

The Relationship Between Instagram Personal Branding and Students' Learning Interest at the Faculty of Communication and Informatics

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ABSTRACT

Instagram is widely used by Indonesian internet users to present a curated self-image, and learning interest is a key driver of engaged study; evidence linking self-presentation through a first account to learning interest remains limited. This study examines the association between personal branding through the first (main) Instagram account and the learning interest of students at the Faculty of Communication and Informatics, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS). A cross-sectional correlational survey using a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire was conducted with 320 undergraduate students (2022–2024 cohorts) from a sampling frame of 1,604 students. Data were analyzed with Spearman's rho after validity, reliability, and distributional checks. Personal branding was positively associated with learning interest (Spearman's $\rho = 0.525$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 320$), a moderate association in this sample. Causality and direction cannot be established. Goffman's dramaturgical theory is used to interpret the first account as a "front stage" for identity performance; motivational mechanisms such as social validation were not measured and are proposed as hypotheses. Given the cross-sectional, self-reported, single-faculty design, findings should be generalized cautiously. Future research should use longitudinal or experimental designs, control confounders, and validate the measurement model.

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Introduction

The rapid development of technology over the past two decades, particularly in social media, has significantly transformed patterns of public communication and interaction. Social media, understood as online platforms through which users create, share, and exchange content (Qadir & Ramli, 2024), has become an integral part of daily life and serves not only as entertainment but also as a space for identity formation and social networking. According to The Global Statistics (2025), 84.80% of internet users in Indonesia actively use Instagram. University students are among the most active user groups and use the platform to build personal branding, which allows them to showcase their personality, build a positive reputation, expand their social networks, and create collaborative opportunities in academic and non-academic settings (Yunikawati *et al.*, 2024).

Personal branding is a strategic process of consciously shaping and strengthening one's self-image so that an individual's strengths and character are recognized and valued by others (Syaifudin & Sutinnarto, 2023). Anggraini *et al.* (2024) describe it as an ongoing effort to manage an individual's image and impression in the eyes of the public, and it is also a strategy for building self-reputation in the social media era (Widiyowati *et al.*, 2025). Peter Montoya, as cited in Samatan *et al.* (2024), explains that personal branding consists of eight indicators: specialization, leadership, personality, distinctiveness, visibility, unity, persistence, and goodwill. In this study, personal branding is operationalized as students' self-reported perception of how they present themselves along these eight dimensions through their first Instagram account. Personal branding has also been examined in relation to outcomes beyond self-image, such as the career success of Generation Z (Rahayu & Marka, 2024).

Instagram is a primary medium through which students construct this image. The platform allows users to share photos, videos, and stories while engaging in digital social interaction (Wattimena *et al.*, 2022), and the Instagram Story feature serves both information needs and the display of self-image (Tanika & Muhibbin, 2023). Students frequently use Instagram to express themselves and build a personal image (Ekayulisa *et al.*, 2023). In this study, the first account (also called the main account) is defined operationally as the Instagram account that a student identifies as his or her primary account, typically used under the student's real identity and visible to a broad audience such as peers, lecturers, and the campus community. It is distinguished from a second account, which is generally used for more spontaneous expression within a smaller circle (Wattimena *et al.*, 2022). The first account is where users manage impressions and display a self-image that aligns with social expectations (Safitri & Harianto, 2023).

Goffman's dramaturgical theory offers a lens for understanding this practice: individuals manage the impressions they give to an audience, presenting a polished self

on the “front stage” and reserving a more private self for the “back stage” (Gray *et al.*, 2024a; Tooley, 2025). In studies of Instagram, the first account has been likened to the front stage on which individuals perform social roles to project a consistent image (Shinta & Putri, 2022). Dramaturgy, however, explains impression management; it does not by itself explain why self-presentation should be related to motivation to learn. A further theoretical link is therefore needed.

Learning interest, in turn, plays a crucial role in the learning process. It is an internal drive that keeps an individual actively and enjoyably engaged in learning (Chandra & Khiong, 2024) and is commonly described through four indicators: feelings of pleasure, interest, attention, and involvement (Nugroho *et al.*, 2020). Students with high learning interest tend to be more focused, diligent, and capable of self-regulation, and they show learning initiative without external coercion (Lestari, 2021).

Prior research can be grouped into three strands. First, studies of social media and learning-related outcomes report that social media use is associated with students’ learning interest (Muskita *et al.*, 2022) and that the intensity of Instagram use is related to student creativity (Qurota & Edy, 2023). Second, studies of self-presentation on Instagram describe how young people manage identity and impressions through first and second accounts (Safitri & Harianto, 2023; Shinta & Putri, 2022; Yunikawati *et al.*, 2024), and how social media accounts are used as a means of self-development. Third, studies of personal branding link it to outcomes such as career success (Rahayu & Marka, 2024). Across the studies reviewed here, identity presentation and academic motivation are examined separately: the first strand focuses on the intensity of use rather than on how students present themselves, and the second and third strands do not examine learning interest. It therefore remains unclear whether personal branding through a first Instagram account is associated with students’ learning interest, which is the gap this study addresses.

Combining impression management with a motivational perspective suggests a plausible pathway. Learning interest is an internal drive (Chandra & Khiong, 2024), and within self-determination theory the psychological needs for competence and relatedness are linked to academic motivation (Al Mamun *et al.*, 2025). Students who consistently present a capable, active, and goal-oriented identity on their first account, and who receive affirmation from peers and lecturers, may therefore feel more competent and connected and may be more interested in learning. This pathway is the authors’ theoretical reasoning, not an established finding: social validation, perceived competence, and intrinsic motivation are not measured in this study. It nevertheless leads to the following hypothesis: H1: Personal branding through the first Instagram account is positively associated with students’ learning interest.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the association between personal branding through the first account and the learning interest of students at the Faculty of

Communication and Informatics, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta. Because it uses a correlational design, the study does not test causal effects. It is expected to contribute theoretically to the study of digital communication and education by examining an identity-presentation variable together with learning interest, and to offer practical insights into how students' social media self-presentation relates to their interest in learning.

Methods

1. Research Design

This study employs a quantitative approach with a correlational research design to examine the relationship between personal branding and learning interest among university students who actively use Instagram. The correlational design is appropriate for examining the association between these variables and describing the phenomenon of Instagram use among students as a means of self-expression and personal branding development. The study collects objective numerical data without any intervention or manipulation by the researchers. However, because this study uses a correlational design, the findings cannot establish a causal relationship or determine the temporal ordering between personal branding and learning interest.

2. Population and Sample

The target population of this study consists of active undergraduate students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS) from the 2022–2024 cohorts who actively use a primary Instagram account. Based on student monitoring system data by cohort in 2025, the sampling frame consisted of 1,604 undergraduate students from the Faculty of Communication and Informatics (FKI), UMS. Eligible participants were identified through screening questions in the questionnaire to confirm their active undergraduate status and use of a primary Instagram account. The study employed simple random sampling, giving each eligible student an equal probability of selection and reducing the potential for selection bias. The minimum sample size was initially determined using the Slovin formula with a 5% margin of error, resulting in 291 respondents, and the final sample was increased to 320 respondents to provide an adequate number of completed responses. Since this study used a cross-sectional survey, the term “dropout” was not applied; instead, responses that did not meet the eligibility criteria or contained incomplete data were excluded from the analysis. The response rate was calculated based on the number of eligible students who completed the questionnaire relative to the number of students invited to participate.

3. Research Instrument

Data in this study were collected using a structured questionnaire employing a five-point Likert scale to quantitatively measure respondents' perceptions of personal

branding and learning interest. The personal branding instrument was developed based on Peter Montoya's theoretical framework, comprising eight theoretically distinct dimensions: specialization, leadership, personality, distinctiveness, visibility, unity, persistence, and goodwill, with a total of 24 items distributed across the eight dimensions. The learning interest instrument was developed based on Nugroho *et al.*'s framework, consisting of four indicators: feelings of pleasure, interest, attention, and involvement, with a total of 12 items. Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, with higher scores indicating stronger levels of the respective construct. Any reverse-coded items were recoded before the analysis, if applicable. The questionnaire was administered in Indonesian, and the wording of the items was reviewed and adapted to ensure clarity and relevance to university students and the context of Instagram use. Prior to the main data collection, the instrument was pilot-tested on 50 respondents who met the relevant characteristics but were not included in the final sample. The preliminary test was conducted to assess the validity of the questionnaire items before the main data collection. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with reliability examined for the overall constructs and, for personal branding, separately for each of the eight dimensions. Although the eight dimensions of personal branding are theoretically distinct, they were combined into an overall personal branding score based on the theoretical framework and the results of the validity and reliability testing.

4. Validity and Reliability

Prior to the primary hypothesis testing, the instrument underwent validity and reliability testing to ensure data quality. According to Ghazali (2021), validity testing determines whether questionnaire items adequately measure the intended construct. In this study, item validity was assessed using the Pearson product-moment correlation between each item and the total score. An item was considered valid when the calculated correlation coefficient was significant at the 0.05 level and exceeded the critical r-value. Reliability testing assessed internal consistency using Cronbach's Alpha, calculated based on the number of items for each construct and, where applicable, each theoretically distinct dimension. Reliability was evaluated based on the coefficient magnitude and established methodological guidelines, with the number of items reported for each coefficient. Cronbach's Alpha was interpreted only as internal consistency, not repeated-measurement stability, since test-retest reliability was not assessed.

Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Prior to hypothesis testing, data were screened for missing values and potential outliers; incomplete responses were excluded, while outliers were examined using boxplots. Normality and monotonicity assumptions were also assessed. Normality was tested using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test due to the sample size of 320 respondents, with $p > 0.05$ indicating no statistically significant evidence against normality. The relationship between

personal branding and learning interest was analyzed using Pearson's correlation when the data met the assumptions of approximate normality and linearity. If these assumptions were not met, Spearman's rho was used, particularly for monotonic but non-linear relationships or violated distributional assumptions. The correlation coefficient was interpreted based on its direction and magnitude. No control variables were included because the research model focused specifically on the relationship between personal branding and learning interest.

5. Ethical Considerations

This study involved human participants and received ethical approval from the Health Research Ethics Committee (KEPK), Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (ethical clearance No. 5858/B.2/KEPK-FKUMS/IX/2025, issued on 10 September 2025), which confirmed that the study met the Declaration of Helsinki, the guidelines of the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS), and the World Health Organization (WHO) 2016 standards. 320 Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time before giving informed consent and completing the questionnaire. No names or other identifying information were collected; responses were kept confidential, used only for research purposes, and stored securely with access limited to the research team.

Result

1. Validity Test

The empirical results obtained for the validity test are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Validity Test Results

Variable	r value range	r table	Decision
Personal Branding	0,291-0,677	0,110	Valid
Learning Interest	0,296-0,626	0,110	Valid

Based on the validity test results presented in Table 1, it is known that the correlation coefficient value (calculated r) for the Personal Branding variable ranges from 0.291 to 0.677, while the Learning Interest variable ranges from 0.296 to 0.626. With a sample size of 320 respondents and a significance level of 0.05, the critical r-table value is 0.110. Since all calculated r values for both variables are greater than the r-table value of 0.110, all statement items in the research instrument are declared valid. Therefore, the items used are considered capable of accurately measuring the intended constructs and are suitable for further statistical analysis.

2. Reliability Test

The reliability test results for the research variables are presented in Table 2. The results indicate the internal consistency of the measurement instruments based on the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients obtained for each variable.

Table 2. Reliability Test Results

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha Value	Decision
Personal Branding	0,899	Reliable
Learning Interest	0,845	Reliable

Based on the reliability test results presented in Table 2, the Personal Branding variable obtained a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.899, while the Learning Interest variable obtained a coefficient of 0.845. Both coefficients exceed the predetermined threshold of 0.60, indicating good internal consistency among the items used to measure each construct. Therefore, both instruments were considered reliable for the subsequent analysis.

3. Normality Test

The normality assessment was conducted to examine the distributional characteristics of the Personal Branding and Learning Interest scores. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied as part of the preliminary data screening. However, the selection of the correlation method was not based solely on the normality test, as formal normality tests can be sensitive to minor deviations in large samples ($N = 320$). The data were also examined for potential outliers and the pattern of association between the variables to assess the assumptions relevant to correlation analysis. As presented in Table 3, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test produced $p < 0.001$ for both variables, indicating significant departures from normality. Considering these distributional characteristics and the measurement properties of the composite scores, Spearman's rho was selected to examine the relationship between Personal Branding and Learning Interest. This non-parametric method is appropriate for assessing the direction and strength of a monotonic association without requiring normally distributed variables.

Table 3. Normality Test Results

Variable	Sig. Value	Decision
Personal Branding	<0,001	Not Normally Distributed
Learning Interest	<0,001	Not Normally Distributed

The results in Table 3 indicate that both variables significantly deviated from normality ($p < 0.001$). Nevertheless, this finding was not used as the sole criterion for selecting the correlation method. Based on the distributional characteristics and

suitability of Spearman's rho for composite/ordinal-type scores and monotonic associations, Spearman's rho was employed for the subsequent correlation analysis.

4. Correlation Test

A Spearman's rho correlation analysis was conducted to examine the direction and strength of the association between Personal Branding and Learning Interest. The selection of Spearman's rho was based on the distributional characteristics of the composite scores and the suitability of the method for assessing monotonic associations. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlation Test Results

Variable	Spearman's ρ	Sig. Value	N
Personal Branding x Learning Interest	0,525	<0.001	320

Based on Table 4, Personal Branding was positively associated with Learning Interest (Spearman's $\rho = 0.525$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 320$). The positive coefficient indicates that higher Personal Branding scores tend to be associated with higher Learning Interest scores. Based on the correlation-strength classification adopted in this study, the coefficient of 0.525 falls within the 0.40–0.599 range, indicating a moderate positive association (Sugiyono, 2019). Although the association was statistically significant, statistical significance should not be interpreted as evidence of causality or substantive importance. The finding indicates an association between the two variables within the sample studied.

5. Discussion

This study found a moderate positive association between personal branding through the first Instagram account and learning interest among students at the Faculty of Communication and Informatics, UMS (Spearman's $\rho = 0.525$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 320$). Students who reported stronger personal branding also tended to report higher learning interest, which is consistent with H1. This is a cross-sectional association within the sampled group; it does not show that personal branding raises learning interest, and statistical significance should not be equated with substantive importance.

The direction of this association is consistent with earlier Indonesian studies reporting that social media use is related to students' learning interest (Muskita *et al.*, 2022) and that Instagram use is related to student outcomes such as creativity (Qurota & Edy, 2023). Those studies, however, examined the intensity of social media use rather than personal branding through a first account, so the magnitude of $\rho = 0.525$ cannot be compared directly with their results. Differences in constructs, instruments, and samples are plausible reasons for any differences in magnitude.

Goffman's dramaturgical theory provides a way to interpret this finding as identity performance, but not as an explanation of learning motivation. In this view, social life resembles a stage performance in which individuals present themselves to an audience to create certain impressions (Gray *et al.*, 2024) , and social identity is continuously constructed and adapted to the context and the expectations of the audience (Tooley, 2025). The first account can be read as a "front stage" on which students present a polished self (Shinta & Putri, 2022) . Dramaturgy, however, describes how impressions are managed, not why impression management would be accompanied by greater learning interest.

A motivational account is needed to connect the two variables. One plausible interpretation, drawing on the link between competence, relatedness, and academic motivation (Al Mamun *et al.*, 2025) , is that students who present a capable and goal-oriented identity, and who receive recognition from peers or lecturers, might feel more competent and connected and might be more interested in learning. This mechanism is a hypothesis rather than a finding. Social validation (likes, comments, and lecturer support), self-confidence, and intrinsic motivation were not measured, so no mediating pathway was tested. Future studies could examine it with mediation models that measure these variables directly.

The interpretation is also limited by what the personal branding instrument measures. It was built from Montoya's general dimensions (specialization, leadership, personality, distinctiveness, visibility, unity, persistence, and goodwill) rather than from academic self-presentation. This study therefore cannot conclude that students use their first accounts to present themselves as academically accomplished; that would require an instrument designed to measure academic personal branding.

Alternative explanations should also be considered. The association may run in the opposite direction, with students who are more interested in learning curating more academic or professional identities on Instagram, or it may be reciprocal. Third variables could also account for it, such as academic self-efficacy, achievement motivation, personality, socioeconomic background, and the intensity of social media use. With a cross-sectional design, none of these possibilities can be ruled out.

This study has several limitations. In addition to the cross-sectional design, it relied on self-reported data, which are vulnerable to common-method bias; the sample came from one faculty at one university, and sampling or nonresponse bias cannot be excluded; unmeasured confounders were not controlled; the eight dimensions of personal branding were treated as a composite score whose dimensionality still needs validation; and no temporal evidence is available. The findings should therefore be generalized with caution.

Conclusion

This study found a moderate positive association between personal branding through the first Instagram account and learning interest among students at the Faculty of Communication and Informatics, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (Spearman's $\rho = 0.525$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 320$). Students who reported stronger personal branding tended to report higher learning interest in this sample. Because the design is cross-sectional and correlational, the results do not show that personal branding causes higher learning interest, and the direction of the association remains unresolved. The findings should not be generalized beyond the sampled context. These findings suggest that students' social media self-presentation and their learning interest deserve to be considered together in digital communication and education research. Higher education institutions may consider offering guidance on wise and productive social media use; however, because this study did not test an intervention, such guidance should not be assumed to raise learning interest and would need to be evaluated in its own right.

The study is limited by its cross-sectional design, self-reported data with possible common-method bias, a single-faculty sample, possible sampling or nonresponse bias, unmeasured confounders, uncertainty about the dimensionality of the personal branding construct, and the absence of temporal evidence. Future research should use longitudinal or experimental designs to examine temporal order and causality, validate the measurement model (for example, through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis), include potential confounders such as academic self-efficacy and achievement motivation, measure and test the proposed mechanisms (such as social validation and intrinsic motivation) through mediation analysis, and draw on broader samples from multiple faculties and institutions.

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