of corporate social performance impacts employer attractiveness
Ambler and Barrow (1996)	Employees from 27 companies	Semi-structured interviews	CSR, Customer orientation, and Work-family balance are dimensions of employer attractiveness	N/A	Further research is required on the employer brand concept
Greening & Turban (2000)	292 students in junior- and senior-level strategic management courses	Surveys	Firms with higher corporate social performance are perceived as more attractive	By only including college students in the sample, the findings may be limited	This study can be replicated with experienced job seekers
Lievens & Highhouse (2003)	275 final-year students and 124 employees in the bank industry	Surveys	Innovativeness and competence are important when evaluating employer attractiveness	Participants were only asked to rate one organisation, which may hinder the quality of the results	Further research can be conducted using a person-organisation fit approach to examine the impact of symbolic attributes on employer attractiveness

Moroko & Uncles (2008)	13 industry participants	Interviews	Brand awareness, value proposition, and uniqueness are dimensions of employer attractiveness	The study was limited to industry experts and excluded prospective and current employees	Future research could unveil the disparities between current and future employees' perceptions of employer attractiveness
Ng & Gossett (2013)	19,261 university students	Surveys	Millennials prioritize balancing work and personal life, contributing to society, social and ethical responsibility, diversity and inclusivity	The millennial generation is not a homogenous cohort and thus perceptions may differ by gender, race and socio-economic background. Also, students may not have realistic job expectations	Longitudinal studies are recommended to explore whether perceptions as students materialize into job choices as employees during their careers
Reis & Braga (2016)	937 working professionals	Questionnaires	Generation Y (millennials) seem to emphasise reward packages, development opportunities and a positive work environment.	The sample consisted of Brazilians with a high education level. The survey was cross-sectional; therefore, the results do not examine attractiveness over time	It is recommended that future studies include a more diversified sample that better represents the Brazilian population.
Srivastava & Bhatnaga (2010)	105 graduate business students	Open-ended questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and surveys	Caring nature of the organisation, the opportunity for growth, credibility and fairness of the organisation, ethics, brand image, and global exposure are factors comprising Employer Image	The findings are limited to prospective employees in managerial positions, thereby limiting generalisability	The researchers recommend exploring why working with an employer brand is important to prospective employees

