



MENTORING AND NETWORKING AS CAREER SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERGRADUATE PERCEIVED EMPLOYABILITY IN NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

Perceived Employability (PE) refers to students' confidence or lack thereof in their ability to obtain and keep formal employment corresponding to their qualification. It is global in scope, with adverse consequences when the perception is negative. In Nigeria, where graduates exceed formal job openings, persistent unemployment and underemployment have intensified negative employability perceptions among undergraduates, leading to academic apathy, vulnerability and helplessness. This study investigated the influence of mentoring and networking on PE among graduating students in South-West Nigeria, guided by the CareerEDGE model and social capital theory. A structured questionnaire was used, comprising Perceived Employability ($\alpha=0.96$), Mentoring ($\alpha=0.91$) and Networking ($\alpha=0.78$) scales. Data were subjected to correlational statistics and multiple regression at $p \leq 0.05$. Participants' age was 22.50 ± 2.04 years, and 55.0% were male. All the variables were significantly positively correlated. Mentoring ($\beta = 0.34$, $t = 10.34$) and networking ($\beta = 0.32$, $t = 9.74$) significantly influenced PE independently and jointly ($F [2, 813] = 191.54$). It was recommended that students should actively engage in mentoring and networking for enhanced positive employability perceptions.

Keywords: Mentoring, Networking, Undergraduate perceived employability, Graduating students

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing number of tertiary institutions, high annual graduate output and significant economic, political, labour, and educational challenges, have led to increasing graduate unemployment and underemployment in both developed and emerging countries, including Nigeria. These adverse economic and labour market conditions undermine students' confidence in their employability, make it more difficult for them to initiate and sustain career goals, develop work-related interests, build career identity, confidence and resilience. After graduation, students may also fear that they may have to accept undesirable jobs and experience prolonged underemployment or unemployment, which can result in psychosocial consequences for them such as stress, neuroticism, reduced self-esteem and dependency (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2023; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). Furthermore, since self-perceptions significantly influence behaviour, negative employability perceptions among students may be linked to increased rates of school dropout, academic disengagement, examination malpractice, Internet fraud and truancy, all of which can hinder Nigeria's social,

political and economic development (Adio & Gbadamosi, 2023).

All over the world, the higher education system is still perceived as the platform for students to acquire the practical knowledge, training and skills needed to develop their employability, succeed in their careers and live fulfilling lives as citizens, employees and business owners (Ossai & Okokoyo, 2022). As a result, it is important to make students' university experiences as relevant as possible to the workplace and society, for them to be employable. Despite its rising relevance, employability remains a concept lacking a generally accepted definition in literature. However, within the university setting, scholars and practitioners have advanced definitions that distinguish between objective and perceived/subjective employability, though most studies on employability in the past have focused primarily on objective employability (Vanhercke et al., 2014).

Yorke and Knight (2006) conceptualise objective employability as the process through which individuals develop skills, attitudes, personal attributes and understandings which boost their employment opportunities and career success, not only for their own benefit but

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also for the growth of the workforce, economy and society. Objective employability is frequently associated with measureable outcomes such as how long it took to get a job, income levels at the time of employment, contract conditions and prospects for career progression within organisational hierarchies (Bargsted, 2017). Furthermore, it stresses lifelong learning and the possession of transferable skills as strategies for ensuring flexibility and resilience in a dynamic labour market. However, objective measures present limitations for judging undergraduate employability, mainly because many students are unemployed during their university studies (Longxiang et al., 2024).

In response to the limitations of objective measures, some scholars study employability from a subjective standpoint, adopting a more psychological perspective. This has given rise to perceived employability (PE), which denotes individuals' self-assessed confidence (or the lack thereof) in their ability to attain and maintain employment which matches their qualification level (Rothwell et al., 2008; Rothwell & Rothwell, 2017). Thus, PE reflects students' belief in their ability to obtain, effectively perform and retain a graduate-level job either currently or in the near future. It also covers their perceived

ability to move into a new job role of equal or greater value, whether with the same employer or in different organisations. Viewed through this psychological lens, employability becomes a personal resource anchored in individual perception and agency (Bargsted et al., 2021).

Individual factors, in the form of career self-management (CSM) strategies that students adopt, potentially influence their employability perceptions. Career self-management strategies refer to career-enhancing processes and behaviours that students adopt to become self-regulating career actors who can significantly manage their careers and handle internal and external career demands (Grosemans et al., 2024). Students' self-directed and adaptive career strategies (career engagement) are believed to be crucial for navigating their school-to-work transition. Essentially, the individual is the central driver of this process, making personal agency a key aspect of CSM. Among the key CSM strategies students adopt to potentially enhance their employability perceptions are mentoring and networking.

Within the higher education sector, mentoring denotes a formal or informal progressive relationship between a mentee (student) and a mentor, aimed at helping the former in acquiring and enhancing their

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employability skills, expanding their knowledge of the labour market and developing better confidence about their career prospects (Okurame, 2011; Odunola, 2021). Students who partake in mentoring relationships often experience better academic performance, make better-informed career decisions, tend to experience less career anxiety and exhibit greater motivation and zeal to explore, reflect upon and deliberately plan their post-university career paths (Ojebode & Ayomipo, 2021). In turn, these benefits enhance their sense of employability security and confidence. However, the overall success of a mentoring relationship could be affected by such factors as compatibility, accessibility and the disposition of the mentor and mentee to enter into a reciprocal relationship.

The second career self-management (CSM) strategy examined in this study was networking. Networking is the practice of building and maintaining strategic personal and professional relationships to obtain critical career assets like contacts, information and influence. In doing so, it contributes to the structural and relational social capital of the networker (Faizan, 2025; Jackson & Tomlinson, 2020). For students, networking serves as a proactive way of cultivating professional and social

ties that allow them to leverage their human capital and gain access to labour market opportunities. Moreover, students' readiness and ability to engage in networking activities can significantly increase their chances of securing mentorships, gaining industry knowledge and having an improved access to employment opportunities.

Furthermore, networking activities expand the size and reach of students' social circles by building new contacts and increasing the number of weak ties (links with acquaintances and peers), who supply diverse opportunities and information. At the same time, frequent interactions within a network foster strong ties (relationships with mentors, close friends and family members) that are characterised by trust, identity formation and the sharing of resources (Granovetter, 1973). For students, both weak and strong ties represent crucial forms of social leverage. Weak ties provide exposure to new opportunities and labour market information while strong ties offer emotional support, guidance during career decision-making and encouragement throughout the job search process (Dill & Ozer, 2019). Together, these forms of social capital may potentially reinforce students' perceived employability by

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building career self-efficacy, improving access to opportunities and enhancing their future job confidence.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The key theories that guided this study were the key to employability/CareerEDGE model (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007) and social capital theory (Coleman, 1988). Within the CareerEDGE framework, five fundamental areas are highlighted: career development learning, work and life experience, subject knowledge, skills and understanding, generic skills and emotional intelligence. Reflection and evaluation occupy a central position in the model because they encourage students to critically assess their academic and non-academic experiences. For university students, actively engaging in the five basic elements of the CareerEDGE model and intentionally reflecting on them fosters the development of the higher-level psychological resources of self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence. These, in turn, are crucial for building employability confidence and positioning students for success in the labour market. Such development can be facilitated by structured personal and institutional strategies like mentoring and networking

programmes. In addition, according to social capital theory, students gain valuable resources and opportunities through the social and professional networks they belong to (Coleman, 1988; Faizan, 2025). Social capital signifies the available and potential resources that are placed in, available through and obtained from network relationships. Because knowledge exchange tends to increase when network members interact closely, social capital is considered a collective asset that exists within relationships rather than in an individual alone.

Empirical review

Some empirical studies provide findings that enhance our understanding of the variables of this study. For example, Niu et al. (2024) investigated how mentoring influences the employability perceptions of 1,023 university students in China, paying particular attention to the moderating roles of mentoring duration, frequency and mentor–mentee similarity. The respondents completed online questionnaires which included demographic items, a 16-item Self-Perceived Employability (SPE) Likert scale, and a 25-item College Student Mentoring Scale (CSMS). After controlling for age, gender, academic field and university rank, the results revealed that mentoring significantly positively affected

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perceived employability. Also, Oji (2023) used a descriptive survey design to investigate the mentor-mentee relationship between lecturers and 239 students in the Department of Library and Information Science at the University of Nigeria Library School, Nsukka, with emphasis on employability. The results revealed that mentorship enhanced the development of such essential employability skills as communication, digital literacy, leadership and interpersonal abilities.

Chong and Thi (2021) evaluated the efficiency of a mentoring initiative intended for first-year students of a Malaysian public university through a concurrent mixed-methods design. Using the CSMS to assess 530 participants, they discovered that mentoring was moderately effective across five dimensions: subject knowledge, career guidance, emotional support, role modelling, and mentor-mentee compatibility/expectation alignment. In another study, Dollinger et al. (2019) used a mixed-methods approach (web-based surveys and interviews with 197 students and mentors) to assess three mentoring programmes by alumni of a research-intensive university in Australia. Their findings showed that alumni mentoring nurtured valuable industry links and increased students' career confidence.

Ma and Bennett (2021) explored the connection between students' perceived employability and their levels of academic engagement and stress using a sample of 1,155 students from three universities in China. The participants answered an online survey and the data was analysed using structural equation modelling. The results showed that the PE of students was positively associated with their academic engagement. The results obtained by Sanusi et al. (2025) revealed that the 300 Nigerian Youth Corpers in their study, perceived the NYSC programme as a positive aid in enhancing their employability and also positive relationships existed between employability and NYSC placement and networking opportunities during the programme. Sin and Amaral (2017) found that students acquired employability through both university curricula and social network learning. Also, both self-initiated and organisational networking contributed significantly to students' employability perceptions. In addition, Chen (2017), drawing on social network theory and using structural equation modelling to analyse the data collected from a sample of 1,468 business graduates, found that perceived employability was positively influenced by social networks, mainly network scope, heterogeneity and relationship strength.

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From the review of literature, two hypotheses were stated and tested

1. There would be a significant positive relationship between mentoring, networking and undergraduates' perceived employability.

2. Mentoring and networking would independently and jointly significantly predict undergraduates' perceived employability.

METHOD

Research design

The research design for this study was a cross-sectional survey using an ex-post facto method. There was no manipulation of variables. The data collected already existed. The dependent variable was perceived employability of undergraduates while the independent variables were mentoring and networking.

Participants

The study focused on final year respondents because it was in the final year of study that students become more aware of their employability and its importance becomes more prominent. The sample size was 816 respondents selected from three federal, three state and three private universities, (one of each type of university was selected from Ogun, Osun and Oyo State respectively) in South-West Nigeria. Participants' age was 22.50 ± 2.04 years and male respondents formed 55% of the sample.

Instrument

A structured questionnaire, composed of standardised scales that measured perceived employability, mentoring support and networking, was used for data collection. Section A captured demographic data such as sex, religion, marital status, academic level, age and university type. Perceived employability was measured with a 32-item scale developed by the researchers to measure the extent to which respondents felt confident in securing and retaining graduate-level employment. The scale was designed in a 5-point Likert response format from "Strongly Disagree" (1) to "Strongly Agree" (5). A sample item was "I take time to consistently improve myself through research and continuous learning". The Cronbach's alpha was 0.96 ($M = 119.14$, $SD = 19.11$). The scale had five dimensions: involvement in personal experiential activities, scholarship,

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adaptiveness, personal qualities and possession of job information.

Section C assessed mentoring with the 15-item Mentoring Support scale developed by Okurame (2011) to assess the career and psychosocial support students received from mentors. The scale adopted a 5-point Likert format from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (5). Its sample item was “I have someone who assigns me challenging duties which facilitate the development of key skills”. The Cronbach’s alpha for the scale in this study was 0.91 ($M = 55.23$, $SD = 11.24$). Section D measured networking using Hirschi et al. (2018)’s 3-item Networking subscale of the Career Resources Questionnaire (CRQ). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert response format from “Not true at all” (1) to “Completely true” (5). Its sample item was “I frequently build contacts with other people who are important for my career development.” The Cronbach’s alpha of the

scale in this study was 0.78 ($M = 11.51$, $SD = 2.68$).

Procedure

The questionnaires were administered to respondents during lecture hours in the nine universities (three federal, three state and three private, one of each respectively), selected in Ogun, Osun and Oyo State, South West Nigeria. Respondents were randomly selected. They were informed of the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Participation was voluntary. The instructions were clear and simple. Of the 1,100 questionnaires administered, 914 questionnaires were recovered (Response rate = 79.65%). However, only 816 questionnaires were properly filled out and used for analysis. Hypothesis 1 was assessed with Pearson’s product-moment correlation statistic while hypothesis two was tested with multiple linear regression statistic.

RESULTS

Hypothesis one, which stated that there would be a significant positive relationship between mentoring, networking and undergraduate perceived employability, was supported in the predicted direction. The result showed that perceived employability had a significant positive

relationship with mentoring ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$) and networking ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$). There was also a significant positive relationship between mentoring and networking ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$). The result is shown in Table 1 below.

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Table 1: Correlation Table Showing the Inter-correlations between Mentoring, Networking and Perceived Employability

Factors	Mean	SD	1	2	3
Mentoring	55.23	11.24	—		
Networking	11.51	2.69	.473**	—	
Perceived Employability	119.14	19.11	.491**	.480**	—

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

Hypotheses two stated that there would be a significant main and joint influence of mentoring and networking on PE. It was supported in the predicted direction. The obtained multiple regression result showed that perceived employability was significantly predicted by mentoring ($\beta = 0.34$, $t = 10.34$, $p < 0.01$), accounting for 34% of the observed variance of PE. The result also showed that networking ($\beta = 0.32$, $t = 9.74$, $p < 0.01$) significantly

predicted the PE of undergraduates, accounting for 32% of the observed variance of PE. The regression model test result showed that the career self-management strategies of mentoring and networking significantly jointly predicted the PE of undergraduates [$F(2, 813) = 191.54$, $p < 0.01$] and accounted for 32.0% of PE's total variance. The hypothesis was analysed using multiple regression statistic. The results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Table Showing the Main and Joint Prediction Effect of Mentoring and Networking on Perceived Employability

Variables	R	R ²	F	Sig	β	T	P
Mentoring					0.34	10.34	<.01
	.57	.32	191.54	.01			
Networking					0.32	9.74	<.01

Dependent Variable: Psychological wellbeing

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DISCUSSION

Hypothesis 1, which stated that the PE of undergraduates would be significantly related to mentoring ($r = 0.49, p < 0.01$) and networking ($r = 0.48, p < 0.01$), was confirmed. The result shows that the more undergraduates adopted mentoring and networking as career self-management strategies, the more their perception of employability was likely to increase positively. This result confirms the findings of Dollinger et al. (2019) when they used a mixed-methods approach (web-based surveys and interviews with 197 students and mentors) to assess three mentoring programmes by alumni of a research-intensive university in Australia. Their findings noted that alumni mentoring fostered valuable industry connections and boosted students' career confidence. Sanusi et al. (2025) found that the 300 Nigerian Youth Corpers, in their study, perceived the NYSC programme as a positive aid in enhancing their employability and also there were positive relationships between employability and NYSC placement and networking opportunities during the programme.

Hypothesis two, which stated that mentoring and networking would significantly independently and jointly predict PE was confirmed. Mentoring

independently predicted PE ($\beta = 0.34, t = 10.34, p < 0.01$). This result showed that mentoring accounted for 34% of the observed variance of PE. This implies that mentoring relationships provide career and psychosocial supports which were important for the development of positive employability perceptions among undergraduates. This is because mentored students had access to important information and counsel which could assist them in remaining positive and resilient in the uncertain labour market of today. This finding was in line with those of Niu et al. (2024), who investigated how mentoring influences university students' perceptions of employability in China. After controlling for age, gender, academic field, and university rank, their result revealed that mentoring significantly positively affected PE.

The result of hypothesis two also showed that networking significantly predicted PE ($\beta = 0.32, t = 9.74, p < 0.01$), accounting for 32% of the observed variance of undergraduate PE. Networks have become important social capital that connect undergraduates to social and professional contacts who are valuable sources of job information and influence. Networks can also be good sources of valuable mentors.

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The obtained result aligned with those of Sin and Amaral (2017), who found that students acquired employability through both university curricula and social network learning. Also, both self-initiated and organisational networking contributed significantly to students' employability perceptions. Also, Chen (2017), drawing on social network theory and using structural equation modelling, found that PE was positively influenced by the network scope, heterogeneity and strength of relationships in social networks.

Finally, mentoring and networking significantly jointly predicted PE [$F(2, 813) = 191.54, p < 0.01$], in the predicted direction. This result showed that perceived employability was actively developed by students through the career self-management strategies of mentoring and networking. This finding supports previous research showing that proactive engagement in mentoring and networking enhances students' employability perceptions. For example, the study by Ma and Bennett (2021), which assessed the relationship between students' PE and their levels of academic engagement (career self-management behaviour/ strategies) and stress, found that self-perceptions of employability were positively associated

with students' academic engagement.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The results of the study revealed a significant positive relationship between PE, mentoring and networking. Perceived employability was significantly predicted independently and jointly by mentoring and networking.

From the results of the study, some recommendations were made:

1. Students must actively participate in CSM activities that enhance their career exploration and planning, help them set realistic goals and foster positive work attitudes and behaviours, which will enhance their employability confidence and resilience.
2. Universities should help students develop their self-awareness. This can be achieved institutionally through career counselling, formal mentoring and networking programmes, student-employer meetings and volunteering opportunities.
3. Future researchers should look into other CSM variables that potentially predict the PE of undergraduates and graduates.

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Declaration of Originality

I declare that this manuscript is my original work and has not been submitted or published elsewhere. I have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

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