

EFFECT OF SHORT SKILL ACQUISITION PROGRAM ON YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY: THE MODERATING ROLE OF GENDER

EFEITO DE UM PROGRAMA DE CURTA DURAÇÃO PARA AQUISIÇÃO DE HABILIDADES NA EMPREGABILIDADE DE JOVENS: O PAPEL MODERADOR DO GÊNERO

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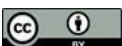
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Abstract

The persistence and stubborn patterns of unemployment among the youth of South Africa remain a reality no one can dispute. Every corner of the country is littered with young people across all colour lines that are directly or indirectly affected by this monster. Hence, being driven by the knowledge of the direct relationship that exists between this type of high unemployment indices and the high incidences of skill mismatch and unemployability among the youths, a comprehensive training program with the intent of providing short-term skills acquisition programs, education and training, as well as other capacity building programs, was introduced, and seen as a veritable tool to address the incidence of youth unemployability. Thus, having provided training for over 900 trainees since inception, it becomes crucial to assess the effectiveness of this program in fostering the required level of employability among the youths. In this research, the effect of on-the-job training and off-the-job training as two components of the training program was examined on youth employability. Additionally, the moderating effect of gender was equally examined in this relationship. Consequently, research data, obtained from a total of 114 randomly selected trainees, were subjected to regression and moderating analysis. Thus, while the results confirmed that a positive and significant relationship exists between on-the-job training and off-the-job training on one side, and youth employability on the other side, there is, however, no moderating effect of gender found for these two relationships, in that a significant difference does not exist in the relationships between both males and females. Finally,

Resumo

A persistência e os padrões persistentes de desemprego entre os jovens da África do Sul continuam sendo uma realidade inegável. Todos os cantos do país estão repletos de jovens de todas as etnias que são afetados direta ou indiretamente por esse flagelo. Assim, motivados pelo conhecimento da relação direta que existe entre esses altos índices de desemprego e a alta incidência de inadequação de habilidades e inempregabilidade entre os jovens, um programa abrangente de treinamento foi introduzido com o intuito de fornecer programas de aquisição de habilidades de curto prazo, educação e treinamento, bem como outros programas de capacitação, sendo considerado uma ferramenta essencial para lidar com a incidência de inempregabilidade juvenil. Portanto, tendo treinado mais de 900 jovens desde o início, torna-se crucial avaliar a eficácia deste programa em promover o nível necessário de empregabilidade entre os jovens. Nesta pesquisa, o efeito do treinamento em serviço e do treinamento fora do serviço, como dois componentes do programa de treinamento, foi examinado na empregabilidade dos jovens. Além disso, o efeito moderador do gênero também foi examinado nessa relação. Consequentemente, os dados da pesquisa, obtidos de um total de 114 estagiários selecionados aleatoriamente, foram submetidos a análises de regressão e moderação. Assim, embora os resultados tenham confirmado a existência de uma relação positiva e significativa entre o treinamento em serviço e o treinamento fora do serviço, por um lado, e a empregabilidade dos jovens, por outro, não foi encontrado nenhum efeito moderador do gênero



important implications for both theory and practice were discussed in line with these findings.

Keywords: Employability. Off-the Job-training. On-the-job Training. Youths. Gender.

nessas duas relações, visto que não existe diferença significativa entre homens e mulheres. Por fim, importantes implicações para a teoria e a prática foram discutidas em consonância com essas descobertas.

Palavras-chave: *Empregabilidade. Formação Fora do Local de Trabalho. Formação no Local de Trabalho. Jovens. Género.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Oluwajodu, Blaauw, Greyling, and Kleyhans (2015) regard unemployment as a socio-economic challenge, with economic costs and many other challenges. They further stated that its consequences have the potential to manifest itself in the form of poverty, inequality, social unrest, and increased crime rates, thereby making the need to equip citizens with the competencies to manage the process of obtaining and retaining a job, a high priority area, most especially in a highly competitive labour market, in both developing and less developed nations (Van der Heijde Van-der Heijden, 2006; Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023). According to Yorke (2006), employability is a condition usually defined by some set of achievements, skills, understandings, and personal attributes, all of which make people more likely to secure employment and be successful in their chosen occupations in such a way that it benefits them, the workforce, the community, and the economy. It encompasses a set of transferable skills, which are essential for success in the workplace, some of which could be in terms of communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and time management skills. On the one hand, while those Individuals with a low level of employability have been linked to high levels of dysfunctional career beliefs (Otu & Omeje, 2021); low self-efficacy and lack of belief in personal growth and improvement (Ifeyanize et al., 2021); as well as the beliefs that it is difficult to find a job or to become a successful entrepreneur or the belief that the economy is to be blamed for their precarious situation (Otu, & Sefotho, 2024), those with a high level of employability are more likely to secure gainful employment (Paadi, 2014); achieve career success (Oanh et al., 2024); navigate job search and succeeds in job interviews (Susanti & Ardi, 2022); thereby impacting negatively on the individual and national level of unemployment (Otu, & Sefotho, 2024).

Based on the report by Dwivedi et al. (2021), the most significant challenge being faced by global companies and projected to become even more pronounced in the near future is the skill gap that these companies face, the lack of knowledge of the appropriate strategies that may be devised to address this shortcoming. Thus, according to Manpower Group, up to 42 percent of global employers faced the challenges of recruiting skilled employees in 2020, even though the challenges of unemployment are concurrently and significantly surging, particularly in less developed and developing nations, while there is an ongoing increase in global economic growth, which stands at 5.5 percent in 2021 and 4.2 percent in 2022 (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023). What this regrettably tends to suggest is a clear mismatch between the skill set in employee possession and the wide array of job opportunities that are made available within the labour market (Bridgstock, 2017), since schools do not adequately emphasise the acquisition of employability skills, resulting in graduates with low employability (Jackson, 2014).

Realising the immense importance of skill acquisition and skill development in terms of producing a vibrant youth population that is capable of adapting to the rapidly changing world of work, as well as taking up the challenges presented by, and harnessing the yet to tapped and robust economic opportunities in the national entrepreneurial landscape, the South African government introduced the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme as a vehicle for youth transformation, which is capable of addressing youth unemployment through the provision of short term skills acquisition programs, education and training, as well as other capacity building program, with a view to long term youth empowerment. This is based on the belief in the capability of this program in reducing poverty levels as well as the gap between the rich and the poor throughout the country. The program is divided into 30% institutional and 70% on-the-job. The 30% institutional component allows learners to compile their portfolio of evidence to be used to determine learner competencies and areas of challenge to be improved upon, while the 70% workplace practical allows the learners an opportunity to apply what they have acquired in the class in a practical setting.

Nevertheless, while the country is not short of policies and strategies for addressing youth unemployment, so many of these strategies have failed to meet the required expectations in the past, due to the shortcomings of the implementation agencies (Urbancová, Vrabcová, Hudáková, & Petr, 2021); as every corner of the country still

seems to be littered with young people across all colour line that is directly or indirectly affected by issues related to unemployability (Otu & Sefotho, 2024). Thus, with the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP) in its 7th year running, while more than 900 participants have been trained since its inception, it is crucial to review the effectiveness of this programme in the sense that results from such assessment would be potentially useful in terms of guiding policy review, or in modifying the existing policy framework as failure to reconcile this disconnect could lead to prolonged periods of unemployment, impaired productivity, and economic stagnation of the country. In summary, by focusing on youths from two rural municipalities in Mpumalanga who were beneficiaries of the CRDP programs, the present study aims to determine the nature of the effect of these programs on the employability of their beneficiaries within these municipalities.

From the earlier studies on the effect of training and skill acquisition programs on outcome variables, employee performance (see; Daniel et al 2024; Yimam, 2022; Dagne-Gebrehiwot & Elantheraiyan, 2023; Mustafa-Sadiku, 2025; Saleh & Azimi, 2025); quality of feedback from supervisors (see; Renting, Jaarsma, Borleffs, Slaets, & Gans, 2023); employee efficiency (Ludwikowska, 2018); knowledge sharing and training transfer (see; Mehner, Rothenbusch, & Kauffeld, 2024); as well as organizational performance (Aragón, Jiménez, & Valle; 2014; Ali & Ngui, 2020; Chakraborty, 2023) have all been examined. Thus, apart from the research by Suyitno, Nurtanto, Jatmoko, Widiyono, Purwoko, Abdillah, Setuju, & Hermawan (2025), who tried to examine the effect of work-based learning, vocational identity, and self-efficacy on the level of employability among university undergraduate students, there is no concrete evidence of other research studies that have focused on how this type of short skill acquisition programs may act to exert an influence on the propensity to secure a job and as well be successful in a chosen occupation or the propensity for entrepreneurial opportunity recognition and success most especially among the thriving youth population who are usually identified with the highest level of unemployment both in the developing and undeveloped countries due to problems relating to inadequate skill set or the mismatch of existing skills, for the plethora of entrepreneurial and job vacancies within the labour market (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023). Hence, this study offers new insights into the literature on employability and career development by shifting the focus from the usual

organizational context to an arrangement that views training and capacity development initiatives as a potential career development strategy, which may be utilised to enhance the progression of youth employability.

Apart from addressing the above limitation, another notable issue about all these studies is that they mainly see training and skill acquisition from the perspective of workplace learning and were conducted in an organizational context where such training programs were viewed as career development initiatives as well as a means of fostering organizational competitiveness (Peeters et al., 2022); even though, this form of skill acquisition programs have been identified as highly essential in terms of preparing the unprepared young population and potential job applicants for the changing world of work as well as the changing demands of the modern workplace (Deming, 2017; Suarta et al., 2017; Suyitno et al., 2025) all of which have the potential of hindering the development of an effective intervention framework for optimising the inherent potentials in this type of short skill acquisition, particularly among the youth population who happens to be desperately in need of an opportunity to exercise their youthful Vigor and creativity within the labour market. Thus, in this present research, we also aim to reconcile this type of shortcoming by focusing on selected youths in both Nkomazi and Bushbuckridge local municipalities of Mpumalanga province who were beneficiaries/participants of the CRDP programs, with the view of ascertaining the potential effect that both the on-the-job as well as off-the-job training components of this program may have impact on their level of employability in terms of future job and career prospects as such endeavour would assist in identifying what aspects of this programs needs to either be modified, or improved upon.

Furthermore, given the fact that a significant difference in terms of gender has been uncovered in the potential effect that organizational development programs may have on career development (see; Tordera et al., 2020; Pinnington et al., 2022; Kravariti et al., 2025), and differences have also been uncovered between males and females in the rate at which these two genders make use of learning to enhance outcomes (Wongwatkit, Panjaburee, Srisawasdi, et al. 2020; Daher, Alfahel, & Anabousy, 2021; Sobaih, Elshaer, & Hasanein 2024; Gupta, Bajaj, Das, Kumar, & Gupta., 2024), as well as the submission by Kroese (2022), which indicates that the inclusion of women in the labour market, nullifies the previous beliefs in gender-neutral approach to training as it does not reflect

the reality of gender differences, It would particularly be of high importance to determine if such a type of difference is also obtainable among mixed gender youths, who were made to undergo a training program with the view of enhancing their employability since there seems to be currently no significant findings related to this area of research in existing literature. Thus, as a means of reconciling this type of important lapse, we also integrate the concept of gender difference as a potential moderator of the relationship between the training program and the degree of youth employability since it is anticipated that such an endeavour would aid in designing gender-specific interventions to promote the effectiveness of training programs which in turn improves youth employability, as well as serve as a means of building theories for this specific area of study. Put in another way; by examining these differences, this study attempts to provide important insights that may be useful in enhancing the effect of training with respect to employability among varying youth with differing gender orientations.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Youth unemployment

According to Statistics South Africa (2021), the quarterly labour force survey continues to depict youth as the segment that makes up a substantially higher proportion of the unemployed population in South Africa, with youth unemployment at 54.7 %. Frame, De Lannoy, and Leibbrandt (2016) opined that the issue of youth unemployment has reached a crisis proportion since the advent of democracy and declared that when one compares the youth unemployment rate of the second quarter in 2008 with that of the second quarter in 2016, there is an indication that the situation has worsened. Despite the government's hawk-eye focus on this challenge, the scourge of youth unemployment remains highly discomfoting. Meanwhile, a consensus exists supporting the fact that this type of unemployment is structural due to a mismatch between the skills demanded by employers for the jobs and the skills supplied by young job seekers (Yu, 2013). Hence, this tends to underscore the critical importance of skills acquisition and skill development programs, which are essential to the needs of the modern workplace as well as the need

to make use of this in enhancing employability level of teeming youths who are often underprepared to face the world of work (Deming, 2017; Suarta et al., 2017).

2.2 Employability

According to Brewer (2013) employability is an individual's ability to secure a job retain employment and move flexibly in the labour market as well as engage in lifelong learning". Tin (2006) emphasizes that the definition of employability has evolved and states that "it is apparent that lifelong employability has become an important and necessary trait that any worker should aim to possess in this rapidly globalising economy". Tin draws on the definition for employability as articulated by McKenzie & Wurzburg's (1997) which states that "in general, lifelong employability is the capacity to be productive and to hold rewarding jobs during a working life, and to be equipped with up-to-date skills and competences". Meanwhile, McGrath, Needham, Papier, Wedeking, Attwal, Calitz, and van der Merve (2010) identify the construct as an interactive encounter which enables additional consideration of vital demand, personal circumstances, and factors that influence the employability of individuals in a particular labour market, or at a specific time, and that serve a lot of importance in enabling them secure or switch employment. While the higher education stream of literature focuses on the process of preparing students for future uncertainties, as well as the plethora of challenges they may face throughout their careers, it views employability as the likelihood or probability for a job to be obtained by students after graduation, the observed level of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes, which makes them to likely gain employment position after graduation and be successful in their respective chosen occupations (Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Harvey 2001); the literature on employability within the workplace focuses on the identification and development of knowledge, skills and attitudes which are needed for an optimal performance in the labour market and then defines it as the continuous fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through the optimal use of competences' (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden 2006) or the movement capital which not only allow employee to change from one job to another, but also allows them to retain their current job (Peeters et al., 2022). Thus, taking a cue from the former, we define the construct as the potential improvement in terms of skills, understandings, and personal

attributes among the youths in this study, that may be directly linked with the short skill acquisition programs, and has the propensity to make them gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.

Going deeper into the higher educational perspective of employability, Knight and Yorke (2004) have identified four interconnected components of the critical skills that evolve from one phase to another during the transition from entry into higher education to the stage of continuous development within the workplace. According to these authors, these skills normally gravitate from the mastery of subjects taught within the classroom, as well as the ability to have the acquired knowledge transferred to other contexts, to the stage of skilful practices. The third stage, which can also be termed as the stage of efficacy beliefs, is entailed by the perception of student's regarding their intelligence, learning approach, and the confidence they have in their abilities as well as their learning motivation (Yorke & Knight, 2006), while the fourth, and last component may be highlighted as the stage of entitled metacognition which encompasses the reflective process of learners, which may be described as the level of awareness they have about their knowledge, learning processes and willingness to learn (Knight & Yorke, 2004). All in all, these four components, as well as the outcomes associated with them, are usually determined by the relevance of the educational and curriculum system, socio-economic factors, the type of practical skills acquired, career aspiration, as well as self-concept and other personality factors (Hosain, Mustafi, & Parvin, 2023).

2.3 Training

Training can be described as a systematic process involved in changing work behaviour (Halim, Rashid, Zulkifli, & Ibrahim, 2023). It is the related competencies in terms of knowledge, abilities, and skills, as well as the motivation that precedes these processes (Shahzadi, Javed, Pirzada, Nasreen, Khanam, 2023; Demerouti & Peeters, 2018); which are capable of bridging the gap between the ability to make use of these competencies in achieving organisation's goals, and the highest level of education completed by employees to improve organizational productivity (Kijek, Kijek, & Nowak, 2020). According to Urbancová, Vrabcová, Hudáková, and Petr (2021), it is a tool that is normally utilized in shaping employees' competencies and to develop their potential.

Thus, from the perspective of Elantheraiyan & Dagnew-Gebrehiwot (2023), it can also be viewed as a means through which knowledge, skills, and attitudes are updated to meet job demands since such an update is an important prerequisite for maximizing the aspects of competencies that were previously not properly utilized. Furthermore, as effective training has been described by Chakraborty (2023) to be what is needed by all individuals in the labour force, as well as those who currently lack this opportunity, in a changing and dynamic business landscape where there is a need to constantly adapt to shifting technological, political, and socio-economic shocks, training is thus defined in this study as a short-term skill acquisition program, which is made up of both on-the-job as well as off-the-job training exercises, which have been designed as a capacity-building program to equip community youths with the required skills that would make them function effectively in their prospective job positions or future entrepreneurial endeavours.

The process involved in training, or any type of skill acquisition process, does not take place in a vacuum, but involves a systematic procedure which are essential to the overall success of the program. This process comprises of a training needs assessment, which has to do with identifying the environmental and institutional needs, in terms of skills, knowledge, and attitude, and then seeing if there is a significant difference or mismatch between these two and then determining the training areas that are required to bridge this gap based on the qualities of existing personnel (Mathis & Jackson, 2016). This stage is closely followed by the training planning and implementation, which focuses on time and resource allocation, choosing participants, and delivery methods. According to Lussier and Hendon (2020), the third and fourth stage of a well-designed training program usually involves the implementation stage and the training evaluation stage, where all training outcomes are matched with expectations as well as the resources utilised.

Given the importance of the need to ensure that training programs have the required and optimal impact on the training needs of trainees, as well as match up with the objectives of the sets of objectives stated in overall organizational goals, it becomes necessary to know the critical factors that may tends to either inhibit or facilitate such type of optimal outcome because such knowledge may assist in managing the program to safeguard the highest possible returns on invested resources (Alfes, Shantz, Truss, & Soane, 2013). Thus, in this regard, training design, training delivery styles, training

contents, training environment, training facilities and materials, training schedule, and presentation style have all been identified across the plethora of existing literature as the inevitable factors to be considered by facilitators to drive the performance of this type of program (see; Yimam, 2022; Chakraborty, 2023; Hajjar, & Alkhanaizi, 2018).

Accordingly, Hlaing, Bhaumik, and Chakkaravarthy (2023) identified two methods of training that every organization can choose to develop employee abilities, depending on the vision and mission associated with training needs (on-the-job training and off-the-job training). For the on-the-job training, this is the type of training that is normally provided to trainees at the work venues and could be in the form of job rotation, transfers, and mentoring (Abdiwali & Musa, 2019).. This type of training is designed to equip trainees with the necessary skills during their official working hours and is usually considered the most cost-effective method of training due to its ability to provide hands-on experience while working. According to Vasanthi and Basariya (2019), with on-the-job type of training, employees are made to learn and garner experience in a working environment under the direct supervision of a supervisor, in an arrangement that allows them to become accustomed to the work environment, tools, as well as working equipment (Bafaneli & Setibi, 2015). Apart from providing contextualization, personalization, and deep learning, while also driving important social elements among peers through the system of feedback, it also makes trainees more focused on work tasks and provides them with feelings of job ownership (Pulakos et al, 2015).

Meanwhile, off-the-job training, on the other hand, is the type of training provided away from the workplace, in which an artificial workplace is duplicated as the working environment and then used to equip individual trainees with job-related skills (Vasanthi & Basariya, 2019). While it is also called vestibule training, it is specifically designed for those trainees whose knowledge of the intended working environment, as well as the job-related skills for the prospective job, is near to zero (Boon et al., 2009), which makes it a best option whenever the objective centres on impacting training on a large number of trainees who are prospective employees (Hlaing, Bhaumik, & Chakkaravarthy, 2023).

2.4 Training and employability

Training and vocational programs that are designed for short-term skill acquisition, which are usually made up of the integration of practical experience in a real work environment, play a vital role in enhancing the employability skills of graduates, thereby bridging the gap between academic knowledge and its practical application in the workplace (Amish, 2024; Autsadee & Phanphichit, 2025). According to Fraile, Psarommatis, Alarcón, and Joan (2023) those training programs that are designed in the form of short skill acquisition or work-based learning provide learners with the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings., thereby enabling youths to engage with their chosen profession as well as have a clear understanding and build a sense of purpose of what is expected by such profession (Abdi, Mahdi, Omar, Asiiimwe, & Osman, 2024)).

Through the combination of formal education and real-world experience, these programs can potentially facilitate the development of technical as well as non-technical skills, which are normally viewed as an essential commodity to enhance career success (Yong et al., 2024). According to Mokhtar et al. (2024) the most effective type of vocational training are those that incorporate classroom learning with real-world experience in practical settings, in that such arrangement, apart from ensuring that those skills imparted through classroom learning achieve a fit with industry requirements, also provides learners with the means of augmenting the relevance and efficacy of the learning experience all of which tends to highlight it as an educational strategy that not only prepares trainees for immediate work but also endow them with the required life-long competencies that are required for future career progression (Autsadee, & Phanphichit, 2024). Thus, the amalgamation of school-based and workplace learning experiences is highly crucial since it enables apprentices to correlate theoretical knowledge with practical application, thereby augmenting their employability skills Zou, Xie, Tan *et al.* (2024) This is more so as some studies have noted that Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs play a pivotal role in equipping students and young people with the skills needed to navigate the economy and become an integral part of national economic development (see; Tripney & Hombrados, 2013; Schneider, 2017; Suyitno et al., 2025), while it has been empirically proven across a plethora of studies

that the degree of access to training act as a significant predictor of employee efficiency and effectiveness (see; Ludwikowska, 2018; Renting, Jaarsma, Borleffs, Slaets, Cohen-Schotanus, & Gans, 2023; Chakraborty, 2023; Abdul-Halim, Rashid, Zulkifli, & Ibrahim, 2023); While a cogent link has been established between training design, training needs assessment, training delivery style and the performance of training programs (see; Yiman, 2022; Chakraborty, 2023).

Thus, accordingly, the Social Learning Theory (see; Bandura, 1977), unequivocally highlights the essential role of coaching, observation, modelling, and interpersonal interactions in the learning process. It is of the opinion that knowledge and skills are effectively acquired by individuals by closely observing the behaviours of others (see; Grant, 2017). As behaviour, techniques, and strategies are consistently demonstrated by facilitators for learners to observe, learners are then made to pass through a transformation process that is built on positive feedback, reinforcement, social support, as well as constructive criticism (Bandura, 2021), until such transformation eventually culminate in a desired level of behaviour (Nilsen, Potthoff, & Birken, 2022).. On the basis we propose this set of hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1a: There is a significant relationship between on-the-job training and employability.

Hypothesis 1b: There is a significant relationship between off-the-job training and employability.

2.5 The moderating role of gender

While personality traits such as attitude, behaviour, lifestyle, and conscientiousness have been highlighted as factors that exercise an influence on the assimilation of knowledge by individual as well as on the outcomes from this acquisition of knowledge (Roberts et al. 2014), being conscientious itself, which has to do with diligent, purposeful and organized, has been shown as associated with gender difference (Keiser et al. 2017; Wrigley-Asante, Godfred Ackah & Frimpong, 2023). Thus, with female learners found to be more conscientious by showing greater efforts and improved attitude towards the learning process than their male counterparts (see; DiPrete & Jennings, 2012; Keiser et al., 2016), this seems to suggest that there may be significant

difference in the type of assimilation and reaction exhibited by these two gender groups during training programs.

Furthermore, while Downey and Vogt Yuan (2005) attuned that certain traits and practices are linked to or contrasted with masculinity or femininity, which have the potential of either exercising a positive or negative impact on learning as well as its associated outcomes among males and females, it has also be declared that the masculine trait, which portrays males as dominant, competitive, and active may likely give them an edge over females in terms of learning initiatives as well as its potential benefits (see; Legewie & DiPrete 2012); while the conciliatory stereotype associated with females may turn out to be a challenge for females as they have to exert greater effort to bridge the learning gap between themselves and their male counterparts (Wrigley-Asante, Ackah & Frimpong, 2023). Due to the differential effect that peer groups may have on both males and females with respect to learning and training initiatives, the submission by Anyichie, and Butler (2023) who declares that the perception, attitude, and motivation of learners are shaped by this type of group depending on their subculture; all of which all of which tends to exert a tremendous effect on the overall learning process (Filade, Bello, Uwaoma, Anwanane, & Nwangburuka, 2019).). Thus, in this regard, Legewie and DiPrete (2012) noted that since one of the subcultures of male peer groups seems to be the prioritisation of other activities and conduct over learning and assimilation initiatives, the adverse effect of such orientation may be in the form of significant lower performance than their female counterpart it terms of making the most use of learning opportunities. Apart from identifying gender stereotypes as a potential contributing factor in the rate of training performance between males and females, Khan (2014) has noted that males are usually faced with a significant level of economic burden more than their female counterparts due to their gender stereotype, which tends to deprive them of ample time to concentrate on purposeful learning activities thereby impacting the performance outcomes of training activities among them.

This is particularly evident, as the submission by Wrigley-Asante, Godfred Ackah, and Frimpong (2023) has identified motivation and support from parents, as well as recent advocacy campaigns focusing on women's empowerment, as important factors that may contribute to higher training outcomes among the female gender group. Meanwhile, empirical studies have found that gender does not moderate the relationship

between soft skills and employability among students at Technical Colleges in Botswana (Awodiji, 2024); that the relationship between career development and such career development program as coaching, web-based career information, continuous professional development and external education provision was moderated by gender (see; Pinnington, Aldabbas, Mirshahi, & Pirie, 2022); while it was confirmed by Ullibarriarana-Garate, Agirre-Aramburu, and Mesonero-De Miguel (2023) in their study that though, workplace experiences in apprenticeship programmes constitutes a valid tool for enhancing future employability, this effect was however more pronounced among the male undergraduate students than their female counterparts, being surveyed in Scotland. Furthermore, this is more so as men were found to exhibit a significantly higher perception in terms of employability compared to their female counterparts, in a population of Spanish youngsters (Cifre, Vera, Sánchez-Cardona, & de-Cuyper, 2018), while another research by Bennet, Ananthram, Lindsay, Benati, and Jevons (2022) also confirmed that male business students in Australia have a higher self-perception of employability than their female counterparts. In sum, what this stream of research tends to suggest is that clear-cut evidence does not yet exist on the moderating role of gender in this relationship, or in if the relationship is stronger among females, or vice versa among males. Thus, even more importantly is the fact that it is yet to be determined what the scenario may likely be among the youths in both Nkomazi and Bushbuckridge local municipalities of Mpumalanga province, who were beneficiaries/participants of the CRDP programs in South Africa. Going by this limitation, the following hypothesis is also presented.

Hypothesis 2a: The significant relationship between on-the-job training and employability would be moderated by gender in such a way that the effect of this training on both males and females would be significantly different.

Hypothesis 2b: The significant relationship between off-the-job training and employability would be moderated by gender in such a way that the effect of this training on both males and females would be significantly different.

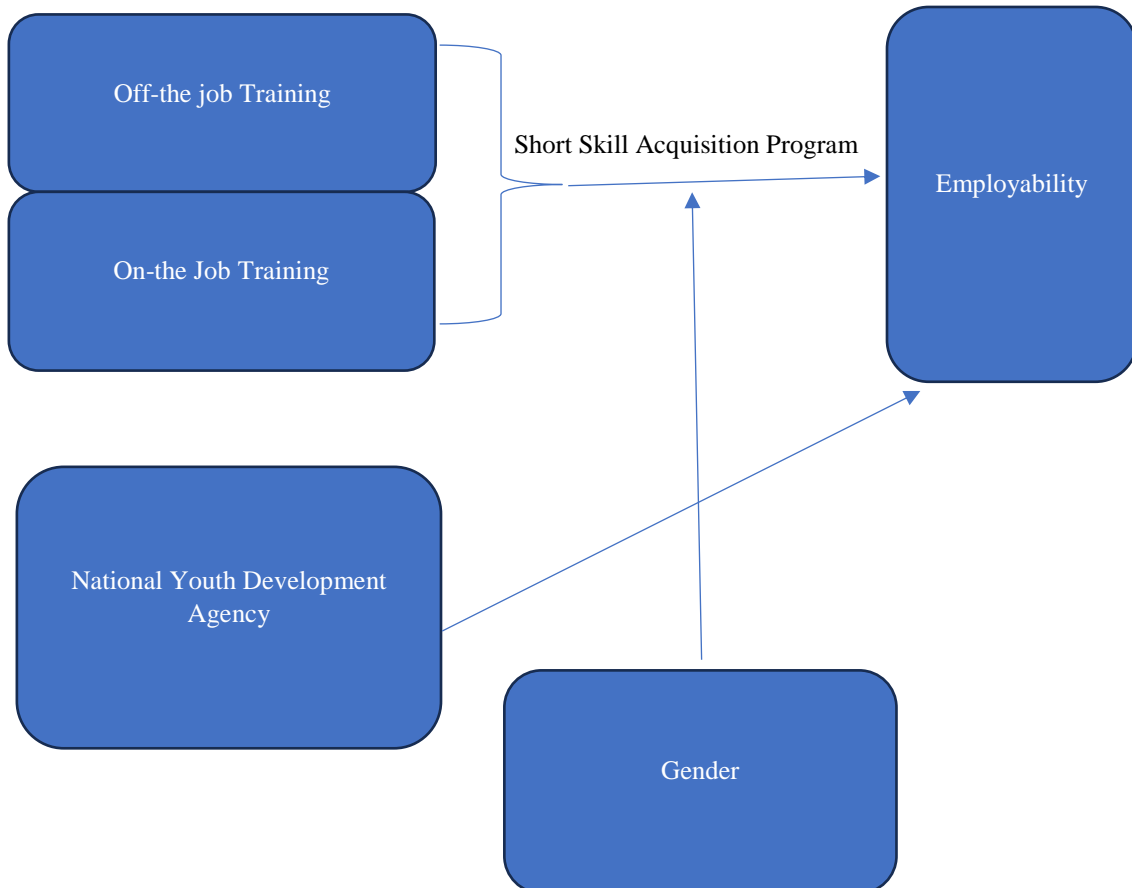
2.6 The National Youth Development Agency of South Africa

The National Youth Development Agency, popularly known as the NYDA, is located within the South African presidential office. It operates across the nine (9) provincial boundaries of the country. The main focus of this agency is the implementation of youth employment program for youths who are between 14 to 35 years old (see; NYDA Strategic Plan 2019). Being put in charge of implementing National youth development programmes, it takes care of the coordination of youth development activities by all stakeholders. In this regard, it has the core mandate of developing an integrated youth development strategy as well as coming up with guidelines aimed at establishing parameters for the development of youth activities in the country and making recommendations to the president. Furthermore, it also initiates, designs, coordinates, evaluates, and monitors all programmes that have the potential to integrate the youths as responsible and active participants in the national economy and society, to provide guidance and contribution to efforts and activities that facilitate economic participation and empowerment, and in the achievement of education and training. In addition to partnering and providing assistance to the organs of state, the private sector, non-governmental organisations, and community-based organisations on initiatives directed at attaining employment and skills development, it also initiates programmes that focus on poverty alleviation, urban and rural development, reduction of criminal activities, substance abuse, and all forms of social delinquency among youths. As a means of creating access to education and training to address the many social challenges facing youth, the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CRDP) was set up by this agency to provide youths with access to education and training with a view to fostering youth employability and achieving a long-term empowerment strategy among them. Nevertheless, despite the aim, objectives, and activities of this agency, it is yet to be determined if its existence, programs, as well as initiatives have any significant impact on youth employability. Because of this, the following hypothesis is also presented.

Hypothesis 3: There is a significant positive relationship between the perceived relevance of the National Youth Development Agency and youth employability.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Hypothesized Model Showing the Interrelationship Between the Two Components of the Short Skills Program, National Youth Development Agency on one side, and Youth Employability on the other Side, as well as the Moderating Role of Gender.



3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Materials/procedures/sample

In total, 200 copies of the questionnaires were circulated to the youths at their respective locations (organizations), where they are expected to translate the off-the-job training being acquired through class sessions into an on-the-job practical context at one point in time. Before the administration of the questionnaire, they were informed about the purpose and objective of the study as well as about their right to free participation,

and the freedom to withdraw from the study at when deemed if so desired. Following this process, quantitative data were finally obtained from a sample of 114 selected youths in both Nkomazi and Bushbuckridge local municipalities of Mpumalanga province who were beneficiaries/participants of the CRDP programs, meaning a response rate of 57 percent. Of this total figure, our analysis revealed a total of 22 or 19.3 percent as individuals between 18-22 years old, a total of 32 or 28.1 percent in the 23-28 age bracket, and a total of 60 or 52.6 percent as belonging to the 29-33 age bracket. We also found that 48 of the participants, which represents a total of 42.1percent, are males, while the remaining figure of 66, or 57.9 percent, were found to be females.

3.2 Measures

Closed-ended questions based on predetermined response 4-point Likert scales were utilised in eliciting the data. These questionnaires are adopted from the Kirkpatrick framework for evaluation of both on-the-job and off-the-job training exercises' effectiveness, as well as the extent to which these exercises impact on employability. Sample items from the off-the-job training include “the theory was well structured and relevant”, “the theory comprehensively covered all outcomes”. Concerning the items on off-the-job training, sample items include “the practical was related to the theory acquired in class”, “the practical was easily applicable”. Also, employability as a construct encompasses items such as “since completing the course, I have been called for prospective job interviews”, “the course has enhanced my employability prospects”. Lastly, the perceived relevance and effectiveness of the National Youth Development Agency on employability were assessed by “the program by the NYDA met my expectations”, “the NYDA is relevant for youth employability”.

3.3 Analysis

Since we rely on self-reported measures as a basis of evaluating the responses from respondents, and as this type of measures are susceptible to common method bias, (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003); the likelihood of the presence of this type of bias was assessed by the Herman Single factor analysis (Kock, Berbekova, &

Assaf, 2021) and its absence was ascertained since the total variance extracted by one factor was found to be below 50 percent (Williams & Cote, 1989; Baumgartner, Weijters & Pieters, 2021). Furthermore, we also rely on the rule of thumb of 10 cases per estimated parameter (items) or a minimum sample size of 100 to conduct an exploratory factor analysis (see; Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1995) and utilize the principal component analysis as a factorial tool of analysis. After making sure that the item's correlation coefficients were at least 0.3 and above, that the Bartlett's test of sphericity is less than the 0.05 significance level, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) and the overall measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) are at least 0.6 and above, items 4 on the off-the-job training, and item 1 on the on-the-job training were deleted as a result of their low commonality, as well as the need to achieve an improvement in total variance explained. Consequently, we obtained a total variance of 68.374 percent, 68.567 percent, 68.928 percent, and 70.357 percent for off-the-job training, on-the-job training, the items on perceived relevance of the National Youth Development Agency to youth employability, and youth employability, respectively. Concerning the factor loading for the items, while a factor loading of .794, .911, and .769 was obtained for the 3 items on off-the-job, a total score of .725, .881, and .869 was equally obtained for the remaining 3 items on the on-the-job scale. This is more so as a factor loading of .808, .893, .786, as well as .866, .809, .823, .853, and .845 were respectively obtained for both the NYDA items and the youth employability items, which means that the recommended threshold of 0.7 percent as prescribed by (see; Alain, Rostin, Joël, Hippolyte, Donatien, Koffi, Jérémie, & Situakibanza 2020; Pallant, 2013) were remarkably adhered to.

With respect to the Average Variance Extracted, the AVE values of 0.684, 0.686, 0.689, and 0.705 were respectively obtained for off-the-job training, on-the-job training, NYDA items, and employability items. Hence, this is evidence of an acceptable level of convergent reliability as all the figures are shown to be greater than 0.5 (see; Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Also, the discriminant validity of the items was established since the square root of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each of the variables is higher than the correlation coefficient of that variable with other variables in the model (Fuller, Simmering, Atinc, Atinc, & Babin, 2016). Similarly, to assess the reliability of the items, we rely on the computation of Composite Reliability and the internal consistency Cronbach's Alpha for the variables. Thus, by so doing, we also obtained a Composite

Reliability (CR) score of 0.866, 0.867, 0.89, and 0.923 for the combination of off-the-job training, on-the-job training, perception of NYDA, and youth employability, respectively. Lastly, a Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency values of 0.766, 0.770, 0.768, and 0.892 were respectively obtained for these variables, meaning that all assumptions of consistency in measures were convincingly satisfied (see; Sekaran & Boogie, 2010; Hair et al., 2014).

As shown in Table 1, the Pearson's correlation (r) between youth employability and off-the-job training is ($r = .211$, $p < 0.05$), and on-the-job training is ($r = .270$, $p < 0.05$), while it is shown that it correlates with the perception of National Youth Development Agency scale at ($r = .338$, $p > 0.05$). Also, off-the-job training is shown to be associated with on-the-job training ($r = .299$, $p < 0.05$) and perception of National Youth Development Agency ($r = .184$, $p < 0.05$), while a correlation value of ($r = .106$, $p > 0.05$) has been uncovered for both on-the-job training and the perception of National Youth Development Agency.

Table 1

Correlation Matrix of the Main Variables and Square Root of Average Variance Extracted

	1	2	3	4	Mean	SD
1 EMPLOY	(.839)				3.87	.75
2 OFF-JOB	.211*	(.827)			4.21	.447
Sig	.027					
3 ON-JOB	.270**	.299**	(.828)		3.23	.397
Sig	.004	.001				
4 NYD	.338	.184*	.106	(.830)	2.43	.354
Sig	.092	.050	.263			

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

3.4 Test of hypotheses

Hypothesis 1a predicts that there is a significant relationship between on-the-job training and employability. As shown in Table 2, on-the-job training positively impacts youth employability ($b = .502$, $p < 0.01$), meaning that this hypothesis is supported. Also, as evidenced in Table 3, a significant and positive relationship is found to exist between off-the-job training and youth employability ($b = .351$, $p < 0.05$), meaning that support is also obtained for hypothesis 1b, which predicts that there is a significant relationship between off-the-job training and employability.]

Table 2

Regression of On-the-Job Training with Youth Employability as Outcome

	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig
Model	B	Std Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	8.843	2.246		3.937	.000
OJN	.502	.172	.270	2.917	.004

Furthermore, the output from the moderation analysis displayed in Table 4 shows that while there is a significant and positive main effect of on-the-job training on youth employability, $b=.5588$, $p= .0017$, ($p < 0.05$), thereby replicating hypothesis 1a, this relationship is found not to be moderated by gender as evidenced by the interaction effect displayed in the Table $b=-.7962$, $p= .1531$, ($p > 0.05$). Thus, with this result, we fail to obtain support for hypothesis 2a, which predicted that the significant relationship between on-the-job training and employability would be moderated by gender in such a way that the effect of this training on both males and females would be significantly different. The interaction plot of this analysis is displayed in Figure. 2.

Table 3*Regression of Off-the-Job Training with Youth Employability as Outcome*

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig
	B	Std Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	10.904	2.001		5.450	.000
OJT	.351	.157	.211	2.242	.027

a. Dependent Variable: Employability

Similarly, and contrary to our expectation, we also found that even though off-the-job training has a positive impact on youth employability as predicted, this impact is, however, not determined by gender as a boundary condition ($b = -.6264$, $p = .2699$, $p > 0.05$). This may be interpreted to be that the positive relationship obtained for off-the-job training and youth employability is generalizable across all respondents and not determined by their gender (Cohen, Cohen, West & Aiken, 2003). Thus, with this result, hypothesis 2a, which predicted that the significant relationship between off-the-job training and youth employability would be moderated by gender in such a way that the effect of this training on both males and females would be significantly different, is not accepted. As evidenced by the unconditional interaction, the R-Square value change is not significant .5939 ($F, .2861$), $p = .5939$, ($p > 0.05$), which clearly shows that the model with the interaction term is not significantly higher compared with the model without the interaction term. See Table 5 and figure 3.

Table 4

Moderated Analysis of the Relationship between on-the-job training and Youth Employability with Gender as a Moderator

Models	Beta	SE	T	Sig	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	15.3819	.2743	56.0800	.0000	14.8381	15.9257
On-the Job	.5588	.1732	3.2268	.0017	.2155	.9022
Gender	-.7962	.5533	-1.4390	.1531	-1.8933	.3008
Int_1	-.4861	.3559	-1.3659	.1749	-1.1916	.2195

R-square (.1050) **F** (4.1468) **P** (.000)

Test of Highest Order Unconditional Interaction Between on-the-Job training and Gender

R2 Change	F	df1	df2	P
.0158	1.8657	1.0000	106.0000	.1749

Table 5

Moderated Analysis of the Relationship between off-the-job training and Youth Employability with Gender as a Moderator

Models	Beta	SE	T	Sig	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	15.3431	.2801	54.7762	.0000	14.7878	15.8984
Off-the Job	.3634	.1581	2.2987	.0235	.0500	.6768
Gender	-.6264	.5648	-1.1090	.2699	-1.7462	.4934
Int_1	.1681	.3144	.5349	.5939	-.4551	.7914

R-square (.0580) **F** (2.1738) **P** (.0954)

Test of Highest Order Unconditional Interaction Between Off-the-Job Training and Gender

R2 Change	F	df1	df2	P
.0025	.2861	1.0000	106.0000	.5939

Lastly, our analysis also failed to find support for hypothesis 3 due to the insignificant relationship that was uncovered between the perceived relevance of the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) and youth employability ($b = .193$, $p = .338$, $p > 0.05$). Hence, this finding seems to suggest that while the highlighted agency was favourably perceived by the youths in the respondents, as evidenced by the above-average mean score displayed in Table 1, it was, however, not viewed by the respondents as an essential tool that has contributed to their employability.

Table 6

Regression of Perceived Relevance of the National Youth Development Agency with Youth Employability as Outcome

	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig
Model	B	Std Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	13.463	1.978		6.805	.000
NYDA	.193	.193	.092	.962	.338

Dependent Variable: Youth Employability

Figure 2

Interaction Plot of Gender as a Product of on-the-Job Training and Youth Employability

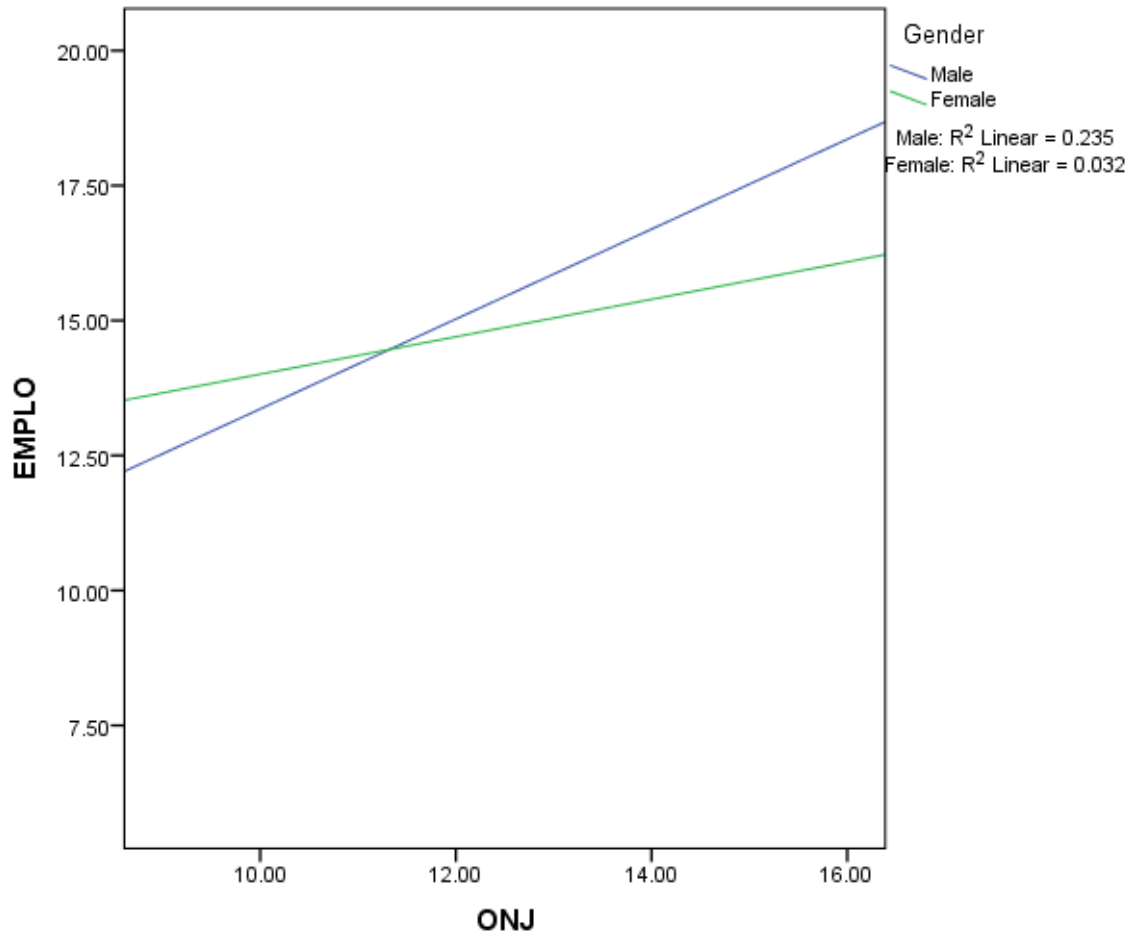
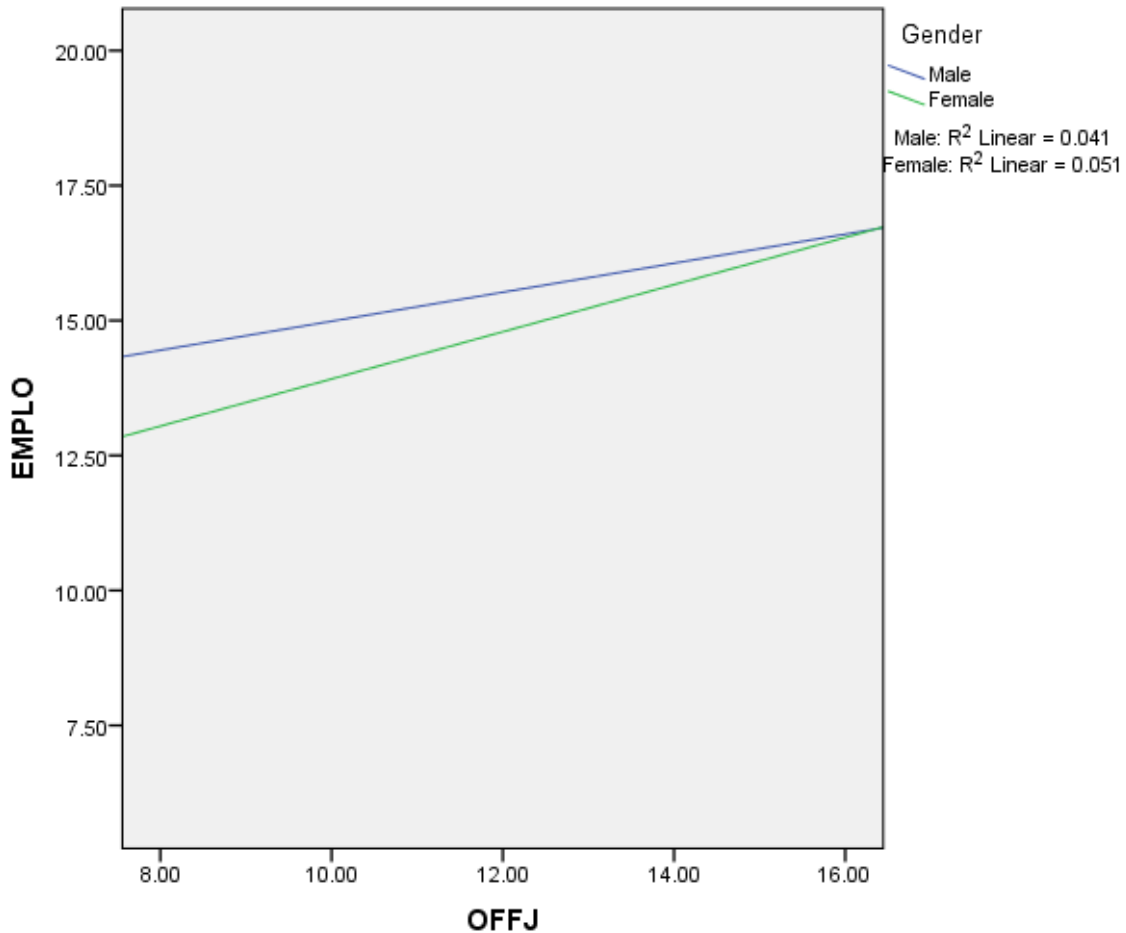


Figure 3

Interaction Plot of Gender as a Product of off-the-Job Training and Youth Employability



4 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between two types of short-term skill acquisition and perceived employability, and to determine the moderating role of gender in this relationship, thereby contributing to the literature in three major ways. First, as previous studies have only focused on within organization related variables such as employee performance, supervisor feedback and knowledge sharing/transfer as outcome related variables that may be associated with skill acquisition programs this study offers new insights into the literature on career development initiatives by shifting the focus from the usual on-the-job organizational related variables to an arrangement which views training and capacity development initiatives as a developmental strategy,

by focusing on both on-the-job training and off-the-job training exercise as a tool to promote future employability as well as the chance for future career sustainability.

Secondly, we also provide an important insight by particularly focusing on the unemployed, unprepared youth population of some selected regions in South Africa and then viewing this type of skill acquisition program as an essential mechanism for preparing them for meeting the demands of the changing world of work, as well as the requirements of the modern workplace since the issue of skill mismatch continues to act as a drawback to the development of the global labour market, as well as the national economic development of most countries in the developing world. Third, given the rise of women's participation in the global labour market and the fact that significant differences have been uncovered in the rate at which the two gender groups of males and females make use of learning to enhance outcomes (Wongwatkit, Panjaburee, Srisawasdi, et al.2020; Daher, Alfahel, & Anabousy, 2021; Elshaer, Hasanein, & Sobaih., 2024; Gupta, Bajaj, Das, Kumar, & Gupta., 2024), we also weave in gender as a potential moderator of the relationship between the both facets of training and employability since we are aware that result from such endeavour could be potentially useful in crafting gender related policies when trying to equip youths with employability skills.

More specifically, from a sample of 114 selected youths in both Nkomazi and Bushbuckridge local municipalities of Mpumalanga province in South Africa, who were beneficiaries of the CRDP programs, we found that both components of the short skill acquisition programs, which were offered in terms of on-the-job and off-the-job training were associated with the perceived employability of the youths in our sample. In other words, our findings revealed that a significant and positive relationship exists between these facets on one hand, as well as the after-training perceived improvement in youth employability on the other hand. Relatedly, while these findings reinforce the opinion of Liu et al. (2024) who view these two facets of training as essential ingredients to facilitate the development of technical as well as non-technical skills needed to enhance career success as well as the submission by Mokhtar et al. (2024) who noted that the most effective type of training is that one that incorporate classroom learning with real-world experience in practical settings, in that such arrangement, apart from ensuring that those skills imparted through classroom learning achieve a fit with industry requirements, also provides learners with the means of augmenting the relevance and efficacy of the learning

experience. This is more so as our results extend earlier findings (see; Tripney & Hombrados, 2013; Schneider, 2017; Suyitno et al., 2025; Ludwikowska, 2018; Renting, Jaarsma, Borleffs, Slaets, Cohen-Schotanus, & Gans, 2023; Chakraborty, 2023; Halim, Rashid, Zulkifli, & Ibrahim, 2023) where empirical evidence has been utilized to show that there are a plethora of human developmental outcomes associated with training and skill acquisition programs.

Contrary to our expectations, it was remarkably revealed by our data that, regardless of gender, the effect of both facets of training on the employability variables is constant across the sample, which seems to suggest that gender is not a moderator of the above-mentioned positive relationships. Though our results in this regard contradict the results and submissions from other studies (e.g; Wrigley-Asante, Godfred Ackah, & Frimpong; 2023; Pinnington, Aldabbas, Mirshahi, & Pirie, 2022; Ullibarrarana-Garate, Agirre-Aramburu, and Mesonero-De Miguel 2023), where support has been provided for significant differences in training outcomes for both male and female employees, it, however, aligns with the empirical evidences from a group of selected trainees in Botswana where the effect of soft skill on trainee was found to be same across all the sample, regardless of their gender dispositions (see; Awodiji, 2024). Lastly, even though our data set seems to reveal that the relevance of the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) was favourably perceived by the youths in this study, this perceived relevance was, however, found not to be associated with the employability variable in as it was revealed by the youths that there is no any form of significant link between the activities of this agency and their level of after training employability. Perhaps, this lack of relationship may be unconnected to the fact that the primary function of this agency directly focuses on designing, coordinating, evaluating, and monitoring the youth education and developmental programs, which may therefore not allow the youths to feel the direct effect of their activities, since they are not mandated to be directly involved in the implementation of these training programs.

Overall, this study offers theoretical contributions by framing the relationship between key components of training exercise and the perceived employability of youths in an evolving and changing labour market, through the social learning theory (see; Bandura, 1977). The theory particularly noted the overbearing influence of coaching, observation, demonstration, modelling, and interpersonal interactions in the learning

process, and the effectiveness of this medium in facilitating the acquisition of knowledge, skills and job-related information, through a transformation process that is built on positive feedback, reinforcement, social support, as well as constructive criticism (Bandura, 2021).

Thus, accordingly, the Social Learning Theory (see; Bandura, 1977), unequivocally highlights the essential role of coaching, observation, modelling, and interpersonal interactions in the learning process. It is of the opinion that knowledge and skills are effectively acquired by individuals by closely observing the behaviours of others (see; Grant, 2017). As behaviour, techniques, and strategies are consistently demonstrated by facilitators for learners to observe, learners are then made to pass through a transformation process that is built on positive feedback, reinforcement, social support, as well as constructive criticism (Bandura, 2021), until such transformation eventually culminate in a desired level of behaviour (Johnston, 2021). Thus, apart from advancing our understanding of the inherent beneficial outcomes in training-related initiatives, it also sheds light on how government institutions and relevant stakeholders, particularly in developing countries, can develop interventions to tackle the issue of inadequate skill sets as well as the mismatch of existing skills, which is widely circulated particularly among the teeming youths in these countries (Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023), and has also been identified as the major driver for global youth unemployment (Susanti & Ardi, 2022).

4.1 Implication for practice

Apart from the theoretical contribution listed above, our results also offer some practical implications. It shows that rather than relying on the formal educational sector as the sole strategy for promoting national youth development and as a means of nurturing citizens into employable and productive national assets, the government should rather focus on integrating practical-based educational programs, such as Technical and Vocational Education, and other short-term skill acquisition programs into the national education curriculum. This is because these types of programs are usually structured to equip people with important and relevant, modern job-related skills and are therefore quite essential in addressing the high level of skill mismatch and skill shortage that

continues to pose a global challenge in terms of addressing the requirements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Secondly, as it has been shown by research evidence that the high rate of global youth unemployment, particularly in the developing countries, is more related to the issue of skill mismatch due to a youth population that is not well prepared for the changing and evolving labour market, rather than the unavailability of those jobs in itself, it thus becomes quite important that government institution, policy makers, scholars and relevant stakeholders must collectively agree on the importance of youth employability and then begin to prioritize the topic of employability in their strategic agendas. They must not just focus on educating the youth population for the current jobs, but must also focus on preparing them for future jobs as well as equipping them with the skills to find, create, and maintain jobs.

Third, since the effect of the two facets of training seems to be constant across the participants in this study, it is necessary for the training intervention targeted at enhancing the employability of participants be conceived, planned and implemented in an arrangement that provides same importance across gender groups both in terms of budgets, training infrastructures and other related training resources.

4.2 Limitations and suggestions for future research

Like all other studies, this study is also not devoid of some important limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the sample size of 114, being drawn from only 2 metropolitan municipalities out of the total 8 metropolitan areas in South Africa, may not be quite enough to generalize to the population of youths in the country. Hence, future prospective researchers must make use of a larger sample size by widening the geographical location and incorporating the youth samples from the other 6 remaining metropolitan municipalities.

Secondly, as we rely on self-report measures to assess the employability of the participants of the research, and as a result of the fact that such a type of measure could be subject to respondents' bias as a result of social desirability issues, a more suitable type of technique that could be considered by future researchers is making use of multi-rater

tools such as both trainee as well as supervisor assessment measures to have a better insight into measures on employability.

Third, as the responses from the respondents in the study were obtained at a point in time after the training exercise, a potential and fruitful research design that may be considered in the future could be the employment of a controlled before-and-after training program, where scores on employability from participants could be assessed before the training and compared to the changes that manifests after the training program.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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