

BUILDING A STANDOUT PERSONAL BRAND: CANDIDATE BRANDING STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT (GEN Z)

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Keyword	Abstract
<i>Candidate Branding, Youth Unemployment, Personal Brand, Digital Presence, Authenticity.</i>	<p><i>Advances in digital technology have transformed the global employment landscape, particularly for Generation Z, who have been raised in an era dominated by the internet and social media. This shift necessitates strategic preparation to compete effectively in the job market. This community engagement initiative aimed to strengthen the competencies of students from Universitas Negeri Jakarta and the University of Sabah Malaysia in developing impactful personal branding and candidate branding. Conducted in July 2025 in a hybrid format, the program engaged 70 participants through interactive lectures and Q&A sessions. Core topics included the principles of personal branding—authenticity, visibility, value, and digital presence as well as candidate branding strategies using social media, storytelling, and gamification. Pre- and post-test evaluations demonstrated notable improvements in participants' understanding of branding concepts and their application in recruitment contexts. The program contributes to preparing young professionals to be more adaptive, professional, and competitive in the global labor market.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z graduates face increasingly complex challenges in entering today's highly competitive labour market, a reality observed in both Indonesia and Malaysia. Employers now prioritize a range of competencies beyond academic qualifications, including professional experience, industry-relevant skills, and strong soft skills. However, many fresh graduates encounter obstacles such as limited work experience, skills mismatches with industry demands (e.g., digital marketing, data analytics, coding), intense competition for limited positions, and underdeveloped communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. Additional barriers include unrealistic salary expectations, inadequate preparation for CV writing and interviews, overreliance on online job portals, limited professional networks, fear of failure, and low adaptability to technological change.

These issues highlight the importance of preparing students before they graduate to navigate recruitment processes and meet employer expectations. As a leading higher education institution in Malaysia, University Malaysia Sabah (UMS) is strategically positioned to provide globally oriented guidance that helps students optimize their potential. This community engagement initiative was therefore designed to strengthen students' readiness through training in personal branding and candidate branding, with the goal of enhancing their professional competitiveness.

Accordingly, this study addresses two key questions:

1. How do social media use and personal storytelling influence the effectiveness of candidate branding among Generation Z in enhancing professional attractiveness in the labour market?
2. To what extent do authenticity and consistency in personal branding affect Generation Z's career opportunities and competitiveness in the digital era?

METHOD

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach with a pre-test and post-test one-group design to evaluate the effectiveness of a community engagement program on students' readiness for the labor market through personal branding and candidate branding training. The design allowed for the measurement of changes in participants' knowledge and skills before and after the intervention.

3.2 Participants

The participants comprised 70 undergraduate students from Universitas Negeri Jakarta (Indonesia) and University Malaysia Sabah (Malaysia). Selection was based on voluntary participation, with eligibility criteria including being in the final year of study and having no prior full-time work experience.

3.3 Procedure

The program was conducted in July 2025 using a hybrid delivery mode, combining face-to-face sessions and synchronous online participation. The intervention consisted of two main components: (1) personal branding, covering authenticity, visibility, value, and digital presence, and (2) candidate branding strategies, including social media utilization, storytelling, and gamification. Learning activities included interactive lectures, case discussions, and question-and-answer sessions.

3.4 Instruments

The research instruments included a structured questionnaire measuring knowledge and understanding of personal branding and candidate branding. The questionnaire consisted of 20 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale, covering conceptual definitions, key elements, and practical applications. Pre-test and post-test scores were used to assess learning outcomes. Content validity was ensured through expert review by three academics specializing in marketing and career development.

RESULTS

The pre-test was administered to 70 participants, consisting of students from Universitas Negeri Jakarta and University Sabah Malaysia. The test comprised five multiple-choice questions designed to assess participants' initial understanding of *personal branding* and *career readiness*. Each correct response was awarded a score of 1, while incorrect responses were assigned a score of 0. Table 1 presents the frequency distribution of correct answers for each question.

Table 1. Distribution of Correct Answers in the Pre-Test ($n = 70$).

No	Questions	Correct Pre- test	% Pre- test	Correct Post- test	% Post- test	Gain (%)	N- Gain Score
1	What is personal branding?	41	58.6	62	88.6	30.0	0.72
	Which of the following is most important in building a strong personal brand?						0.70
2	Which platform is most recommended for developing a professional personal brand?	30	42.9	58	82.9	40.0	0.83
3	Why is having a personal brand important during job seeking?	47	67.1	66	94.3	27.2	0.72
4	What does "career readiness" mean?	34	48.6	60	85.7	37.1	
5		31	44.3	57	81.4	37.1	0.67

Source: Own's work

The post-test results indicated a substantial improvement in participants' understanding following the training program. For the first question, "What is personal branding?", the number

of correct responses increased from 41 participants (58.6%) in the pre-test to 62 participants (88.6%) in the post-test, representing a 30.0% increase. The second question, *"Which of the following is most important in building a strong personal brand?"*, demonstrated the largest improvement, rising from 30 participants (42.9%) to 58 participants (82.9%), a gain of 40.0%. The third question, *"Which platform is most recommended for developing a professional personal brand?"*, showed an increase from 47 participants (67.1%) to 66 participants (94.3%), with a difference of 27.2%. For the fourth question, *"Why is having a personal brand important during a job seeking?"*, correct responses rose from 34 participants (48.6%) to 60 participants (85.7%), marking a 37.1% increase. Lastly, the fifth question, *"What does 'career readiness' mean?"*, improved from 31 participants (44.3%) to 57 participants (81.4%), also showing a 37.1% increase.

These findings indicate that the training effectively enhanced participants' understanding across all assessed areas, particularly in concepts and strategies for building an effective personal brand. The results of the Paired Sample *t*-test revealed a *t*-value of 14.09 with a *p*-value of 0.00015 (*p* < 0.05), indicating a statistically significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores. The N-Gain scores ranged from 0.67 to 0.83, which falls within the high category, signifying an effective improvement in knowledge acquisition after the training.

DISCUSSION

The first topic delivered in the training concerned *personal branding*. Personal branding is a strategic construct that integrates the dimensions of authenticity, visibility, and value in order to establish and maintain a credible professional image. Optimizing one's digital presence through consistent online identity management, the creation of value-added content, and the expansion of professional networks has been shown to strengthen an individual's position in the job market. From a career management perspective, personal branding is positioned as a strategic asset that directly contributes to enhancing future career opportunities. Consequently, its development should commence as early as possible through a systematic and goal-oriented approach (Riffi & Zohri, 2024).

The implementation of personal branding can be operationalized at three stakeholder levels. First, at the individual level, it requires the cultivation of an authentic digital brand along with the adaptive management of online presence in response to technological advancements (Schawbel, 2020). Second, at the organizational level, integrating branding training into career development programs is essential to equip human resources with competencies aligned with industry dynamics (Mizrak, 2023). Third, at the educational level, educators play a pivotal role in fostering branding literacy across professional fields, enabling graduates to build a sustainable self-image and compete in the global arena (Kushal & Nargundkar, 2021). This collaborative approach is believed to strengthen individual competitiveness while simultaneously enhancing the overall quality of human capital.

The second material focuses on candidate branding. In the domain of candidate branding, an approach that prioritizes the applicant experience is critical. Generation Z demands a recruitment process that is fast, transparent, and culturally relevant, including clear salary communication, prompt responses, and the avoidance of "ghosting" practices, as prolonged recruitment timelines can lead to 58% of candidates withdrawing before the process is completed.

One notable innovation increasingly explored in research is the use of gamification in recruitment processes. Recent findings by Fallahi et al. (2025) reveal that gamified assessments enhance candidate engagement, foster positive perceptions of the employer brand, and effectively uncover non-technical skills (soft skills), particularly among Generation Z.

Moreover, digital platforms and social media serve as essential channels for building employer branding. Corporate communication strategies delivered through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn—emphasizing values of sustainability, inclusivity, and work-life balance—resonate strongly with Generation Z's core values (Capriotti, et al., 2021; Ochis, 2024). The use of micro-influencers has been shown to increase engagement among Generation Z, as they are perceived as more credible and personable in their interactions (Ebulueme & Vijayakumar, 2024; Kalukar, 2025).

Finally, personal branding—developed either by organizations or individuals (such as young job seekers)—plays a significant role in career success. Evidence from Indonesia suggests that social media use reflecting personal values and skills within personal branding significantly enhances career prospects for Generation Z (Rahayu et al., 2024).

The pre-test and post-test analysis demonstrated a marked improvement in participants' understanding and application of personal branding concepts following the training intervention. Prior to the session, pre-test scores indicated that many participants possessed only a partial comprehension of the three core dimensions of personal branding—authenticity, visibility, and value—particularly in relation to their integration within a strategic career development framework. This limited baseline understanding is consistent with findings by Schawbel (2020), who emphasized that while personal branding is widely recognized in professional discourse, its systematic application is often underdeveloped at the early stages of career planning.

Post-test results, however, revealed significant gains in knowledge and applied comprehension. Participants demonstrated an enhanced ability to articulate how authenticity can be projected through consistent online identity management, how visibility can be strategically increased via value-added content creation, and how value can be communicated to targeted professional networks. These improvements suggest that the training effectively bridged the gap between conceptual awareness and practical application. This aligns with Misra et al. (2025), who argue that structured branding training embedded in career development initiatives can enhance human capital readiness for dynamic labor markets.

Moreover, qualitative feedback collected alongside the post-test results indicated a greater appreciation of the multi-stakeholder perspective presented in the training. Participants were able to identify how personal branding efforts at the individual, organizational, and educational levels interact to reinforce professional competitiveness. This indicates that the training not only increased technical knowledge but also broadened participants' strategic thinking about branding ecosystems—supporting Li & Lin, (2024) and Nuzilawati, (2025). assertion that branding literacy fosters sustainable self-image development and global career competitiveness.

The alignment between the observed post-test improvements and the theoretical underpinnings presented in the material underscores the effectiveness of the training approach. The results validate the integration of digital presence optimization, stakeholder-oriented branding strategies, and goal-oriented planning as essential components in strengthening career prospects, particularly for early-career professionals and Generation Z job seekers.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effectiveness of a structured training program on personal branding and candidate branding in enhancing the career readiness of university students from Universitas Negeri Jakarta and University Sabah Malaysia. The pre-test and post-test results demonstrated a significant improvement in participants' understanding and application of core concepts, indicating that the intervention successfully bridged knowledge gaps and strengthened relevant employability skills. The integration of theoretical foundations with practical strategies—such as authentic digital brand cultivation, gamification in recruitment, and the strategic use of social media platforms—proved to be highly effective in addressing the career challenges faced by Generation Z.

The novelty of this study lies in its holistic approach, which simultaneously addresses individual, organizational, and educational perspectives of branding, while incorporating emerging recruitment innovations such as gamification. Furthermore, the cross-national participation of students from two different countries adds a comparative dimension that extends the generalizability of the findings.

The breakthrough of this research is the demonstration that a concise, targeted training intervention can lead to measurable cognitive gains in a short time frame, offering a scalable model for higher education institutions and career development programs. By combining contemporary branding theories with the realities of digital recruitment, the study bridges the gap between academic discourse and real-world employability requirements.

It is recommended that universities and training providers integrate personal and candidate branding modules into their regular career readiness curricula, using interactive and technology-driven methods to maintain engagement. Future research may extend this work by assessing long-term behavioral changes and actual employment outcomes, thereby further validating the impact of branding education on sustainable career development.

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