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## DEVELOPING WORK READINESS IN GENERATION Z: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL SKILLS, COMMUNICATION, EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, AND SELF-EFFICACY

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**Abstract:** Literature on work readiness increasingly highlights the critical need for graduates to successfully integrate into specialised professional discourse communities, particularly as institutional communication becomes more complex in the digital era. However, prevailing employability models, predominantly derived from Western contexts, often emphasise self-efficacy as the core psychological mediator. This study critically examines the universality of such models within the sphere of institutional communication in a developing economy. The objectives are to (1) test the direct influence of professional communication skills, digital literacies, and experiential learning on work readiness, and (2) utilise an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (QUAN → qual) to explore the limitations of self-efficacy among Generation Z university students transitioning into the Indonesian labour market. The quantitative phase surveyed 277 students, analysing data via PLS-SEM. The subsequent qualitative phase used in-depth interviews (n=15) to unpack unexpected statistical outcomes. The quantitative results indicated that communicative competence (including the clear articulation and persuasion of ideas), digital skills, and experiential learning significantly drive work readiness. Crucially, however, self-efficacy failed to function as a mediator. The qualitative findings elucidated why this paradox occurred: coping with institutional communication and hiring practices in Indonesia demands strict pragmatism. Students prioritise producing tangible communicative artefacts (e.g., professional portfolios, language certifications) and tapping into informal institutional networks (social capital) far above internal psychological confidence. This study advances the literature by providing robust empirical evidence from a non-Western context. It challenges the universal application of self-efficacy theory, proposing instead that the demonstrated mastery of professional discourse and active

participation in institutional networks are more potent predictors of employability. These findings offer vital implications for teaching foreign languages for specific professional purposes, suggesting educators must prioritise authentic, task-based language instruction that yields verifiable communicative outputs over abstract confidence-building exercises.

**Keywords:** work readiness, digital skills, communicative competence, experiential learning, self-efficacy, mixed-methods, professional discourse, Generation Z.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The imperative to produce work-ready graduates has become a critical global challenge in the Industry 4.0 era, characterised by rapid labour market transformations (Islam, 2022). Nevertheless, a “skills gap” persists, in which employers consistently report that university graduates are frequently unprepared for the realities of the modern workplace (World Economic Forum, 2020). This gap directly highlights a fundamental critique of higher education: curricula are often perceived as overly theoretical, failing to equip students with the practical competencies required to be productive from day one (Lawton et al., 2024). Consequently, identifying the determinants, be they technical, interpersonal, or psychological, that effectively cultivate work readiness has become an exigent research agenda for educational institutions.

In response to this challenge, management and education literature, predominantly originating from Western contexts, has identified various antecedents of work readiness. Research consistently highlights the importance of mastering tangible competencies such as digital skills (Van Laar et al., 2020) and communication skills (Cuic Tankovic et al., 2023; Reith-Hall & Montgomery, 2023), as well as practical experience through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Crucially, foundational theories, such as Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), have positioned psychological factors, particularly self-efficacy, as a critical mediator. The prevailing model in this literature posits that it is this internal conviction (i.e., an individual’s belief in their capabilities) that acts as the psychological “engine” translating acquired skills into workplace readiness (Fugate et al., 2004). Consequently, the current understanding relies heavily on the assumption that self-efficacy is a universal psychological driver of work readiness, an assumption critically examined in this study.

However, this assumption of self-efficacy’s universality warrants scrutiny, as the preponderance of empirical evidence originates from individualistic cultural contexts in Western nations. Scant research has critically examined whether this model, focused on an individual’s internal psychological factors, holds in non-Western countries, such as Indonesia, where contextual and external factors may play a more dominant role. For instance, in a highly pragmatic labour market, students (such as Gen Z) might value tangible evidence of skills (portfolios) or even the strength of social capital (connections or ‘insiders’) over mere internal psychological confidence. Thus, a clear literature gap exists not only to re-test this model but also to explore in depth why such contextual factors might render the standard psychological model less relevant.

Therefore, this research aims to address this gap with two primary objectives: (1) to quantitatively examine the standard work readiness model (including the mediating role of self-efficacy) among Gen Z in Indonesia, and (2) to qualitatively explore why this model may fail to explain

the contextual realities students face. To answer these complex “what” (objective 1) and “why” (objective 2) questions, a purely quantitative design, such as PLS-SEM alone, is insufficient. This study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods (QUAN → qual) design, as described by Creswell (2007), constituting a methodological innovation in this field. This approach integrates the statistical power of quantitative survey data (N=277) for hypothesis testing with deep qualitative insights from interviews to elucidate unexpected findings. Through this methodological integration, the research contributes to the literature by offering a richer, more contextually relevant understanding of the determinants of work readiness in a developing country.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Understanding the antecedents of work readiness has become a principal focus in the education and management literature, particularly in addressing the demands of Industry 4.0. Conceptually, work readiness is not a binary ‘ready or not ready’ state, but rather a complex multidimensional construct (Herbert et al., 2020; Makki et al., 2023). This construct is generally understood as a synergistic blend of human capital (knowledge and technical skills) and psychological capital (personal attributes and self-belief) that enables graduates to adapt and contribute productively in the workplace (Aprile & Knight, 2020; Fugate et al., 2004). Therefore, a comprehensive framework for explaining work readiness must identify how graduates build their ‘assets’ of competence alongside the psychological ‘engine’ that mobilises those assets.

The primary foundation of work readiness lies in the possession of ‘tangible assets’ in the form of competencies relevant to current industry demands. In the modern era, two competencies stand out as non-negotiable: digital skills and communication skills (Cuic Tankovic et al., 2023). Digital skills have evolved from mere technical abilities into a fundamental literacy for professional participation (Gui & Argentin, 2011; Van Laar et al., 2020; World Economic Forum, 2020). In parallel, communication skills, encompassing the clear conveyance of ideas and persuasion, are consistently ranked by employers as the most crucial ‘metaskill’, without which technical abilities lose their value (Farzaliyeva, 2022; Succi & Canovi, 2020). This consistent empirical evidence indicates a fundamental positive relationship between the mastery of these two skills and work readiness, forming the basis for the initial hypotheses in this study.

Furthermore, in the context of a globalized labour market, this communication skill is intrinsically linked to the mastery of specialized professional discourse and, frequently, proficiency in a foreign language (e.g., English for Specific Purposes) (Ramírez, 2015). For Gen Z, communicative competence is no longer limited to interpersonal fluency. It requires the ability to work with complex institutional genres, articulate persuasive arguments, and produce tangible linguistic artefacts (such as professional emails, project pitches, and digital portfolios) that signal their legitimate membership within a professional community.

However, the possession of ‘tangible assets’ (digital and communication skills) cannot be effectively acquired solely through passive, theoretical classroom learning. Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) provides a robust theoretical foundation, positing that knowledge and skills are created through the “transformation of experience.” In the context of higher education, this manifests as internship programmes, project-based learning, and work simulations (Masdarini et al., 2024). These authentic environments serve as the ‘crucible’ wherein students test, practice, and validate their theoretical competencies, transforming them into proven, practical skills. Therefore, participation in experiential learning is hypothesised as the third direct driver of work readiness, as it provides the essential platform for competency development.

Interestingly, the Western-dominated literature does not stop at these direct relationships; it focuses profoundly on the psychological mechanisms that bridge the gap between possessing skills and feeling ready. This is where Social Cognitive Theory, developed by Bandura (1986), becomes particularly influential, proposing that self-efficacy, an individual's belief in their ability to succeed, is the primary psychological mediator. The underlying logic of this model is that successful experiences (e.g., mastering a new skill or succeeding in an internship) build self-efficacy (H5, H6, H7), and this self-efficacy subsequently becomes the internal engine driving work-ready behaviours and attitudes (H8, H9, H10). Consequently, this self-efficacy mediation model has become a 'gold standard' and a foundational assumption in the majority of Western work readiness research.

However, this assumption regarding the universal mediating role of self-efficacy becomes questionable, as its empirical backing is derived almost exclusively from individualistic cultural contexts in Western nations. Little research has critically examined whether this model, focused on an individual's internal psychological factors, remains valid in non-Western countries, such as Indonesia, where contextual and external factors might play a more dominant role. For instance, in a highly pragmatic labour market, Gen Z students might value tangible proof of skills (such as portfolios or certificates) more than internal psychological confidence. Furthermore, external factors, such as the strength of social capital (connections or 'insiders'), might be perceived as a more influential career pathway than individual self-efficacy. Thus, a clear literature gap (a clear advancement gap) exists not only to retest this model but also to explore in depth why these contextual factors might render the standard Western psychological model less relevant.

In developing economies, the transition from education to employment is often influenced by factors beyond individual competence. While Human Capital Theory emphasises skills and knowledge (Becker, 1985), Social Capital Theory highlights the value of social networks and connections in securing economic resources (Bourdieu, 1986).

Previous studies suggest that in collectivist cultures, strong ties, often manifested as kinship or close personal networks, can play a pivotal role in recruitment processes (Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011). This creates a labour market where meritocratic selection coexists with network-based hiring. Consequently, a graduate's confidence may depend not only on their internal skills but also on their perception of access to crucial professional networks.

Based on the aforementioned literary debate, this study proposes a mixed-methods model to test the identified tension. The quantitative phase of this research will test both sides of the argument: (1) the direct influence of tangible assets, skills, and experience, and (2) the mediating role of the psychological engine dominant in Western literature. The qualitative phase (explained in the Methodology) will then be utilised to explore in depth why a mediation failure might occur, thereby providing a literature advancement supported by methodological innovation. Therefore, the quantitative hypotheses to be tested in this study are as follows:

- H1: Digital skills have a positive and significant influence on work readiness.
- H2: Communication skills have a positive and significant influence on work readiness.
- H3: Experiential learning has a positive and significant influence on work readiness.
- H4: Self-efficacy has a positive and significant influence on work readiness.
- H5: Digital skills have a positive and significant influence on self-efficacy.
- H6: Communication skills have a positive and significant influence on self-efficacy.
- H7: Experiential learning has a positive and significant influence on self-efficacy.
- H8: Self-efficacy mediates the influence of digital skills on work readiness.
- H9: Self-efficacy mediates the influence of communication skills on work readiness.
- H10: Self-efficacy mediates the influence of experiential learning on work readiness.

### 3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

#### 3.1. Research design

This study adopts an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (QUAN → qual) (Creswell, 2013; Guest et al., 2006). This design was chosen in response to critiques of a “lack of methodological innovation” and represents an ideal approach to comprehensively address the research objectives. The research flow consists of two phases: (1) The primary Quantitative (QUAN) Phase was utilised to test hypotheses and identify statistical relationships among variables. (2) The subsequent Qualitative (qual) Phase was employed to explain and deepen the quantitative findings that were unexpected and contradictory to existing literature, particularly concerning the failed mediating role of self-efficacy.

#### 3.2. Phase 1: Quantitative (QUAN) study

##### 3.2.1. Quantitative sample and data collection

The quantitative phase of this study employed a cross-sectional survey approach. The target population was Gen Z university students in Indonesia in the final stages of their studies, as they are the group most relevant to the issue of work readiness. Utilising a purposive sampling technique, data were collected from a total of 277 valid respondents. The online questionnaire was disseminated via social media and academic networks during July. To capture richer variations in responses and enhance data sensitivity, all instrument items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree).

##### 3.2.2. Instruments and quantitative measurement

The research instrument (questionnaire) was developed based on established literature. Work Readiness was measured using indicators adapted from the following papers (Fugate et al., 2004a; Herbert et al., 2020), encompassing dimensions of human and psychological capital. Digital Skills were measured using indicators adopted from Van Laar et al. (2020) and Gui and Argentin (2011), focusing on practical competencies in the digital era. Communication Skills were measured using indicators developed by Tankovic et al. (2023). Experiential Learning was measured with indicators adapted from Kolb (1984) and Morris (2020), assessing students' exposure to practical work experiences. Finally, Self-Efficacy was measured using indicators adapted from Bandura (1997). All items had been validated and shown to be reliable in previous research.

##### 3.2.3. Quantitative analysis technique: PLS-SEM

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was chosen over Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM) because this study is exploratory and predictive, focusing on identifying key drivers of work readiness rather than confirming an established theory. Furthermore, PLS-SEM is more suitable for complex models with multiple latent variables and a moderate sample size (below 300), where data normality cannot be fully guaranteed (Hair et al., 2019).

Data from the quantitative phase (N=277) were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4 software. PLS-SEM was selected as the primary analysis technique for two reasons: (1) it is ideal for testing complex models and predicting target variables (work readiness), and (2) its capability to handle models involving both reflective and formative constructs. Following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2022) and Sarstedt et al. (2021), the analysis was conducted in two steps:

### **3.2.3.1. Evaluation of the measurement model**

This step was conducted to ensure data validity and reliability by testing convergent validity (outer loadings, AVE, CR) and discriminant validity (HTMT).

### **3.2.3.2. Evaluation of the structural model**

To test the research hypotheses, path coefficients, p-values, and T-statistics were analysed through a bootstrapping procedure (5000 subsamples) to assess the significance of direct and mediating relationships.

## **3.3. Explanatory qualitative study**

The second phase of this mixed-methods design was devised as a proactive step to gain a richer understanding than is attainable from survey data alone. Its primary objective was to prepare explanations for complex, unexpected, or contradictory quantitative findings. Given that the theoretical background section had already identified a debate over the universality of self-efficacy's mediating role (Western vs. non-Western contexts), this qualitative phase was explicitly designed to explore the "why" behind these relationships from students' perspectives.

This mixed-methods approach was chosen because the study aims not only to identify what relationships exist, but also to explain why they emerge. By adding the qualitative phase, the study gains the methodological depth to uncover the pragmatic realities that students may face, which cannot be captured by quantitative survey data alone.

### **3.3.1. Participant selection and qualitative data collection**

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who could provide the richest insights. Participants were final-year students and recent graduates from the study population with direct experience of the transition from university to the workforce.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached, which occurred at 15 participants. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, allowing the researcher to capture nuances and build a deeper rapport. The interview questions were open-ended and exploratory, focusing on students' perceptions of the relationship between self-belief (self-efficacy) versus tangible skills (portfolio evidence) and the realities of the Indonesian labour market.

In line with the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, participants for the qualitative phase were purposively selected from the respondents who had previously participated in the quantitative survey. This approach was employed to ensure explanatory consistency between the quantitative findings and the qualitative insights. The selected participants represented diverse levels of work readiness and self-efficacy, enabling a deeper exploration of the unexpected quantitative results, particularly regarding the non-significant role of self-efficacy.

### **3.3.2. Qualitative data analysis**

The qualitative data collected from the interviews were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process involves six phases: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This systematic approach allows the researcher to identify key patterns and themes emerging from the data. These themes will then be used to provide deep insights into students' perceptions of the role of self-efficacy in the context of work readiness.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the qualitative findings, this study applied several validation strategies recommended by Lincoln and Kalleberg (1985). These included data triangulation, member checking, and maintaining an audit trail throughout the analytic process. Triangulation was achieved by comparing responses across multiple participants to con-

firm consistency of emerging themes, while member checking was conducted by sharing the preliminary interpretations with several participants to verify the accuracy and authenticity of the results.

### 3.4. Mixed-methods data integration

Finally, this explanatory sequential design integrates both datasets at the interpretation stage. Findings from Phase 1 (QUAN) will be presented first to establish the statistical relationships. Subsequently, findings from Phase 2 (qual) will be presented in the Discussion section to provide a rich, contextual explanation for the statistical findings, particularly for the hypothesis-testing results, both those that were supported and those that were not.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings within the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The first section (4.1) reports the statistical results from the quantitative (QUAN) phase. The second section (4.2) will report the thematic findings from the qualitative (qual) phase.

### 4.1. Quantitative study

#### 4.1.1. Respondent profile and descriptive analysis

The quantitative (QUAN) phase successfully gathered valid data from 277 respondents. The sample comprised 151 male respondents (54.5%) and 126 female respondents (45.5%). In terms of academic background, a substantial majority of participants were from social science fields ( $n = 194$ ; 70.04%), while the remainder were from science fields ( $n = 83$ ; 29.96%).

Descriptive findings indicated high mean scores for all constructs, suggesting generally positive perceptions (Table 1). A crucial initial finding was that Self-Efficacy registered the highest mean score among all variables. This descriptive finding indicates that, at a surface level, the Gen Z respondents possess a very high level of confidence in their abilities.

**Table 1.** *Description of questionnaire results*

| No | Variable              | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|----|-----------------------|------|--------------------|
| 1  | Work Readiness        | 5.79 | 1.06               |
| 2  | Digital Skills        | 5.96 | 0.98               |
| 3  | Communication Skills  | 5.41 | 0.99               |
| 4  | Experiential Learning | 5.92 | 1.01               |
| 5  | Self-Efficacy         | 6.15 | 1.03               |

#### 4.1.2. Evaluation of the measurement model (outer model)

In accordance with PLS-SEM analysis procedures developed by Hair et al. (2019), the measurement model (outer model) was evaluated first to ensure the research instrument met the standards of validity and reliability.

Construct reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR), while convergent validity was evaluated using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). As shown in Table 2, all constructs demonstrated satisfactory reliability, with CA and CR values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. Specifically, Communication Skills demonstrated strong internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.891 and Composite Reliability of 0.896. Furthermore, all AVE values exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.50, indicating adequate con-

vergent validity across all constructs. Although Communication Skills and Digital Skills share identical reliability scores, their validity metrics (AVEs) differ, indicating distinct underlying structures.

**Table 2.** *Measurement model: Reliability and convergent validity*

| Construct                    | Indicator | Outer Loading | Cronbach's Alpha | Composite reliability | AVE   |
|------------------------------|-----------|---------------|------------------|-----------------------|-------|
| <b>Digital Skills</b>        | DS1       | 0.811         | 0.891            | 0.896                 | 0.648 |
|                              | DS2       | 0.842         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | DS3       | 0.716         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | DS4       | 0.841         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | DS5       | 0.839         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | DS6       | 0.771         |                  |                       |       |
| <b>Communication Skills</b>  | CS1       | 0.666         | 0.891            | 0.896                 | 0.509 |
|                              | CS2       | 0.743         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | CS3       | 0.629         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | CS4       | 0.704         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | CS5       | 0.788         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | CS6       | 0.611         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | CS7       | 0.725         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | CS8       | 0.731         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | CS9       | 0.806         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | CS10      | 0.707         |                  |                       |       |
| <b>Experiential Learning</b> | EL1       | 0.707         | 0.890            | 0.892                 | 0.566 |
|                              | EL2       | 0.721         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | EL3       | 0.738         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | EL4       | 0.768         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | EL5       | 0.824         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | EL6       | 0.732         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | EL7       | 0.778         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | EL8       | 0.743         |                  |                       |       |
| <b>Self-Efficacy</b>         | SE1       | 0.783         | 0.871            | 0.882                 | 0.564 |
|                              | SE2       | 0.848         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | SE3       | 0.752         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | SE4       | 0.766         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | SE5       | 0.742         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | SE6       | 0.711         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | SE7       | 0.632         |                  |                       |       |
| <b>Work Readiness</b>        | WR1       | 0.753         | 0.840            | 0.847                 | 0.557 |
|                              | WR2       | 0.811         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | WR3       | 0.715         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | WR4       | 0.738         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | WR5       | 0.793         |                  |                       |       |
|                              | WR6       | 0.659         |                  |                       |       |

*Note: The identical Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values for Digital Skills and Communication Skills are coincidental. The two constructs differ in both item composition and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values, indicating that they are empirically distinct constructs.*

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT) criterion (Henseler et al., 2015). As presented in Table 3, most HTMT values were below the conservative threshold of 0.85, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity among the constructs. However, the HTMT value between Experiential Learning and Communication Skills (HTMT = 0.855) slightly exceeded the recommended cut-off. This marginal exceedance suggests a close conceptual relationship between the two constructs, which is theoretically plausible given that experiential

learning activities often serve as a primary context for the development of communication skills. Despite this, the overall HTMT pattern remains within an acceptable range for exploratory research, supporting the adequacy of discriminant validity for subsequent structural model analysis.

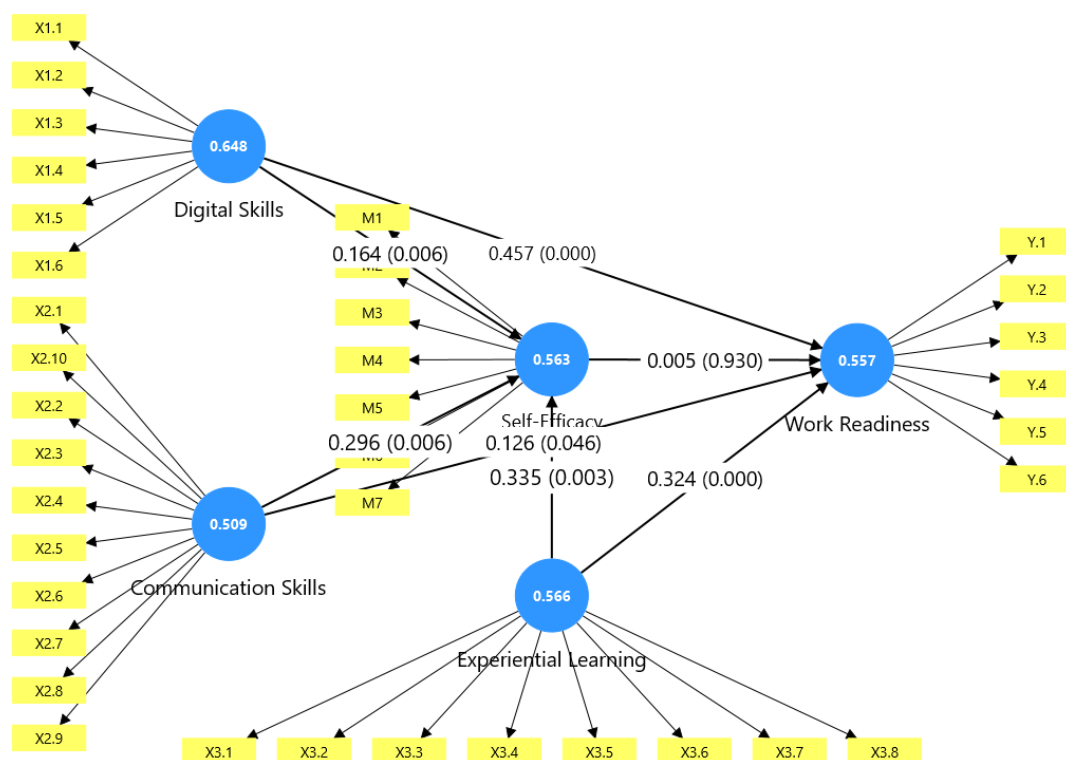
**Table 3.** *Heterotrait-monotrait ratio*

|                       | Self-Efficacy | Work Readiness | Digital Skills | Communication Skills |
|-----------------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Work Readiness        | 0.622         |                |                |                      |
| Digital Skills        | 0.592         | 0.841          |                |                      |
| Communication Skills  | 0.729         | 0.731          | 0.632          |                      |
| Experiential Learning | 0.723         | 0.820          | 0.705          | 0.855                |

Taken together, the results of reliability and validity testing indicate that the measurement model demonstrates an acceptable level of psychometric quality, thereby allowing the evaluation of the structural model and hypothesis testing to proceed.

#### 4.1.3. Evaluation of the structural model (inner model) and hypothesis testing

After the measurement model was confirmed as valid and reliable, the structural model was evaluated to test its predictive power and the research hypotheses (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** *Structural model (PLS-SEM results)*

The model's explanatory and predictive power was evaluated using two primary metrics. First, the in-sample explanatory power was evaluated using the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ). Based on data processing, this model was able to explain 50.4% of the variance in the Self-Efficacy variable ( $R^2 = 0.504$ ) and 65.2% of the variance in the Work Readiness variable ( $R^2 = 0.652$ ). According to the criteria (Hair et al., 2022), both  $R^2$  values indicate moderate explanatory power (trending toward substantial for Work Readiness).

Second, the out-of-sample predictive relevance was evaluated using the Stone-Geisser  $Q^2$  via a blindfolding procedure. The data processing results showed that both dependent variables had  $Q^2$  values  $> 0$  (Self-Efficacy  $Q^2 = 0.478$ ; Work Readiness  $Q^2 = 0.641$ ). As all  $Q^2$  values are well above zero, this indicates that the model possesses strong predictive relevance.

The results of the hypothesis testing (Table 4), obtained through a 5000-subsample bootstrapping procedure, are presented below. The results indicate that H1, H2, H3, H5, H6, and H7 were significantly supported ( $p < 0.05$ ). The most critical finding from this quantitative phase is the rejection of all hypotheses related to the functional role of self-efficacy. Specifically, H4 (the direct influence of self-efficacy on work readiness) was rejected. Furthermore, all three mediation hypotheses (H8, H9, and H10) were also found to be statistically insignificant ( $p > 0.05$ ).

**Table 4.** *Path coefficients and hypothesis testing results*

| Hypothesis | Path                                                     | Path Coefficient | T statistics | P values | Decision      |
|------------|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|----------|---------------|
| H1         | Digital Skills -> Work Readiness                         | 0.457            | 10.607       | 0.000    | Supported     |
| H2         | Communication Skills -> Work Readiness                   | 0.126            | 1.999        | 0.046    | Supported     |
| H3         | Experiential Learning -> Work Readiness                  | 0.324            | 4.907        | 0.000    | Supported     |
| H4         | Self-Efficacy -> Work Readiness                          | 0.005            | 0.087        | 0.930    | Not Supported |
| H5         | Digital Skills -> Self-Efficacy                          | 0.164            | 2.738        | 0.006    | Supported     |
| H6         | Communication Skills -> Self-Efficacy                    | 0.296            | 2.750        | 0.006    | Supported     |
| H7         | Experiential Learning -> Self-Efficacy                   | 0.335            | 3.015        | 0.003    | Supported     |
| H8         | Digital Skills -> Self-Efficacy -> Work Readiness        | 0.001            | 0.078        | 0.937    | Not Supported |
| H9         | Communication Skills -> Self-Efficacy -> Work Readiness  | 0.002            | 0.078        | 0.938    | Not Supported |
| H10        | Experiential Learning -> Self-Efficacy -> Work Readiness | 0.002            | 0.087        | 0.931    | Not Supported |

## 4.2. Explanatory qualitative study

In accordance with the mixed-methods design, the qualitative phase was conducted to explore student perceptions in-depth, in order to prepare explanations for the quantitative findings. Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of 15 in-depth, face-to-face interviews (see Table 5) identified two highly relevant primary themes. Both themes emerged consistently among participants and provided rich contextual insights into why self-efficacy (internal belief) might not function as Western literature assumes.

**Table 5.** *Characteristics of interview participants*

| Participant ID | Gender | Major / Field of Study      | Year of Study | Internship Experience |
|----------------|--------|-----------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| P1             | Male   | Management                  | 4th Year      | Yes                   |
| P2             | Female | Accounting                  | 3rd Year      | Yes                   |
| P3             | Male   | Communication               | 4th Year      | Yes                   |
| P4             | Female | Visual Communication Design | 4th Year      | Yes                   |
| P5             | Male   | Information Systems         | 3rd Year      | Yes                   |
| P6             | Female | Management                  | 4th Year      | Yes                   |
| P7             | Male   | Architecture                | 4th Year      | Yes                   |
| P8             | Male   | Informatics Engineering     | 4th Year      | Yes                   |
| P9             | Female | International Relations     | 3rd Year      | Yes                   |
| P10            | Female | Business Administration     | 4th Year      | Yes                   |
| P11            | Male   | Informatics Engineering     | 4th Year      | Yes                   |
| P12            | Female | Management                  | 4th Year      | Yes                   |
| P13            | Male   | Communication               | 3rd Year      | Yes                   |
| P14            | Female | Criminology                 | 4th Year      | Yes                   |
| P15            | Male   | Electrical Engineering      | 4th Year      | Yes                   |

#### 4.2.1. Theme 1: Gen Z pragmatism towards tangible skill evidence

The first and most dominant theme was a strong pragmatism. Participants clearly differentiated between feeling confident and having demonstrable proof. There was a clear consensus that in the current Indonesian job market, employers (HRD) are no longer interested in abstract self-belief. They demand concrete evidence in the form of portfolios, skill certifications, or clear internship experiences. Self-confidence was deemed hollow or worthless unless supported by tangible proof. This theme was perfectly summarised by one participant (P2):

*“Just being confident isn’t enough, Sir. Nowadays, we must have specific skills that can be shown to HRD to get hired. It’s useless to be confident [percaya diri/PD] if the portfolio is empty.”*

#### 4.2.2. Theme 2: Perceived dominance of social capital (Orang Dalem)

The second emergent theme was a strong perception of the importance of external factors beyond individual control, particularly social capital or informal networks. In the Indonesian context, the term “Orang Dalem” refers to individuals with internal connections or informal ties within organizations or institutions, perceived to facilitate access to job opportunities beyond formal recruitment mechanisms. Participants felt that career paths are often determined more by who you know than by what you believe or even what you can do. This perception further diminishes the relevance of internal psychological factors such as self-efficacy. If success in the job market is perceived as highly dependent on external connections, internal self-belief becomes less critical. This theme was bluntly expressed by the same participant (P3) as a continuation of the previous quote:

*“...Unless there is an ‘insider’ (orang dalem), only then can you get in even if your competence is lacking.”*

While self-efficacy remains a core driver of work readiness, our qualitative data revealed a prevalent skepticism regarding meritocracy. Several participants highlighted that technical competence often plays a secondary role compared to social capital, colloquially known as “Orang Dalem.” For instance, while P3 emphasised the necessity of networking, P8 provided a more direct critique of the hiring landscape:

*“...Honestly, even if I have high confidence and digital certificates, I feel insecure if I don’t have connections inside the company. In Indonesia, “who you know” is often faster than “what you know”.” (P8, Male, informatics engineering)*

This sentiment was corroborated by P12, who observed similar patterns during their internship application process. P12 noted that internal recommendations frequently bypassed standard selection procedures, creating a psychological barrier for students without such networks:

*“...I saw my friend get accepted immediately because his uncle was a manager there. It makes me feel that my skills might not be enough, no matter how hard I study.” (P12)*

These findings suggest that for Gen Z in this context, work readiness is not solely an internal state of confidence but is heavily moderated by their perception of external structural barriers (nepotism).

### 4.3. Discussion

This section integrates the quantitative and qualitative findings to answer the research objectives. Its primary aim is to provide an in-depth explanation of the hypothesis-testing results, particularly those findings that contradict existing literature, thereby offering a clear advancement of the literature.

#### 4.3.1. The self-efficacy paradox: Explaining the mediator’s failure

The most notable finding of this research is the total failure of self-efficacy to function as an influential variable. Quantitatively (Results 4.1.3), hypothesis H4 as well as H8, H9, and H10 were all rejected ( $p > 0.05$ ).

This finding creates a sharp paradox. First, it contradicts our own descriptive findings (Results 4.1.1), where self-efficacy actually registered the highest mean score (indicating students felt highly confident). Second, it directly contravenes the majority of Western literature (Innab et al., 2024) that positions self-efficacy as the primary psychological engine in work-readiness models.

However, this paradox is plausibly explained by the qualitative findings (Results 4.2), which is the strength of this mixed-methods design. The in-depth interviews revealed that Gen Z students in Indonesia are highly pragmatic and capable of distinguishing between reported confidence and actual competence.

Theme 1 (Pragmatism towards Tangible Evidence) explains why this high self-confidence is not functional. Students understand that in the modern job market, self-belief is worthless without tangible proof. As expressed by Participant P3:

*“Just being confident isn’t enough, Sir... It’s useless to be confident (PD) if the portfolio is empty.”*

In other words, high self-efficacy may exist, but it is a ‘confidence unsupported by demonstrable evidence’ that is non-convertible into work readiness. Students place more faith in tangible assets than in internal beliefs. This explanation for the failure of self-efficacy is further reinforced by Theme 2 (Perceived Dominance of Social Capital).

Theme 2, the qualitative finding (Results 4.2), indicates that students perceive external factors beyond individual control, such as connections, as highly influential in shaping career pathways. As Participant P3 revealed:

*“...Unless there is an ‘insider’ (orang dalem), only then can you get in even if your competence is lacking.”*

This qualitative finding provides a robust contextual explanation. When students perceive the job market as heavily influenced by external factors (e.g., connections), the relevance of internal factors/psychological self-belief is automatically diminished. Their focus shifts from *I believe I can* to *I must have tangible proof* (Theme 1) or *I must know someone* (Theme 2).

The combination of these two qualitative themes provides a solid mixed-methods justification for our statistical (QUAN) findings: self-efficacy fails as a mediator because, in the context of Gen Z in Indonesia, it is superseded by the pragmatic demand for tangible skill evidence and the perceived importance of social capital.

#### **4.3.2. The strength of tangible assets**

In stark contrast to the failure of self-efficacy, the quantitative findings (Results 4.1.3) demonstrated robust support for hypotheses H1, H2, and H3. Digital, communication, and experiential learning skills were found to have a positive and significant influence on work readiness. This finding is fully aligned with and reinforced by the qualitative findings. Theme 1 Pragmatism towards Tangible Evidence is essentially a reflection of H1, H2, and H3. The qualitative interviews (Results 4.2) confirmed that students are consciously aware that it is these three ‘tangible assets’ that employers seek:

- Digital Skills (H1) and Communication Skills (H2) are the evidence they referred to in the quote *“...specific skills that can be shown to HRD.”*
- Experiential Learning (H3) is the factory where they acquire the portfolios or certificates that they deem more valuable than self-belief.

Therefore, this combined (QUAN + qual) finding confirms that, in the Indonesian context, the Gen Z work-readiness model is strongly driven by the development of tangible, verifiable assets, rather than internal psychological factors. This finding supports prior research (Cosby et al., 2023; Helsper & Van Laar, 2021) that also emphasises the centrality of digital skills in the modern era.

Viewed through the lens of professional discourse, these ‘tangible assets’ represent concrete communicative outputs. Students intuitively understand that recruiters do not merely evaluate subjective self-belief. They assess a candidate’s applied communicative competence. Digital and communication skills must materialise into verifiable artefacts (i.e., recognized foreign language proficiency certificates, documented cross-cultural internship reports, or multimedia portfolios). In a pragmatic hiring culture, discursive artefacts like these serve as the ultimate proof of work readiness.

#### ***4.3.3. Theoretical implications***

This research offers two primary theoretical contributions that directly address concerns about limited theoretical advancement in studies of work readiness.

First, this study contributes to the ongoing debate on the boundary conditions of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) and self-efficacy-centered models of work readiness developed predominantly in Western contexts. While self-efficacy has been widely validated as a significant predictor of career-related outcomes in individualistic societies, the findings of this study indicate that its mediating role may be substantially weakened in collectivist and pragmatically oriented labour markets such as Indonesia. The consistent rejection of all self-efficacy-related hypotheses in the quantitative phase suggests that internal psychological beliefs alone may be insufficient to explain work readiness in contexts where employability is evaluated primarily through observable competencies and tangible evidence.

Second, rather than treating the non-significant role of self-efficacy as a statistical anomaly, this study advances theory by providing an explanatory account of why the established model fails to operate as expected. Through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the qualitative findings reveal that pragmatic hiring practices, portfolio-based assessments, and perceptions of social capital play a more central role in shaping work readiness than internal self-belief. These findings suggest a contextual reconfiguration of work-readiness theory, in which external and socially embedded resources may serve as dominant mechanisms in non-Western labour markets. Consequently, this study extends the literature by proposing that self-efficacy should be viewed as a context-dependent construct rather than a universally dominant explanatory mechanism.

Third, this study extends the theoretical framework of communicative competence within the discipline of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP). Although modern language pedagogy often integrates psychological interventions to lower affective filters and build ‘willingness to communicate’ (MacIntyre et al., 1998) this research demonstrates that in pragmatic, network-driven communicative situations, discourse mastery must be empirically demonstrable. The findings propose that in non-Western labour markets, linguistic competence is validated not by an individual’s internal efficacy, but by the successful production of institutional genres and the strategic use of language to cope with social capital networks.

#### ***4.3.4. Practical and managerial implications***

These findings have vital practical implications for higher education stakeholders, particularly educators teaching foreign languages for specific professional purposes. Career development and language curricula must no longer overemphasize abstract psychological interventions, such as general confidence-building or casual conversational fluency, as these are insufficient. Priority must be given to experiential learning (H3) programmes that yield concrete outputs (e.g., real projects, skill certifications) that can be shown to HRD, as our participants expressed. Educators must also prioritize highly authentic, task-based instruction that results in verifiable communicative outputs. Universities must shift their focus to helping students build a tangible portfolio of professional discourse, incorporating real-world project documentation, mastery of specialized in-

stitutional vocabulary, and formal language certifications. These are the exact concrete assets that Gen Z students correctly perceive as crucial for bypassing the limitations of subjective confidence when facing HR professionals.

Gen Z students must realise that feeling confident alone will not guarantee employment. This finding encourages them to pragmatically focus on building tangible skill assets (H1 and H2) and documenting them in a professional portfolio during their studies.

#### ***4.3.5. Limitations and future research directions***

This study, despite its contributions, possesses several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design does not permit us to draw definitive causal inferences. Future research would benefit from a longitudinal design, for instance, tracking students from before to after they complete an internship programme.

Our qualitative findings on the importance of social capital are highly provocative. However, this was only explored qualitatively. Future quantitative research should explicitly incorporate ‘social capital’ as a new variable into the work-readiness model for statistical testing.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This research set out to test prevailing work-readiness models in Western literature, with a specific focus on challenging the universal assumption of self-efficacy’s mediating role in a developing country context. By adopting an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, this study successfully not only tested statistical relationships but also uncovered the “why” behind those findings.

The quantitative findings from 277 respondents confirmed that ‘tangible assets’ comprising digital skills (H1), communication skills (H2), and experiential learning (H3) are potent and significant drivers of work readiness. However, the most crucial finding was the total failure of self-efficacy to function as either a direct predictor (H4 rejected) or as a mediator (H8, H9, H10 rejected). This paradox, in which students reported the highest descriptive scores for self-efficacy, yet it was functionally irrelevant, was explained in depth by the qualitative (qual) findings.

The qualitative findings from 15 interviews revealed two primary themes: (1) Gen Z Pragmatism, which values tangible skill evidence over empty confidence; and (2) the perceived importance of Social Capital, which supersedes internal psychological factors. Overall, this study provides a potential contribution to the literature by demonstrating the boundary conditions for the application of self-efficacy-focused theories. Its practical implication for universities is clear: the focus must shift from merely building self-confidence to building a portfolio of proven, tangible skills to prepare graduates for the realities of a pragmatic labour market.

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### ***Conflict of interest***

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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