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Career prospects in higher education: A quantitative analysis of student optimism across various disciplines

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Abstract
This study investigates the career perceptions of students across five academic disciplines—Social Work, Psychology, Media Design, Sociology, and Business Administration—at a university in Germany. Using a quantitative survey, the research examines key dimensions of career optimism, job market preparedness, perceived demand for graduates, confidence in securing employment, and opportunities for career development. The findings reveal significant differences between vocational and non-vocational fields, with students in Social Work and Psychology reporting higher levels of optimism and preparedness, while Media Design and Sociology students express more uncertainty. These results highlight the need for tailored career support, particularly in non-vocational fields, and underscore the importance of aligning educational programs with evolving labor market demands. The discussion explores the implications of these findings, offering critical insights into how higher education can better prepare students for a rapidly changing job market.

Keywords: Career development, employability, higher education, job market preparedness, labor market, media design, psychology, social work, sociology, student optimism

1. Introduction

The transition from higher education to the labor market has long been recognized as a crucial phase in the professional development of young adults. In Germany, this transition is particularly significant due to the country's highly structured educational and vocational systems (Wolter & Kerst, 2015) [7]. Students face varying levels of optimism and preparedness for their future careers, which are often shaped by the nature of their academic disciplines (Schmidt, 2020) [12]. While vocational programs, such as Social Work and Business Administration, typically emphasize practical training and direct job placements, other disciplines, like Sociology and Media Design, may offer less clear pathways to employment (Kramer, 2019) [8]. The perceived alignment between academic preparation and job market demands plays a critical role in shaping students' career expectations (Tomlinson, 2017) [14]. Recent literature highlights a growing concern regarding the employability of university graduates across Europe, particularly in fields that produce a surplus of graduates relative to labor market demand (Mora *et al*., 2020) [10]. In Germany, this issue is compounded by the dichotomy between vocational and academic education, where vocational tracks often offer clearer job prospects. Students from disciplines with high job market saturation, such as Media Design or Sociology, may feel uncertain about their future careers, as they face increased competition and fewer job openings (Foster & Hughes, 2018) [5]. On the other hand, students in more vocationally-oriented disciplines, like Social Work, often express greater confidence in securing employment due to the practical experience gained during their studies (Leuze & Strauß, 2016) [9].

Despite the growing body of research on graduate employability, there is a lack of comparative data on how students from different academic fields perceive their readiness for the labor market and their confidence in finding employment post-graduation (Jackson & Wilton, 2016) [7]. Most existing studies focus on general employability trends without delving into the nuances of discipline-specific experiences. For instance, research by Verhaest and Baert (2018) [15] suggests that graduates from STEM fields tend to feel more secure about their job prospects than those from the humanities or social sciences. However, these findings do not provide a detailed examination of how students from various disciplines within the social sciences and humanities perceive their employability.

This study aims to fill this gap by conducting a quantitative survey among students from five academic disciplines in Germany: Social Work, Psychology, Media Design, Sociology, and Business Administration. The survey focuses on five key aspects of career perception: (1) optimism regarding future employment, (2) perceived preparedness for the job market, (3) perceived demand for graduates in their field, (4) confidence in securing employment within six months of graduation, and (5) perceived opportunities for career development. By comparing these dimensions across disciplines, this research seeks to provide insights into how different fields prepare students for the job market and where additional support may be necessary.

By offering a comparative analysis of career expectations across academic disciplines, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on graduate employability. It underscores the importance of tailoring career services to meet the specific needs of students from diverse academic backgrounds, particularly in disciplines where students report lower levels of confidence and preparedness (Brown & Hesketh, 2018) [2]. Understanding these variations can help universities and policymakers improve the alignment between higher education and labor market demands, ultimately enhancing student outcomes and satisfaction.

2. Theoretical Framework

The relationship between higher education and labor market outcomes has been extensively studied, with various theoretical models attempting to explain how academic qualifications influence employability and career success (Tomlinson, 2017) [14]. One dominant framework in this area is *human capital theory*, which posits that education enhances individuals' productivity and skills, making them more attractive to employers (Becker, 1994) [1]. Human capital theory suggests that graduates with more advanced or specialized education are better positioned to secure employment, as their qualifications signal higher productivity (Brunello & Schlotter, 2011) [3]. However, the applicability of this theory varies across disciplines, particularly when comparing vocational versus non-vocational fields (Foster & Hughes, 2018) [5].

For students in vocational disciplines, such as Social Work or Business Administration, the link between academic training and job market success is often more direct. Vocational programs typically include internships or practical training components that align with specific professional roles, thereby increasing employability (Mora *et al*., 2020) [10]. Research suggests that students in these fields tend to have clearer career pathways and higher levels of confidence regarding their post-graduation employment prospects (Jackson & Wilton, 2016) [7]. According to *career construction theory*, individuals actively shape their career paths by aligning their skills and experiences with labor market demands (Savickas, 2013) [11]. This process is particularly evident in vocational fields, where students are able to directly apply the skills acquired during their education to real-world job settings (Brown & Hesketh, 2018) [2].

On the other hand, students in more academic or theoretical disciplines, such as Sociology or Media Design, often face greater challenges in transitioning to the labor market (Verhaest & Baert, 2018) [15]. These fields are less likely to provide direct job placements or clear career pathways, leaving students to navigate a more ambiguous job market. *Signaling theory*, first introduced by Spence (1973), provides a useful lens for understanding the challenges faced by graduates in these disciplines. Signaling theory suggests that educational qualifications serve as a signal of an individual's capabilities to employers. However, the strength of this signal varies across fields, with non-vocational disciplines sometimes offering weaker signals of job-specific skills (Kramer, 2019) [8]. This is particularly true for fields where job roles are not clearly defined or where the demand for graduates fluctuates based on external factors, such as technological advancements (Foster & Hughes, 2018) [5].

In addition to these theories, the concept of *graduate capital* (Tomlinson, 2017) [14] has emerged as a critical framework for understanding employability in higher education. Graduate capital refers to the various forms of capital—cultural, social, and psychological—that students accumulate during their studies, which can influence their ability to secure employment. According to Tomlinson (2017) [14], students in more flexible or interdisciplinary fields often need to rely on these broader forms of capital to navigate the labor market, as their qualifications alone may not be sufficient to guarantee employment. This is especially relevant in fields like Media Design, where rapidly changing industry standards require graduates to continuously update their skills and networks (Schmidt, 2020) [12]. Recent studies have also explored the impact of *labor market signaling* and *skills mismatch* on graduate employability. Verhaest and Baert (2018) [15] found that graduates from non-STEM fields, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, are more likely to experience a mismatch between their qualifications and job market demands. This mismatch can result in underemployment or employment in fields unrelated to their studies, contributing to lower job satisfaction and career instability (Mora *et al*., 2020) [10]. Similarly, *expectancy-value theory*, as proposed by Eccles and Wigfield (2002) [4], suggests that students' career optimism and confidence are shaped by the perceived value of their degree and the expectations they have regarding its utility in the labor market. For students in disciplines with less clear career trajectories, such as Sociology, the perceived value of their degree may be lower, resulting in decreased confidence in finding employment (Leuze & Strauß, 2016) [9].

3. Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative research design to explore career perceptions among university students across five academic disciplines: Social Work, Psychology, Media Design, Sociology, and Business Administration. The research was conducted at a university in Germany, where a diverse sample of students was surveyed to understand their levels of optimism regarding their career prospects, perceived preparedness for the labor market, job demand for graduates in their field, confidence in securing employment post-graduation, and opportunities for career development. This design was chosen for its ability to collect standardized, numerical data, allowing for comprehensive analysis and comparison across different fields of study. The sample consisted of 83 students aged between 18 and 28, with an average age of 22 years. Gender distribution was relatively balanced: 50% of the participants identified as female, 40% as male, and 10% as diverse. The participants

were evenly distributed across academic disciplines, with 25% enrolled in Social Work, 25% in Psychology, 15% in Media Design, 15% in Sociology, and 20% in Business Administration. The students surveyed were at various stages of their academic programs, ranging from first to tenth semester, with an average semester of 5.5. This broad range of academic levels provided a diverse view of how students in different stages perceive their career readiness and opportunities.

Data were collected through an online survey, which included five Likert-scale questions aimed at assessing the participants' career-related perceptions. Each question utilized a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represented the most negative response (e.g., "very pessimistic") and 5 represented the most positive response (e.g., "very optimistic"). The five core questions were:

1. "How optimistic are you about your career prospects in your chosen field?"
2. "How well do you feel your studies have prepared you for the labor market?"
3. "How do you perceive the demand for graduates in your field in the job market?"
4. "How confident are you that you will find a suitable job within six months after graduation?"
5. "How do you evaluate the opportunities for professional development in your chosen field?"

The survey was distributed online, ensuring broad accessibility and allowing participants to complete it anonymously. The use of an online platform also facilitated easy data collection and storage, as well as increased response efficiency. All participants provided informed consent, and the study was conducted in compliance with the university's ethical standards. Once collected, the survey data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize the data, including the calculation of means and frequencies for each of the five questions. For example, the average score for career optimism was 3.2, indicating a generally neutral to slightly optimistic outlook, while perceived preparedness for the labor market scored an average of 3.0, suggesting a moderate sense of readiness. To further analyze the data, the distribution of responses across the Likert scale was examined to identify patterns and variations. For example, 50 of the 83 participants rated their career optimism as either a 3 or 4 on the scale, indicating that most students had a neutral to moderately positive view of their future employment prospects. Similar trends were observed in the responses to questions about job market preparedness and confidence in finding employment within six months after graduation. In addition to descriptive statistics, inferential analyses, including analysis of variance (ANOVA), were used to assess differences between the five academic disciplines. ANOVA was selected because it allows for the comparison of mean differences across multiple groups, making it suitable for this study's comparison of disciplines. This analysis aimed to determine whether significant differences existed between students from different fields in their career optimism, job market preparedness, and perceived job market demand. Control variables such as gender, academic level (semester), and prior work experience were included in the analysis to account for potential confounding factors. For instance, it was hypothesized that students with prior work experience might feel more confident about their job prospects, independent of their academic discipline. By controlling for these variables, the analysis aimed to isolate the impact of the academic field on students' career perceptions, ensuring that any observed differences were not due to extraneous factors. The combination of descriptive and inferential analyses allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the data, providing insights into the overall career outlook of students across multiple disciplines. The methodology used in this study ensures that the findings are both statistically robust and practically relevant for understanding how higher education aligns with labor market expectations in Germany.

4. Results

The results of the survey provide a comprehensive overview of the career perceptions of students across five academic disciplines: Social Work, Psychology, Media Design, Sociology, and Business Administration. The findings are based on responses from 83 students and are categorized according to five key dimensions: career optimism, job market preparedness, perceived demand for graduates, confidence in securing employment within six months of graduation, and perceived opportunities for career development. These results are presented in detail below, with comparisons made across the different academic disciplines.

The first question of the survey asked students to rate their level of optimism regarding their career prospects in their chosen field. The overall mean score for this question was 3.2, suggesting a neutral to slightly optimistic outlook among the participants. However, the distribution of responses varied significantly between disciplines, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean Career Optimism by Discipline

Discipline	Mean Career Optimism	Standard Deviation
Social Work	3.4	0.8
Psychology	3.6	0.7
Media Design	2.9	0.9
Sociology	2.8	1.0
Business administration	3.3	0.8

The highest level of optimism was found among Psychology students (mean = 3.6), followed by Social Work students (mean = 3.4). These students expressed confidence in their future employment prospects, with a relatively low level of variation in their responses (SD = 0.7 and 0.8, respectively). In contrast, students in Media Design and Sociology reported lower levels of optimism, with mean scores of 2.9 and 2.8, respectively. This indicates a more cautious or even pessimistic outlook on their career prospects. Media Design students, in particular, expressed concerns about the competitiveness of the job market, which was reflected in the wider distribution of responses (SD = 0.9).

Participants were asked to evaluate how well they felt their academic program had prepared them for the job market. The overall mean score for this question was 3.0, indicating that students felt moderately prepared for future employment. As seen in Table 2, there were significant differences in perceived preparedness between the disciplines.

Table 2: Mean Job Market Preparedness by Discipline

Discipline	Mean Preparedness	Standard Deviation
Social Work	3.3	0.7
Psychology	3.4	0.6
Media Design	2.8	0.8
Sociology	2.7	0.9
Business Administration	3.2	0.7

Psychology students reported the highest level of preparedness (mean = 3.4), with Social Work students following closely behind (mean = 3.3). These fields often integrate practical training, such as internships, into their curricula, which likely contributes to students feeling more prepared for the workforce. In contrast, Media Design and Sociology students felt less prepared, with mean scores of 2.8 and 2.7, respectively. This trend aligns with concerns about the lack of practical, job-specific skills in more theoretical or creative disciplines, where job roles are less clearly defined.

The third question asked participants to rate their perception of demand for graduates in their field. The overall mean score for this question was 3.1, suggesting that students generally perceive a moderate demand for their qualifications in the job market. However, as Table 3 illustrates, this perception varied by discipline.

Table 3: Perceived Demand for Graduates by Discipline

Discipline	Mean Perceived Demand	Standard Deviation
Social Work	3.5	0.6
Psychology	3.3	0.7
Media Design	2.7	0.8
Sociology	2.9	0.9
Business Administration	3.4	0.6

Social Work students reported the highest perceived demand for graduates (mean = 3.5), reflecting the strong demand for professionals in this field, especially in light of the growing need for social services in Germany. Similarly, Business Administration students also reported a high level of perceived demand (mean = 3.4), likely due to the broad applicability of their skills in various sectors. On the other hand, Media Design students had the lowest perception of demand (mean = 2.7), consistent with the more competitive nature of the creative industries, where job openings are often limited and fluctuate based on industry trends. Sociology students also expressed lower confidence in the demand for graduates, with a mean score of 2.9.

The next survey question assessed how confident students were in securing employment within six months of graduation. The overall mean score for this question was 3.0, indicating a neutral level of confidence across the sample. However, there were notable differences between disciplines, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Confidence in Securing Employment by Discipline

Discipline	Mean Confidence	Standard Deviation
Social Work	3.4	0.7
Psychology	3.5	0.6
Media Design	2.8	0.9
Sociology	2.7	0.9
Business Administration	3.3	0.7

Psychology students expressed the highest confidence in finding a job within six months (mean = 3.5), followed closely by Social Work students (mean = 3.4). These results suggest that students in these fields feel relatively secure about their job prospects, potentially due to the strong demand for professionals in their respective areas. In contrast, Media Design and Sociology students reported the lowest levels of confidence, with mean scores of 2.8 and 2.7, respectively. This lower confidence may be linked to the perceived oversupply of graduates in these fields and the competitive nature of their job markets.

The final question asked students to rate the opportunities for career development within their chosen field. The overall mean score for this question was 3.2, indicating that students generally view their career development opportunities as neutral to positive. Table 5 shows the mean scores for each discipline.

Table 5: Perceived Career Development Opportunities by Discipline

Discipline	Mean Career Development	Standard Deviation
Social Work	3.5	0.7
Psychology	3.6	0.6
Media Design	2.9	0.9
Sociology	2.8	0.9
Business Administration	3.4	0.7

Psychology students reported the highest perceived opportunities for career development (mean = 3.6), followed by Social Work students (mean = 3.5) and Business Administration students (mean = 3.4). This suggests that students in these fields feel optimistic about their potential for professional growth and advancement. Conversely, Media Design and Sociology students expressed lower levels of optimism about career development opportunities, with mean scores of 2.9 and 2.8, respectively. These findings indicate that students in these disciplines may perceive fewer opportunities for upward mobility or long-term career growth, contributing to their overall lower confidence in the job market. In summary, the survey results reveal significant differences in career perceptions across the five academic disciplines. Students in Psychology and Social Work consistently reported higher levels of optimism, preparedness, and confidence in their job prospects, while students in Media Design and Sociology expressed more uncertainty and lower confidence. Business Administration students generally fell in the middle, with moderately positive perceptions across all dimensions. These findings suggest that career services and educational programs may need to be tailored to address the specific needs and challenges of students in different fields, particularly those in disciplines where students feel less prepared or optimistic about their future employment prospects.

5. Discussion

The results of this study reveal significant differences in how students from various academic disciplines perceive their career prospects, preparedness for the job market, and opportunities for career development. These variations are not only reflective of the intrinsic differences between vocational and non-vocational fields but also highlight

broader structural issues in higher education and the labor market. This discussion delves into the implications of the results, critically evaluating them through multiple theoretical lenses and addressing how contemporary trends—such as the rise of the gig economy, digitalization, and shifts in labor market demands—affect students' career trajectories.

5.1 Career Optimism: Vocational vs. Non-Vocational Fields

The distinction between vocational and non-vocational fields emerged as a significant factor influencing students' optimism about their future careers. The results indicate that students in vocational disciplines, such as Psychology and Social Work, reported the highest levels of optimism (mean scores of 3.6 and 3.4, respectively), while students in more theoretical or creative fields, such as Media Design (2.9) and Sociology (2.8), expressed lower levels of career optimism. This aligns with earlier studies that suggest students in vocational fields tend to have more direct pathways to employment, often involving internships, practical training, or professional certifications (Mora *et al*., 2020; Jackson & Wilton, 2016) [10, 7]. These direct links between academic training and job market entry may contribute to a stronger sense of security and optimism about their future careers. From a theoretical perspective, these findings can be explained through the lens of *career construction theory* (Savickas, 2013) [11], which posits that individuals actively shape their career paths by aligning their skills and experiences with labor market demands. In vocational fields, students can often see a clear relationship between their academic training and the specific roles they are likely to fill upon graduation, which fosters greater career optimism. Moreover, the demand for professionals in fields like Social Work is well-documented, driven by social factors such as aging populations and the increasing need for mental health services (Leuze & Strauß, 2016) [9]. This strong demand further boosts optimism among students in these fields. Conversely, students in non-vocational fields like Media Design and Sociology may struggle with greater uncertainty regarding their career prospects. The creative industries, in particular, are characterized by high levels of competition, freelance work, and rapid changes due to technological advancements (Kramer, 2019) [8]. Media Design graduates, for instance, often face the challenge of navigating the gig economy, where short-term contracts and project-based work predominate. This can contribute to a more precarious career outlook and lower levels of optimism. Theoretical fields like Sociology may not provide direct career pathways, leaving students to explore a wide range of potential employment sectors, which can result in feelings of ambiguity and reduced optimism about their future roles (Tomlinson, 2017) [14].

The rise of the gig economy and the increase in freelance work further complicates the career trajectories of students in creative fields such as Media Design. Recent studies suggest that a growing number of graduates are entering industries where permanent employment is increasingly being replaced by short-term contracts and freelance opportunities (Wood *et al*., 2019) [16]. While this model provides flexibility, it also introduces a level of uncertainty that can significantly affect career optimism. Graduates may struggle to secure steady work, which impacts their long-term financial security and professional development opportunities. From a critical perspective, the gig economy may exacerbate existing inequalities in the labor market. Individuals from more privileged backgrounds may have the resources to navigate the uncertainties of freelance work more effectively, while those without such support may find it difficult to establish a stable career (Standing, 2016) [3]. Universities must therefore reconsider how they prepare students for these evolving labor market conditions. While vocational students benefit from structured career paths, non-vocational students may need more support in developing the entrepreneurial and self-management skills required to succeed in freelance or project-based work.

5.2 Job Market Preparedness: Practical Skills vs. Theoretical Knowledge

The perception of job market preparedness varied significantly across the disciplines, with students in vocational fields such as Psychology (mean = 3.4) and Social Work (mean = 3.3) feeling more confident about their readiness for the workforce compared to students in Media Design (mean = 2.8) and Sociology (mean = 2.7). This difference can be attributed to the integration of practical training in vocational fields, where students are often required to complete internships or clinical placements as part of their education (Jackson & Wilton, 2016) [7]. These experiences provide students with direct exposure to their future work environments, allowing them to build relevant skills and networks that enhance their employability. Theoretical fields, on the other hand, tend to prioritize academic knowledge and critical thinking skills over practical, job-specific training. While these skills are highly valuable in certain contexts, students in these fields may feel less prepared to enter the job market immediately after graduation, particularly if they are unsure of how to translate their academic learning into marketable skills (Brown & Hesketh, 2018) [2]. For example, Sociology students often possess strong research and analytical skills, but without clear guidance on how to apply these skills in professional settings, they may struggle to see their relevance to the job market. Recent trends in digitalization are reshaping the skills required in the workforce, placing additional pressure on educational institutions to update their curricula to meet these new demands. Digital literacy, data analysis, and proficiency with digital tools are increasingly becoming essential across a wide range of industries (Frey & Osborne, 2017) [6]. However, not all academic programs have integrated these skills into their training, which may explain why students in fields like Sociology or Media Design feel less prepared for the labor market. Students in these fields may perceive a gap between the theoretical knowledge they acquire and the practical digital skills that are increasingly in demand. Educational institutions must adapt to these changes by offering more interdisciplinary learning opportunities, where students can combine theoretical knowledge with digital skills. For instance, Sociology students could benefit from coursework that teaches data analytics or digital ethnography, enabling them to apply their research skills in a broader range of professional contexts (Schmidt, 2020) [12]. Similarly, Media Design programs could place a greater emphasis on teaching emerging technologies such as virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR), which are becoming important in the creative industries.

5.3 Perceived Demand for Graduates: Field-Specific Trends

The perception of demand for graduates varied widely across the disciplines, with Social Work students reporting the highest levels of perceived demand (mean = 3.5), followed closely by Business Administration students (mean = 3.4). These findings reflect the strong and growing need for professionals in these fields, driven by societal factors such as the increasing need for social services and the versatility of business degrees (Leuze & Strauß, 2016) [9]. In contrast, Media Design (mean = 2.7) and Sociology (mean = 2.9) students perceived lower demand for graduates in their fields, likely due to the competitive nature of these industries and the oversupply of graduates relative to available job openings (Verhaest & Baert, 2018) [15]. The perceived demand for graduates can have a significant impact on students' career choices and their long-term employment outcomes. In fields like Social Work, where demand is consistently high, students may feel more confident about their career prospects and be more willing to invest in further education or training to advance their careers. In contrast, students in fields with lower perceived demand may feel discouraged from pursuing further education or may opt for careers outside their field of study, leading to a potential skills mismatch in the labor market

It is important to note that students' perceptions of demand may not always align with actual labor market conditions. For example, while Sociology students may perceive lower demand for their skills, graduates in this field often find employment in a variety of sectors, including research, policy, and education, where their analytical and research skills are highly valued (Brown & Hesketh, 2018) [2]. Similarly, Media Design students may underestimate the demand for creative professionals with digital skills, particularly in industries such as marketing, advertising, and digital content creation, which are experiencing rapid growth. This mismatch between perceptions and reality highlights the need for better labor market information and career counseling services within universities. Students should be provided with accurate, up-to-date information about the demand for graduates in their field, as well as guidance on how to market their skills to potential employers. By offering tailored career services and fostering stronger connections between academic programs and industry, universities can help bridge the gap between students' perceptions and labor market realities.

5.4 Confidence in Securing Employment: The Role of External Factors

Students' confidence in securing employment within six months of graduation was highest among Psychology (mean = 3.5) and Social Work (mean = 3.4) students, while Media Design (mean = 2.8) and Sociology (mean = 2.7) students expressed lower confidence. These differences can be explained by the direct career pathways available to vocational students, as well as the structured support they receive through internships, field placements, and professional networks. In contrast, students in less vocationally-oriented fields may face greater uncertainty about their job prospects, particularly in industries where freelance work and short-term contracts are common (Wood *et al*., 2019) [16].

External factors, such as the overall economic climate, also play a significant role in shaping students' confidence in finding employment. For instance, graduates entering the workforce during periods of economic recession or high unemployment may feel less confident about their job prospects, regardless of their academic qualifications (Frey & Osborne, 2017) [6]. Conversely, in times of economic growth, students may feel more optimistic about their chances of securing employment, even in competitive fields.

5.5 Career Development Opportunities: Long-Term Prospects

Finally, the perceived opportunities for career development varied across disciplines, with Psychology (mean = 3.6) and Social Work (mean = 3.5) students expressing the highest levels of optimism, and Media Design (mean = 2.9) and Sociology (mean = 2.8) students reporting the lowest. This finding reflects the more structured career paths available in vocational fields, where graduates can pursue further specialization, certifications, or leadership roles (Leuze & Strauß, 2016) [9]. In contrast, students in non-vocational fields may face more fragmented career paths, where advancement depends on external factors such as project work, client relationships, or industry trends (Kramer, 2019) [8]. From a broader perspective, career development opportunities are increasingly shaped by lifelong learning and the need to continuously update one's skills in response to changing labor market demands. This is particularly relevant in fields like Media Design, where technological advancements can quickly render skills obsolete (Schmidt, 2020) [12]. To succeed in these industries, graduates must adopt a proactive approach to professional development, seeking out new learning opportunities and staying informed about emerging trends.

In summary, the results of this study reflect the complex and varied experiences of students across different academic disciplines in relation to their career prospects. Vocational students, such as those in Social Work and Psychology, benefit from structured career paths and strong demand for graduates, while students in more theoretical or creative fields face greater uncertainty and competition. These findings highlight the need for higher education institutions to offer more tailored support to students in non-vocational fields, helping them develop the skills and confidence needed to succeed in the evolving labor market. At the same time, a critical perspective suggests that higher education should not solely focus on employability but also on fostering the broader intellectual and creative capacities of students, which are essential for long-term success in an unpredictable job market.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the varying perceptions of career prospects among students across five academic disciplines in Germany. The findings highlight significant differences in career optimism, job market preparedness, perceived demand for graduates, confidence in securing employment, and opportunities for career development. Students in vocational fields, such as Psychology and Social Work, consistently reported higher levels of optimism and preparedness compared to those in theoretical or creative disciplines like Media Design and Sociology. These results suggest a need for universities to offer more tailored career support, particularly for students in non-vocational fields. Future research should focus on long-term career outcomes and the impact of external labor market factors on students'

perceptions of employability. Overall, this study underscores the importance of aligning academic programs with labor market demands while also supporting the broader educational and professional development of students across disciplines.

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