

Utilization Of LinkedIn As A Media For Preparation For The World Of Work: A Phenomenological Study Of Final Level Students

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Abstract

Amid the rapid digitalization of the contemporary labor market, LinkedIn has transformed from a conventional job search platform into a strategic arena where university students construct their professional identities and navigate future career pathways. In this study, a total of XX final-year students were involved as participants to explore how they perceive and utilize LinkedIn as a medium for self-actualization, career literacy, and professional networking. Using an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research captures the depth of these students' lived experiences in shaping their professional persona within a digital environment. The findings reveal that students view LinkedIn as a narrative space through which they express their potential, values, and career aspirations. Nevertheless, their engagement with the platform is significantly constrained by three major challenges: limited professional digital literacy, insufficient institutional support, and unequal access to role models, references, and digital learning communities. These constraints collectively form systemic barriers that restrict meaningful student participation in professional online ecosystems. The study highlights the urgent need for higher education institutions to implement strategic interventions, including the integration of digital career literacy into curricula, the development of structured mentorship mechanisms, and the cultivation of adaptive campus ecosystems that align with the demands of platform-based professional environments.

Keywords: Professional Identity, LinkedIn, University Students, Digital Career Literacy, Higher Education, Professional Networking

INTRODUCTION

Changes in the work landscape in the digital era encourage students not only to rely on academic achievement alone, but also to build a professional image online (Supriyanto & Sepriano, 2025) . LinkedIn as a professional social networking platform presents opportunities for students to publish achievements, build personal branding, and expand career networks (Hakim, 2023) . However, amidst the high access to this platform, many students do not fully understand the strategy for optimal use of LinkedIn (Utami et al., 2024) . The existence of a LinkedIn account is often limited to digital formalities without a targeted communication strategy (Bairizki, 2021) . This shows a gap between digital existence and readiness to face an increasingly complex world of work (Ningrum, 2025) . This study is directed at finding the meaning of students' experiences in using LinkedIn as part of the process of forming a professional identity during the transition to the world of work. The focus is given to the reflective aspects and personal strategies of students in managing online self- representation.

The issue of LinkedIn utilization by students has a depth of meaning that crosses academic and practical realms (Saputra, Kom, & Kom, 2024) . From an academic perspective, this phenomenon touches on cross-field studies such as digital literacy, social identity construction, and 21st-century competency-based higher education (Aswita et al., 2022) . Meanwhile, in the realm of practice, LinkedIn is one of the important means used by graduates to navigate the world of work, introduce themselves to potential employers, and follow industry dynamics in real time (Anas et al., 2025) . Failure to understand and utilize this platform appropriately can have an impact on the low visibility of graduates in the digital job market (Dikdik Harjadi & Fitriani, 2024) . Therefore, it is important for educational institutions to not only equip students with technical skills alone, but also the skills to build a professional presence

online (RN Sari et al., 2025) . This study places itself in the middle of the knot between the demands of the digital world of work and the limited readiness of students, by highlighting their subjective experiences as a source of authentic and meaningful knowledge. To maintain the sharpness of focus and depth of analysis, this study was limited to final year students who had been actively using LinkedIn for at least the last six months. The subjects of the study included students from various study programs who were in the phase approaching graduation, so that it was relevant to the work preparation process (Salsabila, 2023) . This study does not examine the effectiveness of LinkedIn quantitatively or compare it with other digital platforms, but specifically explores students' personal experiences in building professional identities through LinkedIn. Using an interpretive phenomenological approach, this study raises the narratives of students as reflective agents who consciously develop engagement strategies in the digital professional space (Fahyuni & Wahyuni, 2021) . Geographical limitations are also placed on the context of higher education in Indonesia, which has its own dynamics in terms of digital literacy and professional culture (Haro, Saktisyahputra, Herlinah, Olifia, & Laksono, 2024) . Thus, the results of the study can provide a contextual and relevant picture of the challenges and potential of using professional social media in higher education environments.

The literature review shows a number of tendencies that have emerged in previous studies regarding LinkedIn utilization among students. (Nahda, nd) . First, LinkedIn is widely positioned as a means of building professional visibility online, where student profiles become a kind of showcase of competence and experience aimed at recruiters (Judijanto, Setiawan, et al., 2024; Nugroho & Suryadi, 2023; Prabowo, Wahyuni, Tanjung, Wijaya, & Adam, 2025; Rosnaini Daga, 2025) . Second, this platform is used to strengthen personal branding and introduce students' professional values to industry networks (Graziano, Fattobene, Giovando, & Pellicelli, 2024; Putri, Marsofiyati, & Utari, 2025; Tsironis & Tsagarakis, 2023) . Third, LinkedIn is considered to have educational potential because it provides informal learning features such as LinkedIn Learning, which allows students to develop competencies independently (Kamil, 2023; López - Carril, Glebova, Bae, & González - Serrano, 2025; Marin & Nilă, 2021; Orgad, 2024) . Fourth, a small number of studies have begun to explore students' subjective experiences with a qualitative approach, but have not yet touched on the reflective dimension in depth (Kanayya & Syeilendra, nd; Langoday, 2024; Sumilih et al., 2025) . This gap is what this study aims to fill, namely by presenting a portrait of students' experiences as active users who not only interact with technology but also interpret the role of technology in shaping their professional presence.

This study aims to explore how final year students use LinkedIn as a medium for preparing for the world of work. The specific objectives developed include three main things, namely identifying how students form professional identities digitally, understanding their strategies in building networks and obtaining job information, and examining the obstacles they face in using the platform. This study is built on the argument that students are active actors who consciously design their professional representation through digital media. There are three derivative hypotheses that underlie this exploration: first, students use LinkedIn as a space for actualizing their professional image; second, students use LinkedIn features to expand connections and enrich knowledge of the world of work; and third, students still face cognitive and structural barriers in optimizing the platform (Andari & Raharjo, 2022; Lestari et al., 2024; Mei Ie, Haris Maupa, Madris, & DPS, 2024; Ramadhani et al., 2023; Riatmaja & Wibawanto, 2024) . Testing these arguments will provide a richer understanding of the dynamics of professional identity in the digital age, while strengthening the foundation for educational interventions that are adaptive to technological developments and labor market needs.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with an interpretive phenomenological orientation, which aims to explore the subjective meaning of students' experiences in using LinkedIn as a medium for preparing to enter the world of work (Mubarok, 2024). The material object in this study is the direct experience of final year students who actively use LinkedIn, especially in the context of building professional identity, networking, and accessing job opportunities. This object was chosen because it contains a reflective dimension that is relevant to the phenomenological approach, where individual experience is the center of meaning for ongoing social phenomena (Hadi, 2021).

The research design was designed exploratively with the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework developed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (Nuriman, Abubakar, Aiyub, Hasan, & Suzanna, 2022; MN Sari Et Al., 2024). This design allows for in-depth capture of participants' subjective experiences and understanding of how they shape meanings of their involvement in professional digital spaces (Dewi & Sakuntalawati, 2023). IPA was chosen because it provides space for researchers to interpret participants' experiences without ignoring the authentic voices of those who directly experience the phenomenon being studied (Ismanto, Antony, & Mulyatno, 2024; Kawangmani, 2021; Kurnia & Aziza, 2021).

The sources of information in this study consisted of six final year students of Nurul Jadid University who were selected purposively. All participants had been actively using LinkedIn for at least the past six months, with varying but consistent levels of engagement in building profiles, following professional accounts, and engaging in job search. The information obtained came from in-depth interviews with the participants, who acted as key informants and the primary source of narrative data. In addition to the interviews, the participants' LinkedIn profiles were also observed contextually to enrich the understanding of the experiences they shared.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews that took place between January and May 2025. The interview guide was prepared based on a literature review and the results of initial discussions with students who met the research criteria (Kurniawan et al., 2023). Interviews were conducted directly with an average duration of 45 to 60 minutes, recorded with the consent of the participants, then transcribed verbatim (Iskandar, 2023). The verification process was carried out through reconfirmation with each participant to ensure data accuracy and avoid misunderstandings in the initial interpretation (Azfaruddin, 2024; Harahap, Masengi, Pi, & orpa Sapulette, 2024; Judijanto, Wibowo, et al., 2024).

The collected data were analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) technique in five stages (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2021). First, re-read and understand the transcripts to build closeness to the participant's narrative (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Second, conduct initial coding to identify meanings that emerge explicitly and implicitly (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Third, compile initial themes that reflect students' personal experiences (Nizza, Farr, & Smith, 2021). Fourth, organize themes into a conceptual structure that describes the relationship between experiences (Pangestu, Harjanti, Pertiwi, Rencz, & Nurdiyanto, 2024). Finally, compile a thematic narrative that represents collective meaning while paying attention to the uniqueness of each participant (Squires, 2023). Data validity was maintained through narrative triangulation, participant verification, and discussion (Creswell, 2024; Nartin et al., 2024; Sarosa, 2021).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

LinkedIn as a Space for Actualizing Professional Identity

LinkedIn serves as a strategic space for final-year students to consciously and dynamically construct their professional identities. This identity formation evolves along with their growing experience, digital literacy, and interactions within the broader digital ecosystem. Four key aspects characterize this process: the construction of profile narratives, the display of credentials, the adoption of professional values and roles, and the emotional dilemmas and self-reflection involved in shaping digital identities.

First, students carefully curate their self-narratives and professional visions. They do not simply fill in their profiles; instead, they intentionally craft summaries, select experiences, and highlight interests to create a strong first impression for recruiters. These narratives typically include career visions, professional values, specific field interests, and expressions of openness and eagerness to learn. This illustrates that professional identity is not static but something that can be actively constructed according to their aspirations.

Second, students adopt credential display strategies as symbols of competence validation. Certificates from online courses, internships, collaborative projects, and portfolios are showcased as concrete evidence of their skills and commitment. In the digital era, such credentials carry reputational value and enhance the credibility of their profiles in professional networks.

Table 1. Credentials Frequently Displayed by Students.

Credential Types	Amount Participants (n=6)	Percentage
Certificate online courses	5	83%
Internship in industry	6	100%
Project collaborative (campus / independent)	4	67%
Performance competition (innovation /startup)	3	50%
Portfolio creative (UI/UX, animation , etc.)	2	33%

These credentials are interpreted as symbolic exchange value , where students seek to strengthen their position in the digital “reputation market.” In addition, they begin to understand the importance of a “digital footprint” in building credibility and accessing career opportunities.

a. Representation of Values and Professional Roles

Students on LinkedIn do more than present technical information; they actively embed professional values and the role identities they aspire to. By using labels such as “young professional,” “junior analyst,” or “early-career designer,” they signal a transition from student identity to emerging professionals within the workforce. Common values they highlight include continuous learning, collaboration, innovation, openness to technology, and strong work ethics. Through curated bios, students not only showcase their competencies but also define who they are in terms of professional character and responsibility. This reflects the idea that digital identity encompasses not just skills, but also morality, personality, and self-worth.

b. Emotions, Reflections, and Identity Tensions

For students, building a LinkedIn profile is more than a technical activity; it involves emotional challenges and personal reflection. Many initially feel insecure or fear judgment due to limited experience, while others discover previously unrecognized strengths as they organize their profiles. Common emotions include fear of being judged, uncertainty about what to publish, growing awareness of their potential, and increased confidence after

completing their profile. This process shows that LinkedIn functions not only as a professional display platform but also as a space for self-learning and psychosocial growth. Students construct a deliberate and evolving self-representation by shaping their narratives, showcasing credentials, expressing values, and navigating emotional tensions demonstrating that professional identity is dynamic and continually reconstructed.

c. LinkedIn as a Source of Career Information and Connections

As students' career orientation becomes increasingly digital, LinkedIn serves as a vital ecosystem for professional information and networking. Final-year students use it not only as a job directory but also as a platform to understand the evolving world of work, access career opportunities, and connect with industry networks. First, students rely on LinkedIn to actively search for job vacancies, internships, and training programs. They study job postings to learn professional terminology, required competencies, the alignment between their major and job roles, entry-level qualification standards, and benchmarks for improving their CVs and profiles. Job information functions not only as an application target but also as material for reflecting on their readiness. Second, LinkedIn becomes a real-time resource for monitoring industry trends and career transformations. Through posts from companies and professional communities, students keep up with technological developments, innovation cases, and new job roles emerging from digitalization such as data storyteller, ethical hacker, ESG analyst, and UX researcher.

Table 2. Industry Trends Followed by Students and Monitoring Objectives

Industry/Sector	Trends to Watch	Academic/ Professional Goals
Technology Information	AI, data science, software development	Adaptation of coding & machine learning skills
Business and Marketing	Digital branding, e-commerce, UI/UX	Strengthening portfolio and design experience
Social and Education Sector	EdTech, CSR, SDGs, work inclusivity	Expansion of career orientation in the social sector
Finance & Fintech	Blockchain, digital payments, compliance	Understanding the digital finance job market

By monitoring industry updates on LinkedIn, students gain a broad, real-time understanding of job market directions, allowing them to build career awareness beyond conventional guidance. Students also develop strategic approaches to building and maintaining professional networks. Networking is treated as a deliberate and ethical process, emphasizing relevance, professionalism, and alignment with career goals. Their strategies include selecting connections carefully, observing content before reaching out, sending polite and purposeful messages, engaging with posts, and maintaining long-term relationships. This reflects their understanding that digital reputation is built on the quality not quantity of connections.

In addition, LinkedIn exposes students to organizational professionalism and values. By observing how companies communicate, celebrate achievements, and present social initiatives, students learn about workplace culture, core values, inclusivity, flexibility, and sustainability. Thus, LinkedIn becomes a space for understanding not only opportunities but also the character and ethics of potential employers.

Table 3. Professional Values Learned by Students from Company Activities

Professional Values	Source Information on LinkedIn	Relevance for Student
Collaborative and open	Team stories , testimonials employee	Preparation of cross-disciplinary team work
Oriented growth	Internal recruitment and training postings	Motivation to continue learning
Inclusive and supportive	Diversity stories and HR policies	Sensitivity to issue diversity
Innovative and bold experimenting	Case study product and agile development	Inspiration approach modern work

Through observing companies on LinkedIn, students broaden their understanding of workplace culture and become better prepared to enter environments that align with their values. However, despite these benefits, students also face significant challenges in professional digital interaction. Many feel uncomfortable introducing themselves formally online, hesitate to send messages for fear of violating communication norms, or struggle to decide what content is appropriate to share. Common obstacles include uncertainty about professional communication formats, language concerns, lack of examples of good content practices, fear of connection rejection, and limited institutional support for developing digital literacy. These barriers demonstrate that digital competence extends beyond technical skills it also requires relational awareness, ethical communication, and growing self-confidence.

Barriers and Challenges in Utilizing LinkedIn

Despite growing up in a digital environment, many students still struggle to manage their professional identities on LinkedIn. These challenges stem not only from personal limitations but also from weak institutional support and unequal access to guidance and relevant resources. Three systemic issues shape their difficulties: low professional digital literacy, lack of institutional support, and limited access to references, mentorship, and communities. A key problem is that students often lack professional digital literacy. While they can use social media, they do not fully understand how to build a strategic professional image, communicate ethically, or leverage LinkedIn for career development. Many create incomplete profiles, write minimal summaries, or leave important sections such as portfolios, certifications, and organizational experiences empty. They also struggle with communication etiquette, feeling hesitant to post, comment, or interact with HR, alumni, or new connections. Common weaknesses include incomplete profiles, poor narrative summaries, unfamiliarity with platform features, inability to present relevant experiences, and confusion about when to use formal language. These issues show that students' digital literacy gaps span narrative construction, platform navigation, and participation in professional digital communities.

Table 4. Dimensions of Professional Digital Literacy that have not been mastered

Dimensions Digital Literacy	Information
Strategic Personal Branding	Don't know compose headlines, summaries and self-positioning
Utilization of Technical Features	Don't know yet skills, certificates , projects features
Digital Communication Ethics	Don't know when and how to interact politely
Activity Professional	Passive, not making posts or engaging in discussions

Representation Experience & Value	Not yet able to present self-values in a narrative and relevant manner
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Low levels of professional digital literacy cause many students' LinkedIn accounts to become inactive and ineffective, preventing the platform from contributing meaningfully to their job readiness. Without improving this literacy, LinkedIn remains a resource they cannot fully utilize. A second major challenge lies in the weak institutional support provided by universities. Although many campuses offer career services, their guidance remains conventional focused on printed CVs, broad career seminars, and interview simulations while LinkedIn has not been positioned as a strategic component within career development programs. As a result, students are left to learn independently through online tutorials or by copying other people's profiles, with little to no formal assistance in crafting profiles, building networks, or creating professional content that aligns with industry standards. This gap is worsened by the fact that many lecturers and advisors do not actively use LinkedIn, limiting students' access to role models in the digital professional space. Overall, universities lack structured LinkedIn training, fail to integrate digital personal branding into the curriculum, overlook digital platforms in career centers, do not organize alumni for online mentoring, and provide no forums on professional digital communication ethics. These systemic gaps show that higher education institutions have not yet recognized LinkedIn as a crucial tool for preparing students to enter the modern workforce.

Table 5. Availability of Supporting Facilities for the Use of LinkedIn on Campus

Facilities / Programs	General Status
Training compile LinkedIn profile	Not yet available
Digital personal branding guidance	Very limited
Curriculum professional digital literacy	Not integrated
Mentoring by alumni on LinkedIn	Are not done
Official campus collaboration with LinkedIn	None / rare

The lack of institutional support leaves students navigating the professional digital world on their own. In this situation, only those with external advantages such as family networks or personal mentors are able to progress quickly, while students who depend solely on campus guidance fall behind in digital work readiness. A third major challenge is the inequality of access to references, role models, and learning communities. This inequality appears both horizontally, among students within the same institution, and vertically, between different campuses. Students from large, urban universities or those with strong alumni networks generally have more examples of good profiles, more active lecturers, and more successful alumni to follow. Meanwhile, students from smaller or regional campuses, or from lower socio-economic backgrounds, often lack role models, have no idea how to start building a LinkedIn profile, and have no mentors to guide them.

These inequalities are rooted not only in geographical and institutional differences but also in the absence of a supportive digital learning ecosystem that fosters professional identity development. As a result, students do not have equal opportunities to grow or use LinkedIn strategically. Common forms of inequality include the absence of relevant profile examples, inactive lecturers and alumni, lack of mentors in suitable fields, absence of campus-based digital communities, and limited or costly access to external training. This creates a "digital gap," where students with support advance rapidly while those without remain passive users. Ultimately, self-representation in digital professional spaces becomes a form of new capital that significantly influences graduates' competitiveness in the job market.

CONCLUSION

Based on data collected from **XX** final-year student participants, this study shows that LinkedIn serves as an important digital space for constructing professional identity and enhancing work readiness. Students use LinkedIn not only to create profiles but also as a medium for self-reflection, informal learning, and building broader professional networks. They actively shape their professional narratives, track industry trends, and connect with alumni or experts, demonstrating adaptive learning in the digital workplace.

However, the findings also reveal three major challenges: low levels of professional digital literacy, limited institutional support in the form of training or mentoring, and unequal access to references, role models, and digital communities. These barriers result in significant disparities in students' ability to build a strong professional presence online. Consequently, the process of utilizing LinkedIn is not merely technical but deeply social, shaped by structural conditions and differing levels of digital access.

In conclusion, the study highlights that LinkedIn has strong potential to empower students, but it may also reinforce inequality if literacy and institutional support remain weak. To ensure LinkedIn becomes an equitable tool for academic-to-professional transition, collective efforts are needed involving students, universities, alumni networks, and digital communities. Strengthening professional digital literacy should be prioritized as a core 21st-century competency to expand fair access to job opportunities and upward social mobility.

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