



HOW CAN PERSONAL BRANDING ENHANCE AN EMERGING ARTIST'S POSITIONING AS AN ENTREPRENEUR IN THE DIGITAL MARKET?

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Abstract:

Personal branding has garnered increasing scholarly interest, particularly as digital tools redefine how professionals present themselves within increasingly competitive markets. Conversely, while in the visual arts the systematic application of personal branding—particularly its capacity to fill out exposure and contact between stakeholders and emerging and middle-career artists—is underresearched, the present study fills both voids by creating a cross-cultural model for visual artists' personal branding strategies and thus creating valuable theory and avenues for practical application.

Two key dynamics underlie the study: (1) the dynamic impact digital platforms and artificial intelligence technologies have on artist self-presentation, and (2) the socio-cultural and intergenerational variations that shape artists' recognition and branding strategy application. Drawing on the Theory–Context–Characteristics–Methods (TCCM) approach, the study proposes a systematic approach grounded in earlier research, designed to address deficiencies in theory, context, and methodology.

The results are taken from a qualitative comparative case study that includes 59 semi-structured interviews. The research outlines key branding variables and examines how cultural norms, platform logics, and the integration of innovative technologies, such as generative AI, influence these elements.

Keywords: personal branding, visual artists, stakeholder relationships, cross-cultural branding, digital platforms, generational dynamics, creative entrepreneurship, TCCM framework.

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1. Introduction

Emerging visual artists often struggle to close the gap between professional and academic practice since they are not well-equipped for their professional lives. At the same time, art education emphasizes technical and artistic skills but often neglects to prepare artists with essential business skills, such as pricing concepts, gallery relationships, stakeholder engagement, and online self-promotion (Fillis et al., 2015; Roysen et al., 2007). Without proper teaching, many artists resort to trial-and-error approaches, opening their professional careers to unpredictability in a blur and competitive sector (Bauer et al., 2011). This lack highlights the importance of accessible tools and methodologies that can help artists navigate the complexities in the art market.

In this regard, artists' usage of social media has increased significantly. In line with that, the emergence of Instagram, TikTok, and other visually oriented platforms has increased artists' opportunities to raise their name. (Dawson, 2020; Forbes, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic also accelerated this shift by forcing artists to rely on digital channels to showcase work and engage collectors (Sutton, 2021). Studies highlight that having an effective online presence not only increases visibility but also serves as a living portfolio, whereby artists can convey their work process, approach, and personal identity to the new generation of audience (Forbes, 2019; Mei et al., 2024; Petrides & Vila de Brito, 2024).

However, social media visibility is not enough to raise an artist's name in the social media market, and artists must differentiate themselves in an oversaturated digital landscape. That is where personal branding comes in as a critical strategy. As the intentional creation of one's own unique talent, personality, and artistic vision, personal branding allows artists to communicate the underlying meaning of their art (Sovianti et al., 2023). Monteiro (2022) emphasizes that effective branding positions the artist more closely aligned with galleries, curators, and collectors by linking the artist's personality with the audience's anticipated expectations. With digital presence determining career opportunities, personal branding is not just a tool for self-promotion but a requirement for staying in touch and increasing personal branding awareness in this industry.

The current state of the art in personal branding research emphasizes digital transformation, creative autonomy, and the tension between marketability and authenticity. Fine art serves not only aesthetic purposes but also functions as a platform for cultural dialogue, resistance, and emotional expression across mediums like painting, installation, and digital art (Sovianti et al., 2023). Yet, artists find themselves navigating a paradoxical terrain that requires balancing creative autonomy with institutional norms and market logics (Holden, 2006). The systemic absence of practical training in art education exacerbates this pressure, particularly in areas like personal branding, stakeholder engagement, and entrepreneurial thinking (Bauer et al., 2011; Fillis et al., 2015). Artists are now using digital platforms in more dynamic ways, blurring the lines between marketing, creating an identity, and building a community. An online presence is no longer static; it is an active space for engagement and interaction. Platforms such as Instagram now serve as hybrid gallery-storefronts where artists share their creative journeys to build audiences (Cruz & Karatzas, 2019; Medjani et al., 2019). This evolution reflects a significant transition from one-way promotion to direct, two-way conversations with followers, a key element in modern frameworks for artistic career success (Padel et al., 2024; Petrides & Fernandes, 2020).

Furthermore, new topics such as the use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in art and branding have not been studied sufficiently (Bankins et al., 2024; Chu et al., 2025). As GenAI becomes more integrated into practice, Key questions about how branding strategies change across different cultures and generations still need to be answered.

This thesis addresses these gaps by examining how emerging visual artists in Iran's and Portugal's distinct art markets utilize personal branding on digital platforms. The primary goal is to understand how these artists establish professional relationships, operate within their local markets, and cultivate a professional online identity. This research aims to explore the key concepts behind personal branding for artists, examine differences across cultures and generations, and analyze their strategies and their impact on audience engagement. It also seeks to identify gaps in theory, methods, and context for future studies.

More specifically, this research is guided by the following objectives:

RO1a: To explore the theoretical foundations of personal branding in the context of emerging visual artists' career development and stakeholder engagement.

RO1b: To examine cross-cultural differences in personal branding practices between Iranian and Portuguese artists operating in distinct art market environments.

RO1c: To understand the characteristics of personal branding strategies used by artists, including how these strategies affect stakeholder relationships, audience engagement, and self-representation.

RO1d: To identify and apply appropriate qualitative methods (e.g., semi-structured interviews, visual content analysis) for analyzing artists' personal branding strategies across digital platforms.

RO2: To trace how generational cohorts (Gen Y and Gen Z) of artists conceptualize and operationalize personal branding across social media, emphasizing entrepreneurial uses and the integration of emerging technologies like AI.

RO3: To offer future research directions by highlighting theoretical, contextual, strategic (characteristic), and methodological gaps in the current literature on personal branding in the visual arts.

Due to these gaps, this dissertation aims to investigate how visual artists strategically utilize personal branding on digital platforms to establish long-term stakeholder relationships in culturally distinct art markets, such as Iran and Portugal. To achieve these objectives, this study adopts a qualitative, cross-cultural, comparative case study design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 59 virtual artists, 33 from Iran and 26 from Portugal, who were selected through snowball sampling based on their active engagement in personal branding via digital platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The participants, drawn from Gen Y and Gen Z, reflect the generational and cultural diversity central to this research. A deductive approach, grounded in existing literature, informed the interview design, while thematic analysis, inspired by grounded theory, guided data interpretation. The analysis framework followed the Theory–Context–Characteristics–Methods (TCCM) model, enabling the systematic organization of findings across key dimensions relevant to personal branding in the arts.

In the following section, we first discuss the research methodology. Then, we provide a comprehensive overview of artist personal branding research, organized using the TCCM framework to analyze antecedents, strategic decisions, and outcomes related to digital branding practices. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods applied in personal branding research. Next, we present the findings, thematically structured around key branding strategies and patterns of stakeholder engagement across culturally distinct settings. We then discuss how these findings relate to existing theory, highlight cross-cultural and generational dynamics, and identify areas within the literature that remain underexplored. Lastly, in the conclusion section, we summarize the key implications of our study, discuss its theoretical and practical contributions, acknowledge limitations, and propose directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Structure and Methodology of the Literature Review

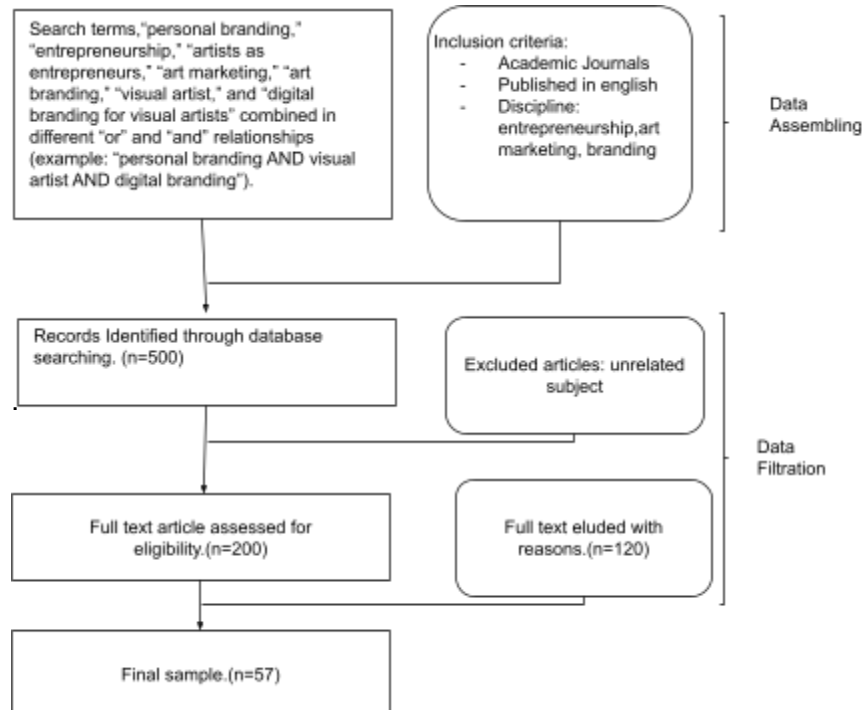
In terms of approach, this Literature Review can be viewed as a three-step process: identifying potential sources, screening articles based on their abstracts, and analyzing selected papers to contain their insights into our examination of personal branding for visual artists, along with the difficulties and prospects related to this topic.

Adhering to established systematic research techniques for academic mapping (Halder et al., 2021; Paul et al., 2021; Randhawa et al., 2016), we collected our data from multiple scholarly databases, including Scopus, ScienceDirect, Web of Science, EBSCO, ProQuest, and Taylor & Francis, producing an initial pool of 500 records.

Figure 1 demonstrates the two-step selection process we implemented to obtain our final article collection, consisting of gathering and refining stages. During the initial gathering phase, we performed an intensive search using various combinations of key terms such as "personal branding," "entrepreneurship," "artists as entrepreneurs," "art marketing," "art branding," "visual artist," "digital branding for visual artists," and "AI for visual artist branding," employing different Boolean operators (for instance: "personal branding AND visual artist AND digital branding").

Regarding this research finding methodology, we chose 57 articles for final examination. Which are its Subsidiary references identified during the Literature Review's development? The complete reference list appears in this work's References section.

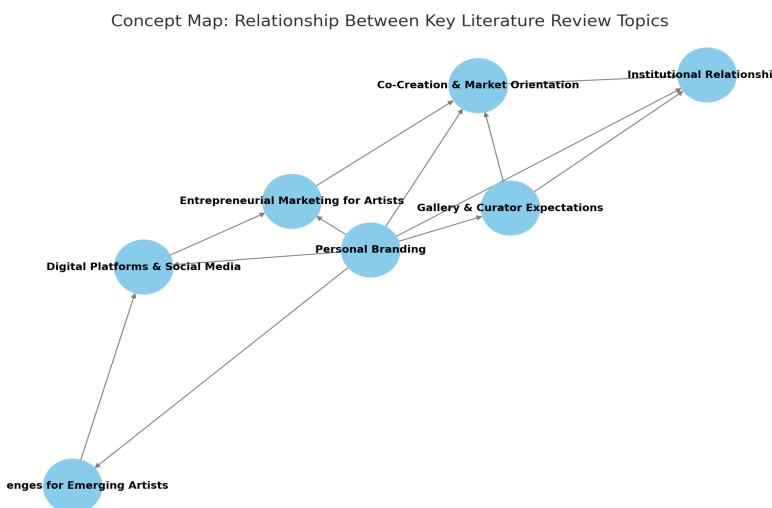
Figure1. Research Prisma



In this literature review, a TCCM framework is employed to examine the concept of personal branding, with a specific focus on visual artists. Our approach tends to explore the current necessity of social media in personal branding, analyze how artists utilize these platforms, and assess their familiarity with personal branding strategies. Additionally, we investigate the acceptance and integration of AI-generated tools in their professional practices.

Since personal branding is fundamentally linked to market forces, this research investigates not only personal branding itself but also the key factors that shape it. These include stakeholders, education, cultural influences, digital platforms, and other elements, all of which will be examined in detail in the literature review.

To clearly outline these relationships, Diagram 1.1 provides a conceptual framework that maps the connections between the study's main themes. This visual model helps define the theoretical relationships, supporting a structured analysis of the research components.



Figuer2. Concept map

2.2 Theoretical Foundation of Personal Branding

Personal branding has been widely examined as a multidimensional concept that bridges self-expression and strategic communication. Before reviewing the specific theories of personal branding within the visual arts concept, it is essential to establish a foundational understanding of personal branding as a theoretical concept.

The concept of personal branding and self-positioning was first articulated in Napoleon Hill's 1937 book *Think and Grow Rich* (2012 edition). In his work, Hill explored the essential skills necessary for professional and business success, offering the earliest documented reference to the practice now known as personal branding. He asserted that to attain success, gain recognition, and attract an employer, individuals must actively work on their personal image and brand.

The concept of strategic self-positioning as a tool for career development was initially explored by Ries and Trout (1986). This concept was later cleaned up and became popular by Tom Peters. Peters (1997) argued that individuals must turn themselves into a brand, and their primary job is to sell themselves. This perspective firmly places the elements of personal branding as a strategy to promote one's professional image and skills for success in the workplace.

However, the meaning of personal branding has particularly evolved with the rise of the internet and the rise of the Web 2.0 era (Hearn, 2006). With higher accessibility to professional self-presentation, it encloses the market image of individuals and crafts it into a broader and often more profit-driven format (Gehl, 2011).

Schawbel (2009) defines personal branding as the process of identifying and communicating one's unique attributes to establish a distinctive professional identity. This perspective aligns with its characterization as a marketing concept where individuals strategically promote their key characteristics to achieve career advancement or social integration (Zarkada, 2012). The notion of the "branded self" further develops this idea by framing personal branding aimed at gaining attention and accumulating both cultural and economic capital (Rosen, 2004). This knowingly designed aspect is closely related to Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, which explains how individuals consciously modify their behavior and appearance to shape others' perceptions within specific social contexts. Goffman's dramaturgical approach emphasizes that such self-presentation is not merely individual but socially conditioned, requiring adaptation to audience expectations and situational norms.

The nature of a personal brand represents the inherent value and distinctiveness of people. As Urde (2016) explains, a strong brand nature triggers both cognition and emotion, and that is essential for being unique in markets that are competitive. Put another way, personal branding represents a means by which a person creates a personal identity that triggers an emotional response in terms of their strengths and values (Kurhayadi, 2022). The approach includes being known as a brand among a given target group (Sovianti et al., 2023).

Several crucial frameworks are able to clarify the makeup of personal branding. One central framework is that of Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Model, which utilizes human personality traits for the expression of brand personalities. The model categorizes five core dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. The traits provide a systematic tool for analyzing the way people express their work personas.

Another important idea is the idea of brand equity by Keller (2006). The idea refers to the value that a brand accrues due to societal opinion and attitudes. Though originally designed for corporate brands, it applies just as well to artists, giving us insight into how their audience judges their body of work.

Finally, Kapferer (2012) outlines brand identity in a six-part "identity prism." The model comprises physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image. Individually, they guide how a brand is experienced and viewed by others.

Process-oriented perspectives further strengthen this foundation. Lair et al. (2005) conceptualize personal branding as a system of identity inputs, communication channels, and outcome outputs. Zarkada (2025) emphasizes the strategic dimension of personal branding, framing it as a conscious, ongoing negotiation between authenticity and market positioning. This view positions personal branding as a balancing act where individuals must manage both self-expression and stakeholder expectations.

Regarding personal branding, Scheidt et al. (2020) mentioned that the ratio of personal branding has changed due to new personal branding dimensions, which are influenced by social media and the values in one's society.

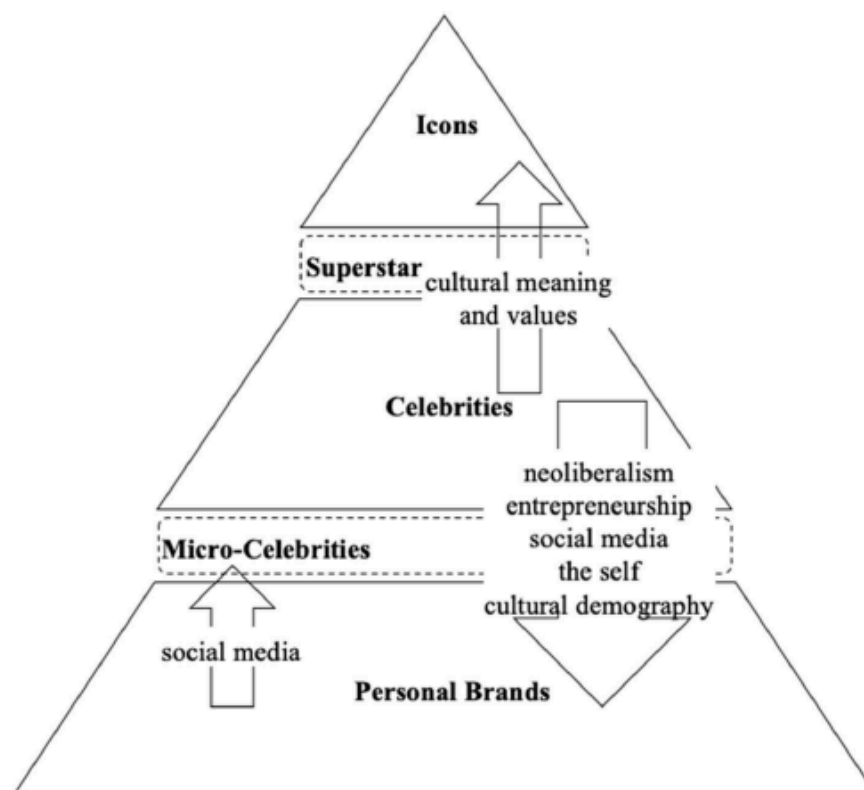


Figure 3. The pyramid of different human brand classes and their appearance in the history of personal branding.

2.2.2 Applying Personal Branding to Visual Artists

The core of a personal brand represents its essential nature and principles. As stated by Urde (2016), a strong brand core creates both rational and emotional responses, and that is what is required for distinctiveness in markets that are overly saturated. Personal branding represents a process by which one creates a personality that elicits an emotional response to one's attributes and principles (Kurhayadi, 2022). This strategy operates to improve one's value within the

marketplace by presenting oneself in an effective, unique message, persona, and marketing approach (Lair et al., 2005).

Numerous theoretical models underpin this concept. Keller (2006) articulates the notion of brand equity, which signifies the worth a brand gains from its societal perception and reputation. Models such as Aaker's Brand Identity Model and Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism also serve as significant analytical instruments. For instance, Kapferer's (2012) prism characterizes a brand across six facets: physique (aesthetic), personality (characteristics), culture (principles), relationship (engagement with the audience), reflection (intended audience), and self-image (the creator's perspective). This comprehensive approach facilitates the development of a cohesive and impactful personal brand (Sovianti et al., 2023).

Once such principles are transferred to visual artists, personal branding becomes the crucial linkage between their individual studio practice and the external art marketplace. As the world becomes increasingly globalized, artists are forced to perform entrepreneurially to establish themselves in the consciousness of the various stakeholders, i.e., collectors and galleries (Sjöholm & Pasquinelli, 2014). They are thus forced to negotiate the "in-between spaces" between their private, isolated creative existence and the external expectations of a career (Portafolia et al., 2013).

An artist's brand is constructed from within around a uniting personal story that is distinctively the artist's own. Schroeder (2005) makes the point that the story has to incorporate the artist's visual imagination, cultural origins, and personal experience. The story is honed for the artist by what O'Reilly (2005) refers to as the "creation myth" (the artist's origin story) and their membership in a visual community. The internal construction, or reflexivity, insists that the artist constructs his or her meaning and identity on his or her own terms and is essential for a brand that appears and feels genuine (Zorloni, 2005).

However, an artist's brand development doesn't happen in isolation but is shaped considerably by external agency and forms of legitimation. Preece and Kerrigan (2015) phrase that a brand takes shape as part of the "art machine"—the interlocking network of institutions, galleries, and critics that are able to boost its reputation (Rodner & Thomson, 2013). Artists must engage actively within this network to earn "symbolic capital" and extend their branding (Currid, 2007). As part of that, a publicly held reputation for an artist that is based on marketplace recognition forms a central parameter for their brand (Zorloni, 2005). Partnerships with those institutions, for example, are able to deliver co-branding benefits that greatly boost recognition (Washburn et al., 2000).

This dynamic between internal imagination and external approval produces a key dilemma: blending art and commerce. As Preece (2014) says, branding in the world of art is associated with commodifying art. Here, visual artists are both owners and marketers who manage supply and their brand name (Rodner, 2014). They need to hybridize audience-driven and product-oriented strategies to remain genuine while addressing demand (Botti, 2000). They must be able to continually shift their strategy without giving up on core values (Monteiro, 2022).

In the end, a well-developed brand enables an artist to showcase beauty and enduring cultural relevance. Those artists who connect their personal brands to larger cultural trajectories are in the best position to reach wide audiences. This builds the emotional and symbolic value of their brand, thereby ensuring that its meaning endures beyond time (Schroeder, 2010).

2.2.3 The Artist's Operating Environment

The context in which an artist must operate is multifaceted, and their successes are frequently tied to factors that are beyond their artistic field. Preece (2014) contends that artists have less agency in relation to their marketplace reputation than is commonly assumed, due to the strong societal constructs and legitimation mechanisms that are in play. One crucial component within this construction includes a cohort of gatekeepers, such as publishers, curators, and the owners of the galleries, who have a great degree of agency in terms of who becomes known as an artist (Kerrigan et al., 2011). The system may compel beginning artists to agree with marketplace consensus, at times to the detriment of their unique artistic personality (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020). Preece (2014) describes the whole apparatus being influenced by core "cultural codes" and ideologies that are sometimes presented as self-evident truths and yet almost go without comment.

The complex environment is also compounded by the internationalization of the art marketplace. While globalization offers artists a chance to approach worldwide audiences, at the same time, they are presented with the problem of navigating diverse cultural settings and marketplace dynamics. Artists are forced to adjust their branding strategy to appeal to diverse audiences while maintaining their authentic identity (Cudny et al., 2020). The question becomes a fine balance that requires a thorough understanding of cultural niceties and audience sensibilities, thus adding another dimension of strategic intrigue for fledgling artists.

2.2.4 Cross-Cultural studies in the art market

Strategic cultural positioning frequently constitutes a central element in branding for artists from non-Western nations. Preece (2014), who conducted research on contemporary Chinese artists, identified a phenomenon known as "strategic orientalism," where those artists engage with socio-political issues and symbols congruent with Western expectations and thereby expand their markets. The above inference would be that creating a brand for an artist constitutes a purposeful compromise between his/her cultural origin and global markets' expectations. The latter are necessarily shaped by internalized cultural orientations. Therefore, artists from collectivist societies are likely to emphasize group success, whereas those from individualistic societies are likely to showcase individual success. The cultural gap thus requires artists to craft a high-end brand that would perform well regardless of locations (Lin, 2024).

In the Middle Eastern region, and thereby in Iran, the artist brand is convoluted by tradition, modernity, and geopolitics. The stakeholder relationships for an Iranian artist could be shaped by high-power-distance norms, a world away from the egalitarian environments for low-power-distance cultures, say those from Portugal (Hofstede, 2010). The "authenticity" for

their brand would thus be gauged by different yardsticks, where management of local cultural codes would be as crucial as market-sensitive self-presentation (Scabini and Manzi, 2011).

Finally, a cross-cultural analysis reveals that the essential elements of an artist's brand authenticity, reputation, and story are not cross-culturally relevant but are dependent on cultural environments (Gandini, 2016). Despite frameworks such as those by Hofstede that allow for important insights, they were criticized for their immobility in a context that is typified by the ever-changing nature of cultural values as a result of globalization and technological changes (e.g., McSweeney, 2002). This underscores the importance of cultural intelligence and responsiveness. Likewise, stakeholder relationships are mediated by cultural considerations; for example, a Lisbon collector might be motivated by the participation of an artist in the European contemporary art dialogue, while a Tehran collector might value artworks that have a point of confluence with a native Iranian cultural story (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000).

2.2.5 The Specificity of the Marketing for Arts

Art industry marketing is a plural activity that consists of situating both artworks and artists in varying economic and cultural settings. As opposed to mainstream industries, the art marketplace necessitates unique techniques that reconcile the intangible, symbolic nature of art and marketplace viability. Standard marketing strategies identified by Fillis (2010) are usually inefficient in creative industries due to their unitary and customer-centric nature. Visual artist marketing, meanwhile, comes first for story construction and cultural value. This relationship arises due to the nature of the art marketplace, which is characterized by collaborative art construction and artist-driven innovation in terms of products, while mainstream marketing is largely customer-centric (Zahay et al., 2018).

Hagtvedt and Patrick (2008) investigate the "art infusion" effect and the way the incorporation of visual art into a product increases quality perceptions. On a personal level, for artists, it demonstrates that being aligned with cultural and symbolic capital may be able to raise their level of market presence. This supports Schroeder (2010)'s contention that visual branding strategies modeled on fine art are transformative. The marketing also has a key role to play in building stakeholder relationships. Wickham et al. (2020) focus on the value of networks in determining the production and distribution of art, where relationships are part of value co-creation.

Other researchers suggest that a fresh paradigm for the marketing of art is needed, one where the artist's creative production takes precedence as the central constituent (Fillis, 2004) and where collaboration between artists and trade professionals, such as dealers and curators, is paramount (Preece et al., 2016). Nevertheless, a branding emphasis may produce a similarity between artworks, which may suppress innovation and originality (Belfiore, 2020; Colbert and Martin, 2009; Fillis, 2011).

2.2.6 Challenges in Art Branding

Balancing Creative Autonomy with Commercial Imperatives: Fillis (2011) mentions the dilemma between creating work that best aligns with an artist's vision and responding to the expectations of stakeholders such as collectors and galleries. The dilemma is especially pronounced in the digital era, where audience measurement drives visibility. The artist must find a means of aligning their creative objectives with branding requirements, a process that necessitates adaptability and resilience.

Resource Constraints: Many artists, particularly those in the early stages of their careers, face resource limitations that restrict their ability to engage in branding and marketing endeavors. According to Rodner and Kerrigan (2014), the financial and temporal obligations associated with personal branding can impede the creative process, resulting in heightened pressure for artists to juggle multiple tasks and self-regulate their professional trajectories. Although digital platforms offer economically viable alternatives, they nonetheless require substantial effort for effective maintenance.

Maintaining Long-Term Engagement: Wickham and Lehman (2020) argue that maintaining relevance in the art market requires continuous engagement with stakeholders and audiences. The need for ongoing visibility and engagement presents a dilemma for artists who must balance long-term branding programs with episodic production. Moreover, the rapidly evolving dynamics of the digital environment require artists to continually adapt their strategies to stay relevant.

One notable issue that artists encounter in personal branding is that they often lack adequate training or mentorship. Most artists are well-trained technically when they enter the arts profession; however, they are often poorly skilled in branding and marketing concepts. The lack of skill has a tendency to leave artists unable to effectively present their value proposition and express their artistic personality to a broader audience (Fillis, 2024). Consequently, a lack of awareness leaves artists unable to create their value proposition and unable to present their artistic vision to a broader audience.

Another issue is the dilemma between marketplace expectations and artistic integrity. (Fillis, 2011) points out that personal branding often requires artists to make their work available to the marketplace, in line with marketplace expectations, which may be at odds with their desire for freedom to create. The dilemma is especially pronounced in a marketplace driven by social media indicators, where one's followers and level of engagement are at odds with one's knowledge and valuation of their artwork (Sjöholm and Pasquinelli, 2014). Some artists are uncomfortable with the language of branding and the commodification of their artwork. They perceive a vast difference between the fields of art and commerce. Artists may feel that they are selling out if they invest a great amount of time and effort in branding and marketing themselves. Additionally, artists may feel pressured to produce commercially successful artworks, rather than those that are meaningful to them. This may lead to a loss of artistic integrity and a sense of disconnection from what they create (Pitkäsalu, 2024).

Moreover, Mei et al. 2024) highlight the psychological burden of managing public perceptions on digital platforms. Social media provides a platform for visibility but also exposes artists to potential misinterpretation or criticism. Artists must constantly balance self-expression with impression management, often feeling constrained by the need to project a marketable image that aligns with audience expectations.

Resource scarcity is also a huge challenge for mid-career and young artists. Fillis (2010) reports that most artists lack the financial resources to obtain expert branding services and are thus required to undertake these tasks independently (Duncan et al., 2015). The self-employed nature of the activity may result in managerial problems over time, as the artists are required to divide their attention between their artwork and branding tasks (Lehman & Wickham, 2014). The international nature of the art market also necessitates a more nuanced appreciation for diverse cultural environments, and branding tasks for international acclaim become increasingly daunting for artists.

The pressure to maintain a consistent and commercially tenable persona across Internet media can lead to emotional burnout. Secondly, social exposure makes artists vulnerable to both criticism and misappropriation, and has the potential to exact a great emotional toll (Sjöholm & Pasquinelli, 2014).

Regardless of these challenges, personal branding represents a fundamental tool for artists aiming to negotiate the art market's competitive field. Through the proper use of symbolic and social capital, as signaled by Rodner and Kerrigan (2014), artists are able to overcome some obstacles and thus build important affiliations with their stakeholders and secure the longevity of their careers in the long term.

One of the persistent problems in art marketing is the absence of proper formal schooling and resources for the artist. Rodner and Kerrigan (2014) contend that while artists exhibit utmost creativity, a vast number are devoid of adequate business skills in efficiently deploying marketing techniques. The resultant lack of understanding creates a tendency for the artist to use a try-and-fix strategy, which proves both time-wasting and expensive.

2.2.7 The Artist as Entrepreneur

Visiting artists often follow their career trajectories as entrepreneurs, blending their artistic practice with businesslike strategies to achieve success. Fillis (2011) frames artists as entrepreneurial marketers, citing their skills in taking risks, cultivating innovation, and demonstrating adaptability within fluctuating market settings. He argues that entrepreneurial behavior is particularly important within the art marketplace, where artists must create demand for their work and not just respond to current market forces. The entrepreneurial artist has a forward-looking and strategic approach to their career, one that actively seeks opportunities in exhibitions, sales, and commissions. They are aware of the necessity of building relationships with key stakeholders within the art field (Sjöholm, 2010).

Meyer and Even (1998) compare contemporary artists with "financially dependent innovators," and these individuals align their artistic projects with accessible market opportunities. This perspective highlights the dual role that artists play as creators and marketplace agents who use their unique perspectives to differentiate themselves in competitive environments. Similarly, Wickham and Lehman (2020) emphasize the importance of networks in entrepreneurial strategies and contend that artists must develop relationships with diverse stakeholders such as galleries, curators, and collectors to establish their positions within the marketplace for art. The networks represent crucial conduits for value co-production, and they allow artists to transform their symbolic and cultural capital into financial returns.

Creativity forms a core characteristic both in the realm of artistic production and in the marketing and branding approaches for entrepreneurial artists. This consists of the use of experimental and unconventional strategies for reaching audiences and creating a recognizable branded name (Cudny et al., 2024). Quoted by Rodner (2014), the entrepreneurial artist survives by making use of different forms of social, cultural, and symbolic capital for the development of one's reputation and market value. They understand that success in the field of art depends not merely on artistic talent but on networking, self-promotion, and the accumulation and development of a recognizable branded name.

2.2.8 Digital Strategies and Audience Co-Creation

Digital media have revolutionized visual artists' development and promotion of their brands, and provided unprecedented channels for exposure, engagement, and acquisition of audience. Social networking sites, for example, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, have become fundamental channels for artists to display pieces, reveal work-in-progress, and engage audiences globally. Mei et al. (2024) mention the use of Social Media Engagement Behavior (SMEB) in personal branding, where artists themselves are actively involved in creating and responding to followers in a bid to build a sense of belonging and loyalty. Through live streaming, reels, and comment-driven posts, artists humanize their brands and build better relationships with followers.

Social interactivity enables audiences to co-produce the artist's brand by sharing, commenting on, and responding to their content. Preece and Kerrigan (2015) note that co-creation injects multidimensionality into the brand, with various audience engagements informing its meaning and value construction. The group branding process resonates with the fluid and distributed nature of digital media, in which stakeholders co-govern narratives around a logo.

Cartoonists and comic book writers, for instance, use strategies like merchandising and crowdfunding to fund their careers. Painters who want to balance artistic integrity and economic success have a thing or two to learn from such strategies (Rodner & Kerrigan, 2014).

Crowdfunding sites, Pitkäsalo (2024) goes on, also open up the options for personal branding by allowing artists to profit from their artistic process without necessarily severing ties immediately with their audience. Crowdfunding sites would allow artists to provide exclusive exposure to their work, a personalized experience, and behind-the-scenes information, thus

tightening the relationship between producers and consumers. This is not only a means for generating alternative forms of revenue, but also for making the artist's brand interactive and participatory.

2.2.9 The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Artist Branding

Artificial Intelligence (AI)'s rapid evolution has created a paradigm shift in the art world, introducing powerful new tools that influence both the creation of art and the branding and marketing strategies of artists (Raisch and Fomina, 2024). Most significantly, Generative AI (GenAI)—a classification of AI that can produce original content, such as images, text, and music—is increasingly being adopted in the creative industries to boost productivity and stimulate innovation (Anthony et al., 2023).

Mariani et al. (2023) stated that Generative AI functions as a tool for operation and a vehicle for communication within the sphere of artistic production and results in higher productivity and variations in creative procedure by means of human-AI co-creation (Plastino and Purdy, 2018).

In concordance with those determined by EMMA et al. (2022), both poles of Generative AI's effect highlight its ability to improve artistic expression with novel mediums (Oye et al., 2022), while at the same time stirring fears about the loss of traditional skills, authenticity concerns, and resultant economic impacts (Bankins et al., 2024).

One of the most direct applications of Generative AI (GenAI) is in automating and optimizing tasks related to creativity and marketing, which addresses the resource constraints frequently faced by artists (Pentland et al., 2020). AI-powered tools are able to parse data across social media networks, generate visual concepts for set or lighting design, and speed up initial production phases, such as creative ideation (Haefner et al., 2021). Empirical research supports that GenAI has indeed been able to enhance both the speed and the quality and quantity of outputs for a range of artistic creation tasks (Anthony et al., 2023). As a result, this allows artists to handle their brand exposure better while being able to spend more time on their core creative practices, while at the same time maintaining the active involvement required for building stakeholder relationships for the digital age.

Moreover, generative AI technologies are now being proposed as co-authentic collaborators within the artistic process, thus essentially re-evaluating traditional notions of authorial ownership and authenticity that are central to a performer's practice (W. Chu et al., 2025). The software guides performers in carrying out tedious tasks such as resizing images, color correction, and the use of generic filtering, thus allowing performers to direct more of their time to the more visionary and complex elements of their practice (Wilson, 2016). Generative AI can also eliminate significant obstacles for beginners and hopeful performers by providing accessible and easily obtainable resources, thereby alleviating their reliance on expensive material and formal educational frameworks (Oye, 2025).

Software such as DeepArt, Runway ML, and Artbreeder enables people to create AI art without requiring advanced technical skills or programming experience, thereby promoting a more

varied and diverse artistic population and empowering a range of voices (W. Chu et al., 2025). The artist should, therefore, purposefully develop a narrative on their utilization of AI as a tool supporting their vision as a visual artist, rather than substituting their distinct artistic contributions (Singh et al., 2024).

Whilst there are many beneficial impacts of AI, the use of GenAI at present is lopsided, being particularly strong at a conceptual and 2D design level, yet lacking at a 3D modeling and high-definition video level. This produces a lack of balance in productivity within workflows that are creative (Ritala et al., 2024). The ability for AI to create limitless variations within a few seconds complicates conventional notions of value and uniqueness within artwork, risking marketplace commodification where quantity takes a greater priority than inherent artistic value (Csaszar and Steinberger, 2022). The basing of existing pieces as a training base for AI programs presents some serious ethical concerns around intellectual rights, copyright infringement, and ownership rights for ideas (Raisch and Fomina, 2024)

2.2.10 Trends in Artist Branding

Social media plays a crucial and diverse role in artists' personal branding and career development, spanning from emerging visual artists to established figures (Hughes 2023). It is an essential tool for boosting awareness, building communities, gaining work leads, and driving direct sales (Young, 2020). Dingli (2021) insists that artists are increasingly viewed as career managers of their own careers, and that their online presence, particularly on social media, is central to this. The process requires intentionally revealing elements of their personality to distinguish themselves and expand how stakeholders and networks see their skills (Kay, 2006). The impact of social networking on artists' careers can be understood in terms of four fundamental goals: branding, participation, networking, and conversion (Petrides et al., 2025).

The art market is constantly evolving, and visual artists are presented with opportunities and challenges in personal branding. One of the core constituents in the evolution is embracing newer means of reaching audiences and building a strong artistic personality.

Hybrid Branding Strategies

One of the strongest trends is the emergence of hybrid branding campaigns that combine physical and digital strategies. Rodner and Kerrigan (2014) highlight the need to combine conventional methods, such as gallery shows and residencies, with digital tools, including Instagram and TikTok, to expand audiences. For example, the combination of traditional gallery exhibitions and digital marketing campaigns enables artists to expand their viewership while maintaining a connection to established art environments (Rodner, 2014). The hybrid strategy will allow artists to strengthen their connection to the established art world while embracing the democratizing power of digital media.

Experiential Branding & Partners

In addition to a hybrid presence, experiential marketing is increasingly defining the artist-audience relationship. Wickham and Lehman (2020) highlight the effectiveness of

immersive experiences, such as interactive installations and live performances, in creating memorable and successful brand moments. The experiences must connect audiences on a higher level while simultaneously adding to the artist's symbolic capital by placing their work as being new and culturally relevant.

Similarly, cross-disciplinary collaborations with brands, designers, or tech innovators are becoming more common, offering new avenues for exposure. Hagtvedt and Patrick (2008) discuss how partnerships with luxury brands or corporations can elevate the perceived value of an artist's work through association with established cultural and symbolic capital. However, these collaborations require careful negotiation to ensure that the artist's integrity and vision are not compromised.

NFTs and Blockchain Technology

Lastly, a significant paradigm shift has been the advent of Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs). The development is revolutionary for art branding as artists can tokenize their art and connect one-on-one with collectors. The use of blockchain ensures openness and trackability, giving artists greater ownership of royalties and rights to resale (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2018).

2.2.11 Challenges of using Digital platforms

Online platforms, though democratizing access, also have their own array of issues. (Mei et al. 2024) Observe that the algorithmic uncertainty on TikTok and Instagram presents a massive obstacle for artists who are in search of consistent exposure. Additionally, the emphasis on performance metrics and likes and shares tends to reduce the art to its digital essence, which may undermine its intrinsic cultural and artistic value.

Artists face the challenge of maintaining ongoing engagement with diverse stakeholders (Schroeder, 2006). The value of symbolic capital in the development of relationships is emphasized by Preece and Kerrigan (2015), who point out that to be culturally relevant and genuine, a continuing effort is needed. For most artists, the pressure imposed by a need to fulfill obligations while maintaining economically productive independence becomes a habitual strain.

Many artists struggle to align the creative drive embedded in their work with the marketplace's financial requirements (Schroeder, 2002). This dilemma between principles may make artists uncomfortable with marketing terminology and reluctant to adopt a marketplace focus. Some artists may be hesitant to see their work as a commodity or engage in self-promotion, fearing that doing so may compromise their artistic integrity (Wickham et al., 2020). Additionally, artists may feel pressured to create pieces that are consistent with current marketplace trends or the supposed taste of collectors and dealers, as opposed to heeding their distinct artistic vision. Pressures such as these work to suppress imagination and may lead to a pervasive disillusionment with the marketplace for art (Fillis et al., 2024).

While digital platforms allow for greater accessibility to audiences, they simultaneously impose significant hurdles. One key issue is the incompatibility of algorithms that govern the visibility of

content according to performance indicators such as likes, shares, and comments. Mei et al. (2024) contend that such an algorithm-driven environment has the tendency to put pressure on artists to prioritize work that has high performance rates at the sacrifice of that which connects with their intent as creators. As such, artists may feel a need to adjust their artworks to fit within current trends on these platforms, which could ultimately compromise their artistic integrity.

Maintaining authenticity is a big challenge in the field of digital branding. Rodner and Kerrigan (2014) state that while a consistent and attractive image on social media may be a necessity, the messy and fluid nature of an artist's body of work may be at odds with that. Balancing the requirement for ongoing content production and the reflective and frequently time-consuming nature of art production requires a great deal of effort. It may, if neglected, lead to inconsistency in the brand or a failure to connect with audiences.

Online branding significantly enhances the opportunities for scrutiny and misinterpretation by the general audience. Mei et al. (2024) point out that the visibility provided by social networks makes artists susceptible to being criticized, receiving adverse reactions, or being mentioned in disputed stands. Reducing these dangers necessitates meticulous curation of the information placed online and deliberate communications strategies, thereby adding to the emotional and psychological load implicit in a digital footprint.

2.2 Summary of Literature Review

The research reviews the literature, situating the study within the body of theory on personal branding and tracing its development from a professional positioning tool to its subsequent importance as a required strategy for visual artists. The literature substantiates that the use of conventional branding frameworks within the arts marketplace requires dealing with a poly-dimensional operational context that is replete with potent gatekeepers, the ambiguity of a global and cross-cultural marketplace, and the idiosyncratic, non-standardized nature of arts marketing.

Against this context, scholarly discussion increasingly defines the modern artist as an entrepreneur who must actively manage their career trajectory. The entrepreneurial approach relies almost exclusively on digital methods, especially targeting audiences and collectively building branded personas with the use of social networks. The debate also examines the paradigm-shifting effects of emerging technologies, for example, artificial intelligence, which promise greater efficiency on one hand and create a formidable obstacle on the other hand to maintaining authenticity and artistic integrity.

Finally, the existing literature consistently emphasizes a singular motif: the ongoing negotiation faced by the artist between maintaining artistic integrity and achieving mainstream success. The analysis presents personal branding as a critical strategic instrument employed to navigate this delicate balancing act, thereby facilitating artists in attaining both cultural significance and a viable career.

2.3 Gaps in the Literature and Research Implications

While the current literature has some worthwhile contributions to make to the nature of personal branding, marketing, and entrepreneurship in the art field, some areas require further research. The current study categorizes these gaps at three different levels: research on diverse cultures, IT research in the art field, and a comprehensive study of artist entrepreneurs.

There is a notable gap in the appreciation of artists within the concept of entrepreneurship. Artists are more than just creators; they are business owners who manage production, finance, marketing, and planning strategy simultaneously. However, the available literature rarely evaluates them on entrepreneurial terms. The omission creates a notable lack of research on the business models, financial plan, and enduring practices that artists, or "artpreneurs," use to keep their careers as viable businesses.

In contrast, the majority of research centers on established artists. As a result, little research examines how mid-career or older artists alter their brands over time, ensure their posthumous reputation, respond to changes in the marketplace, or stay current once they experience initial success.

Moreover, as the art marketplace has registered global expansion via internet mediums, research scholarship persists primarily focusing on a single nation's perspective. The approach fails to account for the subtleties that accompany internationalization, leaving a gap in cross-cultural research. As a result, there is a limited understanding of strategies for branding, audience reception, and criteria for artistic greatness that differ across various cultural environments.

Finally, a fundamental difference exists between the day-to-day work practice of artists and research at universities. Artists are often early adopters of the latest technologies, incorporating social media and artificial intelligence into their creative processes and promotional efforts. On the other hand, research at academic levels has yet to catch up with these additions to technology. There is a lack of qualitative and longitudinal research on artists' initial reactions, innovation strategies, and the actual day-to-day issues they encounter while practicing these digital tools. The effect on branding, artistic personality, and audiences from the artists' perspective is a field that is currently under-researched.

Building on the deficiencies identified in the existing literature, this research study will articulate the research questions that guide its inquiry. The deficiencies serve as a point for crafting the chief research question and the attendant sub-questions. The approach is significant in demarcating the parameters for the research and leading to a distinct direction for tenable conclusions. Consequently, the chief research question upon which the project is anchored is as follows:

How can personal branding enhance an emerging artist's positioning as an entrepreneur in the digital market?

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative design to explore how visual artists use personal branding to engage with stakeholders (e.g., galleries, curators). The study aimed particularly to elucidate the subtleties of the dynamics and establish if there are cross-cultural variations by comparing the experiences of Iranian and Portuguese visual artists. The qualitative aspect involved in-depth probing through semi-structured interviews, while using Chi-square (χ^2) tests to statistically analyze the frequency of coded themes between the two national groups.

3.1 Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was employed in this case to provide rich insights into the experiences, views, and concerns of visual artists regarding personal branding and stakeholder management in today's art marketplace. The research methodology best applies in understanding intricate phenomena and hidden motivations that dictate artists' behaviors within specific cultural contexts. The current research targets newly emerging visual artists from Iran and Portugal, aiming to fill the current gap in the research literature that covers cross-cultural variations between Middle Eastern and Western contexts in the international art marketplace. This approach is well-suited for investigating complex phenomena and the underlying factors influencing artists' behaviors within specific cultural contexts. The study focuses on emerging artists in Portugal and Iran to address the literature gap regarding cross-cultural differences between Middle Eastern and Western contexts in the international art market. Both countries possess rich artistic and cultural heritages and are increasingly participating in global visual art formats.

Regarding that approach, semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, providing adaptability to explore emergent concerns but ensuring systematic exploration of key research topics among interviewees. To complement qualitative data analysis, quantitative aspects were included by converting thematic code incidences into frequency scores.

3.2 Interview Protocol – Preparation and Pre-test

An interview protocol and guide were thoroughly developed based on a comprehensive literature review of personal branding, artist career paths, art market processes, and stakeholder relationships. The initial nine questions were expanded to twelve based on the research supervisor's advice, which recommended that each question be grounded in some aspect of the literature review to ensure good theoretical grounding.

The revised interview guide featured open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives from artists regarding their vocational journeys. The questions were structured to address three core dimensions. These were, firstly, market entry and early career; secondly, the challenges faced by artists, which encompassed business aspects, prevailing trends, and visibility issues; and thirdly, personal branding, a dimension that included artists' perceptions, challenges, strategies, impact, and the role of social media.

A pre-testing phase was conducted to ensure the clarity, flow, and comprehensibility of the interview guide. This phase consisted of two key activities. Initially, an expert review was undertaken in consultation with the research supervisor. This was followed by a series of pilot interviews conducted with three art galleries (two in Iran and one in Portugal). The primary objective of this pre-testing was to confirm that the questions were comprehensible, culturally appropriate, and effective in capturing the intended information within the allocated interview timeframe. Feedback from these pilot interviews confirmed the clarity of the questions and the logical progression of the three main dimensions, resulting in minor refinements to question phrasing before the main data collection.

3.3 Data Collection and Sampling

3.3.1 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted remotely via the Google Meet platform. Prospective participants were initially contacted through an electronic invitation message sent via WhatsApp or Instagram, which outlined the research purpose and invited them to participate in a 30-minute interview.

The Iranian artists were interviewed in Farsi, whereas the Portuguese artists were interviewed in English. Interviews of all the artists were audio-visually recorded using the Google Meet recording option. Once the interviews with the artists were conducted, the Farsi recordings were transcribed directly in Farsi and subsequently translated into English with maximum accuracy to facilitate proper analysis. AI translation review was used to attain linguistic equivalence and conceptual fidelity among the translated transcripts.

The procurement of informed consent from every participant was in two steps. This began with the written statement, included in the initial invitation message, outlining the purpose of the interview, its intention, and where the data would be utilized exclusively for educational research. The procedure was done with verbal consent at the start of each interview, whereby the research purpose was read out and a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity to participants was promised. Special cues to participants were not provided beyond those in the guide, as the questionnaire was designed to capture their various phases of vocational history in the art market sufficiently. Data collection was initiated in March and concluded in May 2025.

3.3.2 Sampling Technique and Sample

For this study, we employed a snowball technique. The primary selection criteria for visual artists from both Iran and Portugal stipulated that they be emerging (not yet highly established) and members of the Gen Z or Millennial generational cohorts, with the additional requirement for Portuguese artists to be able to interview in English due to the interviewer's language capabilities. Gender and specific years of professional experience were not primary selection criteria; however, the focus was strictly on visual artists. This particular sampling approach was selected to proficiently reach artists who are presently experiencing the early to mid-phases of their professional journeys and who are likely involved in or considering personal branding strategies. A total of 59 visual artists participated in the research, comprising 33 Iranian artists and 26 Portuguese artists. The interviewees' socio-demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

3.4 Saturation Point

Identification of saturation was dependent on the idea of routinely tracking the incorporation of novel themes from the information collected via interviews. When the new interviews began generating mainly redundant themes with low amounts of new insights regarding personal branding and stakeholder relationships across each national group, a saturation threshold was considered to be approaching. This determination was also informed by findings from earlier qualitative research in similar research settings, which often provided disparate sample sizes required for reaching saturation. For ascertaining the point of saturation, we adopted the Information Weighted (IW) model, a quantitative approach applied for estimating thematic saturation in qualitative research (McLeod, 2024):

$$T_n = A * b^n / (1 + b (n-1))$$

Based on that, the calculated saturation point was 65.5 in the average mode.

Table 1. Sample characterisation

Indicator			Absolute frequency (n =59)	Relative frequency (%)
Sociodemographic data	Gender	Male	24	47.7%
		Female	35	59.3%
	Age	18–24	19	32.2%
		25-34	35	59.3%
		35-49	5	8.5%
	Nationality	Iranian	33	55.9%

Education level	Portugues	26	44.1%
	Lower secondary education	0	0.00%
	Bachelor	38	64.4%
	Master	21	35.6%

Source: Authors' own work

3.5 Data Analysis

The thematic interview transcripts were analyzed through NVivo version 15.0. The data were expertly analyzed using a six-stage approach that included an iterative and reflexive process for building credibility.

During the first phase, data preparation guaranteed that all the transcripts were incorporated into the research analytically. The second phase involved the development of initial codes from the body of literature that was available. In the third phase, essential themes were identified and a systematic category hierarchy was created as nodes in NVivo. The fourth phase was placed on the development and fine-tuning of these thematic categories against the emergence of novel insights, understanding, and theory-related connections. The abductive nature allowed for a deeper understanding as new patterns were revealed. The fifth phase consisted of a reevaluation of each and every theme in order to ensure that they were consistent with the unfolding interactions between the empirical discovery and theory progress. Altered understanding was captured in the theory notes, thus allowing for an abductive quality to the analytical approach, which blended inductive, experience-informed insights with deductive, theory-informed insights (see Table 2). The sixth phase finally provided the findings, which are discussed in the subsequent section. For a better understanding of the code categorization, see (Graph 2).

Following the initial inductive coding, an analytical phase with deductive thinking was adopted. This stage required a systematic procedure for refinement and classification of codes, such that the initially induced set of codes was scrutinized and united in a rigorous and refined fashion. Similar codes were duly placed in a systematic hierarchical structure, splitting higher-order categories down into more thorough and distinct sub-categories. The central feature of the deductive stage was a systematic classification of all data coded, both at the level of primary codes and sub-codes, according to participant country (Iranian/Portuguese). This allowed for a direct comparative exploration of a theme and its distribution across each cultural group, thereby answering a central research question regarding cultural differences. Subsequently, the NVivo software was utilized for exploring relationships within the dataset. This included exploratory internal relationships between each code (e.g., each dimension of "personal branding challenges" reported by artists) and the discovery of external relationships between

distinct codes (e.g., how and whether "early challenges" would influence "personal branding strategy"). From the identified patterns arising during deductive classification on a country-by-country basis and the formalization of these relationships, tentative hypotheses were framed for the existence of possibly statistically significant differences between Iranian and Portuguese artists in regard to reported experience or perspective on specific areas of personal branding and stakeholder understanding.

3.5.1 Quantitative Analysis: Chi-Square Tests

To test the hypotheses generated from the comparative qualitative analysis and to determine if differences in prevalence for specific themes between the Iranian and Portuguese artist groups were statistically significant, a quantitative study utilizing Chi-square (χ^2) tests was conducted. The Chi-square tests for independence were computed with Python for statistical computation. The use of the tests served two purposes, depending on the nature of the data for each theme. For main codes with more than one sub-category (e.g., "1.3 Early Challenges" and "2.1 First Steps into the Art Market"), multi-category tests were computed for an $R \times 2$ contingency table, where the R rows were the sub-categories and the two columns were the respective nationalities. For single themes or codes, on the other hand, 2×2 contingency tables were constructed, placing side by side the number of artists with the theme against those without the theme, within Iranian ($N=33$) and Portuguese ($N=26$) groups.

For each test, the Chi-square test statistic (χ^2), p -value, and degrees of freedom (df) were calculated. The alpha level was set at 0.05 as the criterion for determining statistical significance. Expected cell frequencies were checked for each test; a cautionary remark was practiced in interpreting results for those tests where expected frequencies were low (e.g., fewer than 5), by reason of the effect that may have on the Chi-square's reliability as an approximation. The purpose behind this quantitative step was to obtain statistical justification for observed similarity or difference patterns between the two cultural groups, evident in the qualitative data. The substantive findings for these χ^2 tests are presented in the section on Findings.

The qualitative data, which were coded on NVivo, were converted to quantitative data. The conversion involved counting the number of Portuguese artists against the number of Iranian artists whose interview data were attached to each specific thematic code/ sub-code relevant to at least one hypothesis. Thus, the approach provided frequency counts for each theme for the respective country group, forming the basis for the contingency tables used in the Chi-square tests. The following are the specified themes and their relevant frequencies adopted in these tests:

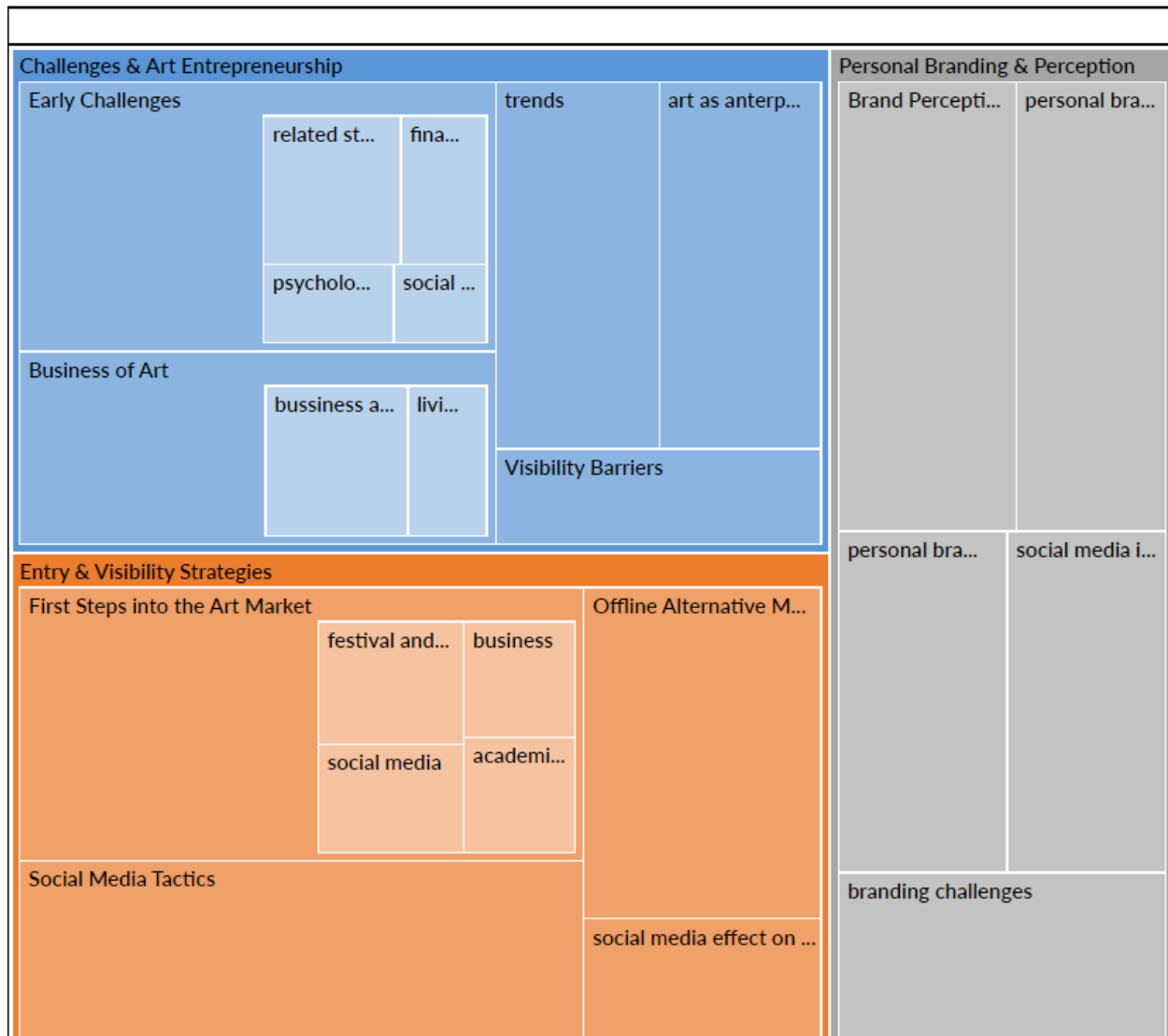
Table 2. Codes/themes identified with NVivo 15.0 software

Code Category	Code Name	Iran (Observed Frequency)	Portugal (Observed Frequency)
1. Early Career & Business	1.1 Artist as an Entrepreneur	12	11
	1.2 Business of Art	9	10
	1.2.1 Business and Art Balance	4	5
	1.2.2 Living Through Art	2	3
	1.3 Early Challenges: Financial	3	1
	1.3 Early Challenges: Psychological	3	1
	1.3 Early Challenges: Related Stakeholders	4	2
	1.3 Early Challenges: Social Media Related	0	2
	1.4 Trends	12	9

Code Category	Code Name	Iran (Observed Frequency)	Portugal (Observed Frequency)
	1.5 Visibility Barriers	8	5
2. Market Entry & Visibility	2.1 First Steps into the Art Market: Academic Entryway	3	2
	2.1 First Steps into the Art Market: Business	3	2
	2.1 First Steps into the Art Market: Festivals & Exhibitions	3	4
	2.1 First Steps into the Art Market: Social Media	4	2
	2.2 Offline Alternative Methods	13	16
	2.3 Social Media Effectiveness on Visibility	5	9
	2.4 Social Media Tactics	17	14
	2.4.1 Enhancing AI for Social Media Tactics	6	3
3. Personal Branding	3.1 Personal Branding Perception	13	11

Code Category	Code Name	Iran (Observed Frequency)	Portugal (Observed Frequency)
	3.2 Personal Branding Challenges	9	10
	3.3 Personal Branding Impact	14	8
	3.4 Personal Branding Strategy	11	14
	3.4.1 Enhancing AI for Personal Branding Strategy	3	3
	3.5 Social Media Impact on Personal Branding	15	5

Graph 2: Hierarchy chart of Codes/themes identified with NVivo 15.0 software



4. Results and Discussion

Regarding gender, 59.3% of the interviewees were female and 47.7% were male. Most participants (59.3%) were aged 25–34, followed by 18–34 (32.2%) and 50–64 (8.5%). Regarding nationality, 44.1% of the interviewees were Portuguese, and 55.9% were Iranian. 64.44% of the respondents held a bachelor's degree, while 35.6% had a master's degree.

Artist's perception of personal branding

As the results showed, the majority of participants perceived personal branding not as a structured marketing strategy but as an intuitive process of "how they show themselves" and "how they present themselves in their artwork." This understanding was primarily informed by personal experience, observation, and "guesses," rather than formal knowledge or training. This finding

Interviewee number 11 believes that personal branding should always be based on one's authentic self, and in art.

[...] I believe personal branding should always be based on one's authentic self, and in art, this shows more than anything else. That's why I try to incorporate a collage into everything I do—whether it's a résumé or a proposal for an exhibition—because it allows me to present the work in a way that reflects who I really am.

Portafolia et al. 2013) note that brand development for artists is a dynamic process shaped by learning and creating that "often occur[s] without strategic planning." The artists' focus on self-presentation through their work is also consistent with the assertion by Preece and Kerrigan (2015 that an artwork is fundamentally "shaped by the artist's identity, personality, and career background."

While the literature establishes a *link* between the artist's identity and their work, this study provides a novel insight into the artists' *own subjective understanding* of this link. The observation that artists make their definitions based on "guesses or what they experienced in their day-to-day lives" highlights a notable disparity between the theoretical frameworks suggested by scholars, such as Keller (2006) and Aaker (2016), and the experiential, practical knowledge provided by the artists themselves. The extant literature identifies the artist's output as a central aspect of brand identity (Fillis, 2010; Schroeder, 2010), and the evidence provided in the current study reinforces that artists tend to view their output as synonymous with their entire branding approach, merging the creative act with the act of communication.

[...] At first, I didn't think about it at all. Now I understand that personal branding isn't just about logos or aesthetics — it's about how people experience you. Your energy, your values, your consistency. I've found that being featured in articles, streams, or podcasts helps people get to know the story behind the work.

The global issue of authenticity and creative limitations

The study highlighted a significant similarity in the struggles that fine artists face when it comes to personal branding, as respondents across different cultural settings mentioned similar hindrances. The most critical identified struggle was the balance between the search for authenticity and the requirements that come with commercialization. A second, particular concern was the fear of being "pigeonholed." Artists themselves have expressed reservations that by launching a given brand, they might be forced by the marketplace, or by those who present their work (curators and galleries), to continue that one identifier, thereby limiting their freedom to grow and create. This remark lends considerable credence to current scholarly thinking. The conflict between authenticity and financial demand becomes a central theme in the literature, as highlighted by Fillis (2011), Botti (2000), and Pitkäsalo (2024), who analyze the pressure to be commercially viable and the danger that comes with being labeled a "sell-out." The sense of being "commodified," as described by Sjöholm and Pasquinelli (2014), directly reflects the artists' sentiments in this study.

It also adds a critical, practical dimension to the general theme of market tension. The particular apprehension that galleries and curators may impose a fixed brand identity represents a

significant discovery that elucidates the manner in which the abstract compulsion for authenticity influences an artist's career trajectory. This perspective extends beyond the broad concept of "market demands" to pinpoint the influence of gatekeepers (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020) in potentially hindering artistic growth through branding practices. Additionally, the observation that these obstacles are "not variant between two countries and cultures" explicitly addresses the gap recognized by Preece (2014), indicating that the conflict between art and commerce constitutes a more widespread phenomenon within the globalized art market than has been previously documented.

Influence on Audience Perception and Generational Differences

Responding to the impact of personal branding on audience reception, interview participants overwhelmingly discussed it as a determining factor in "attracting the right audience" and shaping what the audience "takes away" from their work. There was a remarkable intergenerational difference: Generation Z artists would often measure impact and develop strategies based on social media interactions, while Millennial artists were interested in reactions gathered from their physical presence, for instance, at exhibitions. As Interviewee 20 expresses her method of market entry is :

[...] I took a very different path. After university, I didn't pursue exhibitions. I noticed that attention had shifted toward the media, so I focused on that.

The finding that branding's impact is tied to audience perception is well-supported. Monteiro (2022) states that branding enables artists to "articulate the meanings and associations connected to their work" and establish a "recognizable identity." This aligns perfectly with the artists' goal of managing how they are perceived and remembered. The discovery of a generational divide in how artists measure impact is a significant and original contribution of this study, as it is not addressed in the provided literature. This finding explains that the evolution of digital platforms has led to a split within the way different artist groups comprehend and connect with audiences, where Generation Z focuses on digital numbers, and Millennials value direct, one-on-one feedback. This comment offers a contemporary perspective on the broader debate in arts marketing strategies.

The Strategy of "Better Work" and the Need for Curation

When asked about their personal branding strategy, the majority of artists reported that their primary technique was to focus on creating "better artwork." They saw the continuous improvement of their craft as their primary branding activity, rather than a separate marketing effort. This highlights a general lack of a clear mindset about what strategic branding entails. Underscoring this gap, one artist, Elnaz, stated that an *"artist needs a second person as curator to clarify their message and show them what personal branding is."*

The artists' belief that their work is their brand is foundational in the literature. Schroeder (2010) emphasizes that the "coherence of an artist's work acts as a symbolic marker," and Preece and Kerrigan (2015) argue that the work is inseparable from the artist's identity. In this sense, the

artists are not wrong, but their focus is incomplete. This study reveals a critical misunderstanding among artists: they tend to view artistic production *as a substitute for* branding strategy, not as its foundation. The literature presents the artwork as the brand's core (Fillis, 2010), but this research reveals that artists often view it as the beginning and end of the process. This directly confirms the problem identified by Fillis (2024) regarding a lack of formal training. The articulated need for a curator to "clarify their message" is a robust qualitative finding. It reframes the role of gatekeepers from being merely validators (Rodner and Thomson, 2013) to essential collaborators who can bridge the gap between an artist's creative vision and a communicable brand identity.

Social Media as an Obligation Without a Concrete Strategy

All respondents recognized the importance afforded to social media in increasing exposure; however, few possessed a distinct, strategic plan for making effective use of the tool. The strategy was frequently referred to as reactive; they would "try and promote posts, use reels," and sometimes success would be randomly attained when a post "goes viral." Some artists did adopt more aggressive strategies, for instance, making podcasts or collaborating with other artists, but these were frequently fragmented and did not constitute a comprehensive, long-term strategy.

This finding reflects the challenges discussed in recent literature. Mei et al. (2024) highlight the "psychological burden" and algorithmic pressures of digital platforms, which help explain the artists' unstructured and often overwhelming relationship with social media. The finding that artists are aware of their importance but struggle to leverage it aligns with the broader issue of resource and knowledge constraints faced by artists (Fillis, 2010; Duncan et al., 2015). It also provides a ground-level view of the *specific, often haphazard tactics* artists employ in the absence of a formal strategy. The literature describes the *pressures* of social media, but this research details the reactive and inconsistent *behaviors* that result from those pressures. By documenting tactics such as "post more" or hoping for virality, this finding highlights the significant gap between acknowledging the importance of a tool and possessing the strategic knowledge to utilize it effectively for brand building.

The Hesitant Entrepreneur: Artistic Identity in a Market-Driven World

The study found that Portuguese artists were more likely to reject the "artist as entrepreneur" label. After they accepted the term, it was framed as a reluctant yet pragmatic necessity. This perspective that reductively diminishes entrepreneurship to a necessity to "sell and promote our work" contrasts strongly with the idealization of the artist as a "financially dependent innovator" who skillfully aligns creative activity with possible marketplace (Meyer and Even, 1998). Further, the emotional resistance to the terminology, which describes it as a "suit-and-tie word" that sounds "cold," highlights an identity dilemma that is often overlooked within the literature's more upbeat framing of entrepreneurship as a form of creative expression (Cudny et al., 2024). Iranian artists, on the other hand, were more willing to accept the term, though doing so on the basis that they reinterpreted it in line with their own understanding. They found common ground in the group "use of their creativity," a notion that aligns with the literature's emphasis on

creativity as a core part of entrepreneurial strategy (Cudny et al., 2024). More uniquely, they positioned the role as a "cultural ambassador who may also have an entrepreneurial mindset." This perspective can be seen as an intuitive attempt to build and manage what Rodner (2014) refers to as "symbolic capital." They are willing to be entrepreneurial, but only when it is defined in cultural and creative rather than purely commercial terms. This reframing is a novel finding that shows how artists may try to reconcile the demands of the market with their core identity.

[...] I see artists as cultural ambassadors who can also have an entrepreneurial mindset.

[...] I used to think art was just about painting and expressing, but now I see that if you want to live off your art, you need to think like an entrepreneur, too.

While the literature presents a clear model of the contemporary artist as an entrepreneur: a proactive figure who demonstrates innovation (Fillis, 2011), strategically builds networks with stakeholders like galleries and collectors (Wickham and Lehman, 2020; Sjöholm, 2010), and skillfully leverages social and cultural capital to create market value (Rodner, 2014). However, the findings of this study reveal a significant and nuanced disconnect between this theoretical model and the self-perception of the artists interviewed. The general sentiment among both Iranian and Portuguese participants was one of reluctance to fully embrace this identity, although their reasoning revealed essential differences. To conclude, a significant gap exists between the theoretical artist-entrepreneur and the participants' self-perception. Neither group demonstrated the proactive, opportunity-seeking, and relationship-building approach central to the models proposed by Sjöholm (2010) and Wickham and Lehman (2020). The general reluctance to engage in strategic self-promotion (Rodner, 2014) reinforces the study's earlier finding: that artists often see a need to delegate this entrepreneurial function to a "second person," such as a curator, rather than fully embodying the role themselves.

The Digital Frontier: Bridging the Gap Between Possibility and Practice

Artists have yet to enthusiastically adopt the newer digital tools that are prominently featured in contemporary academic and marketplace literature. The condition is a notable disconnect between the idealized promise of tools like Generative AI and NFTs and their actual practical use within the careers of artists. The chief observation highlights the point that interviewed artists are neither utilizing Generative AI for their fundamental artistic activity, self-promotion, nor for entrepreneurial tasks. The utilization was reported to be low and restricted to routine tasks, and participants reported that they are only utilizing the tool for the activity of "writing captions." The restricted utilization presents a striking contrast to contemporary literature, which presents Generative AI as a potent collaborative tool that has the promise to enhance productivity, facilitate greater creativity, and democratize art production (Wenyi Chu et al., 2025). The hesitation on the part of artists to utilize AI for core workflows suggests that a notable opportunity for greater innovation and efficiencies in creative processes is untapped. The hesitation may indirectly be a harbinger of the same issues identified within the literature, which would make artists fearful of the loss of traditional skills, authenticity in art, and authorial rights, potentially leading to a distinct distance between the tool and their art (Bizzi and Miller, 2022).

The study also found that newer technologies, such as blockchain and NFTs, have only begun to be explored in the artists' world. This interest is almost exclusively confined to the Gen Z cohort, whose efforts were described as tentative and "not very grounded yet." For these younger artists, NFTs currently represent a future ambition rather than a functional part of their business model. This finding constitutes a crucial test of the narrative that presents NFTs as a complete transformative force within the art economy. Whilst reports such as Mei et al. (2024) and Hagtvedt & Patrick (2008) focus on the possibility for artists to use this technology to sidestep traditional gatekeepers, the current study demonstrates that its practical use is in its infancy. The slow and tentative uptake discussed in this analysis highlights the significant barriers—such as those related to "technical knowledge and audience education" identified by Mei et al. (2024).

Finally, the low level of engagement reported with high-end digital tools supports the study's earlier finding that artists are often thinking about their digital presence as a necessary obligation rather than a strategic tool (Hatcher et al., 2018). The scenario contrasts strongly with the hyper-strategizing around digital branding reported in the available literature, as a case in point for the AI artist Ai-Da, who built her career instantly with a high-end and proactive digital persona (Petrides et al., 2025). As the literature presents a template for what is technologically possible, the findings from this study demonstrate that many artists are still struggling with the fundamentals of their digital presence and, therefore, cannot take advantage of the digital sphere's transformative possibilities.

Deductive approach

To justify our findings in the inductive approach, we have done a chi-square test to validate our findings. (Table3)

Table 3: Summary Table of Chi-Square Goodness-of-Fit Results (Testing against overall mention proportions Iran: 0.532, Portugal: 0.468)

Code	Iran (O)	Port (O)	Total	Iran (E)	Port (E)	Chi- Square	P- value	Significant (p<0.05)	Null Hyp. Accurate ?
1.1 Art as an Entrepreneurship	12	11	23	12.24	10.76	0.010	0.919	False	True
1.2 Business of Art	9	10	19	10.11	8.89	0.251	0.616	False	True

Code	Iran (O)	Port (O)	Total	Iran (E)	Port (E)	Chi- Square	P- value	Significant (p<0.05)	Null Hyp. Accurate ?
1.3.3 Related Stakeholder Challenges	4	2	6	3.19	2.81	0.422	0.516	False	True
1.4 Trends	12	9	21	11.17	9.83	0.129	0.719	False	True
1.5 Visibility Barriers	8	5	13	6.92	6.08	0.314	0.575	False	True
2.1 First Steps into the Art Market	7	7	14	7.45	6.55	0.055	0.814	False	True
2.1.3 Festivals and Exhibitions	3	4	7	3.72	3.28	0.226	0.634	False	True
2.1.4 Social Media (First Steps)	4	2	6	3.19	2.81	0.422	0.516	False	True
2.2 Offline Alternative Methods	13	16	29	15.43	13.57	0.668	0.414	False	True
2.3 Social Media Effectiveness on Visibility	5	9	14	7.45	6.55	1.421	0.233	False	True

Code	Iran (O)	Port (O)	Total	Iran (E)	Port (E)	Chi- Square	P- value	Significant (p<0.05)	Null Hyp. Accurate ?
2.4 Social Media Tactics	17	14	31	16.49	14.51	0.026	0.873	False	True
2.4.1 Enhancing AI for Social Media Tactics	6	3	9	4.79	4.21	0.752	0.386	False	True
3.1 Personal Branding Perception	13	11	24	12.77	11.23	0.010	0.921	False	True
3.2 Personal Branding Challenges	9	10	19	10.11	8.89	0.251	0.616	False	True
3.3 Social Media Impact on Personal Branding	16	6	22	11.73	10.27	5.000*	0.025	TRUE	FALSE

3.3 Personal Branding Impact

The Chi-square analysis largely substantiated the qualitative observations that a substantial proportion of the challenges and thematic discussions related to personal branding, the business of art, and social media are common across both Iranian and Portuguese visual artists. For the vast majority of codes that were examined, the null hypothesis, which posits no substantial difference in frequency between the two groups at the country level, was not rejected. This outcome bears witness to a common experiential paradigm and perceptual awareness of these matters within the international visual arts community that often transcends particular cultural environments in various ways.

Yet one point of divergence was the "Social Media Impact on Personal Branding" code. The statistically significant difference observed here indicates that Iranian artists are more likely to articulate the direct influence of social media on their personal brand than their Portuguese counterparts. The statistically significant difference observed here suggests that Iranian artists articulated the direct influence of social media on their personal brand *more regularly* than their Portuguese counterparts ($\chi^2=5.000$, $df=1$, $p < 0.05$). The quantitative result presents a significant external rationale: while both are on social media and familiar with its broad advantages for exposure, Iranian artists appear to be better aware of, or at least more actively engaged with, the distinct effects of social media on their individual brand imagery and career representation. The difference may be a result of a constellation of several interconnected factors. Firstly, in potentially more challenging or more ambiguous art markets, Iranian artists may need to leverage social media platforms more intensively for direct artist-to-public engagement, sales, and brand-building, thereby making their role in their brand more visible and potentially more controversial. Second, this inequality could be a sign of a greater concern with social media as an indispensable instrument of branding and market entrance within the Iranian art market, and consequently, a more conscious understanding of its specific branding meaning.

4. Conclusion

The findings reveal a critical disconnect between the proactive, entrepreneurial artist described in academic literature and the more intuitive, product-focused reality of artists on the ground.

Theoretical implications

These results present a significant disparity between the proactive, enterprising artist idealized in scholarly texts and the more practical, product-centered experiences of practicing artists.

The most notable discovery was the remarkable similarity in the experiences of Iranian and Portuguese artists, who predominantly view personal branding as an unrefined extension of their creative endeavors, rather than a calculated strategy. Both groups conveyed a fundamental tension between preserving artistic integrity and fulfilling commercial demands, in addition to an evident apprehension of being "pigeonholed" by the marketplace. Nonetheless, a statistically significant divergence was observed concerning social media, with Iranian artists expressing a heightened awareness of its strategic significance. This suggests a new relationship: while the

fundamental psychological obstacles to branding appear to be universal, the perceived importance and utilization of specific digital tools are influenced by culture.

This research reveals a critical disconnect between the proactive, entrepreneurial artist described in academic literature and the more intuitive, forward-thinking artist described in studies, and the product-based reality of artists on the ground. The most fascinating discovery was the profound homogeneity of Iranian and Portuguese artists' experiences, both of whom see individual branding as an organic extension of their creative process rather than something that is conceptually planned. Both cohorts reported an underlying conflict between creative integrity and commercial pressure, as well as an acute concern about being "pigeonholed." Two significant cultural differences did arise, though: first, a statistically significant difference in the strategic importance of social media being greater for Iranian artists; and second, a greater willingness on the part of the Gen Z generation in Iran to adopt AI-based tools, perhaps as a means of overcoming entry barriers to the global marketplace.

Managerial implications

The research has implications for a two-pronged interpretation. The study highlights an apparent need for future artists to supplement their academic training with a basic understanding of personal branding and marketing concepts. Although traditional networking via galleries remains viable, the successful use of web forums is an effective way to negate the significant time involved in gaining market access. For stakeholders such as collectors and curators, the increasing use of AI means that there is a need for an increasingly discerning eye for authentic, original artwork. There is a need to balance market trends with the potential to pressure artists into creatively conforming, which can ultimately destroy the singular vision that translates to long-term value. This research, therefore, counsels artists to acquire a strategic level of marketing knowledge that will enable them to decide on following trends that enhance, rather than compromise, their inherent artistic identity.

Finally, with more machines involved in the creative process, this study emphasizes a pressing need for the art market to establish more robust legal and ethical frameworks. The development of straightforward guidelines on originality and copyright for AI-created or aided art has to be established. Preemption of these issues is necessary to prevent market disruption and ensure the accurate valuation of art in an evolving technological regime.

5. Limitations and Future Research

The research focused exclusively on Generation Z and Millennial nascent artists living in Iran and Portugal. The narrow focus implies that findings cannot be generalized to established artists, who likely have different relationships with stakeholders and may employ different branding strategies, as well as to artists who are part of other generational groups or cultural settings. From a methodological perspective, the requirement for Portuguese participants to be interviewed in English may have introduced a selection bias, excluding artists who are less internationally oriented or less proficient in English. Furthermore, the quantitative analysis was based on the frequency of coded themes. While this approach satisfactorily establishes the

salience of a topic, it does not establish the valence or intensity of the discourse. As discussed in the methodology, the reliability of Chi-square tests could be threatened by low anticipated frequencies.

Based on these limitations, future research could expand in several directions. A comparative study between rising and established artists who are active within the same cultural context could shed light on the development of branding strategies over the course of an artist's career. Expanding the reach of this study to include both non-Western and Western countries would also test the hypothesis within a globalized artistic experience versus context-driven strategies. An in-depth qualitative study, possibly utilizing a tool like discourse analysis or digital ethnography, into the formation of Iranian artists' brands on social media could shed important light on the nuances suggested by the quantitative findings of this study. Finally, a simultaneous research project that considers the perspectives of stakeholders, namely galleries, collectors, and curators, within both Iran and Portugal, would allow for a fuller understanding of the dynamics between artists and stakeholders, as well as the importance of personal branding within that context.

6. Research in the Context of the UN Sustainable Development Goals

The research findings in this thesis, although narrow in focus on personal branding for newcomers in the arts, significantly overlap with the end goals embedded in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through research on mechanisms and strategies for artists to construct sustainable careers, the study actively addresses global priorities for equitable economic development, accessibility in quality education, and reducing inequity. This chapter explores how empowering individual artists contributes to these collective global goals.

Based on our discussion and my familiarity with your thesis, I have crafted a chapter that bridges your study and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Now, we are both able to read and refine this work.

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

Essentially, this research examines how artists can contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. The typical career path for an artist is often one of financial insecurity. The present research rethinks the artist as "artpreneur," an economically productive agent who can establish a sustainable income. As a tool for personal branding, the study supports artists in transitioning from precarious to decent work. By networking a strong group of artist-entrepreneurs, creative economies are fostered, a dynamic and vital aspect of international trade. When artists are effective promoters for their work, they both guarantee their economic stability and produce economic value that builds societal wealth.

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities

A cross-cultural perspective on Iranian and Portuguese artists highlights the barriers that hinder entry into the international marketplace, a key focus of Sustainable Development Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities. The study reinforces the idea that digital networks and effective personal branding are great levelers. For artists situated in areas that experience limited exposure to conventional Western art markets, a robust digital presence has the power to transcend geographical and political divides, facilitating direct connections with a worldwide audience comprising collectors and like-minded individuals. By revealing how artists from diverse locations utilize these tools, this dissertation advocates for a more equitable and just art marketplace on a global level, where success is based on talent and imagination, rather than location.

SDG 4 and SDG 9: Quality Education and Innovation

The present study has identified a notable gap in conventional arts studies, which often fail to equip the modern professional sphere with artists who possess the necessary business and marketing competencies. This remark directly aligns with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education, calling for educational frameworks that feature a perspective on entrepreneurship, digital literacy, and strategic communications. The investigation into social media and artificial intelligence in this thesis aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure. The artist is the early adopter of the present digital paradigm and leverages it imaginatively to build their career. The present study calls for a holistic and responsible deployment of these technologies and places both the artist's studio and their digital footprint as locations that are characterized by continuous innovation.

SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

Lastly, the value of a living arts community extends beyond economics, advocating for Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. The arts and culture sectors are worthy components of culturally rich communities, as they build a sense of community identity, safeguard cultural heritage, and foster community dialogue. The success in building a sustainable brand as an artist has the capacity to continue producing, upgrading local culture, and enhancing the civic environment. By supporting individual artists, we make sure that our communities sustain cultural vibrancy and creative involvement and embody a core component of any truly sustainable society.

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