

An industry perspective on the employability skills of marketing graduates in South Africa: Marketing Mavericks or Dilatory Dinosaurs?

Tumishang Sekhu¹, Thérèse Roux^{2,*}, Johan de Jager³

¹ Department of Marketing, Logistics and Sport Management, Tshwane university of technology, Pretoria, South Africa, Orcid: 0000-0003-0820-1723; 0000-0002-1663-4302

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Abstract

Research lacks consensus on fundamental employability skills for marketing graduates, reflecting diverse needs globally. Understanding employers' needs in specific industries and countries is vital for ensuring post-graduation employment and improving industry perceptions. This study examined the perceptions of marketing practitioners regarding the employability skills of marketing graduates in a South African context. Employing a descriptive quantitative research design, an online survey was completed by 169 marketing practitioners from various sectors. To ensure relevant and diverse representation, judgemental sampling was applied to select relevant respondents from marketing organisations. A questionnaire assessed the importance and performance of employability skills, identifying gaps. Findings revealed significant statistical variances in importance ratings across skill dimensions. Communication was deemed most crucial, while analytical skills were least important. Performance ratings showed significant differences, with personal traits and teamwork skills rated highest. Unfortunately, significant gaps were found across all skills dimensions indicating unmet industry expectations. The study offers practical recommendations for educators and employers to bridge these gaps and better prepare graduates for the marketing industry.

¹ E-mail address: sekhutm@tut.ac.za

^{2*} E-mail address: rouxat@tut.ac.za

*Corresponding Author

³ E-mail address: DeJagerJW@tut.ac.za

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The issue of graduate unemployment presents a significant challenge across various African countries, with particularly high rates in Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya (Mohamedbhai, 2016). In South Africa, the risk of unemployment among degree holders reached 10.6% in 2023, doubling over the past decade (Fraser, 2023). Mohamedbhai (2016) identified four key factors contributing to this complex issue: (i) inadequate higher education quality due to rapid enrolment expansion and insufficient funding, (ii) the dominance of social sciences and humanities programs, (iii) weak university-industry connections, and (iv) graduates' lack of essential employability skills. This study focuses on the latter factor, specifically on the soft or employability skills of marketing graduates, which are crucial for their success and employment in the South African job market. By exploring marketing practitioners' perceptions, the study aims to shed light on the skill sets needed for effective employment in the marketing industry in South Africa. One notable advantage of pursuing a career in marketing is the wide array of fields available for employment opportunities (Lamb, Hair, McDaniel, Boivin, Gaudet, Snow, 2022). Marketing graduates frequently find positions across a broad spectrum of specialised domains, encompassing advertising and media, brand and product management, marketing research, sales, direct marketing, and retail. Additionally, employment opportunities extend into various sectors, including government, financial services, arts, sports, and non-profit organisations (Moriarty, Mitchell, Wood & Wells, 2018).

Employability, a multifaceted concept, is heavily influenced by various factors, with education emerging as a pivotal determinant, especially for graduates (Donald, Ashleigh & Baruch, 2018). However, discussions highlight a widening disparity between the expectations of employers and the readiness of students to graduate from higher education institutions (Torres, 2020; Yeoh, 2019). Critics argue that higher education institutions disproportionately prioritize theoretical knowledge over practical application and essential soft skills acquisition. This oversight not only hampers graduates' ability to transition seamlessly into the workforce but also undermines their competitiveness in today's dynamic job market.

Conceptual knowledge forms the theoretical underpinnings of a subject, often found in textbooks like principles of marketing, and is characterised by its enduring relevance. Conversely, skills can be segmented into two primary categories: soft skills (or meta skills), which include higher-order cognitive abilities such as communication skills, analytical thinking, and interpersonal skills; and technical skills, (or hard skills), which involve proficiency in executing specific technical tasks (Schlee & Harich, 2010). In this paper, the term "employability skills" is defined as a 'set of attributes that enhances graduates' likelihood of securing employment and succeeding in their chosen marketing professions,' (Schlee & Karns, 2017 p.69).

Across global research, there is a growing recognition in the importance of basic soft skills in the eyes of employers, with these skills increasingly becoming key predictors of employability (Chowdhury & Miah, 2019; Finch et al., 2012). The extensive study by Di Gregorio et al. (2019), conducted across five European countries (France, Italy, Germany, Spain, U.K.), underscores the paramount importance marketing professionals place on fundamental soft skills. They particularly highlight a significant gap between students' perceptions of required skills and employers' expectations. Similarly, Torres (2020) observed that employers in developed markets often find marketing graduates lacking the necessary competencies upon entering the workforce. This mismatch, compounded by factors such as economic downturns and a burgeoning number of graduates, likely contributes to increased levels of graduate unemployment, especially in developing nations (Khuluvhe & Ganyaupfu, 2022). Given these observations, it is prudent to advocate for the integration of essential soft skills into marketing curricula, despite their unconventional academic nature. Strengthening these foundational soft skills not only enhances graduates' employability but also augments their competitiveness in the job market, complementing their core marketing competencies.

Scholars within the marketing discipline are engaged in ongoing research aimed at elucidating the key components of marketing education on a global scale (Chowdhury & Miah, 2019; Di Gregorio, Maggioni, Mauri & Mazzucchelli, 2019; Kovács & Zarándné, 2022; Rohm, Stefl & Saint Clair, 2019). These efforts are reflected in diverse approaches, with scholars advocating for curriculum enhancements based on practitioners' essential knowledge and skills (Finch et al., 2012), proposing fundamental shifts in teaching methodologies to better reflect actual marketing challenges (Rohm et al., 2019; Wymbs, 2011), and promoting the integration of marketing training through practical and project-based education (Di Gregorio et al., 2019).

This paper will examine marketing practitioners' perspectives on the employability skills of marketing graduates in developing countries, particularly in South Africa. By exploring how industry needs align with educational preparation, this study seeks to offer valuable insights into marketing education and workforce readiness. Focusing specifically on South Africa allows for insights tailored to its unique marketing landscape, addressing a crucial gap in the literature.

1.2. Problem Statement

There is a growing global concern about the mismatch between employers' expectations and graduates' preparedness from higher education institutions (Torres, 2020; Yeoh, 2019), a problem that is also apparent in the marketing industry. Scholars have investigated essential employability skills worldwide, including in the United States (Liu & Burns, 2018; Schlee & Karns, 2017; Yeoh, 2019), Australia (McArthur et al., 2017), European countries (Di Gregorio et al., 2019), Bangladesh (Chowdhury & Miah, 2019), and Hungary (Kovacs & Zarándné, 2022). These studies consistently highlight universal importance of communication skills and raised concerns about marketing students'

readiness upon graduation. Understanding industry requirements from marketing graduates in a South African context is crucial to avoid negative industry perceptions and to ensure students' employment post-graduation. Therefore, this article focuses on potential employers' expectations and perceptions in the South African marketing industry, aiming to provide insights into the required skill dimensions for marketing graduates in the country. This study aims to contribute to existing research by examining practitioners' views of marketing education in South Africa, thereby extending international scholars' work to an emerging market.

1.3. Research aim and objectives

The aim of this study is to determine marketing practitioners' perceptions of the employability skills of marketing graduates in a South African context. To achieve this following secondary research objectives, need to be achieved:

- Determine the perceived importance of employability skills of marketing graduates entering the industry.
- Assess the perceived performance of employability skills of marketing graduates entering the industry.
- Identify the gaps between the perceived importance and actual performance of employability skills of marketing graduates entering the industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The higher education landscape of South Africa

The 1994 national elections in South Africa heralded a transformative period, marked by the demise of the apartheid regime and the advent of democracy. This transition extended to the higher education sector, where the legacy of segregation and oppression against non-white South Africans was challenged. Subsequent legislative reforms, such as The Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, sought to dismantle discriminatory practices and promote inclusivity by expanding access to higher education and increasing student enrolment (Ede, Jilin & Vezi-Magigaba, 2022). This legislative framework precipitated a restructuring of the higher education landscape, consolidating 15 Technikons and 21 public universities into 23 institutions (Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017). These newly formed institutions, including traditional universities, universities of technology, comprehensive universities, and institutes of higher learning, aimed to redress historical imbalances and promote transformation, differentiation, and self-governance (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). By diversifying student demographics and prioritising the inclusion of previously disadvantaged groups, such as students of colour, women, and individuals from marginalised communities, these institutions aimed to foster a more equitable educational environment (Mekoa, 2018). As a result, barriers to access based on race, gender, religion, or culture were dismantled, facilitating a more diverse and representative student

body in South African higher education institutions. This transformation reflects the country's commitment to social justice and inclusivity within the education sector.

The South African government claims to be close to its ambitious National Development Plan (NDP) targets to increase higher education enrolments to 1.6 million in 2022, aiming to enhance the country's economic growth by producing a skilled workforce (Phakathi, 2022). However, despite transformation efforts, several challenges persist. Firstly, while the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) outlines the purpose of South Africa's higher education system, criticisms abound regarding its efficacy in producing skilled graduates (Ede et al., 2019). Industry stakeholders lament the mismatch between the skills provided by higher education institutions and those demanded by employers (Jordaan et al., 2014). Secondly, the language barrier poses a significant obstacle, with English often being a second or third language for many students (Du Plessis Steyn & Weideman, 2013; Marongwe, Mbodila & Kariyana, 2020). This linguistic challenge hampers students' ability to effectively engage with academic content, leading to deficiencies in basic reading and communication skills. Thirdly, financial constraints exacerbate accessibility issues, despite efforts by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to support disadvantaged students (NSFAS, 2020). Limited funding fails to meet the burgeoning demand for higher education, forcing many students to drop out due to financial pressures (Marongwe et al., 2020).

Furthermore, expectations regarding academic roles have evolved needing to publish in prestigious journals to maintain relevance and secure promotion (Breier, Herman & Towers, 2020). While skilled faculty enhance institutional competitiveness and student employability, they now juggle increased administrative duties due to rising enrolments (USAF, 2019). This shift can also negatively impact teaching quality, leading to dissatisfaction among students and inadequately prepared graduates. Finally, in current competitive job market, employers prioritise graduates with practical skills alongside theoretical knowledge (Torres, 2020). Educators must thus foster employability skills, including knowledge as well as non-technical competencies, to enhance graduates' workplace success (Rohm et al., 2019). In addressing these challenges, South African higher education institutions must align their programs with industry needs, provide adequate language support, enhance financial assistance mechanisms, and support faculty development to meet the evolving demands of the knowledge economy.

2.2. Employability skills expected from marketing graduates

The literature employs various labels to denote the competencies expected of graduates, including core skills, meta skills, transferable skills, and employability skills (Suleman, 2016). For this article's purpose, the term "employability skills" will be adopted. These skills encompass interpersonal, intrapersonal, and technical proficiencies necessary for securing employment in a specific field (Di Gregorio, Maggioni, Mauri & Mazzucchelli, 2019). This paper specifically examines the dimensions of employability skills essential for marketing graduates entering the South

African workforce. These dimensions include communication, personal traits, interpersonal skills, and critical analytical decision-making (Di Gregorio et al., 2019), forming the basis for the study's investigation into employability skills.

The foundation of this current study lies in a well-established literature base consisting of past studies on the employability skills of marketing graduates. Table 1 presents a synthesis of findings from studies the past five years concerning the employability skills of marketing graduates as they enter the marketplace. These studies are categorised based on the context and methodologies employed, providing an overview of the findings within the body of knowledge on this topic.

Table 1: Synthesis of studies on the employability skills of marketing graduates

<i>Authors & context & methods</i>	<i>Important and unimportant employability skills</i>
<i>Qualitative</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yeoh (2019) • USA • Delphi with a panel of human resource & marketing managers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative problem solving and communication skills were the amongst top ranked skills • Personal skills were the least important
<i>Content analysis of job advertisements</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kovacs & Zarandne, (2022) • Hungary • Digital marketing junior positions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers were in search of versatile candidates equipped with soft skills specially communication (English language proficiency, presentation skills), teamwork / people skills. • Personal traits were less mentioned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Liu and Burns (2018) • USA • Marketing analytics requirement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing analysts should be proficient in performing various tasks, including conducting big data analysis, social media analytics, SEO, measuring digital marketing metrics, utilising Google Analytics, performing data mining, and implementing predictive analytics.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • McArthur, Kubacki, Pang, Alcaraz (2017) • Australia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most demanded attributes included communication skills, motivation, time management and digital marketing experience. • The least demanded attributes included presentation skills, confidence, and the ability to understand and work with financial tools.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schlee & Karns (2017) • United States 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and people skills, as well as time management, were the most frequently mentioned skills in the job postings. • Attributes such as creativity, enthusiasm/passion, and ethics were less commonly listed
<i>Quantitative</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chowdhury & Miah (2019) • Bangladesh • Survey with Managers & students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to achieve set goals was rated to be the most important while students rated teamwork as highest. • Complex critical thinking skills are not required at entry-level positions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Di Gregorio et al (2019) • Survey with employers in 5 European countries: France; Italy, Germany, Spain, U.K. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Companies expect new graduates to cultivate and enhance their soft skills for a successful marketing career, with interpersonal abilities emerging as particularly crucial. • The demand for digital and technical skills is presently high and is projected to increase further in the future. Nevertheless, it is important to note that digital competencies are not replacing traditional marketing skills.

2.2.1.1. Methodologies employed in studies on the employability skills of marketing graduates

The methodologies employed to glean insights from industry stakeholders vary, encompassing qualitative interviews (Yeoh, 2019), quantitative surveys (Chowdhury & Miah, 2019; Di Gregorio et al., 2019), and content analyses (Liu & Burns, 2018; Kovacs & Zarandne, 2022; McArthur et al., 2017; Schlee & Karns, 2017). These studies underscore the significance of conceptual knowledge areas such as measurement and strategic marketing. However, they also underscore the critical importance of soft skills, which constitute a significant skills gap in marketing education (Di Gregorio et al., 2019; McArthur et al., 2017; Rohm et al., 2019). Yeoh (2019) followed a qualitative approach to explore the technical (hard) and soft skills required for marketers to be employable in the USA. Using a Delphi technique with a panel of human resource and marketing managers they revealed pivotal technical skills (applying marketing concepts, research aptitude, and product knowledge) and soft skills (communication, analytical problem-solving).

Most of these past studies applied a quantitative approach via content analysis of job advertisements or surveys to determine the requirements when entering diverse specialisations within the field of marketing and digital marketing. Schlee and Karns (2017) for example delved into marketing job advertisements in the United States, aiming to identify the necessary knowledge, skills, personal attributes, and corresponding salaries. They discovered that communication, interpersonal skills, and time management were frequently mentioned in job postings, whereas attributes like creativity, enthusiasm/passion, and ethics were less commonly highlighted. In a separate study within the USA, Liu and Burns (2018) analysed employers' job postings, tweets about marketing analytics, and course syllabi to determine essential analytics requirements for undergraduate marketing students. Their findings emphasised the importance of skills such as big data analysis, social media analytics, and predictive analytics. Through an analysis of job advertisements in Australia, McArthur, Kubacki, Pang, and Alcaraz (2017) uncovered a demand for skills such as motivation, time management, communication, and experience. This raised questions about the alignment of marketing curricula with industry needs and the value of degrees. Similarly, Kovacs and Zarandne (2022) observed a preference for hard technical skills alongside an increasing emphasis on soft skills in digital marketing job listings in Hungary. These content analysis studies collectively underline the evolving prerequisites of marketing jobs, emphasising a blend of technical proficiency and interpersonal abilities. They challenge traditional assumptions about qualifications, urging a re-evaluation of marketing education to meet industry demands.

Others conducted surveys to determine expectations regarding the requirements of marketing graduates. In Bangladesh, Chowdhury and Miah (2019) highlighted significant disparities between employers and university students regarding essential employability skills for entry-level marketing and sales roles. While employers prioritised practical skills, students valued broader competencies for long-term career success. Additionally, Di Gregorio et al. (2019) examined the changing landscape of

marketing in Europe, emphasising the strategic core of marketing activities while noting an expanded skillset required in digital, analytical, and technical fields. However, both these surveys only measured the importance of skillset requirements, neglecting to assess performance or the gap between importance and actual performance. In contrast, the current study measures both the importance and performance of marketing employability skill dimensions, enabling the identification of gaps or differences between expected and actual performance.

2.2.1.2. Findings regarding the employability skills of marketing graduates

When considering the findings of the past studies it becomes evident that there are divergent and conflicting perspectives regarding the employability skill dimensions required from marketing graduates. *Communication skills:* Communication skills were highly valued in Australian job advertisements (McArthur, Kubacki, Pang, Alcaraz, 2017), as well as in countries like the USA (Schlee & Karns, 2017) and Hungary (Kovacs & Zarandne, 2022), where they are among the most sought-after attributes by employers. Similarly, communication skills were emphasised in marketing analytics requirements in the USA (Liu & Burns, 2018). Additionally, Yeoh's (2019) interviews with human resource and marketing managers confirmed the frequent mention of communication skills in marketing job postings in the United States. These findings underline the importance of good communication as an essential skill dimension for marketing professionals globally. *Personal traits:* There is disagreement regarding the importance and type of personal traits required for marketers to be employable. Di Gregorio et al. (2019) highlighted the significance of investing in soft skills, including interpersonal skills, for success in marketing careers across European countries. However personal skills were rated as the least important among managers and students in Bangladesh (Chowdhury & Miah, 2019). Additionally, attributes like creativity and enthusiasm/passion were not listed as job requirements in the USA (Schlee & Karns, 2017). These findings imply a contrasting view on the role of personal traits in marketing employment, affected by different social, educational, and cultural contexts. *Leadership & teamwork:* Teamwork and interpersonal skills were deemed essential for Hungarian digital marketing junior positions (Kovacs & Zarandne, 2022) and were highlighted as crucial for succeeding in marketing careers in both European countries and the Australian job market (Di Gregorio et al., 2019; McArthur, Kubacki, Pang, Alcaraz, 2017). These outcomes illustrate the importance of teamwork abilities as central to successful marketing practice, notwithstanding the disagreements in prominence across different contexts. *Analytical skills:* Di Gregorio et al. (2019) noted an increasing demand for digital, technical, and critical analytical decision-making skills in marketing across European countries. Similarly, Yeoh (2019) reported that creative problem-solving was highly valued among human resource and marketing managers in the USA. These variations in findings underscore the diverse skill requirements across different regions and industries within the marketing profession, underlining the changing character of analytical competencies in response to technological advancements and market dynamics.

The variations in findings across studies could stem from several factors, including the diverse specialisations within the field of marketing, such as personal selling, digital marketing, marketing research, and brand or product management (McArthur et al., 2017; Schlee & Harich, 2010). Moreover, the discrepancy may also arise from the wide range of positions available to marketing graduates in the job market. Additionally, it's essential to consider that these studies were predominantly conducted in developed countries, where educational curricula and industry demands may differ significantly from those in other regions. Furthermore, syllabuses in higher education institutions may vary not only from institution to institution but also from country to country.

2.3. Hypotheses

The examination of previous studies on the employability skills of marketing graduates reveals a lack of consensus on the essential skills for marketers, indicating diverse needs across different contexts. While communication skills were deemed crucial in Australia (McArthur et al., 2017), the USA (Schlee & Karns, 2017; Liu & Burns, 2018; Yeoh, 2019), and Hungary (Kovacs & Zarandne, 2022), opinions vary on other skill dimensions depending on the specific context. Therefore, understanding the expectations for marketing graduates in a South African context is vital. Furthermore, past studies neglected to assess performance or the gap between importance and actual performance. The current study aims to address the lack of understanding of what the marketing industry in South Africa seeks by refining measurement through assessing the importance of marketing employability skill dimensions. This will enable the determination of the size of gaps in the skills required from marketing graduates. This will be achieved by testing the following hypotheses:

- H₁: There are statistically significant differences between the perceived importance ratings of marketing employability skill dimensions (Communication, Personal traits, Leadership & teamwork, Analytical skills).
- H₂: There are statistically significant differences between the perceived performance ratings of marketing employability skill dimensions (Communication, Personal traits, Leadership & teamwork, Analytical skills)
- H₃: There are statistically significant differences between the importance and performance ratings for the marketing employability skill dimensions (Communication, Personal traits, Leadership & teamwork, Analytical skills).

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology including the research design, sampling, data collection, validity and reliability are explained below.

3.1. Research design and sample

In this study, a descriptive quantitative research design was employed to capture the perceptions of marketing employers in the South African industry. Utilising survey research, which involves

gathering data from a sample or population using standardised questionnaires, allowed for systematic data collection (Malhotra, 2020).

To ensure the representation of relevant voices within the marketing sector, judgmental sampling was chosen. This sampling method enables researchers to draw upon their expertise to select appropriate respondents who can effectively represent the population under study (Malhotra, 2020). Specifically, marketing employers affiliated with relevant professional marketing organisations and industry publications were targeted. Similar sampling strategies have been utilised in previous research, with a focus on engaging members of official marketing associations, conference attendees, and professional networks (Finch et al., 2012).

For this study, the target population comprised marketing practitioners, whose perspectives provided valuable insights into the employment needs of marketing graduates in South Africa. To identify potential respondents, three lists of South African practitioners were utilised as a sample frame: members of the Marketing Association of South Africa (MASA), recruiters of marketing graduates from the past three years, and active members of the Marketing and Media sector of Biz-community South Africa, a B2B platform catering to industry professionals. This comprehensive approach ensured a diverse representation of voices within the marketing industry, enriching the study's findings.

Careful screening of the lists was conducted to avoid duplication, ensuring that only one questionnaire was sent to each company. The inclusion criteria included that respondents must have i) a minimum of five years of experience in marketing positions and ii) should have recruited, trained, or managed at least five marketing graduates within the last two years. To ensure privacy of members an online survey was distributed by independent administrators from the different bodies to the relevant individuals at 422 different companies. A total of 169 usable questionnaires were received from businesses, resulting in an overall response rate of 40%, consistent with previous international studies on similar topics. To assess non-response bias and the representation of the population of interest, an examination of early and late returns was conducted, revealing no significant differences. This indicates a reasonably low non-response bias, as suggested by Van Selm and Jankowski (2006). Furthermore, the final sample obtained encompassed a diverse range of industrial marketing sectors, company sizes, and experience levels.

3.2. Data collection

Data was collected through an online survey distributed to South African marketing practitioners, including members of the Marketing Association of South Africa (MASA) and active members of the Marketing and Media sector of Biz-community South Africa, a B2B platform for industry professionals. The research instrument employed in this study was adapted from Finch et al. (2012) to suit the South African context, with input from five experienced marketing practitioners.

The questionnaire comprised two sections: firmographic information and assessment of employers' perspectives on the importance and performance of employability skill dimensions (Communication, Personal traits, Leadership Analytical skills) in marketing graduates seeking employment. Section one included dichotomous and multiple-choice questions, while section two utilized 7-point scales. The scale of importance ranged from (1), indicating a basic understanding, to (7), signifying a deep comprehension. Similarly, the performance scale spanned from (1), representing very weak, to (7), denoting very strong.

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the Faculty of Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the Tshwane University of Technology. The study was categorised as low risk, and data collection commenced only upon obtaining approval (Sekhu 2023/a).

3.3. Validity and reliability

To ensure content reliability, previous research studies (e.g., Finch et al., 2012; Chowdhury & Miah, 2019; Di Gregorio et al., 2019; Kovacs & Zarandne, 2022; Liu & Burns, 2018; McArthur et al., 2017; Schlee & Karns, 2017; Yeoh, 2019) were consulted to understand the items, constructs, and methodologies. Face validity was established by seeking feedback from five experienced marketing professionals and five marketing lecturers who reviewed the questionnaire for clarity and relevance of the items. Additionally, a pilot test was conducted with ten marketing practitioners who had employed entry-level marketers in the past year to assess the questionnaire's reliability. Data from the online survey were analysed using Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient to determine internal consistency and reliability, with values above 0.70 considered acceptable. All reported alpha values exceeded 0.8, indicating satisfactory levels of internal consistency reliability (Nunnally, 1978).

4. Results and Findings

The sample profile and hypotheses are discussed below whereafter the findings will be linked to the literature discussed.

4.1. Sample

The sample comprised 169 marketing practitioners, with nearly equal gender representation: 49.1% identified as male, and 50.9% as female. Most practitioners were employed in the Advertising/Communications/Media sector (19.3%), followed by Marketing Education/Research (17.5%) and the Financial Services sector (12.0%), with other sectors also represented. The majority were employed in smaller companies (48%) with up to 50 employees, and they typically had extensive experience in marketing (39.6%). The sample obtained aligns with the profile of the three lists of South African practitioners used as the sample frame, demonstrating adherence to the inclusion criteria during data collection.

Table 2: Sample

		<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>			<i>Freq</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Gender</i>	Male	83	49.1	<i>Number of employees</i>	1 – 20	63	37,3
	Female	86	50.9		21-50	18	10,7
<i>Sectors</i>	Advertising/ communications/ digital media	32	19.3		51-100	18	10,7
	Marketing research	29	17.5		101 – 500	21	12,4
	Financial services	20	12.0	More than 500	49	29,0	
	Not-for-profit/ governmental	15	9.0	<i>Years of experience</i>	Up to 5 years	27	16.0
	Retail/logistics	10	6.0		Between 5 - 10 years	29	17.2
	Sales /tele/direct marketing/	10	6.0		11 - 15 years	23	13.6
	Fast-moving consumer goods/beverages	6	3.6		15 - 20 years	23	13.6
	Other	44	26.5		More than 20 years	67	39.6

4.2. Hypotheses results

4.2.1. The importance of employability skills (H₁)

The importance levels of employability skills are outlined in Table 3. Respondents deemed all employability skill items to be important, as indicated by mean scores of 4 and above across all dimensions, with an average mean of 5.59. Some skills were considered more crucial than others; for instance, the ability to follow through on tasks and projects (5.92; SD=1.30) and ethical decision-making (M=5.90; SD=1.67). Thus, it's imperative for marketing graduates to demonstrate proficiency in project completion and ethical accountability. Conversely, the ability to manage budgets received the lowest rating (M=4.82; SD=1.82). Despite its lower mean score, it remains an important skill since it surpasses the midpoint of 4.0. Notably, the higher standard deviation for budget management (SD=1.82) suggests greater variability in respondents' perceptions regarding its importance. This indicates less consensus among respondents, with some viewing it as highly important while others perceive it as less crucial.

Communication is rated as the most important employability skill dimension (M=5.70; SD=1.22), followed closely by personal traits (M=5.57; SD=0.93) and leadership (M=5.57; SD=1.16). Analytical skills received the lowest rating (M=5.48; SD=1.25), suggesting that while some knowledge of analytical skills is beneficial, it may not be essential at the entry level for marketing positions. The results indicate a statistically significant difference, with the null hypothesis being rejected in favour of the alternative ($F(3,166) = 3.294; p < 0.05$). Hotelling's T-squared test further confirms significant statistical differences among the four importance dimensions of employability

skills. Thus, the null hypothesis $H_{1(0)}$ is rejected in favour of the alternative H_1 , indicating statistically significant differences in perceived importance ratings among the employability skill dimensions.

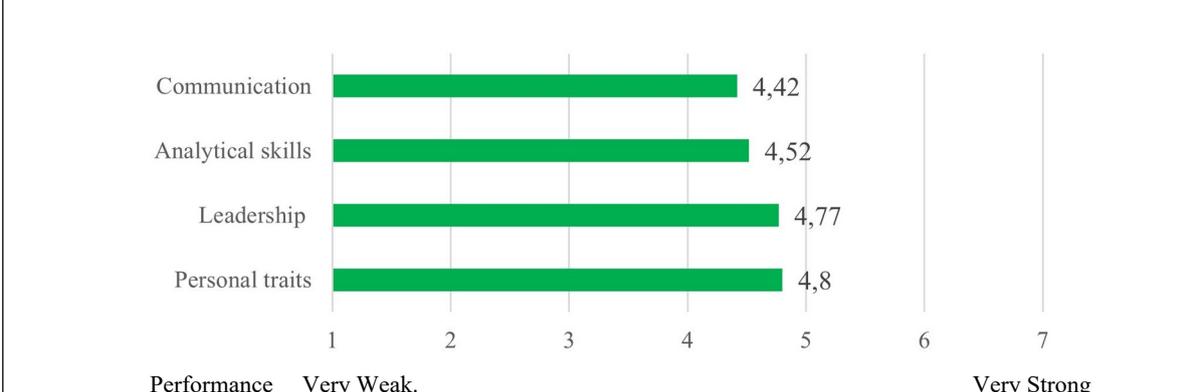
Table 3 Importance of employability skills (n=169)

	Scale Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Communication	5.70	1.22	1.00	7.00
Able to sell ideas/ present ideas	5,74	1,76	1.00	7.00
Business writing skills	5,67	1,74	1.00	7.00
Personal traits	5.57	0.93	1.00	7.00
Demonstrates ethical decision-making	5,90	1,67	1.00	7.00
Manages time effectively	5,80	1,25	1.00	7.00
Adapts well to changes	5,57	1,28	1.00	7.00
Exhibits empathy	5,02	1,34	1.00	7.00
Leadership & teamwork	5.57	1.16	1.00	7.00
Collaborates effectively with others to achieve set objectives	5.82	1.25	1.00	7.00
Exhibits strong interpersonal abilities	5.79	1.20	1.00	7.00
Demonstrates initiative-taking behavior	5.76	1.26	1.00	7.00
Displays leadership capabilities	4.90	1.63	1.00	7.00
Analytical skills	5.48	1.25	1.00	7.00
Ability to apply analytical skills to make informed decisions	5.92	1.30	1.00	7.00
Able to learn software/ tools to conduct marketing analytics	5.66	1.32	1.00	7.00
Able to productively identify, formulate, and solve critical problems	5.54	1.43	1.00	7.00
Able to manage budgets and calculations	4.82	1.82	1.00	7.00
Overall Importance of specific employability skills	5.59	0.98	1.00	7.00
Hotelling's T-Squared	F	df1	df2	Sig
10,002	3,294	3	166	0,022

4.2.2. The performance on employability skills (H_2)

The performance levels of employability skills are outlined in Table 3. The overall mean score of the performance items surpasses the mid-point of 4.0 ($M=4.63$; $SD=1.46$). Among the employability skill dimensions, personal traits ($M=4.8$; $SD=1.37$) and leadership ($M=4.77$; $SD=1.46$) received the highest ratings. However, these items also exhibited relatively high standard deviations, indicating diverse opinions. Conversely, the ability to lead ($M=4.37$; $SD=1.00$) was rated lowest

Table 4: Performance on employability skills (n=169)

				
	Scale Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Personal traits	4,80	1,37	1.00	7.00
Ethical decision-making	5,04	1,46	1.00	7.00
Able to manage time	4,91	1,59	1.00	7.00
Able to adapt to change	4,75	1,42	1.00	7.00
Able to be empathetic	4,51	1,8	1.00	7.00
Leadership & teamwork	4,77	1,46	1.00	7.00
Collaborates effectively with others to achieve set objectives	5,06	1,48	1.00	7.00
Exhibits strong interpersonal abilities	4,98	1,48	1.00	7.00
Demonstrates initiative-taking behavior	4,69	1,65	1.00	7.00
Displays leadership capabilities	4,37	1,00	7.00	7.00
Analytical skills	4,52	1,58	1.00	7.00
Ability to apply analytical skills to make informed decisions	4,88	1,59	1.00	7.00
Able to learn software/ tools to conduct marketing analytics	4,63	1,64	1.00	7.00
Able to productively identify, formulate, and solve critical problems	4,63	1,67	1.00	7.00
Able to manage budgets and calculations	3,95	1,92	1.00	7.00
Communications	4,42	1,72	1.00	7.00
Able to sell ideas/ present ideas	4,52	1,71	1.00	7.00
Business-writing skills	4,32	1,87	1.00	7.00
<i>Overall performance of employability skills dimensions</i>	<i>4,63</i>	<i>1,46</i>	<i>1.00</i>	<i>7.00</i>
Hotelling's T-Squared	F	df1	df2	Sig
43,618	14,366	3	166	0,000

Respondents perceive variations in marketing graduates' performance across different employability skill items, evident from the range of perceived performance. For instance, collaborating effectively with others to achieve set objectives (M=5.06; SD=1.48) received relatively higher ratings, while the ability to manage budgets and calculations (M=3.95; SD=1.92) scored far lower. Budget management and calculations consistently received the lowest ratings and highest standard deviation across importance and performance sections, possibly reflecting diverse industry requirements and company expectations.

The Hotelling's T-squared test yielded statistically significant results ($F(3,166) = 14.366$; $p < 0.05$), prompting rejection of the null hypothesis in favour of the alternative. Thus, there is ample evidence to reject the null hypothesis $H_{2(0)}$ in favour of the alternative H_2 indicating significant differences in mean importance ratings among employability skill dimensions.

4.2.3. Importance-performance gap analysis (H_3)

The Importance-Performance Gap Analysis results are presented in Table 5 in declining order based on the gap between the importance and performance. This attention to the gap is vital, as it will provide educators direction on priority areas for improvement. Neither the employability skills dimensions, nor the single item importance exceeded performance. This means that employer's expectations were not met at all.

- *Communication*. The importance-performance gap is largest for this skill (Gap = -1.28). This result can be explained in the light of the fact that it was the highest ranked in terms of importance. The individual item relating to business-writing skills maintained the widest gap of the individual items in this dimension (Gap = -1.25).
- *Analytical skills*: This dimension maintains the second largest gap (Gap = -0.96). Ability to apply analytical skills to make informed decisions (Gap = -1.04) and learning software/ tools to conduct marketing analytics had the widest gap between importance and performance (Gap = -1.03).
- *Leadership & teamwork*: At the item level, the three items with the largest gap were i) demonstrating initiative-taking behaviour (Gap = -1.07), ii) exhibiting strong interpersonal abilities (Gap = -0.81) and iii) collaborating effectively with others to achieve set objectives (Gap = -0.76).
- *Personal traits*: The individual items with the largest gap include i) the ability to manage time effectively (Gap = -1.29), ii) demonstrate ethical decision-making (Gap = -0.86), and iii) adapt well to changes (Gap = -0.66).

The independent sample t- findings indicate statistically significant differences in the importance-performance ratings ($p < 0.05$). All the differences indicated large effect size ($\eta^2 = 0.273 > 0.25$). The biggest gap between the importance and the performance of means is the communication dimension ($t = 9.706$; $M = 1.28$). This means that the communication skills of the marketing graduates are falling short of industry expectations. The second highest difference is in the analytical skills ($t = 8.572$), with a mean difference of 0.96. The smallest importance-performance gap reported is personal traits ($t = 7.43$), with a difference of 0.77.

Table 5: Employability skills dimensions required from marketing graduates

	Importance	Performance	Gap Analysis
	Mean	SD	Mean diff
Communication	5,70	1,22	-1,28
Business-writing skills	4,32	1,87	-1,35
Able to sell ideas/ present ideas	4,52	1,71	-1,22
Analytical skills	5,48	1,25	-0,96
Ability to apply analytical skills to make informed decisions	4,88	1,59	-1,04
Able to learn software/ tools to conduct marketing analytics	4,63	1,64	-1,03
Able to productively identify, formulate, and solve critical problems	4,63	1,67	-0,91
Able to manage budgets and calculations	3,95	1,92	-0,87
Leadership	5,57	1,16	-0,79
Able to take initiative	4,69	1,65	-1,07
People skills	4,98	1,48	-0,81
Able to work with others to accomplish a goal	5,06	1,48	-0,76
Able to lead	4,37	1,77	-0,53
Personal traits	5,57	0,93	-0,77
Able to manage time	4,51	1,8	-1,29
Ethical decision-making	5,04	1,46	-0,86
Able to adapt to change	4,91	1,59	-0,66

Able to be empathetic	4,75	1,42	5,02	1,34	-0,27
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From the statistical test conducted, there are statistically significant importance-performance gaps in all the employability skills dimensions examined. Therefore, the null hypothesis $H_{3(0)}$ is rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis H_3 . This shows that there are statistically significant differences between the importance and the performance ratings of the employability skills dimensions. This means the employers surveyed expected higher levels of comprehension compared to the perceived performance with regards to communication analytical skills, personal traits, and leadership skills.

5. Discussion

5.1. The importance of employability skills

The examination of hypothesis 1 uncovered a significant statistical variance in the importance ratings assigned to employability skill dimensions. Among the four dimensions scrutinised, communication emerged as the most crucial, whereas analytical skills were deemed the least important by the surveyed employers. This emphasis on communication echoes findings from prior empirical studies conducted in Australia, the US and Hungary (Kovacs & Zarandne, 2022; McArthur et al., 2017; Liu & Burns, 2018; Yeoh, 2019). The noticeable significance of communication skills identified in this study aligns with broader investigations into graduates' marketing and business proficiencies, underscoring the universal need for adept oral and written communication abilities. Employers in South Africa, akin to those in other developing nations, prioritise these skills due to their indispensable role in various professional contexts, including report writing, idea presentation, and digital communication platforms such as social media and emails. Conversely, analytical skills received a comparatively diminished emphasis in terms of importance, suggesting that employers of marketing graduates may not prioritise these capabilities at the entry level. This contrasts with findings from Di Gregorio et al. (2019) and Yeoh (2019), which underscored the significance of analytical decision-making and creative problem-solving skills, respectively, in European countries and the USA. Such disparities suggest regional variations in skill requirements, potentially indicating that analytical skills hold greater prominence in higher managerial roles within the South African context.

While this study did not focus specifically on media or digital media specialisations, it is noteworthy that analytical skills are pivotal for marketing analytics, as highlighted by Liu and Burns (2018), emphasising the importance of competencies like big data analysis and social media analytics. Consequently, while analytical skills may currently receive less emphasis in entry-level marketing positions in South Africa, their practical utility is expected to grow in tandem with evolving industry demands, reflecting global trends.

5.2. The performance on employability skills

Hypothesis 2 investigated the statistical significance of performance ratings assigned to marketing graduates by respondents. The results revealed a significant disparity in these ratings. Notably, personal traits received the highest performance rating, closely followed by leadership and teamwork skills. Respondents perceived marketing graduates as proficient in collaborating on projects, negotiating, problem-solving, and delivering customer service. In contrast, communication skills garnered the lowest overall rating in this study, despite being identified as a critical skill dimension by surveyed employers. This discrepancy highlights a need for improvement in areas such as business writing, conveying concepts, and presenting ideas and reports. The lower rating on communication suggests that South African employers of marketing graduates encounter similar challenges as their counterpart countries (Kovacs & Zarandne, 2022; McArthur et al., 2017; Liu & Burns, 2018; Yeoh, 2019), where communication skills are among the most demanded attributes for those seeking employment. The observed differences in mean ratings of employability skill performance led to the rejection of the null hypothesis through Hotelling's t-test, indicating statistical disparities in respondents' assessments of employability skill performance.

5.3. Importance-performance gap analysis on employability skills

Hypothesis 3 examined the importance-performance gap for employability skills dimensions. The independent t-test findings revealed significant gaps across all four dimensions: personal traits, communication skills, analytical skills, and leadership and teamwork. This indicates that many graduates fail to meet potential employers' expectations, consistent with prior research suggesting academic knowledge often outweighs essential skills among marketing graduates (Di Gregorio et al., 2019; McArthur et al., 2017; Rohm et al., 2021). The largest gaps were observed in communication and analytical skills, emphasising the urgent need to enhance these dimensions for marketing graduates. The communication gap was not unexpected, given that many South African students struggle with English, often their second or third language. Additionally, socioeconomic factors, such as educational background and privilege, contribute to disparities in communication proficiency (Wiese, van Heerden & Jordaan, 2010; Marongwe et al., 2020).

The significant gap in analytical skills implies challenges in problem-solving ability among marketing graduates, indicating potential deficiencies in numeracy, critical thinking, and decision-making. Addressing such gaps is crucial for effective pedagogy, as these skills are integral to professional success. Interestingly, respondents perceived marketing graduates in South Africa as proficient in teamwork and leadership, suggesting strengths in these areas. Overall, the findings underscore the pressing need to bridge employability skill gaps among marketing graduates to align with industry demands and enhance their readiness for the workplace.

6. Managerial Implications

The practical recommendations stemming from this study align with its objective of assessing marketing practitioners' perspectives on the employability skills of marketing graduates within South Africa. Given the apparent mismatch between industry expectations and the skills possessed by graduates across dimensions like personal traits, communication, analytical ability, and leadership, it is imperative for educators, employers, and students to implement strategies aimed at bridging these gaps. The following recommendations elucidate potential approaches to enhance graduates' readiness for the marketing sector.

6.1. Recommendations for educators

Theoretical content devoid of practical application fails to adequately prepare graduates. The identified importance-performance gaps underscore deficiencies across all employability skill dimensions. Efforts must prioritise addressing these gaps in personal traits, communication, analytical skills, and leadership/teamwork. Higher education educators should actively engage with marketing industry organisations to stay abreast of evolving skill requirements. Collaboration with employers should be fostered to contribute to curriculum development. Regular communication channels, such as quarterly meetings and industry expositions, should facilitate discussions on essential employability skills.

Priority should be given to bridging the widest gaps in communication and analytical skills. Institutions can enhance oral and written communication through interactive class activities, practical assignments, and presentations. Moreover, specific focus on subjects like statistics and accounting can aid in developing analytical abilities.

Students should not solely rely on higher education institutions to secure work experience. They should be encouraged to seek practical exposure during their studies, demonstrating their dedication and ability to manage both work and academics. Part-time employment offers an avenue to gain practical skills while earning income concurrently. Moreover, students can contribute to their communities or non-profit organisations by assisting with tasks like market research, social media management, or fundraising initiatives. Taking such initiatives demonstrate their dedication to their own community and taking responsibility for their own career.

6.2. Recommendations for employers of graduates

Organisations in the marketing industry play a crucial role in addressing the identified gaps in the employability skills of graduates entering the industry. They must collaborate with higher education institutions to provide opportunities for co-curricular activities. This can include internships to give students the opportunity to get practical experience in real-world business problems and how experts develop marketing campaigns. Students can benefit greatly from exposure to real-world scenarios and mentorship from industry professionals, enabling them to transition from theoretical knowledge to

practical application of their analytical to analyse actual market data and communication skills to engage with actual clients and colleagues preferably in a controlled environment and on small scale projects. Experiential learning programs, particularly with small to medium businesses, offer valuable opportunities for students to engage in hands-on projects and develop solutions. For instance, students could create websites for niche product lines or design sales materials for social media platforms. By facilitating such experiences, marketing employers play a vital role in bridging the gap between academic learning and practical application, thereby enhancing graduates' preparedness for the dynamic marketing industry.

Organisations hiring marketing graduates across various industries should develop white papers with comprehensive guidelines outlining the specific skills required for their companies and marketing roles. This facilitates a clear understanding for employers regarding the employability skill sets sought in marketing job applicants.

Marketing employers are urged to take a proactive approach in bridging the employability skills and knowledge gap. Collaboration with marketing educators to design programs aimed at cultivating job-ready graduates is recommended. Employers can provide guidance on how graduates can apply analytical and communication skills in real-world scenarios. Assigning marketing students projects from different companies allows them to apply theoretical knowledge and gain practical insights into workplace dynamics.

Regular engagement between employers and higher education institutions is essential to keep curricula aligned with industry needs. Technological advancements have transformed communication methods, requiring marketing graduates to stay updated and proficient in utilising social media and digital platforms to communicate value. Employers can facilitate this transition by offering internship and learnership programs. Through such initiatives, employers can provide feedback to educational institutions regarding areas where graduates may need further development in terms of employability skills and knowledge.

7. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

Prior research on the employability skills of marketing graduates highlights a lack of agreement on the fundamental skills required for marketers, suggesting varied requirements across various contexts. Past studies furthermore neglected to assess performance or the gap between importance and actual performance. To address this knowledge gap regarding industry expectations in the South African context, this study aimed to ascertain marketing practitioners' perceptions of the employability skills of marketing graduates. This was achieved by assessing both the perceived importance and performance of employability skills, followed by the identification of any gaps between them. The findings revealed significant statistical variances in the importance ratings assigned to different employability skill dimensions. Communication emerged as the most crucial,

while analytical skills were considered the least important. In terms of performance ratings, significant differences were also found, with personal traits and teamwork skills obtaining the highest ratings. However, there were unfortunately significant gaps across all four dimensions—personal traits, communication skills, analytical skills, and leadership—indicating that the industry's expectations were not met.

The study encountered limitations that provide insights for future research endeavours. Firstly, due to the insufficient response rates across industrial sectors, statistical comparisons couldn't be conducted. Additionally, the research solely focused on employers' perceptions of marketing graduates, omitting perspectives from other higher education stakeholders such as university staff, parents, and the local community and students. These limitations suggest avenues for improvement in subsequent studies.

To address these gaps, future researchers are encouraged to delve into qualitative aspects through in-depth interviews and focus groups. Engaging employers, professional bodies, early-career marketers, and academic institutions can uncover experiences and best practices in developing and evaluating marketing curricula. Secondly, understanding that higher education institutions are influenced by various stakeholders, including students, academics, advisory boards, and professional bodies, future research should explore the perspectives of these diverse groups. Comparing viewpoints would provide a comprehensive assessment of marketing education's relevance and effectiveness.

Moreover, future studies should investigate the recalibration of marketing qualifications to assess effectiveness and identify areas for enhancement. By addressing these limitations and incorporating qualitative approaches and diverse stakeholder perspectives, future research can offer deeper insights into optimising marketing education curricula.

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