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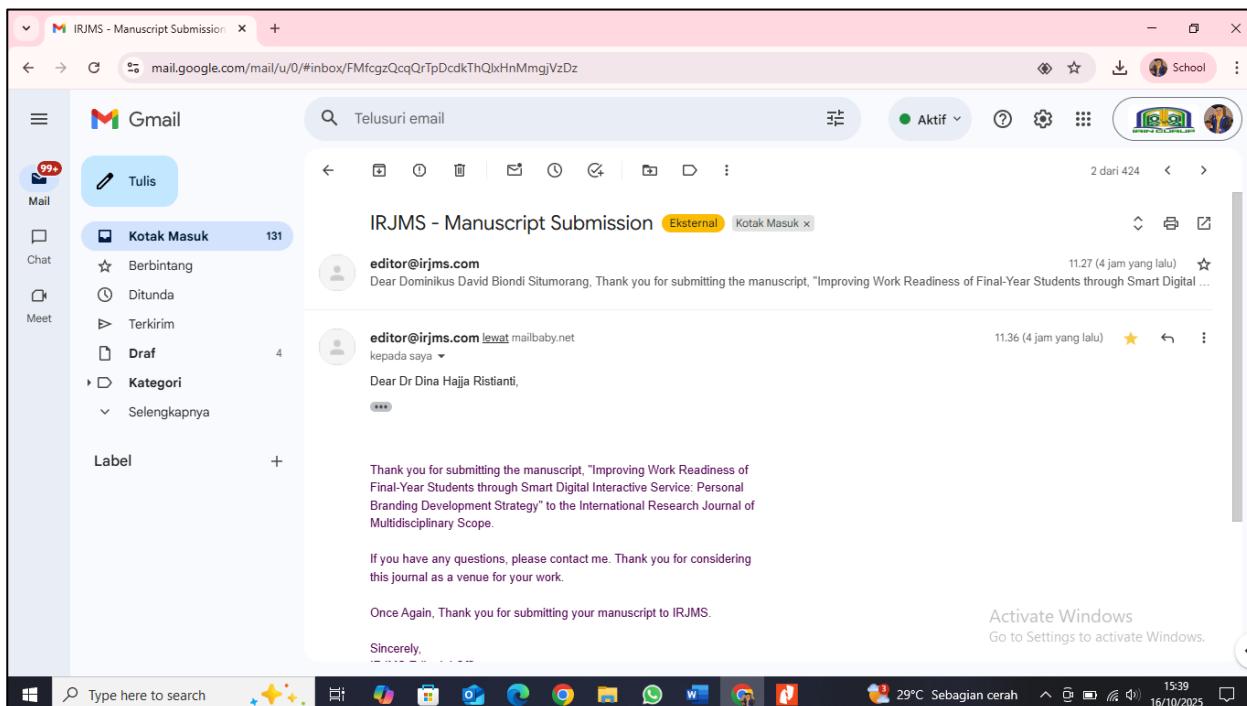
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Improving Work Readiness of Final-Year Students through Smart Digital Interactive Service: Personal Branding Development Strategy

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Abstract

Building personal branding for final-year students is crucial for enhancing work readiness. Consequently, the digital platform known as the Smart Digital Interactive Service at Institute Agama Islam Negeri Curup offers an accessible and effective platform for building personal branding among the millennial generation. The digital platform features a "classic service" that facilitates online discussions among students and counsellors, allowing for the exchange of experiences and information related to personal branding development. Therefore, this study aimed to describe the strategy for building personal branding through the Smart Digital Interactive Service as an effort to improve the work readiness of final-year students. An experimental design was adopted using a one-group t-test model conducted through the Smart Digital Interactive Service application. The study population included seventh-semester students from the class of 2021 at Institute Agama Islam Negeri Curup, with a purposive sampling method used to select 30 participants from various study programs. Data collection also included questionnaires to assess personal branding and students' work readiness. Furthermore, the t-test formula was applied to analyse the differences in personal branding and work readiness before and after the intervention. The results showed that the strategy for building personal branding through the Smart Digital Interactive Service was carried out in several stages. Initially, an offline session explained how to access the digital platform. Students subsequently registered to receive a username and password to log in to the Smart Digital Interactive Service account. The next stage included online discussions and Zoom meetings to further develop and strengthen personal branding.

Keywords: Education, Personal Branding, Smart Digital Interactive Service, Students, Work Readiness.

Introduction

The transition from higher education to the workforce remains one of the most critical phases in the professional development of students. Despite completing their academic programs successfully, many graduates encounter difficulties in adapting to the demands of the labour market. This phenomenon, often described as post-graduation shock or post-power syndrome, is largely attributed to the imbalance between academic preparation and workplace expectations (1). While universities emphasize theoretical knowledge, organizational involvement, and academic achievements, employers increasingly demand graduates who possess practical abilities, self-confidence, and the capacity to present their skills effectively in professional settings. The gap between

institutional preparation and industry requirements underscores the importance of developing additional competencies before graduation. One competency that has gained prominence in recent years is personal branding. Beyond technical knowledge, employers look for individuals who can differentiate themselves, communicate their value clearly, and demonstrate consistency between their skills, attitudes, and professional identity. Personal branding is defined as the strategic process of shaping public perception of one's personality, values, abilities, and unique strengths in order to create a memorable and competitive professional identity (2). It reflects not only what individuals know, but also how they present themselves to the outside world. In today's competitive environment, where

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The present study is novel in two respects. First, it integrates personal branding training into a digital counselling platform and evaluates its direct impact on students' work readiness, an area rarely addressed in prior literature. Second, it contributes new empirical evidence from the Indonesian higher education context, which has been underrepresented in global scholarship. These elements distinguish this work from existing studies and position it to offer fresh insights for both theory and practice.

This research therefore advances existing knowledge in two important ways. First, it extends the literature on personal branding by situating it within the digital counselling environment of higher education. While personal branding has been widely studied in marketing, psychology, and professional development contexts, its integration into digital counselling for students remains underexplored. Second, it offers practical contributions by presenting a replicable strategy for higher education institutions, particularly in emerging economies, to improve graduate employability through technology-driven interventions. In doing so, the study responds to calls for innovative, scalable, and context-sensitive approaches to career development.

In summary, the transition from higher education to employment is increasingly complex, requiring more than academic qualifications alone. Personal branding has emerged as a key factor in shaping students' employability, particularly in the digital era where online presence influences professional opportunities. While international studies have demonstrated the potential of digital counselling, little is known about its role in supporting personal branding development. This study addresses that gap by evaluating the use of the Smart Digital Interactive Service at Institute Agama Islam Negeri Curup to build personal branding and enhance work readiness among final-year students. Through this investigation, the study seeks not only to contribute to theoretical discussions on personal branding and employability, but also to provide practical insights for higher education institutions seeking to prepare their graduates for success in the contemporary labour market.

Theoretical Overview

Personal Branding

Personal branding refers to the unique identity or

"brand" that others recognize in an individual due to distinct qualities and strengths. Consistent demonstration of these traits strengthens personal branding (12). This process includes shaping a positive perception of personality, abilities, and values, thereby creating a strong "selling point" in society. Scholars note that personal branding involves developing, adopting, and organizing personal information into a comprehensive narrative, often facilitated through social media. H. Rampersad described personal branding as comprising elements such as authenticity, self-awareness, clear purpose, consistency, distinctiveness, visibility, relevance, and performance. He further emphasized three core components of effective personal branding: the individual, who strategically crafts and communicates a professional identity; the promise, which reflects the responsibility to fulfil public expectations; and the relationship, which strong personal branding seeks to foster between the individual and their audience (13). In today's digital era, various social media platforms such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram, Quora, SlideShare, podcasts, wikis, and videocasts serve as key tools for building personal brands. For example, YouTube allows individuals to showcase their abilities through video, offering clear depictions of personality, body language, and knowledge (14). Similarly, visual platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram provide opportunities to present skills and attributes through images, short videos, and visually oriented narratives that help strengthen professional identity.

Work Readiness

The labor market increasingly demands flexibility and adaptability to rapid changes influenced by globalization and technological advancement, requiring universities to prepare students not only for professional careers but also for active participation in the 21st-century workforce through career planning, organization, adaptability, communication, cooperation, and presentation skills. Consequently, the establishment of career development units in every university has become essential (15). According to Pool and Sewell, work readiness encompasses career management skills for developmental tasks, field-specific knowledge, the ability to understand and present learned knowledge, and personal attributes that highlight

an individual's potential (16). The objective of developing students' personal branding is to enhance work readiness and foster career maturity by engaging in activities such as career planning, exploring career-related information, making informed decisions, and developing realistic understandings of both desired jobs and labor market conditions (17). Career development initiatives linked to personal branding typically involve assessment to identify character tendencies and interests, feedback on career mapping to highlight areas for improvement, and targeted training to help students articulate their strengths and uniqueness for career success. Students must feel confident in preparing for the workforce and ready to face challenges and obligations (18). In this regard, Pool and Sewell reiterated four key aspects of work readiness—career management skills, field-specific knowledge, presentation of acquired knowledge, and personal attributes that reflect abilities—while Yorke and Knight categorized work readiness into personal qualities, core skills, process skills, technical or subject-specific expertise, and career management competencies. Together, these perspectives underscore that work readiness is not limited to technical skills but includes knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes that enable graduates to perform effectively in professional contexts. Furthermore, Pool and Sewell emphasized the importance of aligning an individual's field of study, personal character, intelligence, and broad knowledge with labor market expectations to ensure job security and career success (19). Multiple factors shape students' work readiness, including internal dimensions such as intelligence, capabilities, interests, motivation, health, ethics, and aspirations, as well as external influences such as family background, work environment, and social connections.

Smart Digital Interactive Service

The Smart Digital Interactive Service represents the digitalization of guidance and counselling sessions at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup. Developed in 2022, the platform was designed to support digital-based service processes for students (20). Its primary aim is to facilitate accessible counselling and career guidance that can address psychological needs while also enhancing work readiness. Through this

application, students can engage in effective career development activities anytime and anywhere.

The use of digital counselling in higher education is essential for contemporary students who are already familiar with digital technologies. Publications show no significant superiority between online and face-to-face counselling; suggesting that effectiveness largely depends on individual preference. The Canadian Workforce Development Board (CFLDB), for example, developed a scoring system to assess websites based on structure, learning value, and quality as providers of several functions (21). The ranking system considered criteria such as visual and linguistic quality, ease of navigation, creative use of technology, reliability of information sources, accuracy of selected content, learning composition (where technology can be easily understood by learners), and learning construction (where technology supports knowledge building) (22). The development of the Smart Digital Interactive Service was based on the needs and foundations for implementing counselling sessions in higher education. Information technology experts evaluated the application across three domains: usability, display, and function. Guidance and counselling experts assessed it in terms of design, content, and communication processes (23). The results of expert validation showed average scores of 79.17% and 80.72%, suggesting that the application is feasible and reliable for student use.

Methodology

Study Design

The study was an experimental examination using a one-group t-test model conducted through smart Digital Interactive Service application. The population consisted of seventh-semester students from the 2021 class at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup (24). The sample included 30 final-year students selected through purposive sampling from various study programs at the Institution. Although the one-group pre post experimental design was appropriate for exploring initial effects of personal branding training, it carries limitations regarding causal interpretation and external validity. Without a control group, improvements cannot be attributed solely to the intervention, and findings may not be generalized beyond the sample of IAIN Curup

students.

Participant Demographics

The final sample consisted of 30 seventh-semester students (16 females and 14 males) aged between 20 and 23 years. Participants represented diverse study programs, including Islamic Education, Economics, Communication, and Counseling. The purposive sampling approach ensured that students selected were in their final year and preparing for graduation, making them relevant for assessing work readiness and personal branding.

Study Instruments

Two measurement tools were used in this study namely personal branding and students' work readiness. The personal branding tool was adapted from the framework developed by H. Rampersad containing sixteen items across eight dimensions namely Authenticity, Self-awareness, Clear Purpose, Consistency, Distinctiveness, Visibility, Relevance, and Performance (25). The try-out test results of the instrument showed a high internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha value 0.87. Additionally, the factor structure of the questionnaire items was identified through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) suggesting that the items were grouped according to the hypothesized eight dimensions confirming the tool's validity (26). The EFA also identified eight main factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1, corresponding to the eight dimensions of personal branding. Students' work readiness measurement tool was adapted from the theory of Yorke, M &

Knigt comprising twenty statements across five dimensions namely Personal Qualities, Core, Process, Technical/Subject-Specific, and Career Management Skills (27). The try-out results showed a very high level of consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.90. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to find the factor structure of the questionnaire items. The EFA results showed that the items were grouped according to the five-dimensional hypothesis, validating the questionnaire design (28). To ensure linguistic accuracy and contextual appropriateness, both instruments underwent a systematic adaptation process. First, the original English items were translated into Bahasa Indonesia by two bilingual experts in psychology and education. A back-translation into English was then performed by an independent translator unfamiliar with the original tools to confirm semantic equivalence. Next, a panel of counseling and psychometric experts reviewed the items for content validity, clarity, and cultural relevance. Based on their feedback, minor modifications were made to wording and terminology. A pilot test was subsequently conducted with ten students from the target population to identify ambiguous items. Items that failed to meet clarity or reliability criteria were revised or removed. This process ensured that the final instruments were both culturally appropriate and psychometrically robust for use with Indonesian final-year students. Furthermore, Table 1 showed examples of statements used in two instruments.

Table 1: Items Sample of Study Variables

Variable	Dimension	Sample Statement
Personal Branding	Authenticity	In every social interaction, students make an effort to present authenticity.
	Self-awareness	Students were aware of the principles.
	Clear Purpose	Students realized the purpose in life.
	Consistency	Students remained consistent in talking to others.
	Distinctiveness	The abilities or skills possessed distinguished students apart from others.
	Visibility	Students often posted content on social media relevant to the field.
	Relevance	Students made sure that the knowledge and abilities were correlated with the needs of the industry.
	Performance	In every job carried out, students tried to be the best.
	Personal Qualities	Students have a strong work ethic and try their best.
	Core Skills	Students were good at working with the team.

Variable	Dimension	Sample Statement
	Process Skills	Students could manage the time well to complete tasks efficiently.
	Technical/Subject-Specific Skills	Students have technical abilities that match their interests.
	Career Management Skills	Students understand how to create an attractive and effective CV.

Study Procedures

The study commenced with a comprehensive review of pertinent theories concerning personal branding and students' work readiness to identify crucial dimensions. Subsequently, questionnaires were developed to assess each dimension, ensuring the relevance and representativeness of each item. Content validation was further conducted by two experts in Counselling guidance and psychology. Following content validation, the questionnaire experienced a pilot test with ten representative individuals from the target population to identify items that might be unclear or ambiguous (29). Items that did not meet the validity and reliability criteria were revised or removed based on the results of statistical analysis. The revised questionnaire was further administered to a larger sample of thirty students to confirm the validity and reliability. These tests ensured that the measuring instrument was reliable and valid for a broader population (30). After undergoing several trials and revisions, the finalized measuring instrument was considered ready for use in the study.

Data collection occurred between May 11, 2023, and August 25, 2023. Following data collection, normality tests, descriptive analysis, and inferential analysis were carried out. Furthermore, a normality test of the data was carried out using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to assess the suitability of the distribution. Descriptive analysis included determining the frequency and percentage of student's demographic data (31). Correlational analysis was also performed to ascertain relationships between variables before the mediation test. The data obtained was finally processed using the Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics 24 applications.

Normality Test Results

Following data collection, scores for each aspect of personal branding and work readiness were totalled to produce a composite score. The normality test of the data distribution was

assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test to determine the suitability (32). The results showed that the data followed a normal distribution with a p -value > 0.05 . Specifically the questionnaire data on the dimensions of personal branding and students' work readiness showed normal distribution, as evidenced by significance values of $p = 0.150$ and $p = 0.160$ respectively. Therefore, parametric statistical analysis methods such as the t-test could be applied to analyze this questionnaire data.

Results

The study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the strategy for building personal branding among final-year students through Smart Digital Interactive Service at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup. Additionally, it focused on determining when there was an improvement in students' work readiness following the implementation of this strategy (33). The study gathered 30 participants from various programs at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup to answer the article questions. These participants were provided with an overview of the study activities to be engaged in during the study.

The initial activity included administering questionnaires to assess work readiness related to personal branding. The participants were further instructed to complete the questionnaire based on individual circumstances or conditions. Subsequently, students participated in personal branding training which was conducted in two stages (34). The first training session took place on Tuesday, July 18, 2023, at the Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup Computer Laboratory Room. During this session, the participants completed the initial questionnaire and the study provided instruction on personal branding for students' work readiness.

In the first session, students further received guidance on accessing and registering on smart Counselling Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup

account application (35). Following registration which included obtaining a username and password, all 30 students successfully registered and logged in to the application. The second training session was carried out via the application website accessible. This online flexible training spanned a period of two weeks from July 24, 2023, to August 1, 2023. The admin of the account organized the class, participants, and instructors to facilitate this training (36). The class names inputted by the admin included "Personal Branding Training" and "Steps to Develop Personal Branding." Additionally, all students who completed the questionnaire during the first training session were enrolled as participants with the experts listed as instructors.

During the second training session, students were instructed to log in to accounts using the assigned usernames and passwords (37). The instructor then initiated the class discussion, focusing on the

steps included in developing personal branding. Furthermore, students actively participated in sharing personal experiences and insights into each step of personal branding development. For the subsequent steps of personal branding development, the training was conducted via Zoom through the Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup Smart Digital Interactive Service application. Before each Zoom session, the admin inputted the Zoom class details into the account. During these sessions, students engaged in discussions aimed at clarifying and emphasizing the steps of personal branding development. Students were motivated to use social media platforms to promote identity and showcase positive attributes (38). The overall activities of personal branding training on the Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup Smart Digital Interactive Service application were depicted in Figure 1.

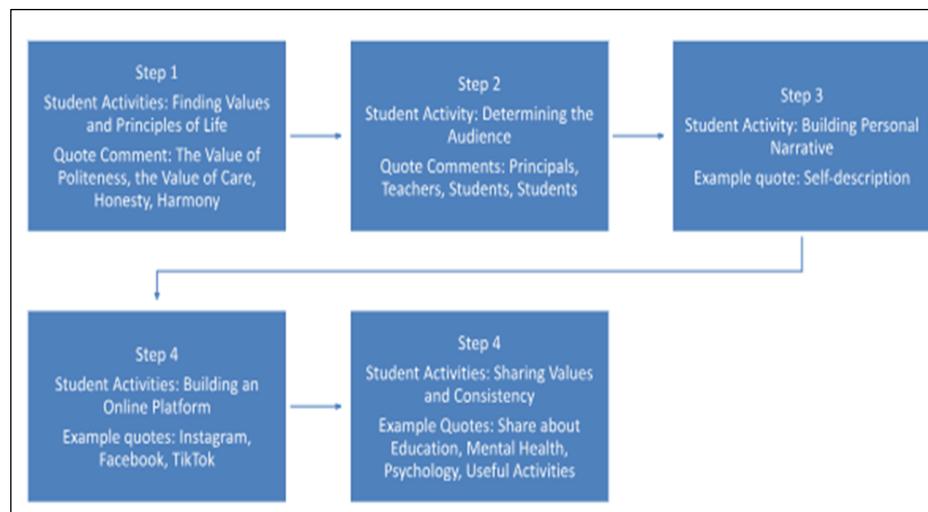


Figure 1: Sequence of Activities Conducted during the Personal Branding Training Program

Figure 1 describes the Sequence of activities conducted during the personal branding training program through Smart Digital Interactive Service, including account registration, online class participation, and Zoom-based discussions. The subsequent task included addressing the second study problem which aimed to determine when there was an enhancement in students' work readiness following the implementation of

personal branding training for final-year students through smart Digital Interactive Service application. The study conducted a test to answer the problem and evaluate any potential increase in students' work readiness after receiving personal branding development training via the application (39). T-test analysis was also performed using the SPSS version 24 applications with the results presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Paired-Samples t-test Results for Work Readiness (N = 30)

Variable	Mean Difference	SE	t (29)	p	95% CI Difference	of	Cohen's d
Work readiness (pre-post)	0.995	0.077	12.99	.001	[0.84, 1.15]		2.37

Effect size (Cohen's *d*)

For a paired-samples t-test with $n = 30$, $t = 12.985$ $t = 12.985$ $t = 12.985$:

$$d = \frac{t}{\sqrt{n}} = \frac{12.985}{\sqrt{30}} \approx 2.37$$

That is a very large effect size (Cohen's benchmark: 0.2 small, 0.5 medium, 0.8 large).

Confidence Interval for the Mean Difference

$$CI = M_{diff} \pm t_{crit} \times SE$$

From your table:

B=0.995 (mean difference)

SE=0.077

$$df = 29, t_{crit} \approx 2.045 (95\% CI)$$

$$CI = 0.995 \pm (2.045 \times 0.077) = 0.995 \pm 0.158$$

$$95\% CI = [0.837, 1.153]$$

The augmentation in students' work readiness before and after personal branding training via smart Digital Interactive Service application at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup was determined by checking when the sig value was less than 0.05 or the t-count value exceeded the t-table value. From Table 2, the sig value was .001 suggesting it was smaller than 0.05 and the t-value showed 0.01 with a significance level of 2.462 while the calculated t-value was 12.985 (40). Since 12.985 was greater than 2.462, the study concluded that there was an improvement in students' work readiness before and after the implementation of personal branding training via the application. The effect size was very large (Cohen's *d* = 2.37), and the 95% confidence interval for the mean difference [0.84, 1.15] confirmed that the improvement was both statistically significant and practically meaningful.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that personal branding training through the Smart Digital Interactive Service application at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup enhances students' readiness for the digital workforce by fostering digital literacy, self-directed learning, and collaborative engagement (41). The application, which integrates personalized training content with real-time feedback and practice modules, provides an accessible platform for students to learn flexibly and interactively. This aligns with broader trends in digital education, where online tools increasingly complement face-to-face teaching and offer scalable solutions for student skill development (42). While the descriptive benefits of the application are clear improved

personal branding skills, greater digital competence, and enhanced collaboration it is necessary to critically situate these findings within the wider debates on employability, equity, and professional identity formation in the digital era (43).

From Descriptive Benefits to Critical Insights

The descriptive results indicate that students gained practical knowledge of personal branding, including how to develop professional profiles, maintain consistent online identities, and strategically use digital media. These are valuable skills in an era where employers routinely evaluate candidates through online platforms such as LinkedIn, digital portfolios, and social media (44). The application also gave students opportunities to practice, receive feedback, and refine their online presence, fostering both technical proficiency and confidence.

However, such descriptive outcomes require critical interpretation. Personal branding, while beneficial, is not a neutral practice (45). It assumes that students can and should market themselves as professional products, a perspective that aligns with neoliberal labor market demands but also risks commodifying student identities. Not all students may be equally comfortable with or equally rewarded for self-promotion. Cultural norms, gender expectations, and socioeconomic background can shape how students construct their professional presence online (46). Thus, while the application equips students with technical and strategic skills, the broader social and cultural dynamics surrounding branding must be acknowledged.

Employability in the Digital Era

The study's contribution becomes clearer when situated within broader employability debates. Employability is not simply the possession of skills but the ability to mobilize those skills effectively in dynamic labour markets. Scholars have argued that employability involves not only human capital (knowledge and skills) but also social capital (networks and relationships) and identity capital (the way individuals present themselves to employers). The Smart Digital Interactive Service application addresses aspects of identity capital by helping students craft coherent personal brands (47). It also indirectly contributes to social capital by fostering collaboration and peer learning, which mirrors workplace teamwork (48).

In the digital economy, employability increasingly requires proficiency in ICT, data literacy, and the ability to adapt to rapidly evolving technologies. This study shows that students who engaged with the application not only improved their digital literacy but also gained a sense of accomplishment through independent learning (49). This is significant because employability is shaped not only by technical ability but also by motivation, resilience, and self-efficacy. By enhancing students' confidence in navigating online platforms and curating professional identities, the training contributes to employability in a holistic sense (50).

At the same time, the findings must be interpreted in light of structural challenges. Digital transformation has created opportunities but also intensified competition. As organizations receive hundreds of applications, personal branding can indeed help candidates stand out. However, employability outcomes depend on labour market conditions, the good name of the entities and socio-economic factors, beyond individual control (51). This means that while personal branding training is useful, it cannot be viewed as a complete solution to employability challenges.

Limitations and Critical Boundaries

Acknowledging limitations is essential to avoid overgeneralizing the findings. First, the study's scope was limited to a single institution, Institute Agama Islam Negeri Curup. The cultural, demographic, and institutional context may have shaped student experiences in ways that are not representative of other universities. For example,

students from urban, technologically advanced institutions may already be familiar with digital branding, while those from rural areas may face barriers in terms of internet access or prior exposure. This context-specificity restricts the generalizability of the results (52).

Second, the duration of the study was relatively short, which prevented observation of long-term effects. While students improved their branding skills in the short term, it remains unclear whether these improvements will be sustained after graduation or whether they will translate into actual employment outcomes. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term employability benefits of digital branding training (53).

Third, variations in student engagement and motivation likely influenced outcomes. Interactive platforms depend heavily on active participation; students who are intrinsically motivated may benefit more, while those with lower motivation may engage superficially. The heterogeneity of student engagement suggests that the application's effectiveness is not uniform. Future research should explore how motivation, learning styles, and prior digital experience mediate outcomes.

Fourth, the focus on personal branding may unintentionally overlook other employability dimensions, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, or intercultural competence, which are equally valued in the labor market. While branding is important, overemphasis on self-presentation risks producing graduates who appear polished but lack deeper professional competencies.

Ethical and Social Considerations

Another critical dimension concerns the ethics of personal branding. Encouraging students to develop consistent online personas raises questions about authenticity and self-presentation. While employers value consistency, students may feel pressured to present idealized versions of themselves rather than authentic ones. This tension highlights the need for training that not only teaches branding strategies but also fosters reflection on professional ethics, privacy, and the boundaries between personal and professional identities online (54).

Moreover, digital inequalities persist. Students with greater access to reliable internet, better

devices, and supportive environments may derive more benefits from digital branding training. Without addressing these inequalities, digital training programs risk widening rather than narrowing employability gaps. Thus, while the Smart Digital Interactive Service application enhances employability skills, its broader effectiveness depends on institutional support and equitable access to digital resources (55).

Situating Findings in Global Debates

Globally, higher education institutions are grappling with how to prepare graduates for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) labour markets. Digital skills are increasingly regarded as baseline competencies, while personal branding and professional identity are seen as differentiators. This study contributes to that debate by showing how a localized initiative digital branding training in an Indonesian university fit into these global trends. In developed economies, students may already be immersed in digital ecosystems; here, branding programs focus on refinement (56). In emerging economies, however, such programs play a dual role: equipping students with essential digital literacy and helping them build competitive identities in globalized labour markets. The Smart Digital Interactive Service application thus highlights the importance of context-sensitive interventions that bridge global demands and local realities.

Analytical Synthesis and Future

Directions

Taken together, the findings demonstrate both the promise and the limitations of digital personal branding training. The promise lies in its ability to empower students with practical skills, confidence, and a sense of identity in the professional world. The limitations lie in contextual constraints, structural inequalities, and the potential risks of commodifying student identities (57).

Future research should address these limitations by conducting multi-site and longitudinal studies, integrating measures of employability outcomes such as job placement rates, and examining the role of motivation and engagement. Additionally, incorporating ethical training on authenticity, privacy, and digital responsibility would provide a more balanced approach to personal branding. Finally, future work should situate branding

training within broader employability strategies, ensuring that it complements rather than replaces other critical graduate attributes (58).

The study contributes to the discourse on employability by showing how digital interactive applications can enhance students' readiness for the workforce through personal branding. Its originality lies in bridging technological innovation with employability debates, demonstrating that digital platforms can serve as both educational tools and professional development resources. At the same time, its limitations highlight the need for critical reflection and further research. By acknowledging these boundaries and situating the findings within broader debates, this study underscores that personal branding training is not a panacea but a valuable component of a holistic employability strategy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the strategy of building personal branding for final-year students through Smart Digital Interactive Service at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup was implemented in several stages. The first stage was conducted offline to explain the process of accessing the Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup smart digital interactive service account. Following this, students registered to obtain usernames and passwords to log in to the account. The second stage included steps to develop personal branding through smart digital interactive service carried out through classical discussions and later in a Zoom meeting to reinforce students' personal branding. Based on the t-test calculation, the value of sig was .001 smaller than 0.05 and the t-calculated value was 12.985 greater than the t-table value. Therefore, the study concluded that there was an increase in students' work readiness before and after personal branding training through smart Digital Interactive Service application at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup.

The study showed that the use of Smart Digital Interactive Service helped students acquire skills relevant to the job market such as digital communication, personal branding management, and presentations. Students could further use digital technology to gain more flexible access to college guidance and Counselling sessions, specifically to enable personal branding whenever and wherever wanted. Furthermore, the results of

this study motivated higher education Institutions to provide guidance and Counselling sessions, particularly related to development of technology-based personal branding.

Abbreviations

None.

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Author Contributions

All authors have contributed equally to the conceptualization, methodology, analysis, writing, and revision of this manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Assistance

The authors declare that no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used in the writing process of this manuscript.

Ethics Approval

This study was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Curup, Bengkulu, Indonesia (Approval No.: 112/KEPK-IAINCRP/VII/2023). All participants were informed of the study objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits before participation. Written informed consent was obtained from each student, ensuring that participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time without academic or personal consequences.

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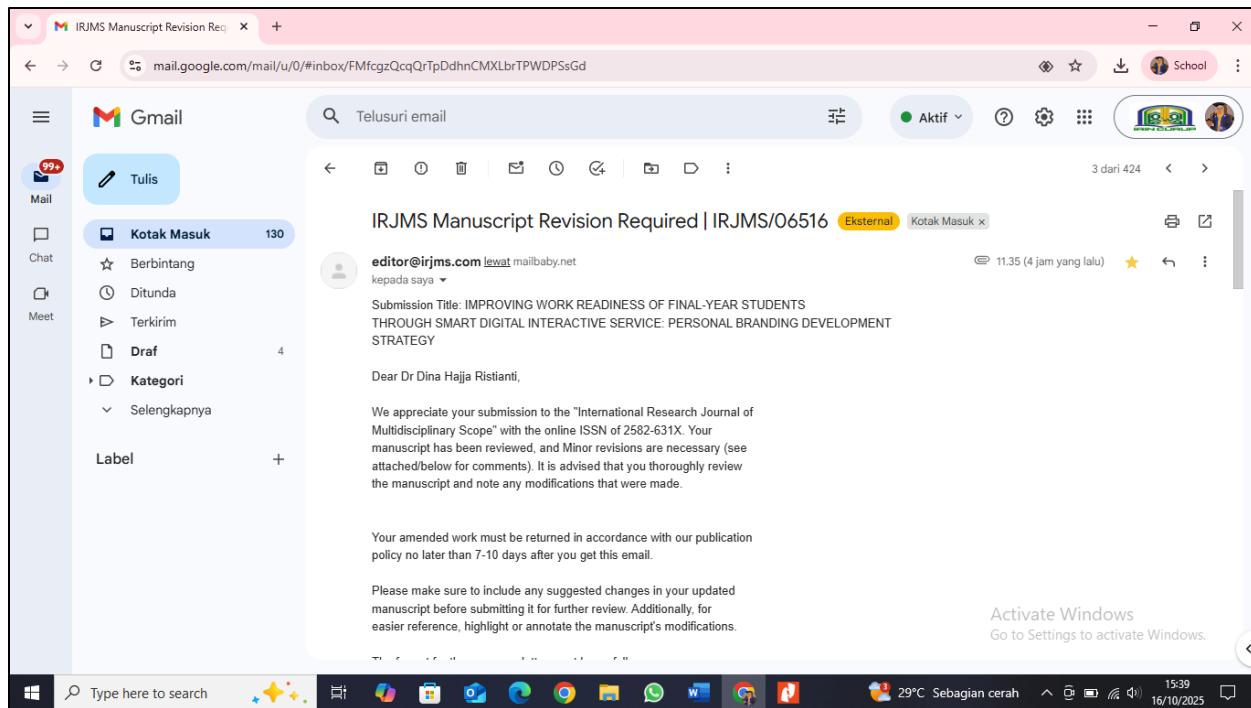
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We appreciate your submission to the "International Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Scope" with the online ISSN of 2582-631X. Your manuscript has been reviewed, and Minor revisions are necessary (see attached below for comments). It is advised that you thoroughly review the manuscript and note any modifications that were made.

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Please make sure to include any suggested changes in your updated manuscript before submitting it for further review. Additionally, for easier reference, highlight or annotate the manuscript's modifications.

The format for the response letter must be as follows:

Referee 1, issue 1: Response 1:

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Comments: Manuscript IRJMS 06516

Final Comments: Minor correction

The study is well written, however, there are a few areas that require further clarification and improvement before the paper can be accepted for publication.

Mandatory corrections in different colors to identify clearly with responses in separate pages and in the manuscript itself to avoid delay in publication.

Reviewer 1:

1. The introduction could be tightened to reduce repetition and better articulate the research gap. A clearer justification of how this study advances existing knowledge would strengthen the section.
2. The one-group experimental design is explained, but it has limitations regarding causality and generalizability. More details about participant demographics (gender, age, program of study) would improve clarity.
3. Ethical approval details are mentioned briefly and should be expanded to show compliance with institutional requirements.
4. Some captions could be more descriptive in result section. The statistical interpretation is correct, but effect size measures (e.g., Cohen's d) could be included to strengthen the findings.
5. Discussion section could be more critical—acknowledging limitations more explicitly and situating the findings within broader employability debates. Some parts read as descriptive rather than analytical.
6. The tables included in the manuscript are not adequately discussed in the text.

Reviewer 2:

1. A sharper articulation of the study's novelty compared to previous research would improve reader engagement.
2. The description of instrument adaptation is a strong point, but the process of translation/validation could be reported more systematically.
3. Ethical approval and consent procedures should be clarified.
4. Including effect size and confidence intervals would provide a better understanding of the magnitude of improvement.
5. Tables should have more self-explanatory captions so they can stand alone.
6. The authors should explicitly relate their findings to international employability frameworks and digital literacy literature. Some points repeat earlier sections and could be condensed to maintain focus.
7. Please check the comma and full stop throughout the manuscript.

Editor's Comment:

career-related information, making informed decisions, and understanding the dynamics of the job market realistically (17). Career development activities for student personal branding included (1) assessment to understand the character tendencies and interests, (2) providing feedback on career mapping to emphasize areas for improvement, and (3) personal branding training to articulate strengths and uniqueness for career development. Students needed to feel confident in preparing for the workforce, and ready to face challenges and obligations (18). Pool and Sewell further outlined four key aspects:

1. Avoid section numbering in between sentences.

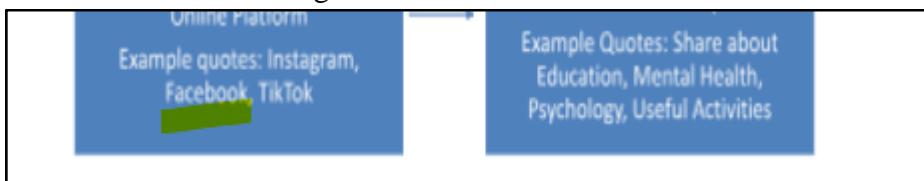


Figure 1. Overall Personal Branding Training Activities on smart D
Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup Application

2. Please change the figure letter, must be in the same size and same font style.

Ethics Approval

This study was conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines. Ethical approval was granted by the research ethics committee of Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup.

3. Ethical approval letter number should be mentioned here. Please share the ethical approval letter with us otherwise your submission will be on hold.
4. The Manuscript should have the following sections after conclusion,

- Abbreviation
- Acknowledgement
- Author Contributions
- Conflict of Interest
- Ethics Approval
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11. Zainudin ZN, Hassan SA, Talib MA, Ahmad A, Yusop YM, Asri AS. Technology-Assisted Career Counselling: Application, Advantages and challenges of career Counselling services and resources. *Int J Acad Res Bus Soc Sci.* 2020; 10(11).
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5. Incomplete references-3,10-14,18,23,24,34,37,42,47,51-add vol no/page no.

---Please make each of those corrections-- failing to do may lead to rejection of manuscript.

NO FURTHER REVISION.

4 Improving Work Readiness of Final-Year Students through 5 Smart Digital Interactive Service: Personal Branding 6 Development Strategy

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13 Abstract

14 Building personal branding for final-year students is crucial for enhancing work readiness. Consequently, the digital
15 platform known as the Smart Digital Interactive Service at Institute Agama Islam Negeri Curup offers an accessible and
16 effective platform for building personal branding among the millennial generation. The digital platform features a
17 "classic service" that facilitates online discussions among students and counsellors, allowing for the exchange of
18 experiences and information related to personal branding development. Therefore, this study aimed to describe the
19 strategy for building personal branding through the Smart Digital Interactive Service as an effort to improve the work
20 readiness of final-year students. An experimental design was adopted using a one-group t-test model conducted
21 through the Smart Digital Interactive Service application. The study population included seventh-semester students
22 from the class of 2021 at Institute Agama Islam Negeri Curup, with a purposive sampling method used to select 30
23 participants from various study programs. Data collection also included questionnaires to assess personal branding
24 and students' work readiness. Furthermore, the t-test formula was applied to analyse the differences in personal
25 branding and work readiness before and after the intervention. The results showed that the strategy for building
26 personal branding through the Smart Digital Interactive Service was carried out in several stages. Initially, an offline
27 session explained how to access the digital platform. Students subsequently registered to receive a username and
28 password to log in to the Smart Digital Interactive Service account. The next stage included online discussions and Zoom
29 meetings to further develop and strengthen personal branding.

30 **Keywords:** Education, Personal Branding, Smart Digital Interactive Service, Students, Work Readiness.

31 Introduction

32 The transition from higher education to the 50
33 workforce remains one of the most critical phases 51
34 in the professional development of students. 52
35 Despite completing their academic programs 53
36 successfully, many graduates encounter 54
37 difficulties in adapting to the demands of the 55
38 labour market. This phenomenon, often described 56
39 as post-graduation shock or post-power 57
40 syndrome, is largely attributed to the imbalance 58
41 between academic preparation and workplace 59
42 expectations (1). While universities emphasize 60
43 theoretical knowledge, organizational 61
44 involvement, and academic achievements, 62
45 employers increasingly demand graduates who 63
46 possess practical abilities, self-confidence, and the 64
47 capacity to present their skills effectively in 65
48 professional settings. The gap between 66

49 institutional preparation and industry
50 requirements underscores the importance of
51 developing additional competencies before
52 graduation. One competency that has gained
53 prominence in recent years is personal branding.
54 Beyond technical knowledge, employers look for
55 individuals who can differentiate themselves,
56 communicate their value clearly, and demonstrate
57 consistency between their skills, attitudes, and
58 professional identity. Personal branding is defined
59 as the strategic process of shaping public
60 perception of one's personality, values, abilities,
61 and unique strengths in order to create a
62 memorable and competitive professional identity
63 (2). It reflects not only what individuals know, but
64 also how they present themselves to the outside
65 world. In today's competitive environment, where

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71 (Received 26th June 2025; Accepted 16th September 2025; Published XXXX 202X)

72 employers often receive hundreds of applications 23
73 for a single position, students who have 24
74 established strong personal brands are more 25
75 likely to stand out. The relevance of personal 26
76 branding is further amplified by the growing role 27
77 of digital platforms in recruitment processes. 128
78 Companies frequently review applicants' social 29
79 media profiles as part of their evaluation of 30
80 character and employability (3). A professional 31
81 consistent, and positive online presence has 32
82 therefore become an extension of one's résumé 33
83 Social media platforms such as LinkedIn 34
84 Instagram, and YouTube enable students to 35
85 showcase expertise, creativity, and values to 36
86 potential employers (4). In this sense, personal 37
87 branding is not only about self-promotion, but also 38
88 about aligning digital footprints with professional 39
89 aspirations. For final-year students, the ability to 40
90 articulate their personal and professional 41
91 identities in both online and offline contexts has 42
92 become an essential component of work 43
93 readiness. Work readiness, as conceptualized in 44
94 employability research, encompasses multiple 45
95 dimensions: cognitive preparation, technical 46
96 proficiency, communication and collaboration 47
97 skills, adaptability, and emotional resilience (5) 48
98 Students who possess these attributes are better 49
99 equipped to enter the labour market and pursue 50
100 career opportunities with confidence. However 51
101 research indicates that many students still lack the 52
102 necessary digital literacy skills required to 53
103 effectively build and manage their personal 54
104 branding (6). Career development units in higher 55
105 education institutions play a critical role in 56
106 addressing this gap, but traditional face-to-face 57
107 interventions often struggle to reach all students 58
108 consistently. Digital solutions therefore provide a 59
109 promising avenue for scaling personal branding 60
110 guidance and enhancing work readiness among 61
111 graduates. Globally, scholars have investigated the 62
112 potential of digital technology in counselling and 63
113 career development. A German study on the 64
114 digitalization of counselling sessions highlighted 65
115 both opportunities and challenges, noting that 66
116 digital platforms increased accessibility but 67
117 required significant adaptation from service 68
118 providers (7). Similarly, research in Australia 69
119 emphasized that digital counselling improved 70
120 service delivery, yet raised concerns over data 71
121 privacy and management (8). In Canada, student 72
122 perspectives revealed that while many valued 73

online counselling for its convenience, preferences varied depending on personal learning styles and technological comfort levels (9). Collectively, these studies underscore the transformative potential of digital platforms in educational and counselling contexts. However, they tend to focus on accessibility, satisfaction, and service delivery rather than the integration of personal branding strategies into digital counselling frameworks.

This gap is particularly relevant in the context of developing countries, where the employability of graduates remains a pressing concern. Indonesia, for example, faces the dual challenge of aligning higher education outcomes with labour market demands while also adapting to rapid technological change. Within this context, the Institute Agama Islam Negeri Curup has developed the Smart Digital Interactive Service, a learning management application designed to facilitate digital-based guidance and counselling for students (10). The platform enables classical, group, and individual counselling sessions without time and space constraints, making it a practical solution for career preparation in the digital age. Its functions include self-development, problem-solving, and career guidance, all of which can be adapted to incorporate personal branding strategies.

The present study builds on these developments by exploring how the Smart Digital Interactive Service can be employed to strengthen final-year students' personal branding and, in turn, improve their work readiness. Unlike prior research, which has primarily examined the technical or psychological aspects of digital counselling, this study explicitly links digital guidance to the development of personal branding competencies. By adopting an experimental design, the study also provides empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the intervention, rather than relying solely on descriptive or qualitative insights. Previous research on digital counselling in Germany, Australia, and Canada has primarily focused on accessibility, student satisfaction, and the challenges of adapting traditional services to online platforms (11). While these studies highlight the transformative potential of digital technology, they do not examine how such platforms can actively foster personal branding—a competency increasingly tied to graduate employability.

174 The present study is novel in two respects. First, it 225
175 integrates personal branding training into a digital 226
176 counselling platform and evaluates its direct 227
177 impact on students' work readiness, an area rarely 228
178 addressed in prior literature. Second, it 229
179 contributes new empirical evidence from the 230
180 Indonesian higher education context, which has 231
181 been underrepresented in global scholarship 232
182 These elements distinguish this work from 233
183 existing studies and position it to offer fresh 234
184 insights for both theory and practice. 235

185 This research therefore advances existing 236
186 knowledge in two important ways. First, it extends 237
187 the literature on personal branding by situating it 238
188 within the digital counselling environment of 239
189 higher education. While personal branding has 240
190 been widely studied in marketing, psychology, and 241
191 professional development contexts, its integration 242
192 into digital counselling for students remains 243
193 underexplored. Second, it offers practical 244
194 contributions by presenting a replicable strategy 245
195 for higher education institutions, particularly in 246
196 emerging economies, to improve graduate 247
197 employability through technology-driven 248
198 interventions. In doing so, the study responds to 249
199 calls for innovative, scalable, and context-sensitive 250
200 approaches to career development. 251

201 In summary, the transition from higher education 252
202 to employment is increasingly complex, requiring 253
203 more than academic qualifications alone. Personal 254
204 branding has emerged as a key factor in shaping 255
205 students' employability, particularly in the digital 256
206 era where online presence influences professional 257
207 opportunities. While international studies have 258
208 demonstrated the potential of digital counselling 259

209 little is known about its role in supporting 260
210 personal branding development. This study 261
211 addresses that gap by evaluating the use of the 262
212 Smart Digital Interactive Service at Institute 263
213 Agama Islam Negeri Curup to build personal 264
214 branding and enhance work readiness among 265
215 final-year students. Through this investigation, the 266
216 study seeks not only to contribute to theoretical 267
217 discussions on personal branding and 268
218 employability, but also to provide practical 269
219 insights for higher education institutions seeking 270
220 to prepare their graduates for success in the 271
221 contemporary labour market. 272

222 **Theoretical Overview** 273

223 **Personal Branding** 274

224 Personal branding refers to the unique identity of 275

"brand" that others recognize in an individual due to distinct qualities and strengths. Consistent demonstration of these traits strengthens personal branding (12). This process includes shaping a positive perception of personality, abilities, and values, thereby creating a strong "selling point" in society. Scholars note that personal branding involves developing, adopting, and organizing personal information into a comprehensive narrative, often facilitated through social media. H. Rampersad described personal branding as comprising elements such as authenticity, self-awareness, clear purpose, consistency, distinctiveness, visibility, relevance, and performance. He further emphasized three core components of effective personal branding: the individual, who strategically crafts and communicates a professional identity; the promise, which reflects the responsibility to fulfil public expectations; and the relationship, which strong personal branding seeks to foster between the individual and their audience (13). In today's digital era, various social media platforms such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram, Quora, SlideShare, podcasts, wikis, and videocasts serve as key tools for building personal brands. For example, YouTube allows individuals to showcase their abilities through video, offering clear depictions of personality, body language, and knowledge (14). Similarly, visual platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram provide opportunities to present skills and attributes through images, short videos, and visually oriented narratives that help strengthen professional identity.

Work Readiness

The labor market increasingly demands flexibility and adaptability to rapid changes influenced by globalization and technological advancement, requiring universities to prepare students not only for professional careers but also for active participation in the 21st-century workforce through career planning, organization, adaptability, communication, cooperation, and presentation skills. Consequently, the establishment of career development units in every university has become essential (15). According to Pool and Sewell, work readiness encompasses career management skills for developmental tasks, field-specific knowledge, the ability to understand and present learned knowledge, and personal attributes that highlight

276 an individual's potential (16). The objective of 277 developing students' personal branding is to 278 enhance work readiness and foster career 279 maturity by engaging in activities such as career 280 planning, exploring career-related information 281 making informed decisions, and developing 282 realistic understandings of both desired jobs and 283 labor market conditions (17). Career development 284 initiatives linked to personal branding typically 285 involve assessment to identify character 286 tendencies and interests, feedback on career 287 mapping to highlight areas for improvement, and 288 targeted training to help students articulate their 289 strengths and uniqueness for career success 290 Students must feel confident in preparing for the 291 workforce and ready to face challenges and 292 obligations (18). In this regard, Pool and Sewell 293 reiterated four key aspects of work readiness— 294 career management skills, field-specific 295 knowledge, presentation of acquired knowledge 296 and personal attributes that reflect abilities— 297 while Yorke and Knight categorized work 298 readiness into personal qualities, core skills 299 process skills, technical or subject-specific 300 expertise, and career management competencies 301 Together, these perspectives underscore that 302 work readiness is not limited to technical skills but 303 includes knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes that 304 enable graduates to perform effectively in 305 professional contexts. Furthermore, Pool and 306 Sewell emphasized the importance of aligning an 307 individual's field of study, personal character 308 intelligence, and broad knowledge with labor 309 market expectations to ensure job security and 310 career success (19). Multiple factors shape 311 students' work readiness, including internal 312 dimensions such as intelligence, capabilities 313 interests, motivation, health, ethics, and 314 aspirations, as well as external influences such as 315 family background, work environment, and social 316 connections. 367

317 **Smart Digital Interactive Service** 368

318 The Smart Digital Interactive Service represents 369 the digitalization of guidance and counselling 370 sessions at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup 371 321 Developed in 2022, the platform was designed to 372 support digital-based service processes for 373 students (20). Its primary aim is to facilitate 374 accessible counselling and career guidance that 375 can address psychological needs while also 376 enhancing work readiness. Through this 377

application, students can engage in effective career development activities anytime and anywhere.

The use of digital counselling in higher education is essential for contemporary students who are already familiar with digital technologies. Publications show no significant superiority between online and face-to-face counselling; suggesting that effectiveness largely depends on individual preference. The Canadian Workforce Development Board (CFLDB), for example, developed a scoring system to assess websites based on structure, learning value, and quality as providers of several functions (21). The ranking system considered criteria such as visual and linguistic quality, ease of navigation, creative use of technology, reliability of information sources, accuracy of selected content, learning composition (where technology can be easily understood by learners), and learning construction (where technology supports knowledge building) (22). The development of the Smart Digital Interactive Service was based on the needs and foundations for implementing counselling sessions in higher education. Information technology experts evaluated the application across three domains: usability, display, and function. Guidance and counselling experts assessed it in terms of design, content, and communication processes (23). The results of expert validation showed average scores of 79.17% and 80.72%, suggesting that the application is feasible and reliable for student use.

Methodology

Study Design

The study was an experimental examination using a one-group t-test model conducted through smart Digital Interactive Service application. The population consisted of seventh-semester students from the 2021 class at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup (24). The sample included 30 final-year students selected through purposive sampling from various study programs at the Institution. Although the one-group pre post experimental design was appropriate for exploring initial effects of personal branding training, it carries limitations regarding causal interpretation and external validity. Without a control group, improvements cannot be attributed solely to the intervention, and findings may not be generalized beyond the sample of IAIN Curup

378 students.

379 **Participant Demographics**

380 The final sample consisted of 30 seventh-semester
381 students (16 females and 14 males) aged between
382 20 and 23 years. Participants represented diverse
383 study programs, including Islamic Education,
384 Economics, Communication, and Counseling. The
385 purposive sampling approach ensured that
386 students selected were in their final year and
387 preparing for graduation, making them relevant
388 for assessing work readiness and personal
389 branding.

390 **Study Instruments**

391 Two measurement tools were used in this study
392 namely personal branding and students' work
393 readiness. The personal branding tool was
394 adapted from the framework developed by H
395 Rampersad containing sixteen items across eight
396 dimensions namely Authenticity, Self-awareness
397 Clear Purpose, Consistency, Distinctiveness
398 Visibility, Relevance, and Performance (25). The
399 try-out test results of the instrument showed a
400 high internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha
401 value 0.87. Additionally, the factor structure of the
402 questionnaire items was identified through
403 exploratory factor analysis (EFA) suggesting that
404 the items were grouped according to the
405 hypothesized eight dimensions confirming the
406 tool's validity (26). The EFA also identified eight
407 main factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1
408 corresponding to the eight dimensions of personal
409 branding. Students' work readiness measurement
410 tool was adapted from the theory of Yorke, M &
411 Knight comprising twenty statements across five
412 dimensions namely Personal Qualities, Core,
413 Process, Technical/Subject-Specific, and Career
414 Management Skills (27). The try-out results
415 showed a very high level of consistency with a
416 Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.90. An exploratory
417 factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to find the
418 factor structure of the questionnaire items. The
419 EFA results showed that the items were grouped
420 according to the five-dimensional hypothesis,
421 validating the questionnaire design (28). To
422 ensure linguistic accuracy and contextual
423 appropriateness, both instruments underwent a
424 systematic adaptation process. First, the original
425 English items were translated into Bahasa
426 Indonesia by two bilingual experts in psychology
427 and education. A back-translation into English was
428 then performed by an independent translator
429 unfamiliar with the original tools to confirm
430 semantic equivalence. Next, a panel of counseling
431 and psychometric experts reviewed the items for
432 content validity, clarity, and cultural relevance.
433 Based on their feedback, minor modifications
434 were made to wording and terminology. A pilot
435 test was subsequently conducted with ten
436 students from the target population to identify
437 ambiguous items. Items that failed to meet clarity
438 or reliability criteria were revised or removed.
439 This process ensured that the final instruments
440 were both culturally appropriate and
441 psychometrically robust for use with Indonesian
442 final-year students. Furthermore, Table 1 showed
443 examples of statements used in two instruments.

444
445 **Table 1:** Items Sample of Study Variables

Variable	Dimension	Sample Statement
Personal Branding	Authenticity	In every social interaction, students make an effort to present authenticity.
	Self-awareness	Students were aware of the principles.
	Clear Purpose	Students realized the purpose in life.
	Consistency	Students remained consistent in talking to others.
	Distinctiveness	The abilities or skills possessed distinguished students apart from others.
	Visibility	Students often posted content on social media relevant to the field.
	Relevance	Students made sure that the knowledge and abilities were correlated with the needs of the industry.
	Performance	In every job carried out, students tried to be the best.
Students Readiness	Work Personal Qualities	Students have a strong work ethic and try their best.
	Core Skills	Students were good at working with the team.

Variable	Dimension	Sample Statement
	Process Skills	Students could manage the time well to complete tasks efficiently.
	Technical/Subject-Specific Skills	Students have technical abilities that match their interests.
	Career Management Skills	Students understand how to create an attractive and effective CV.

446

447 **Study Procedures** 490

448 The study commenced with a comprehensive 491
 449 review of pertinent theories concerning personal 492
 450 branding and students' work readiness to identify 493
 451 crucial dimensions. Subsequently, questionnaires 494
 452 were developed to assess each dimension, 495
 453 ensuring the relevance and representativeness of 496
 454 each item. Content validation was further 497
 455 conducted by two experts in Counselling guidance 498
 456 and psychology. Following content validation, the 499
 457 questionnaire experienced a pilot test with ten 500
 458 representative individuals from the target 501
 459 population to identify items that might be unclear 502
 460 or ambiguous (29). Items that did not meet the 503
 461 validity and reliability criteria were revised or 504
 462 removed based on the results of statistical 505
 463 analysis. The revised questionnaire was further 506
 464 administered to a larger sample of thirty students 507
 465 to confirm the validity and reliability. These tests 508
 466 ensured that the measuring instrument was 509
 467 reliable and valid for a broader population (30). 510
 468 After undergoing several trials and revisions, the 511
 469 finalized measuring instrument was considered 512
 470 ready for use in the study. 513

471 Data collection occurred between May 11, 2023, 514
 472 and August 25, 2023. Following data collection, 515
 473 normality tests, descriptive analysis, and 516
 474 inferential analysis were carried out. 517
 475 Furthermore, a normality test of the data was 518
 476 carried out using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to 519
 477 assess the suitability of the distribution. 520
 478 Descriptive analysis included determining the 521
 479 frequency and percentage of student's 522
 480 demographic data (31). Correlational analysis was 523
 481 also performed to ascertain relationships between 524
 482 variables before the mediation test. The data 525
 483 obtained was finally processed using the Microsoft 526
 484 Excel and IBM SPSS Statistics 24 applications. 527

485 **Normality Test Results** 528

486 Following data collection, scores for each aspect of 529
 487 personal branding and work readiness were 530
 488 totalled to produce a composite score. The 531
 489 normality test of the data distribution was 532

assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test to determine the suitability (32). The results showed that the data followed a normal distribution with a p-value > 0.05. Specifically the questionnaire data on the dimensions of personal branding and students' work readiness showed normal distribution, as evidenced by significance values of p = 0.150 and p = 0.160 respectively. Therefore, parametric statistical analysis methods such as the t-test could be applied to analyze this questionnaire data.

Results

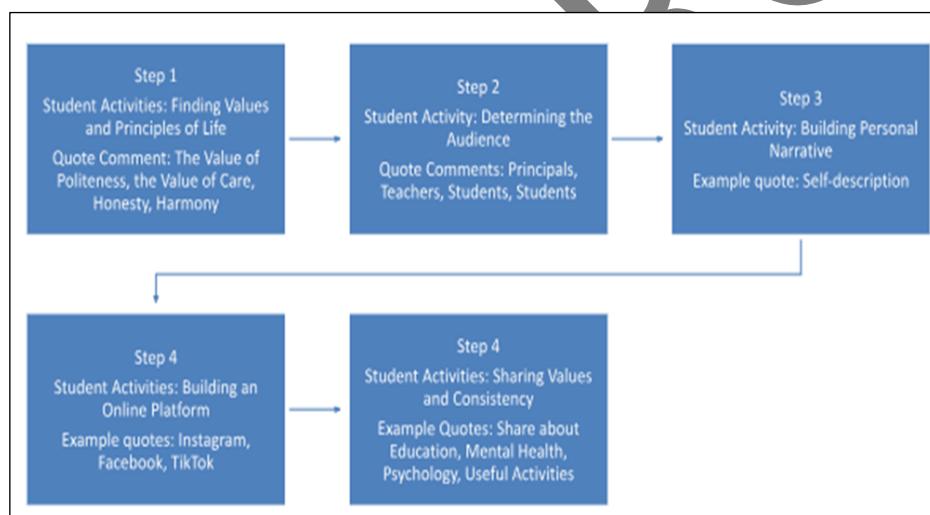
The study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the strategy for building personal branding among final-year students through Smart Digital Interactive Service at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup. Additionally, it focused on determining when there was an improvement in students' work readiness following the implementation of this strategy (33). The study gathered 30 participants from various programs at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup to answer the article questions. These participants were provided with an overview of the study activities to be engaged in during the study.

The initial activity included administering questionnaires to assess work readiness related to personal branding. The participants were further instructed to complete the questionnaire based on individual circumstances or conditions. Subsequently, students participated in personal branding training which was conducted in two stages (34). The first training session took place on Tuesday, July 18, 2023, at the Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup Computer Laboratory Room. During this session, the participants completed the initial questionnaire and the study provided instruction on personal branding for students' work readiness.

In the first session, students further received guidance on accessing and registering on smart Counselling Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup

533 account application (35). Following registration 533 which included obtaining a username and 534 password, all 30 students successfully registered 535 and logged in to the application. The second 536 training session was carried out via the 537 application website accessible. This online flexible 538 training spanned a period of two weeks from July 539 24, 2023, to August 1, 2023. The admin of the 540 account organized the class, participants, and 541 instructors to facilitate this training (36). The class 542 names inputted by the admin included "Personal 543 Branding Training" and "Steps to Develop 544 Personal Branding." Additionally, all students who 545 completed the questionnaire during the first 546 training session were enrolled as participants 547 with the experts listed as instructors. 568 During the second training session, students were 549 instructed to log in to accounts using the assigned 550 usernames and passwords (37). The instructors 551 then initiated the class discussion, focusing on the 572

steps included in developing personal branding. Furthermore, students actively participated in sharing personal experiences and insights into each step of personal branding development. For the subsequent steps of personal branding development, the training was conducted via Zoom through the Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup Smart Digital Interactive Service application. Before each Zoom session, the admin inputted the Zoom class details into the account. During these sessions, students engaged in discussions aimed at clarifying and emphasizing the steps of personal branding development. Students were motivated to use social media platforms to promote identity and showcase positive attributes (38). The overall activities of personal branding training on the Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup Smart Digital Interactive Service application were depicted in Figure 1.



573
574 **Figure 1: Sequence of Activities Conducted during the Personal Branding Training Program**
575

576 Figure 1 describes the Sequence of activities 585 conducted during the personal branding training 586 program through Smart Digital Interactive 587 Service, including account registration, online 588 class participation, and Zoom-based discussions. 589 The subsequent task included addressing the 590 second study problem which aimed to determine 591 when there was an enhancement in students 592 work readiness following the implementation of 593 personal branding training for final-year students 594 through smart Digital Interactive Service 595 application. The study conducted a test to answer 596 the problem and evaluate any potential increase in 597 students' work readiness after receiving personal 598 branding development training via the application 599 (39). T-test analysis was also performed using the 600 SPSS version 24 applications with the results 601 presented in Table 2.

595 **Table 2: Paired-Samples t-test Results for Work Readiness (N = 30)**

Variable	Mean Difference	SE	t (29)	p	95% CI of Difference	Cohen's d
Work readiness (pre-post)	0.995	0.077	12.99	.001	[0.84, 1.15]	2.37

597 **Effect size (Cohen's *d*)**598 For a paired-samples t-test with $n = 30$, $t = 12.985$

599

600
$$d = \frac{t}{\sqrt{n}} = \frac{12.985}{\sqrt{30}} \approx 2.37$$

601 That is a very large effect size (Cohen's benchmark: 0.2 small, 0.5 medium, 0.8 large).

602 **Confidence Interval for the Mean Difference**

604
$$CI = M_{diff} \pm t_{crit} \times SE$$

603 From your table:

605 B=0.995 (mean difference)

606 SE=0.077

607
$$df = 29, t_{crit} \approx 2.045 (95\% CI)$$

608
$$CI = 0.995 \pm (2.045 \times 0.077) = 0.995 \pm 0.158$$

609
$$95\%CI = [0.837, 1.153]$$

610

611 The augmentation in students' work readiness 648
612 before and after personal branding training via 649
613 smart Digital Interactive Service application 650
614 Institut Agama Islam Negeri Curup was 651
615 determined by checking when the sig value was 652
616 less than 0.05 or the t-count value exceeded the 653
617 table value. From Table 2, the sig value was .001 654
618 suggesting it was smaller than 0.05 and the t-value 655
619 showed 0.01 with a significance level of 2.462 656
620 while the calculated t-value was 12.985 (40). Since 657
621 12.985 was greater than 2.462, the study 658
622 concluded that there was an improvement in 659
623 students' work readiness before and after the 660
624 implementation of personal branding training via 661
625 the application. The effect size was very large 662
626 (Cohen's *d* = 2.37), and the 95% confidence 663
627 interval for the mean difference [0.84, 1.15] 664
628 confirmed that the improvement was both 665
629 statistically significant and practically meaningful 666

630 **Discussion**

631 The findings of this study demonstrate that 668
632 personal branding training through the Smart 669
633 Digital Interactive Service application at Institut 670
634 Agama Islam Negeri Curup enhances students' 671
635 readiness for the digital workforce by fostering 672
636 digital literacy, self-directed learning, and 673
637 collaborative engagement (41). The application 674
638 which integrates personalized training content 675
639 with real-time feedback and practice modules 676
640 provides an accessible platform for students to 677
641 learn flexibly and interactively. This aligns with 678
642 broader trends in digital education, where online 679
643 tools increasingly complement face-to-face 680
644 teaching and offer scalable solutions for student 681
645 skill development (42). While the descriptive 682
646 benefits of the application are clear improved 683

personal branding skills, greater digital competence, and enhanced collaboration it is necessary to critically situate these findings within the wider debates on employability, equity, and professional identity formation in the digital era (43).

From Descriptive Benefits to Critical Insights

The descriptive results indicate that students gained practical knowledge of personal branding, including how to develop professional profiles, maintain consistent online identities, and strategically use digital media. These are valuable skills in an era where employers routinely evaluate candidates through online platforms such as LinkedIn, digital portfolios, and social media (44). The application also gave students opportunities to practice, receive feedback, and refine their online presence, fostering both technical proficiency and confidence.

However, such descriptive outcomes require critical interpretation. Personal branding, while beneficial, is not a neutral practice (45). It assumes that students can and should market themselves as professional products, a perspective that aligns with neoliberal labor market demands but also risks commodifying student identities. Not all students may be equally comfortable with or equally rewarded for self-promotion. Cultural norms, gender expectations, and socioeconomic background can shape how students construct their professional presence online (46). Thus, while the application equips students with technical and strategic skills, the broader social and cultural dynamics surrounding branding must be acknowledged.

684 **Employability in the Digital Era**

735

685 The study's contribution becomes clearer when⁷³⁶
686 situated within broader employability debates⁷³⁷
687 Employability is not simply the possession of skills⁷³⁸
688 but the ability to mobilize those skills effectively in⁷³⁹
689 dynamic labour markets. Scholars have argued⁷⁴⁰
690 that employability involves not only human⁷⁴¹
691 capital (knowledge and skills) but also social⁷⁴²
692 capital (networks and relationships) and identity⁷⁴³
693 capital (the way individuals present themselves to⁷⁴⁴
694 employers). The Smart Digital Interactive Service⁷⁴⁵
695 application addresses aspects of identity capital⁷⁴⁶
696 by helping students craft coherent personal⁷⁴⁷
697 brands (47). It also indirectly contributes to social⁷⁴⁸
698 capital by fostering collaboration and peer⁷⁴⁹
699 learning, which mirrors workplace teamwork⁷⁵⁰
700 (48).⁷⁵¹

701 In the digital economy, employability increasingly⁷⁵²
702 requires proficiency in ICT, data literacy, and the⁷⁵³
703 ability to adapt to rapidly evolving technologies⁷⁵⁴
704 This study shows that students who engaged with⁷⁵⁵
705 the application not only improved their digital⁷⁵⁶
706 literacy but also gained a sense of accomplishment⁷⁵⁷
707 through independent learning (49). This is⁷⁵⁸
708 significant because employability is shaped not⁷⁵⁹
709 only by technical ability but also by motivation,⁷⁶⁰
710 resilience, and self-efficacy. By enhancing⁷⁶¹
711 students' confidence in navigating online⁷⁶²
712 platforms and curating professional identities, the⁷⁶³
713 training contributes to employability in a holistic⁷⁶⁴
714 sense (50).⁷⁶⁵

715 At the same time, the findings must be interpreted⁷⁶⁶
716 in light of structural challenges. Digital⁷⁶⁷
717 transformation has created opportunities but also⁷⁶⁸
718 intensified competition. As organizations receive⁷⁶⁹
719 hundreds of applications, personal branding can⁷⁷⁰
720 indeed help candidates stand out. However⁷⁷¹
721 employability outcomes depend on labour market⁷⁷²
722 conditions, the good name of the entities and⁷⁷³
723 socio-economic factors, beyond individual control⁷⁷⁴
724 (51). This means that while personal branding⁷⁷⁵
725 training is useful, it cannot be viewed as a⁷⁷⁶
726 complete solution to employability challenges.⁷⁷⁷

727 **Limitations and Critical Boundaries**

778

728 Acknowledging limitations is essential to avoid⁷⁷⁹
729 overgeneralizing the findings. First, the study's⁷⁸⁰
730 scope was limited to a single institution, Institute⁷⁸¹
731 Agama Islam Negeri Curup. The cultural,⁷⁸²
732 demographic, and institutional context may have⁷⁸³
733 shaped student experiences in ways that are not⁷⁸⁴
734 representative of other universities. For example,⁷⁸⁵

students from urban, technologically advanced institutions may already be familiar with digital branding, while those from rural areas may face barriers in terms of internet access or prior exposure. This context-specificity restricts the generalizability of the results (52).

Second, the duration of the study was relatively short, which prevented observation of long-term effects. While students improved their branding skills in the short term, it remains unclear whether these improvements will be sustained after graduation or whether they will translate into actual employment outcomes. Longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term employability benefits of digital branding training (53).

Third, variations in student engagement and motivation likely influenced outcomes. Interactive platforms depend heavily on active participation; students who are intrinsically motivated may benefit more, while those with lower motivation may engage superficially. The heterogeneity of student engagement suggests that the application's effectiveness is not uniform. Future research should explore how motivation, learning styles, and prior digital experience mediate outcomes.

Fourth, the focus on personal branding may unintentionally overlook other employability dimensions, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, or intercultural competence, which are equally valued in the labor market. While branding is important, overemphasis on self-presentation risks producing graduates who appear polished but lack deeper professional competencies.

Ethical and Social Considerations

Another critical dimension concerns the ethics of personal branding. Encouraging students to develop consistent online personas raises questions about authenticity and self-presentation. While employers value consistency, students may feel pressured to present idealized versions of themselves rather than authentic ones. This tension highlights the need for training that not only teaches branding strategies but also fosters reflection on professional ethics, privacy, and the boundaries between personal and professional identities online (54).

Moreover, digital inequalities persist. Students with greater access to reliable internet, better

786 devices, and supportive environments may deriv⁸³⁷
787 more benefits from digital branding training⁸³⁸
788 Without addressing these inequalities, digita⁸³⁹
789 training programs risk widening rather than⁸⁴⁰
790 narrowing employability gaps. Thus, while th⁸⁴¹
791 Smart Digital Interactive Service application⁸⁴²
792 enhances employability skills, its broade⁸⁴³
793 effectiveness depends on institutional suppor⁸⁴⁴
794 and equitable access to digital resources (55). 845

795 **Situating Findings in Global Debates** 846
796 Globally, higher education institutions are⁸⁴⁷
797 grappling with how to prepare graduates fo⁸⁴⁸
798 volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous⁸⁴⁹
799 (VUCA) labour markets. Digital skills are⁸⁵⁰
800 increasingly regarded as baseline competencies⁸⁵¹
801 while personal branding and professional identity⁸⁵²
802 are seen as differentiators. This study contributes⁸⁵³
803 to that debate by showing how a localized⁸⁵⁴
804 initiative digital branding training in an⁸⁵⁵
805 Indonesian university fit into these global trends. 856

806 In developed economies, students may already be⁸⁵⁷
807 immersed in digital ecosystems; here, branding⁸⁵⁸
808 programs focus on refinement (56). In emerging⁸⁵⁹
809 economies, however, such programs play a dual⁸⁶⁰
810 role: equipping students with essential digital⁸⁶¹
811 literacy and helping them build competitive⁸⁶²
812 identities in globalized labour markets. The Smart⁸⁶³
813 Digital Interactive Service application thus⁸⁶⁴
814 highlights the importance of context-sensitive⁸⁶⁵
815 interventions that bridge global demands and⁸⁶⁶
816 local realities. 867

817 **Analytical Synthesis and Future** 868
818 **Directions** 869

819 Taken together, the findings demonstrate both the⁸⁷⁰
820 promise and the limitations of digital personal⁸⁷¹
821 branding training. The promise lies in its ability to⁸⁷²
822 empower students with practical skills⁸⁷³
823 confidence, and a sense of identity in the⁸⁷⁴
824 professional world. The limitations lie in⁸⁷⁵
825 contextual constraints, structural inequalities, and⁸⁷⁶
826 the potential risks of commodifying student⁸⁷⁷
827 identities (57). 878

828 Future research should address these limitations⁸⁷⁹
829 by conducting multi-site and longitudinal studies⁸⁸⁰
830 integrating measures of employability outcomes⁸⁸¹
831 such as job placement rates, and examining the⁸⁸²
832 role of motivation and engagement. Additionally⁸⁸³
833 incorporating ethical training on authenticity⁸⁸⁴
834 privacy, and digital responsibility would provide⁸⁸⁵
835 more balanced approach to personal branding⁸⁸⁶
836 Finally, future work should situate branding⁸⁸⁷
837

838 training within broader employability strategies,
839 ensuring that it complements rather than replaces
840 other critical graduate attributes (58).

841 The study contributes to the discourse on
842 employability by showing how digital interactive
843 applications can enhance students' readiness for
844 the workforce through personal branding. Its
845 originality lies in bridging technological
846 innovation with employability debates,
847 demonstrating that digital platforms can serve as
848 both educational tools and professional
849 development resources. At the same time, its
850 limitations highlight the need for critical reflection
851 and further research. By acknowledging these
852 boundaries and situating the findings within
853 broader debates, this study underscores that
854 personal branding training is not a panacea but a
855 valuable component of a holistic employability
856 strategy.

Conclusion

857 In conclusion, the strategy of building personal
858 branding for final-year students through Smart
859 Digital Interactive Service at Institut Agama Islam
860 Negeri Curup was implemented in several stages.
861 The first stage was conducted offline to explain the
862 process of accessing the Institut Agama Islam
863 Negeri Curup smart digital interactive service
864 account. Following this, students registered to
865 obtain usernames and passwords to log in to the
866 account. The second stage included steps to
867 develop personal branding through smart digital
868 interactive service carried out through classical
869 discussions and later in a Zoom meeting to
870 reinforce students' personal branding. Based on
871 the t-test calculation, the value of sig was .001
872 smaller than 0.05 and the t-calculated value was
873 12.985 greater than the t-table value. Therefore,
874 the study concluded that there was an increase in
875 students' work readiness before and after
876 personal branding training through smart Digital
877 Interactive Service application at Institut Agama
878 Islam Negeri Curup.

879 The study showed that the use of Smart Digital
880 Interactive Service helped students acquire skills
881 relevant to the job market such as digital
882 communication, personal branding management,
883 and presentations. Students could further use
884 digital technology to gain more flexible access to
885 college guidance and Counselling sessions,
886 specifically to enable personal branding whenever
887 and wherever wanted. Furthermore, the results of

889 this study motivated higher education Institution⁹⁴⁴
890 to provide guidance and Counselling sessions⁹⁴⁵
891 particularly related to development of technology⁹⁴⁶
892 based personal branding.⁹⁴⁷
893 **Abbreviations**⁹⁴⁸
894 None.⁹⁴⁹
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901 **Author Contributions**⁹⁵⁸
902 All authors have contributed equally to the⁹⁶¹
904 conceptualization, methodology, analysis, writing⁹⁶²
905 and revision of this manuscript.⁹⁶³
906 **Conflict of Interest**⁹⁶⁴
907 The author declares no conflict of interest.⁹⁶⁵
908 **Declaration of Artificial Intelligence**⁹⁶⁶
909 **(AI) Assistance**⁹⁶⁷
910 The authors declare that no generative AI or AI⁹⁷¹
913 assisted technologies were used in the writing⁹⁷²
914 process of this manuscript.⁹⁷³
915 **Ethics Approval**⁹⁷⁴
916 This study was reviewed and approved by the⁹⁷⁷
918 Research Ethics Committee of Institut Agama⁹⁷⁸
919 Islam Negeri (IAIN) Curup, Bengkulu, Indonesia⁹⁷⁹
920 (Approval No.: 112/KEPK-IAINCRP/VII/2023). All⁹⁸⁰
921 participants were informed of the study⁹⁸²
922 objectives, procedures, potential risks, and⁹⁸³
923 benefits before participation. Written informed⁹⁸⁴
924 consent was obtained from each student, ensuring⁹⁸⁵
925 that participation was voluntary. Confidentiality⁹⁸⁷
926 and anonymity were guaranteed, and participants⁹⁸⁸
927 retained the right to withdraw from the study at⁹⁸⁹
928 any time without academic or persona⁹⁹⁰
929 consequences.⁹⁹¹
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931 The study did not receive special grants from⁹⁹³
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934 non-profit sectors.⁹⁹⁸
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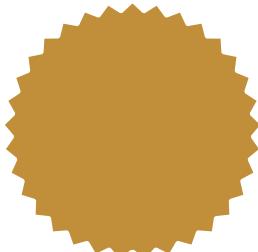
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Personal Branding Development Strategy

Author(s)

Dina Hajja Ristianti, Wandi Syahindra, Idi Warsah and Dominikus David Biondi Situmorang

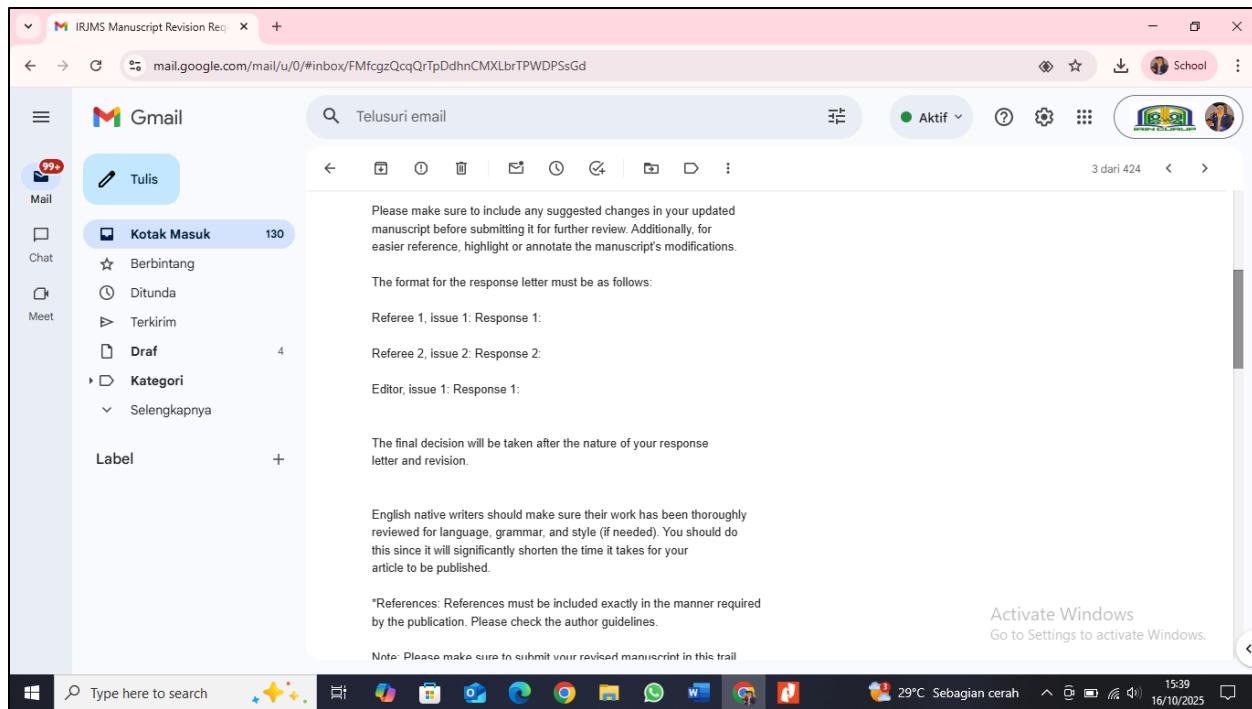
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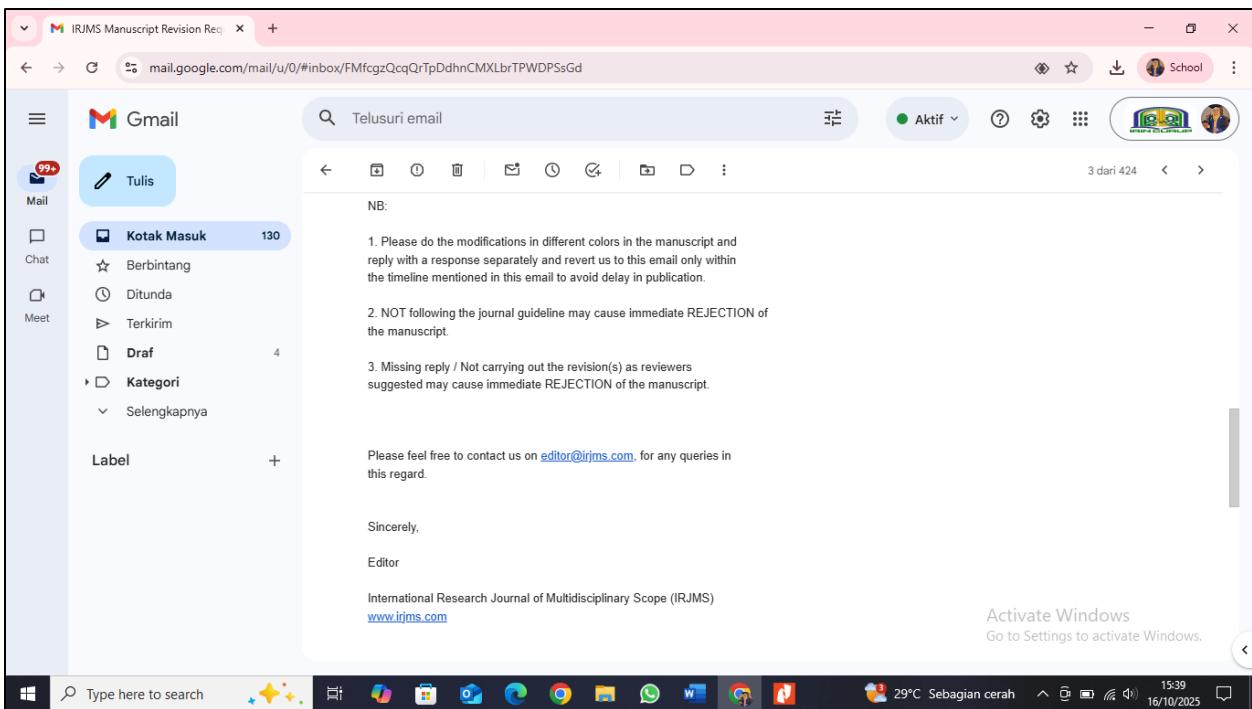
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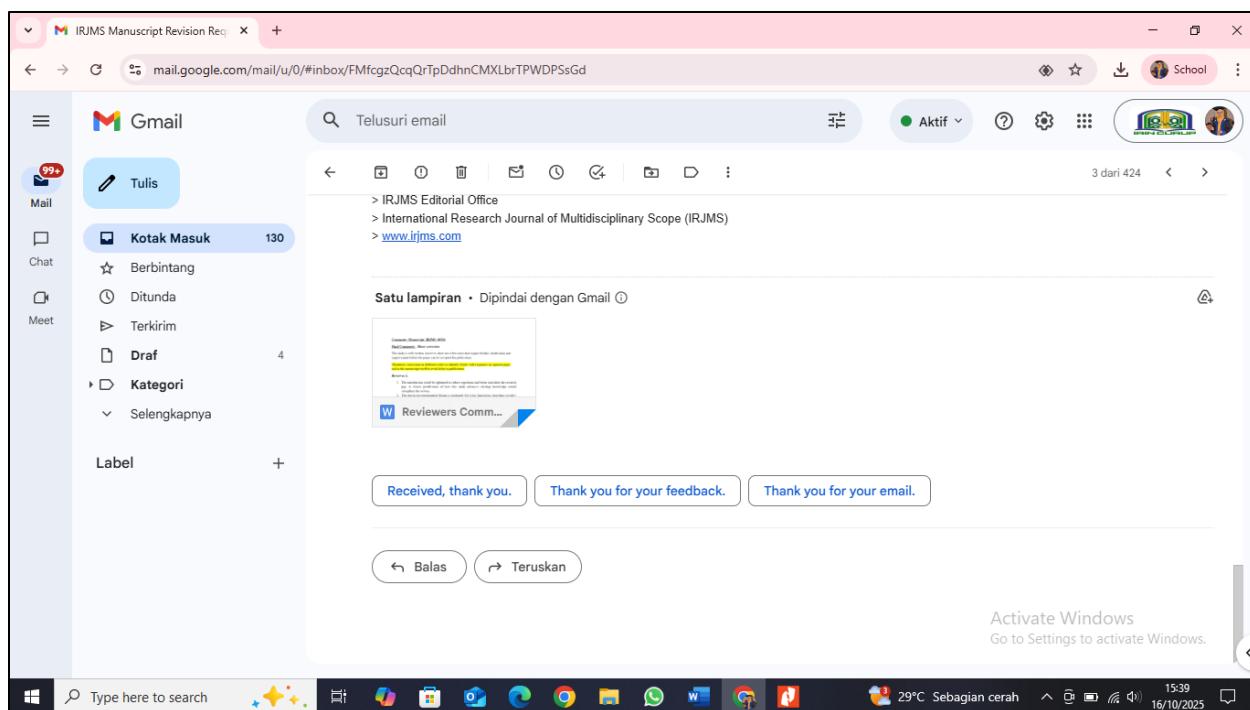
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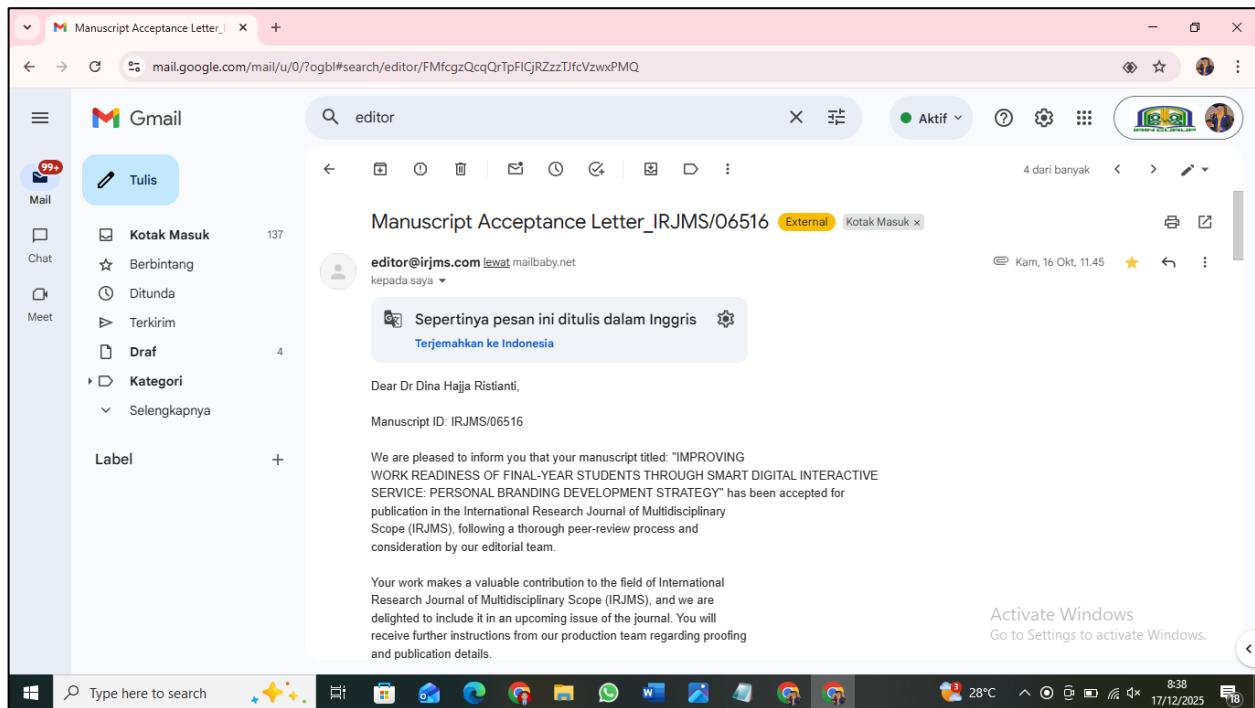
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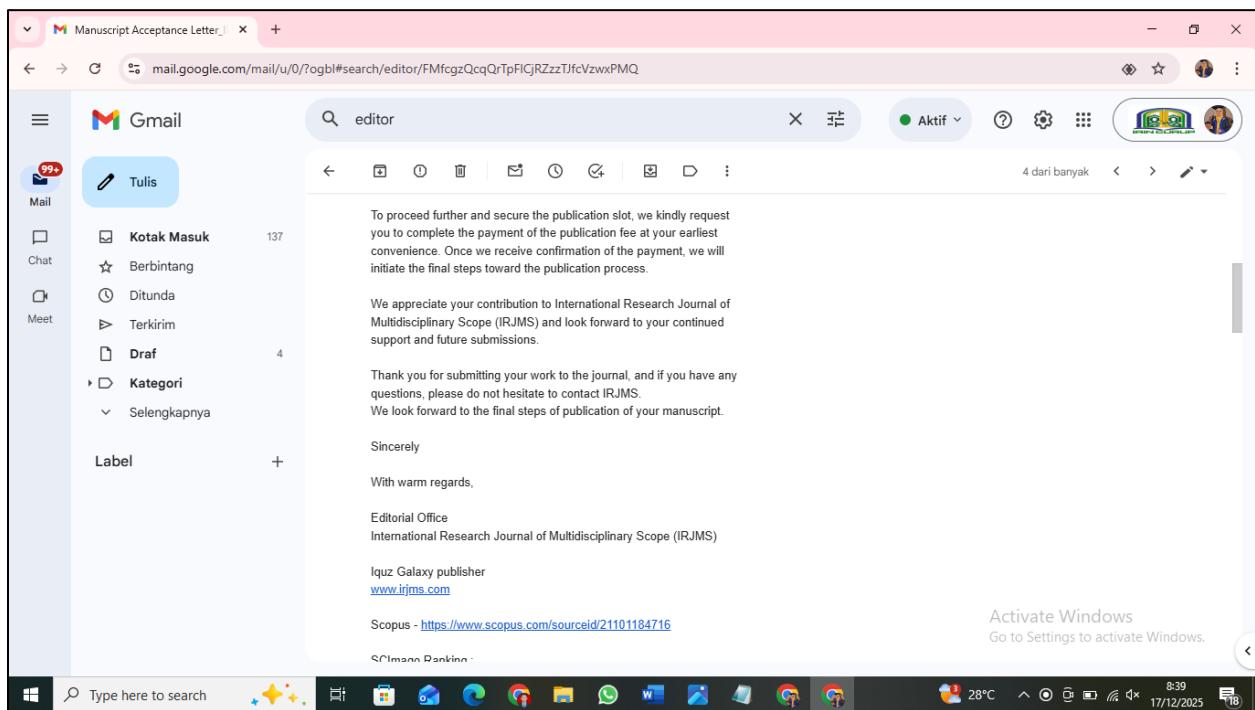
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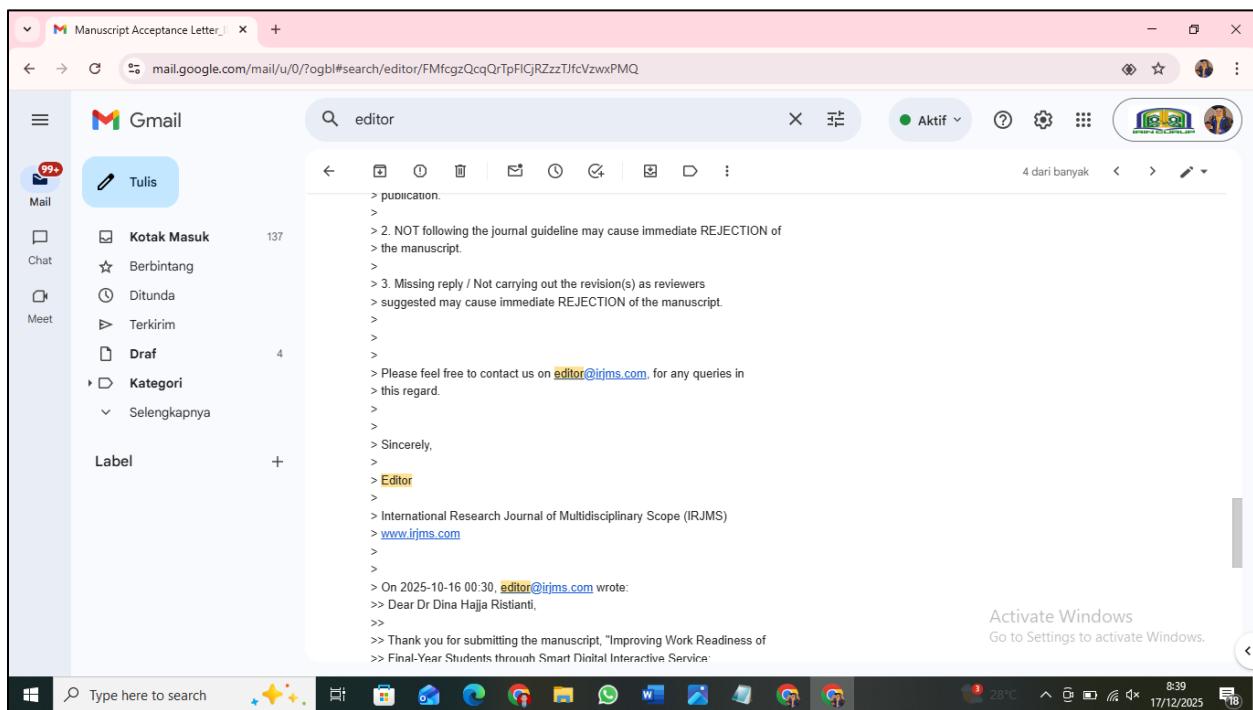
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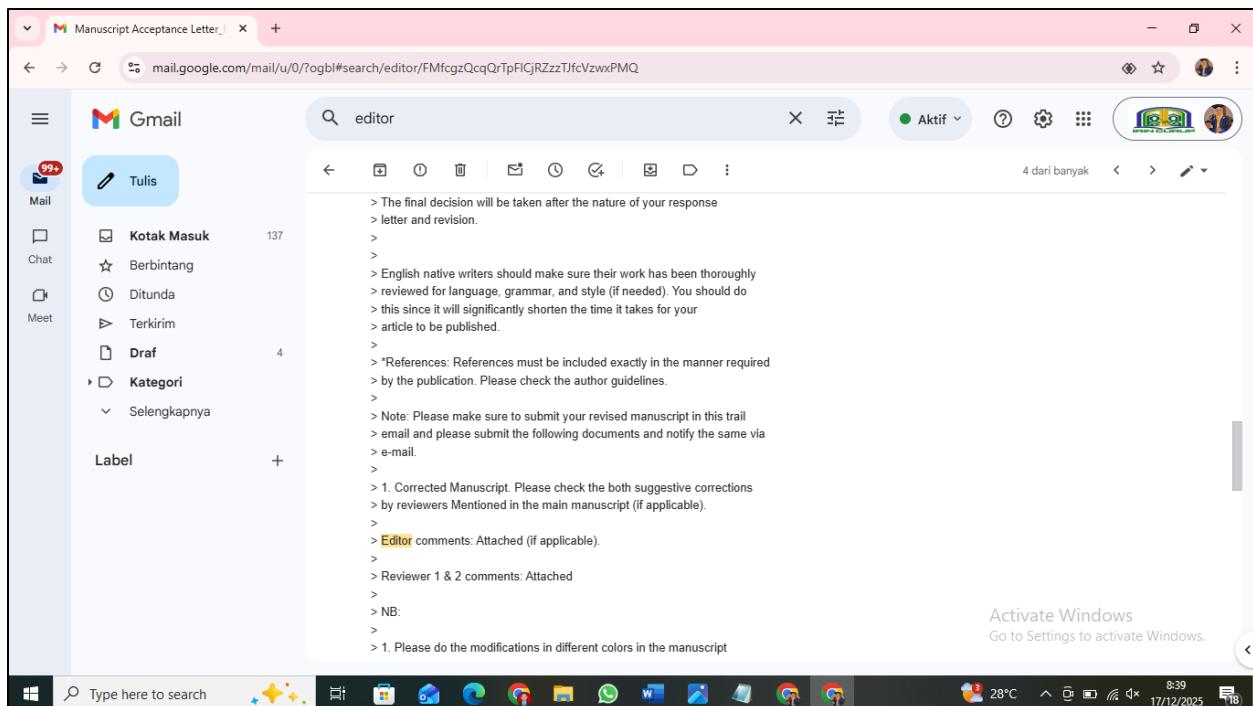


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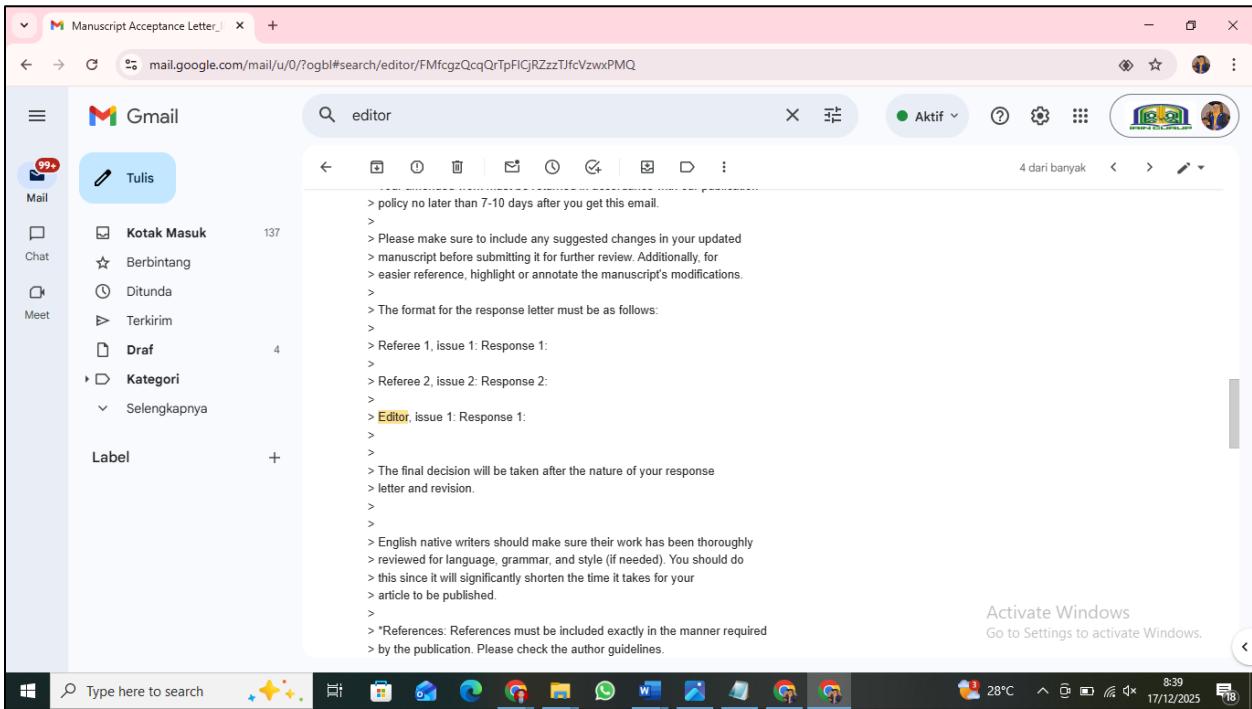


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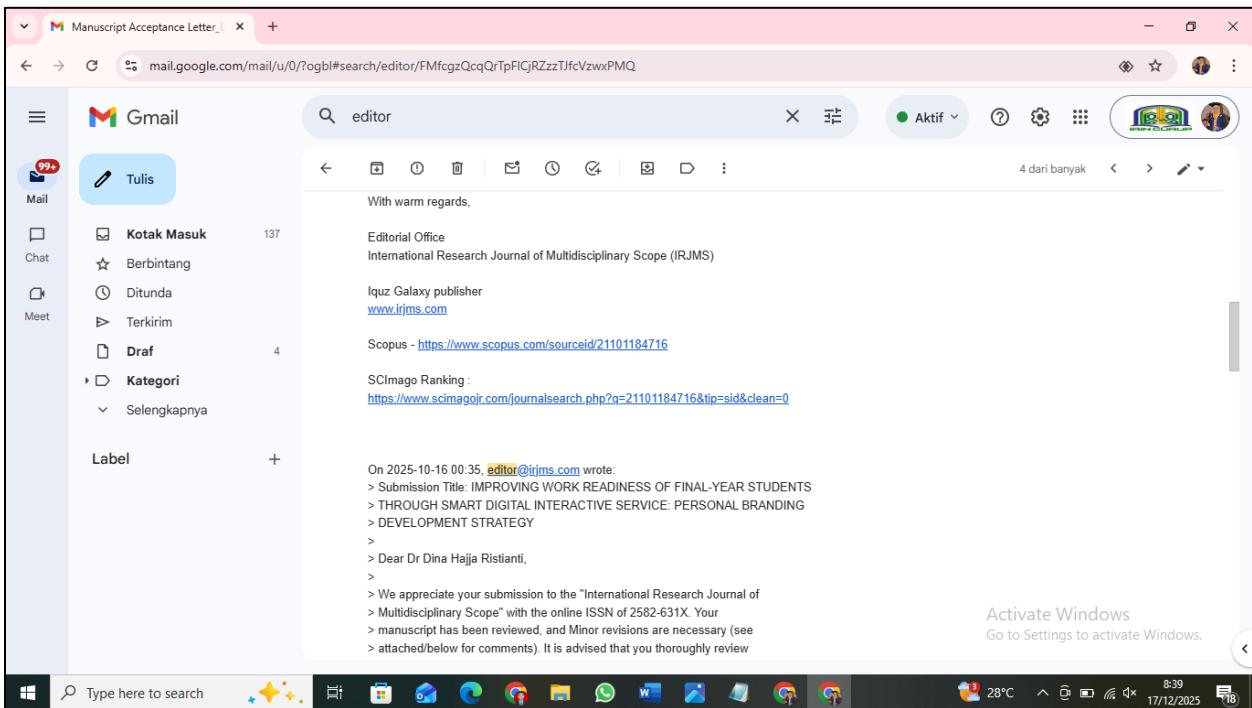
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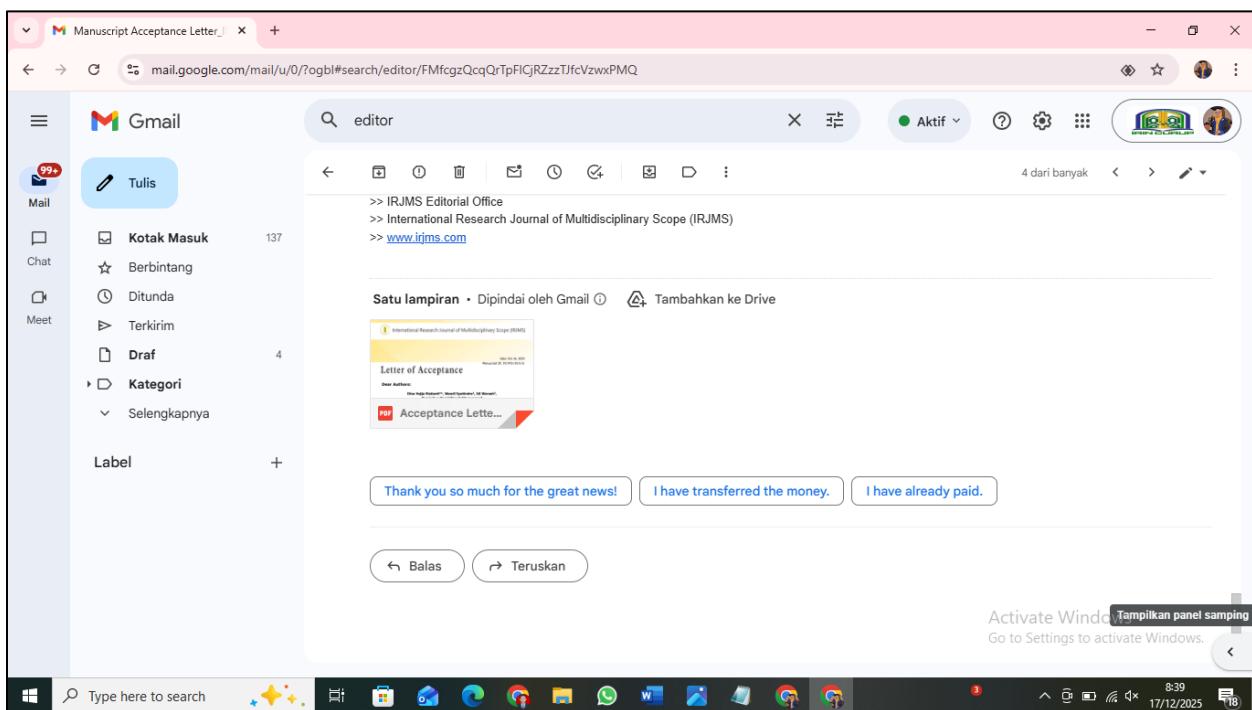
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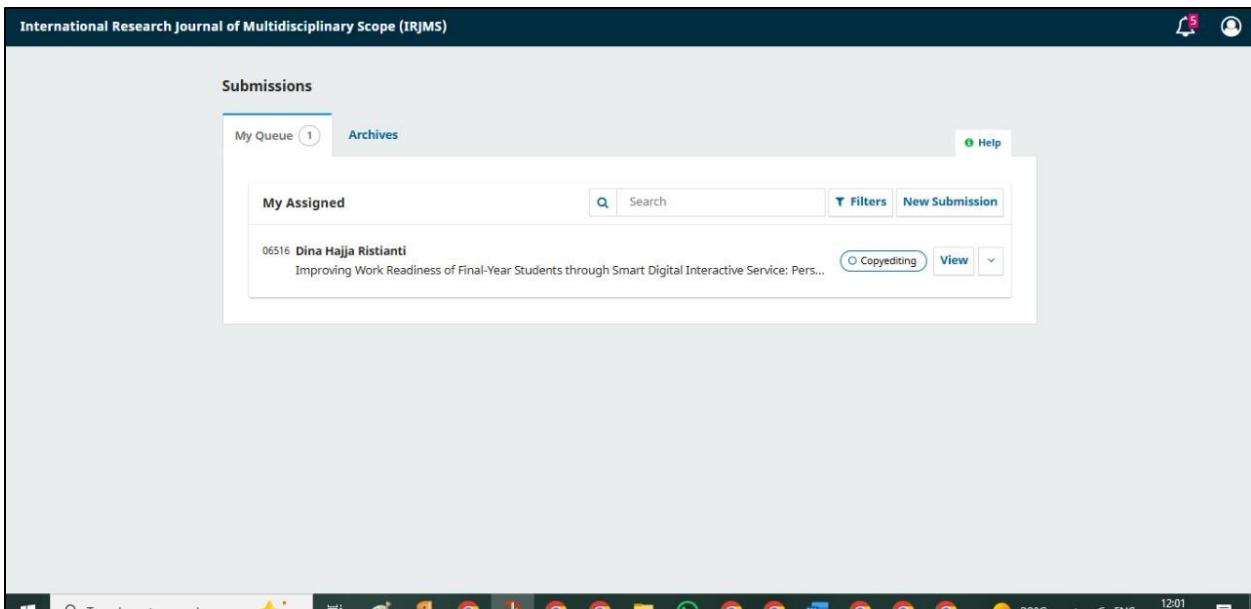
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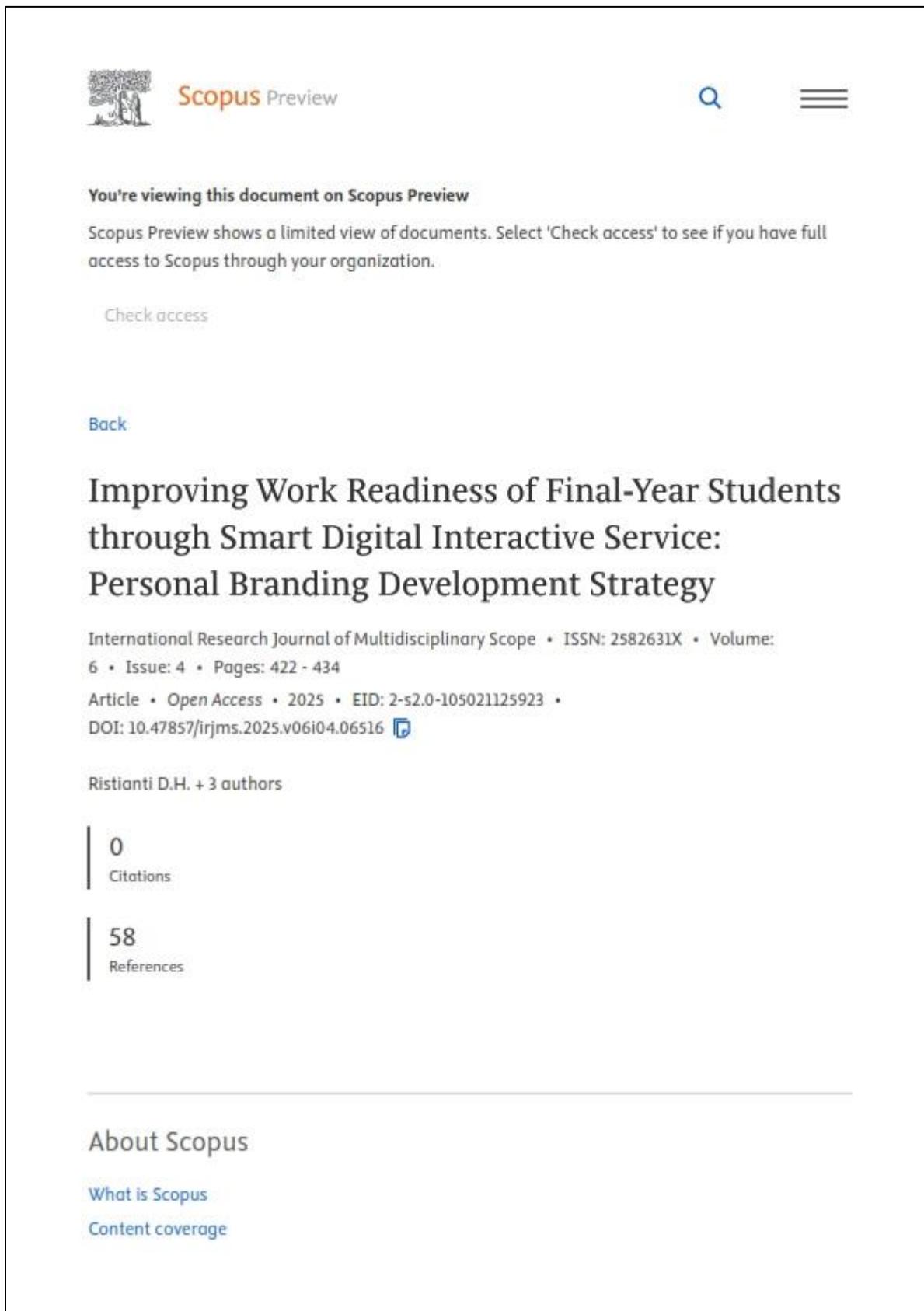
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