Improving Work Readiness

by Ristianti Dina Hajja

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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

employers often receive hundreds of applications for a single position, students who have established strong personal brands are more likely to stand out. The relevance of personal branding is further amplified by the growing role of digital platforms in recruitment processes. Companies frequently review applicants' social media profiles as part of their evaluation of character and employability (3). A professional, consistent, and positive online presence has therefore become an extension of one's résumé. Social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube enable students to showcase expertise, creativity, and values to potential employers (4). In this sense, personal branding is not only about self-promotion, but also about aligning digital footprints with professional aspirations. For final-year students, the ability to articulate their personal and professional identities in both online and offline contexts has become an essential component of work readiness. Work readiness, as conceptualized in employability research, encompasses multiple dimensions: cognitive preparation, technical proficiency, communication and collaboration skills, adaptability, and emotional resilience (5). Students who possess these attributes are better equipped to enter the labour market and pursue career opportunities with confidence. However, research indicates that many students still lack the necessary digital literacy skills required to effectively build and manage their personal branding (6). Career development units in higher education institutions play a critical role in addressing this gap, but traditional face-to-face interventions often struggle to reach all students consistently. Digital solutions therefore provide a promising avenue for scaling personal branding guidance and enhancing work readiness among graduates. Globally, scholars have investigated the potential of digital technology in counselling and career development. A German study on the digitalization of counselling sessions highlighted both opportunities and challenges, noting that digital platforms increased accessibility but required significant adaptation from service providers (7). Similarly, research in Australia emphasized that digital counselling improved service delivery, yet raised concerns over data privacy and management (8). In Canada, student perspectives revealed that while many valued 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.

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.
Students Work Readiness	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.
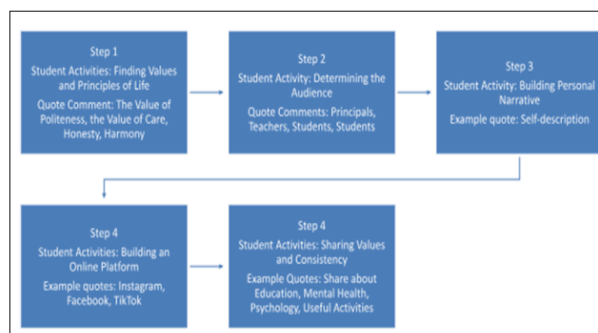
Figure 1: Sequence of Activities Conducted during the Personal Branding Training Program

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 of Difference	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 $n = 30, t = 12.985t = 12.985t = 12.985$:

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

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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