

PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF RAHMAT HADI KUSUMA IN BUILDING PERSONAL BRANDING AS A PHOTOGRAPHER IN BAUBAU CITY

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ABSTRAK

Personal branding merupakan aspek penting bagi fotografer profesional dalam membangun identitas dan meningkatkan daya saing di industri fotografi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui bagaimana strategi Rahmat Hadi Kusuma dalam membangun personal branding sebagai fotografer profesional di Kota Baubau, serta faktor faktor yang mempengaruhi proses tersebut. Penelitian ini, menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan fenomenologi digunakan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman subjektif dan strategi yang digunakan Rahmat Hadi Kusuma untuk membentuk citra profesionalnya. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan analisis portofolio fotografi dan media sosial digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa personal branding Rahmat Hadi Kusuma terbentuk melalui kombinasi gaya fotografinya yang unik, publikasi karya yang konsisten, penggunaan media sosial yang efektif, dan hubungan aktif dengan klien. Selain itu, keyakinannya sebagai fotografer yang unik di Kota Baubau didukung sebagian besar oleh prinsip prinsip pribadinya, seperti inovatif, profesional, dan unik. Studi ini membantu fotografer lain yang ingin membangun personal branding mereka. Ini juga menyoroti betapa pentingnya membangun citra profesional di era digital dengan strategi komunikasi visual dan interaksi sosial.

Kata kunci: Personal Branding, Fotografer, Studi Fenomenologi, Rahmat Hadi Kusuma, Kota Baubau

ABSTRACT

Phenomenology Study of Rahmat Hadi Kusuma in Building Personal Branding as a photographer in Baubau city. Personal branding is crucial for professional photographers in establishing their identity and enhancing their competitiveness in the photography industry. This study aims to determine Rahmat Hadi Kusuma's strategy for creating personal branding as a professional photographer in Baubau City, as well as the factors that influence the process. Using a qualitative and phenomenological approach, this study explores the subjective experiences and strategies used by Rahmat Hadi Kusuma to shape his professional image. Data were collected through observation, in-depth interviews, and analysis of photography portfolios and social media. The study results indicate that Rahmat Hadi Kusuma's personal branding is formed through his distinctive photography style, consistent publication of his works, effective use of social media, and active client relationships. In addition, his belief as an exceptional photographer in Baubau City is primarily supported by his principles, such as innovation, professionalism, and uniqueness. This study helps other photographers who want to build their branding. It also emphasizes the importance of maintaining a professional image in the digital era through effective visual communication strategies and social interactions.

Keywords: *Personal Branding, Photographer, Phenomenological Study, Rahmah Hadi Kusuma, Baubau city.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, most people are increasingly active in engaging in activities via social media, driven by the rapid development of technology and the proliferation of information. (Hendra 2020) . Social media has become a primary tool for individuals to build their self-image and introduce their work to a broader audience. Instagram is one of the most influential platforms, enabling users to establish their personal brand through engaging visual content.

Instagram is a social media platform that enables users to take photos, edit them, apply digital filters, upload pictures, create feeds, share Instagram Stories, and engage with likes and followers, which can influence self-presentation (Setiawan & Audie, 2020).

Instagram has become one of the most popular social media platforms in recent years. In 2019, it ranked fourth as the most frequently used social media platform in Indonesia, with 80% of internet users accessing it (Restusari & Farida, 2019). Instagram is also widely used as a platform for sharing information, creativity, business, and personal

branding (Nasution et al., 2023). Instagram users can develop their brand with a consistent self-image for every photo and video they upload. A person's sense of self is a result of a process of processing, organizing, and storing repeated mental images. This process is called self-image. Self-image is similar to the business card you give to potential clients. It is a personal statement about who you are and how you see yourself (Pradana et al., nd)



Figure 1. Instagram users in Indonesia
 (Source: NeopoleonCat)

Survey on the number of Instagram users in July 2024. According to the study, there are approximately 90.183 million Instagram users in Indonesia, accounting for 31.9% of the total population. Indonesia has a large number of Instagram social media

users, making it a lucrative market for promotional activities.

Social media is currently essential for personal branding because it reveals identity through self-presentation (Efrida & Diniati, 2020).

A personal brand is an individual who can create an emotional response in others (Gogali & Tsabit, 2021).

Personal branding provides clarity as an individual, pleasing both oneself and others. Personal branding is a strategy that promotes oneself by cultivating a positive public image of one's qualities, such as morals, character, and skills (Mujianto, Nurhadi, and Kharismawati, 2021). Personal branding is the best way to describe what makes someone different and valuable.

The smallest part of personal branding is giving a name, and after that, an individual is asked to become a professional in the field in which they are engaged. If they have established a strong public perception, achieving the desired goals will be easier (Jamil, Hamad, and Sari, 2024). Strong personal branding will make their character stick in the public's minds. People build their own positive identities (Leary, 2019).

With the emergence of the internet-based web, social media has become a valuable tool for helping people communicate and build online networks. Social media is beneficial for public relations in disseminating information; according to the theory of management relations, the primary function of public relations is a communication activity that connects organizations and the public. Utilizing social media effectively facilitates communication between an organization and the public (Suri et al., 2023).

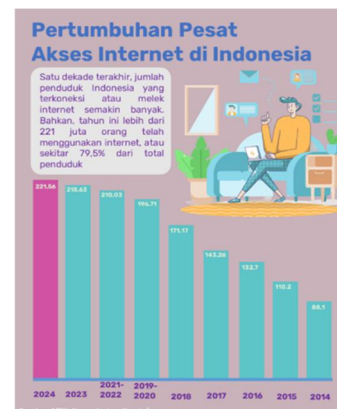


Figure 2. Rapid growth of internet access in Indonesia (**Source:** APJII, Ministry of Communication and Information)

According to the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII), the number of Indonesians using the Internet is expected to reach 221.5 million in 2024, up from a total population of 278.6 million in 2023. According to the APJII penetration survey 2024, Indonesia's internet penetration rate reached 79.5%,

representing a 1.4% increase from the previous period. This indicates a consistent rise in the positive trend graph of Indonesian internet penetration in the last five years, which has increased significantly.

Instagram is used as a medium for sharing photos and as a platform for creative professionals, including photographers, to showcase their identity and quality consistently.

Photography on social media is now not just about capturing moments but also a means of self-expression and a marketing strategy for photographers. Professional photographers utilize Instagram to attract clients, establish credibility, and expand their professional network within the creative industry. However, creating a strong and authentic personal brand in a highly competitive digital environment is not easy.

In today's social media era, photographers must not only produce high-quality photos but also establish a strong personal brand through effective branding strategies. Personal branding is essential because it enables photographers to develop a strong professional identity, attract customers, and foster ongoing trust and credibility.

Baubau City, in the Southeast Sulawesi province, boasts a wealth of

culture and natural beauty, making it one of the areas that is developing in the creative industry, particularly in photography. Amid the increasing number of photographers who use social media to showcase their work, the competition is intensifying. Photographers in Baubau must have distinctive characteristics and strong personal branding strategies to survive and thrive.

One of the photographers who stands out in building personal branding in the city of Baubau is Rahmat Hadi Kusuma. Through his personal Instagram account @rhadikusuma and commercial account @upstairphoto.

Rahmat Hadi Kusuma is a professional photographer based in Baubau City. He has been interested in photography since 2007 and began taking pictures while studying in 2010. That year, he began working as a freelance photographer. To date, his services are still in use by people, both at wedding events, concert events, and any other event that has ever taken place in Baubau City. In Baubau City, he is pretty famous; he has also presented a photography workshop material organized by the Baubau City Tourism Office in 2024.



Figure 3. Instagram social media account @rhadikusuma (**Source:** Instagram account @rhadikusuma)

His two Instagram accounts, which he used to build his personal branding as a photographer, are successful. On his first Instagram account, @rhadikusuma gained 4,257 followers. On this account, he displays his works in the genres of Street photography, Human Interest, and Landscape photography. On the account, he also showcases his portfolio, which includes several projects he has handled in various regions, such as portrait and documentary photography, with locations in Papua. On this account, he produces photography works with an engaging visual style, so he succeeds in building the audience's perception that he is a photographer.

Rahmat Hadi Kusuma has successfully built his follower base and created creative photography works, utilizing the Instagram platform to establish an image and

identity as a photographer. However, the process of building and maintaining personal branding on a very dynamic platform like Instagram is not an easy task. This involves a complex strategy. Starting from the selection of works, visual style, especially consistency and authenticity, are also the main factors in building trust with the audience.

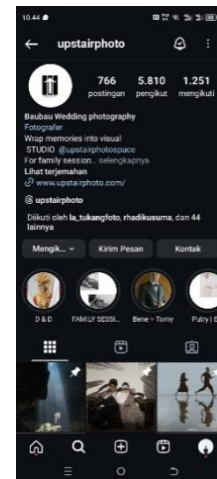


Figure 4. Upstairphoto's Instagram social media account (**Source:** Instagram account @upstairphoto)

In 2015, he created his brand as a freelance wedding photographer on Instagram with the account name @upstairphoto. This account is a commercial account managed by Rahmat Hadikusuma, with 5,814 followers, where the content of the @upstairphoto account differs from that of the @rhadikusuma account. On the @upstairphoto account, only his wedding photography works are published.

The two different accounts are one of Rahmat Hadi Kusuma's strategies to brand himself as a professional photographer on social media, and this is one of his advantages over other photographers. His cool photo content, combined with a neat Instagram feed, is one of Rahmat Hadi Kusuma's key strengths as a photographer.



Figure 5. Photo of the inauguration of the 41st Sultan of Buton (**Source:** Instagram account @rhadikusuma)

One of his works is highly educational and in great demand among the public. Many content or photographic works have been uploaded, one of which is a photographic work when documenting the inauguration of the 41st Sultan of Buton; in addition to the public liking the results of the photos because they use the proper photography techniques and angles, the public also likes the message content obtained from the photo, namely the inauguration process of the Sultan of

Buton where during the oath-taking process, which was carried out in Baruga, a sacred place in the tradition of the Buton Sultanate. In the post, the @rhadikusuma account garnered hundreds of Instagram likes and comment responses from users, most of whom were positive and supportive of each post featuring the work. This indicates that Rahmat Hadi Kusuma has successfully presented a positive image of a photographer, as his work not only showcases pictures but also conveys a meaningful message through them.

By using the nature of the research that attracts attention, Rahmat Hadi Kusuma uses the presence of social media on Instagram as a guide for personal branding. Several previous studies have discussed personal branding on social media; however, specific research examining the individual branding of photographers in developing areas, such as Baubau City, remains minimal.

In addition, although many studies discuss personal branding in general, few have highlighted how photographers construct their professional identities through a phenomenological approach, specifically by exploring their subjective experiences in managing

their self-image on social media. Therefore, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of how Rahmat Hadi Kusuma builds personal branding as a professional photographer by exploring creative photography on Instagram.

This study aims to analyze the personal branding strategy employed by Rahmat Hadi Kusuma in establishing his professional image in Baubau City, identifying the visual and narrative elements used to construct his self-image through Instagram, and understanding Rahmat Hadi Kusuma's subjective experience in developing and maintaining his personal branding on social media.

With a phenomenological approach, this study will explore Rahmat Hadi Kusuma's subjective experience in developing his branding, aiming to gain a more profound understanding of the strategies and challenges involved in establishing a professional identity as a photographer in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being observed. This method, also known as naturalistic research, is

conducted in a natural setting to obtain more in-depth and richer data. This qualitative approach enables researchers to access detailed information about the event and allows them to identify and understand the reasons behind phenomena that can be difficult to comprehend (Suri et al., 2023). This study employs a phenomenological method to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of photographers, including their motives, experiences, and self-meaning, as exemplified by photographer Rahmat Hadi Kusuma's personal branding efforts in Baubau City.

The primary data sources include in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews provide more valid and authentic insights into the informants' perspectives, while observation and documentation provide additional context and empirical evidence. To ensure the validity of the data, this study applies triangulation techniques. Triangulation is achieved by comparing data from various sources, methods, and perspectives to minimize bias and ensure the consistency of findings. By combining multiple data collection methods, this

study aims to present a comprehensive and accurate understanding of personal branding on social media.

This research was conducted in Baubau City by examining Rahmat Hadi Kusuma's Instagram account, including both personal and commercial accounts, as well as in-depth interviews scheduled from January to March 2025. The subject of the study was Rahmat Hadi Kusuma, who is actively building his professional photography brand in Baubau City. Triangulation and various data collection methods are expected to produce reliable conclusions about the studied phenomena. According to Wijaya (2018: 120-121), data triangulation is a method for examining data from various sources in different ways and at other times.

DISCUSSION

The study results show that a professional photographer's branding can be effectively built and maintained through a consistent social media strategy, particularly on Instagram. Rahmat Hadi Kusuma chose Instagram as the leading Platform because of its wide and free accessibility. Although he also has a portfolio in the form of a website, its

primary use is for corporate cooperation. This photographer's personal branding primarily focuses on Instagram, particularly his business account, @upstairphoto, which serves as a digital storefront to showcase his work.

1. Branding Strategy in Building Self-Image as a Professional Photographer

In building personal branding as a professional photographer in Baubau City, Rahmat Hadi Kusuma realized the importance of having a clear identity in photography. He determined his primary focus to be wedding photography and street photography. To strengthen his image, he founded an Upstairphoto vendor and managed two Instagram accounts: @rhadikusuma, which focuses on street photography, and @upstairphotography, which specializes in wedding photography. This separation aims to clarify segmentation and provide a stronger identity for each field of photography in which he is engaged. It is the freest part for the author to express himself. No need to be long-winded, but argue logically. When discussing it, review it in accordance with the research objectives. Connect the findings with observations or previous research

results by showing similarities and discussing the differences.

First, after realizing that personal branding is necessary for a photographer who is involved in the professional world. So, finally, I decided what kind of photographer I would be known as. Well, I, Rahmat Hadi Kusuma, as a person, have an interest in wedding photography, and outside of weddings, I also enjoy street photography. Finally, I created a vendor called Upstairphoto, and then I created two Instagram accounts: one called @rhadikusuma and the second called @upstairphotography. There, I focus on being a commercial or wedding photographer in Baubau. My goal in creating these two accounts is to be more focused, with @upstairphotography specifically for weddings and @rhadikusuma for street or public photography. That is my personal branding strategy as a professional photographer in Baubau". (interview results, February 2025).



Figure 12. Prewedding photos (**Source:** Instagram account @upstairphoto)



Figure 13. Prewedding photos (**Source:** Instagram account @upstairphoto)

In displaying his identity on social media, especially Instagram, Rahmat manages his two accounts using different strategies. On the @upstairphoto account, he only uploads photos of his work in the wedding photography field. He also builds distinctive characteristics into his pictures with a minimalist approach, utilizing negative space composition, and incorporates elements of street photography into prewedding and wedding photography. In addition, he explores the story behind the couple being photographed to give more value to his work. With this approach, Upstairphoto has a distinctive

characteristic that distinguishes it from other photographers in Baubau City.

For example, I asked the two couples where they usually go or what their most memorable place is. Well, that is also what builds people's perception that upstairs photos contain photos that have a story." (interview results, February 2025)



Figure 14. Street Photography (**Source:** Instagram account @rhadikusuma)

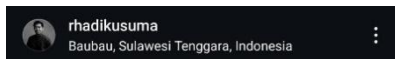


Figure 15. Street Photography (**Source:** Instagram account @rhadikusuma)

Meanwhile, on his Instagram account, @rhadikusuma, he tends to upload photographs that incorporate street photography, utilizing photographic composition techniques

such as the rule of thirds, framing, and human interest. Consistency in uploading content is a crucial factor in establishing personal branding. Rahmat Hadi Kusuma emphasized that in the business world, maintaining a continuous presence on social media is necessary to stay in the algorithm and top of mind for the people of Baubau City. He applies different strategies to his two Instagram accounts. @upstairsphoto posts more frequently to maintain its existence, while @rhadikusuma is more selective in uploading content, as it is more segmented. In addition to social media consistency, he emphasizes the importance of building offline networks as part of a personal branding strategy.

"Consistency is critical because there is a saying (if you do not post, it is hard to close), or what is meant is hard to buy. I am @rhadikusuma, and I am @upstairphoto; that is where I separate, so when I am on @upstairphoto, I have to keep posting so that people can see and always be in the algorithm of the Baubau city community, but if I am on @rhadikusuma, I tend to post feeds less often because it is more segmented. The selling method is also different; if I am on @upstairphoto, I have to post more often. In my

opinion, when entering the business realm, posting consistency is crucial so that we remain at the forefront of the Baubau city community's mind. However, it is equally important to build consistency on social media; in fact, building offline networks is also crucial. So I build my branding online and offline". (interview results, February 2025)

Storytelling plays a vital role in establishing a photographer's image. Rahmat Hadi Kusuma understands that the audience not only wants to see the results of the photos but is also interested in the process of creating the work. Therefore, he often creates behind-the-scenes content and shows the equipment for taking pictures. Additionally, he prioritizes storytelling in his photos by focusing on details that hold emotional value for his clients.

"A good photo is a photo that has a lot of complete storytelling, as we can see in @upstairsphoto. Sometimes I do not just focus on the face, but I focus more on the details that have a story for them." (interview results, February 2025).

According to Rahmat, the success of personal branding in the photography field is influenced by several primary factors. First, a good attitude when interacting with clients is essential, as good quality work will be in vain if a professional demeanor

does not accompany it. In addition, consistency in work, uniqueness or distinct characteristics, strong storytelling, engaging visual narratives, and effective networking and collaboration are also key factors in building a strong brand.

In his efforts to differentiate himself from other photographers in Baubau City, Rahmat consistently strives to think outside the box and create something that many photographers have not done. This creative and innovative approach is one of the advantages that make him known as a professional photographer with strong personal branding in Baubau City.

"I do not know if this is called a strategy, but what I do in my portraits, I always try to think about what other people do not think about." (interview results, February 2024).

2. Subjective Experience in Maintaining Personal Branding on Social Media

To maintain his professional image, Rahmat Hadi Kusuma employs a strategic approach to using social media, particularly Instagram. He is more careful in choosing the content he uploads and ensures that all posts remain related to photography, so

that the image he has built remains consistent.

"I will be wiser, more careful, more observant of everything I post on Instagram, and I will try to post things that are always related to photography so that the image that was initially built as a photographer remains a photographer." (interview results, February 2025).

In maintaining a personal brand on Instagram, several challenges are faced, including boredom, algorithm changes, and intense competition. To overcome boredom, Rahmat looks for new hobbies to refresh his creativity. In dealing with algorithm changes, he strives to enhance audience interaction and foster stronger engagement. Meanwhile, in dealing with competition, he continues to seek new, unique styles that can differentiate his work from that of other photographers.

"Boredom, to overcome it, I will look for new hobbies or things that I like. With the changing Instagram algorithm, the solution is to build interactions with the audience to increase engagement. The competition is tight, the solution is I will look for a new, unique style in my work." (interview results, February 2025)

Interaction with the audience has a significant influence on the personal branding that he builds. With the audience's involvement in commenting on his portfolio, the reach and potential of clients interested in using his services increase. Therefore, building good communication with the audience is one of the essential strategies for maintaining its existence in photography.

In dealing with criticism or negative comments on social media, Rahmat prefers to use them as motivation to continue developing. Constructive criticism can serve as a valuable evaluation tool to enhance the quality of the work produced.

"I use criticism more as motivation to develop" (interview results, February 2025).

Along with the development of social media, personal branding strategies have undergone significant evolution. As a professional photographer in the commercial world, Rahmat realizes that he must

adapt to the changes. For example, the change in the Instagram layout from square to 3:4 format affects how he arranges the composition of the photos he uploads. He can stay relevant and competitive in the photography industry by being flexible and ready to face changes.

"Strategic changes are like a photographer involved in the commercial professional world. We must be prepared for real changes, as the dynamics of photography can change rapidly. Especially in building personal branding on Instagram, the Platform Has changed the size of the post layout, which was originally square and is now 3:4. That finally also changed the size that we used to use often." (interview results, February 2025)

Regarding the audience's response to the uploaded works, Rahmat feels happy if he gets a positive response. However, he also wants the audience to provide more detailed comments so that he can measure the extent to which his photos are successful in conveying visual messages. He accepts both positive and negative comments as material for reflection, continuing to improve the quality of his work.

"When the response is positive, of course, as a human being, I am happy, but sometimes I want them to respond with an explanation, for example, good, what is good, if bad, what is bad, like that. So that I can measure the success of my photos that can be enjoyed by people who see them. Likewise, I want them to comment with reasons why it is bad, rather than just negative comments. However, the conclusion is that I am still happy when the response is positive; if it is negative, I still accept it." (interview results, February 2025).

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, the personal branding of photographer Rahmat Hadi Kusuma in Baubau City was formed through a combination of a consistent photography style, effective use of social media, community involvement, and collaboration with local vendors. Although he faced difficulties, the strategies helped him build a strong personal image and opened up incredible career opportunities.

The strategy implemented by Rahmat in building his personal brand is not limited to consistency in photography style, but also utilizes social media, especially Instagram, as a digital showcase to display his work.

Interaction with the audience, use of Instagram features such as stories, reels, and live, as well as selectivity in choosing photos and captions, also play a role in strengthening his professional identity. Additionally, involvement in the photography community and establishing a professional network with clients and fellow photographers further strengthens his reputation in the industry.

This research can serve as a reference for other photographers seeking to develop their branding, as well as provide insight into the importance of visual communication strategies and social interactions in the photography industry during the digital era. By understanding the strategies that Rahmat has implemented, other photographers can adjust their approaches to meet the needs and developments of social media, staying relevant and competitive in this industry.

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