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# Digital Presence and Online Identity among Digital Scholars: A Thematic Analysis

**António Quintas-Mendes [1,*] and Ana Paiva [2]**

[1] LE@D—Laboratory of Distance Education and E-Learning, Open University, 1250-100 Lisbon, Portugal
[2] LE@D—Laboratory of Distance Education and E-Learning, University of Algarve, 8005-139 Faro, Portugal; amvpaivaster@gmail.com
* Correspondence: antonio.mendes@uab.pt

**Abstract:** In today's postdigital society, the public presence of academics on the Web and the consequent affirmation of a given identity or of a multidimensional identity imply a much more complex and multifaceted management of their image than when we were dealing with a scholar whose identity was affirmed in circumscribed spaces and times. In this work, we seek to analyze the positioning of the subjects about their online identities and the ways in which they express the multiple facets of the construction of their online selves. We adopted a Thematic Analysis approach to qualitative research and used NVivo to analyze the data collected through semi-structured interviews of 13 subjects from a purposive sample of digital scholars. Three major themes were identified: Theme A—Digital-Presence Awareness; Theme B—The Public and the Private Spheres; and Theme C—Offline, Online, and Hybrid Selves. Overall, subjects clearly express the awareness of the need to build a presence on the Web. While there is a general concern to preserve a certain level of authenticity, intimacy, and privacy on the Web, there seems to be some heterogeneity in the experiencing of these processes. For some participants, the distinction between public and private and between personal and professional should be clearly marked, while for others, the necessarily hybrid nature of identity should be assumed, arguing that it is no longer possible to make a clear separation between the offline and the online world. This work, thus, shows different shades in the way academics construct their presence on the Web and how differently they assume several of the constitutive dimensions of their identities.

**Keywords:** digital presence; online identity; digital scholars; thematic analysis



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## 1. Introduction

The development of social Web technologies and the characteristics of today's networked societies has promoted a "participatory culture" with profound implications for sociotechnical systems of higher education. The abundance of contents and the ease of use of the spaces in which people communicate and interact with each other and with the information have profoundly changed interpersonal and institutional relationships, namely in what concerns relationships with people and with information and knowledge. Concepts such as "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2006) or "produsage" (Bruns 2008) lead us to the idea of a social environment created by citizens through their digital participation on the Web. This era of participatory and digital culture expresses a passage, with regard to information and knowledge, from a culture of scarcity to a culture of abundance (Jenkins 2006; Stewart 2015) and from a culture of the "homo clausus" to a culture of the "homo conexus", where the networked self tends to predominate over a closed self (Pettitt 2013). Naturally, these transformations have profound consequences at the level of academia, whether in the roles of teacher, student, or researcher. As Weller (2011) and Veletsianos (2016) point out, social media have penetrated higher education and have impacted not only the ways in which students and teachers connect with each other but also the ways in which scholarship is organized, delivered, enacted, and experienced. Thus, the traditional scholar is

expected to take on new roles, which has given rise to new designations, such as "Digital Scholar" (Weller 2011), "Networked Participatory Scholar "(Veletsianos and Kimmons 2012; Veletsianos 2016), or "Open Educational Scholar" (Jhangiani 2017; Nascimbeni 2020). In this context, several studies have been made about the question of Scholarly Networks, namely about Social Network Sites (SNS), Institutional Repositories and Academic Social Networks (ASNs) (Dron and Anderson 2014; Nentwich and König 2014; Basantes-Andrade et al. 2022). Just as several studies have been developed investigating the issues of scholarly networks there have also been several qualitative studies that seek to study the issue of Scholars *in* Networks (Stewart 2015; Veletsianos 2016; Grand et al. 2016), attempting to capture and analyze the concrete experience of scholars in their experiencing of interaction and connection, sharing, and collaboration in networks, beyond the restricted contexts of the academy. As Veletsianos (2016) states, *"shifting our focus from scholarly networks to scholars in networks allows us to face the fact that scholars will engage, exist, and function within networks in a myriad of ways, and will perform both scholarly and non-scholarly activities in them"* (op.cit, p. 107). In fact, it has been observed (Stewart 2015) that participation in networks greatly extends the traditional scope of academic life through fostering extensive cross-disciplinary public ties and rewarding connections, collaboration, and curation between individuals rather than roles or institutions. This transition process is not exempt from difficulties and contradictions. Since it is a process that may require a high degree of public exposure, it may generate some contradictions between the professional identity and the personal identity of each individual. As Veletsianos (2016) points out, many professionals may feel uneasy about how their activities on social media may be perceived by students, colleagues, administrators, potential employers, or policy makers. According to the author, scholars are currently experiencing significant tensions between their personal and academic lives in a kind of fragmented identity lived in fragmented networks within a context in which academia still does not fully and formally recognize the work developed in networks. As Hildebrandt and Couros (2016) also note, the online personas of academics frequently undergo more meticulous scrutiny because they serve as mentors, and the norms and rules for maintaining a suitable online presence can be quite rigid, and this may prevent them from more fully participating on the Web (Hildebrandt 2018).

### *1.1. Digital Presence, Social Presence, and Online Identity*

Digital presence manifests itself in various ways: through interactions; through shared artefacts; through presence in online groups, communities, or collectives; or even through the mere membership to such groups or communities. Closely related to digital presence is the notion of social presence. Initially defined by Short et al. (1976), social presence relates to the extent to which a person is perceived as "real and present" in any technology-mediated process of communication (Quintas-Mendes et al. 2008). The concept of social presence has become a crucial element in numerous online education theoretical models (Garrison et al. 2010; Lowenthal and Dennen 2017). In scenarios where teachers and learners are not co-present, increasing social presence among participants can lead to an enhanced socioemotional environment, fostering closeness, intimacy, and "mediated proximity" (O'Sullivan et al. 2004) and then facilitating learning. Digital presence and social presence can also be viewed as closely related to online identity. According to Warburton (2010), an individual's online presence can be shaped through the accumulation of data resulting from his/her cyber activities: *"digital identity, online persona, or virtual self, all refer to the amassed electronic information that represents us as individuals—what we reveal about ourselves and the outcomes of our human-machine or machine-machine interactions"* (op. cit. p. 8). Moreover, according to Costa and Torres (2011), these identities encompass two primary aspects: presentation and reputation. Presentation concerns how we portray ourselves online, our engagement within common spaces, and the adoption of a particular "persona" for our online interactions. Reputation, on the other hand, focuses on other people's perceptions of us. In his dramaturgical conception of the presentation of self, Goffman (1967) uses the metaphor of life as a stage for activity where we all have a front stage and a backstage.

Individuals engage in performances where they selectively give and give off details in a complex process of "impression management" (Chester and Bretherton 2007; Hogan 2010).

### 1.2. Online Communication and Impression Management

In a way, we can say that online communication amplifies the possibilities and complexities of "impression management". From the early days of studying what was then called Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), Walther (1996) proposed a model of "hyperpersonal communication". According to this model, the senders of a message can optimize their self-presentation; that is, they can present themselves in a more positive light than they would be able to during face-to-face communication, since, in online communication, they have more time to prepare and edit a message, and they do not have to worry about their immediate non-verbal behavior. To be free of the need to allocate scarce mental resources in the control of our visual cues and appearance means that we can allocate more resources to the elaboration of the message, leading to a more constructed image presented to others. In short, the core of the model's assumptions was briefly described by Utz (2000): "*in CMC, users have the opportunity for selective self-presentation. They have time to think about how to present themselves and can choose the positive aspects*". In a way, this relates to what (Turkle 2011) later called the "edited self": "*Whenever one has time to write, edit, and delete, there is room for performance. The "real me" turns out to be elusive. (. . . ) Which pictures to add? Which facts to include? How much of personal life to reveal?*" (op. cit. p. 180).

### 1.3. Context Collapsing

The other side of the question of the presentation of the self is related to the question of reputation. Because the presentation of self is directed toward an audience, or audiences, we are then confronted with the problem of context collapsing. Context collapse refers to the merging of multiple social settings in the same online space (Davis and Jurgenson 2014). It occurs when people, information, and norms from one context seep into another, affecting self-presentation and identity. Originally linked to broadcast media, context collapse became more significant with digital media and the rise of social network sites. Tensions around identity are at the core of this dilemma, as individuals may perform different personas for different audiences. However, due to factors such as persistence, searchability, and replicability, items posted on social network sites may be seen by unintended audiences, leading to possible discomfort and identity-narrowing behaviors (boyd 2007, 2011; Hogan 2010; Dennen and Burner 2017).

### 1.4. Conceptions about Identity

Issues such as impression management, the edited self, or the problem of context collapsing, make us to reflect more deeply on the nature of identity and online identity, in particular, since the latter can be characterized by a certain malleability and fluidity. This is a widely and long-discussed problem. While some scholars and thinkers adhere to an essentialist perspective, viewing identity as a fixed and singular entity, post-structural approaches suggest that identity is multiple, fluid, and malleable according to sociohistorical contexts (Hildebrandt and Couros 2016). In the more traditionalist view, identity is a fixed and unitary concept that makes up one's authentic self. Under this framework, an "authentic identity" could be derived from a coherent understanding of the self. This perspective has been widely debated and discussed in the context of digital environments, where individuals increasingly participate in various online platforms that shape their identities.

Post-structuralist thinkers emphasize the fluidity and malleability of identity. According to these theories, individuals hold multiple identities or facets of identity that are shaped by various contexts and experiences, which can change or evolve over time. Foucault (1988), for example, speaks about processes of subjectivation instead of identity; Deleuze emphasizes the processes of "becoming" (Semetsky (2011) and Butler (2006)) associates identity with performance and performativity. Of crucial importance are also sociomaterial approaches that emphasize the entanglement between subjects and technology.

Criticizing traditional humanist approaches (Biesta 2006) that separate subject and object (Latour 2005), these perspectives emphasize the entanglement between subjects, artefacts, and technology (Barad 2007; Fawns 2022), and in doing so, they presuppose that it is not possible to envisage identities where subjects are separated from technology. Instead of a clear separation between subject and object, the agentivity of artifacts is underlined and, thus, sociomaterial perspectives are also essential for understanding the way the subjects position themselves (and are positioned) in relation to the Web and how they construe their digital identities.

However, neither essentialist nor post-structuralist and liquid views on identity should be considered dominant or exclusive. All of these perspectives may offer valuable insights into the essential human questions about identity. Moreover, subjects have their own implicit theories of what identity is, and these implicit theories will, in a way, also determine how they manage their identities in the various contexts in which they interact. It is possible that some individuals privilege in their own lives a more static and fixed view of themselves, while others privilege a more fluid and changeable view.

## 2. Methodology

### *2.1. Research Questions*

The questions that are relevant for this research are the following:: How do digital scholars position themselves in the context of participatory culture? How do they approach their digital presence, and how do they construe and manage their online selves? What problems, difficulties, and conflicts do they confront in the building of their digital presence and digital identities?

### *2.2. Participants*

This study utilized purposive sampling, a suitable procedure for qualitative research (Breckenridge and Jones 2009; Webster 2016). The participants were selected in a non-random way in order to purposefully select participants who have been involved with activities related to digital scholarship. The participants are teachers and researchers linked to digital participation practices in social networks, groups, and communities who stand out for having active public profiles in social media or in academic repositories and for acting in areas especially relevant to the study in question: integration of technologies in education, online teaching, research in cyberculture, production of open educational resources, etc. We thus sought to choose people who seemed to us to be good informants in the area of the use of networked digital media.

As we describe in a later section, we followed (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2012) a Thematic Analysis approach for data analysis. Thus, in terms of the sample size, we followed the guidelines of these authors (Clarke and Braun 2013; Braun and Clarke 2021) regarding the appropriate sample size for qualitative studies using a Thematic Analysis: 6–10 interviews for small TA projects, 10–20 interviews for medium projects, and more than 30 interviews for a large project. Guest et al. (2006) point out that, when working with a relatively homogenous population, 12 interviews is the number in which "data saturation" and "thematic exhaustion" is attained, or, in other words, it is the point where no significant new codes or new themes emerge. Thus, 13 teachers and researchers participated in this study, 8 of whom are Portuguese and 5 are Brazilian, with 7 being males and 6 being females (see Table 1).

As we can see, in Table 1, our sample is constituted by relatively experienced subjects who, as digital scholars, progressively and over time have been immersed in the digital environments that have pervaded society and, accordingly, and have lived through successive waves of digital innovation and successive moments of digital transformation.

**Table 1.** Participants in the study.

| Participants | Years of Professional Activity | Gender | Nationality | Age |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (S1) Gabriel | >40 | Male | Brazilian | >60 <65 |
| (S2 Milton | >40 | Male | Brazilian | >60 <65 |
| (S3) Cesária | >10 <20 | Female | Brazilian | >40 <45 |
| (S4) Gil | >20 <30 | Male | Portuguese | >55 >60 |
| (S5) Damásio | >40 | Male | Portuguese | >65 <70 |
| (S6) Clara | >20 <30 | Female | Portuguese | >50 <55 |
| (S7) Cláudio | >10 <20 | Male | Portuguese | >55 <60 |
| (S8) Carlos | <10 | Male | Portuguese | >30 <35 |
| (S9) Telma | >10 <20 | Female | Portuguese | >40 <45 |
| (S10) Vanda | >10 <20 | Female | Brazilian | >50 <55 |
| (S11) Elisa | <10 | Female | Brazilian | >35 <40 |
| (S12) Joana | >30 <40 | Female | Portuguese | >55 <60 |
| (S13) Francisco | >10 <20 | Male | Portuguese | >50 <55 |

### 2.3. Data Collection

The research instrument used for data collection was constituted by semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions around a set of themes or guiding topics grounded on the stated research questions (Peel 2020). Thus, the interviews aimed to elicit a reflective analysis of research participants' practices, ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about their processes of participation on the Web. The interviews were conducted in a conversational and empathic register, in a process of active listening (Holstein and Gubrium 2004), aiming to generate a conversational situation in which the interviewees felt they were leading the account of their experiences and practices.

The interviews were conducted via videoconference, and the average time per interview was 1 h and 59 min, representing a corpus of 23 h and 48 min of video–audio recordings. All participants were previously informed about the objectives of the interview and were provided with written material with information about the research and an informed-consent protocol. After the transcriptions, the interviewers were sent to each subject to validate the respective transcription. All transcripts were then anonymized; consequently, all the names of the participants appearing in this paper are pseudonyms.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

All transcripts were analyzed using software for Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis, namely the NVivo software, version 11. As a method of data analysis, we adopted the Thematic Analysis as it was described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). Thematic Analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset. Through focusing on meaning across data, the Thematic Analysis allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences. Therefore, TA is considered useful for studying people's views and opinions, for studying people's practices, and for studying the reasons why people think or feel or do particular things and the factors or processes that underlie particular experiences or decisions (Clarke and Braun 2013). It should be noted, however, that Thematic Analysis differs from approaches such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, which is more ideographic in nature and oriented by a phenomenological epistemology and also differs, for example, from Grounded Theory, which, although it may have similarities in the ways of coding and characterizing themes, is more oriented toward theory development.

While a Thematic Analysis can produce conceptual interpretations of data, it does not attempt to develop a theory nor the generalization of results to other contexts.

We followed the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) that consist of (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.

Phase one represented a process of intense familiarization with the data, either by listening to the interviews repeatedly or by reading and re-reading their transcripts multiple times. Multiple notes were then taken, and memos were developed in NVivo. Both researchers discussed these notes with each other and developed some preliminary ideas about initial codes. In the second phase, both researchers developed coding separately. Open coding was then used rather than imposing pre-existing codes on our data from a pre-specified conceptual framework or codebook. This constituted a more inductive approach through the creation of meaningful "nodes" rather than a projection onto the data of previous, preconceived ideas by the researchers. During this process, we were always comparing, discussing, and modifying our codes. In the third phase, we aggregated codes with similar contents and created the initial themes. These themes express the most prevalent patterns emerging from the data relevant to the research questions. In stage four, we reviewed, modified, and developed the themes. The main revisions we made included combining themes where there were overlaps and creating new themes; previous themes were transformed into subthemes, while ensuring that each theme and subtheme was coherent and distinct. In phase five, we refined and defined the themes and subthemes to ensure that there were, on the one hand, features of distinctiveness between them and, on the other hand, clear and organic relationships between them. There were multiple rounds of coding at this stage, categorizing the codes into themes and refining the themes and subthemes before the final stage. In phase six, we selected the most representative examples of these themes and subthemes and generated the final analysis of these in relation to the research questions. We tried to ensure that the themes had a thread running through them and were meaningful both in relation to the data and the literature.

The whole process is dynamic and recursive, so all of these stages interact with each other: you do not exactly end one to move on to the next; rather, they build on each other, sometimes overlapping. They are, therefore, not linear phases: they operate in a recursive manner through a shuttling process between data, coding, interpretation, and writing processes. Whilst there is always an ongoing discussion in the field of qualitative analysis as to whether it is more bottom-up or more top-down guided (Kelle 2005; Byrne 2022), it is clear that the questions posed to subjects during interviewing thematize the data obtained from the outset; however, it should also be emphasized that the themes generated are not directly derived from the interviewees' questions and responses. The active roles of interpretation and reflexivity of researchers are clearly assumed (Byrne 2022). As Braun et al. (2022) point out, data alone do not speak, and themes do not emerge "naturally" from the data; rather, they are constructed, generated, and developed by the researchers, as emphasized by Braun et al. (op.cit.) under their conception of "reflexive thematic analysis".

## 3. Results

Three major themes were identified: Theme A—Digital-Presence Awareness; Theme B—The Public and the Private Spheres; and Theme C—Offline, Online, and Hybrid Selves. These themes cover several subthemes, which range from the discovery of the digital footprint that each person leaves on the Web to the progressive construction of an intentional and deliberate online presence and the various forms that this digital presence can take.

### *3.1. Theme A—Digital-Presence Awareness*

Included in the theme Digital-Presence Awareness were the statements in which subjects refer to a progressive awareness of their of digital footprint and of the importance of building an intentional online personal identity and statements in which subjects refer to

historical/biographical changes in the way their identities have been built on the Web (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Theme A: Digital-Presence Awareness.

| Theme A | Subtheme | Subtheme Description |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Digital Presence Awareness | A1. Digital-Footprint Awareness | Subjects report a progressive awareness of their digital footprint and report historical/biographical changes in the way their identities have been constructed on the Web. |
| | A2. A Strategic, Deliberate, and Intentional Online Presence | Subjects report that there is a thoughtful, deliberate, and intentional strategy to build their online presence. |

#### 3.1.1. Subtheme A1: Digital-Footprint Awareness

For many of the subjects we studied, digital presence and identity are not things that appear as a given and immediate fact. It is a matter of a progressive biographical construction, of becoming aware of the importance of digital presence and identity. Clara (S6) states the following:

> *"I think that the question of online identity is a question that is being raised (. . . ) but it is only now that I am starting to become aware of it, isn't it? This is to say that I never thought about what I was doing with my online identity, I just went along with the boat following what interested me, what I like, what I don't like. So I never thought about it as an online identity, as a digital footprint, or whatever you want to call it. But now I admit that at this moment it is important, it is important to think about it and it is important perhaps from a very early stage to start thinking about these aspects. . . ". (S6 Clara)*

Francisco situates the awareness of his personal presence on the Net as something relatively recent:

> *"I realised I had an online identity a few years ago when I happened to do a search on a search engine, (. . . ) and I realised that in fact, my own name had a few pages, I realised that even things that I thought had no value at all, were written there. And so I realised that for better or for worse there is an online identity". (S13 Francisco)*

Telma tells us that she started a blog while she was a master's student and that she ended up keeping this blog for many years and became aware of her digital presence precisely because of this blog, which was already circulating in contexts she was not aware of:

> *"The blog was a personal blog, that is, I talked a lot about things that. . . It was not so much confessional as about things that meant something to me, it had some of my poems,. . . it had what I did with the students. . . I found out about two years later that this blog had been the subject of a course in a Psychology degree course in Brazil. Imagine how I felt when I read someone's work talking about what was "my self" in the blog. Really, at that time it was already as if it was another person for me. . . But feeling that dissected and analysed, really!!!. . . these tools really have a terrible potential!". (S9 Telma)*

It is this awareness of the existence of a digital footprint built by the various ways of participating in online spaces and that the marks of online presence can be out of the individual's control that is highlighted by Clara when she mentions the following:

> *"There are already stories that we hear that, in I don't know in how many years you'll be applying for I don't know what, and the first thing they do is go to the Net to find out about everything you've done in your life and, of course, if we've put photographs on FB or I don't know where, then this will appear and may or may not condition you, (. . . ). In fact, we now have a record of ourselves on the net and I think it's really something you*

*have to think about and it. Until very recently I didn't think about it, now I think about it in terms of my identity construction online…". (S6 Clara)*

#### 3.1.2. A Strategic, Deliberate, and Intentional Online Presence

In the subtheme A Strategic Online Presence, we included the statements in which subjects indicate that there is a thought-out, deliberate, and intentional strategy to build their online presence. It is this awareness that precisely leads subjects to attempt to build an intentional and deliberate online identity. Narrating how becoming aware of his "online footprint" made him think about the importance of "being careful", of creating a "thoughtful identity", Francisco (S13) says the following:

*"we leave an online footprint and that reminded me exactly, it made me realise, made me try to realise, that on the one hand I had to be careful and on the other hand since that was the case I could also create a thoughtful identity and therefore instead of being very casual or very thoughtless it could be more reflective". (S13 Francisco)*

Gil (S4) also underlines the importance, at least from a professional point of view, of assuming a thoughtful, deliberate strategy for building a digital identity:

*"for those who work in the online context it is important to develop an online presence haa… in a more, more planned way or with a strategy. I am a researcher nowadays, I am a teacher… it is clear that nowadays haa… if people want to keep up with the times and keep up with the way people are communicating and reading information it is very important to have an online presence". (S4 Gil)*

### *3.2. Theme B: The Public and Private Spheres*

The theme of The Public and the Private Spheres encompasses statements where participants discussed the presence or absence of clear boundaries between their public and private lives, as well as between their professional and personal spheres (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Theme B: The Public and the Private Spheres.

| Theme B | Subtheme | Subtheme Description |
|---|---|---|
| The Public and the Private | B1. Privacy and Intimacy | Subjects indicate the presence or absence of clear boundaries between their public and private/intimate lives. |
| | B2. The Personal and the Professional | Subjects indicate whether or not there is a clear separation between their professional and personal/private spheres. |

#### 3.2.1. Subtheme B1: Privacy and Intimacy

Statements in which subjects refer to the existence or not of a clear separation between their public and private spheres were included in the Privacy and Intimacy subtheme. There are important differences between subjects in the way they perceive the degree of exposure of their privacy and intimacy. For some of them, there is a clear and strong separation between public and private. For others, there is not. Let us take, for example, this passage from Gabriel (S1):

*"in the relational field I just got a message now from a brother of mine, with his daughter in his lap and he giving his daughter a very tight hug saying "I love you very much", then I thought it's beautiful, isn't it? a father can express his intimacy with his daughter, this affection, this caress, it made me want to do the same thing with my daughter. I do it publicly, right? (…) inequivocally that I think it is a message of humanity for whoever wants to read it in my networks". (Gabriel S1)*

Let us then contrast this statement by Gabriel with the following statements by Joana (S12) and Clara (S6):

*"things with my family, I don't share, I don't do that. . . , I don't do that for several reasons, and so activities that I consider to be of my personal concern, right?". (S12 Joana)*

*"I avoid, on Facebook, I avoid putting very personal things, but that's because I don't like that thing of putting the photograph of. . . , it doesn't mean that if I put one or another, or if someone puts one or another photograph that it upsets me, but I don't like. . . well, Facebook is used a lot for this thing that is almost a diary of life, isn't it? I don't feel like doing that kind of exposure, so I avoid that kind of thing, of being there showing very personal things and so on, but otherwise, in the professional sphere, I don't avoid it". (S6 Clara)*

#### 3.2.2. Subtheme B2: The Personal and the Professional

The subtheme of The Professional and the Personal includes statements in which subjects indicate that there is or there is not a clear separation between their professional and personal/private spheres. Most participants emphasized the importance of having a public professional presence. Gil (S4), for example, states the following:

*"It is very important that people find you, that people can have ways to perceive that you live in that context, that you share information in that context, that they can communicate with you. From this point of view I think it is fundamental. For those who are not,. . . who are not researchers, teachers or don'nt work in an area that is closely connected to or dependent on technologies, I don't know. . . , but for those who work in these areas it is very important". (S4 Gil)*

However, the professional and personal dimensions of digital presence are assumed differently by the subjects. In fact, we can see that there are marked differences between subjects who believe that there is no clear separation between a professional and a personal online identity and subjects who clearly separate these dimensions. Joana (S12), for instance, states that there is a clear separation between her professional sphere and her personal/private sphere:

*"I think it is evident that I consider this intentional presence important as a teacher, isn't it? As a teacher, I have always been concerned with this theme and with defining this presence. As I was saying initially, one of the questions I personally faced was a certain dilemma in which this presence would be a distinct presence between what I am personally, as a person, my habits, my habitats, etc., and on the other hand what I'm in the Web, isn't it? Therefore, I had this dilemma and what I do privilege is the professional part, therefore, my presence is very much on that side". (S12 Joana)*

In this sense, Clara (S6) also reaffirms the importance of a professional online presence but clearly distinguishing it from her private presence:

*"I use it a lot from the professional, relational point of view, but the public part, so to speak, is a relational part which is not a very, very private relational, isn't it? From the point of view of my professional activity, it is important to disseminate what I write, what I do, it is good when someone finds interest in what we do, isn't it? And now, more and more (. . . ) and especially in the area I am in, it is important to be on the networks, isn't it? It is also important in terms of recognition by others, of people knowing what we do". (S6 Clara)*

However, for Cesária (S3), there is no longer this differentiation between the personal and the professional:

*"there is no longer a separation between this professional identity on and off, because with hybridism, cyberspace is no longer a space separated from the town. The mobility, the 3 g connections, WI-F,I plus the access to the net in the palm of your hand. . . . We no longer separate this thing of Cesária in the University and of Cesária on Facebook or in Instagram. I am in the hybrid of these spaces. So, deep down, the networked digital technologies are in us and mediate our daily construction". (S3 Cesária)*

### 3.3. Theme C: Hybrid Identities and Context Collapsing

This last assertion from Cesária (S3) leads us to the consideration of what we will call Hybrid Identities. Can we separate our offline and online identities, or are we definitely living "onlife" identities? Thus, in Theme C (see Table 4), we encompassed the statements where subjects position themselves toward this question and questions associated with it, such as authenticity and reputational risks on the Web.

**Table 4.** Theme C: Offline, Online, and Hybrid Selves.

| Theme C | Subtheme | Subtheme Description |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Offline, Online, and Hybrid Selves | C1. Offline, Online, and Hybridization | Subjects assume strong boundaries between offline and online identity or weak boundaries between them, assuming then a hybrid identity. |
| | C2. Differentiation Between Contexts and Context Collapsing | Subjects assume strong or weak boundaries between contexts and report how they deal with possible context collapsing. |
| | C3. Authenticity, Identity Projection, and Reputation | Subjects refer to problems of authenticity and identity projection and to possible reputational risks. |

### 3.4. Subtheme C1: Offline Identity, Online Identity, and Hybrid Identities

The distinction between what is intimate and what is private, what is personal and what is public, is different depending on whether subjects assume a clear separation between offline life and online presence or whether subjects assume that this distinction is not determinant anymore, assuming instead a hybrid identity. Usually, the subjects that assume a more hybrid identity are the subjects who make lesser distinctions between the public and private and between the personal and professional. For example, Gil (S4) states the following:

> *"I think in the future, I think we will inevitably end up living in a world where the physical world and the virtual world will be very intertwined". (S4 Gil)*

However, for Cesária (S3), this future to which Gil refers is already the present. For Cesária, it is no longer possible to separate the offline identity from the online identity since they intersect and overlap in a natural way. On the other hand, she is clearly aware of the historicity of digital identity and how it has been transformed over the years:

> *"Initially, before Web 2.0, being online meant publicising and giving visibility to what we did in a face-to-face setting. Today, with mobility, with a more consolidated digital culture in the palm of people's hands, there is no longer a separation between this on and off professional identity, because with hybridism, cyberspace is no longer a space separated from the town". (S3 Cesária)*

Damásio (S5) also assumes the necessarily hybrid nature of identity by arguing that it is no longer possible to separate an offline identity from an online identity:

> *"I think that in our days the identity of each one of us cannot fail to be present online. I don't advocate the artificial construction of an identity for online consumption but rather that the reflection that each person conducts on a daily basis, when building him/herself as a citizen, should take into account both the face-to-face and online dimensions. I understand that, by definition of identity, these two dimensions merge into one". (S5 Damasio)*

In the same sense, pointing to a continuum between the spheres of online and face-to-face communication, Gil (S4) mentions the following:

> *"the technologies as they become more… more widespread people stop having the notion of technology I mean… as things became more widespread and became natural, especially with social networks and the many means of communicating via online, people are already starting to stop seeing the technology in that, right? It's starting to become something that's very transparent, isn't it? And it's true that people end up getting along, above all, with people they know from the physical world or, for professional reasons they often end up getting to know several people well that they met online in meetings, conferences… congresses and so on…, so I think that this is starting to be more and more… more fluid you jump from one dimension to another, it's all part of your sociability, isn't it?". (S4 Gil)*

For Carlos (S8), the continuity between the online and offline worlds is an opportunity for individual and social learning of other ways of "projecting the extension of the self" and the "discovery of the other" in these new spaces of socialization, where identity is built:

> *"in personal terms, it has been a curious learning because it has allowed me to discover perspectives that I had no access to in any other way and that allow me to reflect on that space. I think it's interesting because maybe in an environment between friends, even acquaintances and friends, we don't expose ourselves to certain roles or certain conversations (…), but as it is not exactly an extension of ourselves, sometimes we discover characteristics of the person on the Web that we hadn't discovered in person and which then end up triggering a conversation in person, derived from that social conversation that we had online (…) I think that it is a very great potential, the extension of the self and the discovery of the other, to have an online space where we can project ourselves and where others can project themselves. I think it's important". (S8 Carlos)*

### *3.5. Subtheme C2: Differentiation between Contexts and Context Collapsing*

"Context collapse" refers to the phenomenon where people, information, and norms from one context infiltrate the boundaries of another. The merging of various social contexts appears as an important topic among our subjects due to their frequently blurring the lines between public and private, and the professional and personal, as well as the myriad of personas and situations individuals find themselves in. Gil (S4), assuming the need for a clear separation between contexts, explains that just as in offline situations there are different groups and scenarios where we act differently, the same should happen online, where he also shows concern regarding the authenticity projected on the Net:

> *"I don't share a lot of things about my personal life… there's a little photo there or there's a little comment there, but I mean… most of my online activity, and my online identity is very connected to my professional activity, but in this role connected to the professional activity I am very much the person I am, I mean… no… I don't have a… a… a character, I don't have a mask, right?… it doesn't mean that a person cannot have these two sides, right? Haam… now I think that in the world, in the physical world we also don't have these two sides at the same time right? So in the physical world we are also expressing the various facets of our personality in different contexts aren't we? And so I think it's strange that people do this in the same context and there are people who do this online isn't it?" (S4 Gil)*

Thus, he points out the need for not confusing contexts when interaction takes place in digital settings, similarly to what happens offline:

> *"I think that people have to separate the waters and either create another profile or post in another network or use different networks for different purposes right? but… but… because then people confuse a little bit… people don't realize this sometimes, which is, we in life… in the physical world we are also very multifaceted people haa….we are people who have different groups with whom we get along and we never mix them many times, right? I don't invite to my house for lunch or dinner my high school students, my university colleagues and Siemens and Stephen Downes [Gil is referring here to two very well-known researchers in the field of digital education] I mean, I'm not going to put all*

*these people at my table because they're not related aren't they? And people sometimes on the internet do this don't they?". (S4 Gil)*

On the other hand, for Cesária (S3), who, as we saw earlier, advocates for a hybrid identity without major boundaries between the offline identity and online identity, the mixing of contexts is not seen as problematic and, on the contrary, sometimes appears to be desirable:

*"For example yesterday I saw 2 art exhibitions, I shared and I have already triggered my students, see this, go there! it is a way of encouraging a cultural life beyond having a beer with the husband at the weekend. How are you going to educate if you don't use the cultural repertoire? Are you going to be a teacher of school content only? I discuss this exhaustively in my research group so it is fundamental to go to the cinema, it is fundamental to go to the museum, it is fundamental to walk in the garden… you can take this into the classroom and discuss it with your students, for me it is fundamental, I do a lot of this work with my students". (S3 Cesária)*

Apparently, for subjects who assume to a lesser extent a hybrid identity on the Net, the risk of context collapsing is greater. On the contrary, for the subjects who assume more of a hybrid identity, the relationship with different contexts and diverse audiences appears to be easier, more fluid, and less conflictive.

### *3.6. Subtheme C3: Authenticity, Identity Projection, and Reputation*

Naturally, the construction of an intentional and deliberate online presence leads us to the construction of an "edited self" where we have to decide what to write and what not to write, what to show and what not to show, and what to reveal and what not to reveal. This immediately brings us back to the problem of authenticity/inauthenticity, to the vision of identity as a performance, and to the question of the reputational costs that the projection of certain facets may have for the individual or even for the institution to which he or she belongs.

The subtheme of authenticity refers to the statements in which subjects reveal an explicit concern with the authenticity of the identity they project online, avoiding the creation of "characters" or "masks". For example, Carlos (S8) states the following:

*"I think that what I am is what I end up projecting, what I am in the overall sense is what I project on the social network, and what I am and do individually, with each person, I also do individually with that person online. In other words, there is always an extension of our I, and I try to be what I am, I don't try to be what I would like to be, or dream of being, or try to take on a very big role to test myself. No, it's not that way, it's really an extension of what I am in my everyday life". (S8 Carlos)*

Elisa (S11) poses the problem of authenticity not so much as a need for sincerity but as a need for coherence between what one is personally and what one is professionally:

*"First, I think it is coherence. We have to have coherence between what we do in the professional and in the personal sphere. So, I think, there is no point in being concerned with academic seriousness, building myself as a teacher in the space where I work, if I then go to a social network like FB and I am contradictory in terms of what I post there, of my political thoughts, I don't know, economic thoughts, my ideals, right? There's no point in going there and, for example, posting a comment on YouTube if you're inconsistent with what you were discussing conceptually with your students in class. I think that this conceptual, professional and personal coherence we have to have, I worry a lot about this… this coherence, it worries me a lot, in the sense of building a profile, an identity, right?". (S11 Elisa)*

One of the strong motivations to connect and share something on the networks has to do with the need to give visibility to what you do. Cesaria states the following (S3):

*"My main motivation is to expand the networks (…) The visibility of what one does is fundamental to have and to expand the networks (…) Therefore, fundamentally, my*

*main motivation is to give visibility to what we do, even because I think that what we do is important and the more we share and give visibility to our things and the things of our friends or intellectual partners, the more powerful is the network we form". (S3 Cesaria)*

However, this gain of visibility comes with some reputational risks. Cesária (S3) refers the risk of her sharing being taken as exhibitionism:

*"I see sharing as generosity but many people perceive sharing as exhibitionism, even this appears in the speech of some colleagues or in the literature in some way, so I think that the person who is connected, shares, right?, I think she is much more generous, once she shares, she triggers, invites, I really like it when people remember that I am interested in a theme they call me there and show me…". (S3 Cesária)*

In a similar vein, Damásio (S5) says the following:

*"I share what I do but I do so with coyness, for the risk of being confused with the narcissism that characterizes social media". (S5 Damásio)*

## 4. Discussion

The participants in this study revealed a clear awareness of the importance of online presence and of establishing interactions, relationships, and bonds on the Web. This is a general and obvious observation, given the fact that the participants were chosen precisely because they are active participants in networks. It is worth noting that we are not dealing, in this study, with supposedly "digital native" individuals but instead with subjects with a relatively older age and an experienced life as digital scholars, who progressively and over time have been immersed in the digital environments that have permeated society and, consequently, have experienced successive waves of digital innovation and have tried to adapt to these successive moments of digital transformation.

After analyzing our data, we identified our first theme, Digital-Presence Awareness, in which two subthemes emerge: (A1) Digital-Footprint Awareness, in which subjects report a progressive awareness of their digital footprint and their historical/biographical changes in the way their identities have been constructed on the Web; and (A2) A Strategic, Deliberate and Intentional Online Presence, where subjects report that there is a thoughtful, deliberate, and intentional strategy to build their online presence.

We have seen then that the awareness of the importance of building an online identity is, on the one hand, progressive and, on the other hand, heterogeneous in terms of its nature among the participants. It is progressive because, for many subjects, it is the awareness of the existence of a digital footprint built by the various forms of participation in online spaces and the realization that the marks of online presence may be beyond the individual's control, leading to the need for the construction of an intentional and deliberate identity. This is precisely what (Marshall 2015) points out when she states that if the subject does not deliberately create a presence and a digital identity, this identity will be created by others. This can be especially detrimental for academics if they take a "laissez faire" attitude toward the matter. In other words, if the digital scholar does not have a clear/explicit strategy to create a digital identity/presence, he/she will let agents such as Google, for example, to create that identity for him/her through the tracking of his/her digital footprint.

On the other hand, those processes are heterogeneous because, once established the clear necessity of having an intentional and deliberate digital presence, we may say that subjects are heterogeneous in the way they view their online presence and in the way they construct that deliberate online presence. There is no place here for some kind of technological determinism, and there is a place for conscious choice and volitional deliberation from the part of subjects (Howard 2017).

This is particularly visible when we address the issues in Theme B. Theme B is The Public and Private Spheres, for which we identified two subthemes: (B1) Privacy and Intimacy, where participants refer to the presence or absence of clear boundaries between their public and private/intimate lives; and (B2) The Personal and the Professional, in which participants refer to whether or not there is a clear separation between their personal

and professional spheres. If in Theme A it was underlined that online identity was a progressive and biographical construction, Theme B alerts us to the heterogeneity of these construed identities. The distinctions between the public and private and between the personal and professional aspects of life are constitutive dimensions of the different ways of constructing online identities. These identities differ regarding whether individuals perceive a clear separation between their offline lives and their online presence or whether they assume less strict boundaries between those dimensions and then assume a more hybrid identity. If some subjects assume that there are strong boundaries between their private and their public lives, as well as between their personal and their professional lives, others assume a hybrid nature of identity, arguing that the move from an offline world to an online world is something natural, resulting from a process of identity development in the context of cyberculture. Typically, those who embrace a more hybrid identity tend to draw fewer boundaries between the public and private spheres, as well as the personal and professional realms. These questions of boundaries across certain dimensional traits are closely related to the question of the importance of categorization processes in human interactions (Psathas 1999; Davis and Jurgenson 2014; Martikainen 2022). In fact, what emerges as very manifest in our work is that subjects construct their identities around dimensional traits constitutive of more or less tight categories. Basil Bernstein (1977) elaborated upon the concept of strong and weak classification, which refers to the ways in which categories are classified and to the strength or weakness of boundaries between contexts and categories. Categories may be more insulated, implying that there is a strong classification (C+), or less insulated and more porous, with weak classification (C−), implying that they are more flexible and open to new categorizations. We would say, then, that subjects whom we characterized as having hybrid identities construct their identity from categories that have less rigid boundaries between contexts, while those who differentiate their offline from their online identity tend to organize themselves within more strongly classified categories (public versus private, personal versus professional, and online versus offline). Moreover, if for some authors hybridization is the "new normal" (Floridi 2014; Howard 2015), authors such as Hildebrandt and Couros (2016) suggest that we still live an era of "digital dualism", where online relationships, spaces, and selves are sometimes seen as "less real' or less important than those in the offline world, and this certainly may explain why subjects who make a clear separation between their offline and online identities differ from subjects who assume more hybrid identities.

This is what we have identified in Theme C, Offline, Online, and Hybrid Selves. In this theme, we identified three subthemes: (C1) Offline, Online, and Hybridization, where participants assume strong boundaries between offline and online identity or weak boundaries between them, assuming then a hybrid identity; (C2) Differentiation Between Contexts and Context Collapsing, where participants assume strong or weak boundaries between contexts and report how they deal with possible context collapsing; and (C3) Authenticity, Identity Projection and Reputation, where participants refer to problems of authenticity and identity projection and to possible reputational risks when presenting themselves in online contexts.

We relate these processes of hybridization and of "networking the self" with what (Pettitt 2013) has called the "privatization of experience" and the "privacy parenthesis". Pettitt contrasts two different types of identities: that of the "homo clausus" and that of the "homo conexus". "Homo clausus" refers to someone who is closed off from others, seeking privacy and isolation in his/her personal life. In this category, a person values his/her individuality and autonomy and seeks to protect him/herself from the outside world. On the other hand, "homo conexus" refers to someone who is connected to others, valuing communal living and social interaction. In this category, people see themselves as part of a larger social network and value their relationships with others. This is part of a historical and cultural process that Pettitt characterized as the "Gutenberg Parenthesis", for which the "privacy parenthesis" is a subtheme. According to Ong (1982) and Pettitt (2013), pre-print societies were based mainly on orality, proximity, and direct relationships, and this has

changed due to the emergence of print. Print tends toward closeness. The culture of the print, Ong and Pettitt assert, tends to mark knowledge as closed, condensed, and delimited (ideally in a book), separate from other works, constituting a unit in itself, separated from other units. Similarly, the individual also becomes more encapsulated, turned in on him/herself, and the image of the individual reading a book silently is a symbol of this. Alternatively, as Norbert Elias states (quoted by (Pettitt 2013, p. 5)), we are taken by *"self perceptions as an actually existing cage which separates and excludes the "self" from the world "outside" the individual… the notion of the individual "ego" in its locked case, the "self" divided by an invisible wall from what happens outside"*. However, according to Pettitt, it is precisely with the Internet that there is a certain return to the Pre-Gutenberg era where the relationship with knowledge and with others becomes again more direct, more dialogical, less encapsulated in a well-delimited Ego. It is based on this theoretical framework that Pettitt elaborates the categories of "homo clausus" and "homo conexus".

Thus, we would say that some of our subjects are more situated in the "homo clausus" category (with well-defined lines between public and private and between personal and professional) while others are already beyond the edge of that boundary, prefiguring what Pettitt (2013) has called "homo conexus" and others have labelled it as "networked self" (Barabási 2010), hybrid identities (Howard 2015), or "crowdsourcing identities" (Hällgren 2019).

Apparently, for subjects who assume to a lesser extent a hybrid identity on the Net, the fear of context collapsing is greater. Context collapse occurs when multiple social settings come together in the same online space. It can be intentional (context collusion) or unexpected (collision) (Davis and Jurgenson 2014). boyd (2007) described these processes when various groups converge within a single space on social network sites. In each of these contexts, an individual may exhibit a slightly altered version of him/herself. However, since everyone can access one's online content whenever he/she want, this leads to a loss of context for these interactions and artifacts. Instead of being associated with specific situations, artifacts and interactions become linked to individual profiles. This means that the same interactions and artifacts are displayed to all "friends" by the person, and this may lead to misperceptions and misunderstandings or reveal what was not meant to be revealed to a particular audience. On the contrary, for the subjects who assume a more hybrid identity, the relationship with different contexts and diverse audiences appears to be more fluid, although not exempt from conflicts and misunderstandings, because, in the end, they assume more risks, and they do not have such a defensive positioning as non-hybrid subjects relating to the possibilities of context collapsing. We have seen with the testimonials of Damásio (S5) and Cesária (S3) that some discomfort and fear of reputational risks may appear. Although being fully embedded in the networks and engaged in interacting and sharing processes, these participants express some hesitation or discomfort at times: *"I share what I do but I do so with coyness, for the risk of being confused with the narcissism that characterises social media"* (S5 Damásio); *"I see sharing as generosity but many people perceive sharing as exhibitionism"* (S3 Cesária).

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we would say that while there are certainly historical and social–historical forces (Pettitt 2013) that shape how we construct our identities in relation to technologies, there is also a volitional and conscious dimension (Howard 2017) in the process of identity construction that can explain why, in the same historical period, different people construct different visions of what identities should be online. We certainly agree with Kimmons and Veletsianos (2014) when they state that early works on online identity that viewed virtual selves as a continuous process of experimentation of possible or alternative selves (Turkle 1997) are very much marked historically by a period when the Internet was essentially a communication environment that was characterized by anonymity. Partly because of the emergence of social network sites that shaped the presentation of subjects based on their real, authentic, and non-anonymous identity (Kimmons 2014), the presenta-

tion of the self today has that stamp of reality that perhaps it did not have at the time of Turkle's first theoretical explorations, with the exception of certain virtual environments such as games, simulations, and immersive environments that include the use of avatars. In this sense, we agree with Barbour and Marshall (2012) when they state that we are studying real identities and not identity games.

We are not so much in agreement with Turkle (2011) or (Kimmons and Veletsianos 2014) when they imply that Goffman's dramaturgical approach implies, in some way, a perspective of identity inauthenticity. Goffman uses the metaphor of the dramaturgical staging to describe the social game in which we are all immersed and not as the affirmation of some kind of ontological inauthenticity that would be characteristic of human beings. Kimmons and Veletsianos (2014) use the expression "fragmented selves" to refer to parts of the self that are projected onto the network and are socially acceptable. Now, this is precisely what Goffman states when he writes the following: *"the term face may be defined as the positive social value that a person actually claims for himself through the line that others assume he has adopted during a given contact. Face is an image of the self delineated in terms of approved social attributes"* (Goffman 1967, p. 5). What our study shows is that individuals interpret in different ways what are approved social norms in the academic context as digital scholars: some retain a more traditional view of identity (with strong boundaries between offline and online, public and private, and personal and professional), while others interpret these norms in a much more nuanced way. However, instead of "fragmented selves", as they are called by Kimmons and Veletsianos (2014), or elusive selves (Turkle 2011), we found coherent profiles with regard to digital presence and online identity that were structured around specific dimensions.

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