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**Branding strategies on Instagram among
female freelance photojournalists**

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Abstract

As journalism jobs become more precarious and scarce, journalists, especially freelancers, resort to personal branding on social media. For female freelance photojournalists, the situation is even more appalling. Yet, no previous studies have been found to address their online branding. In response to this gap, this study aimed to understand how women freelance photojournalists build their brands on Instagram. In order to do that, this qualitative cross-cultural study resorted to semi-structured interviews with ten female freelance photojournalists from eight different countries and analysed the data collected through the use of grounded theory. The study resorted to Labrecque et al.'s (2011) understanding of online personal branding; Molyneux et al.'s (2017) branding levels and Shoemaker and Reese's (2016) hierarchy of influences model; and Hermida and Mellado's (2020) Mapping Forms of Journalistic Norms and Practices on Twitter and Instagram.

Keywords

Photojournalists; online personal branding; branding levels; branding on Instagram; social media branding for journalists

Abstrakt

Vzhledem k tomu, že pracovní místa v žurnalistice jsou stále nejistější a vzácnější, novináři, zejména nezávislí, se rozhodují budovat osobní značku na sociálních sítích. Pro fotoreportérky na volné noze je situace ještě problematičtější. Přesto nebyly nalezeny žádné předchozí studie, které by se zabývaly jejich online brandingem. V reakci na tuto mezeru se tato studie zaměřila na pochopení toho, jak ženy na volné noze budují své značky na Instagramu. Aby toho dosáhla, tato kvalitativní mezikulturní studie staví na polostrukturovaných rozhovorech s deseti nezávislými fotoreportérkami z osmi různých zemí

a analyzuje shromážděná data pomocí zakotvené teorie. Studie staví na tom, jak chápou osobní branding Labrecque et al. (2011); Molyneux et al. (2017) úroveň značky a využívá také model hierarchie vlivů Shoemakerové a Reese (2016), stejně jako mapování novinářských norem a postupů na Twitteru a Instagramu (Hermida a Mellado, 2020).

Klíčová slova

Fotoreportéři; online osobní branding; úroveň značky; branding na Instagramu; branding sociálních médií pro novináře

Range of thesis: 59 pages and 131.270 characters

Declaration of Authorship

1. The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.
2. The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.
3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

Prague, July 12, 2022

Amanda Orlando Magnani

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**Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism
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Current state of research on the topic (max. 1800 characters): <i>Much has been discussed so far about journalists branding on social media, such as the way employed and freelance journalists stage themselves on social media (Brems et al, 2017); the individual, organisational and institutional levels involved on how journalists engage in branding on Twitter (Molyneux et al, 2017); the personal impact of branding journalism (Holton and Molyneux, 2015), and the motivations that shape branding practices among journalists (Molyneux et al, 2018). There have also been studies about branding practices and gender (Molyneux, 2019), how sexual harassment affects how women journalists behave on social media (Chen et al, 2020), and about the strategies used by women in how they behave in conflict zones (Palmer and Melki, 2016). However, little has been discussed about journalists branding on Instagram, with few exceptions such as Hermida and Mellado's (2020) Mapping Forms of Journalistic Norms and Practices on Twitter and Instagram, and even less has been published about the strategies used in branding on Instagram among female journalists. Therefore, this thesis proposal of a cross-cultural study on the strategies of branding used by female freelance photojournalists on Instagram is original and relevant, especially considering that, for photojournalists, Instagram is an important tool of promoting their work - as Twitter is for most journalists.</i>	

Expected theoretical framework (max. 1800 characters): *To conduct this study, I will adapt the concept of branding from marketing to the process conducted by journalists on social media; then I will resort to the hierarchy of influences model, according to Reese and Shoemaker (2016), to understand what are the influences taken into account by female freelance photojournalists when defining their branding strategies; finally, I will resort to Steiner's (2012) Failed theories: explaining gender difference in journalism to add the gender perspective to the cross-cultural study.*

Expected methodology, and methods for data gathering and analysis (max. 1800 characters): *In regards to data gathering, I will attempt to contact 20 freelance female photojournalists. In order to do so, I will resort to purposeful sampling, where I will directly contact them, as well as collectives of photojournalists. I shall consider as freelance female photojournalists all female-identifying professional photojournalists who are not currently employed at any media outlets. I will conduct semi-structured interviews, in accordance to Leech's (2002) "Asking questions: Techniques for semistructured interviews" via audio or audio-and-video calls, with the aim of understanding 1) how they use their Instagram profiles (professionally or semi-professionally, how often, whether or not they post photographs of themselves, whether or not they appear on camera on Instagram stories, etc); 2) who is the persona/brand they create; 3) what do they deliberately take into account when building their brand; 4) whether their brand has changed over the past two years, and if so, how and why. For the analysis, I will resort to grounded analysis, inferring the strategies from the information that emerges from the data gathered.*

Expected research design (data to be analyzed, for example, the titles of analyzed newspapers and selected time period):

The sample will include 20 photojournalists of any age and nationality who have an Instagram following of 5.000 followers or more, and who have used their Instagram profile professionally or semi-professionally for at least two years.

Expected thesis structure (chapters and subchapters with brief description of their content): *1) Introduction: presentation of the research subject, brief introduction of current context of journalists branding on social media, research question, introduction to content of next chapters.*

2) Theoretical Framework: literature review of studies conducted on the subject, followed by the concepts and theories to be used in the thesis, and how they will be applied.

3) Methods and Research design: presentation of the methods the thesis resorts to, followed by the research design used, including questions of the semistructured interviews and the profile of interviewees.

4) Findings and discussion: presentation of data collected, analysis of it and discussion based on the theoretical framework, as well as answer to research question(s).

5) Conclusion: final considerations, strengths and weaknesses of the study, suggestions for future research.

Basic literature list (at least 5 most important works related to the topic and the method(s) of analysis; all works should be briefly characterized on 2-5 lines):

1. Molyneux, L. (2019), *A Personalized Self-image: Gender and Branding Practices Among Journalists*. Sage Journals. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119872950> - This study envisions journalism and social media both as gendered spaces and examines their intersection as the setting of much of journalists' branding work.
2. Palmer, L., Melki, J. (2016): *Shape-Shifting In The Conflict Zone*, *Journalism Studies*, Doi: 10.1080/1461670x.2016.1161494 - Female war reporters navigate the precariousness of the conflict zone through the strategy of shape shifting—of switching gender performances depending on the environment and the audience. This article examines the shape-shifting phenomenon in the field, relying on 72 qualitative interviews conducted with English- and Arabic-speaking female journalists who have covered various wars and conflicts in the Arab region and beyond.
3. Molyneux, L., Holton, A., & Lewis, S. C. (2017). *How journalists engage in branding on Twitter: Individual, organizational, and institutional levels*. *Information, Communication & Society*, 21, 1386–1401. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2017.1314532 - This study resorts to the content analysis of the Twitter profiles and tweets of a representative sample of 384 U.S. journalists, focusing on the extent of branding practices; the levels at which such branding occurs and how other social media practices may be related to forms of journalistic branding.
4. Molyneux, L., Lewis, S. C., & Holton, A. (2018). *Media work, identity and the motivations that shape branding practices among journalists: An explanatory framework*. *New Media & Society*, 21, 836–855. - This study offers a new way of understanding the motivations that influence media workers' impression management (or branding) in the social media era. It sheds light on how branding activity aligns with individual, organizational, and institutional motivations as well as professional identities. It also shows how branding is manifested over and above social media dynamics.
5. Brems, C., Temmerman, M., Graham, T., & Broersma, M. (2017). *Personal Branding on Twitter: How employed and freelance journalists stage themselves on social media*. *Digital Journalism*, 5, 443–459. - Through a quantitative content analysis of the tweeting behaviour of 40 employed and freelance journalists, this study explores the way they use social media to present themselves and which dilemma's they are facing. It analyses tweeting behaviour in terms of the types of tweets, functions of tweets and modes of interaction. The quantitative content analysis is supplemented with in-depth interviews with 12 journalists, in order to analyse the reasoning behind their social media habits.
6. Leech, B. (2002). *Asking questions: Techniques for semistructured interviews*. *Political Science & Politics*, 35(4), 665–668. - This article presents techniques for semi-structured interviews, from creating relationships with the interviewees, to choosing and structuring different types of questions and to knowing when to stop.
7. Hanna, P., Mwale, S. (2017), 'I'm Not with You, Yet I Am ...': *Virtual Face-to-Face Interviews in: Collecting Qualitative Data A Practical Guide to Textual, Media and Virtual Techniques*, pp. 235 - 255, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107295094.013> -This chapter is concerned with the use of Internet-based video-calling technologies in interview research.

Related theses and dissertations (list of B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. theses defended at Charles University or other academic institutions in the last five years):

Hájková, Karolína, (2020), The usage of personal branding in art: Case study Andy Warhol

Kohlová, Barbora, (2020), Usage of social network Instagram for news coverage in case of the Czech Television

Marková, Kateřina, (2015), Fashion bloggers from the view of the personal branding and their role of opinion leaders

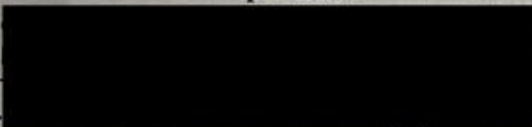
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Further recommendations related to the topic, structure and methods for analysis:

Further recommendations of literature related to the topic:

The research proposal has to be printed, signed and submitted to the FSV UK registry office (podatelna) in two copies, by **November 15, 2021**, addressed to the Program Coordinator.

Accepted research proposals have to be picked up at the Program Coordinator's Office, Mgr. Sandra Štefaniková. The accepted research proposal needs to be included in the hard copy version of the submitted thesis.

RESEARCH PROPOSALS NEED TO BE APPROVED BY THE HEAD OF ERASMUS MUNDUS JOURNALISM PROGRAM.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, journalism jobs have become more precarious and scarce. As technology shifts the media landscape, the boundaries of organisations and media professions are redrawn, and new forms of news work are revealed (Shoemaker and Reese 2016). Media work and the cultural industry have been facing profound transformations in the 21st century, driven especially by digitalisation and by a growing degree of urgency and anxiety that is amplified by social media. Such trends move journalism jobs away from stable, career-sustaining employment, and toward lower pay, fewer benefits, and a higher degree of uncertainty (Molyneux, Lewis and Holton 2018).

Among photojournalists, job precarity is even more noticeable. In the first decades of the 21st century, even in relation to the falling number of journalists in full-time employment in the United States, photographers have lost their jobs in disproportionate numbers (Anderson 2013; Mortensen 2014 in Hadland, Lambert and Campbell 2016). Digitalisation has brought challenges to the profession, such as digital photo editing, newspapers' online video production and amateur photography, all of which played a role in reshaping photojournalists' professional identity (Mäenpää 2014).

The flood of images online that came to be through digitalisation coincided with a marked reduction in the number of photojournalists in full-time employment over the past two decades (Hadland and Barnett 2018). It has produced profound changes in the work patterns, income sources, technology use and ethical principles for the category, at the same time that it increased the threat of physical harm and vulnerability of the professionals (Hadland et al. 2016). For freelancers and for women, the situation is even more appalling.

The combination of precarity, weakened organisations and a desire for individual control have contributed to turning online branding into an essential part of a journalist's work (Brems et al. 2017 in Molyneux 2019). While the practice of journalism has always evoked a sense of the "personal" due to the nature of journalists' relationships with their sources and audiences, social media has exacerbated journalists' need to represent their personal and professional identities online (Bossio and Sacco 2016).

In light of this situation, this study aims to investigate *how women freelance photojournalists build their brands on Instagram*.

In order to do that, the study starts with a review of the literature about online personal branding and how it is employed by journalists in the digital age; about branding levels and the hierarchy of influences which affect journalists; about how these processes are different for women journalists and for freelancers and about the specificities of personal online branding on Instagram.

Following, it discusses the methodology employed, introducing how the sample was selected and the processes of data collection and analysis. Next, the findings are presented and discussed, followed by a brief conclusion.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Photojournalists are an understudied group among creative content producers. Even more so than other photographers, who are still rarely the main concern of literature about the creative industries, even though recent studies have noted a rise in stress, insecurity and precarity in work arrangements among them (Hadland, Lambert and Campbell 2016). Such changes tend to affect women disproportionately.

While much has been discussed about the philosophical, social and artistic functions of photographs, Hadland and Barnett (2018) notice that there has only been limited scholarly interest in photographers themselves. Notable is Mäenpää's (2014) work, one of the few studies dedicated specifically to photojournalists. Through data collected from an online survey and interviews with photojournalists in Finland, it looks at the values that guide photojournalists, examining, more particularly, their relationships with digital photo editing, the production of online news videos and amateur photography.

Meanwhile, Klein-Avraham and Reich (2014) longitudinal study on digitisation and professional photojournalism, rather than associating digitisation with external threats to professional photojournalists, focuses on the new routines and practices of digital photojournalism, embedding them in the broader context of growing threats to cultural industries and labour markets. Moreover, it is one of the very few studies that resort to

qualitative methods, as it is based on in-depth interviews with 15 Israeli photojournalists. Through their research, Klein-Avraham and Reich (2014) conclude that while digitalisation did not cause the crisis in the employment and work conditions of professional photojournalists, its implementation seems to have created a negative synergy between old and new weaknesses of the profession.

Also deserving of mention is Láb, Štefaniková and Topinková's (2016) study, which resorted to in-depth semi-structured interviews with four photojournalists and one photo editor from the Czech Republic, and to a survey with 63 photojournalists and 15 photo editors from 28 different Czech, Polish and Slovak national print daily newspapers to look at the ethical dilemmas they face when mediating events through their cameras, editing images and deciding which part of reality should be presented to the public. Their most evident finding was that while respondents showed a high sense of professionalism and ethical awareness, their decision always depends on the context and the evaluation of each case independently, meaning that even the most questionable practice might be acceptable under certain conditions.

If scarce are the studies that address photojournalists, even rarer are those that directly concern women photojournalists, in spite of the fact that they face more demanding circumstances than their male counterparts. A remarkable exception is Hadland and Barnett's (2018) cross-cultural study, which uses data of 545 female photojournalists from 71 countries to investigate the specific challenges facing women in this profession, particularly the trends of inequality in their employment in the industry and the consequences of this distortion. The study finds that women represent only a small fraction of professional photojournalists and are concentrated in particular segments of the industry, such as fashion or portraiture rather than news – although that was not necessarily the case among the photojournalists selected for this study, as shall be discussed in the next chapter. Moreover, data for the study suggests that women are over-represented in the lowest income groups and are more frequently self-employed than men.

No studies have been found to discuss the online branding of photojournalists, much less with a focus on women and freelancers. However, Hadland and Barnett's (2018) findings point toward the necessity of investigating this group in particular, especially when considering that job precarity, combined with the desire for individual control, tends to lead journalists to rely more on online branding (Brems et al. 2017 in Molyneux 2019).

1.1 Personal branding on social media

Although social media has offered new possibilities for branding, it is by no means a new phenomenon. While early definitions of branding focused on how it was used to sell products as unique and distinctive (Lair et al. 2005; Murphy 1987 in Brems, Temmerman, Graham, and Broersma 2017), since the late 1990's it has also been used to describe the marketing of people. While that can be traced to Peters's (1997) article "The Brand Called You", which popularized the term "personal branding" (in Brems et al. 2017; Molyneux 2019), it was only in the subsequent two decades that this practice proliferated, to the point where it is today, having become a routine, especially among workers in the creative industries (Molyneux 2019).

Branding is by nature a dynamic process. In traditional branding practices, "brand identity is defined as how the marketer wants the brand to be perceived; brand positioning as the part of the brand identity to be actively communicated to the audience; and brand image as how the brand is perceived by the marketplace" (Labrecque, Markos and Milne 2011). According to Labrecque et al. (2011), these practices are commonly used to highlight one's positive attributes, while at the same time differentiating oneself from other individuals.

As the present study seeks to understand how female freelance photojournalists create their brand on Instagram, using their own perception as the starting point, the focus here shall be mainly on practices related to brand identity and brand positioning, although they shall only be differentiated during the analysis in case the findings call for it. Most important is to understand that the present study will not take brand image into consideration, as this category no longer refers to the marketer's decision-making processes and strategies, but rather to the results of their branding practices and to how they are perceived by third parties.

As spaces that provide a platform for identity construction, social media are the optimal arena for personal branding. So much so, that uncountable studies have been dedicated to the matter. Early internet scholars already recognised how online media technologies enabled a multiplicity of representations of identity, from individuals engaged in online chat, gaming, dating and blogging to the connections between online identities and offline contexts (Turkle 1995; Boyd 2006 and 2008; Davis, 2011; Baym 1998 in Bossio and Sacco 2017). Other research has been dedicated to how self-promotion strategies work well

with impression management and status-building, practices that are inherent to social media (Hearn 2008; Gehl 2011; Marwick 2013; Pooley 2010 in Scolere, Pruchniewska, and Duffy 2018).

Labrecque et al. (2011) were among the first to examine the phenomenon of online branding from a personal perspective. Their study investigated the processes people used, explicitly or implicitly, to brand themselves digitally and the challenges they faced in attempting to create a personal brand, especially when considering market feedback. The authors used a mixed method design that combined the digital brand audits of 12 participants with surveys of college students and a qualitative assessment of digital audit profiles by an HR professional. They found that most participants had a branding strategy to manage their online information – regardless of how effective it turned out to be – and that they were conscious of their online efforts, especially on social media.

The authors conclude that, while branding is inevitable when participating in an online environment, managing multiple online personas is increasingly difficult, especially when it comes to separating social and professional worlds, as these processes might take place implicitly through digital footprints found online, regardless of one's conscious efforts, since once information appears online, it becomes permanent and accessible, to the point that its ownership is ambiguous and difficult to control (Labrecque et al. 2011). This study will focus the analysis on the conscious and explicit practices carried out by the interviewees. However, the possibility of identifying implicit branding practices from their answers is not excluded and, if that happens to be the case, these practices will also be taken into account, in spite of not being the priority of this research.

Meanwhile, Scolere et al. (2018) draw upon interviews with 52 online content creators, including designers, artists, writers, and marketing consultants, to examine how cultural workers present themselves across different social media platforms. They conclude that, while the hyper-saturated job market venerates personal branding as something that would allow creators to differentiate themselves from the competition, the personal brand is not enacted singularly by the person behind it, but is rather part of a vast social media environment, which cannot be fully controlled.

Yet, the authors point out that digital networks furnish social capital in what they call a “sprawling reputation economy”, so that a certain amount of unpaid labour on self-branding, visibility and reputation construction is now perceived as natural, especially

among freelancers (Gandini 2016 in Scolere et al. 2018). Differently from product or company-related branding, in personal branding, there is no employer attachment, which makes it particularly useful for freelance journalists.

Meanwhile, more contemporary media research has shown that tensions arise when one tries to negotiate their professional identity in online environments, especially considering that diverse groups of people can access one's profile for different reasons (Boyd 2008 in Bossio and Sacco 2016). Many Internet studies have invoked Goffman's (1959 in Scolere et al. 2018) dramaturgical metaphor to think about the "collapsed contexts" of social media, which, simply put, means that one's family, friends, coworkers and potential employers may all be in contact with the same digital persona. In response to that, what recent studies have shown is that digital users often resort to projecting many "selves" (Zhao et al. 2016 in Scolere et al. 2018).

In spite of the collapsed contexts, however, more often than not, users have a sense of who their audiences are and take that into consideration when creating and broadcasting their content. The audience, as media theorists have long emphasised, rather than being singular and clearly delineated, has an imagined nature, being socially constructed and based upon the perceptions of the media creators (Scolere et al. 2018).

Understanding that people online imagine their audiences in order to present themselves appropriately, taking into account the affordances of different social media, Marwick and Boyd (2010) examined how Twitter users imagine their audiences and what strategies they use to navigate them. What they found is that managing the audience requires monitoring and responding to feedback and interpreting followers' interests. The study also found that the audience influences the information Twitter users choose to broadcast, with some of the people who talked to the authors indicating habits of self-censorship, such as avoiding controversial and personal topics and keeping in mind the possibility of potential clients or employers reading and evaluating the content published.

Interestingly, however, the authors also found that the individuals studied tended to show discomfort in labelling interlocutors as their audience, for the notion of audience suggests the act of personal branding, which they rejected as being inauthentic.

Finally, Marwick and Boyd (2010) suggest that social media combines elements of broadcast media – i.e. the collapse of diverse social contexts into one – and of face-to-face

communication as, unlike broadcast television, users are often corresponding with friends and family, rather than giving speeches to an unknown audience. According to them, “Twitter users maintain impressions by balancing personal/public information, avoiding certain topics, and maintaining authenticity” (Marwick and Boyd 2010, p. 124).

1.2 Journalists and their social media branding

The rise of online platforms has given not only news organisations, but also individual journalists the opportunity to become credible news providers (Molyneux and Holton 2015; Picard 2014 in Brems et al. 2017). This phenomenon has led to over a decade of research in journalism studies on social media, “with hundreds of studies examining how journalists and news organisations have adopted and/or adapted to platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat” (Hermida and Mellado 2020, p. 864).

Much of this scholarly work examines social media through the lenses of journalism studies, with some studies focusing on the interaction between social media and established journalistic norms and practices (see Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2012; Gulyas 2013; Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2013; Zeller and Hermida 2015) and on the boundaries of journalism in new online spaces (see Singer 2005 and Carlson and Lewis 2015); some using the materiality of social media platforms as a starting point to understand how social media influence and are influenced by the journalistic practice (see Hermida and Mellado 2020); and others focusing on journalists themselves as the starting point, either looking into how they negotiate competing norms of journalistic objectivity and online transparency on social media (see Belair-Gagnon and Holton 2018), or at how they adapt the representation and performance of professional identity to particular social media platforms (see Holton and Molyneux 2015).

Other research, however, has shown that while the activity of journalists on social media may have positive effects on the online traffic to news sites and may increase transparency, maintaining a presence on social media is perceived by journalists as too demanding (Bossio and Sacco 2016). Bossio and Sacco’s (2016) study, which used qualitative interviews with Australian journalists to analyse the different ways in which they negotiate representations of their professional and personal identity on social media has

shown that balancing editorial, organisational and institutional demands about how they should present themselves online has material effects on the way journalists do their work.

While the Internet may have allowed people to have a greater capacity to shape their self-representations, social media platforms tend to privilege public-facing personas that address multiple audiences and contexts, posing questions for professional journalists, as they are expected to blend their professional and personal roles (Hermida and Mellado 2020).

While marketing has always been an important element of selling news, it used to be primarily a task for the commercial departments of news organisations (Carlson 2015 in Brems et al. 2017). Nowadays, however, although journalists' use of social media does not directly bring revenue to an organisation, it is a means for newsrooms to promote their brand for free and to drive traffic to their websites, something that creates pressure for journalists to maintain an online presence and to represent themselves as professionals.

Through their branding efforts, journalists market their content and defend their credibility to their audiences; demonstrate to their potential employers that they adhere to policy; and show solidarity with other journalists (Molyneux 2019).

As previously mentioned, the practice of journalism has always been imbued with a sense of the "personal" (Bossio and Sacco 2016). That has been exacerbated by social media and online personal branding. And in a digital economy in which attention is the primary currency, a person's reputation is as valuable as the work they perform and the content they produce (Molyneux 2019). Whilst online branding has become inevitable when participating in any online environment (Labrecque et al. 2011), the pressures and dynamics journalists face are different from those of the average user, which often induces them to devote more time and attention to creating and communicating their personal brands (Molyneux 2019).

For these professionals, there is a growing expectation to participate on social media, "both to complement their reporting with behind-the-scenes transparency and personality and to extend the reach of their professional work and that of their colleagues" (Molyneux, Holton and Lewis 2017, p. 1387).

Although research on the phenomenon of personal branding by journalists on social media is still relatively limited (Brems et al. 2017), the branding messages that identify journalists, their work and their affiliations are increasingly important for the field of

journalism, especially in the digital age, as the profession becomes increasingly unrecognizable (Ryfe 2016 in Molyneux 2019).

Bossio and Sacco's (2016) study is an exponent of the scholarly research in the field, as they use qualitative interviews with journalists and editorial staff from Australian media organisations across television, radio, print and online publications to analyse the different ways in which journalists negotiate representations of their professional and personal identity on social media. The study illustrates the current state of transition experienced by contemporary journalists, as they attempt to balance the pressures of being online with their own professional expectations. Not only does it focus on how journalists represent themselves – or, in other words, on how they build their personal brands – but it also discusses the ways in which these representations are impacted by three different levels of influence – namely: professional, organisational and institutional. These levels will be additionally discussed further in this chapter.

While the authors recognise that there is no clear separation between professional and personal identities when it comes to social media, they differentiate them for the sake of the study. They define professional identity on social media as “representations of the professional activities, organisational affiliations and institutional norms that a journalist might present through image or text on social media platforms” (Bossio and Sacco 2016, p. 528), and personal identity “as the activities, events, opinions and relationships that might represent a journalist's life outside their professional activities” (ibidem, p. 529).

They found that the collapse of contexts experienced on social media creates more tensions for those negotiating the representation of a professional identity than for those who only negotiate their personal brand. Faced with that, the study uncovered three ways in which the interviewed journalists dealt with the situation: by having separate social media accounts for personal and professional use; by only having a professional account as per required by their organisation; or by merging aspects of professional and personal identities on the same account.

Molyneux et al. (2017), on the other hand, rather than resorting to qualitative methods, analysed the content of the Twitter profiles and tweets of 384 U.S. journalists, to investigate: the extent of their branding practices; the levels at which they occur (individual, organisational or institutional); and how other social media practices are related to forms of journalistic branding. What their results suggest is that branding is very common among

journalists on Twitter and that it occurs at all three levels. While it happens primarily at individual and organisational levels, the latter tends to take priority, especially among staff journalists, as they are at the same time producing content under their own names and contributing to the branding of their organisation. That, however, is not the case for freelance journalists, as they are not bound to any news organisation.

Meanwhile, Molyneux et al. (2018) resort to an explanatory framework to understand the motivations that influence journalists' branding in the social media era. Through a survey conducted among 642 North American journalists, the research introduces a framework to interpret internal and external factors that shape the way media workers engage in branding practices, again taking into account individual, organisational and institutional motivations.

Journalists have said they use personal branding as a way to maintain connections; to support other journalists; and to attract attention to themselves, their work and their organisation. The editorial capital created through their branding processes can be used when addressing audiences, colleagues and potential employers. The study also shows that personal branding happens beyond the dynamics of social media and the online environment. Finally, of high relevance for the present research, Molyneux et al. (2018) found that there are prominent differences in how freelance and staff journalists conduct their branding practices.

1.3 Branding levels and hierarchy of influences

Much of the literature about journalists' online personal branding takes into account how such practices happen at the individual, organisational and institutional levels. According to Molyneux et al. (2017), the individual level is the one that focuses on the journalist's own identity, which may be manifest both in personal and professional ways; the organisational level is the one that refers to the news organisation the journalist represents, with activities that seek to promote both the credibility of the journalist and of the entire news organisation; and, finally, the institutional level is the one that deals with journalism as a recognisable profession with its own values, and the activities at this level involve policing the boundaries of the profession in order to assert their own relevance and authority.

In his study about gender and branding practices among journalists, Molyneux (2019) surveyed 642 journalists in the United States, asking them to rate the importance of their individual and organisational brands and how often the content of their personal brand aimed

to reach “their news audience, their sources or potential sources, their employer, potential employers, other journalists, or another target audience” (Molyneux 2019, p. 6). What he found was that female journalists were more likely to seek to reach potential employers and other journalists, especially in the case of those who were younger and less experienced. Moreover, in comparison to their male counterparts, female journalists tended to take a more personalised approach to their branding efforts, which is not to say that women are less professional, as these approaches often correspond to norms women feel they must follow. The study findings suggest that gender has an important role in shaping branding activities and they support what previous research has shown in regards to how social media cultures tend to favour and perpetuate gender-specific forms of communication (Abidin 2016; Duffy & Pruchniewska 2017 in Molyneux 2019).

These results also support Molyneux et al.’s (2018) findings that while many journalists report practising branding at multiple levels, they tend to favour one and apply it consistently across their social media profiles. In this sense, freelance journalists, who might feel disenfranchised, since they are often disassociated from any news organisation, show high levels of institutional branding, as they seek associations with other journalists “as a way of gathering capital and demonstrating their affiliation to the profession” (Molyneux et al. 2018, p. 851).

As the present study seeks to understand how female freelance photojournalists build their personal brands online, it is relevant to note that both personal and professional motivations can be found behind all three branding levels – individual, organisational and institutional. According to Molyneux et al. (2018):

Personal motivations at the individual level may be driven by a want to gain respect and develop relationships, while professional motivations at the same level may be centred on preserving one’s job and increasing one’s marketability. Collegiality with co-workers might be a personal motivation aimed at the organisational level, while adherence to superiors and policies and promoting coworkers might constitute professional motivations. Institutionally, journalists might be personally motivated to support other journalists and encourage collaboration and be professionally driven to uphold journalistic values and maintain journalistic authority (Molyneux et al. 2018, p. 841).

These three levels, however, may not be enough to explain the branding strategies used by journalists and the motivations behind them. Therefore, this study will also resort to Shoemaker and Reese's (2016) hierarchy of influences model. While models cannot capture all the complexity of interrelationships involved in the media, they are a powerful guiding tool for investigation. The hierarchy of influences model does that by laying out five levels of analysis, suggesting ways in which variables relate to shape media content. From the micro to the macro, the model's five levels of influence are: "individual, routines, organisational, extramedia (institutional), and ideological (sociocultural)" (Reese 2007, p. 35). The multiple forces that this model takes into account act simultaneously, meaning the influence at one level may interact with that at another. These factors interact across levels and can be analysed in different contexts, such as national and technological.

While this model may have a tendency to view the individuals as having relatively less power and as being constrained by the successive layers of influence (Reese 2007), its goal is to reveal that higher levels do not eliminate the influence of the level below, but rather require that it is taken into account. Moreover, the model suggests that the very structure which may constrain a journalist or a media worker is the same one which enables their work to materialise.

According to Shoemaker and Reese, "by juxtaposing different levels within the same model, this approach raises the important distinction between structure and agency" (Shoemaker and Reese 2016, p. 396). The authors defend that by evaluating the contribution of multiple levels simultaneously, the hierarchy model offers greater explanatory power, as it does not ascribe too much emphasis either to the personal characteristics of individuals or to the macrostructures. Their model enables sorting out micro, meso and macro levels, providing a framework for analysing how different factors operate.

The individual and routine levels are of particular relevance for this study, as it dives into the decision-making processes and strategies used by photojournalists in their branding on Instagram. On the individual level, in spite of the traditional notion of professional objectivity, Shoemaker and Reese (2016) assume that knowing who journalists are helps better understand journalism as a whole, as this level takes into account "the personal traits of news workers, news values they adhere to, professional roles they take on, and other demographic features (e.g., gender, race, class)" (Shoemaker and Reese 2016, p. 398) – characteristics which the authors assume affect and inform journalists' work. This level of

analysis considers the relative autonomy of individuals and “draws attention to the fact that there is no single professional type, not even within national cultures” (ibidem), something of great relevance to understanding the findings of this research.

As for the routines level, it refers to a level between the two extremes of individual factors and societal norms: it focuses on how ritualised behavioural norms influence the way media content is produced. Routines are defined as unwritten rules about how journalists should behave and how they should do their job. In other words, they are what seems normal for journalists. As a social practice, routines exert influence along with other factors and they collaborate to perpetuate the status quo (Chen et al. 2018). The patterns of behaviour that compose the routine are what form the immediate structures of media work. That means routines are not always exercised through what leaders and organisations dictate, but rather in the practices of everyday life.

As new technologies change the way journalism is practised, routines also shift and new tasks such as the use of social media become normalised. For photojournalists, that involves the use of platforms such as Instagram to promote their work and that of colleagues, to show they adhere to journalistic values and to maintain contact with relevant audiences.

That being said, and considering that the organisational level will not be addressed in this research, as the subjects studied are freelancers and therefore not bound to specific newsrooms, the institutional level is also relevant. This level goes beyond any single organisation and concerns itself with media work as a larger institution (Shoemaker and Reese, 2016).

Finally, Reese (2007) notes that many scholars were tempted to declare the existence of a global level, one that would be the ultimate macro level of hierarchy of influences model, beyond the institutional and the sociocultural level. While he cautions about the limits of this conceptualisation, Reese (2007) also adds that

“To the extent that globalisation has affected every social practice and institution in some way, we can say that journalism to varying degrees has become ‘globalised’, disrupted from old relationships and reconfigured in ways not accounted for by the national. More specifically, it has created a ‘global news arena’, in which information is more synchronized in space and time, news practices are more transparently open to world scrutiny and

evaluated against more universally available normative standards” (Reese, 2007, p. 40).

He defends that, given the effects of globalisation, journalism research cannot remain restricted to national borders. Considering that events that take place in one country are often directly related to and directly affect what happens in other countries, research should also be conducted cross-nationally and cross-culturally.

1.4 How women and freelancers are affected

Online personal branding has become a hallmark of digital work, as media professionals attempt to mitigate the growing precarity of the creative job market in the 21st century (Molyneux et al. 2018). Yet, while reading, responding to, or moderating online comments may provide greater potential for engagement with audiences, it also increases journalists’ duties (Chen et al. 2018), something that has often proved to be perceived by journalists as too demanding (Bossio and Sacco 2016).

However, for freelance journalists, who tend to struggle even more with job precarity, social media platforms can be beneficial in providing an arena for self-branding and entrepreneurship, helping them stay on the radar of potential clients and employers (Brems et al. 2017). In this sense, Brems et al.’s (2017) study is relevant to understanding the particularities of how freelance journalists stage themselves on social media. The authors analyse the content of the tweeting behaviour of 40 employed and freelance Dutch-speaking journalists working in the Netherlands and in Flanders. Besides analysing the types of tweets, functions of tweets and modes of interaction, they supplement the quantitative content analysis with in-depth interviews with 12 journalists, in order to analyse the reasoning behind their social media habits.

The study found that freelance journalists generally tweeted more than their employed counterparts. They also produced more @-replies. Freelancers also used Twitter in a more interactive way, indicating that they “maintain a more intense relationship with their Twitter audience and their professional network” (Brems et al. 2017, p. 452). The studied freelance journalists shared more personal information than the employed journalists, and they also produced more self-promoting tweets.

At the same time, however, the general number of self-promotion tweets found was rather small. Even though such tweets might be beneficial to distribute one's work and possibly attract future clients, personal branding is often seen by journalists as an endangering habit for their authenticity, as consciously speaking to an audience can be perceived as inauthentic (Marwick and Boyd 2010; Brems et al. 2017).

Among women journalists, online personal branding is particularly relevant. The study conducted by Molyneux (2019) using the content analysis of data from Twitter profiles and tweets of 380 journalists, combined with a survey on branding practices administered among 642 journalists from the United States, has shown that female journalists occupy more precarious work positions than their male counterparts and that they are systematically marginalised in their coverage assignments and in social media spaces. The study reveals that, as female journalists are not well served by male-dominated news organisations, they tend to turn to a more personalised self-image in their branding efforts.

Molyneux (2019) examines how performances of gender interact with branding efforts, considering that both journalism and social media are gendered spaces. Starting from the understanding that identity is socially constructed and maintained only insofar as it is performed for others (Goffman 1959 in Molyneux 2019), the study focuses on how gender informs the way women journalists present themselves to others on Twitter. He notes that "these identity performances may be different for different audiences based on the nature of the relationship" (Molyneux 2019, p. 3). Considering that previous research suggests that social media cultures tend to favour and perpetuate gender-specific forms of communication (Abidin 2016; Duffy & Pruchniewska 2017 in Molyneux 2019), one of the key contributions of Molyneux's (2019) study is to "illuminate how gender informs branding efforts across attitudes, reported practice, and actual practice as observed on Twitter" (Molyneux 2019, p. 7).

Although Twitter intensifies journalism's pre-existing gender disparities and biases, the author clarifies that such differences are not innate, but rather the result of socialisation both within and without the newsroom (Rodgers & Thorson 2003 in Molyneux 2019). He concludes that gender is "an important factor in structuring these self-representations, intersecting with age, professional experience, and employment to construct these branding enactments" (Molyneux 2019, p. 8) and adds that the inequities in opportunity produced by

these gendered differences cannot be solved by individuals, but will rather require structural and cultural adjustments in order to be alleviated.

At the same time that there is a growing requirement that female journalists engage in online spaces as part of their jobs, social media provides fertile soil for gendered harassment (Chen et al. 2018), putting women in a particularly delicate position. In their 2018 cross-cultural study, Chen et al. interviewed 75 female professional journalists who work for or have worked for news outlets in Germany, India, Taiwan, the United Kingdom and the United States to understand how women journalists navigate the digital sphere of online commenting and what influence harassment in that space has on their journalistic routines.

The regions from which the interviewed journalists came have different histories, cultures and media systems, which provides a broader understanding of the situation. In spite of the differences, however, men have historically dominated journalistic jobs in all the geographic areas studied. That is also the case for the cultures and media systems of the countries where the photojournalists interviewed for this study come from. Moreover, as globalisation affects journalism, creating what Reese (2007) calls a “global news arena”, and as many of the women interviewed have worked for international news media, this study will not go into details regarding each national culture and media system.

Social media has a tendency to discipline women speaking in public, singling them out through backlash and violent threats (Faludi 1991 in Cole 2015). And while the Internet can empower women by giving them a space to speak that they would otherwise not have access to, it can also restrain them, given that sexist gendered norms occur in online environments as they do offline (Fox et al. 2015 in Chen et al. 2018).

1.5 Platform specificities of journalists’ personal branding on Instagram

In 2020, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report indicated that between 2018 and 2020, young people’s use of Instagram for news consumption doubled and was likely to overtake Twitter’s place (Newman et al. 2020 in Bossio 2021). Yet, to date, very little research on journalists’ social media practice has developed clear platform specificity (Bossio 2021), and most of the existing literature focuses on journalists’ use of Twitter. Hermida and Mellado (2020) and Bossio (2021) represent some of the few exceptions. While Hermida and Mellado (2020) draw from the Chilean case to analyse forms of journalistic norms and

practices on both Instagram and Twitter, taking as a starting point the nature of these platforms, Bossio (2021) uses visual content analysis and semi-structured interviews with Australian journalists to show how journalistic practices on Instagram are context-specific and dynamic.

Hermida and Mellado's (2020) approach to analysing journalistic practices on Instagram and Twitter acknowledges that social media is not homogenous and that one's social presence and self-representation are affected by the rules and logic of each platform. While the term "affordances" is often used to distinguish the physical and structural aspects of a platform, Hermida and Mellado's study goes beyond these characteristics, to include five analytical dimensions meant to "help scholars to investigate the potential redefinitions and/or reinterpretations of established norms and practices given the specific logics of social media platform" (2020, p. 865). These dimensions are: 1) Structure and design; 2) aesthetics; 3) genre conventions; 4) rhetorical practices; and 5) interaction mechanisms and intentionality. The authors notice that these dimensions are not static and that some aspects of one platform can emerge across others, such as, for instance, the hashtag. That being said, while the present study acknowledges the importance of these dimensions for the practices that take place on different social media platforms, it will not zoom into any of them in particular, as the main focus here is to understand how women freelance photojournalists build their brands, through the lenses of their own perspectives, rather than starting from the materiality of social media platforms.

Hermida and Mellado notice that while Twitter and Instagram share an architecture designed to capture moments, the first platform is primarily text-based and the latter is dominated by images. The authors note that as of March 15, 2016, Instagram affirmed on its website that it was designed to show the moments it believed users would care about the most, which resulted in a platform that privileges visual content. Although the platform accommodates text in captions, this content is not the most relevant for the way Instagram is designed. Moreover, unlike Twitter, Instagram is primarily a mobile-only experience, as photos can only be uploaded and posted via the Instagram mobile app, reinforcing the important role played by immediacy and temporality to the value of these images (Zappavigna 2016 in Hermida and Mellado 2020).

Even though both Instagram and Twitter value topicality and instantaneous forms of communication, Twitter has a bigger emphasis on privileging the latest information. And

while in its early days Instagram favoured entertaining and amusing posts (Voorveld et al. 2018 in Hermida and Mellado 2020), as the platform grew in use by both companies and individuals for commercial purposes, users shifted towards more idealised visual representations, carefully planning photos and feeds, thus applying more craftsmanship and attention to details (Manovich 2017 in Hermida and Mellado 2020).

Unlike Twitter, Instagram only allows for active links to be added to profiles, rather than on individual posts, which means its structure makes it a destination for media consumption in itself, keeping users on the platform, while Twitter may direct users to other websites. Moreover, in contrast to Twitter, Instagram does not allow users to share someone else's posts as standard posts, being the only sharing option to repost them on the *stories*, which have a 24-hour lifespan. That limits the interactions on the platform to comments, likes and private messaging. While this may sound restricting at first, these features are still enough to enable for interaction to happen and for users to receive feedback on the content they are publishing, which is essential for the processes of brand-building.

The authors conclude that, while journalists can “display differentiated practices on Twitter and Instagram, they can also use both platforms for similar purposes, or to merge news and traditional journalistic roles at both the professional and personal levels” (Hermida and Mellado 2020, p. 881). Also worthy of notice is their finding that Twitter seems to be more antagonistically oriented, while Instagram seems to be more consensus-oriented – which, as they notice, does not exclude the possibility of journalists being bullied or harassed on either platform.

Meanwhile, through her content analysis, Bossio (2021) finds that “journalistic practices on Instagram emerge and develop along a continuum, from fully commercialised, promotional practices to more relational practices that help build community around a journalist's reportage” (Bossio 2021, p. 2), which reinforces previous research findings (Marwick 2013 in Bossio 2021) that Instagram culture values both authenticity – in this case, the relational practices – and attention-getting strategies – or promotional practices.

The author also draws attention to some of the platform's technical affordances, such as cropping, filtering and colour adjustment. While these may be commonly used for instant photographs posted by the average user, photojournalists who use their Instagram profiles as professional outlets tend to edit and curate their photographs with more craftsmanship,

keeping industry standards in mind. Therefore, this study will also not go into detail regarding these technical affordances.

Bossio remarks that “research about journalism and social media has not yet established how journalistic practices are influencing, or influenced by Instagram’s visual cultures, nor their impacts on the apparently growing distribution and audience reception of news on the site” (2021, p. 2). Although Instagram is not yet the dominant social media used by most journalists, a growing number of media professionals are using the platform, as they acknowledge the benefits of its unique forms of online community and engagement (Bossio 2021). That is particularly true among journalists who focus on areas such as lifestyle and culture (Maares and Hanusch 2020 in Bossio 2021) and among photojournalists, regardless of their areas of focus, although no literature has been dedicated to this group up to date – making the present study groundbreaking.

Finally, it is important to mention that, while Instagram is still the social media platform most used for posting photographs, on June 30, 2021, Adam Mosseri, head of Instagram, published a video¹ where he declared that Instagram was no longer a photo sharing app, but instead, a general entertainment app driven by algorithms and videos.

1.6 This study

As the literature review above has shown, women journalists experience the profession differently from their male counterparts since they are especially affected by the precarity and instability of journalism in the digital age. That is particularly true for female freelance photojournalists, who represent an understudied group, making this research groundbreaking.

Confronted with the specificities of their professional realities, women tend to come up with particular strategies on how to present themselves, be it online or offline, as Palmer and Melki (2016) uncovered in their study about how female war journalists resorted to strategies of shapeshifting as they adapted their gender performances according to the environment and audience.

¹ Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/COwNfFBJr5A/>

The authors point out that “these gendered performances are not simply self-misrepresentations; instead, they are strategic modes of orientation that draw upon culturally constructed notions of gender in conflict zones” (Palmer and Melki 2016 p. 3). The same is true for the online performances of personal branding analysed throughout the present study.

That being said, the study’s goal is to answer the question:

RQ: *How do female freelance photojournalists build their brands on Instagram?*

In order to answer that, the study will identify:

SRQ1: What are the brands they build?

SRQ2: What are the strategies used by them?

SRQ3: What do they take into account in their decision-making processes?

SRQ4: What has changed over the past two years in how their brands are built?

That being said, it is relevant to note that this research understands that gender is a relational act, rather than being a static and dichotomous set of differences between men and women (Steiner 2012). The present study sees gender from the lenses of feminist standpoint epistemology, as understood by Steiner (2012). That means it is not assumed that women and men necessarily produce polar opposite representations of reality, but rather that people are complex and multidimensional.

Gender, as well as other identity dimensions, situates subjects and impacts what one knows and values. Finally, a standpoint does not result from a single location, which means that, besides gender, there are other elements which affect how people see the world and are seen by others, such as race, class, sexuality, age, nationality and so on (Steiner 2012).

2. METHODOLOGY

Since female freelance photojournalists are an understudied group and no studies have been found to address their online personal branding, particularly on Instagram, a very

relevant social media platform for the field, this thesis has opted to resort to qualitative research and to methods of analysis borrowed from grounded theory, which seemed more appropriate for an introductory study and to open the gates for future literature to deepen and broaden the discussion started here.

With that in mind, this study understands research design in accordance with Becker et al. (1961 in Flick 2022), which is in a larger and looser sense, where it refers to the identification of the elements of order, system and consistency of the procedures at hand. As the authors point out in regards to their own research, which also applies to the present one, the research design in use has no “well-worked-out set of hypotheses to be tested, no data-gathering instruments, purposely designed to secure information relevant to these hypotheses, no set of analytic procedures specified in advance” (Becker et al. 1961 in Flick 2022, p. 6).

That being said, in order to answer the main question, as well as the secondary questions, this study resorted to online semi-structured interviews with female freelance photojournalists and to a data analysis method from grounded theory. While more details regarding participant selection, data collection and data analysis will be disclosed over the next sections, it is relevant to mention that this study assumes that “(a) multiple realities exist, (b) data reflect researchers' and research participants' mutual constructions, and (c) the researcher enters, however incompletely, the participant's world and is affected by it” (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012, p. 4). In other words, the study resorts to an approach that provides an interpretive portrayal of the world studied, rather than an exact picture of it (Charmaz 2000, 2007, 2009c in Charmaz and Belgrave 2012).

2.1 Selection of research participants

Given the scarcity of studies about women freelance photojournalists and the effects of digitalisation and globalisation on journalism, it was deemed appropriate to conduct this research cross-culturally, transcending national and regional borders. With that in mind, purposive samples were used, as they use the judgment of the investigator to identify which aspects of the population studied are important and should be represented (O'Muircheartaigh 2008). As Weisberg (2008) points out, there is no right answer as to what the size of a sample should be. The appropriate sample size, according to the author, depends on the

purpose of the research. With that in mind, the goal of this research was to select as diverse a sample as possible in terms of nationality, age, race and religion, within the pool of female freelance photojournalists on Instagram, with the numbers adequate for a diploma thesis.

Firstly, as the entire research rotates around the Internet, from the choice of topic to the data collection, it was deemed appropriate to recruit participants online (Hanna and Mwale 2017). While there was no public advertising, between January and April 2022, potential interviewees were identified on Instagram by searching the profiles of photographer collectives, such as African Women in Photography, Foto Féminas, Women Photograph and The Journal Collective; through identifying collaborations with media outlets such as National Geographic, the Pulitzer Center, Washington Post, and The New York Times, all of which are known for supporting and/or publishing photo stories; through locating collaborators and colleagues of the photographers identified; and through recommendations from the contacted photographers themselves and from other colleagues who work in the field. This process was guided by a conscious effort to reach a sample of professionals as geographically diverse as possible, assuming that this diversity would also lead to a higher representation of the other identity dimensions aforementioned, while also encompassing different cultures and media systems. The sampling also sought to include photographers who covered as wide as possible a range of subjects for a variety of local and international media outlets, as well as for non-profit organisations, as these elements might also have important effects on their branding.

Although photojournalists are the specific focus of this study, the initial search for interviewees looked for female photographers in a more generalised sense, as their Instagram profiles were more clearly identifiable. Since the research asks questions regarding their online personal branding specifically as photojournalists, all of their feeds had to display at least some of their professional work, while the presence of personal images was facultative. Since only a small portion of the photographers and photojournalists disclose their pronouns on their Instagram profiles, their gender was assumed based on generalisations, such as their names, their belonging to collectives of women photographers and their own profile photographs. In some cases, it was also possible to identify their gender through the pronouns used to describe them on their professional websites, when those links were available. That led to an initial poll of 69 women photographers.

Once this group was identified, the second step was to establish who among them were photojournalists. Here it is important to reiterate what has already been mentioned *vis-a-vis* how journalism, as a profession, is becoming increasingly unrecognizable (Ryfe 2016 in Molyneux 2019). With that in mind, the criteria used to determine whether a photographer was or not a photojournalist was public self-declaration. That meant their handle, name or bio had to contain either the word “photojournalist” or both the words “journalist” and “photographer”, be it in English or in their native language. These criteria were used as a way to avoid researcher bias in determining which bodies of photographic work were to be considered journalistic. Considering the nuances of visual storytelling, it also avoided discussions about the blurry limits between photojournalism, photodocumentary and other styles of photography. Moreover, as this entire study revolves around their individual perceptions and processes of online personal branding, it was considered appropriate that the characterisation as photojournalists also came from them.

After the photojournalists were identified, those who had less than five thousand followers were left out of the sample. Considering the impact that the collapse of contexts experienced on social media has on branding efforts and on the negotiation of professional identities online (Bossio and Sacco 2016) it was important for this study that the number of followers each photojournalist had was large enough to have a significant variety of audiences. Five thousand followers were also considered to incorporate enough people so there would be a balance between elements of broadcast media – i.e. the collapse of diverse social contexts into one – and of face-to-face communication with acquaintances and a known audience (Marwick and Boyd 2010). That resulted in a sample of 27 photojournalists.

Throughout the month of April, each photojournalist was contacted through a direct message on Instagram, with a message as follows:

“Hi, (name of the photojournalist), how are you? I’m Amanda Magnani, a Brazilian journalist and photographer, currently finishing my master’s degree in Journalism, Media and Globalisation at Charles University, in Prague. I am writing my thesis based on a cross-cultural qualitative study about how women freelance photojournalists use their Instagram profiles, and I was wondering if you would be willing to talk to me and join my study. All the information used will be completely anonymous, and our talk will be held online, via (video)call. Thank you so much for your time, and please let me know if you need any more information. Best, Amanda”.

After a week, those who had not answered the initial message were contacted by email, through the addresses available on the personal websites of those who linked it on their Instagram bio. Before considering that a photojournalist had not answered and therefore would not take part in the study, each one was contacted a second time on Instagram and a second time via email, giving them an interval of up to four weeks to accept the invitation.

Out of the 27 photojournalists initially contacted, 17 answers were received, seven of which were negative and ten that were positive. Out of the seven negative answers, one clarified she was no longer a freelancer, while six refused to participate for different reasons. Ten photojournalists contacted never answered.

The ten photojournalists who accepted to participate in the study came from eight different countries, as follows: three were from the United States, one from Brazil, one from Chile, one from Germany, one from the United Kingdom, one from the Czech Republic, one from Hong Kong and one from Pakistan. Their ages varied from 29 to 41 years old; their time of experience as photojournalists ranged between four and 13 years; their number of followers varied between 5,6 thousand and 59,4 thousand; three of them declared following a religion; only three of them declared a race other than white. Throughout this study, whenever there is a need to refer to photojournalists individually, they will be identified by their country of origin. Whenever direct quotes are used, participants will be identified by codes, as presented in Table 1 below.

Country of origin	Code	Age	Race	Time working as a photojournalist	Number of followers
United States	USA01	35	White	10 years	25 K
United States	USA02	29	White	4 years	16 K
United States	USA03	40	White	12 years	60 K
Brazil	BRL01	32	White	7 years	15 K

Chile	CHL01	32	Mapuche	4 years	23 K
Germany	DEU01	37	White	7 years	38 K
Czech Republic	CKZ01	41	White	13 years	11 K
United Kingdom	UK01	39	White	10 years	6 K
Hong Kong	HK01	32	Chinese	4 years	33 K
Pakistan	PAK01	38	Pakistani	10 years	23 K

Finally, it is imperative to reiterate that this study relied on a sample that is not representative. Similarly to the research conducted by Chen et al. (2018), the goal of this research is to find meaning through the words of the female freelance photojournalists, not to make generalisable inferences.

2.2 Data collection

The data for this research was collected through online semi-structured interviews, adapting face-to-face approaches to the online environment, as has been done for over a decade by academic research, particularly in the social sciences (James and Busher 2012). All the interviews were conducted synchronously, mirroring traditional interviews. Except for the interview with the Brazilian photojournalist, which was conducted through an audio call over WhatsApp, all the other interviews were conducted through video calls via Zoom. The interviews took place between April 15 and May 22, 2022, and lasted between 35 and 50 minutes.

Resorting to the Internet to collect the data allowed this study to overcome many of the inherent limitations and challenges of face-to-face data collection (Hanna and Mwale

2017), particularly regarding geographic restrictions. Deakin and Wakefield (2014 in Hanna and Mwale 2017) defend this as possibly the biggest benefit to using video calls to conduct interviews, particularly as it allows for broader sampling frames. While this was not a priority for this study, which focuses on qualitative, rather than quantitative data, these digital tools have enabled contact with photojournalists across eight different countries, giving the sample the necessary diversity to make this a cross-cultural research. Moreover, this choice provided ease and flexibility of scheduling, even across time zones, while still offering high levels of participant involvement and spontaneity (James and Busher 2012).

Hanna and Mwale (2017) draw attention to the fact that poor-quality Internet connections may lead to interviews taking longer than planned and recommend this be taken into account when arranging the appointments with participants. With that in mind, upon accepting to participate in the study, all participants were informed about how the interviews were to be conducted – namely through audio or video calls – and how long they should expect them to last. In possession of this information, each participant could find the appropriate date and time when they would have availability. Moreover, they could decide on the better format, according to the quality of their internet connection. As was previously mentioned, except for the Brazilian interviewee, who requested the interview be conducted via a WhatsApp audio call, due to the poor quality of the Internet connection in the location where she was based, all of the participants opted for video calls via Zoom.

While no connection-related disruptions were experienced during the interviews, the limited interval of 40 minutes offered by Zoom video calls presented some challenges, as most of the interviews ended up lasting longer than that. By the end of the first interview, it was noticed that this could be a recurring problem. With that in mind, each subsequent interviewee was informed that in the event of the interview not being finished by the time the platform started the ten-minute count down to the end of the call, the call would be manually ended and link to a new call would be sent by email so that the interview could continue.

Before each interview started, the interviewee was informed about the study and that they would remain anonymous. Following, they were asked for consent both to use the information given throughout the interview, and to have the audio recorded, in order to be later transcribed. It was explained to each one of them that no one other than the researcher would have access to this material. The voluntary nature of their participation and the possibility of withdrawing from the interview at any point was made clear, as those are

important elements of informed consent. (James and Busher 2012). All of them consented. They were also asked to confirm whether they identified as women since, as previously mentioned, their gender was assumed based on generalisations. All of them confirmed it.

Considering that the type of online interviews used for this research predominantly draws on the same approaches and principles of qualitative interviewing more generally, the questions were constructed in the same way as face-to-face interviews (Hanna and Mwale 2017).

That being said, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were privileged, as they allow for the collection of standard information about the informants, while still maintaining flexibility for follow-up questions (Bossio and Sacco 2016). While semi-structured interviews allow both hypothesis testing and the qualitative analysis of interview responses (Leech 2002), only the latter attribute was used for this study, since it uses methods of analysis borrowed from grounded theory and therefore does not propose any hypothesis to be tested. The semi-structured interviews were approached from an ethnographic perspective, where the interviewer “tries to enter into the world of the respondent by appearing to know very little” (Leech 2002, p. 665), as this allowed the answers to be best used as a source of insight.

The interviews were divided into four main parts. Firstly, each photojournalist was asked to confirm their country of origin, age, what race they identified with, whether or not they followed any religion and whether they identified as a woman. Following that, the interview resorted to two grand tour questions and one closing question.

Grand tour questions were chosen as the main element of the interviews as they “ask respondents to give a verbal tour of something they know well” (Leech 2002, p. 667), which gives enough freedom for respondents to talk, while also maintaining some level of focus. The first question – *could you please walk me through your photojournalistic work, particularly over the past two years* – aimed to better understand their individual experiences as photojournalists, from the time they have been working in this profession to the topics covered and where they were featured. Asking them to talk particularly about the past two years was a strategy used to focus on their recent experience since the object of this study is their present online personal brands.

Once this question was answered, the following one was aimed at understanding how they build their brands: *could you please walk me through how you use your Instagram profile?* During the interview, the term brand was avoided based on Marwick and Boyd's (2010) experience, which showed that social media users tended to reject the idea of personal branding as being an inauthentic practice.

In semistructured interviews, prompts are as important as the questions themselves, since they help keep the interviewees talking and redirect the answers to address specific elements that the researcher is interested in finding out, but which might have been neglected by the interviewee (Leech 2002). Moreover, according to Leech (2002), when used in combination, grand tour questions and prompts are often enough to elicit most or all of the information needed in a semistructured interview.

With that in mind, after each grand tour question, a list of prompts was prepared, covering topics which were projected to be useful during the analysis. While prompts, unlike questions, are usually not scripted (ibidem), given that each interview might go in a different direction, the prompts for this study were structured like follow-up questions ready to be used in case respondents did not cover the necessary points.

For the first question, regarding the interviewee's experience as a photojournalist, the prompts prepared were:

- a. For how long have you been working as a photojournalist?
- b. Where has your work been featured?
- c. What is your legal/contractual status with the media you work for?
- d. What are the main topics or events you photograph?

For the second question, about their use of Instagram, the prompts prepared were:

- a. How important is this social media for you?
- b. What are you trying to express/convey through your profile?
- c. What type of content do you post?
- d. How do your posts and stories relate?
- e. How often do you post (both posts and stories)?
- f. How much of your personal and professional life is shown on your Instagram?
- g. How is your decision-making/planning process for how you use your profile?

- i. What is taken into account in this process?
- h. How is your interaction with your followers?

Understanding that question order is important and affects how the interviews occur, the order of the grand tour questions was the same for all the interviewees. However, the same was not true for the prompts. Firstly, because not all of them were necessary for every interview and secondly because they were used according to the natural flow of the conversation.

Once both grand tour questions were answered, the interviewees were asked a final question regarding the latest trends of their Instagram use: *Has anything changed in how you use it over the past two years and, if so, what motivated this change?*

Before finishing each interview, the photojournalist was encouraged to add any information she considered relevant.

Finally, it is pertinent to mention that two of the interviews were not conducted in English, namely the one with the Brazilian photojournalist, which was conducted in Portuguese, and the one with the Chilean photojournalist, which was conducted in Spanish. For the purpose of this research, all the data collected from these two interviews were translated into English prior to the content analysis.

2.3 Data analysis

As mentioned before, this study resorts to methods from grounded theory to analyse the data collected. According to Charmaz and Belgrave (2012), grounded theory is the name given to a systematic method for constructing a theoretical analysis from qualitative data. It uses explicit analytic strategies combined with implicit guidelines for data collection. The term also refers to the products of the method. Rather than being an inflexible series of procedures, grounded theory methods are guides for grappling with constructing abstract analysis.

These methods are, moreover, inductive, comparative, iterative and interactive (Charmaz 2006 in Charmaz and Belgrave 2012), which means that researchers subject the data to successive comparative analyses so that the research goes from studying concrete

realities to inferring conceptual understandings from the data, without forcing it into preconceived categories. Grounded theory was constructed to be a method of studying fluid and emergent processes, which is the case of online personal branding.

That being said, coding is the first analytic step that moves the study from merely describing the data toward conceptualising that description. It is important to notice, however, that the codes are not neutral, as they reflect both the information in the data and the interests and perspectives of the researcher (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012). In other words, researchers using grounded theory methods must acknowledge that they define what is happening in the data. Moreover, grounded theorists “assume that researchers already possess theoretical and research knowledge concerning their substantive field” (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012, p. 10), and encourage researchers to be reflexive about their preconceptions and assumptions. While coding involves constructing labels that describe, dissect and distil the data, its essential properties are still preserved.

The process of coding used in grounded theory includes at least two steps: an initial open coding, where the researcher starts to make analytic decisions about the data, and a second selective and focused coding, which uses the most frequent and/or significant codes from the first step to sort, synthesise and conceptualise the data (*ibidem*). Another relevant element to grounded theory coding is the simultaneous data collection and analysis, which is often disregarded by researchers claiming to use grounded theory.

With that in mind, the analytical process of this research started simultaneously with the data collection via interviews. Firstly, each interview was transcribed immediately after being conducted, which allowed for identifying elements that appeared repeatedly in the answers of the photojournalists, as well as questions which might seem irrelevant. That was the case, for instance, with the prompt question regarding the contractual status between the interviewees and the media where their work was featured. This question was aimed at confirming whether the participants were freelancers, but midway through the series of interviews, it proved to be unnecessary and therefore was dropped.

As the interviews were conducted and transcribed, the data were categorised according to the relevant information. In a broad sense, the elements of the data related to the topics covered by some of the prompt questions. The data collected by the first grand tour question was employed to better understand the participants and their experience, while the

data collected by the second grand tour question was aimed at understanding how they build their personal online brands on Instagram. This represents the main focus of the analysis.

Besides the demographic data, which has been introduced in Table 1 above, the data related to the first grand tour question were classified under four categories: 1) how the photojournalists arrived in this profession; 2) how they afford to produce their work; 3) the topics they cover and 4) where their work has been featured. Following, the data belonging to each of these categories were sorted taking into consideration the information that appeared more frequently. The results of this coding will be presented in the findings session of this study.

As for the coding of the data collected from the second grand tour question, the relevant information was classified into categories simultaneously with the transcription of the interviews. In broad terms, said classification corresponded to the elements which the prompt questions aimed at retrieving. That does not mean, however, that the categories coincide exactly with the prompts.

That being said, for its first coding, this data was grouped into the following categories: a) the relevance Instagram had for the photojournalist, b) conscious strategies, c) what the photojournalist intended to express through her profile, d) what type of content was published, e) how they used Instagram's stories feature, f) how they dealt with publishing personal content, g) their decision-making processes, h) how were their interaction with their audiences and i) what changed in their use of Instagram over the past two years.

While these categories seemed appropriate at first, they soon showed to be redundant, as most of the data collected belonged to two or more categories. Nonetheless, this first coding was helpful in identifying the most relevant pieces of data to be used in the analysis.

Once this step was concluded, the second coding was more specific, focusing on the main and secondary questions this study aims to answer. With that in mind, the data was regrouped under five categories, as follows: 1) role of the platform, 2) brands being built, 3) conscious strategies, 4) decision-making process and 5) recent changes. The results of this coding were compared to the theoretical framework whenever said comparison was appropriate, carefully so as not to force the data into any preconceived categories or theories. The result of this analysis will be presented below in the findings and discussion sessions of this study.

As previously stated, the goal of this research is to find meaning through the words of the woman freelance photojournalists, not to make generalisable inferences. That being said, and given the fact that the sample is not representative, the focus of the analysis is to find the patterns that emerge from the data, without fixating on how many times it happens among the interviewed nor on who specifically is involved, except for cases when that seems to be relevant.

3. FINDINGS

As the literature review introduced in this study has shown, journalism jobs are growingly precarious, which is particularly true for photojournalism. Among women and freelancers, the scarcity of opportunities and instability are even more prominent. The data collected during the interviews with the participants reinforce previous research findings in this regard, as will be further discussed in the next chapter. Besides pointing to the need to diversify their income, women freelance photojournalists have reported challenges even in identifying themselves as journalists. As the photojournalist from Hong Kong points out:

“It is something you learn the hard way: so much of this industry is about confidence, about who is calling themselves a photojournalist. For women, this tends to be harder, since we are more prone to having impostor syndrome.” – HK01

To that, USA01 added that she started asking for better rates once she felt her skills as a photojournalist had increased enough, but that, even so, those rates are still considerably low and the opportunities scarce. The participant from Pakistan reported that, besides having difficulties in getting commissions at home, the copyright laws in the country are not as clear as in other places and its implementation is also not trustworthy, which makes it harder for her to work with local and national media.

The interviewees also mentioned differences between their own experiences and those of their male counterparts, pointing to what was referred to as the sexism of the industry. Besides having fewer opportunities and lower pay, the participants reported the need to be more aware of sharing one's personal image for fear of being criticised and not taken seriously, and for the risk of attracting unwanted attention and being harassed. That being

said, the number of participants who reported having been harassed on Instagram was surprisingly lower than expected. That will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Once the data collected regarding their photojournalistic experience was coded, they could be classified as follows.

3.1 Arrival in the profession

Regarding how they arrived in this profession, interviewees were grouped under a) those who started as photographers and then changed the direction of their photography to cover journalistic stories or b) those who started working as journalists and photographed when given the chance. Most of the participants fall under the first category. The exceptions are the HK01 and USA02, who fall under the second category. Interestingly, both the US photojournalists who started working on other genres of photography before dedicating themselves to photojournalism and the Brazilian photojournalist, who is in the same group, revealed having originally worked as wedding photographers.

Regarding how they afford to produce their photojournalistic work, four participants indicated the need to diversify their income. Among the alternative sources of income were teaching, photographing weddings and other events, working in the communication of politicians, and real state investments. Another important element that appeared was the application for grants in order to develop long-term projects. Those who did not mention looking to diversify their income either signalled using the opportunities given by assignments and commissions to work on their own projects on the side or using the earnings from said work to invest in personal projects.

3.2 Covered topics

In the case of topics covered and where the work was featured, the coding was conducted differently, given that the categories are not mutually excluding, since one photojournalist may very well cover different topics for different outlets. Therefore, rather than the photojournalists being classified according to the categories they belong to, in this case, the coding was employed to identify how the subjects covered by the participants can be grouped. That being said, the topics covered were grouped under a) environment, b) gender,

c) memory, d) social issues, e) social movements, f) conflict, g) politics and h) general news. As for where the work has been featured, rather than focusing on specific media outlets, the data was classified under a) local media, b) national media, c) international media and d) non-profit organisations. Table 2 below presents which topics were covered by each of the participants, and where they were featured.

Country of origin	Age	Time working as a photojournalist	Topics covered	Where was the work featured
United States	35	10 years	Environment	Local, national and international
United States	29	4 years	Memory/Identity, Conflict, Migration	National and international
United States	40	12 years	Migration, social movements, politics, social issues, general news	Local, national and international
Brazil	32	7 years	Social movements, politics, memory/identity, gender, social issues	Local and national
Chile	32	4 years	Conflict, social issues, environment, migration, gender,	National and non-profit

			social movements	
Germany	37	7 years	Memory/Identity, gender, environment, social issues	National and international
Czech Republic	41	13 years	Gender, social issues	National, international and non-profit
United Kingdom	39	10 years	Migration, politics, environment	National and international
Hong Kong	32	4 years	General news, social movements, environment, social issues	National and international
Pakistan	38	10 years	Environment, social issues, gender	National, international and non-profit

Throughout the interviews, other elements emerged, which in spite of not fitting in any of the categories aforementioned, are still noteworthy. Firstly, the majority of the interviewees mentioned, at some point, that they prioritise, whenever possible, spending more time getting to know their sources and subjects, and developing their stories. Secondly, approximately half reported integrating a collective of photographers and/or multimedia journalists.

Finally, there were two remarks which while did not appear more than once each, were deemed relevant to mention. One of them was made by the participant from Pakistan,

who noted that photojournalism was not a common practice in her country, which led her to figure out much of her work by herself. The other was made by the participant from Brazil, who declared having refused assignments when they went against her beliefs and what she defends.

“A few times I refused an assignment because, even though the topic was related to what I cover, they tended to denounce the people affected. So I did not accept them, because they did not meet my values. On the contrary, it opposed what I believe in.” – BRL01

3.3 Role of the platform

The photojournalists interviewed reported having what USA01 called “a love-hate relationship with Instagram”. While there is a general feeling that the platform is not only beneficial but also invaluable for their work, it is “exhausting and unpaid work” – USA03 – and it can be overwhelming, time-consuming and anxiety-inducing. Besides the reported struggles with remaining active in the platform, some also noticed that it is often frustrating to compare one’s progress with that of other photojournalists.

That being said, the main roles of Instagram, according to the participants, can be grouped under four categories: 1) communicate and be seen, 2) editorial independence, 3) connecting and 4) denounce.

Participants mentioned their Instagram is often more important than their professional websites when it comes to showing their work and being visible. Many of them reported using their profiles on Instagram as portfolios, mentioning not only that it is where they can exhibit their work, but also that it offers more freedom than their websites when it comes to experimenting. They defend the importance of keeping their grid well maintained to make it inviting and to express themselves as photojournalists. As one of the participants noticed:

“Instagram is a free marketing place and a really good way to show your work and to attract the work you want to do more of. So I make it clean and professional.” – CZK01

Similar perceptions of Instagram as a platform to communicate who they are as photojournalists and what work they would like to develop can also be seen in the following quotes:

“I also use Instagram as a way to communicate to editors what I care about.” – USA01

“At some point, I want to be hired for my voice and for who I am as a person and what I can bring to a project. So I like that to reflect on what I post in my timeline.” – PAK01

“Instagram is a platform to express who you are and what you see. It doesn’t have to be so regimented, it’s who you want to be, it changes, you can branch outside of that persona. For me, it’s a way to play and experiment and express myself, but a lot of the work is still within that brand, it’s not totally different, so if maybe an editor checks the profile, it’s still a narrative of who I am and the work I’m doing.” – USA02

That being said, the interviewees also pointed out the fact that, on their Instagram profiles, they have editorial independence. Some communicate that, oftentimes, the editorial process of publications leads to final edits which are different from what the photojournalists themselves would have chosen to communicate, so using Instagram gives them an opportunity to show those stories according to their own choice:

“When I submit my images to a client, I no longer have control over how my images will be published. Even if I try to communicate my preferred edit, it can change. In Instagram, I get to communicate images and texts that mean the most to me from a story.” – USA01

In other cases, it represents the opportunity to diffuse stories that would otherwise not be published:

“I don’t have a media outlet that will publish all the stories I produce, so Instagram is the place where I ditch what I can’t otherwise publish.” – BRL01

Another important role of Instagram for photojournalists is the connection, be it to colleagues, possible sources or editors. The participants mentioned they get assignments from Instagram, that they look for sources and possible partners and that they maintain contact with other photojournalists in order to build a community. In the case of the women photojournalists interviewed, there was also a sense of supporting other women in a work environment that is highly male-dominated:

“Besides reporting my works, I use my Instagram to raise flags and defend what I believe in and denounce social and environmental issues, but also as an empowerment tool, because if I managed to conquer these spaces, it’s because of a feminist fight that is not only

mine. So I also use my Instagram as a place where I fight to be in these places and to make it so that other women can also occupy them.” – BRL01

Particularly the interviewees from the Global South used their Instagram profiles also as a tool to denounce situations happening in their countries. Photojournalists from Brazil, Chile and Hong Kong declared having used their Instagram profiles as platforms to produce real-time coverage of protests and other events and that they became a reference in the coverage of said subjects. In some cases, their material became a reference for local and national media:

“My Instagram became a reference for other communicators and media outlets and I was able to set the agenda for stories that ended up in outlets that were covering my real-time coverage. Outlets came to me for information and sources.” – BRL01

Another pattern that emerged among some of the interviewees was the understanding that while Instagram is important, there are other elements of the journalistic work which they consider to be more crucial:

“Since I use it mostly to connect, in my mind, I’d love to be consistent, but I feel that I’m so early on in my career that I’m focusing on the more crucial aspect of doing the work.” – USA02

“Instagram is very important, but also not at all. What is important is the pictures and the connection in the moment of the story.” – USA01

Interestingly, comments regarding using Instagram differently from other photojournalists were also frequent. Most of the time, these comments appeared as criticism or as trying to differentiate oneself from other journalists who perform in ways they do not perceive as appropriate:

“I try to keep it interesting and fun for myself. I’m not a content creator, which is what a lot of photojournalists start trying to do.” – PAK01

“A lot of colleagues express outrage and political opinions. I don’t do that, I think it’s lame.” – USA03

“I see a lot of people are trying to make themselves into a brand and construct the idea of what they should be presenting to people. It feels hollow. I try not to do that. I don’t like how I feel when I see that happening.” – USA01

3. 4 The brands they build

Separating the personal from the professional is a common struggle for journalists creating their online personal brands on social media (Bossio and Sacco 2016). Among the participants of this study, it was not different. Regarding this differentiation, three main patterns emerged, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive: 1) separating the personal from the professional inside the platform, 2) reluctance in showing the personal on Instagram and 3) considering showing more of a personal side.

Among those who separate personal and professional elements within Instagram, the main strategies employed were: 1) using the stories feature, where content is only available for 24 hours, for publishing personal and opinionated content, while maintaining the feed entirely or majorly professional; 2) using the close friends feature of Instagram, where one can filter who has access to the content published on the stories; or 3) having entirely separate profiles, one for personal purposes and one for professional purposes.

The reasons presented for those who avoided or were reluctant about sharing personal content were mostly along the lines of concerns for safety, fear of not being taken seriously and/or wanting for the work to speak louder than their personal images:

“Posting personal stuff makes me feel uncomfortable. Especially sharing it with a bunch of strangers.” – HK01

“I prefer my Instagram not to be personal, I don’t like posting about my life a lot, nor posting how I look like. I would rather have the photos I take be higher in the algorithm.” – USA01

That being said, many of the participants also declared considering the possibility of posting more personal content, in order to remind editors of where they are; to draw more attention to their profiles, given that the algorithm tends to prioritise personal images; and because they admire and feel inspired by other journalists who do that:

“Lately I have been quiet on Instagram because I haven’t been working so much. It makes me a bit anxious, I feel like I should be doing more, but I’ve spent several months building the house [in Mexico]. I’m not someone who shares much about my personal life, but I showed the house to explain what I’ve been working on and that ended up leading to some job offers. Maybe I should post more to show that I’m not just visiting Mexico and to remind editors of that. I’m recalibrating how I think about my Instagram account. I think I should post more about my personal life, so they [editors] will think of me.” – USA03

“Occasionally, when I want to draw attention to something, I use Instagram as a tool of personal communication, I employ a communication that I know will reach people because I know the algorithm works better when you show your face.” – BRL01

“I mostly use my Instagram profile to act as an auxiliary portfolio. Only occasionally do I post personal stuff and it’s rare for me to post self-portraits on my Instagram page. It’s not because I don’t think it’s a good way to use it, but because I feel self-conscious. I admire people who do that and I’m moving more toward this direction, but in the past, I was afraid editors wouldn’t take me seriously.” – UK01

Other participants also mentioned different ways of expressing their individuality, without sharing what they considered to be personal content. They reported doing so through choosing what to post, independently of other media or criticism and/or through the captions of the photographs:

“I can pair the images of a project with those of another experience that is meaningful to me, but that wouldn’t be part of a story. I can express a personal sense of meaning that I couldn’t otherwise pitch.” – USA02

“In my own feed I can just be more relaxed.” – USA03

“Instagram is the place where I can just be me, somehow. It is a very honest place for me to show my photography and to show what moves me and what I care about right now.” – DEU01

“It allows me to show my work the way I want and to express things more personally, I can use the captions to tell my personal experience, have fun with it, play with my work in a way other than how it was published.” – USA02

Finally, the brands built by the photojournalists interviewed fall under three categories. The first one encompasses those who strived to maintain journalistic distance on their behaviour, avoiding over-editorialising, sharing opinions or being one-sided in their posts. The second one, to which only the photojournalists from South America belong, represents a brand built based on activism, as they use their Instagram profile to openly defend the causes they believe in. Finally, the third category represents an in-between place, where journalists neither attempt to be objective nor to be activists. Instead, the goal of those who fall under this category is to show transparency. Their focus is on sharing their processes, being responsible and accountable toward their sources and showing the person behind the stories:

“Part of your following is probably going to be, to some extent, based on who people perceive you to be. They’re not just following your work, they’re following you, so you want to share your personality. It makes your content more relatable, shows that it comes from a human being” – HK01

“I want to make my feed clean and professional, but the stories are more fun, I want to show that I am also a human who enjoys doing fun things.” – CZK01

“It allows you to be more open with sharing what you’re doing and your processes. On Instagram, you can be more personal. Editors follow me there, but it’s also my way of sharing my processes, my mind and how the experiences affect me. It’s not just a professional portfolio.” – USA02

“The interesting thing about photographing now is the accountability because the people you photograph can stay in touch.” – USA02

That being said, it is also relevant to note that some of the participants reported struggling between trying to maintain neutrality and speaking up:

“I struggle with it because there is the idea that journalists should be neutral, but I don’t want to be silent, so I go back and forth from that.” – USA01

3.5 Decision-making and strategies

Throughout the coding processes, it was possible to observe that the strategies used by the photojournalists and what they take into account in their decision-making processes are so intertwined that they cannot be differentiated without causing a great loss to the analysis. With that in mind, both SRQ2 — What are the strategies used by them? — and SRQ3 — What do they take into account in their decision-making processes? — will be addressed together through this session.

As previously mentioned, this study focuses on the explicit and conscious strategies used by the participants. When it comes to strategising Instagram content and its publication, three patterns emerged. Firstly, there were those who reported planning posts ahead of time, occasionally with the use of other applications for support. In some cases, the participants who mentioned planning ahead of time declared only doing so on special occasions, such as taking over other Instagram profiles, promoting a book and/or promoting a long-form story.

Contrary to this group, other interviewees declared they are not strategic in how they post their content on Instagram, instead doing it intuitively, according to what they felt was right at a given time.

Some of the participants acknowledged the importance of strategising and being consistent, while nonetheless reporting that they do not act upon that.

That being said, patterns concerning the decision-making processes emerged, being often simultaneously present.

Firstly, when deciding whether to post a photograph, the participants reported choosing their favourite images, the ones they were most proud of and/or the ones they considered to be the best. This was frequently connected to the notion of meaningfulness, with interviewees declaring they chose images that would be impactful, adding nuance to the stories and narratives already available. To that, it was added that the photographs chosen should not be redundant to images that were reproduced everywhere. Moreover, in connection with the idea of publishing meaningful content, the photojournalists reported wishing that their photographs would help the audience connect and engage with the stories and issues being addressed.

Participants also reported considering what editors will think when seeing their Instagram profiles. With that in mind, they mentioned the importance of maintaining a professional-looking grid and deleting or archiving posts whenever it was deemed necessary to maintain said look. This pattern is particularly relevant given the precariousness of freelance work.

Among the photojournalists who were victims of harassment, concerns regarding their personal safety and that of their sources also emerged. Noteworthy is the fact that the harassment was experienced not only on the platform but also offline. This will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Another common element of the strategies employed was the use of the stories feature, which fell under three non-mutually exclusive categories. Firstly, stories were used more freely and informally, often showing personal moments with friends and family or snapshots of everyday life. While some perceived that as an opportunity to experiment and show a lighter, fun side of the platform, others saw it as a way for the audience to stay connected and maintain relationships. Secondly, stories were used, as previously mentioned, to introduce the “behind the scenes” of the journalistic processes employed by the participants. And thirdly, the feature was used as its own narrative format, particularly by the photojournalists who covered protests and social movements.

Finally, a crucial element of brand-building strategies was the interaction with the audiences. Participants described attempting to answer as many messages as possible, while the same was not true for comments. That being said, they also reported having more difficulties in doing so given time limits and/or creating boundaries. The interaction with followers was often described as overwhelming. It was mentioned that the audience tends to be more interactive and responsive to content published on the stories feature, rather than the timeline, to which one of the participants noted that answers to stories are private and can only be seen by the owner of the profile, rather than by the entire audience.

Signalling to the collapsed contexts found in social media, the interaction often happened with people who followed their work as consumers, but also with editors and potential employers, who often used Instagram messages to make the first contact, rather than email.

Finally, participants also reported that the interactions made on Instagram were not restricted to the online environment, often resulting in in-person connections.

“A lot of my real-life friends I first met on Instagram.” – USA02

3.6 Changes over the past two years

Given that the study took place while the Covid-19 pandemic was still ongoing, it also attempted to find out whether there were considerable changes to the brand-building processes of the participants since the start of the pandemic. That being said, the questions regarding said changes did not explicitly mention this event, so as not to limit the answers to alterations directly caused by it.

Other than the fact that most participants acknowledged that something had changed, there were no frequent patterns in the data regarding these changes, which varied from choosing to focus on other parts of life and taking some time off after trauma to feeling less incentive from the algorithm and turning off story replies.

“A few months ago, I turned off stories replies for people I don’t follow. Of course, it’s an honour and privilege having people care about your work, but I’m an individual human being and it takes energy to interact with strangers.” – HK01

4. DISCUSSION

This chapter will attempt to answer the main question of this research – *how do female freelance photojournalists build their brands on Instagram* – as well as its secondary questions. In order to do so, the aforementioned findings will be discussed through the lenses of the theoretical framework presented by this study.

The first three subchapters that follow – *4.1 Role of the platform*; *4.2 Topics covered* and *4.3 Brands they build* – will answer SRQ1: What are the brands they build? The following subchapter, *4.4 Decision-making and strategies*, will address both SRQ2 and SRQ3 together, given that the strategies used by the photojournalists and what they take into

account in their decision-making processes are so intertwined that they cannot be differentiated without causing a great loss to the analysis.

Finally, given the relatively unsubstantial findings regarding the changes over the past two years, they shall not be further discussed. As the previous chapter has shown, while most participants mentioned the existence of changes, there were no identifiable patterns, either related to the changes themselves or to what motivated them.

4.1 Role of the platform

As the findings have shown, most of the photojournalists interviewed mentioned the need to diversify their income and/or disclosed using the earnings of commissioned work to develop their passion projects. Combined with their comments regarding sexism in the industry and about the specific challenges faced by women photojournalists, these findings support what has been inferred by previous studies, namely: 1) that journalism jobs have become more precarious and scarce, with lower pay, fewer benefits and a higher degree of uncertainty (Molyneux, Lewis and Holton 2018); 2) that particularly among photojournalists there has been a rise in stress, insecurity and precarity in work arrangements among them (Hadland, Lambert and Campbell 2016); and 3) that such changes tend to affect women and freelancers disproportionately.

As the participants defend that Instagram as a platform is invaluable for their work and that it is often more important than their professional websites when it comes to showing their work and being visible, they reinforce previous findings which argue that 1) social media platforms can be beneficial in providing an arena for self-branding and entrepreneurship, helping them stay on the radar of potential clients and employers (Brems et al. 2017) and 2) that online personal branding has become a hallmark of digital work, as media professionals attempt to mitigate the growing precarity of the creative job market (Molyneux et al. 2018).

Moreover, the findings of this study also support Gandini's (2016 in Scolere et al. 2018) understanding that a certain amount of unpaid labour on self-branding, visibility and reputation construction is now perceived as natural, especially among freelancers. At the same time, they also support Bossio and Sacco (2016) and Chen et al. (2018) who have shown that while maintaining a presence on social media can be beneficial, it is also

perceived by journalists as too demanding. As previously shown, the interviewees mentioned having “love-hate” relationships with Instagram and that this “exhausting and unpaid work” can be overwhelming, time-consuming and anxiety-inducing.

In regards to the four categories in which the roles of the platform have been grouped, namely 1) communicate and be seen, 2) editorial independence, 3) connecting and 4) denounce, much can also be linked to existing literature.

Firstly, as the present findings have shown, one of the main roles of Instagram identified by the interviewees is having the possibility to communicate and be seen. On the one hand, they perceive Instagram as a platform to communicate who they are as photojournalists and what work they would like to develop. In other words, while they do not use this term, Instagram is the platform where they can build and communicate their brands. Or, as Labrecque, Markos and Milne (2011) put it, where they can work on their brand identity and brand positioning. On the other hand, while these photojournalists face collapsed contexts as social media users, much of their processes of brand-build take into account what editors will think when seeing their Instagram profiles, something demonstrated by how they defend the importance of maintaining a professional-looking grid. These findings support Molyneux’s (2019) previous findings regarding how female journalists were more likely to seek to reach potential employers and other journalists, especially in the case of those who were younger and less experienced.

As for editorial independence, previous findings by Hadland and Barnett’s (2018) point to the fact that job precarity, combined with the desire for individual control, tends to lead journalists to rely more on online branding. These findings are supported in the present study, as many of the interviewees mentioned the importance Instagram had for their work as the platform offers the possibility of editorial freedom, experimentation and posting stories that would otherwise not get published.

As the previous chapter has shown, connecting is one of the main roles of Instagram for the participants. These findings are particularly interesting given that previous research has shown that freelance journalists, as they are disenfranchised from media organisations, tend to show high levels of institutional branding, as they seek to associate with other journalists in order to gather capital and demonstrate affiliation to the profession (Molyneux et al. 2018). This is further supported by the fact that approximately half of the interviewees reported integrating a collective of photographers and/or multimedia journalists.

Concerning the role of denouncing, as it is intrinsically connected to one particular type of brand, namely the activist one, and given its relation to the place where the photojournalists who resort to this brand come from, it shall be further discussed in “the brands they build” section of this chapter.

Finally, as previously mentioned, another pattern that emerged among some of the interviewees was the understanding that while Instagram is important, there are other elements of the journalistic work which they consider to be more crucial.

4.2 Topics covered

While much could be said about the relatively wide range of topics covered by the participants, this analysis will focus mainly on discussing the relationship between covering said topics and the brands they build. The same is true for the discussion regarding the outlets where their work has been featured.

Firstly, it is relevant to reiterate that the choice of participants took into account the attempt to include photographers who covered as wide as possible a range of subjects for a variety of local and international media outlets, as well as for non-profit organisations.

Secondly, the findings of the present study challenge Hadland and Barnett’s (2018) cross-cultural study conclusion regarding female photojournalists being concentrated in segments of the industry, such as fashion or portraiture rather than news. Although only two of the participants covered topics that this study coded as general news, none of them mentioned fashion as a segment. At the same time, while portraits appeared in the interviews as important elements to the photographs they take, said portraits were generally connected to the coverage of the other topics – environment, gender, memory, social issues, social movements, conflict and politics. Moreover, their testimonials point to a much broader range of segments than that found by Hadland and Barnett (2018).

With one noteworthy exception, the topics covered did not seem to have a big impact on the brands they build. The exception is for the South American photojournalists, who present themselves as activists. While they were not the only ones to cover social movements, this was the category of topics which defined their positioning as activists.

While further research should be conducted in order to prove this assumption, one possible explanation as to why their personal branding does not seem to be highly affected by the topics they cover is the fact that most of them had their work featured on international media and, with the exception of the South American participants, all the others publish content mainly in English. These findings support Reese's (2007) discussions regarding how globalisation affects journalism, creating a "global news arena", a level of influence that works beyond the institutional and the sociocultural level, in ways that cannot be accounted for by national media systems.

4.3 Brands they build

As Labrecque, Markos and Milne (2011) point out, brand identity is defined as how the marketer wants the brand to be perceived. As the interviewees express perceiving Instagram as a platform to communicate who they are as photojournalists and what work they would like to develop, they indicate the existence of brand identity and a level of consciousness thereof, even though most of them did not explicitly disclose what or who corresponds to this identity.

According to Bossio and Sacco (2016), the practice of journalism has always been imbued with a sense of the "personal". The authors also defend that, for freelancers navigating personal branding on social media, there are more tensions when negotiating the representation of a professional and personal identity. Their study uncovered three ways in which the interviewed journalists dealt with the situation: by having separate social media accounts for personal and professional use; by only having a professional account as per required by their organisation; or by merging aspects of professional and personal identities on the same account.

The first and third ways were also found among the participants of this study, being the third one the most common. For those who employed this strategy, as the previous chapter has shown, the stories feature of Instagram was a key tool. As for the second way uncovered by Bossio and Sacco (2016), the participants of this study could not have been employed, given that they are freelancers.

Moreover, it is interesting to notice how their understanding of the separation between their professional and personal identities coincides with that of Bossio and Sacco (2016),

namely that professional identity are the “representations of the professional activities, organisational affiliations and institutional norms that a journalist might present through image or text on social media platforms” (, p. 528), and personal identity are “the activities, events, opinions and relationships that might represent a journalist’s life outside their professional activities” (ibidem, p. 529).

It is also relevant to highlight, as has been previously mentioned, that they also express their personal identities through other ways such as choosing what to post, independently of other media or criticism and/or through the captions of the photographs. That, however, was not always explicitly perceived by them as being part of their personal identities.

As for the disclosure of personal aspects, this study also found that, while the participants often declared being cautious about posting personal content, due to a fear of harassment or of not being taken seriously, they also expressed interest in producing more such content. These findings support Molyneux's (2019) study which reveals that as female journalists are not well served by male-dominated news organisations, they tend to turn to a more personalised self-image in their branding efforts. The author also defends that these personal approaches often correspond to norms women feel they must follow, something that does not seem to be the exact case among the photojournalists interviewed. They seem to perceive this as something desirable, whilst also not entirely safe, as shown by their concerns. Yet, some of the interviewees did express pressure from the algorithm to publish personal content and generate more engagement.

Answering *SRQ1: What are the brands they build?*, this study found, as previously mentioned, that there are three main categories of brands, namely: 1) journalistic distance, 2) activism and 3) transparency.

The first one, where participants expressed avoiding over-editorialising, sharing opinions or being one-sided in their posts, could be explained by the influence of the routines as unwritten rules about how journalists should behave and how they should do their job (Shoemaker and Reese 2016), collaborate to perpetuate the status quo (Chen et al. 2018). Although digitalisation has produced profound changes in work patterns, income sources, technology use and ethical principles (Hadland et al. 2016), this group of participants show that not everything has changed.

The second one, as has been shown, only encompasses the photojournalists from South America. For the two participants, one of the main roles of Instagram as a platform is to denounce the wrongdoings of those in power. Both interviewees mentioned taking part in and covering social movements as something previous to their photojournalistic careers, and argued that this type of coverage was what led them – and their Instagram profiles – to become credible sources of information.

While the photojournalist from Hong Kong did not employ the activist brand, her Instagram account was also a source of credible information during the coverage of social movements. It is interesting to notice that the countries where this happened are places where the media is experiencing threats to its freedom, as well as being questioned in regards to its trustworthiness. A crucial difference between them is that, while the participants from South America produced said content for national and regional audiences, in their native languages, the photojournalist from Hong Kong did so in English, for an international audience. It is also noteworthy that, while Pakistan presents a similar political landscape, the same type of coverage was not expressed by the participant from that country.

Finally, the third category represents an in-between place, where journalists focus on sharing their processes, being responsible and accountable toward their sources and showing the person behind the stories. These findings go hand in hand with Molyneux et al.'s (2017) findings that, for journalists, there is a growing expectation to complement their reporting with behind-the-scenes transparency, something that the participants in this category often did, using Instagram's stories feature.

4.4 Decision-making and strategies

As previously mentioned, Labrecque et al. (2011) define brand identity as how the marketer wants the brand to be perceived and brand positioning as the part of the brand identity to be actively communicated to the audience. In that sense, the decision-making processes and strategies used by the female freelance photojournalists can be seen as how they work on their brand positioning. While the previous section covered the first, this section will cover the latter, as it addresses both SRQ2 — *What are the strategies used by them?* – and SRQ3 – *What do they take into account in their decision-making processes?*.

The topics concerning this discussion will be grouped under four subsections: 1) collapsed contexts, 2) explicit and implicit strategies, 3) branding levels and 4) gendered harassment.

4.4.1 Collapsed contexts

Throughout the interviews, it was possible to observe that the participants have both a sense of who their audiences are and an awareness of the existence of a collapse of contexts (Goffman 1959 in Scolere et al. 2018) among them. In response to that, they tend to project many selves, as previous research has found to be true (see Zhao et al. 2016 in Scolere et al. 2018). Most of the participants tend to separate the professional and the personal selves, using the grid as the professional space for excellence and the stories feature as the space for personal expression. Moreover, it is interesting to notice that the combination of personal and professional, as well as how different features are used for it, also point to what Marwick and Boyd (2010) defend as a quintessential characteristic of social media, which is the combination of elements of broadcast media with elements of face-to-face communication.

The results of this study also support Marwick and Boyd's (2010) findings regarding how social media users manage their audiences through monitoring and responding to feedback and interpreting followers' interests. That could be seen through 1) considering what editors will think about their content; 2) pondering about the reasons people follow their profiles, whether for their work and/or their personalities; 3) being accountable to their sources and subjects; 4) choosing images they believe would be impactful and resonate with audiences and 5) self-censoring so as to avoid polemics and/or unwanted attention.

Interviewees seldom used the term "audience" and, contradictorily, even among those who did mention this term, it was common to encounter criticism towards the idea of brand-building as being inauthentic, supporting Marwick and Boyd's (2010) findings.

4.4.2 Explicit and implicit strategies

As Manovich (2017 in Hermida and Mellado 2020) points out in his study, as Instagram grew in use by both companies and individuals for commercial purposes, there was a shift towards more idealised visual representations, more craftsmanship and more attention

to details. Given that the participants in this study use their Instagram profiles for professional purposes, including attracting more work, it can be concluded that their own craftsmanship and attention to detail are a response to said commercial practices. Even among those who declared not having strategies, there are accounts that clearly point to the concern about keeping a well-craft and professionally looking profile.

In agreement with Labrecque et al.'s (2011) findings, this study also observed that most of the participants had some sort of branding strategies to manage the content published on their Instagram profiles. However, it was also noteworthy that, while a few of them explicitly recognised and expressed having and applying strategies – such as, for instance, planning their posts ahead of time – the majority of the participants declared not having strategies, in spite of describing actions and processes that could be understood as such. Therefore, although this research set out to analyse only explicit strategies, the frequency in which this situation occurs leads to a necessity of also discussing implicit strategies.

Firstly, as Labrecque et al. (2011) point out, branding practices are commonly used to highlight one's positive attributes, while at the same time differentiating oneself from other individuals, which could be clearly identified among the participants as they declare choosing to publish their best/favourite images, as well as differentiating themselves by the type of work they would like to pursue. They also describe devoting time and attention to the craft, for example by selecting photographs that will look good on the grid and carefully crafting the captions to be published alongside them.

It was also common to find accounts of publishing content according to their feelings, or of doing so “intuitively”, which indicates an unconscious understanding of how the platform works and of what is expected of them.

On that note, it is also interesting to observe that many admitted being aware of the importance of having strategies, while at the same time declaring not doing that. While further research would be required to prove this assumption, there seems to be an idealised notion of what consists of having personal branding strategies.

4.4.3 Branding levels

Firstly, it is important to reiterate that this discussion resorts to both Molyneux et al.'s (2018) three levels of influence and Shoemaker and Reese's (2016) hierarchy of influences model and that higher levels do not eliminate the influence of the level below. Rather, different levels interact with one another. That said, this analysis will not dive deep into each of the levels, choosing instead to focus on those which reveal to be most relevant for the study. Moreover, as has been previously noted, while many journalists report practising branding at multiple levels, they tend to favour one and apply it consistently across their social media profiles (Molyneux et al. 2018).

In general, it can be observed that the participants tend to focus on the individual level, namely, the one that focuses on the journalist's own identity (Molyneux et al. 2017), as has been shown in the previous sections.

However, the interviewees also present strong institutional branding, which might be explained by the fact that, as freelancers, they might feel disenfranchised and therefore seek associations with other journalists "as a way of gathering capital and demonstrating their affiliation to the profession" (Molyneux et al. 2018, p. 851). As previously mentioned, the participants described using their Instagram accounts to maintain contact with other photojournalists in order to build a community and also to support other women in a work environment that is highly male-dominated. This finding is particularly interesting as it points to specific ways in which gender can affect institutional branding.

Regarding the organisational level, given that the photojournalists in question are freelancers, they do not have employer attachments and therefore do not resort to organisational branding. Nevertheless, the opinion of potential employers is still taken into account in their branding.

As has been shown in previous studies and supported by the findings here presented, a certain amount of unpaid labour on self-branding, visibility and reputation construction is now perceived as natural, especially among freelancers (Gandini 2016 in Scolere et al. 2018). This work is part of a new set of journalistic routines, brought about by the profound changes produced by digitalisation. This relatively new behaviour has become ritualised and has strong influences on how media content is produced.

Finally, as globalisation affects journalism, creating what Reese (2007) calls a “global news arena”, it could be observed that, in spite of coming from different cultural backgrounds and media systems, there was some level of consistency among the brands they build and the strategies they employ.

4.4.4 Gendered harassment

As has been previously mentioned, at the same time that there is a growing requirement that female journalists engage in online spaces as part of their jobs, social media provides fertile soil for gendered harassment (Chen et al., 2018). That being said, the number of participants who reported having been harassed on Instagram was surprisingly lower than expected.

The participants who described being harassed were the same ones who used their Instagram profiles as a tool to denounce situations happening in their countries, namely the photojournalists from Brazil, Chile and Hong Kong, countries where the media is experiencing threats to its freedom. As the participant from Hong Kong noticed, one recurring element of said harassment was the use of automated bots. Also noteworthy is the fact that the harassment was experienced not only on the platform but also offline, coming often from the police, in the cases of covering social movements, or also from the perpetrators of the events being denounced, which was particularly true in the Brazilian case, who described being followed and receiving death threats. In the case of the Chilean interviewee, there was actual physical harm, which left her partially blind as a result of police brutality.

Most of the participants reported that the interaction with followers was mostly positive and that their comments were generally supportive, which reinforces Hermida and Mellado’s (2020) findings regarding Instagram being consensus-oriented, contrary to Twitter, which tends to be more antagonistically oriented.

CONCLUSION

Practices on any social media platform depend heavily on its affordances, or, in other words, on the convergence between the properties of said platform and the actions of social agents (Gibson 1979 in Scolere et al. 2018). That means that while the material features of the platforms are essential to enable its use, the properties of a technology are not only those defined by its design and features but also those imagined by the users. While the material features of a platform may shape the interactions that take place in it, they are also shaped through use (Scolere et al. 2018).

With that in mind, this study has attempted to answer the question of *how female freelance photojournalists build their brands on Instagram*. It resorted to qualitative methods, employing semi-structured interviews with ten women freelance photojournalists from eight countries, using methods from grounded theory to analyse the information that emerged from the data. The findings allowed to answer questions about the relevance Instagram as a platform has for them and for their work, the brands they build, their decision-making processes and the changes they made over the last two years.

In regards to the roles of the platform, four main roles were identified, namely 1) communicate and be seen, 2) editorial independence, 3) connecting and 4) denounce. Once this was established, the study answered the four subquestions. Regarding the brands they build, three main brands were observed: 1) journalistic distance, 2) activism and 3) transparency. Moreover, it was found that separating professional and personal identities was an important element of the process of building their brands. Subquestions two and three, concerning the strategies used and what is taken into account in the decision-making processes were answered and discussed together given they were so intertwined that they separating them would cause a great loss to the analysis. The study found that the collapse of contexts played an important role in these processes, and that many different levels of influence were at play, particularly the individual level, although the institutional, routines and globalisation levels were also highly relevant. Interestingly, regarding the strategies, while the participants employed them at different levels, they were often not recognised as such. The number of accounts of harassment was surprisingly low. However, it could be explained by Instagram's consensus orientation (Hermida and Mellado 2020). Finally, the

findings regarding SRQ4 – *what has changed over the past two years in how their brands are built?* – were insignificant for the study.

While this study presents groundbreaking findings, it also presented shortcomings. Firstly, while there was an attempt to find as diverse as possible a sample of participants, there was still an imbalance regarding identity dimensions such as race – seven of the ten interviewees identified as white –, age – seven were in their thirties – and religion – only three declared identifying with a religion. The geographic distribution was also not ideal, given that six came either from North America or Europe, and there were no participants from the African continent, the Middle East or Australia. Moreover, since only a small portion of the photographers and photojournalists disclose their pronouns on their Instagram profiles, their gender was assumed based on generalisation, which may have led to a biased and cisnormative understanding of women – something that should be approached by future research. No further research was conducted concerning the media landscapes in the individual countries, which should be pursued by future research, in order to better locate the data in particular contexts.

Secondly, while grounded theory is useful when studying processes and developing theoretical analysis, it also raises potential interviewing problems, such as defining the collective analytic story at the expense of the individual story (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012). There are also methodological limitations concerning the subjectivity of the interview, given that both interviewer and interviewees answer questions according to their subjective viewpoints (Hycner 1985 in Bossio and Sacco 2016). While for the interviewees it did not represent a problem, given that their subjective viewpoints were the object of this study, the subjectivity of the interviewer may have interfered with the data collection and analysis.

In addition, there were language limitations on two levels. Firstly, because most of the interviews were conducted in English, which was not the mother tongue of the interviewer, nor of most interviewees. The same was true for the interviewer during the interview conducted in Spanish, although it gave the interviewee the possibility to answer in her mother tongue. Secondly, because the two interviews which were conducted in languages other than English had to be translated, possibly causing the loss of nuances in the process.

Finally, although qualitative interviews provide rich data, this study relied on a small sample that, as previously mentioned, was not representative. That being said, the goal of the research was to find meaning through the female freelance photojournalists' words, rather

than to make generalisable inferences. Given the amount of data collected, it is also relevant to notice that not all of the elements could be analysed. In other words, the meanings contained in the data could not be exhausted in this study. Future research should follow up with both quantitative studies and locally focused qualitative studies to better understand how female freelance photojournalists from different cultural backgrounds build their brands on Instagram.

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