



Article

The Impact of Digital Presence on the Careers of Emerging Visual Artists

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Abstract: This paper investigates the importance of digital presence for the emerging visual artists' careers. The study first examines how artists manage their digital presence and subsequently analyzes the impact of this presence on their careers by applying a model that consists of four objectives (branding, engagement, networking, and conversion). A qualitative method was employed, and interviews were conducted with illustrators at an early or emerging career stage. The findings demonstrate that an effective presence on digital platforms requires not only producing and showing artistic work but also managing an artistic brand, engaging with the audience, and making use of networking opportunities. It is also established that artists need to complement their digital presence with interactions in the physical world to increase the chances for advancing their careers. This paper follows the literature that studies the visual artist as brand manager and adds to the body of knowledge on how artists build successful careers.

Keywords: digital presence; emerging artists; illustrators; artistic careers; artistic brand; social media; Instagram



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1. Introduction

1.1. Aims of the Study

Among the factors that affect the development of the careers of visual artists, digital presence, and especially the use of social media, has gained prominence in recent years. Artists increasingly recognize the importance of their digital presence as a tool that enhances their visibility, and although this visibility is not always automatically translated into sales, it has positive spillover effects on creating a community of followers and developing a professional network where work opportunities arise. Digital presence can be defined as “the sum total of all the online activities managed by your organization (including websites, blogs, and social media profiles) as well as the online activities carried out by your key stakeholders, such as employees and consumers” (Cruz and Karatzas 2019, p. 64).

The paper explores the link between the management of digital presence and the potential for developing a successful artistic career. Specifically, this study investigates the impact of the digital presence on the career of emerging visual artists, focusing on four main areas: branding, engagement, networking, and conversion. The degree of the impact is related to the way this digital presence is established and managed. Therefore, our first research question (RQ1) examines how artists manage their digital presence, and the second (RQ2) studies the impact of this presence on their careers.

To address the second question, we adapted the model of the four types of social media objectives developed by Medjani et al. (2019) that analyzes how managers quantify and evaluate social media objectives within an emerging market. The four objectives are branding, engagement, networking, and conversion, as illustrated in Figure 1.

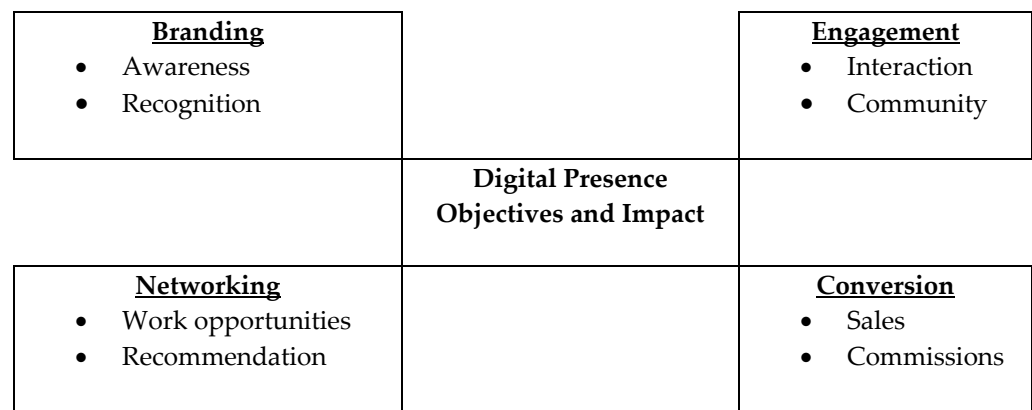


Figure 1. Conceptual framework—adapted from [Medjani et al. \(2019\)](#).

This model was developed by [Medjani et al. \(2019\)](#) when researching the use of social media by marketing/communications managers across different industries, and it can be applied also to artistic careers, as in this study, artists are managers of their own digital presence. These four objectives help us analyze the impact of the digital presence of artists on their career, and we use them as themes: branding refers to how the artist raises awareness so that his/her work becomes recognizable ([Schroeder 2005](#)); engagement refers to the interaction with the audience and the creation of a sense of community with engaged consumers who boost the dissemination of the brand; networking, means developing relations with gatekeepers aiming at creating work opportunities ([Petrides and Fernandes 2020](#)); and conversion refers to artwork sales and commissions, as ultimately these will provide artists with “the necessary financial resources to continue producing art” ([Petrides and Fernandes 2020](#), p. 312).

Using a qualitative approach, our research was conducted in Portugal and focused on visual artists who identify themselves as professional illustrators. In parallel to their digital presence, most of the interviewed artists maintain contacts with art-market gatekeepers (the gallery system and collectors) while also pursuing portfolio careers ([Throsby and Zednik 2011](#)) encompassing art-making and other activities that require the use of their creativity. For most of the participants, multiple sources of income resulting from these activities (e.g., art sales, commissioned artwork, teaching at art workshops, and live sketching) allow them to make a living as artists even if they are at an early career stage.

From our study, two key points have emerged: first, the major impact of the digital presence is on artistic brand; and, second, the digital presence has to be complemented by interactions in the physical world, involving the audience and art-market agents.

1.2. Literature Overview

Our literature overview is guided and organized according to the conceptual model that encompasses four objectives: branding, engagement, networking, and conversion. The literature on artistic career development has considered the artist as an entrepreneur ([Poorsoltan 2012](#); [Fillis 2015](#)) and a manager ([Fernandes and Afonso 2014](#)), while establishing that the successful artist is also a brand manager ([Schroeder 2005](#); [Muñiz et al. 2014](#); [Kerrigan et al. 2011](#); [Rodner and Kerrigan 2014](#)). In the digital era, it is fundamental for artists as brand managers to have a digital presence disseminating their work and interacting with the audience, with the aim to attract work opportunities and generate sales.

1.2.1. The Artist as Brand Manager

A model was developed by identifying four building blocks as components of a successful artistic career: “creativity, artistic production, and the desire to exhibit; relationships with gatekeepers; entrepreneurial marketing skills; creation and management of an artistic brand” ([Petrides and Fernandes 2020](#), p. 312). The successful artists are also brand managers who achieve exhibiting their work and reaching high levels of sales ([Schroeder 2005](#)).

For instance, Andy Warhol “managed with profitable results, his own Celebrity Brand as a *pop art strategist*” (Kerrigan et al. 2011, p. 1519), while Pablo Picasso established his brand through artistic innovation and relations with art-world gatekeepers (Muñiz et al. 2014). Successful artists can also be considered as human brands, which “refers to any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts” (Thomson 2006, p. 104). The human brand should be seen as authentic; otherwise, it will risk alienating the audience and being perceived as a pretender (Thomson 2006). The artist’s authenticity, according to Moulard et al. (2014), “does influence behavioral intentions via the attitude toward the artist and the attitude toward the artwork” (p. 586). A good example is the contemporary artist Ai Weiwei, whose authentic brand has replicated the artist’s values across different channels and constructed a coherent narrative using the internet and social media as fundamental tools to spread his work, reach an audience, and co-create (Preece 2015).

1.2.2. Consumer Engagement

Consumer engagement is described as a greatly interactive and experiential process that includes “learning, sharing, advocating, socializing and co-developing” (Brodie et al. 2013, p. 112). The positive consequences of consumer engagement, according to Brodie et al. (2013), include consumer loyalty, emotional bonding, trust, and commitment; therefore, artists should stimulate interactions with their audience, aiming towards building a community that feels connected to the artists and their work (He et al. 2012). Engaged consumers are highly valuable, as they provide brand testimonies with their comments, develop optimistic buzz around the brands they feel connected with, and even bring new consumers to the brand circle (Saboo et al. 2016). Content planning in social media should be strategically envisioned and designed to create either active or passive social media-engagement behaviors (Dolan et al. 2019). Therefore, brands should frequently provide new offers aiming at staying present in consumers’ minds and not be forgotten in a saturated market, where choices abound (Saboo et al. 2016).

1.2.3. Online Art World

Digital channels and social media provide people with opportunities to connect with the art world like never before (Forbes 2019). Social networking platforms like Instagram, where images have preponderance over text, opened a new era for expression and interaction that was not possible when communicating only with text (Griffith et al. 2021). Due to COVID-19, most art events migrated to an online format, and, consequently, artists had to find new ways to interact and engage with audiences that were only available through social media and other digital channels and platforms (Sutton 2021). Instagram played a central role, as it brought the possibility of interacting with potential clients in an easy-to-use and visually appealing format that allowed artists to augment their brand visibility without having to wait for gatekeeper approval (Dawson 2020).

1.2.4. Digital Creators and Collectors

A new creative category has emerged in recent years—the creators—that aggregates a variety of creative people who produce digital content, such as podcasters, writers, bloggers/vloggers (vloggers post short videos as opposed to bloggers who post texts), or visual artists, making money from their online activity (Chayka 2021). Lois Van Baarle, a Dutch illustrator with 1.5 million followers on her Instagram account, states that creators should exploit the algorithm to gain visibility, posting content of a small size as frequently as possible (Ables 2019). It is also important for content creators to understand their audiences’ behaviors and provide them with interactive content to enhance the feeling of togetherness (Levordashka et al. 2021). However, the creator culture requires fast production and posting, thus marginalizing “projects and practices that don’t fit its preexisting digital structures” (Chayka 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, online transactions turned out to be the predominant way collectors purchased art from galleries and artists. Collectors are attracted to digital

platforms (e.g., Saatchi Art, Artsy, and Artnet), as they are easy to use and overcome barriers, such as distance and the intimidating culture of galleries (Lee and Lee 2019). In 2020, Instagram was the most used social media channel by collectors, as one-third of them either found artworks there or through links provided by Instagram (McAndrew 2021). In the following years, Instagram continued to be the most important channel for collectors to find and research new artists (McAndrew 2022).

2. Materials and Methods

Our research was conducted in Portugal during the COVID-19 pandemic and focused on visual artists who identify themselves as professional illustrators. Eight artists were interviewed who are in an early/emerging career stage, and even if the interviewees are active in the same context, each career path, ways of working and personal experiences were very different (Table 1 provides further information on the participants). The artists have various income sources that include collectors, private and corporate commissions, book publishers, live events, workshops and art courses, architectural illustrations, gallery/art fair sales, and online shop sales. The participants' age ranges from 24 to 42 years, and their professional experience from 4 to 12 years; hence, they are emerging or are at an early career stage. The adoption of a qualitative method was chosen for researching complex issues involving human experience, actions, and points of view (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015; Kelly 2017). The sample size may be considered small, but it was a consequence of the restrictive conditions prevailing during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, our interviews yielded rich data for addressing the research questions.

Table 1. Participant information.

A1	28 years old (7 years of experience), lives in Porto, and works mostly as an illustrator influencer collaborating with brands. The artist's work also has social and activist purposes.
A2	36 years old (12-year experience), lives in Porto, and works at a gallery. Revenues from artistic activities derive from galleries, illustration fairs, and individual clients.
A3	32 years old (10 years of experience), lives in Porto and works mainly with book editors but also sells work through galleries.
A4	24 years old (7 years of experience), lives in Lisbon, and currently works mainly in live sketching/drawing (mostly weddings). Gives online painting workshops on Instagram and sells customized watercolors to individual clients.
A5	27 years old (4 years of experience), lives in Porto, and works as a graphic designer and illustrator, mainly with brands and companies. Exhibits works at galleries and organizes workshops.
A6	35 years old (12 years of experience), lives in Porto, and works with private clients and brands, but also sells through galleries.
A7	29 years old (4 years of experience), lives in the district of Viseu, and works as a graphic designer and illustrator. Works are sold to individual clients, companies, and brands, but also exhibited at galleries.
A8	42 years old (10 years of experience), lives in Lisbon, and works from 9 am to 5 pm as an architectural illustrator, and also works as a freelancer, giving drawing workshops (live and online) and executing live sketching at weddings and customized paintings for individual clients.

All interviews took place online, using the Zoom application, with an average duration of forty minutes. The participants authorized the recording of the sessions and the use of excerpts for scientific research purposes, while their anonymity was preserved by using a code (A1 through A8). The sampling method was purposive (Farrugia 2019), and an interview guide was used with flexibility to accommodate modifications according to the interviewee's responses (Aborisade 2013; Adhabi and Anozie 2017). The answers varied according to the subjectivity of each participant's experience and perspectives that are unique and diverse (McIntosh and Morse 2015). The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2013), and especially for the second research question, the four objectives identified in the conceptual framework guided the coding process.

3. Results

3.1. *The Management of the Artist's Digital Presence (RQ1)*

All participant artists have a digital presence dating back to the beginning of their career as illustrators or even before launching their career. This shows that, from a young age, the artists saw potential in investing time into establishing their presence in the digital world. Two different time frames are observed regarding the beginning of their digital presence: some artists established a presence even before initiating their careers, when they were teenagers or at art school, while others did at the beginning of their professional activity.

A3: I created a blog when I was a teenager that had illustrations and texts. In college I had a collective blog with friends where I used to write and do comics. After that I created a more professional Facebook account and had a Tumblr account as well.

A2: I used to have a website when I was in school.

Artists who initiated their digital presence at the beginning of their career demonstrated strategic intent because they realized that their digital presence could positively affect their career development.

A5: I am part of a generation that thinks first about the post and then about the artwork. I recognize that from my digital presence I get every work opportunity.

A4: My career started digitally. I started immediately on Instagram and Facebook. Contact via email was never natural for me; social media allowed me to be more informal and spontaneous.

A8: I have my Instagram since 2016 when I started to work in architectural illustration.

All participant artists manage their digital channels by themselves, with no external assistance, while one gets additional help from a friend managing the online store orders and from an agency on email exchanges with brands. When analyzing the artists' digital channels, it becomes evident that Instagram is the most important one, and it is used by all of them. This can be explained by the fact that Instagram was conceived for image-based communications, which lies at the heart of the visual arts.

Following Instagram, the online store is the second most important channel, used by seven out of eight artists. The majority have their online store on the Etsy marketplace, which provides artists with the opportunity to show and sell their work all over the world. The interviewees using Etsy have a direct connection from their Instagram to the store and stated that most people accessing it are coming from Instagram, yet still other people find their way to their online store while navigating on the Etsy website, or from using various internet search engines.

Most interviewees also have their own website, although some admitted that it is not updated regularly. Artists consider that their website serves a different purpose from their Instagram presence; namely, it is used like an online depository of images (like a portfolio of finished works) to allow those interested in the artist to obtain a quick and easy access to his/her work.

A7: I only put on my website the final works that I really like.

A3: I don't show everything on my website, it is more like a business card.

We also observe that our participants pay little attention to Facebook, since they do not get any feedback on this platform, and, therefore, it is not worth the effort to be active on it. In addition to the already mentioned digital channels and tools, some artists also sporadically use TikTok (A1 and A4), Behance and LinkedIn (A5), Newsletter (A3), Twitter (A1), and YouTube (A8); however, little importance is given to them.

The participants concentrate their digital channel management efforts on their Instagram presence, and we attribute this fact to two reasons. One, it is the platform that works more naturally for them for sharing their work with the public, aiming to raise awareness and gain recognition (related to the branding objective); two, it is the means

through which most of the potential buyers find their way to their online store (related to the conversion objective).

Given the importance that artists place on Instagram, we explored how they manage their presence on this platform. One of the advantages that artists mentioned about using Instagram was that it allows more space to show both their identity (by sharing part of their daily life and routine) and their working process leading to the finished works.

A7: On Instagram I show the day-to-day life, the spontaneity of certain things, or the creative process, not only the finished work as it appears on the website.

A6: What I do is mixing my personal life and my work. I think it makes sense because my work has something very personal that attracts people.

Exposing part of their lives on Instagram comes more naturally to some than to others, and one artist openly admitted that these actions serve as a personal branding statement.

A8: On Instagram I show some parts of my daily life through drawings, and that is sort of my personal branding, drawing my day-to-day life.

When asked about the frequency of their postings, the majority revealed that it is not always consistent, ranging from daily to weekly.

A2: I sometimes post every day or two times a week. It also depends on what I have to show.

A8: I used to do it more frequently in the beginning and tried to post something every day. Now, I do around one post per week, but I do not really have a plan.

A4: I used to feel a lot of pressure to be always posting, but then I understood that this pressure to post was making me feel less creative.

Although the creator culture is characterized by fast producing and regular posting, our interviewees offer insights on why they do not entirely adhere to this principle. They are genuinely concerned more about the quality of their posts rather than posting frequency. The fact that they diminished the frequency of their posts shows that, to some degree, the creator culture was interfering with their creativity. Therefore, they had to synchronize their posting activity with their creative output, thus striking a balance between the creator culture and his/her artistic practice.

Even if Instagram is the only channel used by all participant artists, they admitted that the most recent Instagram algorithm is not working for them as well as before, and to a certain extent, some frustration is noticeable in their answers.

A7: I think that the Instagram algorithm is not great for images and it is better for reels and that gets me upset.

A2: I do not make Instagram posts as often as stories, as I get tired of fighting against the algorithm.

Most artists do not see video as a suitable medium for their illustration work, which also explains why TikTok is not among their preferred platforms. Illustration works that are usually presented in static images require an extra effort for the artist to convert them into videos. All interviewees affirmed that the reels tool, to which Instagram gives priority, is not something natural for them to use.

A1: Reels require a lot of work and people do not understand that. I can work with video but I am not a big fan.

A3: I have never made a reel. It is not something natural for me.

A5: I do not use reels. I think my career will end here because I hate reels and it is the biggest trend now.

Illustrator artists do not feel comfortable with using videos for sharing their work on social media platforms, and for some, it is incompatible with the nature of their work, which is capturing their message with a single image or a series of static images.

3.2. The Impact of Digital Presence on Artistic Careers (RQ2)

3.2.1. Branding Impact

For all participant artists, digital presence has an impact on branding, as it allows artists to show their work and have a portfolio that is easily accessible by everyone and serves as a source of information on the artist and their production. At the same time, it offers the opportunity to show their persona behind their work, allowing their followers to get to know who they are and what they believe in. This is particularly relevant for Gen-Z consumers, who tend to make purchases influenced by their affinity with the brand and how the brand resonates with their self-identity, community, or causes they are involved with (Forbes 2019).

A4: Instagram has played a significant role in spreading my brand, as most of the people got to know me through Instagram.

A1: I am sure that my business got noticed and grew thanks to social media.

A2: A lot of people got to know me on Instagram thanks to the “Inktober”, which consists in posting one illustration per day during the month of October. One day I have illustrated a snake—and I don’t know why—the algorithm made it viral, which brought me five thousand followers.

A7: I believe my digital channels did have an impact on spreading my artistic and personal brand.

The participants find on Instagram not only a space to express themselves through their work, but also to reveal who they are as persons.

A1: People should not be shy to show who they are; we know we won’t please everyone, so it’s better to stick to our values and what we believe in.

A6: I think it only makes sense to show the person I am behind my work. I feel that for it to work for the other side [audience] it must be authentic; when it is something generic, I don’t think it works.

Revealing their personality online will positively influence their artistic brand only if it is perceived as authentic by the audience. “Authentic” here refers to the personality of the creators as revealed through their attitude towards the world and reflected in their artistic production.

3.2.2. Engagement Impact

The interviewed artists mentioned that Instagram provides a sense of community between them and their followers, as well as with fellow artists. However, the sense of community stemming from Instagram interactions needs to be complemented with physical experiences, or at least with spending more time interacting online. Art classes and workshops, either online or in person, provide opportunities for enhancing the sense of community between artists and their audience.

A1: It goes beyond than the simple digital interactions. There is really a community and I have realized that when I launched my book, there was a long line of people waiting for me to sign it and make a quick customized drawing for them.

A4: I feel there is a group of people that interact every time I post something on Instagram, including other artists. With these people we always feel the need to meet in the physical world.

A8: I only have more interaction when I make pedagogical posts with more content. I feel like there is a sort of community that comments more, but those are the people that also come to the workshops. Besides, there is also a community of artists that also do wedding sketching and we end up communicating a lot.

We observe that engagement occurs with two distinct groups: followers and peers. Followers are people interested in the artists’ work and may in the future convert to buyers, whereas peers are other artists who form an artistic community. It is important to under-

score that these two constituency groups have distinct effects on career development: the conversion of some followers into buyers is important financially for all artists, while being part of an artistic community can have an impact on prestige (peer validation through association) and enhance the networking efforts of the artist (peer recommendation to market or institutional agents). However, some artists noticed that, after the pandemic, people are not interacting online as they used to. A possible explanation is the adoption of a different mindset by users who are getting interested in their digital wellness and “looking for ways to spend their time online more meaningfully” (Ables 2019). As regards collector behavior in particular, recent data indicate that, after the pandemic, collectors continue to purchase art online and “digital tools remain critical to buying and discovering art” (Kakar 2023).

3.2.3. Networking Impact

For most artists, their digital presence has a positive networking impact that translates into receiving work opportunities from companies and individuals. Networking online is fundamental for those artists who admit lacking networking skills in real life.

A5: My network has grown through my Instagram account, where brands contact me with work opportunities. I am not good at networking in real life, so Instagram helps me a lot.

A7: I got important contacts and opportunities from there [digital presence]. Individual clients that want to buy something from the store or something customized, 99% of them come from there. Many companies discover me there and contact me for their marketing related works, social media formats, videos, and animations.

A4: My Instagram ends up being my portfolio thus I do not need an agency or a gallery, since 95% of the brands. . . clothing, fashion, cosmetics, Deloitte, find me there.

However, for those artists who work with commissions by book editors and commercial brands, their digital presence is not a significant source for new work opportunities.

A8: I think it helps me on networking, but I do not think I get opportunities that originate there. What happens is that people that already know I exist go there to check my work and have a confirmation, and then it works as a communication channel.

A3: I had a few work opportunities coming from there, but I do not think it affects much what I do, because I mainly work with editors.

The networking impact of the digital presence has varying degrees of importance for artists, and it is contingent upon social skills in real life and the type of work. For those artists with a very specialized work and particular style who have already in place a network of professional contacts, their digital presence serves as a reinforcement for deepening relationships with already established customers.

3.2.4. Conversion Impact

Artists state that an increase in the number of followers does not translate into higher sales, although it positively affects brand awareness and networking contacts. Therefore, regarding conversion, it is more effective to invest in engaging with a loyal audience than trying simply to increase the number of followers.

A8: I do not think that having more followers translates into more sales, because the number of my followers is growing but the level of sales remains the same. On Instagram, maybe one out of fifty contacts converts into a client.

A1: Increasing the number of followers translates directly in brand awareness, not in sales.

A3: I think that purchase actions depend on the quality of the followers. I do have many and there is a small percentage that buy. Having a post gone viral does not mean that more people will buy.

Our findings support the view that the online art marketplace resembles the physical art market. Looking at the numbers of visitors at commercial art galleries and art fairs, we see that only a tiny percentage of those visitors convert to buyers, and the same seems to be the reality of our interviewed artists.

A1: I think we should invest in both worlds [digital and physical], as it is dangerous to live only from the digital or social networks (. . .) I sell in galleries, in addition to my online store, as I believe it is important to have a more direct relationship with the consumer.

A5: Even if it is not what I like to do most, I sell in galleries because I think it is one of the easiest ways to reach people.

A7: I think galleries are important because they show my work to a different audience.

However, two interviewed artists, as they work on commissioned projects, are not part of the gallery system because their art is already sold before being executed; hence, they consider that a gallery collaboration would not provide any further advantages to them.

A4: For those artists who wish to express themselves on paper, a gallery can help them a lot, as it provides a space for exhibition, critique and dialogue that goes much deeper than the comments you get on Instagram. For me, because my work is commissioned, it does not make much sense.

Therefore, even if we live in a digital era, artists who want to sell their creations that are not commissioned should consider having a space to exhibit their work. This space is not necessarily a commercial gallery; it can be an artist-run space, a curated exhibition, or any venue that provides access to a wider and diverse audience.

4. Discussion

Our research shows that artists attribute varying degrees of importance to the impact that their digital presence has on their career. Artists with a network of clients who buy their work regularly (commercial brands and book editors) and who mostly execute commissioned work do not need to dedicate time to post frequently to attract new followers, since they already generate a volume of sales considered satisfactory. However, artists who depend on attracting clients through their Instagram presence need to be more active on the platform, posting new content frequently. For this type of artist, an Instagram presence becomes more effective when he/she reveals the persona behind the work and engages with his/her audience. Increasing the level of engagement in social networks requires fast production and posting, which may eventually compromise the quality of the artist's creative process. The behavior exhibited by the participant artists does not correspond to the assertion that content planning in social media is something that should be planned strategically (Dolan et al. 2019). Our findings indicate that the necessary planning for a consistent presence on social media (planning the frequency of posts) is not something that characterizes artists' behavior. This is explained by the artists' perception that planning restricts and interrupts their creative process and adversely affects the spontaneity and authenticity of their posts.

Establishing and maintaining a presence on digital platforms requires producing and sharing artistic work and managing an artistic brand. Branding awareness and recognition is a first step in this process, where the artist engages with his/her audience. However, this engagement encompasses a wide spectrum of behaviors, ranging from simple digital interactions (e.g., thanking followers for positive comments) to getting to know people personally in face-to-face meetings in professional or social gatherings. In this sense, digital engagement may become more meaningful, leading to the creation of communities with followers and peers. We make the distinction between followers and peers because they influence the career trajectories of artists in different ways. Followers are appreciators of the

artist's work, including buyers and collectors, whose digital activity and word-of-mouth further increase the brand awareness of the artist in question and potentially result in sales. Peers play an important role in the art world because of their networking capacity with gatekeepers such as curators and gallerists, thus expanding the artist's networking opportunities. Conversion to sales or commissioned work does not correlate with a large number of followers; instead, it originates from a core of engaged followers who buy work or give positive recommendations. In the case when the artist chooses to reveal his/her persona, values, and beliefs, conversion may materialize also due to the affinity the followers feel with the artist, whom they perceive as authentic. Projecting authenticity helps forge strong connections with the audience, while a lack of authenticity, as perceived by the audience, may label the artist as a pretender and negatively affect the artist's brand.

In relation to the four objectives (branding, engagement, networking, and conversion), our research shows that digital presence has the most direct impact on branding. Digital channels and social media (mainly Instagram) give artists the opportunity to raise awareness for their work. Even if artists do not have a strategy for posting content often, their work remains online and can be easily found by appreciators and potential clients.

We also observe that the digital presence does not substitute entirely face-to-face interactions, especially as regards the feeling of community, which does not seem to exist on Instagram or other digital networks per se, but it is developed when complemented with physical presence (organizing physical events like workshops, book presentations, and artists' talks). In the same sense, collaborating with a gallery and having work exhibited remains very important because galleries promote and disseminate the artists' work, bring it to the attention of potential buyers, and generate sales, thus enhancing the artists' own efforts to earn a living from their art.

This paper contributes to the literature that considers the visual artist as a brand manager by investigating the management of his/her digital presence and the direct and indirect impact it has on his/her career. We consider art sales and commissioned work that result from the presence of the artist on social media and digital platforms as direct (conversion). The indirect impact is the creation and broadening of a community of followers that positively affects the artist's brand, as well as the establishment of networks from where work opportunities may arise. The paper also adds to the body of empirical knowledge on how artists build successful careers, as it is based on primary sources that inform us about decisions and actions undertaken by the participant artists whose careers are still in the making. Furthermore, the interviewed artists are uniquely positioned to evaluate the impact of their digital presence, which they manage themselves, as opposed to many internationally branded artists who can afford to delegate this management to third parties (personal assistants, agents, and galleries).

This research is based on illustrators, and it is probable that the findings may not fully reflect the realities in the careers of other types of visual artists (e.g., painters, sculptors, and photographers); therefore, we suggest that further studies be conducted within the visual arts sector to gain more insights about the digital presence and its impact on artistic careers. We also suggest researching other contexts, both peripheral and central, to reveal the extent to which our findings can be generalized.

Our study has several implications for emerging artists and aspiring artists who are still at art school, as it shows that they should have a digital presence to help raise awareness that they exist as artists and disseminate their artistic production to gain brand recognition. The digital presence, especially in an art world that is interacting and transacting increasingly online, can lead to engagement with the public, which is instrumental for amplifying through word-of-mouth the artistic brand, and it is also crucial for networking that creates work opportunities. The digital presence should be approached strategically by the artists, since it can play an important role in the development of their careers. Artists may opt to share more than the final artwork; they can share the execution process and even reveal aspects of their persona (values, beliefs, and lifestyle) which help create and reinforce a sense of community with their followers. At the same time, we argue that the necessary

tools for such a strategy should be provided by art schools. The bigger issue here is whether art schools consider that their obligations are limited to teaching art theory and creation, or a much broader view needs to be adopted by art educators, namely preparing students for a career in the art market and the wider cultural and creative industries.

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