

EXPLORING TRADE UNION RELEVANCE AMONGST UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY YOUTH EMPLOYEES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Trade union movement in South Africa is often regarded as the driving force behind the political transformation. In this research paper we report, on an exploratory analysis that focused on a quantitative study conducted with purposively selected young employees within one University of Technology in South Africa. The main objective being to determine the overall perception of the relevance of trade union movement amongst employees between the ages of 18 to 35 years at this University. The literature of the study reveal that in the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) employees that are younger than 30 years of age, constitute a third of non-members and only 15% in both (COSATU) and other unions federations. Data analysis was performed using the structural equation modelling (SEM). SEM has been described as “a multivariate, statistical technique largely employed for studying relationships between latent variables (or constructs) and observed variables that constitute a model” (Schermelleh-Engel, Klein & Moosbrugger 2017). Results obtained from the employees of one University of Technology (UoT) under study confirmed that there is an association between young workers and their relationship with the existing trade union movement in their institution.

Keywords: *trade union, relevance, employees, workplace, University of Technology.*

JEL Classification Code: J51 Trade Unions: Objectives, Structure and Effects.

1. INTRODUCTION

Trade union movement in South Africa gained momentum in the early 1970s against the exploitation, meagre pay and poor working conditions of employees primarily the Black employees in the mining sector (Buhlungu, 2007). To date unions are still regarded as relevant agencies that deal with issues affecting workers in their respective workplaces (Luce, 2014; Wrigley, 2002). Trade unions in South African organisations have vigorously challenged management and defended the rights of employees' in the workplace (Shrestha, 2012; Armstrong & Steenkamp, 2008). Ironically despite the gains that have been made by union movement, there are still major challenges that faces union movement across the globe such as the difficulty to remain relevant, recruitment and attracting younger employees within various organisations (Visser, 2019:9). Further challenges could be posed by the advent of the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) as captured by Joseph (2020) that many organisations and employers are already discussing possible pay cuts and retrenchments. In this research paper, we report on an exploratory analysis that focuses on a quantitative study conducted with purposively selected young employees within one University of Technology in South Africa. The main objective being to determine the overall perception of the relevance of trade union movement amongst employees between the ages of 18 to 35 years at this University. We begin by outlining the various explanations of the younger worker union density differential and the quality of empirical support for them, and describing the survey instruments employed to gather the data in the present study. We then present an overview of union membership patterns in South Africa by age, and investigate the relationships among attitudes, labour market locations and propensity to join and belong to unions. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for unions and recommendations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Trade union movement in South Africa

The ascending of the National Party (NP) into power in 1948, saw South Africa drafting and implementing industrial relation policies which discriminated on the basis of race and gender. The Nationalist apartheid government institutionalized apartheid phenomenon also spread to workplaces such as factories and mines. This meant that White workers were treated as superior to their African counterparts (Budeli, 2009). By the beginning of the 1970s African employees fought tooth and nail and were no longer prepared to accept the status quo as inferior second class citizens in workplaces. The battle in the 1970s was about the recognition and unbanning of Black unions by the White Afrikaner apartheid regime which did not

recognize Black trade unions (Bhorat, Naidoo & Yu, 2014). One of the reforms was the passing of legislation in 1979 that allowed African employees to join and form trade unions (Casale & Posel, 2008). For the purpose of this study a trade union is defined “*as an association of employees whose prime purpose is to regulate the employment relationship between the employer and employees, through a direct process of collective bargaining*” (Bray, Deery, Walsh & Waring 2005; Phillip & Gully, 2014).

From the definition it can be postulated that unions exist solely because workers share common, goals, aspirations and vision in the workplace. Unions exist primarily to improve the material conditions of their constituencies. These conditions are achieved in various methods this includes the provision of bursaries, skill development programmes, and social initiatives (Bendix, 2010; Labour Research Services, 2011). In the South African context youth is defined as those that are between the ages 15 to 35 years of age. In Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) employees that are younger than 30 years of age, constitute a third of non-members and only 15% in both (COSATU) and other unions federations in South Africa (Visser, 2019). It is worrisome as the figures are very low for young employees that are involved in union activities compared to older employees. Lower figures in younger workers’ levels of unionization have been greeted with alarm and pessimism by many trade unionists and academics. The current ‘failure to mobilize young people’ raises serious concern and indicates a ‘bleak future’ for the union movement (Visser, 2019).

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Even after the advent of the new dispensation the conditions in South Africa were such that trade unions still had a significant role to play in the working class community, but they represent only a small proportion of the previously disadvantaged working class (Bendix, 2015). There is a constant increase in the discouraged numbers of job seekers with unemployment reaching 29.30% in early January 2020 to February 2020 (Statistic South Africa, 2020). It is in this vein that different sectors have to employ most of the unemployed youth that is expected to be 53% by the end of the first quarter of 2020 and the bulk of the challenges to be dealt with in the South African economy. This development reinforced pre-existing labour market inequalities at the expense of the youth (Kretsos, 2014).

4. TRADE UNION FEDERATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The trade union movement in South Africa is often regarded as the driving force behind the political transformation. Currently in South Africa there are five main trade union federations namely the Congress of South Africa Trade Union (COSATU), South African Federation of Trade Union (SAFTU), Federation of Democratic Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA), Confederation of South African Workers Union (CONSAWU) and National Council of Trade Union (NACTU) (Public Services International, 2012; Levy, Venter Holtzhausen, Conradie, Bendeman & Dworzanowski-Venter, 2014).

Table 1: South African trade union federations and their affiliates

COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions)	SAFTU (South African Federation of Trade Union)	NACTU (National Council of Trade Unions)	FEDUSA (Federation of Unions in South Africa)	CONSAWU (Confederation of South Africa Workers Union)
20	21	18	19	20

Source: Levy, Venter Holtzhausen, Conradie, Bendeman & Dworzanowski-Venter (2014).

COSATU was formed in 1985 and is the largest of the federations in terms of union affiliates and membership (Beckman, Buhlungu & Sachikonye, 2010; Finnemore & van Rensburg, 2002). COSATU boasts a membership of close to 1.3 million members. In COSATU employees that are younger than 30 years old constitute only 15%. This is worrisome as the figures are very low for young employees that are involved in union activities (Kahmann, 2002).

5. RELUCTANT OF YOUNG WORKERS TO JOIN TRADE UNIONS

The lack of participation by young workers in labour organisation has proven to be a dilemma facing many unions. The main contributing factor to lower figures is that young workers do not find trade union to be attractive and relevant and view them as a waste of time to affiliate to a union (Swanepoel & Slabbert, 2012). Young workers tend to pay less attention to union activities due to the fact that young employees no longer view labour unions as attractive and relevant structures that takes their workplace concerns seriously. Union officials are often accused of furthering their own selfish interests and neglect serious organisational issues affecting employees. Trade union movements in South Africa are often regarded as a driving force behind the political transformation (Swanepoel & Slabbert, 2012;

Buhlungu & Webster, 2004). Union members are the bedrock of power, without energetic and militant young member's unions will find it difficult to survive in the current labour sphere. The major fact that has been identified by Tailby & Pollert (2011) as the main contributing factor as to why young workers are reluctant to join unions is because of high rate of job shift and short tenure of young employees in employment. At the heart trade union activism lies the individual's decisions to join and support a union (Public Service International, 2012). According to Finnemore (2002) workers that join unions are the ones that have unfulfilled needs and have certain expectations, but for these expectations and needs to be achieved certain external factors influence an employee to join a union these include:

- The capacity of the union to help and attend to employee concerns;
- Encouragement or even peer pressure from co-workers; and
- Lack of other alternative available to the employees in the workplace.

6. UNION POWER AND STRATEGY

In a country such as South Africa employee activism through their unions are still relevant at a shop floor level. For unions to remain relevant, a union should device a workable strategy. Ndlozi (2010) define a "strategy" *as a programme based on an analysis of the political and labour economy of society, which seeks to alter the relationship of working class to means of production and political administration.* For an effective union movement to thrive and be relevant it should strive to recruit younger energetic workers if they want to gain power in workplaces. For unions to be able to achieve this it means that unions should target campaigns which are exclusively relevant to young employees within the organisation (Luce, 2014). As explicated by Swanepoel & Slabbert (2012) for a union to be relevant and powerful three aspects need to be taken into consideration namely the constitution, policy making and executive function. For unions to remain relevant to young workers a union should have a clear policy in terms of having a certain percentage of young employees under the age of 35 years into their rank and file. This will make it easy for younger workers to view unions as being relevant. Of great significance unions must be deliberate when drafting their resolution and policies. During their conference to have mechanism in enticing younger workers in being members of unions.

7. THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISATION (ILO) ON FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING BY UNIONS

South Africa became a member of the ILO in 1919, two key conventions that were ratified by the South African government were Convention 87 of 1948 and Convention 98 of 1949 (Grawitzky, 2013; International Labour Organisation, 2001). The first convention focused on “Freedom of association” this means that employees are allowed to be part of unions without any intimidation and victimisation by the employer. The second convention advocated for the right of union to bargain collectively and organise in the workplace without any hindrance from the employer (Sewerynski, 2007). Table 2 illustrates the labour standards set by the ILO.

Table 2: Core labour standards as set by the ILO on freedom of association and collective bargaining

Fundamental principle	Relevant ILO convention
Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining	87 freedom of association and protection of the right to organise and 87 (Right to organise and Collective bargaining)
Elimination of all form of forced labour or compulsory labour	29 (forced labour) and 105 (Abolition of forced labour)
The effective abolition of child labour	138 (Minimum Age) and 182 (Worst forms of Child Labour)
The elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation	100 (Equal Remuneration) and 111 (Discrimination, Occupational and Employment)

Source: Bamber, Lansbury & Wailes (2011).

8. ORGANISATIONAL RIGHTS

In the South African employment context, the rights of unions to enter and recruit members are referred as Organisational Rights which are covered by the LRA No: 66 of 1995 (Venter et al. 2011). This is a constitutional right to freedom of association is a. This right is enshrined in Section 23 of the constitution. In order to effectively manage the employment relationship between the unions and employer a majority representative union needs to be accorded organisational rights these rights include (Grosset & Hills, 2003).

- Right of access, Payment of stop order facilities;
- Holding elections of shop steward on employer's premises;
- Leave for trade union officials; and Disclosure of information (Du Toit, Bosch, Woolfrey, Godfrey, Rossouw, Christie, Cooper, Giles & Bosch, 2003).

9. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A well-structured questionnaire comprising of closed-ended questions was used as an instrument to gather the required data from the selected young employees identified. The institution is situated within in Southern of Gauteng in South Africa. A sample size of 100 employees between the ages of 18 to 35 years was collected for analysis. Out of the 100 distributed questionnaires only one was incomplete and was excluded from the study.

9.1 Data analysis

In this study the researchers employed Statistical Packages for Social Sciences version to analyse the data. Data analysis was performed using the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). SEM has been described as “a multivariate, statistical technique largely employed for studying relationships between latent variables (or constructs) and observed variables that constitute a model” (Schermelleh-Engel, Klein & Moosbrugger, 2017).

9.2 Results

Results obtained from the institution's employees confirmed that there is an association between young workers and their relationship with the existing trade union movement in their institution. This is illustrated by a path coefficient of 0.530 that was realized after testing H1. This result suggests that there is a positive influence on the young employee's views of the important role that the trade union may play in advancing the quality of their working environment. Furthermore, the results indicate as outlined below.

9.3 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Path results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and path analysis was performed using Smart PLS simultaneously (Davari & Rezazadeh, 2015). The function of CFA is to evaluate how well the latent variables are measured by the observed variables (Li, 2016.) while that of path analysis is to investigate causal relationships among unobserved variables (Mueser et al. 2017).

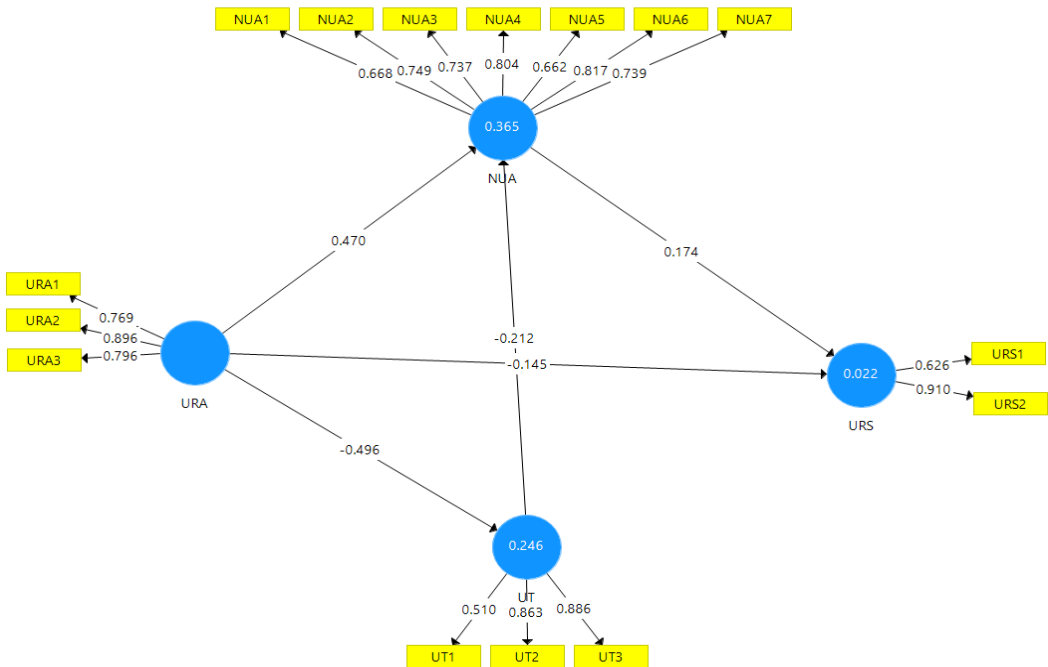


Figure 1: Path Coefficient

Source: Researcher’s own compilation

Note: RUL = Role of Union Leadership; UOP = Union Outreach Programmes; AS = Affordable Subscription, UT = Union Trustworthiness, NUA= Nature of Union Attractiveness, URA= Union Relevant Activities, URS= Union Representation Strength, SD= Standard Deviation, CR= Composite Reliability and AVE= Average Variance Extracted. Five hypotheses were tested, and the path coefficients provided in Figure 1. The significant levels were assessed using p-values and t-statistics. Respectively using the p-values. Hypotheses are viewed as significant at a 95% or higher level of significance ($\geq 95\%$), that is to say that p-value is ≤ 0.05 (Hastie et al. 2009; Hair et al. 2010). The t-statistics are expected to be greater than 1.96 for the proposed relationship to be deemed acceptable. The proposed hypotheses and path coefficients are provided first and followed by t-statistics and p-values that indicate the significance level of the proposed relationship. The path coefficients demonstrate the strength of the relationships between the dependent and the independent variables (Hsu, 2008). Upon assessing the probability value also referred to as the p - value, it was demonstrated that three of the five hypotheses postulated were significant at $p < 0.05$ which is significant.

Table 3 provides results for the five hypotheses tested. All the five hypotheses were proposed to be positive. However, only three of five hypotheses were found to be positive.

Table 3: Path Analysis Results

Hypothesized Relationship	Hypotheses	Path Co-efficient	T-Statistics	P-value	OUTCOME
URA → NUA	H1	0.543	7.930	0.000	Significant & Supported
URA → URS	H2	0.573	6.633	0.000	Significant & Supported
URA → UT	H3	- 0.363	3.062	0.002	Rejected but significant
NUA → UT	H4	- 0.241	1.892	0.059	Rejected & insignificant
NUA → URS	H5	0.101	1.024	0.306	Supported but insignificant

Note: NUA = Nature of Union Attractiveness; URA = Union Relevant Activities; URS = Union Representation Strength; UT = Union Trustworthiness

Source: Researcher’s own compilation

Five hypotheses were proposed in the study. Three out of the five proposed hypotheses are statistically significant. The strongest relationship was between Union Relevant Activities (URA) and Union Representation Strength (URS) which has $\beta=0.573$; $t=6.633$; $p=0.000$. This was followed by the relationship between Union Relevant Activities (URA) and Nature of Union Attractiveness (NUA) which has $\beta=0.543$; $t=7.930$; $p=0.000$. The third strongest relationship was between Union Relevant Activities (URA) and Union Trustworthiness (UT) which has $\beta=-0.363$; $t= 3.062$; $p=0.002$. The second weakest was between Nature of Union Attractiveness (NUA) and Union Trustworthiness (UT) which has $\beta = -0.241$; $t= 1.892$; $p=0.059$. The weakest was between Nature of Union Attractiveness (NUA) and Union Representation Strength (URS) which has $\beta = 0.101$; $t= 1.024$; $p=0.306$.

9.4 Results after testing hypothesis 1

The results obtained following the test of H1 confirmed that there is an association between Union Relevant Activities (URA) and Nature of Union Attractiveness (NUA). A path coefficient of 0.543 was realized after testing H1. This means that union relevant activities have a positive influence on nature of union attractiveness. Furthermore, the results indicate that the relationship of union relevant activities and nature of union attractiveness are positively related in a significant way ($t=7.930$, $p= 0.000$).

9.5 Results after testing hypothesis 2

The results obtained following the test of H2 confirmed that there is an association between Union Relevant Activities (URA) and Union Representation Strength (URS). A path coefficient of 0.573 was realized after testing H2. This means that union relevant activities have a relatively strong relationship with union representation strength. Furthermore, the results indicate that the relationship between union relevant activities and union representation strength is positive and significant ($t= 6.633$, $p=0.000$).

9.6 Results after testing hypothesis 3

The results obtained following the test of H3 confirmed that there is an association between Union Relevant Activities (URA) and Union Trustworthiness (UT). A path coefficient of -0.363 was realized after testing H3. This means that union relevant activities have a negative influence on union trustworthiness. Furthermore, the results indicate that the relationship of union relevant activities and union trustworthiness are negatively related in a significant way ($t=3.062$, $p= 0.002$).

9.7 Results after testing hypothesis 4

The results obtained following the test of H4 confirmed that there is an association between Nature of Union Attractiveness (NUA) and Union Trustworthiness (UT). A path coefficient of -0.241 was realized after testing H4. This means that nature of union attractiveness has a negative influence on union trustworthiness. Furthermore, the results indicate that the relationship nature of union attractiveness and union trustworthiness is rejected in an insignificant way ($t=1.892$, $p= 0.059$).

9.8 Results after testing hypothesis 5

The results obtained following the test of H5 confirmed that there is an association between Nature of Union Attractiveness (NUA) and Union Representation Strength (URS). A path coefficient of 0.101 was realized after testing H5. This means that nature of union attractiveness has a positive relationship with union representation

strength. Furthermore, the results indicate that the relationship between nature of union attractiveness and union representation strength is positive and insignificant ($t= 1.024$, $p=0.306$).

9.8 Overall analysis of hypotheses testing results

Individual path coefficients of H1, H2, H3, H4 and H5 were 0.543; 0.573; -0.363; -0.241; 0.101 respectively. Generally, these results indicate that three of the latent variables have a positive relationship with each other except two (H3, H4) respectively. Drawing from the research findings, union relevant activities has a strongest relationship with union representation strength as indicated by the path coefficient value of 0.573.

10. MEASUREMENT MODEL ASSESSMENT

10.1.1 Reliability and Validity tests in CFA

Once an appropriate overall fit was established, the following step was to assess reliability and validity, under the guide of previous literature (Devine & Hughes, 2016; Canivez, 2016; Willoughby et al. 2017). Item reliability recognizes “the amount of variance in an item due to underlying construct rather than to error” (Chau 1997). Convergent validity alternatively is referred to as the degree to which a construct is represented by its measurement items (Results obtained from the institution’s employees confirmed that there is an association between young workers and their relationship with the existing trade union movement in their institution Smith et al. (2016).

Table 4: Measurement Instrument Assessment (Confirmatory Factor Analysis)

Table 4 below provides the Reliability measures. Cronbach alpha and Composite reliability coefficients were used to assess the reliability of measurement instruments used to measure the research variables.

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
AS	0.748	0.883	0.791
RUL	0.800	0.861	0.554
UOP	0.522	0.753	0.509
UT	0.669	0.809	0.587

Note: = AS = Affordable Subscription; RUL=Role of Union Leadership; UOP = Union Outreach Programmes; UT = Union Trustworthiness SD= Standard Deviation CR= Composite Reliability AVE= Average Variance Extracted

11. TESTING FOR RELIABILITY

11.1.1 Cronbach’s Alpha (CA)

Cronbach’s alpha coefficient, composite reliability (CR) was used to evaluate the measurement scale to verify the internal consistency and checking the reliability of the measurements. Diedenhofen and Musch (2016) advance that values greater than 0.6 are reliable. In this study, the reliability of the instrument was first tested using Cronbach alpha and overall, one of Cronbach alpha values did not exceed the recommended threshold of 0.6 (UOP=0.522), hence, this means that one of the measurement instruments used in the study cannot be deemed reliable.

11.1.2 Composite Reliability (CR)

Composite reliability index greater than 0.7, is deemed acceptable (Diedenhofen & Musch (2016). For this study, Smart PLS calculated the Composite Reliability and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). AVE is expected to be greater than 0.5 – the acceptable threshold. However, an AVE that is above 0.4 is regarded marginally acceptable (Chinomona & Cheng, 2013). Therefore, the AVE results on this study range from marginally acceptable to acceptable. In the current study, the lowest composite reliability value (CR) was for (UOP) the value of 0.753 whilst the highest composite reliability was for (AS) with 0.883. Other research constructs composite reliability is reported in the table above. The lowest AVE is 0.509 while the highest AVE is 0.791. The results indicate an acceptable internal consistency.

12. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study was restricted to participants between the ages of 18 to 35 years at a particular University of Technology in South Africa. It is however recommended that the study be extended to all age groups and other Universities to reflect the total perception of employees between those age groups.

13. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results obtained from the employees confirmed that there is an association between young workers and their relationship with the existing trade union movement in their institution. In general, young workers enjoy less favorable conditions of employment protection than older age groups of the workforce across. The following recommendation are therefore proposed:

- Unions should conscientise young workers about the importance of joining and being members of a union;
- Trade unions must devise vigorous recruitment campaigns solely directed at young workers;
- Unions should be appealing to younger workers by having an agenda that focuses strictly on young employees,
- Make monthly union subscription inexpensive and affordable to attract younger workers; and
- Have increased younger shop stewards in the unions higher echelons to promote its relevance to younger employees.

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