

Examining Factors Affecting Gen Z's Career Success in Surabaya

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Abstract. This research examines the factors that influence Generation Z's career success in Surabaya. It focuses on the roles of networking and personal branding with social capital as a mediating variable. The Indonesian job market has shown increasing instability for young professionals in recent years, with Surabaya facing a higher-than-average youth unemployment rate. Gen Z, once seen as a demographic advantage for the country, is at a crucial juncture where it could become either a demographic asset or a burden. This study investigates how networking and personal branding affect career outcomes through social capital. Quantitative research was conducted through a survey of 108 Gen Z graduates in Surabaya, aged 24 to 28, all with at least three years of work experience, using purposive sampling. Data was collected through an online questionnaire and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results indicate that networking and personal branding significantly influence career success, while also enhancing social capital. Social capital has a positive influence on career success and significantly mediates the effects of personal branding and career success. These findings indicate that Gen Z should not only emphasize technical skills but also invest in building their networks and personal brands to enhance their career success. The research recommends creating university programs that focus on relationship-building skills, digital branding, and social capital development to improve the career growth of Gen Z in Indonesia.

Keywords: Career Success; Generation Z; Networking; Personal Branding; Social Capital.

Abstrak Penelitian ini mengkaji faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi kesuksesan karier Generasi Z di Surabaya. Penelitian ini berfokus pada peran jaringan (networking) dan personal branding dengan modal sosial sebagai variabel mediasi. Pasar kerja Indonesia menunjukkan peningkatan ketidakstabilan bagi para profesional muda dalam beberapa tahun terakhir di Surabaya yang menghadapi tingkat pengangguran kaum muda yang lebih tinggi dari rata-rata. Generasi Z, yang dulunya dipandang sebagai keunggulan demografis bagi negara, berada pada titik krusial, yaitu mereka dapat menjadi aset demografis atau beban. Studi ini menyelidiki bagaimana jaringan dan personal branding memengaruhi hasil karier melalui modal sosial. Penelitian kuantitatif dilakukan melalui

survei terhadap 108 lulusan Generasi Z di Surabaya yang berusia antara 24 hingga 28 tahun, semuanya dengan pengalaman kerja minimal tiga tahun, dan menggunakan metode purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner daring dan dianalisis menggunakan Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa networking dan personal branding secara signifikan memengaruhi kesuksesan karier, sekaligus meningkatkan modal sosial. Modal sosial memiliki pengaruh positif terhadap kesuksesan karier dan secara signifikan memediasi pengaruh personal branding dan kesuksesan karier. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa Generasi Z tidak hanya perlu menekankan ketrampilan teknis, tetapi juga berinvestasi dalam membangun jaringan dan personal branding untuk meningkatkan kesuksesan karier mereka. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan pembuatan program universitas yang berfokus pada ketrampilan membangun hubungan, digital branding, dan pengembangan modal sosial untuk meningkatkan pertumbuhan karier Generasi Z di Indonesia.

Kata kunci: *Generasi Z; Kesuksesan Karir; Networking; Modal Sosial; Personal Branding.*

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BACKGROUND

The global job market today continues to fail meeting the job demands. The generation most affected are the Younger generations, with the unemployment rate reaching 12.6% (ILO, 2025). Young people are facing significant pressures regarding financial stability. In Southeast Asia, 77.3% of young people worry about losing jobs, while in Indonesia, the average percentage of youth aged 15–24 who are unemployed, not in education, or not in training (NEET) reached 21.94% from 2014 to 2023 (ILOSTAT, 2023). New graduates and people who are no longer in school or training are facing huge difficulties when trying to pursue career opportunities.

Surabaya, as the second-largest city in Indonesia, recorded an unemployment rate of 7.62% in 2022, which is higher than the national average of 5.86% (BPS Provinsi Jawa Timur, 2024). There is also an increase in jobs in the informal sector in Surabaya, which makes jobs less stable, pays less, and creates fewer formal jobs (Misra et al., 2024). Moreover, high competition makes it even more important for individuals to find a strong competitive edge in a crowded market (Mauliddah et al., 2022).

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, has been presented as part of Indonesia's demographic bonus, a condition in which the working-age population becomes the majority, potentially increasing income per capita (Utomo & Heriyanto, 2022). However, without a stable and productive income, this demographic bonus may just become a demographic burden (Vero ASEAN, 2024). Understanding the factors that can help Indonesian Gen Z secure career success is therefore crucial. Career success is defined as "the accomplishment of desirable work-related outcomes at any point in a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur et al., 2005), which today extends beyond stable jobs and high income to include fulfillment, financial stability, and work–life balance (Jackson et al., 2024). This study uses Generation Z as a contextual lens where

they entered the labor market during a period of rapid digitalization and employment uncertainty instead of a homogeneous classification.

The researcher did a pre-survey of 36 Gen Z graduates in Surabaya and the two factors affecting career success according to the respondents are networking (31 respondents) and personal branding (26 respondents). Networking is the attempt to develop and maintain relationships with people who can help in one's work or career, and is associated with better income and career advancement (Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Blickle et al., 2011; Wolff & Moser, 2009). Personal branding refers to the expectations, thoughts, and images formed in others' minds when they hear or see someone's name, helping individuals set themselves apart in the job market (Al-Zyoud, 2018; Heskiano et al., 2020).

Social capital, which are traits of a social organization including information, trust, and reciprocity norms (Chen, 2011), are related to both networking and personal branding (Xu et al., 2023; Avery & Greenwald, 2023). Higher social capital increases the chances of achieving career success (Norton, 1996; Kistyanto et al., 2025). However, the extent to which networking and personal branding affect career success, particularly through the mediation of social capital, remains underexplored in the context of Surabaya's job market.

The purpose of this research is to determine whether networking and personal branding significantly affect the career success of Gen Z graduates in Surabaya, and whether or not social capital mediates these relationships. This study specifically focuses on Gen Z graduates in Surabaya, integrating networking and personal branding as predictors, social capital as a mediator, and career success as the outcome. Unlike previous studies that examined these factors separately or in different populations, this research provides context-specific insights for one of Indonesia's largest urban economic areas.

The research is conducted for a specific period of time by distributing questionnaires (google forms) to Gen Z graduates in Surabaya from graduation batch 2020 onwards. These respondents were chosen because they are the generation that needs the information the most to achieve career goals. The research will only focus on 4 variables that will be tested, which are networking and personal branding as independent variables, social capital as mediator, and career success as dependent variables. The research will be conducted from March to May 2025 with the scope of social capital theory as the grand theory. The structure of the paper includes background of the study, literature review, research methodology, findings, and conclusion.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory explains how relationships and networks enable individuals to access resources and achieve common goals (Lin, 2001). For career success, social capital is a bridge that connects individuals to jobs, information, and professional influence (Seibert et al., 2024). This works especially in competitive labor markets like Surabaya, where having the right contacts can either make or break one's career. Coleman (1998) also pointed out that social capital exists in the form of social relationships and

conditions the behavior of individuals in such relationships. For careers, this means that trust, sponsorship, and recommendation often stem from social contacts and networks.

The theory supports the idea that networking and personal branding are mechanisms for building social capital, which in turn influences career success. Networking directly adds by raising visibility to information, contacts, and support (Xu et al., 2023), it connects individuals to others who provide information or opportunities. Meanwhile, personal branding adds by shaping an individual's value and credibility perception, enabling them to stand out in a competitive marketplace (Avery & Greenwald, 2023), increasing the likelihood of gaining trust and support.

In this study, social capital is positioned as a mediating variable between networking, personal branding, and career success of Gen Z in Surabaya. It is also a theoretical assumption that positions networking and personal branding in social-capital-building behaviors. Since social capital has been established in various studies as significantly correlated with career success, it is critical to understand how it is cultivated and leveraged for young professionals to achieve secure and high income.

Relationship between Networking and Career Success

Networking is one of the most important ways to get access to information, mentorship and referrals. Forret and Dougherty (2004) defined networking as any kind of behaviour that relates to initiating, developing, and maintaining informal relationships which later enables professional development. Examples of networking behaviors include connecting with someone at a professional event and maintaining contact with individuals in high positions within a well-known organization. Based on Forret and Dougherty (2004), networking behavior indicators are maintaining contacts with people who may assist in future career paths, socializing at informal social events, engaging in professional activities, community involvement, and increasing internal visibility by actively making someone known and recognized within an organization.

In a previous study by Wolff and Moser (2009), networking behaviours are strongly related with outcomes that predict growth in a career, especially in a competitive job market. Faizan (2025) also found out a positive and significant relationship between networking and the financial aspects of career success, such as salary, promotion, and job security. In fact, Blicke et al. (2011) found that people who are good at networking have higher incomes because they have more contacts and access to information related to upward career mobility and visibility. Generation Z graduates are familiar with digital networking platforms such as LinkedIn and Instagram which help them share professional experiences along with searching for potential mentors, recruiters, or colleagues who can help support their future careers. Therefore, this research hypothesizes that:

H1: Networking has a significant positive effect on the career success of Gen Z graduates in Surabaya.

Relationship between Personal Branding and Career Success

Personal branding are the expectations, thoughts, and images formed in people's mind when they hear or see someone's name (Al-Zyoud, 2018; Heskiano et al., 2020). It is a strategy to create, position, and maintain a positive impression based on each person's unique individual characters (Gorbatov et al., 2019). Personal branding has become a survival mechanism to win competition in the saturated job market because it can be used to enhance visibility, credibility, and authority. According to Gorbatov et al. (2019),

personal branding dimensions include a strategic personal brand, which shows intentional image building; a differentiated personal brand, which focuses on communicating a unique strength and successes; and a technologically savvy personal brand, which includes creating content to show professional presence online.

Rahayu et al. (2024) conducted a quantitative research of Generation Z in Indonesia to find the relations of personal branding and career success. The research shows that there is a strong positive impact of personal branding on career success, illustrating how personal identity, online reputation, and offline reputation have significant impacts on work and income levels. Based on Rahayu et al. (2024)'s findings, which indicates that people who intentionally manage and communicate their personal brand are more likely to gain professional opportunities and enhance their career achievements, this study positions personal branding as one of the independent variables that influences career success among Gen Z graduates in Surabaya.

A well-communicated personal brand can improve credibility, reliability, and distinctiveness of a person. People who intentionally manage how others see them are able to showcase their skills, achievements, and career goals, which can attract powerful people or potential clients to work or partner with them in exchange for the value offered. There are many testimonials of huge successes caused by personal branding online, including names like Theo Derick, Eva Alicia, and Erika Richardo. These people managed to earn loyal followers through showcasing their skills, what they know, and succeeded in opening a lot of opportunities in their industry. For example, Erika Richardo built her painting portfolio until she got asked to paint on a Porsche, wedding gowns, and even an airplane. There are other painters in Indonesia, but Erika Richardo stands out. The personal brand that she built definitely plays a role in how many eyes are watching her paintings, how many doors of opportunity are opened, and how successful she is as a painter now. Therefore, there is a huge link between personal branding and career success. Based on the explanation above, this research hypothesizes that:

H2: Personal branding has a significant positive effect on the career success of Gen Z graduates in Surabaya.

Relationship between Networking and Social Capital

Social capital is the resources and opportunities that a person can access through their relationships and connections (Al-Zyoud, 2018; Heskiano et al., 2020). Hassan et al. (2024) mentioned that indicators of social capital include Structural Social Capital (SSC), which is how large and diverse the structure of network that a person has; Relational Social Capital (RSC), which is based on trust, norms of reciprocity, and long-term personal relationships; and Cognitive Social Capital (CSC), which refers to values, language, and shared understanding that allows effective communication and coordination to achieve a shared vision. Sarwar et al. (2021) analyzed the relationship between networking and social capital and they found out that networking significantly influenced social capital. The study confirms that close relationships will give someone access to support, information, and opportunities. For Generation Z in Surabaya, networking can be the first step in the development of social capital by earning resources and opportunities from the people they know. Therefore, this research hypothesizes that:

H3: Networking has a significant positive effect on social capital among Gen Z graduates in Surabaya.

Relationship between Personal Branding and Social Capital

Personal brand and social capital are related, as an effective personal branding increases someone's ability to attract and maintain valuable social relationships. Avery and Greenwald (2023) explained how personal branding can represent someone's professionalism, competence, and trustworthiness. These are all essential to gaining access to social capital. When others perceive someone as credible and valuable, they are more likely to include them in conversations and partnerships. This type of inclusion action can give an individual access to resources, collaboration, shared knowledge, and shared opportunities, which is what social capital is. Phuong (2024) investigated the effect of personal branding behaviors such as self-promotion on social capital among 290 working women in Hanoi. The study found that self-promotion significantly enhanced social capital. Personal branding also relates to the Relational Social Capital (RSC) and Cognitive Social Capital (CSC) as it includes trust and commonality. Therefore, this research hypothesizes that:

H4: Personal branding has a significant positive effect on social capital among Gen Z graduates in Surabaya.

Relationship between Social Capital and Career Success

Career Success can be conceptualized in two dimensions: objective (e.g., income, promotions) and subjective (e.g., job satisfaction, perceived achievement). For Gen Z, subjective satisfaction, such as meaningful work, self-progress, and flexibility, could be worth as much as traditional measures. As Jackson et al. (2024) indicate, recent graduates prioritize such things as financial security, balance between work and life, and good relationships, evidencing a shift from communal or extrinsically motivated satisfaction to more individualized and intrinsic definitions of achievement. The indicators of career success include learning and development, which reflects whether an individual sees work as a way to learn and grow; work-life balance, which shows whether an individual makes time for their personal life outside of the professional one; positive impact, which means the desire to give positive influence and help others grow through their careers; entrepreneurship, which is the desire to have their own business and seek independence for something personally fulfilling; positive work relationships, which is making strong connections and positive work relationships; financial security, which is the ability to provide and satisfy basic needs for a long-term sustainability and financial stability; and financial success, which indicates the purpose of generating wealth and financial accomplishments like a high income.

Kistyanto (2025) researched the impact of digital sources of social capital on career success among Indonesian natives and immigrants. They found that trust and digital exclusive circle are the determining factors of career success. Norton (1996) stated that people with a strong social capital are more likely to be successful because they made connections through mutual trust, shared norms, and social reciprocity. Kistyanto et al. (2025) reinforced this concept by stating that social capital helps individuals create a stronger starting point in the job market because they utilize connections and community networks. When the job market is uncertain, like in Surabaya, social capital can serve as a powerful resource for job attainment and long-term career development. Even in a family business setting, a study by Ongkowijoyo et al. (2020) mentioned that the relationship among family and business members has a positive and significant effect towards the business itself.

For Generation Z graduates who may not have experienced many jobs or professional credentials, possessing great social capital can substitute for these shortcomings and give access to informal mentoring, early job offers, peer support, etc. Social capital can provide knowledge access, accelerate information on job opportunities, and help avoid mistakes in professional practice. Moreover, having another person vouch for one's abilities could be more convincing to potential employers than simply the applications made without social capital. Thus, social capital is expected to be vital for the career success of Gen Z graduates in Surabaya, as measured by objective career outcomes (e.g., income) and subjective outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction).

H5: Social capital has a significant positive effect on the career success of Gen Z graduates in Surabaya.

The Mediating Role of Social Capital Between Networking and Career Success

As stated above, networking is one of the key ways that an individual cultivates social capital. When people connect and interact with others, they get information, support, and trust, all of which are the building blocks of social capital (Lin, 2001). Thus, social capital has become a resource, which individuals can use to pursue and achieve career goals. Xu et al. (2023) also referred to social capital as the outcome of network behaviors, which means that networking is the behavior that leads to social capital. Hence, the career success people experience may not be from networking alone, but through the social capital, networking facilitates. From the previous studies that showed the positive link between networking and career success, many of them focus on the direct effect but did not go through the mechanism that really makes networking effective. This research explores social capital as the mechanism that becomes a pathway between networking and career success.

This connection is really important for Generation Z in Surabaya because by networking with someone either online or in person, they are not only connecting with someone, they are building a support system. Networks later can expose someone to access to jobs, internships, mentorship, and professional development, to which are important to their career success. Therefore, social capital is the mechanism where networking supports positive career outcomes. Based on this reasoning, the hypothesis is that social capital mediates the association between networking and career success for Gen Z graduates in Surabaya.

H6: Social capital significantly mediates the relationship between networking and career success.

The Mediating Role of Social Capital between Personal Branding and Career Success

Personal branding has an impact on others' perceptions of someone, which means it impacts the support, trust, and opportunities given to that person. Avery and Greenwald, (2023) mentioned that the act of personal branding creates opportunities for trust and credibility, which are both aspects of social capital. When someone is portrayed with a strong personal brand, this person will be viewed as capable and trustworthy and, therefore, people will be willing to invest in a relationship with them. Over time, these perceptions are formed and will become a new, separate social capital which can be used to further their career goals. Personal branding creates opportunities for relationships, and as such it does not create an opportunity for career success itself but creates the social

capital that leads to career success, which is why the researcher uses social capital as a mediator between the variables.

Again, prior research only highlights the direct effects but little is known about whether personal branding enhances career success because it directly signals value, or because it builds trust and relationships that form social capital. By examining social capital as a mediator, this research addresses the gap and clarifies how personal branding really contributes to career outcomes.

In Surabaya, career opportunities depend on referrals and reputation. Personal branding is not only a way of self-promotion in this environment, it can also act as a gateway to earning social capital. Gen Z graduates who are persistently and authentically working on their personal brand will further strengthen their bonds with their colleagues, mentors, and professionals in the industry. The bonds later become trust and those people will support their career growth in the long run. Therefore, this research hypothesizes that:

H7: Social capital significantly mediates the relationship between personal branding and career success.

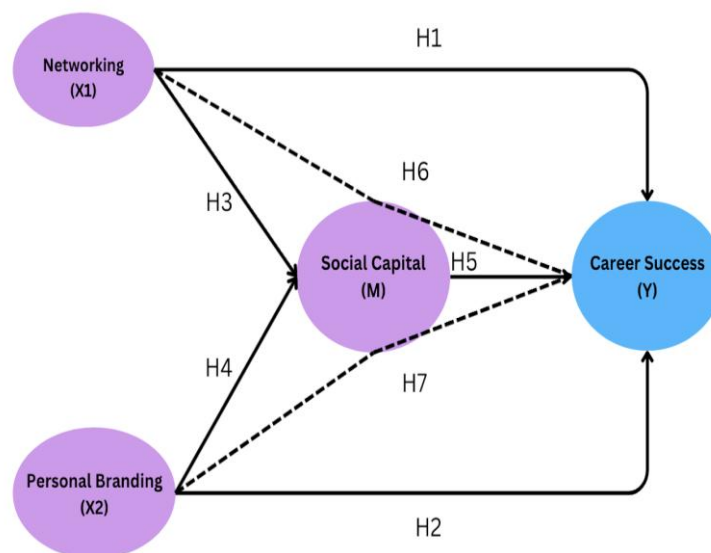


Figure 1. Model of Analysis

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach with a causal research design to examine the influence of networking and personal branding on career success, with social capital as a mediating variable. The research aims to test the relationships between these variables using statistical analysis based on survey data collected from respondents who meet the study criteria. The population of this study consists of Generation Z graduates residing in Surabaya who have completed a bachelor's degree and are actively engaged in work or entrepreneurial activities. In this research, the sample size is determined using GPower 3.1 software through an a priori power analysis. The analysis was conducted based on a linear multiple regression model with five predictors, applying the following

parameters: effect size (f^2)=0.2 (small), significance level (α)=0.05, statistical power ($1-\beta$)=0.95, and number of predictors=5. The minimum sample requirement is 105 participants to ensure sufficient statistical power for detecting significant relationships in the model.

Primary data were collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: demographic information, networking, personal branding, social capital, and career success. All variable items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (5) while still giving respondents a chance to be neutral because not all respondents hold a strong positive or negative opinion. This will help the researcher to know that there are undecided groups rather than a forced answer.

The research instrument was developed based on previously validated measurement scales: networking indicators adapted from Forret and Dougherty (2004), personal branding indicators adapted from Gorbato et al. (2019), social capital indicators based on the dimensions proposed by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998), and career success indicators adapted from Arthur et al. (2005) and Jackson et al. (2024). Each construct was operationalized into self-assessment statements tailored for Gen Z in Surabaya.

Data analysis was performed using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS software. This technique was chosen because it allows simultaneous assessment of the measurement model and structural model, accommodates small to medium sample sizes, and is suitable for testing complex relationships with mediating variables. The analysis included assessment of validity and reliability, model fit, and hypothesis testing. The validity test is measured through convergent (outer loadings and AVE) and discriminant validity (HTMT ratio). The reliability is measured using composite reliability to ensure internal consistency of the constructs (Hair et al., 2022). The model fit uses collinearity analysis (VIF), coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2). Hypothesis testing was carried out by examining path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values using the bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS, with further analysis of direct, indirect, and mediating effects among the variables.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Demographics	Descriptions	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	29	26.8
	Female	79	73.2
Age	24 years	21	19.44
	25 years	37	34.26
	26 years	11	10.19
	27 years	21	19.44
	28 years	18	16.67
Domicile	Surabaya	108	100
Education Level	Diploma (D1/D2/D3)	3	2.78
	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	98	90.74
	Master's Degree (S2)	7	6.48
Work Experience	Have 3 years work experience after finishing S1	108	100

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The researcher managed to collect data from 134 respondents. However, 8 did not meet the age requirement, 7 did not meet the domicile requirement, 3 did not meet the level of education requirement, and 8 did not have 3 years of work experience. Therefore, the researcher has collected 108 respondents that fulfill the sample criteria and has achieved the minimal number of samples which is 105. The respondents characteristics are presented below in Table 1.

In this research, each variable has indicators that are translated to as question items in the questionnaire then to be analyzed. Originally, career success had 9 indicators, networking and personal branding had 5 each, and social capital had 12. However, after running the outer loadings, in Table 2 are the final indicators that are significant, removing CS1, CS2, CS3, CS4, CS5, N1, PB2, PB3, SC4, SC6, and SC12 because it is less than 0.7. Below also presented the construct reliability and validity test using Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, and AVE.

Table 2. Outer Loadings

Variable	Items	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Career Success	CS6	0.892	0.936	0.954	0.839
	CS7	0.933			
	CS8	0.938			
	CS9	0.901			
Networking	N2	0.815	0.799	0.869	0.625
	N3	0.811			
	N4	0.816			
	N5	0.717			
Personal Branding	PB1	0.827	0.861	0.916	0.784
	PB4	0.930			
	PB5	0.896			
Social Capital	SC1	0.768	0.912	0.927	0.586
	SC10	0.756			
	SC11	0.797			
	SC2	0.767			
	SC3	0.774			
	SC5	0.778			
	SC7	0.727			
	SC8	0.715			
	SC9	0.801			

It is shown that the results of Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability for 4 variables are all significant with results above 0.7, and all variables have passed the above 0.5 benchmark of AVE. Therefore, the research moved on to the next test which is a discriminant validity test using Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity (HTMT)

	Career Success	Networking	Personal Branding	Social Capital
Career Success				
Networking	0.420			
Personal Branding	0.432	0.421		
Social Capital	0.454	0.566	0.592	

The result shows that all the variables are valid through the HTMT test because they did not exceed the 0.9 threshold of HTMT. The next step is to test the structural model using path coefficients. This test determines whether the variables significantly affect the other variables based on the hypothesis made and results are presented below in Table 4.

Table 4. Path Coefficients

Variables	Original Sample	t-Statistics	P-Values	Result
H1: Networking → Career Success	0.174	2.021	0.044	Supported
H2: Personal Branding → Career Success	0.204	2.019	0.044	Supported
H3: Networking → Social Capital	0.350	3.057	0.002	Supported
H4: Personal Branding → Social Capital	0.411	4.246	0.000	Supported
H5: Social Capital → Career Success	0.238	2.295	0.022	Supported
H6: Networking → Social Capital → Career Success	0.083	1.667	0.096	Rejected
H7: Personal Branding → Social Capital → Career Success	0.098	2.008	0.045	Supported

Based on the statistical results, the findings were analyzed using the t-statistics and p-values. All hypotheses are supported with p-values below 0,05, except for H6, which is rejected. Networking, personal branding, and social capital each positively affects career success, while both networking and personal branding also significantly influence social capital. However, through the special indirect effect test, it is shown that social capital only mediates between personal branding and career success. Social capital does not mediate between networking and career success.

The next test is the R Square (R^2) test which explains how much variance in the dependent variable can be explained by the independent variables. Higher R^2 values means stronger predictive ability of the model. The result in Table 5 shows that networking, personal branding, and social capital together explains 24.7% of the variance in career success and 39.3% in social capital. According to Hair et al. (2022), these values show a moderate level of explanatory power and it means that the model sufficiently represents the relationship between studied variables.

Table 5. R Square

Variables	R Square	Adjusted R Square
Career Success	0.247	0.225
Social Capital	0.393	0.381

The next test is the F square test (f^2) which is used to evaluate how much each independent variable contributes to the dependent variable. Based on the results in Table 6, personal branding has the largest effect on Social Capital with f^2 reaching 0.244, followed by networking towards social capital at 0.176. Both networking and personal branding have a small-to-moderate effect on career success. This shows that personal branding actually contributes more strongly to increase social capital than personal branding does.

Table 6. F Square

Variables	Career Success	Networking	Personal Branding	Social Capital
Career Success				
Networking	0.030			0.176
Personal Branding	0.039			0.244
Social Capital	0.046			

In Table 7, the Q square test (Q^2) is conducted to measure the predictive relevance of the model. A positive Q^2 indicates that the model has predictive power and is able to reconstruct observed data effectively. For career success and social capital both have positive Q^2 which confirms that the model has adequate predictive relevance. It means that these variables used in the study have strong potential to explain real world patterns of Gen Z career outcomes in Surabaya.

Table 7. Q Square

Variables	SSO	SSE	Q Square
Career Success	432.000	345.201	0.201
Networking	432.000	432.000	
Personal Branding	324.000	324.000	
Social Capital	972.000	769.136	0.209

DISCUSSIONS

The Effect of Networking on Career Success

Based on the result, networking has a positive impact on career success ($p=0.044$). In the context of Gen Z graduates in Surabaya, networking is proven to be one of the key reasons they achieve career success. Most of the respondents are in their mid-20s, which is a stage where they are still building their reputation, portfolios, and searching for stability. Thus, having a strong network helps them to find better job opportunities and gain referrals.

The finding of this research is aligned with previous research by Forret and Dougherty (2004) as well as Simmons et al. (2022), who found that networking helps individuals to get access to information, mentorship, and visibility. These things are helping them to get promotions and better income. In Surabaya, networking also reflects in the local culture that values relationships (“orang dalam”). Job offers nowadays come from informal recommendations rather than an official application. The grand theory of Social Capital by Lin (2017) also states that relationships can give someone access to resources that can improve their career outcomes. In this digital age, Gen Z also does networking through their social media to connect with people outside of their existing offline environment.

The Effect of Personal Branding on Career Success

Based on the result, the hypothesis that personal branding has a positive impact on career success is accepted ($p=0.044$). Gen Z who intentionally manage how they are perceived are more likely to succeed in their career. Both offline and online activities of personal branding can have a significant impact on career success. Many respondents in this study are actively using social media. The researcher collected data from their instagram direct messages, which means that the respondents are actively using this

platform. They also have a huge number of posts that express their skills, achievements, and identity.

This result is aligned with the research of Gorbatov et al. (2019) and Rahayu et al. (2024), who found that a strong personal brand helps individuals to gain credibility, visibility, and trust, which are all determinants of increasing career opportunities. From the grand theory perspective, a strong personal brand can help others perceive someone as reliable and capable, making them more likely to invite that person into job opportunities.

In a competitive environment like Surabaya, people who stand out more online are more likely to be noticed by recruiters or clients. Many HR managers are also saying that nowadays, they look at someone's LinkedIn or Instagram profile to get a glimpse of how the applicants present themselves online. Wiraguna et al. (2025) also said that Gen Z in East Java tend to express their identity and self-expression to build credibility and loyalty. Therefore, personal branding is an aspect that can not be ignored to be a career investment for Gen Z.

The Effect of Networking on Social Capital

Networking has a positive impact on social capital ($p=0.002$). This means that the idea of relationships as the foundation of social capital is true. Gen Z graduates who are expanding their connections and networks gain access to shared information, trust, and cooperation, which later become valuable resources towards their career growth. This finding is also consistent with Xu et al. (2023), who explain that networking behaviors, such as engaging in community activities or professional events, can build trust and shared understanding. In Surabaya, maintaining relationships and being part of a community is seen as important for both personal and professional growth. Many respondents have participated in organizations, church activities, or business communities, which strengthens their social capital.

The Effect of Personal Branding on Social Capital

Personal branding also has a significant positive effect on social capital ($p=0.000$), meaning that a well-managed personal brand can help individuals attract meaningful relationships and opportunities. People tend to connect with others who appear credible, professional, and trustworthy on their social media platforms and offline social settings.

The finding of this research is aligned with Avery and Greenwald, (2023) and Burke et al. (2024), who found that personal branding behaviors such as self-promotion will increase someone's social capital. If Gen Z professionals present their skills clearly, others are more willing to collaborate or mentor them. In Surabaya, reputation spreads quickly through word of mouth and social media. Thus, personal branding for Gen Z's looking for career opportunities becomes a shortcut to building credibility in a community that spreads information fast. Wiraguna et al. (2025) also found that Gen Z's emotional connection and identity alignment with a brand can increase their loyalty to that brand. This means that the same thing can happen to themselves, when they attract people through personal branding, it builds emotional connection and professional trust that can lead to valuable social capital.

The Effect of Social Capital on Career Success

Social capital is shown to have a significant positive effect on career success ($p=0.022$). This means that Gen Z graduates who have resources of social capital tend to achieve better career outcomes. Social capital such as strong relationships provide access to career information, emotional support, and even financial opportunities.

This result is also aligned with the study by Fukuyama (1995) and Kistyanto et al. (2025) who stated that social capital helps people achieve career success because of mutual trust, shared norms, and mutual recognition. In Surabaya settings, many opportunities come through personal recommendations, which means having a higher level of social capital is important. For example, graduates who have trust or shared norms with mentors, ex-colleagues, or business partners are more likely to get referred or helped to advance in their professional career. Thus, social capital is an intangible resource and an invisible currency that enhances someone's credibility, creates a sense of belonging in their professional environment, and gives them access to opportunities that can not be gained through formal qualifications only. This explains why Gen Z should strive for social capital to advance in career outcomes or even to get support systems in work settings.

The Meditating Role of Social Capital Between Networking and Career Success

This hypothesis is rejected ($p=0.096$). It means that even if networking builds social capital, the indirect effect of networking on career success through social capital is not showing any effects. A possible reason is that many Gen Z respondents in Surabaya are still early in their careers. They may have many contacts, but these networks are still "weak ties" that still have not yet translated into real career opportunities.

Another reason could be related to the industry context. In creative or digital fields, direct networking (e.g., meeting clients or joining communities) can already lead to opportunities without needing mediation through social capital. It means not all networks automatically turn into trusted, resourceful relationships. Trust and reciprocity take time to build. This is related to the respondents of this research, because many of them are creative workers such as makeup artists, freelance designers and illustrators, photographers, and many more creative jobs. This means that they have a huge number of networks but not the kind of network who increases social capital through shared values and trust. However, this finding still adds insight that networking only is not enough. It needs to be consistent and genuine to grow into real social capital that benefits career success.

The Meditating Role of Social Capital Between Personal Branding and Career Success

There is a mediating effect of social capital between personal branding and career success ($p = 0.045$). This means that personal branding influences career success through social capital. Personal branding still directly contributes to career success without social capital, but this result shows that social capital strengthens and explains part of that effect. Personal branding relates to success not only through perceived image or self presentation, but also through the social value and credibility that it increases through the action. When people perceive someone as competent and trustworthy, they are more likely to connect, recommend, or support that person's career. Over time, this trust forms social capital, which then drives career success.

This finding is aligned with Avery and Greenwald (2023), who explained that personal branding helps build credibility that leads to trust and relationship development. For Surabaya's Gen Z professionals, being consistent and authentic in their personal brand will help them build networks that truly matter. A good image attracts opportunities, but a trustworthy reputation is the key to sustainability and loyalty.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigates how networking and personal branding affect career success among Gen Z graduates in Surabaya, with social capital as a mediating variable. The results confirmed that networking and personal branding both have significant positive effects on career success. Social capital also has a significant positive impact towards career success and it partially mediates the relationship between personal branding and career success. Overall, the findings relate to the grand theory, social capital theory, and explained that trust and shared norms are key resources to professional growth in today's competitive market.

This study has emphasized and given Gen Z graduates ideas of contributing activities that they can do to increase their professional career outcomes, showing that there are aspects in their control to increase their success rate, which are personal branding, networking, and social capital. However, this study has several limitations. The self-reported data may show a response bias and the focus on Gen Z graduates in the city of Surabaya may limit generalizability. Future research may focus on expanding the sample to more regions.

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