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# Marketing graduate students' intention to apply: a study of drivers influencing job choices

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# INTRODUCTION

The personnel selection process is a topic that has been widely developed within the literature over the years. The relevance of this process has been investigated both from the point of view of organizations, with the stream of research known as *organization attraction*, and from the side of applicants, focusing on the psychological and decision-making issues of the latter during the job-search phase.

Considering the perspective of organizations, several authors including Hallén (2007), Minchington (2010) and Prinsloo (2008) observed that in a historical period where skills and knowledge represent a competitive differential, companies cannot ignore the importance of attracting and retaining talented employees. Furthermore, Cheese et al. (2007) emphasized that this requires a special effort from companies given the increased competition in the job market caused by the advent of globalization and liberalization. Consequently, as Jain and Bhatt (2014, p.635) observed: "Development of a better understanding of the expectations of young graduates and the organizational characteristics that influence them during their job searches is crucial for organizations (Montgomery and Raus, 2011).".

As all social phenomena and processes, the selection process is subject to the changes dictated by society itself and especially by technological progress. Compared to the past, there has been a considerable change in the way in which companies and graduate students interact and in how the information needed by both parties is collected. This process has always been characterized by a particular asymmetry of information between the two actors: in this sense there is a first remarkable change, as nowadays applicants have at their disposal a greater number of means through which to obtain information on the actual working conditions offered by a company. In this regard, Cable and Turban (2001) suggested that three main types of information are likely to be relevant to prospective applicants: job information, employer information and people information. In this perspective, the possibility of finding information on the web from current or former employees of an organization (Glassdoor.it for example collects information on pay levels and feedback on working conditions) is very important, but at the same time the way in which the employer itself presents its offer is relevant for potential applicants' evaluations.

In this context, companies tend to optimize their selection processes using technological tools that allow the evaluation of large numbers of candidates at the same time and the implementation of psychological techniques to better frame candidates. Williamson, King, Lepak, & Sarma (2010) pointed out in their study on the attraction of applicants that a company's website is a very efficient medium to carry out recruitment activities, both considering the lower costs respect to traditional recruiting mediums and a more effective communication with applicants. In particular, the authors observed that: "[…] there is evidence that recruitment Web sites can play an important role in determining whether an organization attract not just applicants, but qualified applicants (Allen, Mahto, & Otondo, 2007; Cober, Brown, Keeping & Levy, 2004; Dineen, Ling, Ash & DelVecchio, 2007)." (p.670). Indeed, it is important to emphasize, as also argued by Barber (1998) that one

of the intermediate goals of the selection process is to attract a large pool of qualified applicants since the early stages of the process. Cable & Judge (1994) and Rynes (1991) have identified a further element to be considered: higher quality job seekers tend to be more selective about job proposals, consequently they are less likely to spend time and resources in pursuing jobs that are not expected to provide rewards and opportunities that match their abilities. It is therefore necessary for organisations to structure and communicate their job proposals taking into account the characteristics of the ideal applicant: based on the level of experience, training and objectives that the candidate may have, it is essential to know drivers to leverage to increase the chances of attracting the attention of qualified applicants.

It is clear that the stages of this process are closely linked to external factors such as the cultural context in which they take place, the specific business sector to which the actors belong and also the socio-demographic characteristics of the graduate students. The main objective of this study is to highlight the role that the elements that make up a job offer have on the psychology of the candidate and in particular on his or her the intention to apply. The study will focus on an analysis sample of Italian Marketing students who have graduated or are about to graduate and therefore have had or are about to have their first approach to the labor market. Accordingly, the study's research question is presented below:

**Research Question 1:** Which are the drivers that affect Italian Marketing graduate students' intention to apply for a job?

The first chapter is divided into two main blocks: the first part, regarding the general situation of marketing trends, while the second part of the chapter will consider the literature review and the theoretical background, starting point of the research. Lastly, in the second chapter the research method and the relative results will be described, introducing the tools deployed and the research design. In the last section of this study discussion and conclusion will provide managerial implications and suggestions for further studies in this field.

# Chapter 1 – Literature Review

## 1.1 Framing

Nowadays, the study and understanding of the dynamics that characterise the tertiary sector are relevant given the development both at academic level and in the labour market of this sector. In particular, Cattani & Pedrini (2020) observed that the assessment of labour market outcomes of Higher Education programmes is becoming more and more critical in the political agenda at both national and international level to understand whether the tertiary sector is providing the right kind of skill and knowledge to new graduate students. The tertiary sector has developed significantly, to such an extent that the actual society, today, is referred to as the "services society". In this context, marketing has evolved and today companies have strengthened their marketing departments and many independent marketing agencies have been created. In this regard, the Prometeia agency in its study published in September 2020, highlighted the constant growth in the number of employees working for advertising and market research companies in Italy from 2017 to 2021 (Statista, September 2020).

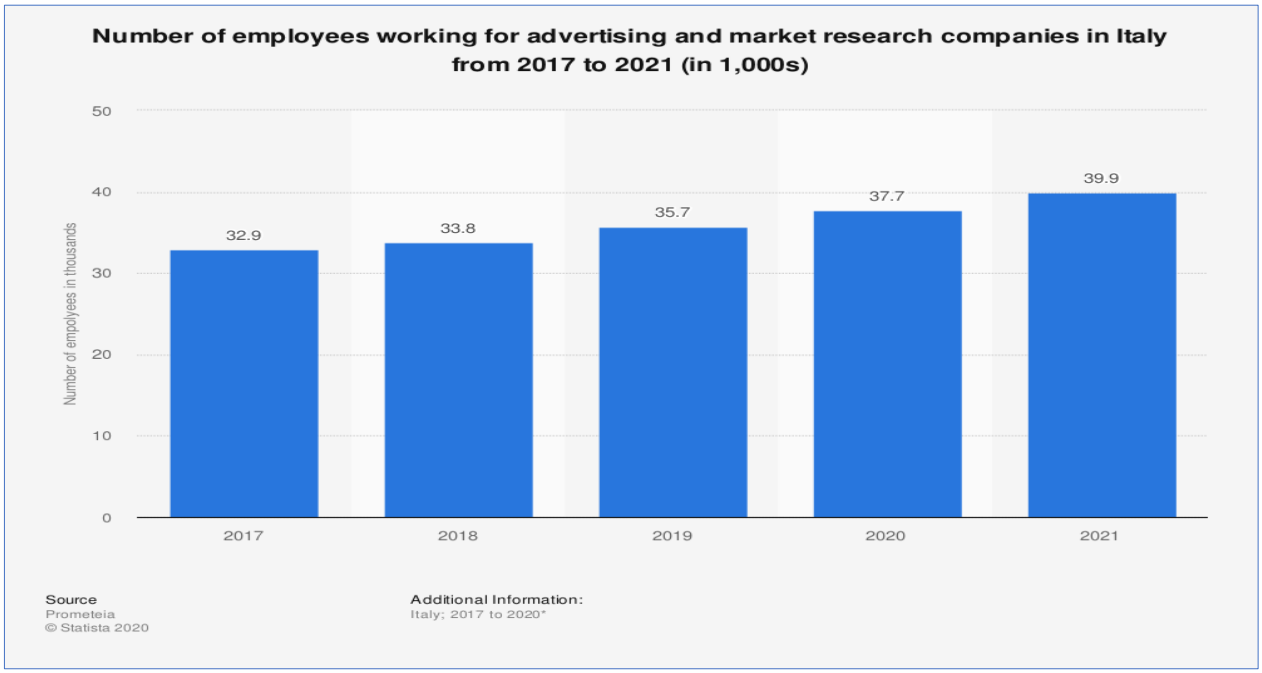


***Figure 1.1**: Number of employees working for advertising and market research companies in Italy from 2017 to 2021*
***Source:** Prometeia, Analisi dei microsettori- Pubblicità, marketing, ricerche di mercato, sondatti (p. 15), June 2019*

In the last decades marketing activities have increased their effectiveness and efficiency, as a consequence of technological development and social forces. In particular, in addition to the specialisation of traditional marketing techniques, such as TV advertising and PR activities, it is possible to observe an horizontal development of the marketing's boundaries related to the growth of digital marketing and the rise of social

networks platforms. From the companies' point of view, this change has led to the need for research and introduction of new professional profiles with specific skills to take advantage of these new opportunities. In the literature, several authors stressed the need for companies to keep up to date with new technological and socio-demographic developments. For example, Dumitriu et al. (2019) in their study underlined that the digital marketing is a fundamental component for the growth and the enhancement of the brand equity for SMEs (small and medium sized enterprises), key actors of the European economy. Labour market demand for digital marketing experts and content creators is nowadays high, being supported by technological development, and this trend is clearly established even in the literature. However, to an equal extent, many articles focus on the issue of graduate students' work-readiness, considering their typical difficulties in the transition from university to the labour market. Also Cabellero, Lissette, Walker & Arlene (2010) observed the importance of "work-readiness" as a requirement for recruitment, but at the same time identify an absence of evidence in the literature on the possibility of evaluating this variable. It is difficult to assess how ready a candidate is to enter the labour market without previous experiences: it is likely that the urgency to increase work experience have an effect on graduate students job-related decisions.

The research of new professional profiles and new skills in the labour market, have certainly influenced the education planning and the decision-making model of many graduate students in the marketing sector, and it will be of interest for this study to observe the dynamics that govern their intention to apply for a job.

### 1.2 New trends in marketing and the implications on selection processes

Changes in the marketing sector have been clearly identified over the years by both practitioners and scholars. Vinerean (2017) affirmed that marketing practices, today, are influenced by technological innovation and social media, which helped customers to become more empowered and engaged in their brand interactions. From the companies' point of view, the most important developments were mainly two: the possibility to exploit e-commerce in relation to conversion goals, and the use of digital marketing tools to strengthen brand awareness and brand knowledge. Such an important change within a sector is naturally reflected in the labour market, both on companies and on job seekers side. However, considering the Italian panorama, the literature has not been addressed the consequences that this change has eventually brought in the labour market. It will be of interest of this study to analyse part of this phenomenon, focusing on the job-seeker side.

The elements that have brought this change are especially technological progress and the large-scale use of social networks. Today, social networks represent a relevant source of data for companies and an important touchpoint with consumers and prospects, and technological progress has made it possible to efficiently exploit this large amount of data. The digital transformation is both a challenge and an opportunity: as Di Gregorio, Maggioni, Mauri & Mazzucchelli (2019) underlined, the traditional marketing career path has been disrupted, consequently, choosing a career path coherent with new needs of the companies should allow candidates to have an advantage during the selection process.

The importance of social networks is widely studied within the literature, being currently acknowledged to be a highly efficient instrument to reach millions of consumers, exploit online WOM, and influence consumers' decision-making processes by expanding the target audience (Pantano, Priporas & Migliano; 2019). Pantano, Priporas & Migliano (2019) in their study on the integration of social networks into the marketing mix, observed how social networks like Facebook have increased the power of consumers, pushing marketers to reconsider their traditional model. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this change is the speed with which it occurred and how our society has changed long-established practices. Think of the steady increase in online shopping, or the gradual replacement of newspapers with online news and the use of social networks as a source of information. One element that has further increased the importance of the digital component was the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on a sample of 1000 Italian respondents aged 16-30 years, social media is the activity with the greatest increase in use since the start of lockdown (Statista, March 2020). The inability for customers to go to physical shops has led companies to boost their e-commerce and set up consistent digital communication and digital marketing practices. A practical example that I have had the opportunity to observe is represented by L'Oréal Italia, the market leader company in beauty & cosmetics sector, which decided to significantly cut its investments to reduce losses, except for digital activities, such as exploring new marketing opportunities in the emerging social network TikTok.

These aspects may suggest that society, companies, and individuals are experiencing a disruptive change that has challenged established practices over the past decades. One of the consequences of this ongoing change, from a company's point of view, may have been the need to assess the trade-off between updating actual employees' skills and looking for new professional profiles whose education included skills in the new digital activities that have become increasingly important over the years.

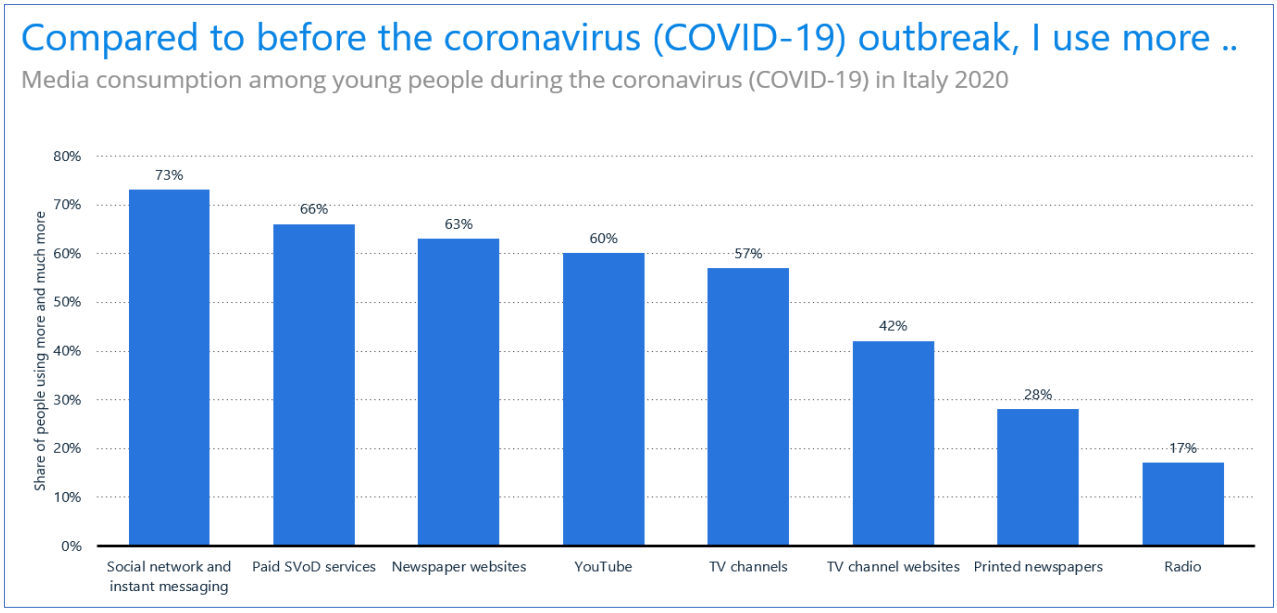


***Figure 1.2**: Compared to before the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, I use more...*

***Source:** MTV, Irresponsabili a chi? (p. 16), April 2020*

However, the study realised by Walker, Tsarenko, Wagstaff, Powell & Steel (2009) highlights a characteristic of graduate candidates that can certainly contrasts what has been said above. The authors seek to identify the critical components of marketing education that enable students to transform into competent marketing practitioners. The findings of the study, whose strength is considering simultaneously graduates and their employers' impressions during the early years of transition from recent graduate to marketing professional, show that on average both employers and graduates indicate that it takes up to 2 years to develop proficiency in their first marketing role. This could explain why many universities, in addition to international experience and extra-curricular activities, encourage graduate students to engage in work experience even before graduating. Referring to the findings of the study, graduate students are generally conscious of their need for work-experience. Indeed, during the decision- making process concerning the job positions to which they aspire, graduate students could be encouraged to positively consider temporary experiences, if these represent an added value for their training and for their future careers. The effect of this situation on marketing graduate students' intention to apply will be evaluated in this study.

Considering the organisational level of companies, as traditional marketing functions continue to be of great importance, new digital teams have often been created or, alternatively, new positions with complementary tasks have been added to existing teams. In particular, the digital transformation of marketing requires companies to hiring new professional profiles and creating new organisational structures to succeed in the digital domain (Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011; Lamberton & Stephen, 2016; Royle & Laing, 2014). Thomas, Andrew & Jeffery M. Ferguson (2019) in their study "Preparing workplace-ready students with digital marketing skills" underlined that "digital marketing practice continues to grow along with the need for a qualified workforce". This statement is supported by the market situation: the authors reported that demand in online content creation and advertising is "outpacing qualified job applicants with an anticipated industry spend of 100 billion dollars annually (Burning Glass Technologies, 2017)". Also, they suggest that "students must invest time to learn from the frustrations and challenges of working with the actual providers of services (e.g. Google Ads, Facebook, and LinkedIn)".

Minder and Balina (2015) conducted a study on the approach that companies should have to guarantee actual employee-satisfaction and, especially, to attract new professional profiles, and how these practices may impact the business performances. They underlined that the attractiveness of an organization towards potential employees is a crucial aspect for general management, as it plays an increasing role to reach company's goals. In particular, the authors observed that an approach which takes into account the needs of a target group that should be acquired and retained by the organization, is necessary to stimulate effectiveness and efficiency committed to the company's success. Finally, they affirmed that for companies it is important to position themselves successfully as a more attractive employer than their competitors, and it will be interest of this study to evaluate which driver should be leveraged in the attempt.

The Italian labour market is characterised by a high unemployment rate of 9,8% (Istat, December 2020), a fact that might suggest greater market power on the part of companies than graduate candidates. However, as

pointed out in the literature, to optimise recruiting output, it is necessary for companies to refer to the line of study known as human resources marketing and employer branding. Lane (2016) stated that employer branding refers to the tools and practices by which an organization manages its brand, or reputation, as an employer, among certain, specified audience groups. In particular, the author underlines the importance to communicate an EVP (employer value proposition) based on what an organization would like to offer to employees and prospective employees. By analysing this topic, Lane identifies what may be the results of best practices in this area by quoting Hewitt's analysis of the Fortune 500 companies:

1. a 10% increase in attracting and retaining pivotal employees adds approximately $70-$160 million to a company's bottom line;
2. average annual sales growth is nearly 40% higher for best employers vs other companies;
3. best employers enjoy nearly half the turnover and double the applications per opening vs other companies.

The results of a company derive from the optimisation of each individual function, but above all from the achievement of synergy between the different functions. This is especially true in the coordination between the various functions and the human resources, which will have the fundamental task of identifying, selecting and finally hiring the best employees. In a phase of change, being able to find professional profiles with the necessary skills on the labour market could represent a differential advantage. The objective of this study is to assess which are the main drivers that lead graduate students to apply for a specific job, the results should represent an assessment of which aspects of an EVP have the greatest effect on this type of candidates.

### 1.3 Theoretical background

The analysis of selection processes becomes relevant in a historical period in which the labour market is characterized by high levels of competitivity, both on companies and applicants' side. Nowadays companies are facing the challenge of optimising their ability to attract and retain talented employees. In this regard Grăjdieru & Khechoya (2019) stated that "in the knowledge economy, the human capital is the most important source of competitive advantage" (p. 97). Furthermore, the authors argued that "applying branding principles to human resource management contributes the company's attractiveness as an employer" (p. 97). Therefore, it is appropriate to complement the empirical evidence on drivers that influence the marketing graduate students' intentions to apply with a theoretical concept: employer branding. Employer branding has been defined for the first time by Ambler and Barrow (1996) as "The package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (p. 187). Consequently, as Berthon & al. (2005) observed, EB can also be expressed as the global efforts of a company to communicate to current and potential employees that it is a desirable place to work. Employer branding is represented in the literature as an application of marketing principles to HRM practices: it is possible to affirm that a strict relation between employer branding activities and companies' reputation exist. Given the nature

of the selection processes, i.e. a process involving the interaction between two parties, and the importance of companies' reputations on applicants, employer branding assumes a discriminating role between applying for a specific position or not. So, we assume that for the same working conditions (i.e. wage-level, work-hour, work location), marketing graduate students' intention to apply will be determined by the capability of the employers to differentiate their offer.

### 1.4 Graduate students' employability and work expectations: which variables influence their intention to apply?

The study of the marketing graduate students' motivations which affect the transition from universities to the labour market is a relevant issue both for the importance of marketing at corporate level and for the impact that today's graduates will have in the sector in the coming decades. In the literature, not many studies have focused on the motivational sphere of the graduate student, rather there is a focus on the role played by organisations (e.g. universities and companies) in identifying the skills needed to make students more attractive on the labour market, increasing their employability.

The employability of graduate students in fact is addressed by many scholars in the literature. As Crossman & Clarke (2009; 2010) reported in their study, employability can be defined as having the skills and abilities to find employment, remain in employment or obtain new employment as, and when, required (Hillage and Pollard 1998; Rothwell and Arnold 2007; Thijssen et al. 2008). Yorke (2004) defines employability as "a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy". In general terms, the concept of employability can be considered as the set of relevant job skills, interpersonal skills and all the elements assessed by employers during the selection process, which express a candidate's market power in the labour market.

While increasing employability is important from a candidate's point of view, it is also necessary to consider the elements that can influence the attractiveness of companies on the labour market. Companies' attractiveness has been widely analysed in the literature, considering both monetary and reputational components. One of the elements that should contribute to companies' attractiveness is their own reputation.

As Turban & Cable (2003) stated in their study, " both social identity theory and signalling theory offer rationales for why applicants should be interested in organizational reputation and be more attracted to firms with positive (versus negative) reputations" (p. 735). In this study, we refer to signalling theory as theoretical background. Signalling theory suggests that given the information asymmetry, applicants often do not have complete information about companies: for this reason, they often refer to firms' reputations as signals that provide information about the internal working conditions (Breaugh, 1992; Rynes, 1991). Makarius & Stevens (2019) reported in their study the consideration of many authors on organizational reputation. Forbrum (1996) defined corporate reputation as a perceptual representation of a company's overall appeal versus leading rivals.

Boyd et al. (2010) affirmed that reputation is an intangible resource that enables firms to achieve various goals, as increasing their applicant pool. Another interesting point of view is the one offered by Rindova et al. (2005, p. 1034) which define reputation as the "global impression, which represents how a collective- a stakeholder group or multiple stakeholder groups- perceive a firm". Considering these definitions, companies' reputation has an impact on the decision model of every stakeholder, in particular potential applicant. The impact of reputation on marketing graduate students is expected to be positively related to their intention to apply. This positive effect not only could be reflected on short-term decision (e.g., intention to apply), but even on their long-term job expectations: to be hired by a company with a good reputation represent an important signal in applicants' curriculum given the importance of previous experience in the actual labour market. Smith (2017) affirmed that job expectations play an important role in the graduates' job searching process. Furthermore, the author observed that job search literature has deeply analysed how people search and find jobs, considering the crucial role of expectations during this process. In this regard, Makarius & Stevens (2019) sustained the importance of companies' reputation to strengthen the external perception of employees, serving as a signal to other employers. Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa & von Rittmann (2003) confirmed in their study that reputation quality of prior employment affiliations is often evaluated in hiring decisions. Accordingly, to increase their future employability, graduate students should be expected to have higher intention to apply for companies whose reputation is considered good.

Therefore, it will be considered in this study the effect that reputational driver, like the impact of company reputation on candidates' cv, have on graduate students' intention to apply:

**H1)** Companies reputation has a positive impact on marketing graduate students' intention to apply for specific job.

In the study of hypothesis 1, the impact of a company's reputation on the work-related decisions of graduate students will be assessed. However, it is possible to say that a company's reputation does not only have an influence on the professional sphere of an individual, but also on his or her relational sphere. This pattern has been addressed in organization attraction's theories as the self-presentation goals of applicants that underlie attraction to organizations. Ashforth & Mael (1989) and Scott & Lane (2000) observed in their studies that organization often contribute to the formation of their members' social identity and generally people identify with organizations to enhance their own self-esteem. Furthermore, Cable & Turban (2001) enlarged this perspective, affirming that even the company's applicants will focus on their feelings and impression regarding companies when they are looking for a job. Another interesting view is the one offered by Lievens and Highhouse (2003): the authors underlined that the role of employees' symbolic associations with the company for which they work has a great importance, together with instrumental attributes of the job, first of all for the attraction and then for the retention. Highhouse, Thornbury & Little (2007) have further deepened this topic by considering the impact that symbolic features of firms have on companies' attraction. In particular, the

authors suggested that symbolic features "allows job seeker to communicate to others how he or she wants to be perceived. That is, we suggest that concern for symbolic attributes is motivated by desires to regulate others' impressions of one's self" (p. 134). It is therefore possible that the company's reputation has a twofold impact on applicants' job choices: on the one hand, the applicant has personal expectations linked to his or her own education; on the other, the applicant values the reputation of a company as a means of expressing himself or herself and acquiring social approval. In this regard, Lievens and Highhouse (2003¸ p. 135) affirmed that "job seekers not only concern themselves with the tangible and functional features of jobs (e.g., working conditions, job security) but also with the meanings that people associate with the employing organization (e.g., sincerity, prestige)". Accordingly, I refer as theoretical background to this hypothesis to the Social Identity theory which, as suggested by Davis, Love & Fares (2019, p.256) affirms that "identities are internalized meanings attached to the self as a unique person, an occupant of a role, and/or as a member of a group (Burke and Stets 2009; Stets and Burke 2014a; Stets and Serpe 2013).". According to Shavitt (1989), the main function of social identity is therefore to behave in such a way as to obtain social approval.

The existence of a strong social component, i.e., the search for external approval by candidates, is likely to have an impact on the job search process of companies' applicants. Once hypothesis 1 has been studied, verifying that a brand reputation has a differential effect on the intention to apply, it will be interest of this study to observe the impact of the social component described above.

As Highhouse, Thornbury & Little (2007, p.137) observed: "At a more specific level, two social-identity needs dominate the attitude literature: the social-adjustment need (i.e., the need to impress) and the value-expressive need (i.e., the need to express; Katz, 1960; Smith et al., 1956).". I will focus only on one type of need, that is social adjustment need, which refer to applicants' interest to be associated with a company deemed to be impressive or prestigious in order to impress others. Social adjustment concerns in applicants it is consequently expected to impact the intention to apply by affecting the companies consideration set of the jobseeker, potentially excluding less-known ones. In this regard Highhouse, Lievens & Sinar (2003) observed that the perceptions of the prestige of well-known company shown a strong impact over intention to apply.

**H2)** Marketing graduate students' social adjustment concern is related to their intention to apply for a company.

Graduate students' intention to apply can also be affected by the personal and financial commitment related to their training. Higher expenses on education can increase their expected salary level, just as excellent academic achievement can increase their job expectations. Consequently, graduate students might decrease the number of job positions in their consideration set, increasing their selectivity. An interesting study about relationship between marketing education and marketing careers is the one published by Bacon (2017). He replicated a frequently cited article carried out by Hunt, Chonko & Wood in 1986, trying to identify the most significant changes occurred in the 30 years between the two publications. Hunt, Chonko & Wood (1986)

study's main finding was that marketing degrees have not a significant correlation with income in a marketing career. As expected, the results of the Bacon's study differ substantially from the HCW's one: having a marketing major is significantly related to higher income in a marketing career. Cai (2012,2013) studying the employers' perceptions above graduate candidates, consider both the human capital theory (Schultz 1961; Becker 1964) and job market signalling theory (Stiglitz 1975; Arrow 1973; Spence 1973). In particular, Human capital theory argues that education increases individuals' productivity, providing marketable skills and abilities relevant to job performance. Consequently, the more highly educated people are, the higher the chance to get a better position in the labour market. In this regard, it is likely that in the Italian labour market, characterised by a high unemployment rate, the need for investments in high level of education is even more important for new graduates. Matthews & Mercer-Mapstone (2016, 2018) observed in their study that "graduates increasingly are expected to be proficient in a range of skills that are widely applicable and transferrable, and beyond discipline-oriented content knowledge" (p. 644). For these reasons, to have more possibilities in the labour market, graduate students are implicitly required to develop their skills horizontally, combining academic education with the study of foreign languages, international experiences, interpersonal relationships, and the capability to deal with digital software and tools. Taking into account this trend, universities have increased their focus on the development of extra-curricular skills considered relevant to enter the labour market. Nevertheless, Matthews and Mercer-Mapstone pointed out that current research indicates that both candidates and employers consider primary responsibility for employability resting with the individual (Van Buren III 2003; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005). Mazuki, Maimun & Siong (2011) affirm that university graduates' expectations are mainly based on what they have been taught in their formal education: this statement is consistent with the possibility that higher levels of formal education result in higher expectations. However, at the same time this statement implicitly contrasts with Matthews and Mercer-Mapstone's view: if graduates' expectations are mainly based on formal education, the importance of extra-curricular skills acquired independently would seem to have no particular effect on the candidates' system of choices. It is likely that raising the level of education requires a greater effort both in economic terms and commitment for graduate students: probably this trend has an influence on their job expectations and on what will be the criteria considered when applying for a job. In this regard, it is interesting to cite the Alonso & Romero's study (2016): the authors stated that wage expectations influence individual choices on education, investment and labour supply. Furthermore, they find out that past academic performances play a key role in the ability to form wage expectations. It is expected that both monetary and motivational variables may be influenced by this trend. However, as Jusoh, Simun & Chong observed, today exist a conflict between graduates' expectations and their actual experiences, and they may face work situations totally different from what they had initially expected. It will be interest of this study to isolate the effects of each driver, so that it should be possible to individuate the component with the highest impact on candidates.

**H3)** Wage-level is positively related to marketing graduate students' intention to apply.

**H4)** The coherence between job description and graduates' education is positively related to marketing graduate students' intention to apply.

In summary, the actual trends in marketing sector and in the labour market are expected to impact the behaviours of companies, universities, students, and in particular the way in which they interact each other. By examining the effect that actual trends have on the variable studied, which is "marketing graduate students' intention to apply", the intent of this study is to evaluate the peculiar traits of this target group during the transition from university to job.

# CHAPTER 2 – Data collection and empirical study

Once the hypothesis, the research question and the related conceptual model have been introduced, this chapter will deepen, analyse, and report the data necessary for the study of the topic. The first part will present the research design, the data collection's methods and how the information will be elaborated. The results, the discussion of hypotheses, future potential research and managerial implications will conclude this chapter.

## 2.1 Methodology

The goal of this study is to analyse the hypotheses that have been introduced, identifying which drivers effectively affect marketing graduate student's intention to apply and which ones have the greatest impact. Given the goal of the study, the research design more appropriated is represented by a causal research, that allow us to describe the characteristics of a relevant group. Accordingly, I refer to a quantitative approach which is a reliable methodology to test statistical evidence related to the topic. To test the hypotheses of the study, a questionnaire survey has been ran considering the opinions of Italian marketing graduate students. Given the target group involved in the study, mainly represented by young people mobile-friendly, and the historical period in which the study was developed, the best alternative to administer the survey is represented by online survey.

## 2.2. Questionnaire design

For the construction of the questionnaire, measures consisting of several items were used to assess the theoretical constructs introduced in the previous chapter. The search for and use of items already tested and used in the literature allows the development of a research tool that increases the chances to have reliable, accurate and valid measures. The questionnaire has been developed both in Italian and English, using the same questions opportunely translated and maintaining the same order.

### 2.2.1 The effect of company reputation on intention to apply

The first theorical construct to be investigated in this study is the impact of company reputation on marketing graduate students' intention to apply. I assume that the concept of company reputation is linked to the recognisability of the company by the agents of the labour market. This assumption is related to signaling theory, which is one of the most cited theory in the literature on recruitment processes. Celani & Singh (2011, p.223) reported in their study "Signaling theory (Rynesm 1991; Spence, 1973) is commonly used to explain how applicant attraction to a recruiting organization may, in part, be influenced by information, or signals,

about an organization's characteristics revealed during recruitment activities.". The basis of the signalling theory is the information asymmetry behind the selection process: companies do not know the real preparation of the candidates, who in turn do not know the effective working conditions: in this situation both recruiters and applicants take in account "signals". Jain & Bhatt (2015, p. 635) observed that "To reinforce their capacity to recruit young graduates, some firms have already decided to use the concept of the employer brand which can be described as the benefits associated with a job or an employer and their promotion inside and outside the firm (Ambler and Barrow, 1996)". Well-known brands, given the importance of attracting talented professionals, are more likely to invest in employer branding activities improving their reputation. Considering the assumption of signalling theory from the graduate students' perspective, the opportunity to include work experience in companies with a good reputation in their CVs is a valuable signal to possible future employers. Based on these assumptions, the first block of questions will include two sections.

The firsts five questions of this section are aimed at verifying the respondent's knowledge of the company and his opinion on company's reputation. For each question, respondents are requested to indicate (using 7-point Likert-type scales, 1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree) the extent to which they agree the statement presented. The first five questions were adapted from Turban et al. (1998) and aim to identify respondents' perceptions of the company's reputation.

| |
|---|
| I am familiar with this company |
| I know a lot about what this company does |
| I have heard a lot of good things about this company |
| This company has a reputation of being an excellent employer |
| Most graduates are interested in this firm as an employer |

***Figure 2.2.1:*** *Items for measuring the perception of reputation.*
***Source:*** *Turban et al. (1998).*

The last five questions are aimed at measuring our dependent variable, that is the intention to apply which can be defined as the result of the candidate's decision-making process in relation to the desirability of the employer and the job offer's characteristics. These questions will be used in the evaluation of each hypotheses. This item was adapted by Aiman-Smith, Bauer & Cable (2001) and Highhouse, Lievens & Sinar (2016) studies using 7-point Likert-type scales (1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree).

| |
|---|
| I would accept a job offer from this company after graduating |
| I would make this company one of my first choices as an employer |
| If this company invited me for a job interview I would go |
| I would exert a great deal of effort to work for this company |
| I would not be interested in this company except as a last resort |

***Figure 2.2.2:*** *Items for measuring the intention to apply.*
***Source:*** *Aiman-Smith, Bauer & Cable (2001); Highhouse, Lievens & Sinar (2016).*

### 2.2.2 The effect of social-adjustment concern on intention to apply

The impact of a company's reputation on a candidate's choices is determined by several components. Firstly, in relation to the previous paragraph, I will be measure the intention to apply linked to the fact that the candidate knows the brand and its reputation as an employer. Subsequently, through the items presented in this section of the study, the objective is to assess whether an individual personality trait, namely social-adjustment concerns, is related to the intention to apply by restricting the consideration set. This allows a more complete analysis of the reputational driver and also makes it possible to identify further characteristics of the candidate, thus obtaining more information on his/her personality. In this regard Snyder & DeBono (1985) confirmed that individuals with high level of social adjustment concerns, were more impacted by the image of a product respect to its quality, and this dynamic can also be applied to brands as employers. Lemmink et al. (2003) carried out an interesting study about the role of corporate image on graduate students' intention to apply. The authors distinguished between the two components of company image: corporate image, that can be described as "The set of perceptions that people have of organizations is referred to as the corporate image (Holzhauer, 1999)." (p. 4), and company employment image, which represents what the organization as employer stands for. According to the authors, "this image can also be formed after exposure to a company's recruitment activities. [...]. However, the impressions people hold about the company's attractiveness as an employer is formed by many factors and is not only created after exposure to recruitment activities" (p. 4). This statement is coherent with the possibility that individual with high social adjustment concern will probably present different intention to apply based on their actual consideration of a specific company.

As stated in the previous paragraph, survey's respondents have been randomly exposed to a well-known brand (Nike) or a not well-known brand belonging to the same business sector. Once the respondents have evaluated the familiarity and the reputation of the brand and their related intention to apply, a multi-items scale have been used to verify their social adjustment concern.

The scale was adapted by Highhouse, Lievens & Little (2007) study and it is composed by 4 items using 5-point Likert-type scales (1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree).

| |
|---|
| It is important that the company be popular and prestigious |
| Working for an impressive company would make me seem impressive to others |
| I want to work for a company that is perceived to be impressive |
| I would consider how impressive my family thinks working for the company would be |

***Figure 2.2.3:*** *Items for measuring graduate student' social adjustment concern.*
***Source:*** *Adapted from Highhouse, Lievens & Little (2007).*

### 2.2.3 The effect of wage level on intention to apply

The third construct that is analyzed is the effect of wage level on marketing graduate students' intention to apply. Brunello, Lucifora & Winter-Ebmer (2004, p. 1117) affirmed that "When individuals make decisions about higher education, they face important choices that depend on expectations about earnings and employment opportunities. Educational attainment, labor supply decisions and the choice of occupation […] require individuals to form (subjective) expectations on the different possible outcomes, under different contingencies.". Generally, the first job opportunities that graduate students get do not present high wage level and applicants are aware of this contingency. Once the economic conditions of the offer will be displayed, respondents will be required to judge the attractiveness and to report their intention to apply. The items to measure economic appeal were adapted by Berthon, Ewing & Hah (2005), one of the most recognized study in the employer attractiveness area. For each question, respondents are requested to indicate (using 7-point Likert-type scales, 1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree) the extent to which they agree the statement presented.

| |
|---|
| This job offer presents an above average basic salary |
| This job offer presents an attractive overall compensation package |

***Figure 2.2.4:*** *Items for measuring wage level.*
***Source:*** *Adapted from Berthon, Ewing & Hah (2005).*

The item to analyze the intention to apply is adapted from Aiman-Smith, Bauer & Cable (2001) and Highhouse, Lievens & Sinar (2016) studies using 7-point Likert-type scales (1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree).

| |
|---|
| I would accept this job offer after graduating |
| I would make this job offer one of my first choices as an employer |
| If I was invited for a job interview, I would go |
| I would exert a great deal of effort to get this job |
| I would not be interested in this job offer except as a last resort |

***Figure 2.2.5:*** *Items for measuring the intention to apply.*
***Source:*** *Adapted from Aiman-Smith, Bauer & Cable (2001); Highhouse, Lievens & Sinar (2016).*

### 2.2.4 The effect of job description-education background fit on intention to apply

The last construct I will study concerns the impact of competences and training of marketing graduate students on their job choice. Jyoti, Sharma, Kour & Kour (2020; p.112) affirmed "Individuals come to organizations with certain needs, desires, skills, etc. and expect to find an environment where they can utilize their abilities and satisfy their basic needs (Farzaneh et al. , 2014). Person-job fit is the degree of alignment between individuals and the job (Wong and Tetrick, 2017 cited in Huang et al. , 2019). A good match between employees and their job can produce positive attitudes and behaviour.". Several studies have demonstrated the importance of person-job fit for the optimization of human resources outcomes. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that it is crucial for both companies and applicants that the person-job fit is identified from the recruitment phase onwards. In this regard, according to Takeuchi & Takeuchi (2013), it has been observed that a specific assessment of a job and a well-planned recruitment and selection of employees will increase the future employees' job engagement and commitment. These assumptions are coherent with the hypothesis that marketing graduate students should have greater intentions to apply when the job description is aligned with their skills and attitudes. Person-Organization fit studies also included the individual job search and choice phase, even if Kristof (1996, p.21) observed that "P-O fit literature has concentrated on the consequences, rather than the antecedents of individuals' assessments of P-O fit during organizational entry". Furthermore, Kristof (1996, p.21) affirmed "The specific influences on fit assessments were the firm's general reputation, attitude toward product/industry, […], training and advancement opportunities and geographic location (Rynes et al., 1991).".

In order to evaluate the construct presented, I combined items from Saks & Ashforth (1997) and Kristof (1996), measuring the Graduate Student-Job fit through a 5 item Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree, and 5= strongly agree). Before answering these questions, respondents will be shown a job offer listing the characteristics of the job position, without referring to monetary components.

| |
|---|
| I am the right type of person for this job |
| This job is the job I was seeking |
| My knowledge, skills and abilities match the requirements of the job |
| The job fulfils my needs |
| The job has a good match for me |

***Figure 2.2.6:*** *Items for measuring the person-job fit.*
***Source:*** *Adapted from Saks & Ashforth (1997) & Kristof (1996)*

The item to analyze the intention to apply is adapted from Aiman-Smith, Bauer & Cable (2001) and Highhouse, Lievens & Sinar (2016) studies using 7-point Likert-type scales (1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree).

| |
|---|
| I would accept this job offer after graduating |
| I would make this job offer one of my first choices as an employer |
| If I was invited for a job interview, I would go |
| I would exert a great deal of effort to get this job |
| I would not be interested in this job offer except as a last resort |

***Figure 2.2.7:*** *Items for measuring the intention to apply.*
***Source:*** *Adapted from Aiman-Smith, Bauer & Cable (2001); Highhouse, Lievens & Sinar (2016).*

## 2.3 Vignette Design

Considering the nature of the study, it is important to present respondents with a realistic scenario. In this regard, to test hypotheses I adopted an experimental vignette methodology (EVM), referring to Aguinis & Bradley (2014) study. A vignette, according to Atzmuller & Steiner (2010, p.128), can be defined as a "short, carefully constructed description of a person, object, or situation, representing a systematic combination of characteristics".

The choice of EVM is linked to the practical difficulties in developing an experimental design and, as Aguinis & Bradley (2014, p.352) observed, the possibility of using this method "[…] to manipulate and control the independent variables, enhancing both internal and external validity (Atzmu¨ller & Steiner, 2010; Hox, Kreft, & Hermkens, 1991).". Below are the vignettes used as a premise for the questions presented to study the three hypotheses.

### 2.3.1 Company's reputation Vignette

In this section, two different brands will be randomly presented to the survey respondents to assess the impact of company reputation on their choices. The brands shown belong to the same sector, and no details related to a job offer will be presented. For instance, the brands are Nike and Joma. The difference between the two alternatives will be the notoriety of the brand: in one case a well-known brand (Nike) will be shown, in the alternative scenario a less well-known brand (Joma) will be presented. Both brands belong to the sportswear sector, which tends to be less influenced by gender differences. Both vignettes are presented in both Italian and English, below is the English version.

***Figure 2.3.1:*** *Well-known brand Vignette*
***Source:*** *Realized ad-hoc*

***Figure 2.3.2:*** *Not well-known brand Vignette*
***Source:*** *Realized ad-hoc*

### 2.3.2 Salary and company's benefit Vignette

To verify the second hypothesis, I will randomly display a marketing-related salary and company's benefit offer of an employer to the survey respondents. For instance, in one case the proposed monthly salary will be of 500 euros, in the other case it will be of 850 euros. Both scenarios refer to monetary compensation for internship, which tends to be the most common form of contract at the beginning of a professional career. Once the economic conditions of the offer will be displayed, respondents will be required to judge the attractiveness and to report their intention to apply. Both vignettes are presented in both Italian and English, below is the English version.

**SALARY AND COMPANY BENEFITS**

1. Remuneration 500 € gross per month;
2. Unlimited access to the E-Learning platform
3. Agreement (10% discount) with gyms and cinemas.

***Figure 2.3.3:*** *Worst scenario: salary and company benefit Vignette*

***Source:*** *Realized ad-hoc*

**SALARY AND COMPANY BENEFITS**

1. Remuneration 850 € gross per month & free access to company canteen;
2. Possibility of residence accommodation during the first 2 weeks
3. Unlimited access to the E-Learning platform
4. Agreement with a real estate agency specialized in rentals.

***Figure 2.3.4:*** *Best scenario: salary and company benefit Vignette*

***Source:*** *Realized ad-hoc*

The choice of the economic conditions shown above derives from an observation of the economic proposals for marketing internships on the Italian scene, using Linkedin as a search tool. Specifically, the worst scenario Vignette represent an average economic proposal for an internship in Italy, while for the best scenario Vignette, L'Oréal's economic proposal, which is one of the most advantageous in this respect, was taken as a reference.

### 2.3.3 Job description Vignette

The last block of question in the survey regards the person-job fit. In order to study the effect of this driver on the intention to apply, a vignette will be shown reporting a job description listing the main activities related to the position and the requirements that the candidate should have. Specifically, the following vignette was created based on the description of the tasks and requirements listed in L'Oréal's offer for an internship in its marketing department. The vignette is presented in both Italian and English, below is the English version.

**JOB DESCRIPTION**

The candidate will have the objective of supporting the team in carrying out Marketing activities aimed at growing the brand and the categories assigned. The **main activities** are as follows:

1. Monthly sales analysis;
2. Monitoring competitors' activities (launches, communication and promotions) and producing reports;
3. Supporting the implementation of marketing activities, from the launch of new products on the market to the communication of existing brands;
4. Participating in branded projects in collaboration with transversal functions (commercial & digital marketing).

**REQUIREMENTS**

1. Degree in Marketing
2. Entrepreneurial spirit and energic approach in carrying out projects
3. Excellent knowledge of English and Italian
4. Excellent analytical skills and knowledge of the Office package
5. Enthusiasm and willingness to learn

***Figure 2.4.5:*** *Person-job fit Vignette*

***Source:*** *Realized ad-hoc*

### 2.4 Data Collection

The questionnaire was created using Qualtrics Online Survey Software and it was administered to 251 respondents from Italy. Considering the target of the study, the questionnaire was mainly assigned to fellow students of the Marketing course (Italian and English) of Luiss Guido Carli and of my previous faculty, i.e., the University of Pisa. They were recruited by direct contact or WOM, mainly through a WhatsApp broadcast chat. After the data cleaning process, 52 responses were eliminated as incomplete, resulting in a total of 199 valid responses.

### 2.5 Descriptive statistics

The participants were 199 Italian marketing students, of which 55,8% are men and 43,2% are women and a remaining 1% chose to do not disclose gender(111 males, 86 females, 2 unreported gender). Respondents were aged from 20 to 29 years (Mean=24,34; S.D.= 1,38). Considering the respondents' employment status, the 75,9% is a Student, while the remaining 24,1% of the respondents is Employed full-time (18,1%), Employed part-time (1,0%) or Unemployed looking for work (4,5%).

**Table 2.5.1: Sample characteristics**

| **Total number of respondents** | | 199 | 100% |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 111 | 55,80% |
| | Female | 86 | 43,20% |
| | Unreported gender | 2 | 1% |
| Age | ≤20 | 2 | 1% |
| | 21-25 | 162 | 81,40% |
| | 26-30 | 35 | 17,60% |
| Employment status | Student | 151 | 75,90% |
| | Employed full-time | 36 | 18,10% |
| | Employed part-time | 2 | 1% |
| | Unemployed looking for work | 9 | 4,50% |

### 2.6 Scales' reliability: Cronbach's Alpha Analysis

In this study the measuring of different constructs has been carried out through multi-items scale. In this section it will be verified the internal consistency of items. For a scale to be valid, it must first be reliable, which is why the first step in the analysis is reliability. Accordingly, I refer to Cronbach's Alpha test to verify the internal consistency within items. Lance, Butts & Michels (2006) in their study reported several observations from the literature regarding the reliability's cut-off: results of their study shown that a acceptable coefficient should be higher than or equal to 0,7. For instance, before calculating the reliability, a reverse item used to measure the intention to apply, that is "I would not be interested in this company except as a last resort" (measured by a Likert-type scale from 1=strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree) have been recoded in the same variable, by reversing previously assigned values. It should be noted, with regard to the mean and standard deviation values shown in the table below, that the variables collect the responses of subjects randomly exposed to two alternative scenarios.

**Table 2.6.1: Descriptive statistics, correlations and reliabilities of main constructs**

| | ***M*** | ***SD*** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1-Brand Reputation | 4,36 | 1,57 | (0,909) | | | | | | |
| 2-Intention to apply (Reputation) | 4,87 | 1,56 | 0,758** | (0,931) | | | | | |
| 3-Social-Adjustment Concern | 3,66 | 0,85 | 0,046 | 0,007 | (0,842) | | | | |
| 4-Wage Evaluation | 3,35 | 1,70 | 0,320** | 0,253** | -0,035 | (0,808) | | | |
| 5-Intention to apply (Wage) | 4,01 | 1,56 | 0,329** | 0,275** | -0,109 | 0,705** | (0,930) | | |
| 6-Person-job fit | 4,84 | 1,55 | 0,026 | -0,049 | 0,010 | -0,228** | -0,140* | (0,953) | |
| 7-Intention to apply (P-J Fit) | 5,02 | 1,37 | -0,072 | -0,154* | -0,027 | -0,230** | -0,129 | 0,826** | (0,898) |

*Note:Cronbach's alpha reported in parentheses. **p<0,01; *<0,05.*

*Brand Reputation:* This independent variable was measured through a five-item scale. This scale reported an excellent level of reliability (alpha= 0,909) and the correlations between the items is higher than or equal to 0,536. For these reasons, scale have proven to be internally consistent and reliable.

*Intention to apply (reputation):* I measured Intention to apply based on a five-item scale, which has been used once the respondents were exposed to the related vignette. The scale's reliability is excellent (alpha= 0,931) and all the items resulted to be highly correlated each other: correlation inter-item is higher or equal to 0,619.

*Social Adjustment Concern:* Respondents' social adjustment concern was measured through a four-item scale indicating a good reliability (alpha= 0,842) and a satisfactory level of correlations across the items. In fact, the correlation is higher than or equal to 0,502. The scale has proven to be reliable and internally consistent.

*Wage Level Evaluations:* Respondents were asked to evaluate two alternative economic offers, randomly displayed, through a two-item scale. Even if Cronbach's alpha values are typically higher for scales composed by several items, in this case the measure resulted in a good level of reliability (alpha=0,808). The correlation between the two items was good (0,677).

*Intention to apply (wage-level):* I used the same scale previously presented to evaluate intention to apply in relation to the economic offer observed. Also in this case the measure shown an excellent reliability (alpha=0,931) and a good level of inter-item correlation, which was higher than or equal to 0,638.

*Person-Job Fit:* To evaluate the degree to which a job description fit with respondents' expectations and formation, I used a five-item scale. The measure resulted in an excellent reliability (alpha=0,953) and even the correlation between items was very good, with a minimum value equal to 0,736.

*Intention to apply (Person-job fit):* The scale to measure intention to apply has been adapted also in relation to P-J fit. The measure indicates an high reliability (alpha=0,898), while the inter-items correlation was not so high (higher than or equal to 0,404) but still acceptable, considering a typical cut-off of 0,3.

### 2.7 Hypothesis testing and results

Once the reliability test has been carried out, in this paragraph the hypotheses presented in the previews chapter will be tested.

The statistical tests were executed adopting a confidence interval equal to 95%, considering admissible a margin of error α up to 5% (α= 0.05). For Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3, independent samples t-test was adopted, while for Hypothesis 4 a simple regression test was preferred.

I referred to Independent samples t-test to analyze the difference in means of the independent groups that can be individuated in the response set. The feasibility of this option is guaranteed by the fact that respondents were randomly assigned to alternatives scenarios, thus offering the possibility of dividing them into two independent groups with associated means by introducing two dichotomous variables.

The first dichotomous variable was introduced in relation to the brand presented to the respondents in the survey (Value 1=Nike; Value 2= Joma), while the second dichotomous variable was introduced in relation to the alternative economic offers presented (Value 1= Best Wage-Scenario; Value 2= Worst Wage-Scenario).

Considering independent samples t-test, the null hypothesis ($H_0$) and alternative hypothesis ($H_1$) can be expressed in that way, where $\mu_1$ and $\mu_2$ represent the population means for the two groups considered:

$H_0$ : $\mu_1 = \mu_2$ ("the two population means are equal")

$H_1$ : $\mu_1 \neq \mu_2$ ("the two population means are not equal")

Starting from the first hypothesis (H1) that is "Companies reputation has a positive impact on marketing graduate students' intention to apply for specific job" it is possible to state the null and the alternative hypothesis to be tested.

$H_0$ : The intention to apply of respondents exposed to a well-known brand is NOT higher that the intention to apply of respondents exposed to a not well-known brand ($\mu_{NIKE} \leq \mu_{JOMA}$).

$H_1$ : The intention to apply of respondents exposed to a well-known brand is higher than the intention to apply of respondents exposed to a not well-known brand ($\mu_{NIKE} > \mu_{JOMA}$).

The first step of independent samples t-test requires to check the Levene's test (output reported in the Appendix) to evaluate if the groups' variances are equal or not: the test requires the assumption of homogeneity of variance. Since p-value is < .05, H0 is rejected, thus variances are not constant for intention to apply across Nike group and Joma group. So, for the t-test I will refer to the second row of the SPSS output, which is *Equal variances not assumed*.

**Table 2.7.1: Independent samples t-test: Group Statistics**

| Scenario | Mean | Std.Dev. |
|---|---|---|
| **NIKE** | 5,7981 | ,97276 |
| **JOMA** | 3,8646 | 1,4447 |

**Table 2.7.2: Independent samples t-test**

| df | Sign. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| 197 | <,001 | 1,93347 | ,17354 |
| 164,837 | <,001 | 1,93347 | ,17586 |

The t-test to evaluate difference of means across the two groups proved that H0 is rejected (*t*= 10,994 [*df* = 164,837]; *p-value* (<0,001) < 0.05). Therefore, the manipulation of brand was successful and Hypothesis 1 is supported by the underlying data.
The well-known brand (i.e. Nike) was evaluated positively by respondents, which present a statistically much higher intentions to apply than the ones which were exposed to the not well-known brand (i.e. Joma):
$M_{NIKE}$ = 5,7981 SD = 0,97276; $M_{JOMA}$ = 3,8646 SD= 1,4447.

I proceeded with the test of Hypothesis 2 which required a supplementary manipulation. In order to evaluate the differences in the intention to apply between respondents with high social-adjustment concern vs. respondents with low social-adjustment concern, it is necessary to divide them in two distinct sub-group. For instance, social-adjustment concern was measured on a 5 points Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree). Taking into account this aspect, respondents with reported social adjustment concern higher than or equal to 4 (Agree) have been considered to be high in this trait, while respondents with reported score lower than 4 have been considered to be low in social-adjustment concern. Successively, I also used the dichotomous variable related to the brand scenario, resulting in a double independent samples t-test: the first test will consider intention to apply of respondents with high SAC vs. respondents with low SAC exposed to Nike, the second test will consider intention to apply of respondents with high SAC vs. respondents with low SAC exposed to Joma.

The total respondents exposed to Nike were 103; 52 of them presented high level of SAC while 51 presented low level according to the arbitrary cut-off previously introduced. Below the alternative hypotheses of the test:

$H_0$ : The intention to apply of respondents with high level of SAC is NOT higher that the intention to apply of respondents with low level of SAC ($\mu_{HSAC} \leq \mu_{LSAC}$).
$H_1$ : The intention to apply of respondents with high level of SAC is higher that the intention to apply of respondents with low level of SAC ($\mu_{HSAC} > \mu_{LSAC}$).

Levene's test output presents a p-value <.05: H0 is rejected, thus variances are not constant for intention to apply across High SAC group and Low SAC group.

**Table 2.7.3: Independent samples t-test: Group Statistics**

| Scenario | Mean | Std.Dev. |
|---|---|---|
| **High SAC** | 6,05 | 0,704 |
| **Low SAC** | 5,54 | 1,135 |

**Table 2.7.4: Independent samples t-test**

| df | Sign. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| 101 | 0,006 | 0,517 | 0,186 |
| 83,267 | 0,007 | 0,517 | 0,186 |

The t-test to evaluate difference of means across the two groups proved that H0 is rejected (*t*= 2,770 [*df* = 83,267]; *p-value* (0,007) < 0.05). Accordingly, H2 for Nike scenario it is supported by underlying data.
The results of the t-test demonstrate that there is a statistically relevant difference between the means of the two groups, even if the difference is not so high and both groups reported a high intention to apply. This pattern was predictable since individuals with low SAC should not present particular preclusions to the employer.
$M_{HSAC}$ = 6,05 SD = 0,704; $M_{LSAC}$= 5,54 SD= 1,135.

The second part of the test involved the group exposed to the brand Joma. The total respondents exposed to Joma were 96; 46 of them presented high level of SAC while 50 presented low level according to the arbitrary cut-off previously introduced. The method applied and the alternatives hypotheses are the same adopted before.

Since Levene's test p-value > .05, H0 cannot be rejected, thus variances are constant for intention to apply across High SAC group and Low SAC group. So, for the t-test I will refer to the first row of the SPSS output, which is *Equal variances assumed*.

**Table 2.7.5: Independent samples t-test: Group Statistics**

| Scenario | Mean | Std.Dev. |
|---|---|---|
| **High SAC** | 3,67 | 1,496 |
| **Low SAC** | 4,04 | 1,388 |

**Table 2.7.6: Independent samples t-test**

| df | Sign. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| 94 | 0,217 | -0,366 | 0,294 |
| 91,694 | 0,218 | -0,366 | 0,295 |

The t-test to evaluate difference of means across the two groups proved that H0 cannot be rejected (*t*= -1,244 [*df* = 94]; *p-value* (0,217) > 0.05). Accordingly, H2 for Joma scenario it is rejected by underlying data.
The results of the t-test demonstrate that there is not a statistically relevant difference between the means of the two groups. $M_{HSAC}$ = 3,67 SD = 1,496; $M_{LSAC}$= 4,04 SD= 1,188.

The next step is the study of the third hypothesis (H3), which is "Wage-level is positively related to marketing graduate students' intention to apply". In this case, the two independent groups are represented by the ones which were exposed to the Best-Wage scenario and the ones exposed to Worst-Wage scenario. As before, it is necessary to establish the null and the alternative hypotheses for the independent samples t-test:

$H_0$ : The intention to apply of respondents exposed to a higher economic offer is NOT higher that the intention to apply of respondents exposed to a lower economic offer ($\mu_{BEST\text{-}WAGE} \leq \mu_{WORST\text{-}WAGE}$).
$H_1$ : The intention to apply of respondents exposed to a well-known brand is higher than the intention to apply of respondents exposed to a not well-known brand ($\mu_{BEST\ WAGE} > \mu_{WORST\text{-}WAGE}$).

Levene's test p-value= 0,010 < .05, H0 is rejected, thus variances are not constant for intention to apply across Best-Wage scenario group and Worst-Wage scenario group. So, for the t-test I will refer to the second row of the SPSS output, which is *Equal variances not assumed*.

**Table 2.7.7: Independent samples t-test: Group Statistics**

| Scenario | Mean | Std.Dev. |
|---|---|---|
| **Best-Wage** | 4,7197 | 1,38117 |
| **Worst-Wage** | 2,9951 | 1,20697 |

**Table 2.7.8: Independent samples t-test**

| df | Sign. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| 197 | <,001 | 1,72454 | 0,18901 |
| 187,579 | <,001 | 1,72454 | 0,18458 |

The t-test to evaluate difference of means across the two groups proved that H0 is rejected (*t*= 9,343 [*df* = 187,579]; *p-value* (<0,001) < 0.05). Therefore, the manipulation of economic offers proposed was successful, and H3 it is supported by underlying data.

The Best-Wage scenario was evaluated positively by respondents, which presented a statistically much higher intentions to apply than the ones which were exposed to the Worst-Wage scenario:

$M_{BEST\text{-}WAGE}$ = 4,7197 SD = 1,38117; $M_{WORST\text{-}WAGE}$ = 2,9951 SD= 1,20697.

Finally, I proceed with testing Hypothesis 4, that is "The coherence between job description and graduates' education is positively related to marketing graduate students' intention to apply". Through Pearson's correlation coefficient is possible to identify the strength and the direction of association that exists between two continuous variables, that in this case are represented by "Person-Job fit" and "Intention to apply". The coefficient value can range from -1 (perfect negative linear relationship) to +1 (perfect positive linear relationship), a value of 0 indicates no relationship between the variables. As shown in the descriptive statistics table a statistical relevant, strong, positive correlation between the two variables is confirmed ($\rho$ = 0,826**).

Linear regression is the next step up after correlation. Through regression test it is possible to predict how the dependent variable, in this case *Intention to apply*, will change based on independent variable values, in this case *Person-Job Fit*.

The alternatives hypotheses in regression test are:

H0: $\beta_1 = 0$

H1: $\beta_1 \neq 0$

The null hypothesis implies that there is no linear relationship between the two variables, while the alternative hypothesis states that there is a relationship (positive or negative). Given the nature of the alternative hypothesis a two-tailed test is required.

**Table 2.7. Regression Analysis Summary for Person-Job Fit Predicting Intention to Apply (*N=199*)**

| Variable | B | Std. Error | Beta | t | Sign |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Constant) | 1,346 | 0,263 | | 5,121 | <0,001 |
| PJ_FIT | 0,737 | 0,036 | 0,831 | 20,271 | <0,001 |
| Gender | 0,072 | 0,108 | 0,027 | 0,668 | 0,505 |

**Table 2.7. Model Summary**

| Model | R | R square | Adjusted R square | Std. error of the Est. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 0,826 | 0,682 | 0,679 | 0,77626 |

The results of the regression test shown a R square value equal to 0,682, which indicates that 68,2% of the total variation of the dependent variable can be explained by the independent variable. The regression model statistically significantly predicts the outcome variable since p-value (<0,001) < 0,05. Accordingly, it is possible to observe that Hypothesis 4 is supported.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The start of the professional career after completing academic formation is of great importance both for the new graduates and for organisations. On the companies' side, this market represents the fundamental batch from which to draw the employees of the future and to obtain new competences guaranteed by the innovations introduced in the training programmes. At the same time, the selection of new graduates entails the need to implement internal training activities that allow the development of the required professional skills. From this point of view, as underlined in the previous sections, the concept of "work-readiness" has become important for companies, which have a particular interest in introducing ready-made candidates into their teams, for whom the acclimatisation phase will not require long periods of time.

Therefore, the candidates who are considered “work-ready” and match this with the skills sought by a company represent a valuable factor in the labour market. In order to increase the chances of hiring valuable resources, companies need to leverage several drivers, so that their job offer is suitable for the candidates.

From the graduate student's point of view, the selection process is often a complex activity strongly characterised by the presence of a relevant information asymmetry. If it is true that information asymmetry is also present on the side of the organisations, which cannot fully know the characteristics of the candidates, it is appropriate to observe how organisations repeatedly face the carrying out of selection processes, unlike new graduates approaching the labour market for the first time. Given this situation, the graduate students’ intention to apply is mainly based on what information they are able to find.

For these reasons, the theoretical assumption on which the following study is based is the signalling theory. As Connelly et al. (2011) observed, the information asymmetry in the HRM field is mainly related to external market of the organization. Accordingly, it is expected that a signaller (organizations) sends out information to influence external receivers (potential applicants) in developing positive inference. Chang & Chin (2018; p.177) affirmed that “Information asymmetry prevails in HRM because outsiders cannot recognize how a firm manages human resources unless that information is provided.”.

Today, compared to the past, there are several ways by which potential applicants can inform themselves about an organisation (web referrals, organisation websites, etc.), so employers should pay close attention to two aspects. Firstly, it is necessary to structure a job offer that is coherent with the profile sought, and secondly, it is essential to communicate the offer in the most appropriate way. These assumptions form the basis of the intention to apply process of graduate students.

Within this study, some of the main drivers through which a job offer is evaluated and their effects were analysed. In particular, reference was made to the monetary component (wage-level), the brand reputation component, the individual social-adjustment concern and finally the person-job fit importance.

The results confirmed that the variables included in the study have an impact on the intention to apply of Italian marketing graduate students. The hypotheses presented were supported by the statistical analysis of the reference sample and allow for some qualitative assessments of the results.

The first driver evaluated was the *notoriety and reputation* of the brand to which to apply. The result of the test showed that the intention to apply for a well-known brand is statistically much higher than for a less well-known brand. This trend was expected. However, an aspect that I pointed out in the study could represent a differential element in the evaluations of intention to apply: given the importance of gaining work experience, feeding one's "work-readiness", could provide an incentive for new graduates to apply also to less known brands, but this aspect did not appear in the sample analysed.

The study of the effect of brand notoriety and reputation on the intention to apply was then also analysed from the perspective of *individual social-adjustment concern*. While having the opportunity to work for a well-known company is a form of personal satisfaction, many studies have also recognised the importance of how the individual makes decisions by considering the judgement of others. This dynamic was confirmed in the sample-group exposed to Nike: individual high in social-adjustment concern shown a statistically relevant higher intention to apply than individual with low level of social-adjustment concern. Contrary to assumptions, social-adjustment concern did not affect with statistical relevance sample-group exposed to the less-known brand. A possible explanation is that the brands in question (Nike and Joma), apart from the economic sector to which they belong, have not been presented in depth, with a view to limiting the judgments on intention to apply to the notoriety of the brand itself. Consequently, although individuals with low social-adjustment concern were expected to present a higher intention to apply, it is possible that this lack of information in relation to a not well-known brand such as Joma limited their intention to apply perspective.

With regard to the *economic driver*, the result obtained is comparable to that described above for the effect of notoriety and reputation of the brands. The fact that the intention to apply was higher in relation to a more advantageous economic offer was again to be expected, especially in relation to a trend of increasing expenditure on training by graduate students. However, generally the entry-level salary does not represent a particularly high sum. Accordingly, it was possible to assume that the economic component could take a back seat to the need to gain work experience and increase one's work-readiness, resulting in a not relevant influence the intention to apply.

Finally, statistical analyses confirmed a positive effect of *Person-Job fit* on the intention to apply. This result can be interpreted from two complementary points of view in the decision-making model of the individual. On the one hand it can be understood as the psychological security of feeling fit for the job position, on the other hand it can be understood as the willingness to carry out an activity aligned with one's academic profile as recognition of one's education. This last aspect, again, can be considered predictable, but in a field like marketing, characterised by a set of different but interdependent specialisations, it was possible that individuals do not exclude the development of competences in a branch different from the one in which they are already specialised.

The findings of the study might have some relevant managerial implications. The results suggest that organisations that are well known in the market and enjoy a good reputation certainly have an advantage in the topic known as organisation attraction. However, the study also showed that drivers other than reputation play a significant role in the choices made by marketing graduate students. Therefore, the ability to shape the attractiveness of the organisation by leveraging an educational offer aligned with the graduate students' backgrounds and offering them an above-average remuneration can be a winning method to attract valuable professional profiles.

**Limitations**

The following study has limitations that can be analysed in the future in order to get a more complete picture of how graduate students form their intention to apply.

The first limitation of the study concerns the limited number of drivers taken into account: the selection process, as well as all those choices that have an influence on the future of people, is a very articulated process that is influenced by a large number of drivers both of an intrinsic and extrinsic nature.

In addition, the drivers taken into account were analysed individually with the aim of assessing the impact of each in isolation. This aspect could be considered as a methodical stretch, as the evaluation of a job offer also includes the acceptance of trade-offs, evaluating the different drivers in an interdependent way.

Finally, with regard to the sample analysed, it should be pointed out that it may be excessively homogeneous. For reasons of availability, the sample is composed almost entirely of students from Luiss Guido Carli and the University of Pisa, thus not guaranteeing a varied representation of the Italian academic panorama.

## APPENDIX

### Tables for Hypothesis 1

**Independent samples t-test: Levene's Test for equality of variances**

| **Levene's Test** | **F** | **Sig.** |
|---|---|---|
| | 41,098 | <,001 |

**t-test Results Comparing Intention to apply to Nike vs Joma**

| | **Brand** | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Nike | | | Joma | | | Mean Difference | t | df |
| | M | SD | n | M | SD | n | | | |
| **Intapp_Rep** | 5,7981 | 0,9727 | 103 | 3,8646 | 1,444 | 96 | 1,93347 | 10,99* | 164,8 |

* p < .05.

## Tables for Hypothesis 2

**Independent samples t-test: Levene's Test for equality of variances**

| **Levene's Test** | **F** | **Sig.** |
|---|---|---|
| | 12,977 | <,001 |

**Nike - t-test Results Comparing Intention to apply to Individual with High SAC vs Low SAC**

| | **Social adj concern** | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | High Sac | | | Low Sac | | | Mean Difference | t | df |
| | M | SD | n | M | SD | n | | | |
| **Intapp_Nike** | 6,05 | 0,704 | 52 | 4,04 | 1,388 | 51 | 0,517 | 2,770* | 83,3 |

* p < .05.

**Table 3.8.7: Independent samples t-test: Levene's Test for equality of variances**

| **Levene's Test** | **F** | **Sig.** |
|---|---|---|
| | 0,810 | 0,370 |

**Joma - t-test Results Comparing Intention to apply to Individual with High SAC vs Low SAC**

| | **Social adj concern** | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | High Sac | | | Low Sac | | | Mean Difference | t | df |
| | M | SD | n | M | SD | n | | | |
| **Intapp_Joma** | 3,67 | 1,496 | 46 | 4,04 | 1,388 | 50 | -0,366 | -1,244 | 94 |

## Tables for Hypothesis 3

**Table 3.8.10: Independent samples t-test: Levene's Test for equality of variances**

| **Levene's Test** | **F** | **Sig.** |
|---|---|---|
| | 6,759 | ,010 |

**t-test Results Comparing Intention to apply to Best Wage vs Worst Wage**

| | **Wage level** | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Best Wage** | | | **Worst Wage** | | | Mean Difference | t | df |
| | M | SD | n | M | SD | n | | | |
| **Intapp_WAGE** | 4,7197 | 1,3811 | 117 | 2,9951 | 1,206 | 82 | 2.35 | 9,343* | 187,579 |

* p < .05.

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# Resume

## Introduction

The personnel selection process is a topic that has been widely developed within the literature over the years. The relevance of this process has been investigated both from the point of view of organizations, with the stream of research known as *organization attraction*, and from the side of applicants, focusing on the psychological and decision-making issues of the latter during the job-search phase.

Considering the perspective of organizations, several authors including Hallén (2007), Minchington (2010) and Prinsloo (2008) observed that in a historical period where skills and knowledge represent a competitive differential, companies cannot ignore the importance of attracting and retaining talented employees. Furthermore, Cheese et al. (2007) emphasized that this requires a special effort from companies given the increased competition in the job market caused by the advent of globalization and liberalization. Consequently, as Jain and Bhatt (2014, p.635) observed: "Development of a better understanding of the expectations of young graduates and the organizational characteristics that influence them during their job searches is crucial for organizations (Montgomery and Raus, 2011).".

As all social phenomena and processes, the selection process is subject to the changes dictated by society itself and especially by technological progress. Compared to the past, there has been a considerable change in the way in which companies and graduate students interact and in how the information needed by both parties is collected. This process has always been characterized by a particular asymmetry of information between the two actors: in this sense there is a first remarkable change, as nowadays applicants have at their disposal a greater number of means through which to obtain information on the actual working conditions offered by a company. In this regard, Cable and Turban (2001) suggested that three main types of information are likely to be relevant to prospective applicants: job information, employer information and people information. In this perspective, the possibility of finding information on the web from current or former employees of an organization (Glassdoor.it for example collects information on pay levels and feedback on working conditions) is very important, but at the same time the way in which the employer itself presents its offer is relevant for potential applicants' evaluations.

In this context, companies tend to optimize their selection processes using technological tools that allow the evaluation of large numbers of candidates at the same time and the implementation of psychological techniques to better frame candidates. Williamson, King, Lepak, & Sarma (2010) pointed out in their study on the attraction of applicants that a company's website is a very efficient medium to carry out recruitment activities, both considering the lower costs respect to traditional recruiting mediums and a more effective communication with applicants. In particular, the authors observed that: "[…] there is evidence that recruitment Web sites can play an important role in determining whether an organization attract not just applicants, but qualified

applicants (Allen, Mahto, & Otondo, 2007; Cober, Brown, Keeping & Levy, 2004; Dineen, Ling, Ash & DelVecchio, 2007).". Indeed, it is important to emphasize, as also argued by Barber (1998) that one of the intermediate goals of the selection process is to attract a large pool of qualified applicants since the early stages of the process. Cable & Judge (1994) and Rynes (1991) have identified a further element to be considered: higher quality job seekers tend to be more selective about job proposals, consequently they are less likely to spend time and resources in pursuing jobs that are not expected to provide rewards and opportunities that match their abilities. It is therefore necessary for organisations to structure and communicate their job proposals taking into account the characteristics of the ideal applicant: based on the level of experience, training and objectives that the candidate may have, it is essential to know drivers to leverage to increase the chances of attracting the attention of qualified applicants.

It is clear that the stages of this process are closely linked to external factors such as the cultural context in which they take place, the specific business sector to which the actors belong and also the socio-demographic characteristics of the graduate students. The main objective of this study is to highlight the role that the elements that make up a job offer have on the psychology of the candidate and in particular on his or her the intention to apply. The study will focus on an analysis sample of Italian Marketing students who have graduated or are about to graduate and therefore have had or are about to have their first approach to the labor market. Accordingly, the study's research question is presented below:

**Research Question 1:** Which are the drivers that affect Italian Marketing graduate students' intention to apply for a job?

## Chapter 1- Literature Review

### New trends in marketing sector and the effects on labor-market

Nowadays, the study and understanding of the dynamics that characterise the tertiary sector are relevant given the development both at academic level and in the labour market of this sector. In particular, Cattani & Pedrini (2020) observed that the assessment of labour market outcomes of Higher Education programmes is becoming more and more critical in the political agenda at both national and international level to understand whether the tertiary sector is providing the right kind of skill and knowledge to new graduate students. The tertiary sector has developed significantly, to such an extent that the actual society, today, is referred to as the "services society". In this context, marketing has evolved and today companies have strengthened their marketing departments and many independent marketing agencies have been created.

From the companies' point of view, this change has led to the need for research and introduction of new professional profiles with specific skills to take advantage of new opportunities. In the literature, several

authors stressed the need for companies to keep up to date with new technological and socio-demographic developments. For example, Dumitriu et al. (2019) in their study underlined that the digital marketing is a fundamental component for the growth and the enhancement of the brand equity for SMEs (small and medium sized enterprises), key actors of the European economy. Labour market demand for digital marketing experts and content creators is nowadays high, being supported by technological development, and this trend is clearly established even in the literature. The research of new professional profiles and new skills in the labour market, have certainly influenced the education planning and the decision-making model of many graduate students in the marketing sector, and it will be of interest for this study to observe the dynamics that govern their intention to apply for a job.

Changes in the marketing sector have been clearly identified over the years by both practitioners and scholars. The elements that have brought this change are especially technological progress and the large-scale use of social networks. Today, social networks represent a relevant source of data for companies and an important touchpoint with consumers and prospects, and technological progress has made it possible to efficiently exploit this large amount of data. The digital transformation is both a challenge and an opportunity: as Di Gregorio, Maggioni, Mauri & Mazzucchelli (2019) underlined, the traditional marketing career path has been disrupted, consequently, choosing a career path coherent with new needs of the companies should allow candidates to have an advantage during the selection process. Society, companies, and individuals as a consequence are experiencing a disruptive change that has challenged established practices over the past decades.

One of the consequences of this ongoing change, from a company's point of view, may have been the need to assess the trade-off between updating actual employees' skills and looking for new professional profiles whose education included skills in the new digital activities that have become increasingly important over the years. Considering the organisational level of companies, as traditional marketing functions continue to be of great importance, new digital teams have often been created or, alternatively, new positions with complementary tasks have been added to existing teams. In particular, the digital transformation of marketing requires companies to hiring new professional profiles and creating new organisational structures to succeed in the digital domain (Harrigan & Hulbert, 2011; Lamberton & Stephen, 2016; Royle & Laing, 2014). Thomas, Andrew & Jeffery M. Ferguson (2019) in their study "Preparing workplace-ready students with digital marketing skills" underlined that "digital marketing practice continues to grow along with the need for a qualified workforce". The analysis of selection processes becomes relevant in a historical period in which the labour market is characterized by high levels of competitivity, both on companies and applicants' side. Nowadays companies are facing the challenge of optimising their ability to attract and retain talented employees.

**Hypotheses presentation and theoretical background**

The study of the marketing graduate students' motivations which affect the transition from universities to the labour market is a relevant issue both for the importance of marketing at corporate level and for the impact that today's graduates will have in the sector in the coming decades.

While increasing employability is important from a candidate's point of view, it is also necessary to consider the elements that can influence the attractiveness of companies on the labour market. Companies' attractiveness has been widely analysed in the literature, considering both monetary and reputational components. One of the elements that should contribute to companies' attractiveness is their own *reputation*.

In this study, we refer to signalling theory as theoretical background. Signalling theory suggests that given the information asymmetry, applicants often do not have complete information about companies: for this reason, they often refer to firms' reputations as signals that provide information about the internal working conditions (Breaugh, 1992; Rynes, 1991). Makarius & Stevens (2019) reported in their study the consideration of many authors on organizational reputation. The impact of reputation on marketing graduate students is expected to be positively related to their intention to apply. This positive effect not only could be reflected on short-term decision (e.g., intention to apply), but even on their long-term job expectations: to be hired by a company with a good reputation represent an important signal in applicants' curriculum given the importance of previous experience in the actual labour market.

Therefore, it will be considered in this study the effect that reputational driver, like the impact of company reputation on candidates' cv, have on graduate students' intention to apply:

**H1)** Companies reputation has a positive impact on marketing graduate students' intention to apply for specific job.

In the study of hypothesis 1, the impact of a company's reputation on the work-related decisions of graduate students will be assessed. However, it is possible to say that a company's reputation does not only have an influence on the professional sphere of an individual, but also on his or her relational sphere. This pattern has been addressed in organization attraction's theories as the self-presentation goals of applicants that underlie attraction to organizations. Ashforth & Mael (1989) and Scott & Lane (2000) observed in their studies that organization often contribute to the formation of their members' social identity and generally people identify with organizations to enhance their own self-esteem.

Furthermore, Cable & Turban (2001) enlarged this perspective, affirming that even the company's applicants will focus on their feelings and impression regarding companies when they are looking for a job.

Highhouse, Thornbury & Little (2007) have further deepened this topic by considering the impact that symbolic features of firms have on companies' attraction. In particular, the authors suggested that symbolic features "allows job seeker to communicate to others how he or she wants to be perceived.

That is, we suggest that concern for symbolic attributes is motivated by desires to regulate others' impressions of one's self" (p. 134). It is therefore possible that the company's reputation has a twofold impact on applicants' job choices: on the one hand, the applicant has personal expectations linked to his or her own education; on the other, the applicant values the reputation of a company as a means of expressing himself or herself and acquiring social approval. Lievens and Highhouse (2003¸ p. 135) affirmed that "job seekers not only concern themselves with the tangible and functional features of jobs (e.g., working conditions, job security) but also with the meanings that people associate with the employing organization (e.g., sincerity, prestige)". Accordingly, I refer as theoretical background to this hypothesis to the Social Identity theory which, as suggested by Davis, Love & Fares (2019, p.256) affirms that "identities are internalized meanings attached to the self as a unique person, an occupant of a role, and/or as a member of a group (Burke and Stets 2009; Stets and Burke 2014a; Stets and Serpe 2013).". According to Shavitt (1989), the main function of social identity is therefore to behave in such a way as to obtain social approval.
As Highhouse, Thornbury & Little (2007, p.137) observed: "At a more specific level, two social-identity needs dominate the attitude literature: the social-adjustment need (i.e., the need to impress) and the value-expressive need (i.e., the need to express; Katz, 1960; Smith et al., 1956).". Social adjustment concerns in applicants it is consequently expected to impact the intention to apply by affecting the companies consideration set of the jobseeker, potentially excluding less-known ones. In this regard Highhouse, Lievens & Sinar (2003) observed that the perceptions of the prestige of well-known company shown a strong impact over intention to apply.

**H2)** Marketing graduate students' social adjustment concern is related to their intention to apply for a company.

Graduate students' intention to apply can also be affected by the personal and financial commitment related to their training. Higher expenses on education can increase their expected salary level, just as excellent academic achievement can increase their job expectations. Consequently, graduate students might decrease the number of job positions in their consideration set, increasing their selectivity. Human capital theory argues that education increases individuals' productivity, providing marketable skills and abilities relevant to job performance. Consequently, the more highly educated people are, the higher the chance to get a better position in the labour market. In this regard, it is likely that in the Italian labour market, characterised by a high unemployment rate, the need for investments in high level of education is even more important for new graduates. Mazuki, Maimun & Siong (2011) affirm that university graduates' expectations are mainly based on what they have been taught in their formal education: this statement is consistent with the possibility that higher levels of formal education result in higher expectations. It is likely that raising the level of education requires a greater effort both in economic terms and commitment for graduate students: probably this trend has an influence on their job expectations and on what will be the criteria considered when applying for a job. In this regard, it is interesting to cite the Alonso & Romero's study (2016): the authors stated that wage

expectations influence individual choices on education, investment and labour supply. Furthermore, they find out that past academic performances play a key role in the ability to form wage expectations. It is expected that both monetary and motivational variables may be influenced by this trend.
It will be interest of this study to isolate the effects of each driver, so that it should be possible to individuate the component with the highest impact on candidates.

**H3)** Wage-level is positively related to marketing graduate students' intention to apply.

**H4)** The coherence between job description and graduates' education is positively related to marketing graduate students' intention to apply.
In summary, the actual trends in marketing sector and in the labour market are expected to impact the behaviours of companies, universities, students, and in particular the way in which they interact each other. By examining the effect that actual trends have on the variable studied, which is "marketing graduate students' intention to apply", the intent of this study is to evaluate the peculiar traits of this target group during the transition from university to job.

## Chapter 2– Data collection and empirical study

### Methodology

The goal of this study is to analyse the hypotheses that have been introduced, identifying which drivers effectively affect marketing graduate student's intention to apply and which ones have the greatest impact. Given the goal of the study, the research design more appropriated is represented by a causal research, that allow us to describe the characteristics of a relevant group. To test the hypotheses of the study, a questionnaire survey has been ran considering the opinions of Italian marketing graduate students. Given the target group involved in the study, mainly represented by young people mobile-friendly, and the historical period in which the study was developed, the best alternative to administer the survey is represented by online survey.

### Questionnaire design

For the construction of the questionnaire, measures consisting of several items were used to assess the theoretical constructs introduced in the previous chapter. The search for and use of items already tested and used in the literature allows the development of a research tool that increases the chances to have reliable, accurate and valid measures. The questionnaire has been developed both in Italian and English, using the same questions opportunely translated and maintaining the same order.

The first theorical construct to be investigated in this study is the impact of company reputation on marketing graduate students' intention to apply. I assume that the concept of company reputation is linked to the recognisability of the company by the agents of the labour market. This assumption is related to signaling theory, which is one of the most cited theory in the literature on recruitment processes.

The firsts five questions of this section are aimed at verifying the respondent's knowledge of the company and his opinion on company's reputation. For each question, respondents are requested to indicate (using 7-point Likert-type scales, 1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree) the extent to which they agree the statement presented. The first five questions were adapted from Turban et al. (1998) and aim to identify respondents' perceptions of the company's reputation.

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|---|
| I am familiar with this company |
| I know a lot about what this company does |
| I have heard a lot of good things about this company |
| This company has a reputation of being an excellent employer |
| Most graduates are interested in this firm as an employer |

The last five questions are aimed at measuring our dependent variable, that is the intention to apply which can be defined as the result of the candidate's decision-making process in relation to the desirability of the employer and the job offer's characteristics. These questions will be used in the evaluation of each hypotheses. This item was adapted by Aiman-Smith, Bauer & Cable (2001) and Highhouse, Lievens & Sinar (2016) studies using 7-point Likert-type scales (1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree).

| |
|---|
| I would accept a job offer from this company after graduating |
| I would make this company one of my first choices as an employer |
| If this company invited me for a job interview I would go |
| I would exert a great deal of effort to work for this company |
| I would not be interested in this company except as a last resort |

The impact of a company's reputation on a candidate's choices is determined by several components. Firstly, in relation to the previous paragraph, I measured the intention to apply linked to the fact that the candidate knows the brand and its reputation as an employer. Subsequently, through the items presented in this section of the study, the objective is to assess whether an individual personality trait, namely social-adjustment concerns, is related to the intention to apply by restricting the consideration set.

Survey's respondents were randomly exposed to a well-known brand (Nike) or a not well-known brand belonging to the same business sector. Once the respondents have evaluated the familiarity and the reputation

of the brand and their related intention to apply, a multi-items scale have been used to verify their social adjustment concern.

The scale was adapted by Highhouse, Lievens & Little (2007) study and it is composed by 4 items using 5-point Likert-type scales (1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree).

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|---|
| It is important that the company be popular and prestigious |
| Working for an impressive company would make me seem impressive to others |
| I want to work for a company that is perceived to be impressive |
| I would consider how impressive my family thinks working for the company would be |

The third construct that is analyzed is the effect of wage level on marketing graduate students' intention to apply. Generally, the first job opportunities that graduate students get do not present high wage level and applicants are aware of this contingency. Once the economic conditions of the offer will be displayed, respondents will be required to judge the attractiveness and to report their intention to apply.

The items to measure economic appeal were adapted by Berthon, Ewing & Hah (2005), one of the most recognized study in the employer attractiveness area. For each question, respondents are requested to indicate (using 7-point Likert-type scales, 1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree) the extent to which they agree the statement presented. The items to measure intention to apply were the same used fort the previous construct.

| |
|---|
| This job offer presents an above average basic salary |
| This job offer presents an attractive overall compensation package |

The last construct I studied concerns the impact of competences and training of marketing graduate students on their job choice. Person-job fit is the degree of alignment between individuals and the job (Wong and Tetrick, 2017 cited in Huang et al. , 2019). A good match between employees and their job can produce positive attitudes and behaviour.". Several studies have demonstrated the importance of person-job fit for the optimization of human resources outcomes. In order to evaluate the construct presented, I combined items from Saks & Ashforth (1997) and Kristof (1996), measuring the Graduate Student-Job fit through a 5 item Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree, and 5= strongly agree). Before answering these questions, respondents will be shown a job offer listing the characteristics of the job position, without referring to monetary components.

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|---|
| I am the right type of person for this job |
| This job is the job I was seeking |
| My knowledge, skills and abilities match the requirements of the job |
| The job fulfils my needs |
| The job has a good match for me |

**Vignette design**

Considering the nature of the study, it is important to present respondents with a realistic scenario. In this regard, to test hypotheses I adopted an experimental vignette methodology (EVM), referring to Aguinis & Bradley (2014) study. A vignette, according to Atzmuller & Steiner (2010, p.128), can be defined as a "short, carefully constructed description of a person, object, or situation, representing a systematic combination of characteristics".

In this section, two different brands will be randomly presented to the survey respondents to assess the impact of company reputation on their choices. The brands shown belong to the same sector, and no details related to a job offer will be presented.

**Well-Known Brand**

**Not Well-Known Brand**

To verify the second hypothesis, I will randomly display a marketing-related salary and company's benefit offer of an employer to the survey respondents. For instance, in one case the proposed monthly salary will be of 500 euros, in the other case it will be of 850 euros.

**SALARY AND COMPANY BENEFITS**

1. Remuneration 500 € gross per month;
2. Unlimited access to the E-Learning platform
3. Agreement (10% discount) with gyms and cinemas.

**SALARY AND COMPANY BENEFITS**

1. Remuneration 850 € gross per month & free access to company canteen;
2. Possibility of residence accommodation during the first 2 weeks
3. Unlimited access to the E-Learning platform
4. Agreement with a real estate agency specialized in rentals.

The choice of the economic conditions shown above derives from an observation of the economic proposals for marketing internships on the Italian scene, using Linkedin as a search tool. Specifically, the worst scenario Vignette represent an average economic proposal for an internship in Italy, while for the best scenario

Vignette, L'Oréal's economic proposal, which is one of the most advantageous in this respect, was taken as a reference.

The last block of question in the survey regards the person-job fit. In order to study the effect of this driver on the intention to apply, a vignette will be shown reporting a job description listing the main activities related to the position and the requirements that the candidate should have. Specifically, the following vignette was created based on the description of the tasks and requirements listed in L'Oréal's offer for an internship in its marketing department. The vignette is presented in both Italian and English, below is the English version.

**JOB DESCRIPTION**

The candidate will have the objective of supporting the team in carrying out Marketing activities aimed at growing the brand and the categories assigned.
The **main activities** are as follows:

1. Monthly sales analysis;
2. Monitoring competitors' activities (launches, communication and promotions) and producing reports;
3. Supporting the implementation of marketing activities, from the launch of new products on the market to the communication of existing brands;
4. Participating in branded projects in collaboration with transversal functions (commercial & digital marketing).

**REQUIREMENTS**

1. Degree in Marketing
2. Entrepreneurial spirit and energic approach in carrying out projects
3. Excellent knowledge of English and Italian
4. Excellent analytical skills and knowledge of the Office package
5. Enthusiasm and willingness to learn

**Descriptive statistics and hypothesis testing**

The questionnaire was created using Qualtrics Online Survey Software and it was administered to 251 respondents from Italy. Considering the target of the study, the questionnaire was mainly assigned to fellow students of the Marketing course (Italian and English) of Luiss Guido Carli and of my previous faculty, i.e., the University of Pisa. They were recruited by direct contact or WOM, mainly through a WhatsApp broadcast chat. After the data cleaning process, 52 responses were eliminated as incomplete, resulting in a total of 199 valid responses. The participants were 199 Italian marketing students, of which 55,8% are men and 43,2% are women and a remaining 1% chose to do not disclose gender(111 males, 86 females, 2 unreported gender). Respondents were aged from 20 to 29 years (Mean=24,34; S.D.= 1,38). Considering the respondents' employment status, the 75,9% is a Student, while the remaining 24,1% of the respondents is Employed full-time (18,1%), Employed part-time (1,0%) or Unemployed looking for work (4,5%).

Once the reliability test has been carried out, the hypotheses presented in the previews chapter will be tested. The statistical tests were executed adopting a confidence interval equal to 95%, considering admissible a margin of error α up to 5% (α= 0.05). For Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3, independent samples t-test was adopted, while for Hypothesis 4 a simple regression test was preferred.

**Conclusion**

The results confirmed that the variables included in the study have an impact on the intention to apply of Italian marketing graduate students. The hypotheses presented were supported by the statistical analysis of the reference sample and allow for some qualitative assessments of the results.

The first driver evaluated was the *notoriety and reputation* of the brand to which to apply. The result of the test showed that the intention to apply for a well-known brand is statistically much higher than for a less well-known brand. This trend was expected. However, an aspect that I pointed out in the study could represent a differential element in the evaluations of intention to apply: given the importance of gaining work experience, feeding one's "work-readiness", could provide an incentive for new graduates to apply also to less known brands, but this aspect did not appear in the sample analysed.

The study of the effect of brand notoriety and reputation on the intention to apply was then also analysed from the perspective of *individual social-adjustment concern*. While having the opportunity to work for a well-known company is a form of personal satisfaction, many studies have also recognised the importance of how the individual makes decisions by considering the judgement of others. This dynamic was confirmed in the sample-group exposed to Nike: individual high in social-adjustment concern shown a statistically relevant higher intention to apply than individual with low level of social-adjustment concern. Contrary to assumptions, social-adjustment concern did not affect with statistical relevance sample-group exposed to the less-known brand. A possible explanation is that the brands in question (Nike and Joma), apart from the economic sector to which they belong, have not been presented in depth, with a view to limiting the judgments on intention to apply to the notoriety of the brand itself. Consequently, although individuals with low social-adjustment concern were expected to present a higher intention to apply, it is possible that this lack of information in relation to a not well-known brand such as Joma limited their intention to apply perspective.

With regard to the *economic driver*, the result obtained is comparable to that described above for the effect of notoriety and reputation of the brands. The fact that the intention to apply was higher in relation to a more advantageous economic offer was again to be expected, especially in relation to a trend of increasing expenditure on training by graduate students. However, generally the entry-level salary does not represent a particularly high sum. Accordingly, it was possible to assume that the economic component could take a back seat to the need to gain work experience and increase one's work-readiness, resulting in a not relevant influence the intention to apply.

Finally, statistical analyses confirmed a positive effect of *Person-Job fit* on the intention to apply. This result can be interpreted from two complementary points of view in the decision-making model of the individual. On the one hand it can be understood as the psychological security of feeling fit for the job position, on the other hand it can be understood as the willingness to carry out an activity aligned with one's academic profile as recognition of one's education. This last aspect, again, can be considered predictable, but in a field like marketing, characterised by a set of different but interdependent specialisations, it was possible that individuals do not exclude the development of competences in a branch different from the one in which they are already specialised.

The findings of the study might have some relevant managerial implications. The results suggest that organisations that are well known in the market and enjoy a good reputation certainly have an advantage in the topic known as organisation attraction. However, the study also showed that drivers other than reputation play a significant role in the choices made by marketing graduate students. Therefore, the ability to shape the attractiveness of the organisation by leveraging an educational offer aligned with the graduate students' backgrounds and offering them an above-average remuneration can be a winning method to attract valuable professional profiles.

**Limitations**

The following study has limitations that can be analysed in the future in order to get a more complete picture of how graduate students form their intention to apply.

The first limitation of the study concerns the limited number of drivers taken into account: the selection process, as well as all those choices that have an influence on the future of people, is a very articulated process that is influenced by a large number of drivers both of an intrinsic and extrinsic nature.

In addition, the drivers taken into account were analysed individually with the aim of assessing the impact of each in isolation. This aspect could be considered as a methodical stretch, as the evaluation of a job offer also includes the acceptance of trade-offs, evaluating the different drivers in an interdependent way.

Finally, with regard to the sample analysed, it should be pointed out that it may be excessively homogeneous. For reasons of availability, the sample is composed almost entirely of students from Luiss Guido Carli and the University of Pisa, thus not guaranteeing a varied representation of the Italian academic panorama.