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THE UNSEEN PRESSURE: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PERSONAL-BRANDING ON CAREER-RELATED ANXIETY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract. In the contemporary landscape of digital self-promotion, personal branding via social media has emerged as a prevalent strategy among young professionals striving to enhance their career prospects. While this practice offers avenues for visibility and professional positioning, it may concurrently engender psychological strain, particularly in the form of career-related anxiety. This study investigates the association between self-branding behaviors on social media platforms and the prevalence of career anxiety among final-year university students and recent graduates in Indonesia. Employing a quantitative research design, data were collected through an online survey administered to 150 respondents. The dataset was analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlational analysis. Results reveal a statistically significant negative correlation between the intensity of personal branding activities and levels of career anxiety. Specifically, individuals who actively manage and project their professional persona online tend to report reduced anxiety concerning their career trajectories. Conversely, demographic variables and platform-specific metrics—such as age, frequency of social media usage, and follower count—did not exhibit a significant relationship with career anxiety. These findings suggest that personal branding may function as a psychological resource, enabling young adults to cultivate a sense of agency and self-efficacy in navigating career uncertainties. Nonetheless, the data also underscore the ambivalent nature of digital self-presentation, as some participants expressed experiencing pressure to maintain a consistently marketable and productive image. This duality highlights the complex psychological implications of constructing a professional identity in the digital era and contributes to the broader discourse on the mental health dimensions of online career development practices.

Keywords: Personal-Branding; Career Anxiety; Social Media; University Students; Digital Identity.

1. Introduction

In the era of digital development, human interaction and communication patterns have also undergone changes with the emergence of various social media platforms, especially among Generation Z. Digital reports show that social media users in Indonesia have reached 143 million people, or around 50.2% of the total population, with Generation Z being the most dominant generation, accounting for 34.40% (DataReportal, 2025; APJII, 2024). Not only as a channel to connect with each other, social media has now transformed into a primary means of building personal branding that supports career preparation. Personal branding is a strategy used by individuals to create a positive image and reputation in the public eye based on their interests, values, or expertise. This is considered useful in increasing competitiveness, particularly for job seekers or students who will soon enter the professional world (Rahayu et al., 2024).

Beyond the positive impacts, such as reducing career-related anxiety and increasing self-confidence, the phenomenon of personal branding also triggers negative effects that are sometimes overlooked, one of which is social comparison that arises from excessive exposure to content about other people's career journeys. Comparing oneself to others can

worsen career anxiety and trigger feelings of incompetence or fear of failure, thereby adding to the unconscious psychological burden behind efforts to develop one's reputation (Fukubayashi & Fuji, 2021).

Until now, studies related to personal branding have mostly highlighted the positive aspects that arise, such as expanded job opportunities and career success. One such study, conducted by Gorbato et al. (2019), revealed that personal branding through social media has been proven to increase the career success of students. However, very few studies have highlighted the negative implications of this phenomenon, particularly in relation to the demands and pressures faced by final-year students and fresh graduates amid fierce job competition. Therefore, it is important to examine the influence of personal branding practices on social media on the career anxiety of Indonesian students. This article aims to bridge this research gap in the context of Human Resource Management (HRM) with a focus on young people and recent graduates in Indonesia.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Personal Branding

Personal branding adalah suatu proses untuk menanamkan persepsi yang kuat dan spesifik di mata publik terhadap individu melalui penafsiran dan penampilan citra diri yang konsisten entah itu berupa nilai, keahlian, maupun keunikan (Ki et al., 2020). Dalam konteks perkembangan digital, media sosial adalah platform utama yang digunakan individu untuk secara strategis mengkomunikasikan keunggulan profesional serta personal mereka (Jacobson, 2020; Fitria, 2023). Bagi mahasiswa maupun fresh graduate, personal branding di media sosial dipandang sebagai langkah awal yang penting untuk mempersiapkan diri sebelum memasuki dunia kerja (Girard & Pinar, 2021). Di dukung oleh banyak penelitian serupa, personal branding terbukti dapat meningkatkan kesiapan karier serta memperluas relasi di bidang profesional (Nisa et al., 2025).

2.2 Career-Related Anxiety

Kecemasan merupakan kondisi emosional yang ditandai oleh munculnya rasa khawatir, ketegangan, dan ketakutan terhadap situasi yang belum jelas atau potensi ancaman, baik dalam bentuk fisik maupun psikologis (Choi et al., 2024; Sitanggang et al., 2025). Sementara itu, career-related anxiety merujuk pada kekhawatiran spesifik terkait transisi antara dunia akademik ke dunia kerja profesional, kemampuan untuk mendapatkan atau mempertahankan pekerjaan yang sesuai, serta kelanjutan karier di masa depan. Kecemasan ini seringkali timbul akibat tekanan untuk mencapai standar keberhasilan yang terlihat dari rekan-rekan sebaya mereka (Nurfitri & Ratnasari, 2024).

3. Research Methods

This study uses a quantitative descriptive approach to analyze personal branding practices carried out by students and recent graduates at Siliwangi University and their influence on career anxiety. The number of respondents was set at 150 based on the Slovin formula calculation. Primary data was collected through a questionnaire using purposive sampling with the following criteria: students/recent graduates, aged at least 20 years old, and actively uploading personal branding content on social media. There were two main constructs measured, namely personal branding based on the indicators of Labrecque, Markos, & Milne (2011) (self-presentation, communication strategy, visibility, and social comparison) and career-related anxiety adapted from Xu & Tracey (2017) (performance anxiety, future anxiety, and social anxiety). All items were measured using a five-point

Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Validity and reliability tests were conducted prior to the main analysis using simple linear regression and Pearson's correlation with the help of SPSS software version 26.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Sample Characteristics

Table 1. Descriptive sample characteristics

Category	Sub Category	Number of Respondent	Percentage
Gender	Male	75	50%
	Female	74	49.3%
	Prefer not to say	1	0.7%
	Total	150	100%
Daily Social Media Use	<1 hour/day	0	0%
	1-2 hours/day	7	4.7%
	3-4 hours/day	72	48%
	5-6 hours/day	56	37.3%
	>6 hours/day	15	10%
	Total	150	100%
Social Media Platform	LinkedIn	24	16%
	Instagram	75	50%
	TikTok	51	34%
	Total	150	100%

Source: Processed data by the author (2025)

Table 1 presents the grouping of respondents based on gender, daily duration of social media use, and the most frequently used social media platforms. The data shows that there are slightly more male respondents than female respondents, although the difference is very small. Meanwhile, a small number of participants chose not to answer this question.

In terms of social media usage intensity, the majority of respondents reported using social media for 3–4 hours a day, indicating a fairly high level of exposure, with TikTok emerging as the most widely used platform.

4.2 Instrument Reability Test

Table 2. Instrument Reability Test

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Personal Branding	0.766	7
Career Anxiety	0.961	8

Source: Processed data by the author (2025)

The reliability test results show that Personal Branding has a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.766 with 7 items, which means that this instrument is quite reliable. Meanwhile, Career Anxiety shows very high reliability with a value of 0.961 from 8 items. Both instruments are considered suitable for use in further analysis.

4.3 Descriptive Analysis

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variabel	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Personal Branding	150	1.75	6.43	4.0783	0.50802
Carier Anxiety	150	1.38	4.75	3.0583	1.27826

Source: Processed data by the author (2025)

Respondents are quite active in building personal branding, as evidenced by the high average value on this variable. Meanwhile, the value for the Career Anxiety variable is at a moderate level.

4.4 Correlation Analysis

Table 4. Pearson Correlation: Personal Branding vs. Career Anxiety

Variable	1	2	Mean	SD
Personal Branding	-		4.0783	0.50802
Carier Anxiety	-0.183	-	3.0583	1.27826

Source: Processed data by the author (2025)

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant negative relationship between self-branding and career anxiety ($r = -0.183$, $p = 0.025$). This finding suggests that students who are more active in presenting their personal image on social media tend to experience slightly lower levels of career anxiety, although the strength of the correlation is relatively weak.

4.1 Multiple Regression Test

Table 5. Multiple Regression Test

Independent Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	6.901	3.077	-	4.2.242	0.028
Personal-Branding	-0.716	0.208	-0.393	-3.445	0.001
Followers Count	0.131	0.194	0.080	0.674	0.503
Durasi sosmed	-0.371	0.352	-0.126	-1.054	0.296
Age	-0.001	0.110	-0.001	-0.006	0.995

Source: Processed data by the author (2025)

Dependent Variable: Career Anxiety

$R = 0.405$, $R^2 = 0.164$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.139$, Sig. Model = 0.002

The linear regression analysis indicates that the research model is statistically significant overall ($F = 3.91$, $p = 0.002$), explaining 13.9% of the variance in career anxiety (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.139$). Partially, the Self-Branding variable shows a significant negative effect on Career Anxiety ($\beta = -0.393$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting that individuals who are more inclined to present their personal image on social media tend to experience

lower levels of career anxiety. Meanwhile, the variables of follower count, daily social media usage duration, and age do not show a significant influence on career anxiety ($p > 0.05$).

The study reveals a significant inverse relationship between personal branding and career anxiety, suggesting that students who actively cultivate their online persona tend to experience reduced career-related stress. In contrast, external metrics such as follower count, time spent on social media, and age were not found to significantly impact career anxiety. These results underscore the importance of self-perception and proactive digital identity management over superficial social media metrics.

5. Discussion

The results of the study show that the majority of respondents, namely 130 people (86.7%), actively engage in personal branding on social media. This indicates a strong tendency among students and fresh graduates to use social media as a means of building a professional image and expanding career opportunities. Meanwhile, the level of career anxiety that arises is evenly distributed between the low and high categories, each at 45.3%. These findings indicate psychological ambivalence, where personal branding not only builds confidence and career readiness, but also creates pressure due to social comparison.

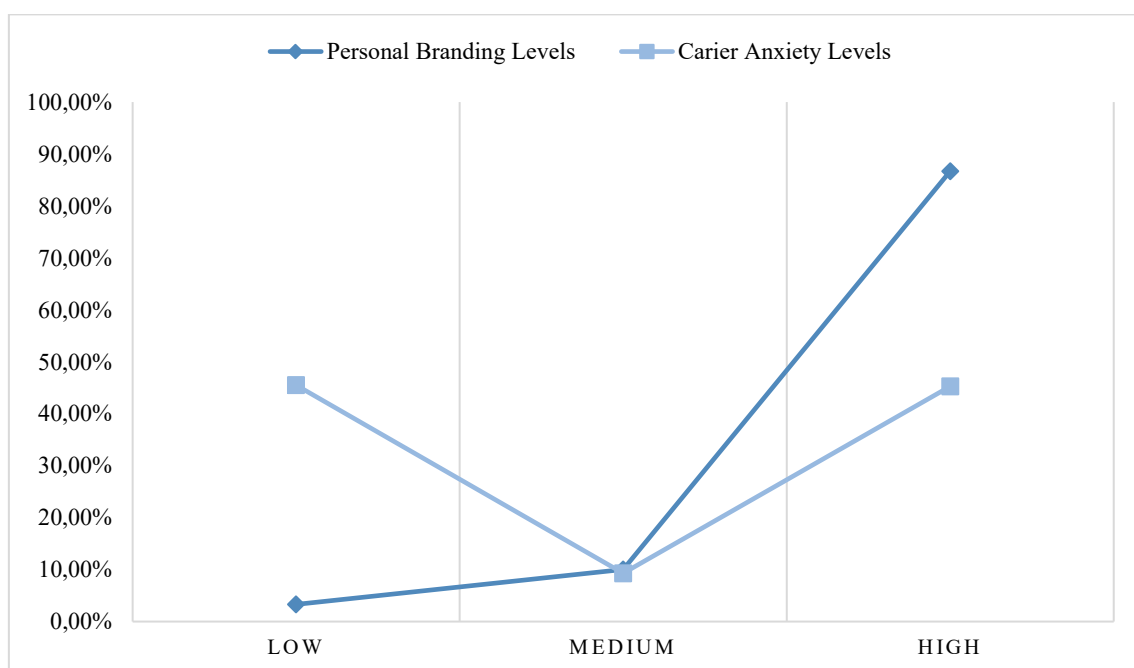


Fig. 1. Comparison of Personal Branding and Career Anxiety Levels

Although showing weak intensity, it was found that personal branding is negatively correlated with career-related anxiety. This means that the more active students and fresh graduates are in personal branding, the lower their career anxiety will be. This reinforces the assumption that actively building one's image tends to provide a sense of control and clarity of career direction for some individuals (Fitrah & Widhiastuti, 2022). However, the weak correlation shows that personal branding is not always the main protective factor against anxiety. These results are in line with the findings of several

previous studies that emphasize the ambivalent effects of personal branding on psychological well-being, where building an image on social media can increase self-confidence while also creating pressure due to constant exposure to excessive input related to the processes and achievements of others (Mao et al., 2023).

The complexity of the impact of personal branding on anxiety levels is commonly known as a double-edged sword. One of the effects arises from the conflict between internal self-control efforts and uncontrolled external exposure (Wulansari et al., 2024). When someone actively engages in personal branding, they are required to formulate their values, goals, and expertise (Aqilah et al., 2024). This process has been proven to increase confidence in one's abilities and clarity of direction and control over future career prospects, thereby reducing anxiety levels (Fitrah & Widhiastuti, 2022). However, the process of self-actualization always goes hand in hand with intensive exposure to peers' posts about their achievements, which ultimately triggers upward social comparison and feelings of inadequacy (Wulansari et al., 2024; Akbar & Hakim, 2024).

The cultural pressure to "show your achievements" in the digital age also contributes to high levels of anxiety due to individuals' efforts to control others' perceptions of them, commonly referred to as self-impression management. This has the potential to create psychological burdens arising from the fear of revealing imperfections. This fear and anxiety are reinforced by the fact that social media can create an infinite audience in the future. In other words, posts can be viewed by recruiters at any time, creating a tendency to always be in the job market (Jacobson, 2020; Wulansari et al., 2024).

It should be emphasized that the effect of personal branding on anxiety is not universal due to the existence of moderating variables. For example, individuals with personal branding strategies based on personal integrity and identity consistency may be more protected from anxiety. This is in contrast to those who engage in false branding without strong personal values (Widiyowati et al., 2025).

Beyond internal factors, career anxiety is also influenced by macro-level external conditions, such as economic instability and high competition in the post-graduation job market (Nisa et al., 2025). These factors are beyond the control of personal branding and can be a more dominant source of psychological pressure, thereby potentially reducing the strength of the relationship between personal branding and overall anxiety levels.

6. Conclusion

This study explores the connection between personal branding efforts on social media and the level of career-related anxiety among final-year university students and recent graduates. The findings reveal a significant inverse relationship: individuals who are more engaged in shaping their professional image online tend to experience lower levels of career anxiety.

Interestingly, control variables such as age, number of followers, and time spent on social media did not significantly influence career anxiety. This suggests that internal psychological factors and self-perception in navigating social media play a more pivotal role than the sheer quantity of digital engagement.

Moreover, the score distribution shows that most participants reported high levels of personal branding activity alongside moderate levels of career anxiety. This indicates

a nuanced balance—while many young adults are proactively managing their online professional presence, they still face emotional challenges, though not at overwhelming levels.

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