

Covid-19 Pandemic, Personal Branding, and the Corruption of Communication

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Abstract—as an individual strategy for professional career development, personal branding continues to be pursued by various groups, even during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, including academics. However, it is not uncommon for personal branding efforts to be accompanied by the communication corruption practices, namely the act of reducing the right of the audience or the public to receive messages completely and correctly according to facts, both normative (objective) and contemplative (subjective). This article examines the phenomenon of communication corruption in academics' personal branding during the Covid-19 pandemic. Apart from identifying forms of communication corruption in the dimensions of the message, media, context, and behavior, we also discussed with two separate groups, namely lecturers and students through the FGD method, to explore their views and experiences regarding this phenomenon. The results show that the group of lecturers tends to do personal branding related to the needs of academic positions and build a reputation as an expert in their field for work and consulting projects, while the student group tends to brand themselves for careers after college and academic reputation in writing their final work. In the message dimension, communication corruption is generally in the form of misinformation, disinformation, polished visuals, fake data, twisted meaning, and hidden facts, while in the media dimension it takes the form of utilizing media features for polishing facts to make them more impressive. In the context dimension, usually by conditioning the atmosphere and setting of events to present the desired impression. In the behavioral dimension, it tends to take the form of plagiarism, whether intentionally or unintentionally, authorship for sale as well as attempts to slander the source of the quote.

Keywords— *message corruption, media corruption, Covid-19*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic does not only present disasters but also opportunities, including in personal branding. Marx [1] states that there was no previous period that highlighted the role of teleconferencing as great as the Covid-19 pandemic era, which was triggered by a physical distancing situation and the necessity to do more activities from and at home. Therefore, this phenomenon also has an impact on forms of personal branding activities during a pandemic, such as organizing virtual events, social media communication, and social working. As in other crisis situations, the pandemic must also be addressed optimistically. Because life goes on. Brands must also

remain alive in the minds and hearts of consumers. What needs to be done is adapting to conditions under limitations and changes, including in formulating a personal branding strategy.

Arruda [2] suggests, although the power of "look-each-other-in-the-eye connections" is irreplaceable in the effectiveness of daily personal branding, there are still specific strategies in personal branding during the Covid-19 pandemic, including 1) leverage social media (because of its extraordinary networking power), 2) become a video star (because the power of audiovisuals in online communication is likely to stimulate engagement), 3) appoint a leadership role (because initiative and taking an active role in communication will make we stand out more than others), and 4) be a digital brand steward (because brand stewards move outside the normal hierarchy of an organization, and make them more valuable).

On the other hand, Marx [1], considering the power and abundant opportunities in information technology during a pandemic that requires us to stay at home, sees the importance of [online] social interaction and value-based networking. Online social interaction through various social media platforms by consistently maintaining a distinctive identity, while value-based networking by displaying or offering clear and sharp values for the built network. Without real values and benefits, networking will become a relationship that is not worth it.

Meanwhile, Vergheze [3] provides 6Ps tips for personal branding during a pandemic, namely Pause and Plan, Pivot and Pursue, and Pitch and Propagate. With misinformation running rampant and fake news on the rise, it is both responsible and accurate in what you want to portray, due diligence of the content you receive before spreading it. Meanwhile, brands that recognize that it is time to rediscover and revisit their existence will benefit in the long run. As a personal brand, you can play multiple roles, for example, sharing voluntary opportunities and Covid-19 funding. Lastly, there are many ways to convey and spread a message. We all have access to the same channels --not only online but also in our communities, be it in housing estates or religious and socio-cultural forums in our respective neighborhoods. In the context of academic personal branding, Vergheze [3] adds that as 'scientists', scholars can consider innovative ways to support society.

In principle, everyone has a personal brand, it can be positive, negative, or neutral [4] depending on the trail marks they made because brands are traces that are left in the minds and hearts of consumers, which give rise to certain meanings and feelings [5]. Likewise during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the digital footprint was abundant. It is important to create positive traces, to make our personal brands more meaningful [6].

According to Holloway [7], the personal brand consists of values, drivers, reputation, behaviours, skills, and image. Gorbatov et al. [8] define personal branding as a strategic process in creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression on a person. Meanwhile, Evans [9] views from the perspective of human resources and career development by defining personal branding as the way someone wants to be perceived as an employee, potential employee, and client, both for short-term and long-term career interests. From a marketing perspective, Khedher [10] simply defines personal branding as a person's planned process of marketing himself. Meanwhile, Cederberg [11] calls personal branding an active process in synthesizing and packaging a personal brand to be communicated to target customers, prospective employers, and online network communities.

Given its great benefits for career development and one's reputation, personal branding has now become one of the weapons of many academics in developing their professional careers, both in the academic and non-academic realms. There are at least three key benefits of personal branding for academics [12], namely: first, it helps academics find project jobs and other responsibilities. Secondly, it provides a framework for determining how academics can best perform in their institutions. Lastly, it helps academics better understanding themselves and encourage their own engagement and advancement. Tregoning [13] argues that today's academics must change their mindset to more "sell" themselves through personal branding, because being brilliant is not everything. The first thing to do is that academics must "be the brand" by seeing themselves as a product (both in the form of an idea and a figure of themselves). Next is "develop the brand" by diligently publishing works to gain public awareness, and the last is "sell the brand" by expanding networking. This is in line with Wijaya's research [14] which proposes individual academic branding through communications of scientific works, scientific profiles, scientific activities, scientific recognition, and scientific achievements.

Several studies have also highlighted the role of personal branding in academic contexts. A study by Matulenko et al. [15], for example, found that 66% of people in Russia consider branded teachers for their educational institution destinations. On the other hand, Borman-Shoap et al. [12] summarizes three important aspects in personal branding, as well as three risks that can pose a threat of failure in what they call the Venn diagram of academics brand sweet spot, namely passion, skill, and institution's need. The shortfalls that exist between the intersections of these two components will have consequences that weaken the academic personal brand. The shortfalls that exist between the intersection of these two components will have consequences that weaken the academic personal brand.

Borman-Shoap et al. exemplify if an academic is skilled in a certain area, and the institution requires these skills, but he is not passionate about it, his career may be considered safe, but job satisfaction is low and the risk of burnout [12]. Conversely, if academics are involved in a job that they like and it also meets institutional needs, but they are not skilled at it, they may be at risk of poor job performance. Likewise, if an academic has passion and skills for a field, but there is no place for that in an institution, then that job will only become a hobby or extracurricular activity.

With the widespread use of personal branding strategies by academics, there are still very limited studies relating it to communication corruption practices. In fact, the corruption of communication is very likely to occur because of basic communication needs, both related to identity needs, social needs and instrumental goals [16], which are part of the substance of personal branding. Communication corruption is an act or event in communication that reduces the right of the audience to receive messages completely and correctly according to facts, both normative and contemplative facts by utilizing the power, strength and opportunity of the communicator [17]. Communication corruption occurs in various dimensions, including message dimensions (both verbal and non-verbal), media dimensions (both related to abuse, manipulation of features/ attributes and media ownership), context dimensions (both related to engineering and manipulation of situations, events, locations, time, moments, and other context attributions for the purposes of impression management and impression laundering), as well as behavioural dimensions (relating to attitudes or intentions, actions, and their consequences that may impact on ethical and legal violations).

Previous studies regarding the corrupt practices of students' communication in personal branding through social media showed a tendency to "use all kinds of means" or inappropriate ways in managing professional and skilful impressions, both in the form of portfolio manipulation and visual stories [18]. Another study related to the final assignment indicated the students' habit of citing without including clear sources, manipulating data, and "slandering" the source of the citation by including the author's fake name [19].

Likewise, the study of Wijaya et al. [20], which reveal the reasons for education personnel to commit communication corruption in branding themselves, including managerial reasons (to polish performance and get a position), financial (related to projects or jobs that have an impact on income), and communicative (for social recognition). While during the Covid-19 pandemic, academics (both lecturers and students) continued to carry out personal branding in various ways, it was important to trace the communication corruption practices that were likely to occur. Therefore, this article discusses: 1) how did academics brand themselves during the Covid-19 pandemic? 2) what forms of communication corruption occur in academics' personal branding?

II. METHOD

Based on Communication Corruption Theory (CCT), we discussed with two academic groups, namely the lecturer and student groups. Focus Group Discussion (FGD)'s topics

include communication corruption in the dimensions of messages, media, context and behavior. We also triangulate with examples of corruption of personal branding communication on social media. The discussion uses reflective questions. The issues discussed are not related to the participants directly but how they know, perceive, and assess the case based on their experiences. Reversed questions also complement the discussion to avoid a judgmental impression on the participants, which allows dishonest or rejected answers. There were ten discussion participants, five from the lecturer group and five from the student group with various demographic, psycho-geographic, and sociographic backgrounds. We coded the informants' identities by labelling them "Inf-1", "Inf-2", and so on, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE I. PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE

Group L (Lecturers)			
Participant s	Demographic*	Psycho-geographic **	Sociographic ***
Inf-1	32, female	Openness, Jakarta	High, SM act.
Inf-2	45, male	Conscientiousness, Palembang	Med., SM av.
Inf-3	33, male	Conscientiousness, Bandung	High, SM av.
Inf-4	49, female	Agreeableness, Yogyakarta	Low, SM non-act.
Inf-5	38, male	Openness, Jakarta	Med., SM av.
Group S (Students)			
Inf-6	20, female	Conscientiousness, Jakarta	Med., SM av.
Inf-7	21, male	Extraversion, Jakarta	High, SM act.
Inf-8	20, male	Neuroticism, Surabaya	Med, SM act.
Inf-9	22, female	Conscientiousness, Jakarta	Med., SM av.
Inf-10	19, female	Openness, Makassar	High, SM act.

* Including age and gender **including personality (OCEAN big five personality), lifestyle, and domicile ***including how sociable informants are (high/ medium/ low) and how active they are in social media (SM active/ SM average/ SM nonactive) as they admit.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Personal Branding during Covid-19 Pandemic

We encountered several forms of personal branding by academics during the Covid-19 pandemic, both for academic and professional purposes. In an academic context, lecturer groups generally establish internal and external institutional relationships for personal, managerial, social, and intellectual interests. Personally, for example, lecturers continue to stay in touch with fellow lecturers, academic staff, and students to construct an impression as a pleasant individual. Managerially, lecturers establish good relationships with superiors and various parties, both inside and outside the institution, so as not to hinder the bureaucracy and administration of academic work.

I feel this is especially important, ... because there are friends who are smart, diligent in publishing their works in reputable journals, but because they are lazy to stay in touch with their superiors, their functional position in their lecturer career is hampered. It is exceedingly difficult for him to go up to the associate professor level,

even though he is incredibly good in his performance, even to the professorship level (Inf-3, Bandung, Zoom, 02/05/2021).

Borman-Shoap et al. [12] state that the good performance of academics in their institutions that do not meet the needs of the institution (in this context, may indeed be needed by the institution but are not connected due to lack of communication and good relations with superiors), will only become a kind of hobby or extracurricular activity means nothing to the institution. Therefore, academics, even though in the Covid-19 pandemic conditions which require work from home (WFH), admit that they continue to maintain relationships online by utilizing communication technology and social media facilities such as WhatsApp (WA) and email.

This communication technology channel is also used by academics in establishing social relations externally, both with the community of lecturers or academics in other institutions as well as with professional entities in the communication industries. For lecturers, this good relationship can create social recognition and facilitate collaboration with various parties. Likewise, in creating an intellectual image, lecturers actively establish relationships with journal editors, conference organizers, and join social media groups that are active in informing the publication and dissemination of scientific works. It is important for lecturers to get scientific recognition because it is related to their academic profession.

Meanwhile, among students, personal branding during the Covid-19 pandemic is in line with their interests in achieving academic achievement, self-confidence, and, of course, social recognition. For this purpose, students carry out it through interesting thesis writing activities and satisfying performance in the presentation of the final work, because these activities and moments can be an effective stage in constructing themselves as great students.

Inf-6 for example. This Palembang-blooded woman from a state university in Jakarta admits that she is serious about working on her thesis because she does not want to be underestimated by her friends, and especially, her supervisor. "I see a lot of friends who are actually much smarter than me, but because they are lazy and mostly NATO [no action, talks only], they end up being labelled as bad by the supervisor," said Inf-6. This was agreed by Inf-9 who thought that attitude was important in the final project process because it had an impact on the student's self-image. "Sometimes, because their image is already bad, the lecturers are lazy to serve them. That is a stereotyping power!" Inf-9 said.

Inf-8 added, the dangers of stereotyping students among lecturers have even occurred since the class in the learning process and doing weekly assignments.

I was 'bullied' by a lecturer. Twice I did not pass a course that the lecturer taught. In class I was sometimes used as a bad example because I was considered lazy, preferring to play games rather than pay attention to class material. My image is not only bad in the eyes of the lecturers, but also my classmates, especially when doing group assignments. And even in online classes, I tend to be watched more by lecturers than other students.

I was obliged to keep on camera because the lecturer did not believe that I would stay in class during the learning process. It is annoying, but that is the price to pay for a stereotype that has formed (Inf-8, Surabaya, Zoom, 08/05/2021).

Stereotypes, images, traces of meaning, and impressions formed on a person are important artifacts in the formation of a brand, including personal brands [5][8]. Therefore, it is important for academics (both lecturers and students) to keep their artifacts in the eyes of stakeholders and people around them, so they do not get experiences like Inf-8. Apart from being artefactual, personal brands are also positive, strategic, promising, and person centric [8].

For professional purposes, the traits and personal brand aspects are becoming increasingly relevant. From the student group, Inf-7 admits that he posts many positive things on his Instagram and Facebook, especially related to the field that will become his future career, namely interior design. Apart from posting portfolios, he also shares posts from well-known design brand sites such as Elle Décor, IKEA, and others to show his taste in design. That way, potential clients or employers can weigh his credibility based on his taste and work on Instagram and Facebook. Inf-10 agrees that social media is indeed exceptionally good at building reputation and showing taste and talent in the fields we are working on, especially in the current pandemic. This phenomenon is not surprising, as a CareerBuilder survey reveals that 58% of employers do social check to find information that supports a candidate's qualification, 50% make sure the candidate has a professional online persona, and 34% see what is posted about the job [21].

Likewise, the lecturers actively branded themselves during the pandemic through various virtual events in the form of seminars, talk shows, workshops, tutorials, and online learning. In addition to the need for functional academic positions from the aspect of community service, these activities are also to build a professional and expert image in their fields to attract prospective project givers. Lecturers can become consultants, collaborators, or trainers in companies, government agencies, and industrial projects that are relevant to their field of expertise. In addition, the personal branding of the lecturers is also useful in developing side businesses, both in attracting investors, partners, and customers.

Before becoming a lecturer, I had a professional career and built a catering and restaurant business with colleagues. So business is nothing new to me. Currently, I provide a lot of training to SME players, such as sharing experiences as well as consulting, especially in the culinary business. As well as being known among entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs, seminars posted through social media have also popularized my business brand, bringing in new customers and clients (Inf-5, Jakarta, Zoom, 02/05/2021).

During a pandemic, social media has indeed become a popular media in the personal branding of academics. Inf-1, a lecturer at a state university in Solo, even created a tutorial vlog channel on YouTube to build an image of himself as an expert and professional in the field of graphic design. Equipped with a dozen years of experience working in multinational advertising agencies, the vlog has attracted thousands of viewers and subscribers. "Experience at the agency taught me to communicate in a simple, clear, and interesting way. That is what I applied to my vlog," said Inf-1. However, inf-1 admits that the purpose of the vlog is not solely to have a financial impact, but also social, especially to help start-ups and small-capital SMEs or beginners who want to learn design. Vergheze [3] states that in the current Covid-19 pandemic where social media is the prima donna of social communication, academics can also take innovative ways to build society and show their social responsibility.

Apart from social media, lecturers also carry out personal branding through forums and scientific media such as journals, proceedings, and other forms of publications including popular scientific blogs, such as those developed by Inf-4, which focus on health and environmental issues. "My goal is to ward off hoaxes and fake news about health that are circulating in online media, especially related to the Covid-19 ," said Inf-4 who is also a health practitioner from a state university in Padang, West Sumatra.

B. The Corruption of Communication in Personal Branding

Although personal branding is especially important for academics to improve performance in institutions and is useful for getting project jobs [12], in practice, communication corruption often occurs, both in the dimensions of the message, media, context, and behaviour. In the message dimension, communication corruption takes the form of misleading information, both verbal and nonverbal. Other forms are polished visuals to create certain beneficial impressions, mostly in personal branding through social media. Not infrequently, communication corruption is present in the form of facts that are partially being hidden to

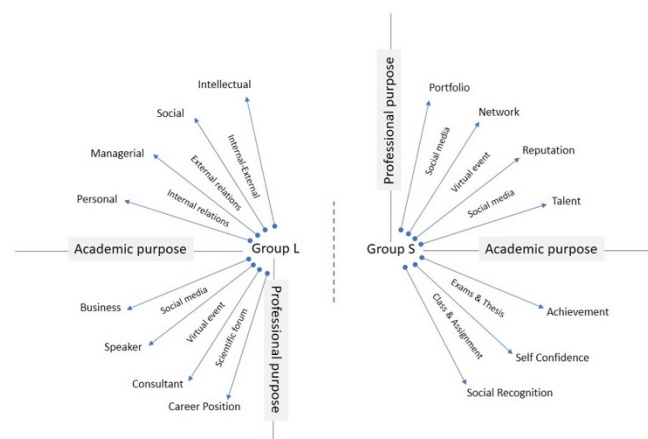


Fig. 1. Why academics keep branding themselves during the covid-19 pandemic.

In addition to social media, Inf-10 who wants to build a career as a master of ceremony and professional announcer also takes advantage of virtual events to branding themselves. Online events, both on-campus and off-campus, often use him as a host or moderator. Of course, this adds to the portfolio and professional experience to get a job or build a business after college. Therefore, he always posts all activities related to his field on social media, like most students who do personal branding through social media for future professional career goals [18].

change the overall meaning or the meaning that has been twisted to present the impression and facts as desired.

Inf-2 for example. He had a bad experience in revising a student's final project proposal that he tested. In the proposal seminar, he gave suggestions on the criteria for informants because of the methodological approach used. However, the student used a different informant, thus showing different and invalid results. "As someone who understands this method, of course, I can easily find irregularities in the research data. He hid the fact that the informants were different, and the data was collated to match. I suspect, this kind of practice might also happen to other students, and many lecturers found it but did not disclose it openly," said Inf-2. This phenomenon, in a different context, is similar to the findings of Fauziah [19], which revealed the practice of slandering article writers cited by students in thesis writing by displaying information that is different from the facts in the article.

Another experience was told by Inf-6, who had found extraordinary visual polish on her friend's Instagram. She knows her friend physically what like is, because she meets her every day. However, because she wanted to attract a guy she had a crush on and often peeked at her Instagram, the friend was willing to touch up her photo in such a way that it was much shinier than the original. "...and in the end, they are going out. Maybe this is what is called the first impression so tempting," said Inf-6 with a laugh. Wijaya and Nasution [22], also found a similar thing on the Instagram of students who polish their portfolio works on social media to attract prospective employers or clients who use their skills and talents. Interestingly, Nasution [18] revealed that prospective employers did not object to the manipulation of student work if they could prove it at work.

In the media dimension, communication corruption occurs in the form of misuse of media features, manipulation of media data such as the number of followers, shares, and likes. While communication corruption in the context dimension includes situation engineering, deceptive moments, exaggerating facts to create certain impressions, conditioning events, and washing away negative impressions that have been formed previously through replacing positive impressions.

I saw on Instagram a friend was highly active posting pictures of him who seemed busy doing his final project from one cafe to another, every night, staying up late, with self-encouraging picture captions. Sometimes the image caption is aphorisms about 'a result that never betrays the process' to show that he is seriously struggling to finish his studies. This is contrary to the fact that has been attached to him, which seems lazy to do assignments, is often reprimanded by lecturers in class, and tends to be passive in class discussion groups. I think he is changing his impression of himself, from negative to positive, and covered up real facts about himself (Inf-10, Makassar, Zoom, 08/05/2021).

On the other hand, Inf-5 sees some of his colleagues tend to use all kinds of ways to get scientific work performance points (in the academic career system in Indonesia, called KUM), for example in publications or research reports. Not infrequently, they do what is called 'authorship for sale' [23], namely by paying the main author to be named as a co-

author (or become the main author) even without any contribution in the technical process of research and writing.

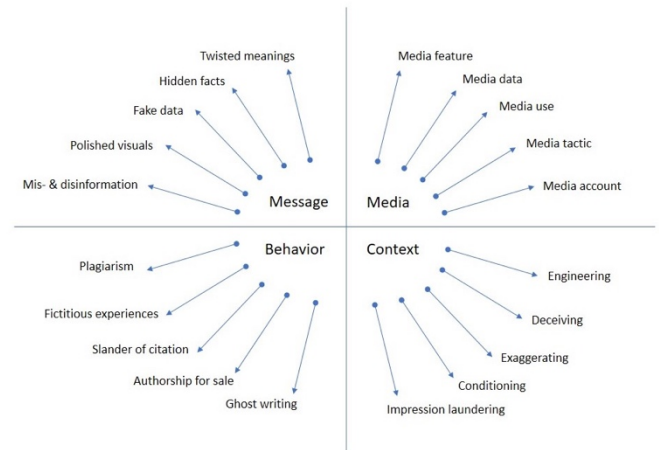


Fig. 2. Communication corruption modes in academics' personal branding during Covid-19 pandemic

This phenomenon does not only occur in Indonesia, but also in other countries as reported by Hvistendahl [24] regarding the practice of predatory publication in China. This does not only occur for publications in predatory journals by corrupting the peer review process referred to as 'science for sale' [25], but also in reputable journals indexed by credible indexing institutions [24]. In fact, In 2013 a computer scientist from France, Cyril Labbé found many computer-generated nonsense works published by reputable publishers such as Springer and IEEE [26].

Another phenomenon is to falsify professional experience data in the industry in career background narratives to strengthen credibility as a webinar or talk show speaker. "... even though I, as a friend who works in the same field, of course know her real career background in the industry before becoming a lecturer," said Inf-4. But Inf-4 chose to remain silent and understand it because the speaker is 'selling' herself to the public, and hopes to profit from it, even though in a way that, from a moral standpoint, is inappropriate. This is in line with the research of Wijaya et al. [20], who revealed three main motives for communication corruption of academics in personal branding, namely financial motives (to fulfil daily needs and increase income), managerial (to get a position in the institution), and communicative (to construct identity and gain social recognition). In the behavioural dimension, apart from the phenomena above, communication corruption also occurs in the form of ghost writing, slander of citation, and plagiarism.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study shows that groups of lecturers and students tend to brand themselves during the Covid-19 pandemic for academic and professional purposes. For academic purposes, lecturers use internal and external relationships, which have positive implications for both personally, managerially, socially, and intellectually, while students mostly do personal branding for academic purposes in the context of boosting achievement, self-confidence, and social recognition, both in class or in doing assignments as well as during examinations and thesis defense. For professional purposes, a group of

lecturers tends to use personal branding as a weapon to get career positions, become consultants, speakers, and support side businesses. Personal branding through scientific forums, virtual events, and social media. Student group uses professional personal branding for portfolio purposes, networking, building reputations, and promoting talent.

Meanwhile, issues of communication corruption in the message dimension that emerged in the discussion included misinformation and disinformation, polished visuals, fake data, hidden facts, and twisted meanings. In the media dimension, corruption occurs concerning misuse of media features, manipulation of media data, devious tactics to optimize media functions, and the creation of fake social media accounts. In the context dimension, communication corruption takes the form of engineering events and moments, creating deceptive narrative contexts, fabricating stories, conditioning, and washing negative impressions by covering them with positive impressions. As for the behavioral dimension, communication corruption manifests in ghostwriting activities, plagiarism, fabricating career backgrounds in webinar events to create the impression of professional experience, slander in quotations, as well as buying and selling practices for the status and role of authorship.

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