

No Connections, No Employment: Social Capital and Youth Graduate Unemployment in South Africa



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ABSTRACT

South Africa continues to battle against the constantly increasing unemployment rate despite the major improvements in the massification of higher education. Young people, in particular, are at the receiving end of the stubborn unemployment problem, and the increasing graduate unemployment is a cause for concern. This paper thus explored the perspectives of unemployed young graduates regarding the association of nepotism, favoritism, and the struggle of young graduates to find employment in South Africa. The study employed the lens of social capital theory to explain the “connections phenomenon” in relation to graduate unemployment in South Africa. Primary qualitative data was solicited through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted with 30 graduates. The findings indicate that young graduates perceived nepotism and favoritism as significant factors that determine the probability of finding employment, particularly in South Africa’s public sector institutions. The findings revealed that the connections phenomenon in South Africa occurs through family members, relatives, friendships, political affiliations, and professional networks. Thus, graduates without connections, particularly from poor families, are disadvantaged in the labor market. This paper concluded that high unemployment is a driving force for nepotism and favoritism in South Africa’s labor market. Therefore, addressing nepotism and favoritism largely depends on increasing the labor force demand in South Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

Unemployment remains a major global development problem.¹ While many countries continue to face stubbornly increasing unemployment, South Africa is ranked among the world's top five countries with the highest unemployment rates.² South Africa’s official unemployment rate was reportedly 33.5% in the second quarter of 2024. Unsurprisingly, youth unemployment also remained very high at 45.5% among those aged 15 to 34 years. While graduate unemployment remains relatively low, its trajectory is a cause for concern. Statistical evidence suggests that graduate unemployment significantly increased up to 9.7% in 2024.³ With graduate unemployment increasing consistently alongside the overall official unemployment, the return on higher education, therefore, becomes a debatable topic. These unemployment statistics are not only concerning, but they underscore the importance of further researching unemployment, particularly among young graduates.

¹ Ying Feng, David Lagakos, and James E Rauch, “Unemployment and Development,” *The Economic Journal* 134, no. 658 (January 29, 2024): 614–47, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/uead076>.

² Dimakatso Sekwati and Mbulaheni Albert Dagume, “Effect of Unemployment and Inflation on Economic Growth in South Africa,” *International Journal of Economics and Financial Issues* 13, no. 1 (January 14, 2023): 35–45, <https://doi.org/10.32479/ijefi.13447>.

³ Statistics South Africa, *Quarterly Labour Force Survey: Quarter 2 2024* (Pretoria: Statistical Release P0211, 2024).

South Africa's graduate unemployment rate is complex and cannot be attributed to a single factor. The combination of factors such as poor education, skills mismatch, lack of work experience, and lack of labor demand, as associated with a poor economy, has increased graduate unemployment in South Africa.⁴ In a developing country like South Africa, where access to higher education has significantly improved, the increasing graduate unemployment is a cause for concern. Graduate unemployment is problematic not only for unemployed graduates but also for the entire South African society. For an unemployed graduate, unemployment means unrealised goals associated with the probability of falling into depression, drugs, alcohol, and criminal activities.⁵ For the nation, on the other hand, graduate unemployment means the loss of human capital, wasteful government expenditure, and the overall negative impact on the country's economy.⁶ Therefore, more attention should be placed on the graduate unemployment challenge.

In the era of high unemployment, coupled with graduate unemployment, the notion of "connections", which may be regarded as synonymous with "nepotism" and "favoritism", is deemed one of the key determinants for securing employment in South Africa. It is very important to acknowledge that nepotism is a common phenomenon across the world, as evident in numerous studies. For example, a study that was recently conducted in Nigeria correlated unemployment with favoritism and nepotism.⁷ Correspondingly, a study was conducted in Ghana on the "whom you know" factor, and its findings shockingly indicate that most employees in the banking sector secured employment through nepotism.⁸ Furthermore, a Pakistani study that examined the impact of nepotism on employment status discovered that nepotism has a significant impact on the graduates' probability of securing employment in the public sector. In addition, the study found that political affiliation is an influential factor in the recruitment process, where politically affiliated candidates were given jobs in the public sector.⁹ Despite the substantial literature evidence presenting nepotism as a common unprofessional practice in many countries, there is a lack of research on this phenomenon in the South African context. This research is therefore conducted to close this gap. Its purpose is to explore the perspectives of unemployed young graduates regarding the association of nepotism, favoritism, and the struggle of young graduates to find employment in South Africa. This study has major policy implications to address corruption and the issue of graduate unemployment in South Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Nature of Graduate Unemployment

Numerous studies have been conducted to understand the nature of graduate unemployment in South Africa and beyond. While graduate unemployment can be attributed to various factors, lack of work experience, skills mismatch, and poor education curriculum are cited as the key issues compromising graduates' transition to the labour market in many countries. In addition to education level, graduate attributes, and lack of employability skills, a study conducted in Klang Valley, Malaysia, found skills

⁴ Zethembe Mseleku, "Youth High Unemployment/Unemployability in South Africa: The Unemployed Graduates' Perspectives," *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning* 12, no. 4 (July 15, 2022): 775–90, <https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-06-2021-0114>.

⁵ Rinet van Lill and Therese Maria Bakker, "Life at a Stop Sign: Narrative Plots of the Transition to Adulthood During Unemployment Among South African Graduates," *Emerging Adulthood* 10, no. 1 (February 14, 2022): 124–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696820937879>;

Jasvir Kaur Nachatar Singh, "Challenges in Obtaining Employment in China: Lived Experiences of Australian Chinese Graduates," *Australian Journal of Career Development* 29, no. 3 (October 30, 2020): 153–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416220947085>; Virpi Timonen, Jo Greene, and Ayesha Émon, "'We'Re Meant to Be Crossing Over ... but the Bridge Is Broken': 2020 University Graduates' Experiences of the Pandemic in Ireland," *Young* 29, no. 4 (September 4, 2021): 349–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/11033088211004792>.

⁶ Chris Ifeanyi Onodugo, "Graduate Unemployment and Economic Growth: Nigerian Experience under Democratic Government," *International Journal of Engineering Research and General Science* 3, no. 1 (2015): 1389–93.

⁷ Nathaniel Nnaemeka, "Does Corruption Matter for Unemployment? Investigating the Role of Bribery, Favouritism and Nepotism Corrupt Practices in Employment, Evidence from Nigeria," *Journal of Developing Economies* 3, no. 1 (November 25, 2021): 32–50, <https://doi.org/10.47672/jde.853>.

⁸ Remy Nyukorong, "Corruption, Nepotism or the 'Whom You Know' Factor and How It Affects Recruitment in the Banking Sector of Ghana," *Developing Countries Studies* 4, no. 24 (2014): 38–53.

⁹ Mudassar Yasin et al., "The Impact of Nepotism on Employment Status in Public Sector Institutions: An Evidence from Fresh Graduates of Pakistan," *Journal of Economic Impact* 1, no. 1 (2019): 7–11.

mismatch as a problem contributing to graduate unemployment.¹⁰ Similarly, a study that explored the perceived causes of graduate unemployment in South Africa attributed the problem to inadequate skills, among other factors.¹¹ Previous research also shows that factors such as poor market conditions, overeducation, and inadequate skills and abilities among individuals often lead to graduate unemployment.¹²

While broader issues such as high population growth, global economic recession, and corruption determine employment, a factor at an individual level – lack of work experience, is a key cause of graduate unemployment.¹³ It is evident that work experience remains a key requirement for one to secure a job, a phenomenon that has resulted in the global popularity of internships¹⁴ A Malaysian study also pointed to the importance of hands-on skills and practical work experience on graduate employability.¹⁵ There is a huge body of literature demonstrating the importance of education, particularly higher education, on graduate employability.¹⁶ However, poor-quality education has been cited as one of the reasons behind the increasing graduate unemployment. A study that was conducted in Nigeria found that poor-quality education, as associated with unemployment, has negative social and economic implications, such as increased crime rate and civil unrest.¹⁷ In the African continent, generally, public education is deemed poor and associated with prevailing poverty and unemployment.¹⁸ This literature evidence underscores the importance of providing high-quality education at all levels for a country to attain sustainable development.

Implications of Graduate Unemployment

Graduate unemployment has serious negative implications for individuals, families and society at large. These implications can be economic, social and even psychological.¹⁹ From an economic perspective, graduate unemployment potentially damages the economy. What is also very important to note is that economic stagnation is often associated with increasing graduate unemployment.²⁰ Considering that governments invest resources, including through education infrastructural development, bursaries, and scholarship towards education, graduate unemployment, therefore, implies low or no returns from investment in education. High graduate unemployment means highly knowledgeable and skilled human resources are not economically active. Also, unemployed graduates may opt for low-paying and poor-quality jobs, which are often associated with low firm productivity and increased staff turnover rate, which negatively affects the country's economy.²¹ Therefore, graduate unemployment is a major threat to economic growth.

Previous research has also pointed to the major social implications of graduate unemployment. While graduate unemployment is a socio-economic problem itself, the growing body of literature suggests that this problem leads to various social issues in society. It is evident that graduates who have

¹⁰ Mohammad Imtiaz Hossain et al., "Factors Influencing Unemployment among Fresh Graduates: A Case Study in Klang Valley, Malaysia," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 8, no. 9 (October 2, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v8-i9/4859>.

¹¹ Faith Oluwajodu et al., "Graduate Unemployment in South Africa: Perspectives from the Banking Sector," *SA Journal of Human Resource Management* 13, no. 1 (2015): 1–9.

¹² Youngsik Hwang, "What Is the Cause of Graduates' Unemployment? Focus on Individual Concerns and Perspectives," *Journal of Educational Issues* 3, no. 2 (August 1, 2017): 1, <https://doi.org/10.5296/jei.v3i2.11378>.

¹³ Salah Abdirahman Farah and Hussein Abdi Ali, "A Study on the Causes of Unemployment among University Graduates in Kenya: A Case of Garissa County, Kenya," *Open Journal of Economics and Commerce* 1, no. 1 (2018): 55–60, <https://doi.org/10.22259/2638-549X.0101007>.

¹⁴ Ruth Helyer and Dionne Lee, "The Role of Work Experience in the Future Employability of Higher Education Graduates," *Higher Education Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (July 23, 2014): 348–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12055>.

¹⁵ Nur Hayati Abd Rahman et al., "The Issue of Graduate Unemployment in Malaysia: Post Covid-19," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 10, no. 10 (October 25, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v10-i10/7843>.

¹⁶ Dawn Bennett, "Graduate Employability and Higher Education: Past, Present and Future," *HERDSA Review of Higher Education* 5 (2019): 31–61.

¹⁷ Ibrahim Talasse Tukur and Chukwuebuka Cornelius Aguiyi, "Poor Education, Unemployment and National Security in Nigeria," *NIU Journal of Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (March 31, 2022): 187–97, <https://doi.org/10.58709/niujs.v8i1.1428>.

¹⁸ Martinus Jacobus Nortje, "The Effect of Poverty on Education in South Africa," *Educator Multidisciplinary Journal* 1, no.1(2017):47–62.

¹⁹ Stephen Mago, "Urban Youth Unemployment in Africa: Whither Socio-Economic Problems," *Mediterranean Journal Os Social Sciences* 5, no. 9 (2014): 33–40.

²⁰ S. E. Airi, R. I. Ounakpo, and H. A. Anebi-Atede, "Impact of Graduate Unemployment on the Economic Growth of the Nigerian Economy," *International Journal of Advanced Academic Research* 2, no. 3 (2016): 1–16.

²¹ Airi, Ounakpo, and Anebi-Atede, "Impact of Graduate Unemployment on the Economic Growth of the Nigerian Economy."

been unemployed for extended periods are likely to partake in criminal activities, use drugs, and engage in risky sexual behavior.²² Based on the literature, graduate unemployment not only perpetuates ordinary social ills like crime,²³ it is also cited as a source of conflicts and civil disorders.²⁴ The relationship between unemployment and crime is well-established in the literature. Particularly, black unemployed youth from disadvantaged backgrounds were found likely to engage in criminal activities.²⁵

In an era where mental health is a trending topic, research is increasingly conducted to understand the psychological implications of graduate unemployment. The unemployed individuals not only suffer economically but also experience social exclusion, discrimination, and even destroyed social relationships.²⁶ A study that was conducted in Bangladesh discovered that unemployed graduates suffer mental depression, embarrassment, socio-economic vulnerability, erosion of inner potentiality, degradation of personality, and frustration.²⁷ Recent evidence shows a high degree of mental illness attributed to unemployment among university graduates. It is evident that mental distress among unemployed graduates presents itself in three forms: (1) psychological disorder, (2) social and emotional dysfunction, and (3) cognitive disorder.²⁸ Therefore, conclusive literature evidence suggests that graduate unemployment has far-reaching implications that are beyond economic issues.

Interventions to Overcome Graduate Unemployment

Given the massive impact of graduate unemployment, interventions are made by diverse stakeholders to solve this problem. Since it has been proven that most graduates struggle to secure employment due to a lack of work experience, most government bodies, private companies, and even civil society organisations are offering internship programmes. The purpose of the internships is to provide new graduates with employability skills and work experience.²⁹ In some contexts, internships have been effective in facilitating the transition of graduates from higher education to the world of work.³⁰ In addition, entrepreneurship is increasingly supported as a job creation strategy. In South Africa, for instance, the government continues to support entrepreneurial initiatives, and youth with feasible business ideas are supported through the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA).³¹ It is also worth noting that efforts to promote entrepreneurship education are also made, including through integrating entrepreneurship into higher education curricula.³² Although this strategy has its challenges, it has demonstrated potential for a significant contribution to job creation. Concerns have been raised regarding the contribution of a poor education system to graduate unemployment. Therefore, improving the quality of higher education is also seen as part of the broader strategy to address the graduate unemployment problem.³³ Some strategies have focused on stimulating economic growth to improve the demand for

²² Maria Melchior et al., "Unemployment and Substance Use in Young Adults: Does Educational Attainment Modify the Association?," *European Addiction Research* 21, no. 3 (2015): 115–23, <https://doi.org/10.1159/000365887>.

²³ Emmanuel Ampong, "Graduate Unemployment In Ghana: Challenges And Workable Strategies," *International Journal of Research Publications* 57, no. 1 (July 16, 2020): 108–29, <https://doi.org/10.47119/IJRP100571720201344>.

²⁴ Yemareshet Hailu Demeke, "Youth Unemployment and Political Instability: Evidence from IGAD Member Countries," *Cogent Economics & Finance* 10, no. 1 (December 31, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322039.2022.2079211>.

²⁵ Shawn Bushway et al., "Barred from Employment: More than Half of Unemployed Men in Their 30s Had a Criminal History of Arrest," *Science Advances* 8, no. 7 (February 18, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abj6992>.

²⁶ Yohannes Asmare and Missaye Mulatie, "A Tale of Youth Graduates Unemployment," *Global Journal of Human Social Science (A)* 14, no. 4 (2014): 46–51.

²⁷ Md Harunur Rashid and Md Ashrafur Islam, "Impacts of Unemployment on Graduates in Bangladesh: A Case Study," *Br. J. Arts Humanit* 2, no. 5 (2020): 87–94.

²⁸ Sayed Azharul Islam and Md. Amanullah, "The Effect of Unemployment on Mental Health: A Study on the University Graduates of Bangladesh," *Khulna University Studies*, March 19, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.53808/KUS.2024.21.01.1074-mb>.

²⁹ Maria Baron-Puda, "Improving Graduate Employability through Internship Programs," *Regional Barometer. Analyses & Prognoses* 15, no. 1 (2017): 107–14.

³⁰ Ilias Kapareliotis, Katerina Voutsina, and Athanasios Patsiotis, "Internship and Employability Prospects: Assessing Student's Work Readiness," *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning* 9, no. 4 (September 20, 2019): 538–49, <https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-08-2018-0086>.

³¹ Ignatius Odongo and Paul Pinamang Kyei, "The Role of Government in Promoting Youth Entrepreneurship: The Case of South Africa," *Journal of Social Development in Africa* 33, no. 2 (2018): 11–36.

³² Chux Gervase Iwu et al., "Entrepreneurship Education, Curriculum and Lecturer-Competency as Antecedents of Student Entrepreneurial Intention," *The International Journal of Management Education* 19, no. 1 (March 2021): 100295, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2019.03.007>.

³³ Aradhana Ramnund-Mansingh and Nikita Reddy, "South African Specific Complexities in Aligning Graduate Attributes to Employability," *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability* 12, no. 2 (July 30, 2021): 206–21, <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2021vol12no2art1025>.

labor. A consensus has been reached in the current body of research that solving graduate unemployment requires cooperation from diverse stakeholders.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Capital Theory

This study is underpinned by the social capital theory. First defined by Bourdieu in 1985, the social capital theory deems social networks as capital that can be used to achieve social and economic outcomes.³⁴ This theoretical perspective broadly emphasizes the value of norms and relationships in facilitating collective action for mutual benefit.³⁵ Social capital is an economic and cultural capital in which social networks are central in enabling people to work together for the common good.³⁶ For Robert Putnam, it is networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation among people for mutual benefits. It is therefore clear that social capital promotes cooperation between two or more individuals.³⁷ As widely accepted by social scientists, there are two forms of social capital: “bonding” and “bridging”. While bonding social capital focuses on family, close friends, and people who share a common culture or ethnicity, bridging social capital focuses on distant friends, colleagues, and associates.³⁸

Central to the social capital theoretical perspective is the importance of social relationships available to individuals and groups. Such relationships are deemed pivotal for one to achieve certain goals or to collectively achieve common objectives. While bonding social capital is associated with strong ties, which involve emotional bond, trust, and reciprocity, bridging social capital, on the other hand, is associated with weak ties where people only communicate occasionally.³⁹ This paper considers both bonding social capital and bridging social capital in explaining the phenomenon of connections and opportunities for employment as perceived by graduates. Using the lens of social capital theory, this paper goes beyond analyzing whether or not nepotism and favoritism are unfair practices to explore how they create employment opportunities for some graduates while denying others. Eventually, the paper will conclude whether social capital is inherent to graduates in securing employment.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the perspectives of graduates on the phenomenon of “connections” in relation to graduate unemployment in South Africa. The aim was to study this social phenomenon in-depth by eliciting detailed insights from recent South African graduates. Accordingly, the applied qualitative approach enabled graduates to express their perspectives by drawing from their knowledge, observations, and experiences. This is in accordance with the view that qualitative research allows for an in-depth understanding of social phenomena.⁴⁰

To collect data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 30 graduates who graduated from five South African universities, including the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), the University of South Africa (UNISA), the University of Zululand (Unizulu), Durban University of Technology (DUT), and Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). It is very important to note that all graduates who participated in this study were part of the Work Experience Programme (WEP) offered by eThekweni Municipality in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

³⁴ Nan Lin, “Building a Network Theory of Social Capital,” in *Social Capital* (Routledge, 2017), 3–28, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315129457-1>.

³⁵ Brenda Gannon and Jennifer Roberts, “Social Capital: Exploring the Theory and Empirical Divide,” *Empirical Economics* 58, no. 3 (March 6, 2020): 899–919, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00181-018-1556-y>.

³⁶ Seung Hyun Han, Seung Won Yoon, and Chugnill Chae, “Building Social Capital and Learning Relationships through Knowledge Sharing: A Social Network Approach of Management Students’ Cases,” *Journal of Knowledge Management* 24, no. 4 (May 29, 2020): 921–39, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JKM-11-2019-0641>.

³⁷ Michele Bianchi and Marcelo Vieta, “Co-Operatives, Territories and Social Capital: Reconsidering a Theoretical Framework,” *International Journal of Social Economics* 47, no. 12 (2020): 1599–1617.

³⁸ Dean Kyne and Daniel P. Aldrich, “Capturing Bonding, Bridging, and Linking Social Capital through Publicly Available Data,” *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy* 11, no. 1 (March 6, 2020): 61–86, <https://doi.org/10.1002/rhc3.12183>.

³⁹ Federica Ceci, Francesca Masciarelli, and Simone Poledrini, “How Social Capital Affects Innovation in a Cultural Network,” *European Journal of Innovation Management* 23, no. 5 (November 7, 2019): 895–918, <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJIM-06-2018-0114>.

⁴⁰ Claire Bless, Craig Higson-Smith, and Sello Sithole, *Social Research Methods: An African Perspective* (Cape Town: Juta, 1995).

Participants (graduates) were recruited to participate in the study through a non-probability sampling technique, which is a purposive sampling technique. The purposive sampling technique was deemed appropriate since the purpose of the researcher was only to elicit the perspectives of recent graduates who were actively searching for employment, and these graduates were purposively selected from the graduate work experience programme. The sample size of 30 graduates was found adequate as this study focused on the depth rather than the width of the phenomenon. This sample size corresponds to what previous studies recommended as the appropriate sample size in qualitative research, which is 10 to 30 participants.⁴¹

A thematic analysis was conducted to analyze qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews. This was done by following a six-step data analysis process as proposed by Braun and Clarke.⁴² After transcription of all interview recordings, a thorough reading and re-reading of all interview transcripts was performed for better familiarity with the dataset. With a better understanding of interview transcripts, it was possible to generate initial codes using the NVivo 12 software. This step was followed by a careful search for themes, which were reviewed and then defined. Finally, a write-up of the findings was done thematically as presented in this paper's findings and discussion section.

This study complied with the standard ethical requirements in social sciences. Before data collection, the study was assessed and found ethically sound by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee with protocol reference number: HSS/1307/017D. Key research ethics principles were fully considered in this study. These included informed consent and voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, discontinuance, and respect for participants' rights.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the phenomenon of “connections” in relation to graduate unemployment in South Africa. It elicited the perspectives of graduates regarding the association between connections and graduate employment prospects. The findings revealed that the connections phenomenon in South Africa occurs through family members, relatives, friendships, political affiliations, and professional networks. The findings are therefore clustered into three themes: (1) connections through family members, relatives, and friendships; (2) connections through political membership and affiliations; and (3) connections through professional networks.

Connections through family members, relatives, and friendships

Nepotism has been widely studied globally, and it is deemed an unfair practice where power is used in favor of relatives, friends, or associates for opportunities, particularly jobs.⁴³ Graduates interviewed in this study regarded nepotism as a major problem in South Africa and a barrier for graduates without connections to secure employment. Most graduates reported difficulties in securing employment as they lack the necessary connections. In this regard, one graduate remarked the following:

“If you are not connected in South Africa, you struggle to find a job because nepotism is happening in most organizations. Those in positions of power in these organizations reserve jobs for their family members and friends. So, for someone like me with no one in a position of power from my family, it is very difficult to get a job.” (Graduate #3)

The above remarks not only reflect the struggle of unemployed graduates in South Africa, but they also account for why most graduates from poor families are unlikely to find employment as compared with those from affluent families. Consistent findings were found in a study that analyzed the barriers to the labour market for unemployed graduates in South Africa, where those with better connections were

⁴¹ Konstantina Vasileiou et al., “Characterising and Justifying Sample Size Sufficiency in Interview-Based Studies: Systematic Analysis of Qualitative Health Research over a 15-Year Period,” *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 18, no. 1 (December 21, 2018): 148, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-018-0594-7>.

⁴² Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners* (London: Sage, 2019).

⁴³ Neelam Kaushal, Suman Ghalawat, and Rahul Kaurav, “Nepotism Concept Evaluation: A Systematic Review and Bibliometric Analysis,” *Library Philosophy and Practice* 2021 (February 11, 2021).

likely to find employment.⁴⁴ Furthermore, most graduates interviewed reported nepotism as an unfair, corrupt practice that undermines their potential as follows:

“Gone are those days when applicants used to get jobs based on their qualifications and skills. Nowadays, finding a job largely depends on how connected you are. This is very unfair because not everyone has a family member in an organization that can recommend them for a job.” (Graduate #5)

In an era in South Africa where graduate unemployment is increasing and competition for scarce jobs is high, the connections phenomenon draws a line between finding a job and not finding a job.⁴⁵ Similarly, another graduate expressed the challenge of unemployment in relation to the connections phenomenon as follows:

“I have applied for many job opportunities here in South Africa, but unfortunately, I have never received a call for an interview. Now, I have admitted that without connections, you cannot get a job. People give jobs to their family members, relatives, and friends. Unfortunately for me, I do not have such connections.” (Graduate #8)

Another participant emphasized the role of friendship, which is also regarded as cronyism, in securing employment.⁴⁶ Unlike preferential treatment that is based on familial and relative connections, some people secure employment based on friendship connections, as alluded to below:

“What I noticed is that most people easily get jobs if they have a friend working in the Human Resources department. This is the reason why someone like me, with no friends responsible for recruitment in the Human Resources department, struggles to get a job.” (Graduate #20)

Although this current study has a specific focus on the perspectives of youth graduates, its findings are partly consistent with the findings of the recently published conceptual review, where nepotism is deemed a globally pervasive phenomenon.⁴⁷ The preferential treatment for employment opportunities deeply rooted in kinship, familial ties, or friendship can best be understood through a social capital theoretical perspective. The social capital theory explains the importance of relationships in achieving social and economic advancement.⁴⁸ Based on this study's findings, individuals are more likely to gain entry to the labor market based on social capital. Thus, social capital becomes a mechanism that facilitates access to employment, a disadvantage to unemployed graduates with limited or no social capital.

Connections through political membership and affiliations

This study further discovered that the connections phenomenon presents itself through political membership and affiliations. Political membership and affiliations are highly regarded as a channel for seamless access jobless market in South Africa. While preferential treatment for job offers to candidates based on political membership and affiliations is undoubtedly a corrupt and unfair labor practice, this practice has become a norm in South Africa, just like in many other countries. Graduates interviewed in this study perceived a lack of political membership and affiliations as a major factor inhibiting one's access to the labor market, as reflected below:

“Finding a job in South Africa is very difficult, but easy for comrades because they are connected politically. For graduates like me with qualifications related to government jobs, it is very difficult to get a job in government because most government jobs are given to comrades based on political associations.” (Graduate #11)

⁴⁴ Graham et al., "Barriers to the labour market for unemployed graduates in South Africa," *Journal of Education and Work* 32 no.4 (2019): 360-376.

⁴⁵ van Lill and Bakker, "Life at a Stop Sign: Narrative Plots of the Transition to Adulthood During Unemployment Among South African Graduates."

⁴⁶ Sadia Shaheen et al., "Does Organizational Cronyism Lead to Lower Employee Performance? Examining the Mediating Role of Employee Engagement and Moderating Role of Islamic Work Ethics," *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (October 2, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.579560>.

⁴⁷ Pauline Schilpzand, Constantin Lagios, and Simon Lloyd D. Restubog, "Family First: An Integrative Conceptual Review of Nepotism in Organizations," *Human Resource Management* 64, no. 1 (January 21, 2025): 157–80, <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22253>.

⁴⁸ Joseph Raffiee and Heejung Byun, "Revisiting the Portability of Performance Paradox: Employee Mobility and the Utilization of Human and Social Capital Resources," *Academy of Management Journal* 63, no. 1 (2020): 34–63.

The above remarks show how political connections lead to recruitment biases, particularly in the public sector, where some decision-makers (powerful government officials) are affiliated with certain political parties. The favoring of politically affiliated over non-politically affiliated job seekers has been cited in the literature as a major problem. One study discovered a significant role of political affiliation in the preferential appointment of a candidate who is politically affiliated with public sector institutions.⁴⁹ The appointment of people based on political standing rather than their level of competency and merit not only undermines organizational productivity, but this practice also negatively affects the overall economy of a country.⁵⁰ A participant in this study reflected on the issue of nepotism in South Africa as follows:

“It is very hard nowadays to get employment without being politically connected with those in powerful positions. The chances of getting a job through the fair recruitment process are very slim. You must know someone inside to get inside the workplace. This is the reason why we end up getting membership in political organizations. You must always try to position yourself if you need a job in government.” (Graduate #2)

Corresponding remarks were also shared by a recent graduate whose dream is to work in the local government sphere in South Africa:

“Last year, after graduation, I visited my local municipality looking for employment opportunities and just to get information on the opportunities that the municipality offers to young people in the community, like internships. Guess what, they asked me if I have a membership in the African National Congress (ANC). They said it is very difficult to get opportunities from the municipality if you are not a member of ANC.” (Graduate #6)

As a result of favoritism based on political affiliations, highly skilled and highly talented young people remain overlooked in South Africa’s labor market. Correspondingly, a study that was conducted in Durban, South Africa, on the causes of youth unemployment discovered that job offers are politically motivated, leaving those who are not politically connected vulnerable to long-term unemployment.⁵¹ Therefore, there is a link between nepotism, favoritism, corruption, and graduate unemployment in South Africa. Political connection is considered a form of social capital that enables graduates to access employment opportunities, particularly in government.⁵² This is consistent with the view that social capital is extended to individuals and groups based on social relations.⁵³ In this regard, political connections constitute such social relations necessary to secure employment. Despite the established rules and regulations that prohibit nepotism, favoritism, and corrupt practices, preferential treatment for politically connected individuals in the labor market remains alarmingly prevalent in South Africa’s public sector.

Connections through Professional Networks

In the era where the probability of finding a job in South Africa is low, networking is largely pronounced essential to secure employment. Accordingly, unemployed graduates are increasingly encouraged to build professional networks in their fields to increase their employment opportunities. This is particularly justifiable as numerous studies have established the importance of networking to secure a job, where wider and stronger networks are associated with high employment probabilities.⁵⁴ Preferential treatment

⁴⁹ Yasin et al., “The Impact of Nepotism on Employment Status in Public Sector Institutions: An Evidence from Fresh Graduates of Pakistan.”

⁵⁰ Daniel Mlambo, “Fighting Public Sector Corruption in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Progress on Paper, Hurdles on the Ground,” in *Mbali Conference 2023 Proceedings*, 2023, 326.

⁵¹ Sibusiso Blessing Ntshiza, “Assessing the Causes of Youth Unemployment in Durban Townships: The Case of Cato Manor” (University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College, 2018).

⁵² Lauren Graham, Leilanie Williams, and Charity Chisoro, “Barriers to the Labour Market for Unemployed Graduates in South Africa,” *Journal of Education and Work* 32, no. 4 (May 19, 2019): 360–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2019.1620924>.

⁵³ Seok-Woo Kwon and Paul S. Adler, “Social Capital: Maturation of a Field of Research,” *Academy of Management Review* 39, no. 4 (October 2014): 412–22, <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2014.0210>.

⁵⁴ Emilio J. Castilla, George J. Lan, and Ben A. Rissing, “Social Networks and Employment: Outcomes (Part 2),” *Sociology Compass* 7, no. 12 (December 2, 2013): 1013–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12095>; Allison Carey et al., “Networking towards Employment:

of members of one's social network for employment opportunities is normal in South Africa. Thus, graduates with limited professional networks often struggle to secure employment, as expressed by the participants below:

“It is all about connections, social networks, and professional networks. To stand a better chance of getting a job, you must be widely connected in your discipline. It means we must all try to connect with those in the industry so that they can remember us when it comes to opportunities. It is very difficult because networking is very difficult if you are unemployed.” (Graduate #3)

The above remarks indicate the importance of building professional networks, which are, however, difficult to realize for most new graduates. This study further discovered that graduates from affluent families whose parents are professionals find it easy to build professional networks, which ultimately facilitate their transition to the world of work. In this regard, one graduate stated that:

“You see, networking is crucial to know people who can assist you in navigating your career. It is true that graduates from rich families with parents who are connected with industry professionals do not struggle much to find opportunities like employment opportunities. If parents have a good professional network, that automatically gives their children an advantage.” (Graduate #30)

Indeed, graduates from affluent families are likely to secure employment through professional networks built by their parents or immediate family members. These findings are consistent with the findings of the previous research, which shows that graduates from affluent families generally find work quickly through their parents' social networks.⁵⁵ It is very important to note that this does not automatically constitute nepotism if a graduate is the most qualified. However, this practice may constitute favoritism if a graduate is favored for a job based on the network as opposed to merit. Nevertheless, bonding social networks that exist between graduates and their rich parents, who typically have bridging social capital with industry professionals, play a key role in graduates' access to opportunities.⁵⁶

Conversely, graduates from poor families generally find it difficult to secure employment through professional networks. This is because their parents or immediate family members' network with industry professionals is generally poor or non-existent, as alluded to by one participant below:

“Coming from a poor family is hard. You struggle when you are at the university financially, and when you graduate, you struggle to get a job because you have no one who helps you get a job. And you will find someone less qualified than you getting the job because their rich parents are friends with the CEO of your potential employer or a Director of the department you wish to work for. It is not easy for some of us.” (Graduate #27)

Unlike graduates from rich families, graduates from poor families generally lack professional networks. Compared to graduates from rich families, graduates from poor families are unlikely to secure employment compared with those from rich families, even if they are better qualified. These findings underscore the importance of bonding social capital, which generally provides emotional support to unemployed graduates, and bridging social capital, which generally provides access to employment opportunities.⁵⁷

Moreover, this study discovered that social media platforms like LinkedIn are increasingly used by graduates to build and strengthen professional networks. These networks are deemed very crucial in accessing employment opportunities, as reported by several graduates. For example, one graduate reported the following:

“Most of us are on social media, and we use it for different purposes. For graduates like me, I am on LinkedIn for opportunities because on LinkedIn, you find a lot of professionals in your field. So,

Experiences of People Who Use Augmentative and Alternative Communication,” *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities (RPSD)* 29 (January 1, 2004).

⁵⁵ Jeremy Seekings, “Young People’s Entry into the Labour Market in South Africa,” in *Towards Carnegie III: Strategies to Overcome Poverty and Inequality Conference, University of Cape Town*, 2012, 3–7.

⁵⁶ Graham, Williams, and Chisoro, “Barriers to the Labour Market for Unemployed Graduates in South Africa.”

⁵⁷ Schilpzand, Lagios, and Restubog, “Family First: An Integrative Conceptual Review of Nepotism in Organizations.”

I try to connect to as many professionals as possible. They normally share opportunities, but I also approach them for opportunities. People with a huge following stand a better chance.” (Graduate #25)

Similarly, another graduate stated the following:

“I use social media a lot. I noticed that LinkedIn is very professional. Unlike other platforms, on LinkedIn, people share success stories and opportunities, and that is where I got information about this internship.” (Graduate #4)

In line with the findings of the previous studies, this study discovered the role of social media in building professional networks necessary to access employment opportunities.⁵⁸ While no evidence was found for using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, strong evidence was found for using LinkedIn to build professional networks and access opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, this study recommends the following strategies:

- Strengthening the demand for labor through rebuilding the important sectors of the economy, such as manufacturing.
- Improved monitoring of the recruitment processes by external auditing agencies to prevent nepotism, favoritism, and relevant corrupt practices.
- Mentorship of students on self-employment and entrepreneurship facilitated by higher learning institutions in collaboration with industry partners.
- An online innovative performance management system for government institutions that can improve transparency and accountability of public servants.
- Future qualitative and quantitative research on the effectiveness of the existing strategies to address nepotism and favoritism in employment processes is recommended in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the perspectives of unemployed young graduates regarding the association of nepotism, favoritism, and the struggle of young graduates to find employment in South Africa. It was discovered that the connections phenomenon in South Africa occurs through family members, relatives, friendships, political affiliations, and professional networks. Drawing from the lens of social capital theory, this study demonstrated the importance of social capital in securing employment in South Africa’s era of high unemployment. Nepotism and favoritism have been identified as two important factors that highly determine securing a job, particularly in public sector institutions. Graduates, particularly from poor families, without the necessary connections with potential employers, reported difficulties in securing employment. Thus, this study presented nepotism and favoritism as barriers inhibiting young graduates without connections from securing employment in South Africa. Nevertheless, LinkedIn has been found as a powerful tool for building professional networks necessary for accessing employment opportunities. It can be concluded that high unemployment in South Africa is a driving force for the prevalence of nepotism and favoritism in the labor market, a situation that underscores the importance of strong social capital in securing employment.

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⁵⁸ Joanna Davis et al., “Networking via LinkedIn: An Examination of Usage and Career Benefits,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 118 (April 2020): 103396, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103396>; Joseph G. Gerard, “Linking in With LinkedIn®,” *Journal of Management Education* 36, no. 6 (December 7, 2012): 866–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562911413464>.

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