



Employability Skills and Career Readiness Among Muslim Vocational Students: Mediating Role of Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Rapid changes in the labour market require vocational students to develop career readiness supported by employability skills and psychological resources for career decision-making. This study tested the direct and indirect effects of employability skills on career readiness via Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy (CDMSE) among Grade-12 Muslim vocational students. Using a cross-sectional design, all students at SMK Multicomp Depok, Indonesia (N = 215) were surveyed using saturated sampling, with Muslim status verified through school records. Adapted measures were used: the Self-Perceived Employability Scale ($\alpha = .96$), the Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale ($\alpha = .95$), and the Student Career Readiness Scale ($\alpha = .98$). Mediation was examined using PROCESS Macro for SPSS (Model 4) with bootstrap resampling. Employability skills significantly predicted CDMSE ($b = 1.21$, $SE = .12$, $t = 10.22$, $p < .01$; $R^2 = .33$) and career readiness (direct effect controlling for CDMSE: $b = .66$, $SE = .11$, $t = 6.09$, $p < .01$). CDMSE also significantly predicted career readiness ($b = .42$, $SE = .05$, $t = 8.13$, $p < .01$; model $R^2 = .53$). The indirect effect of employability skills on career readiness via CDMSE was significant ($b = .51$, $SE = .09$, 95% BC CI [.35, .70]), indicating partial mediation. The findings support Social Cognitive Career Theory and suggest that guidance and counseling programs should integrate employability development with interventions that strengthen decision-making self-efficacy. Limitations include the cross-sectional design, self-report measures, and a single-school sample; future research

should use longitudinal designs and broader settings to improve generalizability.

Keywords: Employability Skills; Career Readiness; Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy; Mediation; Vocational High School Students

ABSTRAK

Perubahan cepat dalam dunia kerja menuntut siswa mengembangkan kesiapan karier yang didukung keterampilan kerja dan sumber daya psikologis dalam pengambilan keputusan. Penelitian ini menguji pengaruh langsung dan tidak langsung keterampilan kerja terhadap kesiapan karier melalui efikasi diri pengambilan keputusan karier (*Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy/CDMSE*). Desain kuantitatif *cross-sectional* melibatkan seluruh siswa kelas XII beragama Islam di SMK Multicomp Depok, Indonesia (N = 215) dengan *saturated sampling*. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan *Self-Perceived Employability Scale* ($\alpha = 0,96$), *Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale* ($\alpha = 0,95$), dan *Student Career Readiness Scale* ($\alpha = 0,98$) yang diadaptasi. Analisis menggunakan PROCESS Macro SPSS Model 4 dengan *bootstrap*. Keterampilan kerja memprediksi CDMSE secara signifikan ($b = 1,21$; $SE = 0,12$; $p < 0,01$; $R^2 = 0,33$) dan memprediksi kesiapan karier setelah mengontrol CDMSE ($b = 0,66$; $SE = 0,11$; $p < 0,01$). CDMSE juga memprediksi kesiapan karier ($b = 0,42$; $SE = 0,05$; $p < 0,01$; R^2 model = 0,53). Efek tidak langsung keterampilan kerja terhadap kesiapan karier melalui CDMSE signifikan ($b = 0,51$; $SE = 0,09$; 95% BC CI [0,35; 0,70]), menunjukkan mediasi parsial. Temuan ini mendukung *Social Cognitive Career Theory* dengan menjelaskan mekanisme psikologis yang menghubungkan keterampilan kerja dan kesiapan karier pada siswa SMK Muslim, serta menegaskan perlunya program bimbingan dan konseling yang mengintegrasikan pengembangan keterampilan kerja dan penguatan CDMSE. Keterbatasan meliputi desain potong lintang, instrumen *self-report*, dan sampel satu sekolah; riset lanjutan perlu desain longitudinal dan konteks sekolah lebih beragam untuk memperkuat generalisasi serta menguji faktor kontekstual lain.

Kata kunci: Keterampilan Employabilitas; Kesiapan Karier; Efikasi Diri Pengambilan Keputusan Karier; Mediasi; Siswa Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan (SMK)

INTRODUCTION

Rapid changes in the global workplace have intensified attention to students' career readiness during the transition from education to employment. Digitalization, technological disruption, and growing demand for nontechnical competencies require individuals to master academic knowledge while also developing adaptive and sustainable skills (Potgieter et al., 2023; Rachmawati et al., 2024; Rahmat et al., 2019). International Labour Organization (ILO) reports indicate that youth and graduate unemployment remain persistent challenges, with young graduates often facing higher unemployment rates than the general workforce, partly due to skills mismatch between education outcomes and labour market demands. National statistics in Indonesia reported by Statistics Indonesia (BPS) similarly show that open unemployment among higher-education graduates remains substantial, underscoring continuing gaps between competencies and industry needs (Lambey et al., 2023; Prabowo et al., 2021; Suminar et al., 2025). These macro-level indicators are relevant to vocational secondary education because labour market mismatch develops across the schooling pipeline and becomes visible at the point of labour market entry. Grade 12 vocational students face this entry earlier and more directly, making early career preparation critical.

Career readiness refers to the level of preparedness students demonstrate through their competencies, attitudes, and psychological capacities that enable them to enter and remain active in the labour market. Previous studies have shown that higher levels of career readiness are associated with stronger employability, more successful transitions from education to employment, and improved psychological well-being (Husna et al., 2025; Sahin et al., 2025; Vijayalakshmi & J, 2025). Limited career readiness has been associated with delayed labour market entry, reduced confidence in job seeking, weaker perceived employability, and difficulty communicating competencies to employers. Students with low readiness also tend to show unclear career direction, lower persistence in career planning, and poorer employment outcomes after graduation, particularly when exposure to career exploration and guidance activities is limited (Stebleton et al., 2020). These patterns position career readiness as more than an educational output, since it functions as a determinant of transition success and longer-term career development.

Evidence also suggests that employability and career readiness are unevenly distributed across educational contexts. Among final-year students, only 16.4% demonstrated high employability, while 69.0% were moderate and 14.6% were low. Career maturity was similarly high in only 27.17% of participants, with 61.41% moderate and 11.41% low (Pratiwi & Fatwa, 2024). Findings from employability skills interventions provide a contrasting picture, with 81% of students reporting that they possessed the skills required to succeed in the labour market after completing an employability skills development module, indicating relatively strong perceived readiness (Perera et al., 2020). Variation across these findings implies that comparable educational efforts may produce different readiness outcomes across student populations.

Employability-related factors contribute substantially to work and career readiness. Skill competency accounted for 48.84% of the variance in work readiness, while employability skills contributed 19.98% (Wardani et al., 2017). Career readiness is strongly associated with work readiness ($r = .590$) (Husna et al., 2025), and career self-efficacy has been reported to explain up to 60% of students' work readiness (Baiti et al., 2018). These studies largely demonstrate direct associations and do not fully explain why students with similar skill levels may exhibit different levels of career readiness. Effect magnitudes also vary across studies, suggesting that additional psychological mechanisms may influence how skills are translated into readiness.

Career development research increasingly emphasizes process explanations, not only whether employability skills relate to career readiness, but also how such skills become readiness outcomes. Accounts that rely primarily on skill acquisition remain theoretically limited because they cannot adequately explain variability in readiness among students with comparable competencies. A correlational quantitative approach that tests a mediation mechanism is warranted to clarify the pathway linking competencies and readiness, particularly in contexts where many students still show moderate or low levels of employability and preparedness.

Value-based and cultural dimensions may further shape career development in Islamic educational contexts. Career readiness among Muslim students may be oriented not only toward labour market success but also toward the internalization of Islamic Work Ethic (IWE), which includes responsibility (*amanah*), excellence in work (*ihsan*), and purposeful

orientation framed as *ibadah* (worship) and *khidmah lil ummah* (service to the community) (Choirudin et al., 2022; Mariyono, 2025). These values can provide a moral frame that strengthens intrinsic motivation and ethical commitment in workplace preparation. A study of Muslim adolescents in Madura shows that career orientation is interpreted not merely as economic pursuit but also as service and worship, with family influence, peer support, and religiously grounded values shaping motives, preferred paths, and standards of career success (Sa'idah et al., 2023). In the present study, these value dimensions are treated as contextual background that may shape meaning-making around career decisions. The tested model focuses on employability skills, career decision-making self-efficacy, and career readiness as measured variables.

Career readiness is often understood as a multidimensional concept that encompasses technical competencies, transferable skills, awareness of career pathways, and psychological preparedness to make career decisions and address occupational challenges (Harris-Reeves et al., 2024; Lapan et al., 2017; Mattern et al., 2014). Empirical evidence indicates strong links between career readiness and work readiness, suggesting that students with higher readiness are better positioned to meet industry demands and secure employment opportunities (Husna et al., 2025). Career readiness also functions as a psychological buffer by reducing anxiety and strengthening confidence in managing career uncertainty (Ferreira et al., 2024; Vijayalakshmi & J, 2025).

Among the factors associated with career readiness, employability skills are considered one of the most reliable predictors. They encompass transferable abilities such as communication, problem solving, teamwork, adaptability, and career management that support individuals in obtaining employment, maintaining their positions, and progressing in dynamic labour markets (Hamad & Abdelrahim, 2024; Nayan & Nayan, 2024; Omar et al., 2023). These skills bridge academic learning and workplace demands, supporting work readiness and career readiness (Harris-Reeves et al., 2024; Risdwiyanto et al., 2023). In the context of digital transformation and the emergence of Industry 4.0, employability skills are increasingly associated with career adaptability and the long-term sustainability of employability (Potgieter et al., 2023; Sarkar et al., 2024).

Skill mastery alone does not fully explain differences in career readiness among individuals, pointing to internal psychological mechanisms that shape how skills are used

in career decision-making. Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy (CDMSE) has received substantial attention as a domain-specific mechanism. CDMSE refers to beliefs about one's ability to carry out career decision tasks, including self-exploration, goal setting, planning, and problem solving (Nuraini et al., 2025; Sulong & Mahfar, 2024). CDMSE influences how students evaluate options, develop future plans, and persist when facing obstacles and uncertainty (Makki et al., 2023; Putri et al., 2024; Sahin et al., 2024; Wu & Zhao, 2022). Evidence also indicates that self-efficacy, alongside self-awareness, is significantly associated with students' career decision-making ability, suggesting that stronger efficacy supports greater confidence and effectiveness in decision processes (Cahyani et al., 2023).

Recent research consistently demonstrates that CDMSE has a positive relationship with decision-making quality, career preparation activities, work readiness, and career readiness in diverse educational and cultural contexts (Chen et al., 2025; Hermawan & Novita, 2025; Şeker, 2025). CDMSE has also been positioned as a mediator explaining how other factors influence career outcomes. Earlier research indicates that CDMSE plays a mediating role in linking general self-efficacy to career decision-making processes (Milledzi et al., 2024), between digital literacy and career decision-making (Sutiman et al., 2022), and between career management skills and employability (Lee & Jo, 2022; Zhou & Jiang, 2025). This evidence supports CDMSE as a psychological pathway through which competencies may be converted into readiness.

Several gaps remain. Many studies still emphasize the direct influence of employability skills on career readiness, leaving the underlying mechanism insufficiently specified (Liu et al., 2023). Research on Muslim students also suggests that career orientation may include moral responsibility and purpose-driven attitudes, raising questions about whether skill mastery alone is sufficient to explain readiness in value-oriented contexts. Domain-specific efficacy is also less frequently examined than general self-efficacy, even though CDMSE may offer stronger explanatory power for career outcomes (Milledzi et al., 2024; Zhou & Jiang, 2025). Mediation studies remain limited in vocational secondary settings, despite evidence that early career preparation is crucial for long-term career sustainability (Husna et al., 2025; Sulong & Mahfar, 2024). Studies focusing on Muslim student populations further indicate that demographic characteristics alone do not adequately explain variation in self-efficacy, suggesting the need to examine deeper

psychological and contextual mechanisms (Mufidah et al., 2025). The pathway linking employability skills to career readiness via CDMSE has not been clearly examined in vocational students whose career meaning may be embedded in religious value considerations.

This study's novelty is reflected in its focus on testing CDMSE as a mediator in a vocational secondary setting characterized by value-based interpretations of career development, instead of proposing a new theoretical model. Unlike research that focuses primarily on university students or relies on general self-efficacy constructs (Mawaddah, 2021; Nuraini et al., 2025; Sujono, 2014; Telussa & Kusumiati, 2022), this study emphasizes CDMSE as a context-relevant form of self-efficacy in vocational education. The proposed model combines employability skills, CDMSE, and career readiness within a mediation framework based on Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), and examines whether the cognitive–motivational pathway identified in previous studies remains consistent across different educational and value-based contexts (Kleine et al., 2021; Lee & Jung, 2022; Ma et al., 2024; Sholikah et al., 2021).

SCCT conceptualizes career readiness as the outcome of interactions between skill resources and cognitive-motivational processes, with self-efficacy beliefs shaping how individuals use skills, regulate behavior, and make career decisions (Liu et al., 2023; Zhou & Jiang, 2025). SCCT was selected because it explicitly explains how personal beliefs connect competencies and behavioral outcomes, while other perspectives, for instance, theoretical perspectives like Career Construction Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior, emphasize narrative identity or intention formation rather than the translation of skills into readiness-related behavior. Within this framework, employability skills are expected to strengthen CDMSE, which in turn enhances career readiness.

This study aims to: (1) analyze the effect of employability skills on students' career readiness; (2) examine the effect of employability skills on students' career decision-making self-efficacy; (3) analyze the effect of career decision-making self-efficacy on students' career readiness; and (4) examine the mediating role of career decision-making self-efficacy in the relationship between employability skills and students' career readiness.

METHODS

The study utilized a quantitative methodology based on a cross-sectional survey design. Information was collected once through standardized self-report instruments distributed to participants during classroom sessions. The overall procedure followed established guidance for cross-cultural instrument adaptation and mediation-based survey analysis (Beaton et al., 2000; Hayes, 2013). The research process comprised instrument adaptation, field data collection, and statistical analysis. The sequence of study stages is summarized in Figure 1.

The population included all Muslim Grade 12 students at SMK Multicomp Depok, Indonesia. Using saturated sampling, the entire accessible population was included, resulting in a final sample of 215 participants (Saunders et al., 2017). Demographic information is presented in Table 1. Data were collected on-site after institutional permission was obtained. Participants were informed about the study purpose, confidentiality procedures, and their voluntary participation before completing the questionnaires during a supervised session. Responses were recorded independently and treated confidentially. Participants' Muslim status was verified through school administrative records.

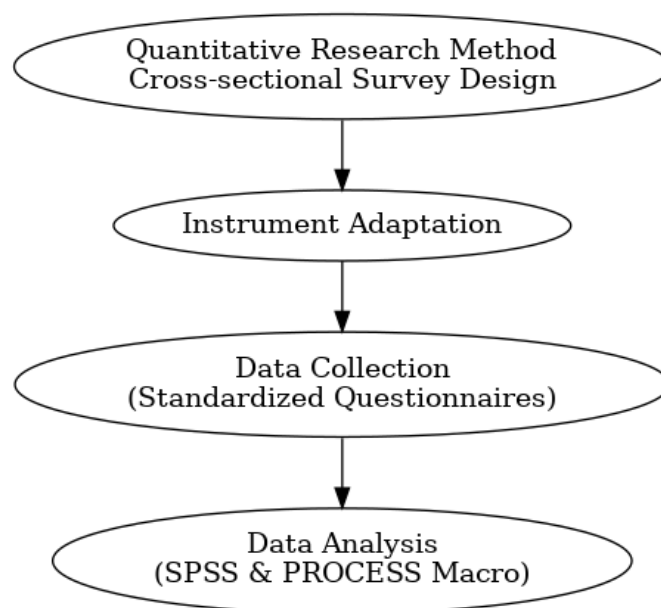


Figure 1. Flowchart of the Research Process

Table 1.
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=215)

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	82	38.1%
	Male	133	61.9%
Age	17 years	8	3.7%
	18 years	200	93%
	19 years	7	3.3%

All instruments were adapted following the cross-cultural procedures proposed by Beaton et al. (2000), including forward translation, synthesis, back-translation, expert review, and pilot testing to ensure conceptual and contextual equivalence. Employability skills were measured using the 11-item Self-Perceived Employability Scale (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007), rated on a 5-point Likert scale, which demonstrated excellent reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$). Career decision-making self-efficacy was assessed using the 25-item Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Scale (Betz et al., 1996), measuring confidence in tasks such as self-exploration, information seeking, goal setting, planning, and problem solving ($\alpha = .95$). Career readiness was measured using the 21-item Student Career Readiness Scale (Sultoni et al., 2022), covering responsibility, adaptability, work readiness, and self-development, also rated on a 5-point Likert scale ($\alpha = .98$).

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS. Prior to hypothesis testing, the dataset was screened to ensure suitability for regression analysis, and descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize participant characteristics and study variables. The mediation model was tested using PROCESS Macro Model 4 (Hayes, 2013), which estimates the total, direct, and indirect effects of employability skills on career readiness through career decision-making self-efficacy. Indirect effects were assessed using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples and a 95% confidence interval. Mediation was considered significant when the confidence interval for the indirect effect did not include zero (Hayes, 2013; Gregory et al., 2016).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As shown in Table 2, descriptive statistics indicate that the mean score for Career Readiness was $M = 81.91$ ($SD = 11.91$), Employability Skills was $M = 40.03$ ($SD = 6.28$), and Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy was $M = 89.86$ ($SD = 13.18$). Across variables,

the mean values exceeded the standard deviations, suggesting moderate variability and relatively consistent response patterns in this sample. Rather than serving as evidence of representativeness, these descriptive indices are presented to summarize central tendency and dispersion before hypothesis testing. Following preliminary data screening for completeness and plausibility, hypothesis testing was conducted using PROCESS Macro Model 4, and the results are reported in Table 3.

Table 3 and Figure 2 indicates that: (1) Employability Skills had a positive and significant effect on Career Readiness ($b = .66, p < .01$); (2) Employability Skills had a positive and significant effect on Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy ($b = 1.21, p < .01$); (3) Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy had a positive and significant effect on Career Readiness ($b = .42, p < .01$); and (4) Employability Skills positively affected Career Readiness through Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy, with a significant indirect effect of .51 (BootLLCI = .35; BootULCI = .70; $p < .01$). These coefficients are reported as unstandardized estimates, consistent with PROCESS output.

Based on the results of the analysis, this study found that employability skills have a positive and significant effect on career readiness. These findings suggest that vocational high school students' career readiness is shaped not only by mastery of work-related skills but also by confidence in their ability to make and implement career decisions. This suggests that skills may function more effectively when students believe they can use them in choosing and planning careers rather than when skills operate independently. In practical terms, employability skills are likely to translate into stronger readiness when accompanied by adequate career decision-making self-efficacy.

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistics and Inter-Variable Correlations

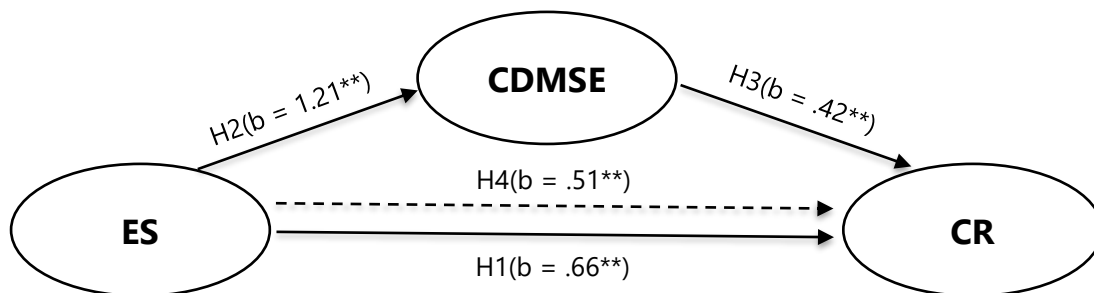
Variable	1	2	3	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
1. Career Readiness	–			81.91	11.91	50	105
2. Employability Skills	.620**	–		40.03	6.28	22	55
3. Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy	.670**	.575**	–	89.86	13.18	53	120

Note. N= 215. M= Mean; SD= Standard Deviation. ** $p < .01$; α (ES)=.96; α (CDMSE)=.95; α (CR)=.98.

Table 3.
Regression and Mediation Analysis Results (PROCESS Model 4)

Outcome: Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy (CDMSE)				
Predictor	b	SE	t	p
Constant	41.58	4.78	8.70	< .01
Employability Skills	1.21	.12	10.22	< .01
Model fit: R = .575; R ² = .33; F(1, 213) = 104.49; p < .01				
Outcome: Career Readiness (CR)				
Predictor	b	SE	t	p
Constant	17.27	4.22	4.09	< .01
Employability Skills	.66	.11	6.09	< .01
CDMSE	.42	.05	8.13	< .01
Model fit: R = .729; R ² = .531; F(2, 212) = 119.54; p < .01				
Indirect effect (bootstrapping): Employability Skills → CDMSE → Career Readiness				
Effect	b	BootSE	95% BC CI LL	95% BC CI UL
Indirect (a×b)	.51	.09	.35	.70

Note. Regression and mediation were tested using PROCESS Macro for SPSS Model 4 (Hayes, 2013) with 5,000 bootstrap samples and a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval (BC CI). Coefficients are unstandardized (b). Indirect effects are significant when the BC CI does not include zero.



Note. Unstandardized coefficients (b) are shown. p < .01.
Indirect effect (ES → CDMSE → CR) = .51 (BootSE = .09; 95% BC CI [.35, .70]).

Figure 2. Path Diagram of The Mediation Model

This finding aligns with prior research establishing self-efficacy as a significant predictor of work readiness among vocational students (Fitri et al., 2025). However, some studies report insignificant or context-dependent effects of self-efficacy on work readiness, particularly when moderated by external factors such as labor market conditions, socioeconomic background, or institutional support. Consequently, the role of career self-efficacy as a mediating variable becomes important in understanding how instructional

quality and social support influence career construction among vocational students (Saputro et al., 2023).

In the context of Muslim vocational students, career readiness may also be interpreted through value-based orientations, including Islamic values such as responsibility (*amanah*), perseverance (*sabr*), and striving for excellence (*ihsan*), which can shape attitudes toward work and career planning as part of moral and religious commitments. These values are positioned in this study as contextual meaning systems rather than measured predictors, and they may influence how students interpret career choices and sustain commitment during the decision-making process. These values may strengthen students' intrinsic motivation to prepare for future careers and encourage them to view career development as a meaningful form of social contribution and worship.

The findings regarding the direct effect of Employability Skills on Career Readiness indicate that students who possess strong communication skills, problem-solving abilities, teamwork skills, and adaptability tend to be better prepared to face the transition from education to the world of work. Mastery of these skills not only helps students understand job demands but also psychologically prepares them to cope with career uncertainty. These results are consistent with previous studies stating that employability skills are key determinants of career readiness and work readiness, particularly in secondary and vocational education contexts (Harris-Reeves et al., 2024; Husna et al., 2025; Rachmawati et al., 2024).

The consistency of these findings suggests that Employability Skills function as important personal resources in shaping students' career readiness. Furthermore, the systematic integration of these competencies into the curriculum is considered helpful in bridging the gap between educational outputs and industry demands (Tsaqib et al., 2025). Specifically, the development of self-efficacy and motivation has been shown to enhance work readiness (Taufan et al., 2025). Self-efficacy functions as a psychological foundation that fosters the motivation, resilience, and confidence necessary for students to succeed in both academic and professional settings (Megasari et al., 2025).

This relationship also underscores the importance of integrating practical training opportunities, such as internships, which provide mastery experiences and bridge the gap between school-based learning and industry requirements (Megasari et al., 2025). Through

these experiences, students are able to apply their competencies in authentic work contexts. For Muslim students, such experiences may also create opportunities to practice ethical conduct and responsibility alongside skill application, which may further strengthen confidence in career decisions.

The results of this study also indicate that skill mastery alone does not fully explain variations in students' career readiness. This is reflected in the finding that Employability Skills have a positive and significant effect on Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy. This finding suggests that the work-related skills possessed by students contribute to increasing their confidence in exploring career options, setting goals, and formulating career plans. These results align with previous studies emphasizing that learning experiences and mastery of skills relevant to the world of work play an important role in shaping career decision-making self-efficacy (Nuraini et al., 2025; Sulong & Mahfar, 2024).

Consequently, successful performance experiences through skill development can strengthen students' confidence in navigating vocational choices (Ahmid et al., 2023). This psychological mechanism is particularly relevant in vocational education settings, where alignment between curriculum content and industry standards provides authentic mastery experiences that inform career planning (Omar et al., 2023; Taufan et al., 2025). From a psychological perspective, employability skills can be understood as sources of mastery experiences that strengthen individuals' beliefs in their capabilities.

When students feel capable of mastering the skills required in the workplace, they tend to have stronger confidence in making career decisions. These findings support the view that self-efficacy develops through meaningful learning experiences and successful task mastery (Betz et al., 1996). Although several studies indicate that self-efficacy may also be influenced by other factors such as social support or verbal persuasion (Makki et al., 2023), this study suggests that employability skills are one important source in the development of Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy.

In this context, self-efficacy may help students navigate structural constraints more effectively (Tentama & Nur, 2021). Within Muslim educational settings, reflective practices and moral guidance may support students in interpreting mastery experiences as responsible decision-making rather than merely performance achievement. Such processes may strengthen students' confidence in applying their competencies in real career situations.

In addition, this study found that CDMSE has a positive and significant effect on Career Readiness. These findings indicate that students with higher levels of career decision-making self-efficacy tend to be better prepared to enter the world of work, as they demonstrate greater confidence, clearer career direction, and a stronger ability to manage career-related uncertainty. These results are consistent with previous research identifying career decision-making self-efficacy as an important psychological predictor of career readiness (Hermawan & Novita, 2025; Putri et al., 2024).

When students possess the confidence to make informed career choices, they are more likely to engage in career exploration behaviors and utilize their competencies (Donald et al., 2024; Kamarudin et al., 2023). This relationship is further supported by evidence that self-efficacy beliefs influence confidence and competence, thereby contributing to employability (Wu & Zhao, 2022). Several previous studies have emphasized that structural factors such as labor market conditions, institutional support, and socioeconomic background also influence career readiness (Potgieter et al., 2023).

This study does not deny the role of these external factors; rather, it positions CDMSE as an internal mechanism that helps students respond to these conditions. Thus, readiness can be understood as emerging from the interaction between external opportunities and internal confidence. For Muslim students, proactive career behaviors may also be understood as fulfilling social responsibility to the *ummah*, which can support persistence in career preparation.

Another key finding indicates that CDMSE partially mediates the relationship between Employability Skills and Career Readiness. This finding demonstrates that employability skills enhance career readiness both directly and indirectly through increased confidence in career decision-making. These results are consistent with studies examining the mediating roles of self-efficacy and related constructs (Lee & Jo, 2022; Milledzi et al., 2024; Zhou & Jiang, 2025).

Rather than replacing the direct role of skills, CDMSE appears to explain how students translate competence into preparation behavior. This interaction implies that educational interventions should address both skill development and decision confidence (Ramaprasad et al., 2021). The findings of this study support the Social Cognitive Career

Theory (SCCT) framework by indicating that career readiness emerges from the interaction between skill-related resources and cognitive-motivational processes.

The results are consistent with the SCCT assumption that self-efficacy links competence and behavioral outcomes without suggesting modification of the theory. Skills and psychological factors therefore operate as complementary components in shaping students' career readiness, particularly within vocational education. These findings highlight the importance of integrating both skill development and psychological support in career preparation programs.

Although this study makes an important contribution, several limitations should be noted. First, this study uses a cross-sectional design; therefore, causal relationships cannot be fully established. Second, the study sample is limited to one vocational high school, so the generalization of the findings should be interpreted cautiously. Third, the data were collected using self-report instruments, which may be influenced by perception bias. Therefore, future studies are recommended to employ longitudinal or experimental designs, involve more diverse samples, and combine different measurement methods to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing students' career readiness.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data analysis and discussion, this study concludes that: (1) Employability skills significantly and positively predict students' career readiness, indicating that higher skill levels are associated with greater preparedness for entering the world of work; (2) employability skills significantly and positively predict CDMSE, suggesting that stronger work-related competencies are linked to greater confidence in making career decisions; (3) CDMSE significantly and positively predicts career readiness, indicating that students with higher decision-making self-efficacy tend to be better prepared to plan and pursue their careers; and (4) CDMSE partially mediates the relationship between employability skills and career readiness, showing that employability skills enhance career readiness both directly and indirectly through increased decision-making confidence. This study contributes by integrating employability skills, CDMSE, and career readiness within a single mediation model grounded in Social Cognitive Career Theory, extending evidence to vocational high school students, a context that remains comparatively underexamined.

Limitations include the cross-sectional design, a single-school sample that may limit generalizability, and reliance on self-report measures that may introduce response bias. Future research should employ longitudinal or experimental designs, include broader educational settings and more diverse samples, and incorporate multiple data sources or mixed-method approaches to strengthen inference and generalizability.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was not required for this study because the research involved a minimal-risk educational survey using anonymous self-report questionnaires and was conducted after obtaining institutional permission from the school. The author(s) confirm that the study was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality protection, and the right of participants to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

The author(s) used ChatGPT to assist with language editing and readability improvement. The author(s) have reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted content and accept full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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