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‘I am competent so I can be choosy’: choosiness and its implication on graduate employability

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Employability is always used as a measure to gauge the value of graduates. Hence, most past studies attempted to identify competencies that can enhance the level of employability of graduates today. While these past studies found some competencies to be more important than others, the influence of graduate’s attitude, mainly their level of choosiness were not given due consideration. Therefore, this research sets out to determine how choosiness influences the relationship between competencies and employability. We conducted a field experiment with 244 Human Resources executives with considerable experience in employee recruitment and selection. Naturally, highly competent graduates were considered more employable than their less competent counterparts. However, the level of graduate choosiness reduced their employability. Fundamentally, being choosy has a detrimental effect on graduates’ employability.

\textbf{KEYWORDS}

Employability; attitude; recent graduates; generic competences; choosiness

\textbf{Introduction}

Fresh graduates step out to the corporate world with hopes of landing their dream job. With their college degree scroll in hand, most expect to land a job as soon as they graduate. However, an analysis of the past studies (e.g. Nawagune 2014; Shierholz, Sabadish, and Finio 2013) on job market and graduate employment trend has clearly indicated that graduate unemployment appears to be an impending problem.

The unemployment rate for new graduates in China for the year 2013 has almost doubled from the graduate unemployment rate of 10\% reported in 2012 (China Central Television 2014). In the United States, the unemployment rate of young college graduates between the ages of 21 and 24 was 8.8\% in 2013 (Shierholz, Sabadish, and Finio 2013). While the unemployment rate may appear insignificant, the underemployment rate of recent graduates was greater than in the preceding two decades. The underemployment rate increased significantly from 34\% in 2001 to 44\% in 2012 (Nawagune 2014). Sadly, most graduates had to resort to taking on jobs which underutilized their skills and ability to avoid being unemployed (Nawagune 2014).

In Malaysia, a comparable predicament exists. While the youth (15–24 years old) unemployment rate is not worryingly high, statistics indicate that 60\% of all unemployed workers are from that age bracket (\textit{New Straits Times} 2014). The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (2015) reported that since 2006 more than one quarter of graduate students could not find a job within six months after graduation (see Figure 1). Disturbingly, this figure has not changed much over the years and the percentage is increasing. Although the percentage of increase in unemployment appears
insignificant, the number of unemployed graduates is also increasing steadily. Sadly, with the increased effort showered by the government and higher learning institutions, the rate of unemployment among fresh graduates has not decreased considerably since 2006 (see Figure 1).

There could be numerous reasons for graduate unemployment. In Malaysia, the increasing graduate unemployment rate is attributed to the marketability of graduates. Industry players have repeatedly pointed out that graduates today are seriously lacking the necessary competencies (Goon 2014). To make matters worse, over the years, there is a prominent increase in the number of institute of higher learning (IHL) graduates. Sadly, the increase in the number of graduates is not supported by a parallel increase in job opportunities. This creates a buyer’s market where prospective employers are able to choose the best candidate from a large pool of job seekers (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2012). Therefore, graduates are expected to equip themselves with standard soft and hard skills to remain competitive and secure employment.

Currently, it is said that graduates are mostly equipped with subject matter knowledge and lack core competencies required for sustainable employment (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2012). Bearing this in mind, the National Graduate Employability (GE) Blueprint (2012–2017) was developed to serve as a guide to address this labour market issue by improving the employability of recent graduates (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2012). In addition, a budget of RM200 million was allocated to form a Graduate Employability taskforce (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2012) to help improve graduates’ employability. Clearly, the government is willing to invest in enhancement of graduate employability as it believes that the progress of employability would entail increasing the employment rate and national strength.

The GE Blueprint calls out to IHLs to incorporate core competencies based on the Employability Attributes Framework (EAF). This framework delineated four main attributes – academic attributes, personality management attributes, exploration attributes and connectivity attributes – required to develop more employable graduates (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2012). The academic attributes focus on academic performance and job-related knowledge whereas the personality management attribute includes competencies such as positive attitude, responsibility, flexibility, leadership and selflessness. The exploration attribute emphasizes the ability of graduates to think outside the box by being imaginative, innovative, critical and creative in their thinking. Finally, the connectivity attribute accentuates skills needed to enhance group dynamics (effective communication and interpersonal skills, team working skill) and increased awareness of the industry scenario (technology development and commercial awareness) (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia 2012).

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**Figure 1.** Percentage of total unemployed graduates (2006–2014).
Note: Adapted from Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, *Graduate Tracers Study* (2015).
The EAF has captured the competencies identified in the literature. For example, Archer and Davison (2008) investigated the relationship between some competencies and employability and found that top five most important skills and capabilities when recruiting new graduates are teamwork, communication skill, integrity and honesty, confidence and intellectual ability. Rasul et al. (2012) identified the importance level among seven competencies such as interpersonal skills, thinking skills, resource skills, system and technology skill, basic skills, information skills and personal qualities.

The abovementioned efforts are said to be aligned with the industry. The study by Singh, Thambusamy, and Ramly (2014) implies that competencies taught through the university curriculum are in actual fact aligned to the needs of the industry. The findings of their study led them to raise a pertinent question: ‘why a large number of graduates remain unemployed’. While we agree that enhancing core competencies is the way forward towards improving employability among recent graduates, we believe there is a missing piece to the puzzle – the attitude of fresh graduates. The specific attitude we are referring to here is graduate’s choosiness. According to the survey by JobStreet.com (2011), top five reasons why fresh graduates were rejected in 2011 were asking for unrealistic salary or benefits (64%), bad character, attitude and personality (60%), poor command of English (56%), lack of good communication skills (52%) and being too choosy (38%). The influence of graduates’ level of choosiness was also reflected in the survey conducted by ManpowerGroup (2013) among employers within the Asia Pacific region. The survey revealed that besides lack of competencies, graduates’ attitude of seeking out higher salaried jobs than being offered also affected their employability.

Basicly, this study argues that low employability of fresh graduates is not only attributed to low competencies but to also their attitude of being choosy. While most reports on employability highlighted the possible impact of choosiness, the hypothesized impact has not been verified empirically. There is a dearth of studies on the influence of graduates’ level of choosiness on their employability. We are only aware of two articles by Trivellato and Giraldo (2003, 2006) which identified the indicator of choosiness of labour supply.

Therefore, it is essential to address this gap to ensure government and higher learning institutions’ efforts to enhance graduate’s level of competencies are not wasted. Even though fresh graduates are equipped with sufficient level of competencies such as communication skills, leadership and a good personality, employers may opt to reject fresh graduates due to their choosy attitude. It would be a wasted effort if graduates equipped with necessary competencies remain unemployed due to their choosiness. Therefore, this study intends to explore the possible moderating effect of choosiness of the relationship between graduate’s competencies and employability.

**Theoretical bases and development of hypotheses**

**Competencies and graduate employability**

Competency is a performance dimension that provides a high competitive advantage to the individual or organization that possesses the competency (Athey and Orth 1999). Graduate students who have obtained the necessary competencies are said to have an edge in terms of employability compared with those who are lacking in such competencies (Quek 2005; Van Der Heijde and Van Der Heijden 2006).

An optimistic outlook of the knowledge-intensive economy has driven universities today to emphasize more on academically oriented provision and pedagogy (Tomlinson 2012). These higher learning institutions failed to realize that employability of graduates is no longer determined by formal educational credentials especially when the job market is flooded with equally qualified graduates (Holmes 2001; Tomlinson 2007, 2012). Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) highlighted that when relating the concept of competencies to employability, it is important to go beyond the traditional skills-based perspective that relies heavily on technical skills or old list of skills such as communication
skills, problem-solving, IT skills and numeracy. However, most past studies on employability are still centred along these conventional lists of competencies.

A review of the literature revealed that there were numerous competencies identified in past studies. Table 1 provides a snapshot of competencies that has been positively associated with employability. While different terms were used, there were significant overlaps in terms of what each competency represented. For instance, communication skill was listed as basic literacy and numeracy skills, and oral communication in some studies. Terms such as human skills, interpersonal skills were used to represent teamwork skills. Hence, we narrowed down the list of competencies into 10 major competencies – (1) teamwork; (2) problem-solving; (3) communication; (4) information and communications technology (ICT) and Technical; (5) knowledge/learning; (6) character/personality, (7) language skill; (8) leadership; (9) professionalism and (10) experience.

Based on the summary presented in Table 1, teamwork, problem-solving and communication skill were top three generic competencies commonly quoted to be associated with employability. These three competencies were in line with the graduates attributes outlined in the EAF – mainly explorative and connectivity attributes. Furthermore, employers still hold these competencies at a pedestal. For instance, despite the call for going beyond old list of skills, Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) found that employers still seek evidence of competencies such as interpersonal skills, teamwork and communication skills at the point of appointment. Hence, these three competencies will be used in our study to differentiate highly competent candidates versus the less competent counterparts.

Besides the abovementioned competencies, we will also include English proficiency as one of the required skill. In reality, employers do give due consideration for language skills at the point of appointment (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011). Similar expectations were noted in the Malaysian context. Ong, Khaun, and Singh (2011) reported that 80% of employers considered English proficiency as an important criterion when recruiting students. In fact, English is becoming more and more important for Malaysian graduates as Malaysia aims to become a developed nation by 2020 (Darmi and Albion 2013). Despite repeated emphasis on the importance of English, graduates are still not equipped with this competency. For instance, ‘fresh graduates are requesting job interviews to be conducted in languages other than English as they are not proficient in the language’ (Aeria 2014, 1). Basically, Malaysian graduates have yet to realize the importance of English as the world lingua franca. This notion has been reiterated by the Former Prime Minister of Malaysia – Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad – who succinctly mentioned ‘students should master English as a universal language to enhance their employability’ (Teh 2013).

Therefore, this study will include four main competencies – communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving skills and English proficiency – to differentiate candidate’s level of competency in our experiment. As these competencies have been associated with graduates’ employability, we, therefore hypothesize that:

H1: Highly competent candidates are more likely to be perceived employable than the ones with low competencies.

**Boundary condition: graduate’s level of choosiness**

There is an upcoming trend in studies on employability that has made a strong call for a shift from traditional skills-based approach to approaches that include subjective dimensions of employability such as type of dispositions, attitudes and identity (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011; Tomlinson 2007). ‘Employability in this sense may be seen to be value and identity-driven, relating to graduates own dispositions and biography’ (Tomlinson 2007, 287). We wholly agree with the arguments put forward and strongly believe that attitude of graduates play an important role in influencing their employability.

The attitude this study will focus on is graduate’s level of choosiness. Besides the lack of competence, graduates today are also said to be very choosy (JobStreet.com 2011; Lajiun 2014).
Table 1. Important competencies identified in selected previous studies on employability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competencies</th>
<th>Teamwork</th>
<th>Problem-Solving</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>ICT and Technical</th>
<th>Knowledge/Learning</th>
<th>Character/Personality</th>
<th>Language skill</th>
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Notes: Teamwork: Human skills, Interpersonal skills, Personal organization and Teamwork; Problem-Solving: Analytical skill, Informational skills, Planning and organization, Problem-solving, Thinking skill, Critical thinking, Resources skill, Sources skill; Communication: Communication skill, Basic literacy and Numeracy skills, Oral communication; ICT and technical: Computer skill, ICT and technical, System and technology, Information Technology skills, Technical skill; Knowledge/Learning: Academic eligibility, Intellectual ability, Learning, Willingness to learn, Basic skills; Character/Personality: Character/Personality, Integrity and honesty, Personal quality, Positive attitude; Language skill: English proficiency; Leadership: Leadership, Management skill; Professionalism: Confidence, Work ethics, Professionalism, Responsibility; Experience: Work experience.
ManpowerGroup (2013) also found that 11% employers think candidates are looking for higher salary offer than is being offered. A survey by JobStreet.com (2011) revealed that fresh graduates, who demanded unrealistic salary and were choosy, were viewed unfavourably by potential employers. Graduates today were also said to be picky in job selection as they seek high-paid positions (Lajiun 2014).

Fundamentally, there is a shared sentiment among employers that being choosy can be detrimental to a candidate’s prospect of landing a job. Hinchliffe and Jolly’s work (2011) lends some support to the employers’ predicament. Besides values, intellect and performance, employers are also interested in engagement. This component of graduate experience expects graduate to show that they are open to various opportunities, willing to take on challenges and are adaptable. After careful thought, we found that the lack of engagement is clearly displayed by graduates who were choosy, and this may have an impact on their employability.

However, this sentiment is not shared by fresh graduates themselves. Some graduates believe it is their right to seek out positions which meet their expectation. An excerpt of an article by Lajiun in *The Borneo Post* (2014) explains the perspective of graduates instead:

Fresh graduate, Therense Voo, on the other hand questioned why was it so wrong for someone like her to be picky when it came to selecting her dream job. ‘I have to agree with the choosy part because I am in that category. After I graduated, I only longed to work in the field that I love. I wonder if that can be classified as being picky?’ she questioned. ‘Maybe, in my search for the job that I love, I have wasted a little time but if there was really no vacancy for the post I am looking for, I won’t hesitate to look for another job’.

This attitude of being choosy appears to be common among recent graduates who fit the profile of millennial job seekers. These job seekers have a set of pre-employment expectation about their imminent employment and incentive they anticipate to receive (Hauw and De Vos 2010). Many Millennials have experienced a shielded and comfortable life provided by their well-meaning parents (Pew Research Center 2007). These experiences have added to Millennials’ high expectations and strong sense of entitlement (Twenge 2006). Among the criteria Millennial job seekers contemplate when considering jobs and employers include salary offer, advancement opportunities and whether the job location is near their permanent address (Career Rookie 2010). Basically, both parents and Millennials believe that their first job should provide the ‘initial payoff for all the planning, stress, and shared ambition’ (Howe and Strauss 2003, 133; as cited in Meyers and Sadaghiani 2010) they have endured.

Basically, students tend to ‘look at factors relating to personal disposition, attitudes, and individual characteristics as determining their labour market trajectories’ (Tomlinson 2007, 230). The orientation of students can be categorized into four types – Careerist, ritualist, rebel and retreatist (Tomlinson 2007). Most students were found to fall within the Careerist or Ritualist categories. Careerist students perceive future work as an avenue for self-development and fulfilment (Tomlinson 2007). Hence, they may have a higher tendency to choose careers that facilitates the achievement of their identity, in other words who they wanted to become. On the contrary, ritualist viewed work as means to an end. Hence, in an attempt to manage risk, they may be choosy in an attempt to settle for careers that are perceived to be more convenient and manageable.

Evidently, the views of employers/recruiter and recent graduates are not aligned. This contradicting view on being choosy in job seeking raises a pertinent question – can being choosy have serious implications on graduates’ employability? The employers think so but recent graduates think they are just taking control over their future life trajectories (Tomlinson 2007). The lack of empirical evidence to support any argument related to the consequences of being choosy may continue to allow Millennial job seekers to falsely believe that they are entitled to be choosy.

Therefore, this study sets out to empirically test the consequence of being choosy on the association between graduate competency and employability. We believe graduates’ level of competencies can significantly influence their employability. However, mere possession of competencies is insufficient. Our stand is based on the graduate identity approach proposed by Holmes (2001). While graduates may believe they are well-equipped for jobs allocated for graduates (hence permitting them to
be choosy), employers may not be prepared to accept them as worthy of employment as graduates. ‘Gatekeepers of such occupations will seek to justify their decisions to allow or disallow entry, by making reference to certain legitimated grounds for such decisions’ (Holmes 2001, 115). In reality, employability can be only enhanced when claims made on identity of a graduate (by the graduates themselves) are affirmed by significant others such as graduate recruiters (Holmes 2001).

In a nutshell, ‘it is not the self-identification or the social ascription that is salient but the outcome, within a particular situation, of the interaction between the both’ (Holmes 2001, 115). Hence, we posit that graduates level of competence will interact with their attitude – mainly their level of choosiness. Basically, when graduates are highly choosy, this may reduce their employability level when compared with those who are not chooSY. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H2: The level of candidate’s choosiness will moderate the influence of candidate’s competencies on their employability.

H2a: Recent graduates with high competencies and high choosiness will be perceived to be less employable compared to their counterparts with high competencies but less chooSY.

H2b: Recent graduates with low competencies but high choosiness will be perceived to be less employable compared to their counterparts with low competencies but less chooSY.

H2c: The negative implication of choosiness on the competency–employability relationship will be greater for recent graduates with low competencies compared to their counterparts with high competencies.

Method
Research site and participants
The sampling of this study was conducted by selecting Human Resource executives or others who are in positions which require them to make hiring decisions. We believed their experience in the recruitment and selection process can help them make informed decision on whether or not to hire the candidate presented in our scenario.

A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed. We finally received 244 usable questionnaires – giving us a response rate of 61%. About 45.1% of the respondents have made six or more hiring decisions and about 40.6% made about one to five hiring decisions in the course of their career. The remaining 14.3% admitted that while they have not made hiring decisions before, but they have sat in panels that deliberated hiring decisions. Majority of the respondents were within the age range of 21–30 years (44.2%) and 31–40 years (46.4%). The sample had almost equal proportion of male and female respondents.

Experiment design and procedures
Each respondent is asked to respond to a series of questions in all sections of the survey. We are aware of the use of common respondent for all the variables in our study could increase the possibility of common method variance, hence, affecting our study’s internal validity (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Thus, as suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003), a psychological separation was created between the independent, moderator and dependent variable to minimize the possibility of this bias. We presented different scenarios reflecting the relevant variable in separate sections to ensure it did not appear as if the variables are interrelated. This was done to reduce the likelihood of them trying to associate the variables of the study and provide favourable responses as probably expected by the researcher (Podsakoff et al. 2003). The experimental design adopted in this study is discussed below.

The data collection was conducted using scenario-based surveys that included varied combination of the level of competencies and level of choosiness of a candidate. This was done in a manner that resulted in four different scenarios (see Table 2) that allowed us to test the possible
influence of different level of choosiness with regard to the relationship between competency and employability.

The selected respondents were then asked to respond to one (out of four sets) of scenario-based questionnaires assigned to them. In Section 1 of each questionnaire, the respondents were asked to think of a fresh graduate job applicant who is a highly competent or least competent candidate (depending on the survey assigned to them). When respondents were assigned scenarios on highly competent candidates, they were asked to think of a competent graduate. Alternatively, for sets on low competency, respondents were asked to think of candidates who were less competent. The scenario used is as presented below. Only the underlined words were replaced with the word in parentheses depending on the scenario assigned:

Recall all fresh graduates whom you have ever interviewed, worked with, or exposed to, or familiar with. Now, think of the one who, in your judgment, is the MOST (LEAST) competent graduate. Listed below are several competencies that the fresh graduate may or may not have. Please indicate your degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement by circling the appropriate number (given on a 5-point scale given below) that best represents your view about the fresh graduate that you have in mind. He/She (i.e. the Most (least) Competent fresh graduate) was able to …

After presenting the scenario, respondents were then asked to respond to a set of statements on the level of competencies of the candidate in mind. These statements served as a manipulation check to ensure the respondent indeed thought of the intended candidate (high/low competency).

The subsequent section presented a brief manipulated description on the level of choosiness of the candidate (high/low choosiness). Before answering the questions for being choosy, the respondents are required to read one scenario, which describes the recent graduate as highly choosy or less choosy. The scenario used to reflect high level of choosiness is as stated below:

… He/she wants a job, with more or less permanent terms. He/she does not want to be absorbed as a contract staff. Instead, he/she insists on a permanent position. In addition, he/she mentions that preference is for a job offer within his/her hometown. You also noticed that the expected salary stated in the CV was above the average rate and was not negotiable.

The scenario which reflected low level of choosiness is as stated below:

… He/she can accept a job, with short terms or part time. In addition, he/she mentioned that preference is for a job offer within his/her hometown but he/she can move and work at any branch of the company in the nation if necessary. You also noticed that the expected salary stated in the CV was in the average rate and was negotiable.

These scenarios were developed based on the research conducted by Trivellato and Giraldo (2003, 2006). We focused on four areas – type of job (contract duration), working time regime, place of work and minimum acceptable wage – to reflect choosiness. These elements of choosiness were incorporated into these scenarios. The respondents were then asked to respond to manipulation check items to reflect the level of choosiness of the candidate. Finally, respondents were asked to keep the candidate’s competencies and attitude in mind and indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with each statement on employability to indicate the employability level of the candidate.

**Measures**

In order to test if respondents thought of the intended candidate (competent/less competent) as mentioned in the scenario, we included measures of four main competencies in the study vignette.
as manipulation check items. The competencies included in this study to differentiate highly/less competent fresh graduates were teamwork, communication skill, problem-solving skill and English proficiency.

The items for competencies are adopted from the previous researches. The items of teamwork, communication skill and problem-solving skill were adopted from Rosenberg, Heimler, and Morote (2011). Sample items for teamwork include ‘contribute to group efforts’ and ‘help others to learn’. Communication skill included items such as ‘organize basic ideas; communicate orally’ and ‘organize basic thoughts, ideas, and messages in writing’. On the other hand, problem-solving skills were measured using items such as ‘Generate new ideas’ and ‘specify goals and constraints, generate alternatives, consider risks, and evaluate and choose the best alternative’. The measure for English proficiency was adopted from the work of Singh and Singh (2008). Sample items include, ‘Speak English to others without any problem’ and ‘use the English language without hesitation when communicating’. These measures required the participants to indicate on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) the degree of their agreement or disagreement with each statement, when evaluating the most/least competent candidate presented in the survey.

We developed a list of questions based on four areas identified in the work of Trivellato and Giraldo (2003, 2006) – type of job (contract duration), working time regime, place of work and minimum acceptable wage – to reflect choosiness. Sample questions include, ‘Do you think this candidate is flexible enough to move and work in an unfamiliar area?’ and ‘Do you think the candidate will accept the job offer if it does not fulfil what they want?’ The respondents were then asked to respond to these manipulation check items using a Yes/No scale.

Finally, employability was measured using the scale by De Cuyper et al. (2011). Sample items include, ‘Given his/her qualifications and experience, getting a job would not be very hard at all’ and ‘I can think of a number of organizations that would probably offer him/her a job if he/she was looking’. Respondents were asked to indicate the employability level of the candidate on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) the degree of their agreement or disagreement with each statement.

Data analysis and results

We used two approaches in our study. The measurement model was tested using the Partial Least squares (PLS) approach whereas hypotheses were tested using ANOVA. We also employed EFA to conduct Harman’s one-factor test. We considered the unrotated factor solution including all 31 items of all the 6 variables (teamwork, communication, problem-solving, English proficiency, employability and choosiness) rated by the respondents. The analysis resulted in a five-factor solution with a total variance of 68.7% and the first factor explained 45% of the variance. Thus, common method bias was not a serious concern in this study (Podsakoff et al. 2003).

Dimensionality and distinctiveness of measures

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we used the PLS approach and subjected the measures employed in this study to a confirmatory factor analysis to examine the psychometric properties of the measures. As suggested by Hair et al. (2013), we referred to the factor loadings, composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) to measure the convergent validity. The recommended values for loadings are set at >0.7, the AVE should be >0.5 and the CR should be >0.7. We conceptualized competencies as a second-order construct. The results of the analysis are as presented in Table 3 clearly show that the pertinent values of the measurement model exceeded the recommended values, hence demonstrating sufficient convergent validity.

Next, we moved on to evaluate the discriminant validity using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) method. Discriminant validity specifies the extent to which the items discriminate among constructs. In order to assess discriminant validity, we compared the square root of AVE with correlations. As
shown in Table 4, the criterion of square root of AVE (shown in diagonals) should be greater than the values in the rows and columns of the specific construct was fulfilled. Hence, we conclude that adequate discriminant validity has been established and the measures employed in this study are distinctive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competencies</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Competencies</td>
<td>0.761</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Employability</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.859</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Choosiness</td>
<td>-0.310</td>
<td>-0.435</td>
<td>0.771</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Diagonal values in bold are AVE.

Manipulation check

Manipulation check is conducted in order to confirm the success of experimental manipulation in this study. As mentioned earlier, four scenarios were prepared based on the level of competency and choosiness of a recent graduate.

Firstly, a manipulation check computed with one-way ANOVA (see Table 5) was carried out to ensure respondents thought about the candidate who was competent or less competent (depending on the scenario assigned to them). As expected, the mean value for competencies ($M = 3.55$) was significantly higher for candidates thought of in the High Competency Scenario compared to candidates
thought of in the Low Competency Scenario \((M = 2.74), p < .01\). However, it is important to note that the probability of achieving statistical differences is based not only on statistical considerations but also the actual size of the effect (Hair et al. 2013, 9). A significance test does not imply how large the effect is or if the effect is important (Kirk 2001). Therefore, besides using statistical significance as an important criterion to test for differences, effect size was also calculated to complement significant mean differences. Eta squared is a common method used to measure effect size. Based on the strength the guidelines of Cohen (1988), an eta squared value of 0.268 indicates a large effect size. This indicates that the experimental manipulation of high or low competency was quite successful and this can suggest high internal validity of this study.

Next, a manipulation check for the level of choosiness of candidate was conducted using a one-way ANOVA (see Table 6). As expected, the mean value for high choosiness \((M = 1.55)\) was significantly greater for candidates presented in the High level of Choosiness scenario compared to candidates presented in the Low level of Choosiness scenario \((M = 1.27, p < .01)\). Based on the strength the guidelines of Cohen (1988), an eta squared value of 0.132 indicates a moderate effect size. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the experimental manipulation of the candidate’s level of choosiness was also quite successful.

### Test of hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 (H1) sets outs to test if the competency level of recent graduates has a significant influence on the employability potential. The ANOVA result is presented in Table 7. As hypothesized, recent graduate candidates who were perceived to be competent were more employable \((M = 4.77)\) than their less competent counterparts \((M = 3.64)\). With reference to the guidelines of Cohen (1988), an eta squared value of 0.214 indicates a large effect size. Therefore, H1 is supported.

The moderating effect of the level of choosiness of recent graduate job applicant was tested using a two-way ANOVA (see Tables 8 and 9). This result indicates that there is a significant interaction between the level of competency and level of choosiness \((F(1, 220) = 9.269, p < .01)\). This implies that the level of candidate’s choosiness moderates the relationship between graduate competency and employability. The magnitude of the difference in the mean was small (eta squared = 0.04). Hence, Hypothesis 2 (H2) is substantiated.

Highly competent and choosy candidates were given lower employability ratings \((M = 4.61)\) compared to highly competent candidates who were less choosy \((M = 4.98, p < .05)\). Therefore, H2a was substantiated. While significant difference was confirmed, the magnitude of the difference was not

---

**Table 5.** Manipulation check of high/low competency scenario.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of competency</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Eta squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competencies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>81.454</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>0.268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6.** Manipulation check for the level of choosiness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of choosiness</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Eta squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choosiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>33.752</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>0.132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7.** Employability of candidate by the level of competency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Eta squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>60.329</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>0.214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Dependent variable: employability.
large. On the other hand, we found that respondents were more critical of candidates who were less competent. The results indicated that candidates who were less competent and less choosy stood a greater chance to be employed ($M = 4.23, p < .01$) compared to less competent candidates who were choosy ($M = 3.03$). Hence, H2b was supported. Interestingly, candidates with low competency and less choosy were given fairly high ratings for employability ($M = 4.23$). Finally, we noted that the magnitude of this difference ($d_{Cohen} = 1.09$) was greater than the difference noted for candidates who were competent ($d_{Cohen} = 0.42$). This finding lends support to H2c.

**Discussion**

This study aims to investigate the moderating role of recent graduates' level of choosiness on the competency–employability relationship. Given this objective, we tested two hypotheses: (a) the relationship between fresh graduate’s competencies on their employability and (b) the moderating influence of choosiness on the relationship between fresh graduates’ competencies and employability.

Fundamentally, competency is a performance dimension which provides a high competitive advantage to the individual (Athey and Orth 1999). As expected, highly competent candidates were perceived to have higher levels of skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, communication and English proficiency compared to their less competent colleagues. These candidates who were perceived to be highly competent were considered more employable compared to candidates who were found to be less competent. Similar findings were noted in past studies. For instance, Archer and Davison (2008) argued that those who have high competencies such as communication skill or teamwork are perceived to be more employable compared to those who lack such competencies.

While the abovementioned competencies have been perceived to be conventional and ‘old school’ (e.g. Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011), it still remains relevant to some extent in influencing the level of graduate employability. However, subjective components of graduate identity which includes attitude have a significant impact on graduate employability. The attitude studied in this study – choosiness – had an interesting moderating effect on the relationship between competencies and employability. When competency was high, highly choosy candidates were rated slightly lower than their less choosy counterparts in terms of employability. However, this difference was minor when compared to candidates with low competency. When candidates were competent, their level of choosiness was not given much consideration. Highly competent graduates with high choosiness were still evaluated as more employable compared to graduates with low competency and less choosy. This result indicates that the competency level of graduates is given higher priority in the recruitment process than the level of choosiness although both competency and choosiness have significant impacts on graduates’ employability.

**Table 8.** Test between-subjects effects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean square</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Partial eta squared</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competency</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>74.757</td>
<td>74.994</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosiness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33.877</td>
<td>33.985</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competency*Choosiness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.239</td>
<td>9.269</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>0.997</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 9.** Means and standard deviations: employability as a function of graduate competency and graduate level of choosiness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Choosiness</th>
<th>$N$</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>$d_{Cohen}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>4.98</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Interestingly, the impact of choosiness is obvious when the level of competency is not up to the industry’s expectation. Candidates with low competency yet choosy were rated significantly lower in terms of employability than candidates with lower competency but less choosy. This clearly indicates that when candidates lack the required competency, their level of choosiness was clearly influential on their employability. Employers are willing to give graduates with low competency a chance (albeit lesser than the chance a highly competent candidate stands) if they are less choosy. On the contrary, if the graduate was choosy while lacking required competency, employers perceived the candidate negatively. This had a detrimental effect on the employability of the graduate. This finding clearly supports the notion put forward by researchers such as Holmes (2001), Tomlinson (2007) and Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011). Graduates may believe that the mere possession of traditional competencies such as communication skills or teamwork skills will guarantee them their dream job. Evidently, this is not the case. Employers’ affirmation of the graduate’s level of employability appears to depend more on attitude of graduates rather than the mere possession of competencies.

The findings of this study clearly validate the concern highlighted by employers today. In general, employers have complained that graduates today are too choosy when applying for job. JobStreet.com (2011) and Manpower Group (2013) reported that being too choosy or having unrealistic expectation for salary could negatively influence the prospect of employment for graduates. The concerns about the impact of choosiness highlighted through these reports were empirically validated through this study. Undeniably, choosiness has an impact on the employability of graduates. In short, employers are willing to give potential candidates a chance – even when their competency levels are low – provided that they have the right attitude of not being choosy.

**Implication to theory**

This study has some obvious theoretical ramifications. Most if not all past studies have approached the issue of graduate employability from a conventional perspective – enhance graduate competency and employability improves. These studies appear to advocate the idea that as long as graduates were competent, they stand a greater chance at being employable. While this notion holds weight, competency development should not be limited to mere development of technical skills and soft skills. This study shows that although the impact of choosiness is not strong in the case of graduates with high competency, the implication on graduate employability was still evident. Hence, competency and employability models should incorporate the component of attitudes such as choosiness to be able to better assess graduates’ employability. In a nutshell, the finding of this study has reinforced that mere assessment and development of graduate’s competency is not sufficient to address the issue of employability.

**Implication to practice**

The result of this research implies the importance of high competency and low choosiness in obtaining high employability. All stakeholders involved in improving graduates’ employability such as undergraduate students themselves, universities and government should be aware of this positive combination of high competency and low choosiness.

Most higher learning institutions have relied on the findings of the previous researches about the need to equip their graduates with high competency and limited their focus towards competency development (Tomlinson 2012). Sadly, the attitude element has not been given due consideration. In actual fact, attitude such as choosiness has an implication on graduate employability.

Bearing this in mind, universities and educational institutions can improve graduates employability by providing proper training programmes to students that incorporates the attitude element as well. As students invest more to obtain higher education credentials, they look to these institutions to help raise their absolute level of employability (Tomlinson 2012). As Rasul et al. (2012) suggested,
using employability assessment tool is beneficial to realize graduate’s employability level. Academic institutions should also incorporate attitude assessment which includes assessment of graduate’s level of choosiness into such tools to better assess and prepare graduates for the job market. Such holistic assessment which includes graduate’s level of choosiness would help increase the employability chance of a fresh graduate. In fact, graduates should be exposed to the concept of ‘graduate identity’ to help them develop ‘agreed identity’ that reflects an agreement between their personal expectations and affirmation by important others. Governments should also consider the negative impact of choosiness. As mentioned previously, the GE Blueprint facilitated the allocation of RM200 million to improve employability. While large amount of money was allocated to improve graduate competency and employability, this study reminds the government to consider the influence of graduate choosiness on their level of employability. Relevant government departments should proclaim the negative effect of choosiness and the GE Blueprint should include the measures on attitude such as choosiness in order to improve graduates employability effectively. Furthermore, it would be great if the relevant government departments could conduct continuous survey about standard level of salary range and other benefits for fresh graduates and share these findings with recent graduates. This would help recent graduates to be aware of reality (e.g. the reasonable level of salary) and prevent them from being too choosy.

Finally, the findings of this study hope to enlighten students on the influence of competency and choosiness on their level of employability. If students realize the negative impact of choosiness, they would learn to accept reasonable level of benefit and salary range. Starting their job without wasting time due to expectation of unrealistic salary and benefit can help to bring about stable society with graduates participating in the labour market and avoiding the risk of increasing crime rate as Fougére, Kramarz, and Pouget (2009) pointed out. In a nutshell, graduates must understand that their employability ‘entails an integration of academic abilities with personal, interpersonal and behavioural attributes’ (Tomlinson 2012, 421).

**Limitation and direction for future research**

Despite theoretical and practical contributions, our study has potential limitations. First, the measurement of choosiness can be enhanced. As we were not aware of any other study, which focused on choosiness except for the ones conducted by Trivellato and Giraldo’s (2003, 2006), this study chose the broad concept of choosiness when developing the measurement for the survey questionnaires. However, choosiness can be defined using more detailed dimensions such as expectations compensation and benefit, work place and office environment, company brand and reputation, company size, culture, history, contract condition, job position, responsibility in the organization and so forth. Identifying which content of choosiness has significant impact on employability will have a greater value in improving employability. It can help students to better understand which demands are acceptable to employers or which demands are considered unreasonable. Therefore, one suggestion for further research is to investigate the various dimensions of choosiness and determine which dimension is more influential on employability.

Next, this study only included four primary yet general competencies to assess graduate competency. It would be interesting the components of competency can be customized further to fit the fields of specialization. Furthermore, some competencies may be more relevant in some fields compared to others. As we did not control for employer sector and size, we were unable to complete the analysis in order to ascertain whether respondents’ perceptions varied by these components. We admit this could have provided important insights and future studies should compare and contrast the findings by employer sectors and size. Finally, future studies should include other components of attitude to the competency model to better understand the interaction between competency and attitude.
Conclusion

Malaysian students face severe competition when they graduate. Studies have proven that improving the level of graduate's competencies can enhance employability level. However, the relationship is not as straightforward as it seems. While graduates are entitled to seek jobs that meet their expectation, there must be a limit to their level of choosiness. If employers perceive a candidate's level of choosiness is high, their employability decreases clearly. While the impact appears to be less severe among highly competent graduates, the negative implications should not be ignored. In a nutshell, it would be a wasted effort in competency development if our graduates remained unemployed due to their attitude of being choosy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References
