

# Examining Students' Feelings and Perceptions of Accounting Profession in a Developing Country: The Role of Gender and Student Category

Joseph Mbawuni<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Business Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Correspondence: Joseph Mbawuni, Faculty of Business Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.  
E-mail: mbawuni@gmail.com

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## Abstract

This paper examines the preconceived notions accounting students in Ghana have about the accounting profession and whether these perceptions are influenced by gender and student category (graduates and undergraduates). This study was a cross-sectional survey of 516 undergraduate and 78 graduate accounting students from a public university in Ghana. A self-administered structured questionnaire was developed to collect primary data. Data were analysed using SPSS 16.0.

The results of this study show that, generally, both undergraduate and graduate accounting students have positive perceptions about accounting profession, contrary to most existing literature. Our findings indicate that despite the generally negative perception held by the public about accountants' behaviour, accounting students in Ghana do not share the same perception with the public. This study also found that gender influences the perception of both graduate and undergraduate accounting students, and few significant differences existed between graduate and undergraduate accounting students' perception of the profession. This research contributes to the academic debate surrounding the concerns of the future of accounting profession and its implications for contemporary accounting education in developing countries. It also provides knowledge to accounting educators in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) regarding areas of career orientation and training required to positively influence the perception of future accounting professionals in SSA and Ghana in particular. The limitations of this study are discussed to provide directions for future research.

**Keywords:** accounting, profession, career, accountants, job outcomes, job reputation

## 1. Introduction

The accounting profession globally has gone through image/reputation crisis over the past three decades. Globalisation presents many challenges to the accounting profession in ensuring global accounting standards, certification and ethics in the accounting profession (Ball, 2006; Chakrabarty, 2011). Apart from that, corporate scandals that occurred with global companies in the US and Europe such as Enron, Stanford International Bank, Satyam Computer Services, WorldCom, Parmalatas well as other local companies have posed a big challenge to the accounting profession's integrity, professional conducts and responsibility to the public.

These events have cast negative perceptions and stereotypes on the image and integrity of the accounting profession globally from the general public (Byrne & Willis, 2005). An Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) report (ACCA, Closing the Value Gap, 2012), found that as the role of the accountant has evolved in line with changing regulation and business law, a perception gap between the profession and the public when it comes to the issue of trust has emerged. The report found a 25% trust discrepancy indicating the gap between how the industry perceives itself and the level of trust the public actually holds for accountants. Moreover, 85% of the accountants agreed that accountancy as a profession should be doing more to improve its overall image.

Several studies have found that accountants were stereotyped as being conformist, cold, submissive and lacking social skills (e.g., Hunt, Anthony, & Intrieri, 2004; Parker, 2000; Siegel, 2000). According to Parker (2000, p. 50), the "common stereotype of the accountant—usually portrayed as male—introverted, cautious, methodical, systematic, antisocial and, above all, boring". Siegel (2000) also reported that first-line operating and

management staff often views the accountant as a bean counter and corporate policeman. Hunt et al. (2004) maintain that, even though accountants were widely seen as being skilled in maths and tax work and attentive to detail, they were not considered particularly admirable, exciting, or strong in leadership capabilities.

Generally, perceptions of students eventually form part of their beliefs which in turn can influence their career choices (Hunt et al., 2004, Ferreira & Santoso 2008; G. White & M. White, 2006). The perception accounting students hold about their intended professional careers in accounting can affect their self-image, attitude towards the career and even their confidence in the profession (Dalci, Arasli, Tümer, & Baradarani, 2013; Saemann & Crooker, 1999). Since wrong perceptions can lead to misleading representations, it becomes critically important for accounting students to have a realistic perception of what the accounting profession entails (Byrne & Willis, 2005). In this regard, Holt (1994, p. 24) believes: “how accounting is perceived by society affects whether or not the best and brightest students are attracted to the profession”. Stereotyping accountants and other negative perception some students hold about the accounting profession might explain the worldwide decline in the number of students choosing to become accountants in the last few years (P. Marriott & N. Marriott, 2003). Albrecht and Sack (2000) listed five reasons for the decline in student interest in the accounting profession in the USA: low starting salaries, more attractive career choices, a willingness to choose risky majors, a misconception of accountants and the accounting profession and the requirements of the 150-hour rule. Three of the five reasons relate to students’ perceptions of the accounting profession.

In spite of the critical role accounting students’ perception play in determining their choice of accounting programmes before they enter university and choice of accounting careers after university (Sale, 2001; Hunt et al., 2004; Ferreira & Santoso, 2008), there is very limited empirical studies that examine the phenomenon in developing countries in general and Sub-Sahara African (SSA) in particular. In this regard, Byrne and Willis (2005, p. 368) noted that although perceptions play a critical role in career decisions, few studies have explored this issue in the field of accounting. They also noted that much of the research of accounting students perceptions of the profession has been done in Europe and the US. Only a few have explored this research problem in developing countries and SSA (Fatokun & Ojo, 2004; Myburgh, 2005; Wessels & Steenkamp, 2009). In Ghana, only one study by Awayiga, Onumah, and Tsamenyi (2010) examined the accounting knowledge and skills required by graduates. Given the prominence of college students’ perception of accounting profession in prior research, we investigate whether those concerns also apply in Ghana. This is because there had been acute shortage of qualified accountants in Ghana since the last decade, and that it had been estimated that Ghana would need about between 4000 to 8000 qualified accountants to fill the job market and to propel the economy to the middle income status (ACCA Ghana report, 2005, 2006).

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the preconceived notions accounting students in Ghana have about the accounting profession and whether these perceptions are influenced by gender and student category (graduates and undergraduates). The main contributions of this research are two-fold. First, it provides empirical evidence to contribute to the academic debate surrounding the concerns of the future of accounting profession and its implications for contemporary accounting education in developing countries. Second, it provides knowledge to accounting educators in SSA regarding areas of training and career orientation required to positively influence the perception of future accounting professionals in SSA and Ghana in particular. Accounting educators play a vital role in changing students’ perceptions of accountants (P. Marriott & N. Marriott, 2003).

This study addresses the following specific objectives:

- To examine students’ perception of accounting profession in a Ghanaian Higher Education Institution.
- To determine differences in students’ perception of accounting profession between males and females, and between undergraduates and graduates.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Brief Overview of Development of the Accounting Profession in Ghana

The development of the accounting profession is an area of rising interest in recent times. (De Lange, Jackling, & Basioudis, 2013; Tingey-Holyoak & Burritt, 2012; Yee, 2012; Zhang, 2013). Most of these studies unearth the role of the accounting profession in organizing, securing and advancing the interest of not only its members but also that of the public. Most of the above studies have been on developed countries such as the UK, Australia and America. Little research work has been done to understand students’ perception of accounting profession of developing countries.

The Association of Accountants in the Gold Coast (Ghana) established in 1954 was the first registered

professional accounting body in British West Africa. This then was transformed to the Institute of Chartered Accountants, Ghana, (ICAG) in 1963. The Institute of Chartered Accountants (Ghana) was established by an Act of Parliament, Act 170, in 1963. It is charged with the regulation of the accountancy profession in Ghana, including setting professional standards. It is the sole such organization in Ghana with the right to award the Chartered Accountant designation, and with the right to regulate the accountancy profession in Ghana. ICAG conducted its first professional examinations in 1968 under the oversight of ICA (England and Wales). Two out of the seven candidates (30%) passed. In 1978, ICA (England and Wales) gave ICAG full professional independence and freedom after being convinced of ICA (Ghana's) standards of examination and membership qualifications to be satisfactory and that ICAG could manage its own affairs.

The founding members of ICAG were mostly qualified professionals from the UK bodies, i.e. ICA (England and Wales) and ICA (Scotland). Currently, most of the initial practicing members have phased out; some by death, others by virtue to old age and infirmity. There are now two categories of membership, i.e. (a) those who qualify by taking the examinations of the institute and (b) those who are admitted by virtue of their membership of other accountancy bodies so recognized by council. Under group (b) is a large number of ACCAs, ICWAS, and CPAs.

ICAG is also a member of regional and international accounting professional bodies such as Association of Accountancy Bodies in West Africa (ABWA), International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) and Pan-African Federation of Accountants (PAFA).

From a humble beginning of two candidates who passed the Institutes first examinations in 1968, ICAG now can boast of 3,923 qualified members out of which 352 are practitioners. The Institute also has a current student population of over 10,000, with more than 6,000 who regularly sit for the Institutes examinations. With branch offices in every region of Ghana, ICAG is making significant contribution to the economic development of Ghana.

## *2.2 Conceptual Framework for Perception of Accounting Profession*

Prior research shows that first-year accounting students usually have negative perceptions about the subject (Hunt et al., 2004; Parker, 2000; Siegel, 2000; Wessels & Steenkamp, 2009) which are likely to affect their interest for the accounting profession (Ferreira & Santoso, 2008; G. White & M. White, 2003). These perceptions may stem from different sources such as corporate scandals of global companies, accounting teachers' or lecturers' perception, wrong understanding of the nature and challenges of the accounting profession, parental expectations and perceptions, peer influence, critical experiences with practicing accountants, among others.

The conceptual framework for this study is depicted in Figure 1. It shows that this research focuses on five themes or areas of perception that may form part of accounting students' perception about the accounting profession. These are perceived negative behaviour of accounting people, perceived positive reputation of accounting people, accounting job outcomes, accounting job requirements and general feelings about accounting profession. These areas have been chosen mainly because this study wants to examine personality and job-related factors that affect career choice among students, which have received relatively little research attention in the literature, especially in developing country contexts. This study also examines differences in students' perception of accounting profession between males and females, and between undergraduate and graduate accounting students.

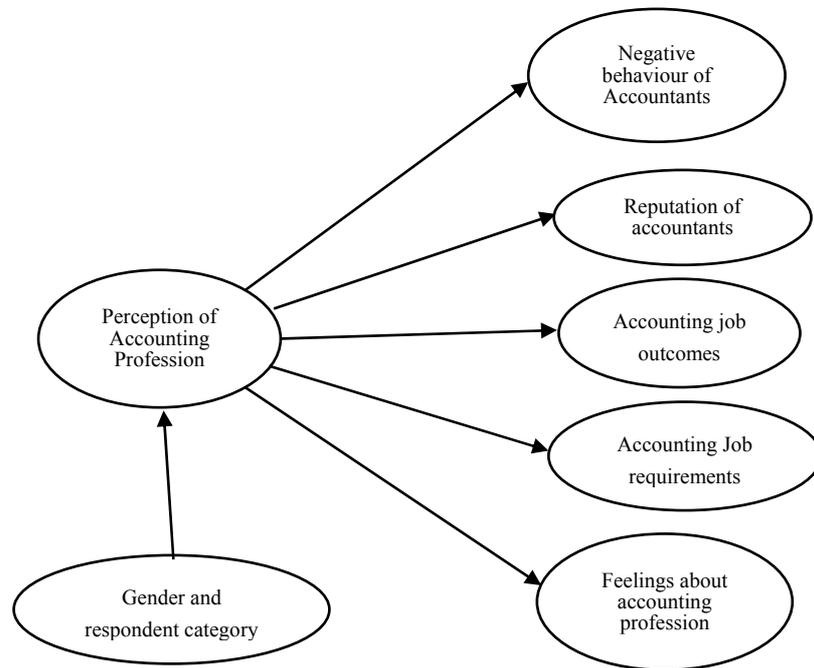


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the study

### 2.2.1 Perceived Negative Behaviour of Accounting People

Accounting students may have negative perception of accounting people in general. Some of these negative perceptions include the fact that accounting people are corrupt, untruthful, and dishonest, often manipulate figures in financial reports, and often do not report the true state of affairs and often hide vital materials in financial reports (Wessels & Steenkamp, 2009). Prior research has established that people tend to perceive accountants as rigid, people who are too structured and often follow strict regulatory requirements (Parker, 2000; Hunt et al., 2004). A notable report (ACCA, Closing the Value Gap report, 2012), warned that accountants should endeavor to uphold high ethical standards in order to win public trust perceptions for the profession. This leads to the research question: what are the perceptions of accounting students about negative behaviour of accountants held by the public?

### 2.2.2 Perceived Positive Reputation of Accounting People

Like negative perception, accounting students may also have positive perceptions about accounting people in terms of respect, recognition and reputation for accountants. Previous studies have found that some students' perceived accountants as reputable and respected people due to the demands of the profession (Germanou, Hassall, & Tournas, 2009; Góis & Brás, 2013). As mentioned earlier, 85% accountants agreed that accountancy as a profession should be doing more to improve its overall image (ACCA report, Closing the Value Gap, 2012). This leads to the specific research question: how do accounting students in Ghana perceive reputation of accounting people?

### 2.2.3 Accounting Job Outcomes

Apart from negative and positive perceptions about *accounting people*, accounting students may have negative or positive perceptions of *accounting jobs*. Prior research has shown that, generally, individuals' choice of careers is determined by the perceived outcomes of the job being the benefits they would derive from a job (Karakaya, Quigley, & Bingham, 2011). Perceived job benefits or outcomes are motivational factors that may be intrinsic or extrinsic as suggested by motivational theories (Bolton, 2010; Reiss, 2012). These job outcomes may include accounting jobs providing extrinsic motivation like substantial incomes such as salaries, allowances, bonuses and other financial incentives, and opportunity for other materials possessions. On the other hand, job outcomes may be intrinsic motivation such as opportunities for career advancement, personal fulfillment, recognition and prestige, among others. Negative or positive perceptions about job outcomes can affect accounting students' intentions (Chia et al., 2008; Dalci et al., 2013; Karakaya et al., 2011), and of joining the profession or being committed to the rigour and demands of the education and training leading to certification in

the profession. This leads to the research question: how do accounting students perceive accounting job outcomes?

#### 2.2.4 Accounting Job Requirements

Every profession has its regulations, principles of practice and professional job requirements. The accounting profession is governed by many rigorous job requirements such as accounting regulations, reporting standards as well as the demands of the specific accounting jobs. Accounting students may have negative perceptions about these job requirements which may not reflect the reality (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Meredith, Steward, & Lewis, 2011; J. Solomon, A. Solomon, Joseph, & Norton, 2013). Some of the job requirement perceptions include the perception that accounting job is quite challenging or demanding, requires a lot of mental energy in terms of managing complex accounting problems and conforming to accounting regulations, requires much intelligence, education and training, and is a nonstop activity that can be dull, routine and monotonous in practice (Wessels & Steenkamp, 2009). Wrong perception about accounting job requirement can result in over ambition and unrealistic job expectations for the profession (Solomon et al., 2013). This leads to the research question: how do accounting students perceive accounting job requirements?

#### 2.2.5 General Feelings about Accounting Profession

Feelings and attitudes are the foundations of individuals' perceptions (Ajzen, 1991). Accounting students' general feelings about the accounting profession may be sourced from early childhood experiences, college education and training, and practical experiences from prior employment in accounting jobs. In this regard, Jackling and Calero (2006) concluded that many students form their judgements about the work of accountants from their accounting studies. From an early age, children are presented with idealized portraits of professions. Parents encourage children to pursue noble and well-regarded professions including health, education, and public service. Feelings about a profession include feelings that the profession is interesting, has a sense of accomplishment, good and worthwhile and providing a kind of emotional and financial security (Karakaya et al., 2011; Peltier, Cummins, Pomirleanu, Cross, & Simon, 2014; Wessels & Steenkamp, 2009). Negative feelings for the accounting profession can be formed throughout life and can affect interest for the profession.

#### 2.2.6 Influence of Gender and Education

Past studies into gender differences in perceptions of accountants indicate that males perceive the accounting profession as more interesting and requiring a higher degree of interaction than females (Heiat et al., 2007; Byrne & Willis, 2005, p. 374). For example, Byrne and Willis (2005) conducted a study with 506 students of Irish secondary school, about students' perceptions on the accounting profession. Their findings indicate that female students had a neutral perception on accounting profession while the male students considered it boring. Moreover, the studies of Chia, Koh, and Pragasam (2008) and Dalci, Arasli, Tümer, and Baradarani (2013) indicate that male students attached a significantly greater importance to "material rewards" than female students do. However, in the South African context, Wessels and Steenkamp (2009) found no such significant difference between perceptions of male and female accounting students. In other-related professions like sales profession, Karakaya, Quigley, and Bingham (2011, p. 24) found that, "...gender has the greatest impact with males having a greater intention to pursue a career in sales than women." The inconsistencies in the findings on gender influence on students' perception of accounting profession calls for more empirical research. This study therefore explores these areas to contribute to the literature.

In addition to gender, this study also explores differences in perception among graduate and undergraduate accounting students. It is expected that since graduate students in accounting have a higher educational attainment, they have acquired more useful educational experiences that are supposed to give them a better perception of accounting profession than undergraduate accounting students.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Population and Sampling

The population consisted of about 1200 final year undergraduate accounting students and 90 graduate students pursuing accounting programmes at the College of Technology Education, Kumasi Campus of the University of Education, Winneba (COLTEK). The University of Education, Winneba (UEW) is a Ghanaian public university established in 1992 and mandated to train professional teachers for all levels of education in the country. UEW was chosen because it is a leading public institution that has been offering graduate and undergraduate accounting education programmes for over 20 years. Students of UEW have a rich variety of students from all regions across Ghana and even international students across Africa, which could be a fair representation of Ghanaian accounting students.

Based on the total population of accounting student groups, the appropriate sample size was statistically estimated using Yamane's (1967) formula that yielded a minimum sample size of 300 for the undergraduates and 74 for the graduates. In order to collect data of high quality that reflects the students' opinion, a survey was conducted in August, 2014, which yielded a usable 516 and 78 questionnaire for the undergraduate and graduate groups respectively.

### *3.2 Research Instrument*

A self-administered, structured questionnaire was developed for the survey. The question items on the research instrument were based on previous studies and modified to suite the research context. The questionnaire was pre-tested to a sample of twenty (20) students for refinement in order to get a more effective instrument. It was finally administered to the target population through personal contact by the researcher for one week. The responses to the questionnaire items were a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, coded 1 to 5 respectively. Initially, the questionnaire was developed for a larger study so it included other sections that are not relevant to this paper. Two sections were relevant to this paper; one section of the questionnaire contained demographic data of the respondents (gender, age, programme of study). The other section had items of feelings and perception of accounting profession. In all, there were five constructs (or dimensions) and 22 measurement items of student perception of accounting profession (SPAP). These items are depicted in Table 1. For the initial validity and reliability of the instrument, the face and content validity were verified and established by two experts in accounting research. The item and construct reliability for each construct was ascertained using the Cronbach alpha generated from the output of SPSS 16.0 (see Table 1). Table 1 shows that the Cronbach alphas range from 0.70 to 0.83, which adequately satisfy the recommended minimum of 0.7 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010), and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy for validity of all the items was 0.938. These indicate that the reliability and validity of the research instrument are acceptable.

### *3.3 Data Analysis Methods*

Data were analysed using SPSS 16.0 for windows to conduct descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviations, frequencies and percentages to describe the respondents' background data as well as ratings of perception of accounting profession. Moreover, Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine the differences in perception between males and females and between graduates and undergraduates (Hair et al., 2010). K-Wallis test (H) was considered most appropriate non-parametric ANOVA since it is difficult to achieve all the strict assumptions of parametric ANOVA or T-test, especially for all items rated or evaluated by respondents (Hair et al., 2010).

## **4. Results of the Study**

### *4.1 Respondents' Profile*

For the characteristics of the undergraduate respondents, in terms of gender, 69% of the respondents were males and 31% were females. 49.2% were below 25 years, 43.8% of the respondents were within the ages of 25-35 years, 6.2% were between 36 and 45 years, and .8% was between 45-55 years. This implies that majority of them were younger people within the youth and adult youth in the economically active population. In terms of programme of study, 70% were enrolled into regular full time programme and 30% of them were enrolled into evening part-time study programmes in accounting. 80% of the undergraduates earn some monthly income up to US\$250 while the rest 20% earn monthly income above US\$250 up to US\$300.

For the characteristics of the graduate respondents, in terms of gender, 70.5% of the respondents were males and 30.5% were females. 4% were below 25 years, 52% of the respondents were within the ages of 25-35 years, 37% were between 36 and 45 years, and 7% were between 45-55 years. This implies that majority of them were young and matured adults, 80% of them are working in industry and schooling at the same time. 70% of the graduate respondents were in their second year and 30% in their first year of study.

### *4.2 Respondents' Perception of Accounting Profession*

The results of respondents' perception of accounting profession are summarized in Tables 2 and 3. To describe each item's rating, we establish a hypothetical mean of 3.5 to describe responses as positive perception and means below 3.5 as not positive perception. Table 2 indicates that both undergraduate and graduate respondents have positive perceptions for job outcomes, reputation of accounting people and both groups have positive feelings that accounting profession is good and worthwhile, interesting, gives a sense of accomplishment and financial security. For job requirement and negative behaviour of accounting people dimensions, both groups seem to rate their perception similarly. For job requirements, both graduates and undergraduates have positive

perceptions that accounting jobs are challenging, require much intelligence, education and training, and are not necessarily non-stop activities, though they require a lot of mental energy. Similarly, both groups do not share the same perception of negative behaviour of accounting people held by the public, that accountants are corrupt professionals according to news report (GhanaNews24.com, 13th December, 2014). This public view has been debunked by the president of the Institute of Chartered Accountants, Ghana, Professor Boasiako Omane-Antwias false and untrue (GhanaNews24.com, 13th December, 2014). Both graduate and undergraduate groups agree that accountants often follow strict regulatory requirements. Thus, both groups believe that although accounting people are expected to be strict, they are not necessarily corrupt, do not often hide vital materials in financial reports, they do not fail to report true state of affairs, and they do not manipulate figures in financial reports.

Amongst the dimensions of students' perceptions of accounting profession, as is shown in Table 3, the highest rated positive perception of undergraduates is reputation of accounting people (mean = 4.21, SD = 2.25), followed by accounting job outcomes (mean = 4.11, SD = 2.01), feeling towards the profession (mean = 4.02, SD = 2.65), accounting job requirements, and the least rated perceptions relate to negative behaviour of accountants (mean = 3.00, SD = 3.05), which could be described as a neutral position.

Within the graduate respondents the highest rated positive perception is accounting job outcomes (mean = 4.06, SD = 2.05), followed by reputation of accounting people (mean = 4.03, SD = 2.30), accounting job requirements (mean = 3.85, SD = 3.18), feeling towards the profession (mean = 3.84, SD = 2.03), and the least rated perceptions relate to negative behaviour of accountants (mean = 3.00, SD = 3.05), which could be described as a neutral position.

#### *4.3 Differences in Graduates and Undergraduates' Perception*

In terms of differences in perceptions, according to the results of Kruskal-Wallis H test in Table 3, there was a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of graduates and undergraduates regarding reputation of accountants,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.754, p = 0.029$ , with a mean rank perception rating of 303.37 for undergraduates and 258.67 for graduates. This implies that undergraduates rated their perception for perceived reputation of accounting people higher than their graduate counterparts. In addition to this, there was a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of graduates and undergraduates regarding feelings about accounting profession,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.334, p = 0.037$ , with a mean rank perception rating of 303.13 for undergraduates and 260.24 for graduates. This implies that undergraduates rated their feelings of the profession higher than their graduate counterparts.

Table 1. Reliability of measurement items

Code	Dimensions and Items of Evaluation	No. of items	Sources	Cronbach $\alpha$
<u>Accounting job outcomes</u>				
JOU1	An Accounting job is valuable.	5	Karakaya, Quigley and Bingham (2011).	0.83
JOU2	An Accounting job is personally satisfying			
JOU3	An Accounting job is high-status (prestigious) job			
JOU4	An Accounting job provides substantial income			
JOU5	An Accounting job offers great chances of career advancement			
<u>Accounting job requirements</u>				
AJR1	An Accounting job is quite challenging	6	Karakaya, Quigley and Bingham (2011).	0.70
AJR2	An Accounting job requires much intelligence			
AJR3	An Accounting job requires much education and training			
AJR4	An Accounting job is a nonstop activity			
AJR5	An Accounting job is dull, routine and monotonous			
AJR6	An Accounting job takes a lot of mental energy			
<u>Perceived negative behaviour of accounting people</u>				
PNP1	Accounting people often manipulate figures in financial reports	4	Góis&Brás (2013), Peltier et al. (2014).	0.70
PNP2	Accounting people often do not report the true state of affairs			
PNP3	Accounting people often follow strict regulatory requirements			
PNP4	Accounting people are often hide vital materials in financial reports			
<u>Perceived reputation of accounting people</u>				
PRP1	Accounting people are intelligent	3	Góis&Brás (2013) Peltier et al. (2014).	0.81
PRP2	Accounting people are admired and respected by others			
PRP3	Accounting people are recognised as important in organisations			
<u>Feeling towards accounting profession</u>				
FAP1	Accounting job is good and worthwhile	4	Karakaya, Quigley and Bingham (2011).	0.76
FAP2	Accounting job is interesting			
FAP3	Accounting job gives a sense of accomplishment			
FAP4	Accounting job provides financial security			

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of perception and feeling of accounting students about accounting perception

Code	Dimensions and Items of Evaluation	Undergraduates (n = 516)			Graduates (n = 78)		
		Mean	Std. Dev	Remarks	Mean	Std. Dev	Remarks
Accounting job outcomes							
JOU1	An Accounting job is valuable.	4.23	0.94	Agree	4.19	1.01	Agree
JOU2	An Accounting job is personally satisfying	3.91	1.08	Agree	3.99	0.96	Agree
JOU3	An Accounting job is high-status (prestigious) job	4.27	0.95	Agree	4.10	1.15	Agree
JOU4	An Accounting job provides substantial income	3.93	0.92	Agree	3.92	0.86	Agree
JOU5	An Accounting job offers great chances of career advancement	4.22	0.88	Agree	4.09	0.94	Agree
Accounting job requirements							
AJR1	An Accounting job is quite challenging	3.90	1.00	Agree	4.08	0.96	Agree
AJR2	An Accounting job requires much intelligence	4.32	0.83	Agree	4.27	0.96	Agree
AJR3	An Accounting job requires much education and training	4.39	0.78	Agree	4.33	0.83	Agree
AJR4	An Accounting job is a nonstop activity	3.77	1.15	Agree	3.82	0.91	Agree
AJR5	An Accounting job is dull, routine and monotonous	2.56	1.30	Not agree	2.73	1.24	Not agree
AJR6	An Accounting job takes a lot of mental energy	3.75	1.09	Agree	3.88	0.91	Agree
Perceived negative behaviour of accounting people							
PNP1	Accounting people often manipulate figures in financial reports	2.73	1.29	Not agree	2.76	1.22	Not agree
PNP2	Accounting people often do not report the true state of affairs	2.59	1.27	Not agree	2.63	1.25	Not agree
PNP3	Accounting people often follow strict regulatory requirements	3.85	1.05	Agree	3.77	1.04	Agree
PNP4	Accounting people are often hide vital materials in financial reports	2.82	1.23	Not agree	2.88	1.15	Not agree
Perceived reputation of accounting people							
PRP1	Accounting people are intelligent	4.10	0.93	Agree	3.95	0.99	Agree
PRP2	Accounting people are admired and respected by others	4.27	0.85	Agree	4.10	0.89	Agree
PRP3	Accounting people are recognised as important in organisations	4.25	0.85	Agree	4.04	0.84	Agree
Feeling towards accounting profession							
FAP1	Accounting job is good and worthwhile	4.13	0.81	Agree	3.87	1.00	Agree
FAP2	Accounting job is interesting	4.09	0.83	Agree	3.99	0.88	Agree
FAP3	Accounting job gives a sense of accomplishment	4.02	0.85	Agree	3.90	0.83	Agree
FAP4	Accounting job provides financial security	3.86	0.95	Agree	3.62	1.01	Agree

Note. Scale 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree; a hypothetical mean of 3.5 is chosen as cut-off for agree.

Table 3. Differences in Undergraduate and Graduate Accounting students' perception of accounting profession

	Undergraduates (n=516)			Graduates (n=78)			Group difference (df=1)		
	Mean	Std dv	Mean ranks	Mean	Std dv	Mean rank	H (X <sup>2</sup> )	Sign.	Remarks
Perceived reputation of accounting people	4.21	2.25	303.37	4.03	2.30	258.67	4.754	0.029*	Difference exist
Accounting job outcomes	4.11	2.01	297.80	4.06	2.05	295.51	0.012	0.912	No difference exist
Feeling towards accounting profession	4.02	2.65	303.13	3.84	2.03	260.24	4.334	0.037*	Difference exist
Accounting job requirements	3.78	3.12	294.36	3.85	3.18	318.29	1.331	0.249	No difference exist
Per. negative beh. of accounting people	3.00	3.05	297.42	3.01	3.39	298.05	0.001	0.976	No difference exist

Note. \*significant at 0.05.

Table 4. Influence of gender on undergraduate accounting students' perception of accounting profession

	Male (n=356)			Female (n=160)			Group difference (df=1)		
	Mean	std dv	mean ranks	Mean	std dv	mean rank	H (X <sup>2</sup> )	Sign.	Remarks
Perceived reputation of accounting people	4.2	2.2	255.28	4.22	0.19	265.66	0.555	0.456	No difference exist
Accounting job outcomes	4.15	3.54	266.57	4.04	0.28	240.55	3.395	0.065	No difference exist
Feeling towards accounting profession	4.02	2.62	255.84	4.04	0.22	264.42	0.374	0.541	No difference exist
Accounting job requirements	3.45	3.42	254.58	3.37	0.30	267.22	0.802	0.371	No difference exist
Perceived negative behaviour	2.95	2.94	248.55	3.11	0.26	280.65	5.172	0.023*	Difference exist

Note. \*significant at 0.05.

Table 5. Influence of gender on graduate accounting students' perception of accounting profession

	Male (n=55)			Female (n=23)			Group difference (df=1), *sign at 0.05		
	Mean	std dv	mean ranks	Mean	std dv	mean rank	H (X <sup>2</sup> )	Sign.	Remarks
Accounting job requirements	3.48	3.87	41.51	3.14	3.17	34.7	1.484	0.223	No difference
Accounting job outcomes	4.18	3.86	43.11	3.77	4.22	30.87	4.796	0.029*	Difference
Feeling towards accounting profession	3.95	2.99	43.62	3.60	2.19	29.65	6.274	0.012*	Difference
Perceived reputation of accounting people	4.13	2.36	43.57	3.78	1.99	265.66	6.191	0.013*	Difference
Perceived negative behaviour	3.01	3.46	39.15	3.00	3.32	40.35	0.046	0.83	No difference

#### 4.4 Gender Influence in Graduates and Undergraduates' Perceptions

Among the undergraduate respondents, the Kruskal-Wallis H test in Table 4 shows that there was a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of males and females regarding perceived negative behaviour of accountants,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.172$ ,  $p = 0.023$ , with a mean rank perception rating of 248.55 for males and 280.65 for females. This implies that males disagreed to the perceived negative behaviour of accountant more than their female counterparts. No statistically significant differences were found for the rest of the dimensions of perceptions between males and females.

Among the graduate respondents, the Kruskal-Wallis H test in Table 5 shows that there was a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of males and females in three areas. First difference exists

regarding perception of accounting job outcomes,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.796$ ,  $p = 0.029$ , with a mean rank perception rating of 43.11 for males and 30.87 for females. This implies that males have higher positive perception of accounting job outcomes more than their female counterparts. Second, difference exists regarding feelings about accounting profession,  $\chi^2(1) = 6.274$ ,  $p = 0.012$ , with a mean rank perception rating of 43.62 for males and 29.65 for females. This implies that males have stronger positive feelings about accounting profession more than their female counterparts. Third, difference exists regarding perception of reputation for accountants,  $\chi^2(1) = 6.191$ ,  $p = 0.013$ , with a mean rank perception rating of 43.57 for males and 29.76 for females. This implies that males have higher positive perception of reputation for accountants more than their female counterparts.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this paper was to explore the preconceived notions accounting students in Ghana have about the accounting profession and whether these perceptions are influenced by gender and student category (graduates and undergraduates). The results of this study show that, generally, both undergraduate and graduate accounting students have positive perceptions about accounting profession. This finding contradicts most existing literature that found that accounting students continue to have negative perceptions about accounting subject and profession (Fatokun & Ojo, 2004; Hunt et al., 2004; Parker, 2000; Siegel, 2000; Wessels & Steenkamp, 2009). One reason that might account for this contradiction is that the respondents used in this study were either in their final year in the undergraduate accounting programme or were master's degree students who have been exposed to educationally useful teaching and learning experiences in accounting and its related courses. Therefore their perception might have been improved about accounting profession better than beginning accounting students' perceptions that have been found to be generally negative in previous studies (e.g., Góis & Brás, 2013; Manganaris & Spathis, 2012; Mladenovic, 2000). Our finding confirms the study of Manganaris et al. (2012, p. 59) who concluded that:

*In general, the results show that the students' initial perceptions of the accounting profession are rather traditional and stereotypical, but that these perceptions generally become more "positive" at the end of their first semester after completing an introductory accounting course.*

This study also found that both undergraduate and graduate respondents have positive perceptions for job outcomes, reputation of accounting people, have positive feelings about accounting profession and job requirements, but they disagree to the perceived negative behaviour of accounting people held by the public. Despite the fact that previous studies have pointed that accountants were not considered particularly admirable and exciting (Hunt et al., 2004), our findings indicate that both undergraduate and graduate accounting students consider accountants as admirable.

These findings lend support to those of Góis and Brás (2013) who found that graduate students in Portuguese higher education institutions perceive accounting profession as interesting and not boring as pointed out by some studies (Malthus & Fowler, 2009). Similarly our findings confirm those of Wessels and Steenkamp (2009) who found that in South Africa, undergraduate students considered accounting profession to be an interesting, admirable, good, worthwhile, and a profession that gives a sense of accomplishment.

Our findings indicate that despite the fact that generally the public associate accountants with negative and unethical behaviour, accounting students in Ghana do not share the same perception with the public. This means that public perception is not likely to negatively influence future accountants' perception and choice of accounting careers. This study found that both graduate and undergraduate accounting students in Ghana believe that though accountants often follow strict regulatory requirements, they are not necessarily corrupt, nor do they often hide vital materials in financial reports or fail to report true state of affairs or manipulate figures in financial reports.

The highest rated positive perception of undergraduates is reputation of accounting people followed by accounting job outcomes. This means that college students in Ghana have high respect for the accounting profession and have high expectations of what the profession will offer them, despite the high demands of the profession.

According to our results, undergraduates rated their perception for perceived reputation of accountant and feeling about the profession higher than their graduate counterparts. Thus, it implies that undergraduates appear to have high hopes and expectations for the accounting profession. It is likely that the graduate respondents in this study have some work experience in the accounting profession, so some of their expectations are met or they have somewhat a better view of the profession and, therefore, are not over-enthusiastic like their undergraduate counterparts.

This study found that gender influences the perception of both graduate and undergraduate accounting students. Specifically we found that males disagreed to the perceived negative behaviour of accountant more than their female counterparts. Among the graduate respondents, first males have higher positive perception of accounting job outcomes more than their female counterparts. Second, males have stronger positive feelings about accounting profession more than their female counterparts. Third, males have higher positive perception of reputation for accountants more than their female counterparts. Taken together, males appear to have more positive perceptions about accounting profession than females. These findings are consistent with some previous studies that males perceive the accounting profession as more interesting and requiring a higher degree of interaction than females (Heiat et al., 2007). Our findings also confirm those of Chia et al. (2008) and Dalci et al. (2013) that male students attached a significantly greater importance to “material rewards” or job outcomes than female students do.

However, our findings are different from those of Byrne and Willis (2005) who found that female Irish secondary school students had a neutral perception on accounting profession while the male students considered it boring. We found that both male and female students perceive accounting profession in Ghana as interesting, respected, valuable and worthwhile. Moreover, while in South Africa, Wessels and Steenkamp (2009) found no such significant difference between perceptions of male and female accounting students, our findings are contrary.

## 6. Implications of Findings

Prior research has concluded that little or no progress has been made in dispelling the unflattering image of accountants, despite the profession’s representation of contemporary accounting practices as dynamic environments requiring people with creativity and critical thinking skills (e.g., Byrne & Willis 2005; Coate, Mitschow, & Schinski, 2003; Mladenovic, 2000). However, the findings of the present study imply that the traditional view of students having negative perception of accounting profession might not be applicable to graduate and undergraduate students in Ghana. Thus, the trend of accounting students perception might be changing gradually. In support of this conclusion, Germanou et al. (2009) also found that Malaysian exchange students hold positive perceptions of the accounting profession and there is a significant correlation between students’ perceptions and their intention to pursue a career in the profession.

Moreover, theoretically, the differences in findings of this study compared with some previous research implies is that generalisations of research findings across countries and research context should be done with caution due to difference in culture, economic situations, social expectations and educational interventions in different higher educational institutions. For example, even within West Africa, while Fatokun and Ojo (2004) found that undergraduate accounting students do not have favourable attitude toward postgraduate study in accounting, findings of the present study indicate the contrary. Therefore, researchers should contextualize students’ perception of accounting profession in order to provide useful contribution to the on-going debate and concerns about stakeholder perceptions about accounting profession.

Managerially, the findings imply that there is the need for accounting lecturers and educators to provide more career orientation for female accounting students both at the graduate and undergraduate levels in SSA to help improve upon their perception of the profession. It is also recommended that accounting lectures and tutors at all levels of education should adopt a blend of practical-oriented teaching methods, with the help of ICT, to help accounting students understand the application of accounting principles to real life situations. This is to enable them understand accounting principles better in order to pass their professional exams easily and gain employable skills while in school.

## 7. Limitations and Direction for Future Research

This study is limited in terms of the generalizability of the findings. The samples used are from only one university in Ghana and that the findings should be interpreted with caution. Future research should explore students’ perception of the accounting profession in other SSA contexts and compare the findings with those of this study for theoretical and practical implications and conclusions to be drawn. Moreover, future research should examine whether first year students in SSA have negative perceptions about accounting as suggested by some previous studies conducted elsewhere.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this paper was to explore the preconceived notions accounting students in Ghana have about the accounting profession and whether these perceptions are influenced by gender and student category (graduates and undergraduates). The results of this study showed that, generally, both undergraduate

and graduate accounting students have positive perceptions about accounting profession, contrary to most existing literature. Our findings indicate that despite the fact that generally, the public associate accountants with negative and unethical behaviour, accounting students in Ghana do not share the same perception with the public. This study also found that gender influences the perception of both graduate and undergraduate accounting students, and few significant differences existed between graduate and undergraduate accounting students' perception of the profession. The main contributions of this research were two-fold. First, it provided empirical evidence that contributes to the academic debate surrounding the concerns of the future of accounting profession and its implications for contemporary accounting education in developing countries. Second, it provided knowledge to accounting educators in SSA regarding areas of career orientation and training required to positively influence the perception of future accounting professionals in SSA and Ghana in particular. Limitations are noted and future research directions are provided.

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