



“If I Don’t Praise Myself,
Then No One Will”:

An Exploration of How Photographers
Use Instagram in the Process of
Establishing an Artistic Career

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of Establishing an Artistic Career

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ABSTRACT

Social Media has long been recognized as a driving force of change in the art world. For artists, these platforms offer opportunities as well as challenges, especially affecting the way they approach their artistic careers. As the responsibility for career development nowadays increasingly shifts from institutions to the artists themselves, social media is recognized as a tool for self-management, offering new ways for individuals to take control over their career trajectory. Previous research particularly highlights the applicability of social media for networking and marketing practices which are regarded as prerequisites for leading a successful career within the highly competitive and overcrowded artistic labor market. This thesis builds on this notion, exploring how the platform Instagram is used by art photographers in the process of establishing a career in the field. To approach this, two different methods were combined, online observations and qualitative interviews, which allowed the researcher to explore the artists' activities on Instagram, as well as their individual motivations and goals for using the platform. While the results of this study underline the great relevance of the platform for marketing and networking activities, they also draw attention to the difficulties of negotiating social media use and artistic identity, and of dealing with platform-specific mechanisms such as the algorithm. Overall, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of artistic careers in a changing cultural field and the place of social media in career trajectories.

Keywords: Artistic Careers, Art Photography, Artistic Identity, Social Media, Instagram

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1 INTRODUCTION

The digital era of the 21st century has brought a wide variety of new technologies and digital media to the attention of the arts sector. Especially the massive popularity of social media amongst the general population has started to impact the processes and dynamics of the art world significantly (MacDowall & Budge, 2022). Nowadays, these platforms constitute a crucial part of the sector's infrastructure, increasingly taken up by cultural institutions, the art market, and artists themselves. This development, naturally, comes with both challenges and opportunities for all involved parties, and is still often approached with caution (Flew, 2017; Lingo & Tepper, 2013). Nevertheless, given the enormous amount of people that can be reached via social media, the integration of it into the everyday lives of cultural actors appears to shift from a possibility to a necessity (MacDowall & Budge, 2022; Win, 2014).

In the midst of these changes stands the contemporary artist who has been recognized to utilize social media platforms for both artistic and career-oriented purposes (Duffy et al., 2017; Gardiner & Gere, 2010; Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Morris, 2014; Petrides & Fernandes, 2020; Taylor & Luchman, 2020). When it comes to visual artists, Instagram in particular has often been the focus of research (Fiers, 2020; MacDowall & Budge, 2022; Novaković, 2021). As one of the most popular social media sites in the world (Dixon, 2023), and more importantly, as a platform focusing on the distribution of visual content, Instagram appears especially suitable for these artists to showcase their work to a broad audience. Furthermore, the platform is increasingly being discussed as a tool for entrepreneurial activities such as networking (Thom, 2016), marketing (Gandini, 2016), and branding (Duffy et al., 2017), often centered around the process of self-management in artistic careers.

Surprisingly, one type of visual artist has not yet received much attention in this context: the photographer. Although a consolidated understanding of photographers as artists has only taken foot in the cultural field towards the end of the 20th century (Bate, 2009), nowadays, “art photography” (Soutter, 2013) is recognized as both a relevant artistic field and a popular career goal. The work environment for art photographers is in many aspects similar to that of other artists, especially regarding rising competition, precarious employment conditions, lack of institutional support, and the resulting need for constant job search (McDonald et al., 2021). The embrace of digital technologies by the wider public, however, is considered to have an even stronger impact on the work of photographers compared to other artists. According to McDonald et al. (2021), the proliferation of high-quality photographic devices, primarily in the form of smartphone cameras, currently leads to a drastic decrease in demand for professionals. At the same time, the emergence of more and more digital platforms offers photographers new

ways for publishing their art, selling images, and finding work opportunities. The uptake of Instagram for these purposes can be seen as part of this wider development. Considering this, the art photographer becomes a particularly relevant subject for researching the use of social media within artistic careers. Therefore, this master thesis approaches the following research question:

How do photographers use Instagram in the process of establishing an artistic career?

Contextualized within the prevalent complexity and irregularity of contemporary artistic careers (Bille, 2020; Bridgstock, 2005; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Lee et al., 2018; Lindström, 2016; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017), social media is hereby discussed in its function as a tool for career-oriented practices. While previous studies on the social media use of artists will provide a guideline, this thesis takes an exploratory approach, allowing for unexpected practices to arise and providing a closer look at how the photographer's case might differ from others. Furthermore, exploring the "how" of using social media in this study not only refers to behavior, but also means investigating how artists negotiate these activities with their values, goals, and ideas of artistic identity. This is based on the academic discourse around the long-standing dichotomy of art and entrepreneurship, which is prevalent to much research on the topic of artistic careers (Lindström, 2016; Morris, 2014; Poorsoltan, 2012; Tomiuc, 2015; Thom, 2016; Win, 2014). Artists' use of social media for entrepreneurial practices has led to a reconsideration of traditional notions of artistic identity, increasingly highlighting the openness of contemporary artists towards entrepreneurial mindsets (Tomiuc, 2015; Win, 2014).

To explore the research question, I therefore combined two distinct methodological approaches, namely online observations on Instagram and qualitative, semi-structured interviews with photographers from the artistic field. In doing so, the study brings together insights about the activities and behavior of artists on social media, as well as their opinions and attitudes towards the use of Instagram within their career development. The sample for the online observations consists of 82 individuals who exhibited their work at the Rotterdam Photo Festival in 2023, providing a comprehensive picture of how photographers make use of the platform. This is then further complemented by in-depth material from interviews with eight of these photographers, who offered their individual views on the opportunities and challenges of using Instagram for their work.

The goal of this master thesis is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role social media can play in the career development of contemporary artists in general, and photographers in particular. Thereby, the study introduces a new research subject, complementing previous

work on career strategies of other artist groups, such as painters (Muñiz et al., 2014) and musicians (Haynes & Marshall, 2018). Approaching the topic from the perspective of contemporary artistic labor markets and career models furthermore means adding to academic research on the requirements for building and maintaining artistic careers in contemporary times. In this context, the research also aims to increase knowledge of the skills and competencies photographers should acquire and be taught before entering the artistic field. Finally, while this thesis does not aim at providing a guideline on how to use Instagram efficiently, it can still have practical implications for photographers by providing insight into various strategies and practices performed on the platform.

To achieve this, the initial chapters lay out the theoretical foundation for understanding the overall dynamics of the artistic labor market and artistic careers, followed by an overview of previous research on the use of social media by artists. After that, the methodological procedures of this study are explained thoroughly to help understand the conditions and limitations of the research project and build the bridge to the presentation of the results. These offer insight into the most relevant topics that emerged from both the online observations and the interviews, providing information on the perceived importance of Instagram for the careers of the participants and its suitability as a tool for career-oriented activities. Finally, the conclusion presents the answers to the research question, points out the limitations of the study, and offers indications for further research in this area.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical fundament for this thesis will be laid out in two sections. First, the characteristics of contemporary artistic careers will be explored, including the conditions of the labor market, required competencies and skills, as well as the connection between career development and artistic identity. The second part then introduces the structure and affordances of platforms like Instagram, followed by a review of previous literature on the role of social media for career-oriented practices of artists.

2.1 Contemporary Artistic Careers

Wyszomirski & Chang (2017) define a career as “a succession of related occupations that are hierarchically arranged, through which a worker rises in an orderly sequence” (p. 5). In the artistic field, however, a career is generally considered to neither follow a clear order nor progress in a strictly hierarchical manner, thereby deviating from linear career models which dominate in many other sectors (Bridgstock, 2005). In contemporary times, artistic careers are acknowledged to be complex and irregular, often characterized by alternating periods of employment and non-employment, the simultaneous completion of multiple jobs, and an ever-increasing self-responsibility for artists when it comes to finding work opportunities and managing their own career (Bille, 2020; Bridgstock, 2005; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Lee et al., 2018; Lindström, 2016; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). To gain a deeper understanding of the conditions and routines of artistic careers, this chapter provides information on the most common employment models and career paths of artists, as well as relevant skills and competencies required to navigate these successfully. Furthermore, the artist as worker will be discussed in the context of arts entrepreneurship (Bridgstock, 2012), entering the discourse around artistic identities as influential factors for the career decisions of artists.

2.1.1 Career Paths Within Self-Employment

One of the most common employment models for artists nowadays is self-employment. In the year 2021 almost half of the artists living and working in Europe were self-employed (Eurostat Statistics Explained, 2022a), which is a striking percentage when compared to the 14% of self-employment in the general European economy. Woronkiewicz & Noonan (2019) see the main reason for such high rates of self-employment among artists in the high amount of flexibility that makes this employment model line up with the routines of a “footloose lifestyle” (p. 654). Flexibility hereby concerns both time and location. Self-employment allows artists to work in a project-based manner and select (often simultaneous) jobs according to how much time they

have available, as well as where they are based at the time. Artists thus remain more independent in their choices about what to work on. Other research, however, shows that self-employment is not always a choice made by the artists themselves, but rather a result of the current conditions of the artistic sector (Bille, 2020; Bridgstock, 2005; Lee et al., 2018). Reduced funding and therefore fewer permanent positions within cultural institutions (Lingo & Tepper, 2013), a drastic oversupply of artists on the labor market (Lee et al., 2018), and general forces like globalization and fast technological progress (Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017) are only some of the developments that are seen to impact work arrangements in the cultural sector, leading to more and more short-term and project-based employment. This comes with significant challenges for artists. It has widely been recognized that workers in artistic occupations must accept low income (Lee et al., 2018), perform large amounts of unpaid labor (Gandini, 2016), work unreasonably long hours, and deal with inadequate support systems (Munnelly, 2022) throughout their careers. Despite great flexibility and autonomy, self-employment is thus not always the preferred way of working for artists (Woronkowicz & Noonan, 2019), sometimes, however, the only possibility to construct a career in the field.

2.1.1.1 The Portfolio Career

Within self-employment, scholars have observed different ways for artists to build a career, one of which is the so-called “portfolio career” (Munnelly, 2022; Stokes, 2021; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). Often used interchangeably with the terms “protean” (Bridgstock, 2005), “variable” (Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017), and “boundaryless” (Bridgstock, 2005) career, the concept of the portfolio career refers to an increasingly popular way for individuals to construct a career outside of organizations and institutions. The primary goal is to compile a portfolio of short-term jobs that strengthen the individual’s “employability” (Bridgstock, 2005, p. 41), rather than progressing within long-term employments. This career model thus necessitates the constant search for work opportunities, managed by the individuals themselves. Hereby, each job is supposed to add a certain skill to their portfolios and contribute to the expansion of their networks, thereby increasing the chances for further employment. For artists, this way of constructing a career appears particularly suitable since it allows for both artistic advancement and financial stability (Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). Jobs can be chosen in succession, providing what the artist is striving for at the time. This, however, can also pose challenges for the progression of artistic careers. As Stokes (2021) claims, the idea of assembling a diverse range of occupations can be seen to conflict with the notion of artists as specialists in their field, thereby undermining their “reputational legitimacy” (Stokes, 2021, p. 353) within the arts sector. To lead a successful portfolio career while still retaining legitimacy, the author thus

emphasizes that artists must carefully balance artistically and economically oriented work opportunities.

2.1.1.2 Multiple Job Holding

While the portfolio career refers more to the accumulation of diverse jobs in succession (Munnely, 2022), artists are also known to perform several jobs next to one another (Bille, 2020; Lindström, 2016; Throsby & Zednik, 2011; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). In the literature, this is commonly referred to as “multiple job holding” (Lindström, 2016). A study by Throsby & Zednik (2011) shows that the additional jobs are hereby often arts-related, but not within the core discipline of the artist, and sometimes even completely outside of the cultural field. According to the authors, these jobs are generally taken on with the intention of compensating for low income and high employment insecurity which are very common within artistic professions. Often also described as “breadwinning work” (Lindström, 2016), they are meant to provide artists with the necessary financial stability and freedom to invest the remaining time in their artistic activity. Lindström (2016) claims, however, that the performance of multiple jobs is often seen negatively by artists, since it disrupts the idea of a life solely dedicated to the arts. The author emphasizes the role that work and career play in the construction of identity and discusses the concept of multiple job holding within the context of bohemian versus entrepreneurial artistic identities. Lindström hereby concludes that the understanding of one's own artistic identity is a crucial factor in determining which additional jobs are performed by artists and what value they assign to them.

2.1.2 Requirements for a Successful Career

As the previous sections have shown, contemporary artists find themselves in a work environment characterized by unstable employment models that result in a constant search for work and increasingly shift the responsibility for career management from institutions to the individuals themselves. Building and sustaining a career within these uncertain environments thus requires artists to perform numerous tasks besides the process of artistic creation and develop a set of skills that supports them in the ongoing acquisition of jobs (Lingo & Tepper, 2013). Hereby, artist must demonstrate a high level of adaptability, continually readjusting their skills to the changing conditions of the art world. This will become particularly relevant in the later chapters of this paper, since social media can be seen as one of the most recent changes that artists must deal with. First, however, more general skills needed for the management of an artistic career in contemporary times will be discussed.

2.1.2.1 Strategic Career-Building

Following a model by DeFillippi & Arthur (1994), Bridgstock (2005) emphasizes six core competencies that are required for leading a successful protean career. The author argues that a strategic approach to managing one's own career necessitates "knowing what, knowing why, knowing how, knowing when, and knowing whom" (Bridgstock, 2005, p. 45). Accordingly, one of the most relevant skills for artists is knowing who to form professional or even personal relationships with. Strategic in this context would mean to focus on individuals who have the potential to advance one's career through job offers or the provision of vital resources. Furthermore, success depends on knowing about the why, meaning personal motivations, expectations, and career goals as well as interests and talents. The what and where, on the other hand, concern knowledge about the industry, including sector-specific challenges and opportunities as well as determinants for value and success. Another important task to master is the timing of one's career steps, knowing when to end current employments, take new offers, and the readiness to seize emerging opportunities quickly. Under the last competency of knowing how, Bridgstock summarizes general skills for the completion of one's work, which also apply to more traditional career models, like communication, organizational, or teamwork skills. Regarding the careers of artists, the author concludes by emphasizing the difficulty of achieving a balance between acquiring these career management competencies and focusing on artistic development.

Further insight into which skills and actions are demanded from individuals when pursuing a career in the arts is provided by Petrides & Fernandes (2020). Through bringing insight together from literature on economy, management, and sociology, the two scholars constructed the "Building Blocks of Artistic Careers Model (BBAC)" (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020) which is meant to explain the most important steps to take within an artistic career. A successful career as a visual artist is hereby defined as regularly exhibiting and selling artworks, through which artists can sustain themselves financially, as well as reaching a high number of people with one's work. Given the complexity of determining the value of an artwork and the multitude of parties involved in that process, Petrides & Fernandes determine the construction of a positive artistic reputation to be the primary goal artists should aim towards. Therefore, each building block identified by the authors responds to a way in which individuals can strengthen their reputation within the artistic field.

The BBAC model is based on four activities that must be performed strategically in order to achieve success as an artist: (1) Artistic production, (2) relationship-keeping, (2) marketing, and (4) branding. The first building block called "Creativity, Production, Desire to

Exhibit” (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020, p. 306) functions as the point of departure. According to the authors, an artistic career is generally initiated by an individual’s interest in showing their art to a wider audience. Hereby not only the quality but also the quantity of artistic production is significant. The collection of artworks should be large enough to fill exhibition spaces and allow for some of the work to be sold. This connects to the second building block, regarding the establishment and maintenance of relationships with relevant individuals of the art world. The authors emphasize the importance of building relationships with gatekeepers and experts, who play a vital part in defining the value of an artwork and contribute significantly to an artist’s reputation. This calls for high levels of networking and social skills that can help with catching the attention of gatekeepers and keeping in contact with them over the course of a career. The next step for artists, especially those who intend to make a living out of their art, is to locate an audience interested in purchasing their work. Based on the assumption that artists create certain work out of an inner desire to do so, Petrides & Fernandes (2020) argue that marketing for artists generally follows an approach where the focus is on finding the right public for a product rather than fulfilling the needs of consumers, which is the more common marketing technique in other fields. Furthermore, the authors highlight that artists often develop their own style of marketing, sometimes resulting in creative and innovative marketing techniques. The last building block of the BBAC model refers to the activity of branding. Arguing within the definition of branding as creating recognition value, Petrides & Fernandes claim that “the successful artist is also a brand manager” (2020, p. 310). For building a brand and strengthening it, branding must traverse both the process of artistic production as well as the public appearance and activities of the artist. Commonly, artists’ branding techniques would include associating oneself with renowned gatekeepers of the art world to gain credibility or using a specific personality trait as distinguishing feature (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020).

The BBAC model by Petrides & Fernandes (2020), as well as the six competencies highlighted by Bridgstock (2005), therefore provide an initial idea of what is required from artists when pursuing a career within the contemporary conditions of the cultural and creative sector. Most of these skills connect directly to the artist’s use of social media, which is increasingly recognized as a tool for activities such as networking, marketing, and branding (Appel et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2017; Gross, 2022; Haynes & Marshall, 2018) and will therefore become relevant again in the later theoretical chapters.

2.1.2.2 The Significance of Reputation

The notion that reputation is one of the most valuable assets for artists in their career development not only lies at the center of the BBAC model (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020), but

is shared amongst various scholars exploring the determinant factors for career progression in the arts (Duffy et al., 2017; Gandini, 2016; Fiers, 2020; Stokes, 2021; Tomiuc, 2015). Gandini (2016) emphasizes the importance of reputation in its function as “the cultural conception of value” (p. 124), corresponding with Petrides & Fernandes (2020) who see reputation as vital for reducing uncertainty for buyers of artworks. Stokes (2021), too, considers artistic reputation to compensate for more “ambiguous evaluation criteria” (p. 353) within the cultural field. A higher reputation would therefore not only result in a higher (presumed) value of the artworks, but also strengthen the employability of the artist.

Following Bourdieu’s (1986) theorizations of capital as something accumulated over a span of time with the potential of producing benefits for its owner, Gandini (2016) uses the term “reputational capital” (p. 134) when exploring how freelance workers profit from self-branding activities. The professional curation of an artistic brand is hereby mentioned as one way to accumulate reputational capital, which can then be used as a symbolic resource by artists in their career management. Besides self-branding, both Gandini (2016) and Petrides & Fernandes (2020) locate further acquisition of reputational capital in the interaction and networking activities with gatekeepers, experts, other artists, and the public. Reputation is considered to arise out of social processes and is characterized by constant re-negotiation with all other actors of the art world. Gandini (2016) also argues that this leads to a stronger emphasis on collaboration rather than competitiveness amongst contemporary artists since they are mutually dependent on enhancing each other’s reputation. The author thus frames reputation primarily as a process of investment and return. Investment in the sense of putting time and energy into building relationships and achieving visibility; and return in the form of higher value and increased employment opportunities.

2.1.3 The Artist as Entrepreneur

Drawing on the previous chapters, it becomes apparent that artistic talents and skills only make up a small part of what is required from artists who aspire to build a career within the contemporary work environment. As the responsibility for career management increasingly lies on the artists themselves, they depend on their own skills and competencies to find job opportunities and create visibility for their art. In this context, the current research on artistic careers increasingly highlights the entrepreneurial side of being an artist (Bridgstock, 2013; Robinson & Novak-Leonard, 2021; Szostak & Sułkowski, 2021; Win, 2014). The bridge to entrepreneurship is usually built when scholars discuss artists’ more proactive approaches to career development. These include activities such as networking, marketing, and branding,

which are now broadly recognized as “indispensable ingredients” (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020, p. 308) for the success of artistic careers.

There is also critique, however, that entrepreneurship is an expertise that artists “may neither have nor be interested in attaining” (Morris, 2014, p. 274). Such arguments often draw on the fact that education on entrepreneurial activities is lacking in many art schools (Bridgstock, 2012), meaning that artists are not equipped with the respective skills when starting their careers. Furthermore, the idea of entrepreneurship in the arts still causes controversy, since it is seen as an economically oriented mindset, contradicting the desire for artistic independence and autonomy traditionally associated with the work of artists (Lindström, 2016).

Following the argument of Lindström (2016) that work and career behavior is closely dependent on personal motivations and values, the subsequent section will put the controversy surrounding entrepreneurship in the arts in connection with a value discussion of artistic work. Since this thesis focuses on the artist’s use of social media for their career development, it is crucial to understand how entrepreneurial activities are perceived by artists and what role they play in their working lives.

2.1.3.1 The Connection between Artistic Careers, Identities, and Values

The perception of art as an occupation can be understood as a rather recent phenomenon. Gerber (2017) explores this development historically in Western societies, starting prior to the Renaissance period when artmaking was seen as a straightforward craftsmanship, mostly performed within fixed contracts and often following clear instructions from clients. According to Gerber, these conditions changed during the Renaissance when the name of the artist gained more significance and the first collectors appeared, allowing artists to produce artworks for purchase. Only in the nineteenth century, the concept of “art for art’s sake” (Gerber, 2017, p. 15) emerged, distancing artistic work from commerce. In the same context, the idea of the artist as an exceptional individual who only follows their muse when creating was born, which Gerber argues to have characterized society’s understanding of the artist ever since. During the world war periods in the twentieth century, however, first calls to recognize the artist as a worker were made. The transformation of artistic work into a job has been ongoing ever since, closely dependent on changes in funding structures and legal developments such as copyright law. Today, Gerber considers the “occupational turn” (2017, p. 26) in the arts to be completed, leading to more artists identifying as workers and professionals.

While the notion of artistic practice as an occupation is seen to dominate the current work of artists (Gerber, 2017), the idea of a “bohemian ethic” (Lindström, 2016, p. 45)

connected to the values of art for art's sake still appears to be deeply rooted in many artistic identities. Although contemporary artists are considered to be more open to the entrepreneurial demands of building a career (Lingo & Tepper, 2013), tensions remain when it comes to business-oriented activities, such as attracting buyers. For instance, in a recent study conducted by Lindström (2016), who explored the connection between artists' identities and their framing of breadwinning work, 12 out of 20 participants were still assigned to the bohemian artist category, characterized by the opposition to market logics and rejection of career-oriented behavior. In comparison, only two interviewees were seen to exhibit a clear entrepreneurial mindset. The remaining participants were put into a newly created category called "the bohemian identity/entrepreneurial behavior artist" (Lindström, 2016, p. 50), referring to artists who express bohemian values, but accept the necessity of entrepreneurial activities for sustaining their careers.

All these ideas connect to a seminal study performed by Gerber (2017) on value concepts in creative careers. By conducting qualitative interviews with 80 visual artists from the United States, the author explores the question of how artists reason the value of their artistic work. The analysis hereby focuses on the artists' "narratives of investment" (Gerber, 2017, p. 33), based on the assumption that they, too, expect something in return for their work. By applying the strategy of typification, Gerber's research results in four types of value accounts common among the artist population: (1) Pecuniary, (2) credentialing, (3) vocational, and (4) relational. The first two accounts both refer to the more instrumental understanding of value in creative work, often centered around money and career-building. Hereby, the pecuniary account is dominated by narratives around clear and calculated investments, primarily in the form of money or time, aligning closely with a general economic logic. Artists using the credentialing account, on the other hand, see the value of their artistic work especially in where it positions them within the labor market. Artmaking for them functions as a "credential" (Gerber, 2017, p. 43) for further jobs, mostly in teaching or in the commercial field of the respective art form. Furthermore, not only the artistic practice, but also the artist's personality is used as a credential. Characterized by self-confidence and hustle, the artistic "temperament" (Gerber, 2018, p. 48) would often be considered more valuable than any particular skill when looking for a job outside of the arts.

In contrast to the first two categories, the vocational and relational accounts move away from monetary and calculable value. Gerber considers the vocational account to be closest to the notion of art for art's sake, building on the idea that artists create out of an inner drive and strong passion to do so. Hereby, art in itself is regarded as the highest reward and a sufficient

return for the artist's investment. Individuals arguing within the vocational account would often disregard the role of the public and the market in their decisions on what to produce. Everything after the actual process of artistic creation is generally deemed irrelevant for this narrative. Lastly, individuals using the relational account draw value from the presumed significance of art for society at large and its benefits for artists and citizens. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of community and find reward in the construction of relationships with other artists or the public.

Gerber (2017) concludes that considering these four accounts in the analysis of artists talking about their work can help to understand what investments they are willing to take on and what they expect in return for their efforts. This can become relevant when looking at what the artists of this study invest in their social media work, how they perceive this investment, and where they see the value of it in connection to their artistic practice.

2.1.3.2 What Makes the Artist Entrepreneurial?

Importantly, the idea that artists are also entrepreneurs is not an attempt to undermine any sort of authenticity typically associated with the artistic process, but rather to acknowledge that the artistic process often involves entrepreneurial responsibilities and acumen. (Morris, 2014, p. 276)

While the discourse around entrepreneurship in artistic careers becomes increasingly pronounced, it is still considered to differ significantly from entrepreneurship in business (Bridgstock, 2012). Commonly used terms such as “artist-entrepreneur” (Calcagno & Balzarin, 2016, p. 29) or “bohemian entrepreneurs” (Robinson & Novak-Leonard, 2021, p. 4) draw attention to this difference. Lee et al. (2018), for example, emphasize that while artists may perform entrepreneurial activities in their working lives, it is usually not done with the same profit-oriented mindset as entrepreneurs. Regardless of whether the motivations are different, however, a body of literature can be found that emphasizes a set of skills and competencies that artists and entrepreneurs are meant to have in common.

Scholars hereby usually start by highlighting the entrepreneurial skills that they believe to be inherent in artistic practice. Connected to the concept of the creative class as defined by Florida (2012), the artistic population today is considered to be one of the primary sources of creativity and innovativeness – two competencies that are deemed vital for entrepreneurs (Robinson & Novak-Leonard, 2021). Furthermore, artists are often framed as risk-takers, because they are investing resources despite the high levels of uncertainty when it comes to how their work will be perceived by the public (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020). As already

mentioned in connection with the current conditions of the artistic labor market, artists are also known for showing adaptability and high “tolerance for ambiguity” (Poorsoltan, 2012, p. 77), meaning that they are able to operate within constantly changing and often unstructured environments. Additionally, the research conducted by Poorsoltan (2012) indicates that artists generally believe to be in control of their own future, thus demonstrating high levels of agency and self-confidence.

In addition to these traits, artists are required to attain entrepreneurial competencies that are not yet present in their artistic practice. By combining insights from the literature on entrepreneurship with knowledge from working fine artists, Thom (2016) identifies seven skills that are essential for an artist to lead a successful career. It is important to note that success is hereby defined economically, meaning that the main criterion for a successful career is whether the artist can make a living from it. Heading the list of skills is once again creativity/innovation, which both dominated the findings from the literature and were rated as most important by the participants of the study. Following this is a competency that has not yet been mentioned, namely strategic planning. This refers to the development of long-term plans based on knowing one’s own objectives and the conditions of the industry. The third skill mentioned by Thom concerns recognizing and seizing new work opportunities, which has already been mentioned in the previous chapter, particularly in connection with the high frequency of unstable employment in the arts sector. Next on the list of skills is the ability to network effectively. Networking is hereby meant to transcend the initial encounter with a person and provide future opportunities for the artist. Therefore, Thom emphasizes the importance of selecting suitable activities for networking, and then being able to show one’s expertise and convey the value of one’s work. This connects to a further requirement for entrepreneurial artists, concerning leadership skills. Artists must have a clear vision of where they want their career to go and the ability to inspire others to help them achieve these goals. The last two skills highlighted in Thom’s study are not so much connected to an entrepreneurial approach, but rather competencies that are necessary for upholding a business in general, namely finance and marketing skills. Especially for self-employed artists, it is vital to know how to manage the financial resources of one’s business, including how to apply for grants and funding. Moreover, to succeed economically, artists must know their target audience and make their art visible to them through means of marketing (Thom, 2016).

2.2 Social Media as a Tool for Career Management

It is widely acknowledged that the increasing importance of social media platforms is changing the routines and strategies of entrepreneurs, including artists (Horst & Hitters, 2020; Morris, 2014; Taylor & Luchman, 2020). In the context of artistic careers, most research hereby focuses on the impact of social media on activities such as networking (Gandini, 2016), marketing (Appel et al, 2019; Barreto, 2014), and self-branding (Duffy et al., 2017; Gross, 2022). After providing a short introduction to the structures and dynamics of social media in general, the following chapters will provide an overview of the existing literature on opportunities and challenges that social media provides for contemporary artists and how the use of these platforms impacts the performance of their work activities.

2.2.1 Characteristics of the Social Media Environment

Research on social media often focuses on how the online environment shapes the behavior of its users. Boyd (2011), for instance, argues that social media platforms can be understood as architectures which function as “structural forces” (p. 42) in determining how people participate in them. For the exploration of how artists use social media, it is thus vital to gain an initial understanding of the fundamental properties that characterize the social media environment. Furthermore, as this study focuses on the platform Instagram, the following sections also provide insight into the features of “social networking sites” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 63), which Instagram is generally classified as.

2.2.1.1 An Introduction to Social Media

Social media can be seen as a core pillar of modern society. At the beginning of the year 2023 almost 4.8 billion people around the globe were using social media, which makes up around 60 percent of the worldwide population (Petrosyan, 2023). Not only individuals, but also enterprises are increasingly present on social media. As of 2021, 59 percent of the businesses in the European Union, including sole entrepreneurs like many artists, are making use of at least one social media platform (Eurostat Statistics Explained, 2022b). While motivations for the personal use of these platforms are generally found in social interaction, entertainment, and information-gathering (Whiting & Williams, 2013), companies are considered to use social media in a more strategic way, utilizing it for image-building, marketing, and networking purposes (Eurostat Statistics Explained, 2022b).

Although the term social media is widely used both in everyday and academic language, an exact definition is difficult to provide. It is argued that this is in part due to the fast-changing nature of social media technologies as well as the variety of ways in which “sociality” (Treem

et al., 2016, p. 769) can be defined in this context. In general, potential definitions are therefore kept broad, including a range of online applications associated with the technology of “Web 2.0” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Often used interchangeably with the term social media, the concept of Web 2.0 is considered to describe the technological basis of social media, providing the possibility for participatory and interactive content-creation between individuals on internet platforms. Social media is thus characterized by a variety of users participating in the creation and exchange of online content, as well as the interaction and communication between these users (Treem et al., 2016).

2.2.1.2 The Affordances and Features of Social Networking Sites

As one of six types of social media platforms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), the primary purpose of social networking sites is to foster connection between users by allowing them to share personal information on individual profiles and communicate with others via private messages or public comments. By using the term “networked publics” (p. 39), boyd (2011) discusses social networking sites as public spaces shaped by networked technologies and platform-specific “affordances” (p. 39). The concept of affordances refers to “the objective, latent possibilities present in an environment that actors [can] act on in specific ways” (Duffy et al., 2017, p. 2) and is generally used when attempting to understand how individuals make use of technological features. According to boyd (2011), “affordances do not dictate participants’ behavior, but they do configure the environment in a way that shapes participants’ engagement” (p. 39). It is therefore vital to look at the fundamental features and affordances of social networking sites in detail before exploring how artists act on them.

Boyd (2011) lists four features that she deems most relevant when talking about social networking sites as public spaces. The first one concerns the individual profile as a space for presenting oneself, sharing content, and communicating with others. In many cases, users would carefully build their profiles to convey a distinct image of themselves to the public. Access to profiles, however, can also be restricted, which is generally done by making use of the second feature – the friends list. Through constructing friends lists, users indicate with whom they want to form a connection with. A challenge hereby can be the fusion of originally separate social contexts, showing the same version of oneself to friends, family, work colleagues, acquaintances, and others. According to boyd, this results in often precisely curated friends lists, which can then be provided with information through the feature of “stream-based updates” (2011, p. 43). Lastly, the audience on social networking sites can react to the posted content via tools that enable communication and interaction with others. Most communication would

hereby take place in form of comments, which are generally kept short and can appear to have little actual value. Boyd, however, highlights the symbolic function that comments can have:

The ritual of checking in is a form of social grooming. Through mundane comments, participants are acknowledging one another in a public setting, similar to the way in which they may greet each other if they were to bump into one another on the street. Comments are not simply a dialogue between two interlocutors, but a performance of social connection before a broader audience. (boyd, 2011, p. 45)

In addition to these features, boyd introduces some “structural affordances” (2011, p. 45) that are likely to shape user’s participation on social networking sites. Above all, these affordances concern the way in which information is handled within these environments. For one, content on these sites is automatically stored, which enables users to converse asynchronously, but also allows for information to be taken out of its original context. Furthermore, content published online can easily be replicated, making it difficult to distinguish between the original and the copy. Often considered advantageous by users, is also the high scalability of content on social networking sites, making information visible to a huge audience. Boyd, however, draws attention to the unpredictability of what gains visibility on these platforms, arguing that “the property of scalability does not necessarily scale what individuals want to have scaled [...], but what the collective chooses to amplify” (2011, p. 48). The last affordance mentioned by the author refers to the possibility of searching for specific content, including people, places, and other information that can enrich the user’s social environment.

All these affordances lead to distinct dynamics on social networking sites that are different from other public spaces. Users act within environments where several social, spatial, and temporal contexts coalesce, private and public life merge, and the audiences of one’s performance often remain invisible (boyd, 2011). Artists therefore face different challenges and opportunities in the online environment than in the offline world, which will be laid out in the following chapter.

2.2.2 Artists on Social Media

Within current research on the dynamics of contemporary art worlds, social media is recognized as a new force, altering the responsibilities and interdependencies of the involved actors (Gronlund, 2017), restructuring the “value chain” (Bacache-Beauvallet & Bourreau, 2020, p. 424) of artistic production, inspiring new techniques and aesthetics (MacDowall & Budge, 2022), and changing the experiences of the art audience (Beyl & Bauwens, 2010). With artistic

creation being the starting point of all these processes, scholars have also approached the challenges and opportunities created by social media for the work of artists more specifically.

Hereby, perspectives are manifold, exploring both social media's potential as a creative tool (Gardiner & Gere, 2010; MacDowall & Budge, 2022) as well as its role within artistic career management (Duffy et al., 2017; Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Morris, 2014; Petrides & Fernandes, 2020; Taylor & Luchman, 2020). While the former is generally framed like an artistic decision, the latter is seen to move towards a necessity. The increasing importance of social media within artistic careers hereby goes hand in hand with the overall shift from institutional to individual responsibility, simultaneously allowing and requiring artists to take on career management tasks themselves (Morris, 2014). These range from connecting with audiences, to creating visibility through marketing, constructing an artistic brand, and creating relevant networks (Duffy et al., 2017; Gandini, 2016; Gross, 2022; Konrad, 2013; Win, 2014). Gandini (2016) argues that:

Social media has come to represent a working tool that serves the curation of a professional image and the management of social relationships for purposes of professional success and career progression. (Gandini, 2016, p. 124)

As this statement suggests, practices such as networking, branding, and marketing emerge as the primary topics that research on social media in artistic careers focuses on. In the following, these will thus be laid out in more detail. Furthermore, at the end of this chapter, the often proclaimed “democratizing effects” (Morris, 2014, p. 275) of social media in connection to artists will be explored briefly.

2.2.2.1 Building and Maintaining Networks

Given that the word “networking” is already present in the term “social networking sites”, it appears obvious that these platforms can function as tools for networking practices. As the previous chapters have already shown, networking is regarded to be one of the most crucial activities that artists must perform in contemporary times (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020; Thom, 2016). Because of the highly uncertain and informal employment structures of the arts sector, establishing relevant contacts with gatekeepers, experts, and other artists is recognized as a way to nurture one's reputation, thereby increasing the chances for finding jobs and exhibition opportunities (Bridgstock, 2012; Duffy et al., 2017; Taylor & Luchman, 2020). In a case study conducted by Blackstone et al. (2016) on the importance of networks within the creative field in Canada, the participating artists even found networking to be more relevant for building a career than their artistic abilities.

This is not to say, however, that all artists take a positive stance towards networking activities. Gill & Pratt (2008) emphasize that while some artists might enjoy building connections with like-minded people from the field, others may find this form of socializing rather compulsory. The use of social media can intensify these perceptions by raising the expectations for artists to constantly engage in building and maintaining relationships online (Duffy et al., 2017).

In general, however, the distinct features of SNSs are regarded to enhance the possibilities for networking (boyd, 2011; Horst & Hitters, 2020; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011). Richmond et al. (2011) argue that social networking sites alter “the landscape of how we relay information to our social connections” (p. 148). The authors hereby particularly draw attention to the high pace and scale of networking practices on social media. They argue that a higher number of relationships can be maintained while investing less effort than in the physical world. Furthermore, SNSs would make it easier to get in contact with people outside of one’s offline social circle, enabling individuals to form essential “weak ties” (Richmond et al., 2011, p. 149) that can provide information otherwise unavailable to them. The desired connections can be confirmed through features such as friends lists and constantly updated on one’s career progression in the form of social media posts (boyd, 2011). As boyd argues, even the smallest interactions on social networking sites in form of comments or likes can function as important indicators for the formation of social connections. Lastly, Kietzmann et al. (2011) highlight that platforms differ in whether they support the expansion or mainly the maintenance of relationships as well as regarding the level of formality within the online interactions. This will be a crucial point to consider within the current research project, questioning how Instagram is perceived by the participants in this regard.

2.2.2.2 Marketing and Branding

The rise of social media – with its incitement to brand the self with resolve – means that [...] marketing activities have taken on a new urgency for creative professionals. (Duffy et al., 2017, p. 7)

Challenging the idea of the traditional bohemian artistic identity, research is increasingly highlighting successful marketing strategies exhibited by artists of the past and present. Using examples of artists like Picasso (Muñiz et al., 2014) or Ai Weiwei (Preece, 2015), scholars draw attention to the fact that popularity in the arts has more often than not gone hand in hand with strategic marketing approaches. While marketing art in the past has often been the responsibility of intermediaries such as galleries or managers, the opportunities provided by social media have triggered a shift of the marketing activities to the artists themselves (Muñiz et al., 2014). Artists

are increasingly recognized to engage in practices referred to as “self marketing” (Gandini, 2016, p. 126) or “self-branding” (Duffy et al., 2017), terms that highlight the artists’ takeover as marketers of their own work. Tomiuc (2015) even goes as far as saying that “promotion and branding are part of the contemporary artist’s identity” (p. 11).

Artists, however, not only carry out these activities themselves, but their personality often becomes the focus of the marketing strategy. This is commonly described as the process of constructing an “artistic brand” (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020, p. 312). Especially in the highly competitive online environment, artists often try to stand out by creating a “persona” (Gandini, 2016, p. 124) or “professional image” (Gandini, 2016, p. 127) focused on conveying a unique artistic personality, including a recognizable name and appearance. Visual content-sharing sites like Instagram are particularly suitable for the branding process, allowing individuals to enhance their persona through a multimedia presentation (Carah & Shaul, 2016). Gandini (2016) furthermore argues that the strength of an artist’s brand directly impacts their reputation within the art world. Branding on social media allows for “reputation to become tangible” (Gandini, 2016, p. 125) in the sense that successful brands are likely to attract high numbers of followers and likes.

Social media, however, also poses a challenge for the branding process. On online platforms, the artistic brand is subject to constantly reevaluating audiences who possess the power to either validate or reject the proposed image (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020). Therefore, artists must carefully curate all online interactions, whether it is creating, sharing, or commenting, to fit a consistent personality (Horst & Hitters, 2020). Utilizing social media for the process of self-branding can thus strengthen the artistic brand while simultaneously making it even more vulnerable to external influences.

2.2.2.3 Democratization & Accessibility

A final topic that stands out in the literature on social media in artistic careers concerns the democratizing effects of digital technologies for both the production and consumption of art (Bacache-Beauvallet & Bourreau, 2020; Beyl & Bauwens, 2010; Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Morris, 2014). First and foremost, these arguments assume easy accessibility and low costs of social media platforms for both artists and audiences, allowing a more diverse population to participate in the artistic discourse (Bacache-Beauvallet & Bourreau, 2020). Furthermore, social media is considered to enable a more direct form of contact between artists and audiences, decreasing the need for intermediaries to control social or even financial interactions (Haynes & Marshall, 2018). Linked to this is the observation that traditional gatekeepers are less powerful within social media environments, resulting in the distribution of artistic content that

might be disregarded by the ones in control of the access to the offline art world (Bacache-Beauvallet & Bourreau, 2020).

Some scholars, however, remain critical of such claims. Boyd (2011) points out that social networking sites in general are likely to reproduce some of the same social inequalities prevalent in other public spaces. The author argues that while social media can offer more people a platform, it is not guaranteed that they can also gain an audience. Furthermore, in a study on the social media use of independent musicians conducted by Haynes & Marshall (2018) the participating artists emphasized that acknowledgement by traditional intermediaries is still imperative for being taken seriously in the music industry. Their research even showed the emergence of new influential gatekeepers on social media.

Because of over-saturation and the overwhelming amount of information available to audiences, Internet media is becoming increasingly consolidated and a handful of the most successful sites are establishing themselves as new gatekeepers and tastemakers within the digital music field. These new gatekeepers complement rather than replace existing gatekeepers and, in many cases, intertwine with them. (Haynes & Marshall, 2018, p. 1987)

Finally, some scholars express concern about the increasing conflation of artists with the general creative population on social media platforms (Morris, 2014; Win, 2014), making it harder for artists to distinguish themselves and communicate the worth of their artistic work. Taking these effects into consideration, it will thus be important for the following study to explore how photographers look at social media in terms of accessibility and “disintermediation” (Haynes & Marshall, 2018, p. 1987) and how they are trying to stand out between the masses participating in the creative process on social media.

3 METHODOLOGY

To approach the research question of how photographers use Instagram in the process of establishing an artistic career, a qualitative study was conducted which combined two different methods of data collection: online observations and qualitative interviews. The research project hereby followed the methodological guidelines of netnography, an approach introduced by Kozinets (2010) who adapted the basic principles of ethnography for the research of online cultures. In his second edition “Netnography: Redefined” (Kozinets, 2015) the author specifically explores the possibilities and difficulties of doing research on social media platforms, and provides instructions for data collection, storage, analysis, and interpretation.

Within the ethnographic study of online environments, it is common to use the combination of observations and interviews (Fenton & Parry, 2022). The two methods are recognized to be complimentary in the way that their strengths lie in the other method’s weaknesses. While interviewing is generally considered to reveal more in-depth information about the individual’s intentions, beliefs, ideals, and emotional states, observations are seen to provide better access to naturally occurring, interactive situations (Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Combining these two methodological approaches can therefore provide a deeper understanding of the individual’s behavior, while also preventing the researcher from assuming coherence between what is said and what is done (Jerolmack & Kahn, 2014).

This study therefore used online observations to gather data about behavioral patterns and activities of art photographers on the social media platform Instagram and enlightens these by adding further background information on the participant’s motivations, goals, and expectations communicated through in-depth interviews.

3.1 Sampling

As this study aims at exploring the experiences of photographers who are currently in the process of building an artistic career, the first step was to decide on how to limit the sample to artists who are not yet established within the field but have already exceeded the amateur level. Since artistic careers are known to progress in rather non-linear ways (Skaggs, 2022), setting an age range to narrow down the sample has not been considered an option. Rather, a festival site for art photography in Rotterdam has been chosen to determine the sample for this study. The Rotterdam Photo is an annual photography fair offering independent photographers a space to exhibit their work. Conditions for the participation include adhering to a specific topic and the selection through a committee (Rotterdam Photo, 2023a). This year’s festival took place between the 9th and 12th of February under the topic “Freedom Redefined” (Rotterdam Photo,

2023b), a pandemic-inspired discussion surrounding the meaning, the value, and the limits of freedom. In the end, 94 photographers from all over the world were selected and given the opportunity to exhibit either a single photograph or a larger photography project. The application procedure as well as the purpose of the festival to gain visibility within the sector are thus seen as indicators for a certain career stage of the participants, positioning them in between amateur and established photographers. Furthermore, it shows that the artists are actively trying to reach audiences for their work, making them suitable subjects for the exploration of career management.

A few weeks prior to the event, the official website of the festival published a list of all the participating photographers, including a short description of their project, as well as their website and Instagram name. The importance of Instagram within the photography field already became apparent here, as there were only four artists in the entire list that did not reference an Instagram account and no other social media platforms were mentioned on the website.

From the 90 photographers active on Instagram, another eight were excluded because they either had a private profile or an account run by an organization. The remaining 82 photographers constitute the sample used for the online observations. The decision to keep all 82 artists in the sample, regardless of the extent of their Instagram activities, was made based on the diversity of online practices it allows to observe. However, for the in-depth interviews, only a sub-sample of eight photographers was purposefully selected with the intention of covering a wide variety of perspectives on the topic. This concerns, amongst others, differences in the frequency of online activity, follower numbers, the appearance of the profile, the content of the posts and stories, as well as the amount of observable interaction with others.

While all the selected interviewees work on artistic photography projects to some extent, they do so in very different disciplines. These range from documentary, architectural, portraiture, and still life to conceptual photography. Furthermore, the sample includes a variety of employment models and career paths. Several participants engage in multiple job holding, performing two or more jobs within the creative sector simultaneously. The main reason for this, mentioned by the participants, was gaining financial stability that allows them to perform their artistic work on the side. This was also the case for the few participants who work as full-time photographers but take on both commercial and artistic projects. One interviewee also provided the perspective of a student doing an artistic photography program. More information on the interview participants can be found in Appendix A.

Finally, it is important to reflect on how this sampling method could influence the results of this study. First, it must be considered that the festival has its own criteria for the selection

process, and it cannot be ruled out that the Instagram presence of the photographers plays no role in this. Therefore, other events might have shown a higher number of photographers who do not use social media for their work and would have provided more insight into the perspective of non-users. Furthermore, the participation in the festival requires financial resources which means that the perspective of photographers who are not willing or able to invest in these kinds of activities is excluded from the sample as well.

3.2 Data Collection

The conducted study draws from two separate data sources, the online observations, and the qualitative interviews. This results in a rich amount and diverse range of data, requiring different approaches to data collection. In the following, the two processes of collecting data for this research project will be explained separately.

3.2.1 Online Observations

A crucial step when doing ethnographic research on online cultures is to determine which channel is most relevant for answering the research question. Kozinets (2010) emphasizes that a platform needs to show a high amount of activity, interactions, and data-richness to be suitable for conducting a netnography. Considering this, the channel chosen for this study is Instagram, a social media platform that stands out due to its “unique visual nature” (Laestadius & Witt, 2022, p. 581). The structure of Instagram as a visually based social networking site determines significantly what can be observed and what kinds of data can be gathered on the platform. The main source of data on Instagram are the general posts that combine visual as well as textual elements. These can either be stored and made accessible for the public in the profile, or they can be set to disappear after 24 hours when being posted via the story feature. A relatively new opportunity hereby are the story highlights, which allow users to keep selected stories visible in their profile. Besides that, Instagram offers a range of smaller elements that can be viewed as informative data, including hashtags, comments, likes, and follower numbers. Lastly, the individual profiles are relevant sites for observation as well, providing information through profile names, descriptions, and their overall appearance.

The online observations were conducted over a period of three weeks, starting one week before the opening of the Rotterdam Photo Festival. This time frame was chosen based on the expectation that the photographers will show increased activity on Instagram during the event. Furthermore, it was important to include the festival period in the observations since that can provide insight into how the artists interact with the festival as a gatekeeper account on Instagram. Relevant information was then recorded in the form of written field notes (Appendix

B), following a four-section structure including the observations, related context information, methodological, and theoretical reflections, as proposed by Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr (2014). To support the fieldnotes and retain the visual element of the observed online activity, an amount of 429 screen-captured images were gathered, showing Instagram posts, stories, highlights, and profile appearances. This data was collected manually, allowing a purposeful selection according to the research question and reducing the amount of irrelevant data that can accumulate in more automated processes (Laestadius & Witt, 2022). Since this study explores the behavior of photographers on Instagram without the goal of measuring the success of these activities, numbers of likes and followers as so-called “engagement measures” (Laestadius & Witt, 2022, p. 589) have not been regarded as data in this process. Similarly, comments and hashtags have only been taken into account if their content showed relevance in connection to the research question.

3.2.2 Interviews

Based on the observations and with the intention of covering a wide range of perspectives on the topic, eight photographers were selected and invited for interviews. After establishing an initial contact to the photographers at the festival in person, the final invitation was extended through Instagram. The most difficult part was to include the perspective of a non-user, since out of the four photographers who did not mention an Instagram account on the festival website, three were absent at the event, and the fourth individual declined the interview invitation. Another photographer, however, had only just created an Instagram profile for their photography work a couple days prior to the festival and was willing to share their experiences in an interview, which contributes significantly to a more diverse sample.

The in-depth interviews were predominantly performed online via Zoom, since most of the participants were living outside of the Netherlands at the time of the study. Only one photographer could be interviewed in person. The conversations had an average length of 56 minutes and were recorded with two separate devices. Five of the interviews were conducted in English and three in German. Finally, the interviews were transcribed verbatim in the language they were held. When direct quotes were used from the interviews in German, they were translated by the researcher into the English language. An overview of all the material collected for this study can be found in Appendix C.

3.3 Research Ethics

The key ethical concern when doing social media research is the question whether online content should be treated as public or private information and thus, if consent should be

requested (Fenton & Parry, 2022). While no general agreement has yet been reached on this subject, researchers use different strategies to mitigate the risk for their research subjects (Franzke et al., 2020). In this study, privacy concerns are addressed in three ways. The first step was to set up a separate account on Instagram, only dedicated to the research project. In the profile description I identified myself as a researcher and explained the content and aim of the study. By following the accounts of the research subjects, they are thus indirectly informed that their profiles are observed for the purpose of this research project. All the subsequent interactions with the participants, including the communication about the interviews, have been conducted through this research account.

A further important step was to exclude all the photographers who had their profile set to private from the observations. Since Instagram allows users to change their privacy settings at any time, all included accounts were checked again for their settings one month after the observations had been conducted. Finally, anonymity of all observed participants is guaranteed by abstaining from the use of profile pictures, usernames, and highly identifiable visual Instagram content in this paper.

The interview participants, on the other hand, have all been requested to read and sign a consent form, informing them about the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study (Appendix D). Therein, they were also asked to give permission for recording the interview and using transcribed parts of the conversations in this paper. In the result section, the interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms that they chose for themselves.

3.4 Operationalization

The data collection process was overall guided by the same themes for both the online observations and interviews. These concern, first and foremost, the online activities of networking, marketing, and self-branding, highlighted in previous literature on the use of social media in artistic careers. As the two methods, however, have different strengths in revealing information, there were certain topics that could only be observed within one of the two. The following thus explains how the concepts and themes derived from theory have been made observable in the data collection of each method.

3.4.1 Online Observations

When collecting and analyzing the material from the online observations, the primary focus was on behavioral patterns and activities that appeared to be performed for career-oriented purposes. While the process remained open for new activities to emerge, the central topics concerned the previously mentioned practices of networking, marketing, and self-branding. To

understand the activity of building and maintaining relationships on Instagram, for instance, it seemed especially relevant to explore content in which other accounts were mentioned by the photographers. In this way, it was possible to track which actors the artists wanted to connect with on the platform and how they approached these relationships. Hereby, special emphasis was also placed on published imagery that showed other people or institutions, gaining insight into who the artists associated themselves with. When it came to the observation of marketing practices, content was sought that drew attention to artworks for sale or upcoming events, for example by providing clear information on materials, editions, prices, or opening hours. Lastly, in terms of self-branding, the photographers' posts and profiles were scanned for material that gave the accounts a recognizable style or professional appearance. This included the use of characteristic colors or fonts, in some cases even logos, and the overall profile design. Moreover, the way in which the photographers approached the construction of an artistic persona was explored by collecting and analyzing content in which the artists showed themselves, their personalities, or lifestyles.

3.4.2 Interviews

While the main purpose of the observations was to reveal the activities photographers engaged in on Instagram, the interviews made it possible to gain a deeper understanding of the motivations and goals behind these, as well as the attitudes of the artists towards the use of the platform. Besides revealing advantages and disadvantages of using social media within artistic careers, this also allowed to approach questions regarding democratization, reputation, and artistic identity. The interviews were held as semi-structured conversations, guided by a list of questions and topics based on the theoretical knowledge attained a priori (Bryman, 2012). This means that the researcher can deviate from the premade guidelines at any moment and introduce new questions, enabling more flexibility and spontaneity in the interview process and leaving room for unexpected topics to come up.

The interview guide consisted of two parts. While the first section was designed to provide an overall context regarding the artists' working lives and career aspirations, the second part focused solely on their use of Instagram. After an introductory part about the general background of the photographers, concerning artistic interests, education, and occupational status, the participants were asked about the different activities their work as artists entails, and how they would rank them in terms of importance and personal preference. This was used to build a bridge to the topic of entrepreneurship, exploring how the respondents feel about performing entrepreneurial tasks such as networking and marketing. Following this, the photographers were asked about how they define a successful artistic career and what skills

they consider necessary for building a career in this field. This was also meant to offer an initial opportunity to bring up social media as a relevant tool within the artists' careers. The participants were then asked more specifically about their use of Instagram. This part began with some general questions regarding when and why they started using the platform, what they like and dislike about using it for their work as photographers, and how they would judge its importance in the photography field. These were then followed by five thematic blocks of questions derived from theory, concerning networking, audiences, self-branding, marketing/sale, and inspiration. In between all these, the guide also contained questions which were individually created based on the observed Instagram content of each photographer. Hereby, the participants were asked about specific details that stood out from their profiles or distinguished them from other users. These questions were found to be especially valuable for understanding the decision-making process behind the artists' Instagram behaviors. For more detail, the full interview guide can be found in Appendix E.

3.5 Analysis

Both the observations and Instagram data, as well as the interviews underwent a thematic analysis with the help of the software Atlas.ti. The coding process followed an inductive three-step system, as described by Boeije (2010), consisting of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The material collected from the online observations and interviews was kept separately during the coding process, allowing topics to arise that are unique to each data source. Consequent comparison of the two coding processes, however, was necessary to discover where the similarities and differences lie between what was observed and what was reported by the interview participants.

The coding process for both data sources started with open coding, where the codes remained as close as possible to the actual text. These codes were then revised, during which unnecessary codes were removed and similar codes were merged. In the axial coding stage, the open codes were joined into bigger categories. It followed the final step of selective or theoretical coding, connecting the categories to theoretical themes from the literature review. A more detailed overview of how many codes emerged from this process can be found in Table 1. Furthermore, Appendix F provides an example of how the different steps of coding led to the final themes, and Appendix G contains a visualization of the relations between the codes.

Table 1

Number of Codes, Categories, and Themes for both Data Sources.

| Online Observations & Instagram Data | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Open Codes | 426 |
| Axial Codes (Categories) | 47 |
| Selective Codes (Themes) | 5 |
| Interview Data | |
| Open Codes | 302 |
| Axial Codes (Categories) | 39 |
| Selective Codes (Themes) | 7 |

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In approaching the research question of how photographers use Instagram for their career development, the online observations and data gathered on the platform as well as the qualitative interviews have revealed three key purposes for which Instagram is used: (1) Increasing visibility, (2) building relationships, and (3) becoming informed and inspired. After a general introduction to the perceived relevance of Instagram within the participants' artistic careers and the main factors that impact their overall attitude towards the use of the platform for career-related purposes, these three key areas will be outlined in more detail.

4.1 The Importance of Instagram for Photographers

The fact that Instagram plays a crucial role in the lives of contemporary art photographers could not go unnoticed even during the process of data collection. The Rotterdam Photo Festival hereby already anticipated the relevance of Instagram in two ways. First, through the limited number of participants who did not have an Instagram account, and second, by the noteworthy presence of the platform on the festival site. Next to the website, Instagram was hereby most often given to the visitors as a platform where they can see the photographers work and stay in touch with them, as shown by Illustration 1.

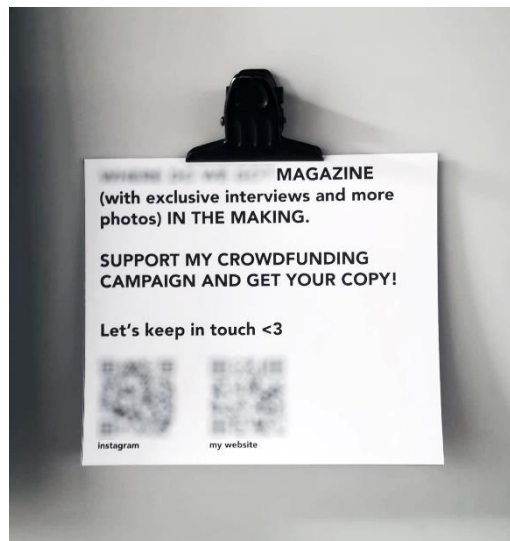


Illustration 1: Photograph taken at the Rotterdam Photo '23 Festival Site (February 9, 2023). Source: Author.

This was then further corroborated by the material collected through the online observations and interviews. Although the data revealed overall different approaches to the use of Instagram by the participants, there was little ambiguity about the fact that Instagram is “absolutely necessary” (Chun-Li) for building a career in the field. The preference for Instagram over other

social media platforms was perceived as rather obvious by the photographers, who based their arguments for choosing Instagram primarily on its inherently visual nature:

I specialize in Instagram because Twitter is about words, TikTok is about videos and Instagram is about photos and that's why it's my medium. (Klara, 45)

Especially within the context of self-employment, Instagram is appreciated as a tool for self-management, providing the necessary opportunities for artists to advance their career independently. Hereby, several respondents touched upon the topic of accessibility, emphasizing that Instagram can be used without much prior knowledge and investment of resources, making it particularly relevant for emerging photographers as an initial steppingstone. For Samuel, publishing his projects on Instagram was “the first step to get out of the private hobby photography”, offering a possibility to present his work to an audience. “At the age of 17”, he emphasized, “I didn’t have the possibility to open a photography business”, indicating that Instagram at the time was easier accessible to him than other career drivers. Similarly, Klara considered Instagram to be “low-threshold” in comparison to other platforms for photographers, such as competitions and festivals, where “you always have to pay money to participate”. With arguments like these, the respondents tied in with the theoretical discussion of democratization through social media (Bacache-Beauvallet & Bourreau, 2020; Beyl & Bauwens, 2010; Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Morris, 2014), recognizing the free availability and simple handling of Instagram as relevant aspects for making it a valuable platform for aspiring artists with limited resources.

At the same time, however, several photographers pointed out the high workload of curating an Instagram account in a way that is beneficial for one’s career. Most respondents hereby associated a successful use of the platform with the necessity of constant online activity. As Ilse emphasized when comparing the maintenance of a professional Instagram account to that of a website:

My website is easier because I'm creating it and that's it, you know? But on Instagram, every day is new. You have to be there; you have to be fancy or whatever you want to be on Instagram [laughter]. [...] Instagram is much more struggle, much more work, much more time. (Ilse, 27)

The respondent considered the cultivation of a professional social media presence to be more than one task among many of a self-employed photographer, describing it rather as “ten jobs in one”. Another participant argued that “you almost have to see it more as a professional project, because, for example, things like vacation [...] are then also simply no reason not to post

something” (Samuel). This is accompanied by great pressure felt by many of the participants to always be active and create new material that can be published on the platform, leading to a paradoxical simultaneity of liberation and constraint commonly observed in the context of using social media for work activities (van Zoonen & Rice, 2017). Klara underlined this by acknowledging that there are times when she keeps away from the platform to ensure that the process of artistic creation is not influenced by the pressure to post.

4.1.1 Social Media Use and Artistic Identity

Statements like the previous one by Klara pervaded most of the interviews performed for this research project and indicate a strong connection between the use of social media and the photographers’ artistic values and ideas of identity. Thereby, the majority of participants suggested a strong affiliation with a bohemian artistic identity, associated with individual motivations and values connected to the idea of art for arts’ sake (Gerber, 2017; Lindström, 2016; Lingo & Tepper, 2013). This becomes particularly evident with a significant number of artists emphasizing that although they would know how to use Instagram in a more strategic way, they make a conscious decision against it to protect their identity and values as artists. As Alec reflected, “I sometimes try to do more [...] but it doesn't come natural to my personality [laughter]. So, you know, I also want to stay true to myself.” Similarly, Leon highlighted that it was important for him to find his own way of using the platform so that it is beneficial for his career, but can still be reconciled with his artistic ideals:

I know what I could be doing, but I just decided not to do it, just because it's not fully my kind of style. So I just tried to find something in between that can work well for bringing some traffic and attention to my work, but I do understand what could be done to even improve it more. (Leon, 32)

Most of the respondents, thus, tried to approach Instagram in a similar way that they approach their photography, giving their artistic interests highest priority. Hereby, adapting a more entrepreneurial mindset is only valued as long as it does not limit the possibilities for expressing individual creative passions. For Ilse, for example, the idea of building an online presence based on the goal of growing a business appeared “overly frustrating”. In a similar way, Klara considered her artistic interests to be the most important requirement for her career as a photographer:

Where do I want to go and who is my target audience of course plays a role, but if I would think like that when photographing, I think I would not be able to take a single

picture. Rather I have to think, what am I up for; what do I want to see; what would excite me if I stumbled across a book; how does it have to look. Maybe other people do it differently and maybe they're more or less successful because of that, but for me that's the only way it works. If I don't have a passion for it, then it's such a dispensable, such an exhausting thing to be an artist. I have to have fun with it and I have to like what I'm doing. (Klara, 45)

These arguments also give insight into the respondents' value accounts, as described by Gerber (2017), that determine how they justify the (non-)investment of resources in the use of social media for their artistic work. The statement shown above can hereby be allocated to the vocational account, where the artist's willingness to invest stems from a strong passion for what they do and the desire to share it with their audience. Within the present data set, this value account stood out as the most prominent and often correlated with disregard for popularity and economic success. Ilse, for example, emphasized: "I stay stuck on my vision of showing the real, the normal, the raw people. And I see that it's not very popular, but I don't mind [laughter]. I go well with what I like to see myself." This is furthermore complemented by the fact that most of the photographers that were interviewed worked multiple jobs or engaged in "breadwinning work" (Lindström, 2016), making it possible for them in the first place to "remove the money-making from [their] photography" (Klara).

4.1.2 The Challenge of Algorithmic Control

Another relevant factor that appears to shape how the artists approach Instagram is the awareness of algorithmic mechanisms that structure the experience on the platform. The Instagram-specific algorithm is generally considered to be overly complex, and little is known about its exact functioning (Cotter, 2019). This is reflected in the relationship of the photographers with the algorithm. While only a small number of respondents showed a more detailed knowledge about the Instagram algorithm, there appeared to be a common understanding of the control it can have over their online activities. In this context, Samuel, who maintains an Instagram account with almost 50,000 followers, reflected on his process of gaining popularity on the platform:

On Instagram, things become popular by coincidence. [...] I think with images it is also partly that pure quality is not necessarily the only point, but it is very random. It's all super complex. (Samuel, 25)

For several respondents, the algorithm and their lack of knowledge thereof goes hand in hand with a perceived decrease in agency. This concerns both the process of becoming successful on Instagram and the way in which the platform can be used strategically for their careers. Chun-Li, who is focused on still life photography, for example, saw the difficulty in the algorithmic preferences for images of people over objects and explained “people love people, and people love faces, [...] and so portraits and photography with people are more recognizable by the machine algorithm and it's shown really more often than a still life”. Furthermore, some participants expressed concern about the increasing popularity of video material on the platform, that is connected to the algorithmic priority for posts on which viewers spent a lot of time (Warren, 2022). According to Samuel, “there are certain things like reels that you almost have to do to get seen, because they are preferred by the algorithm. So the classic one-picture post is almost no longer relevant”. In this context, the photographers relate to what boyd (2011) describes as the unpredictable nature of scalability on social networking sites, resulting in a perceived difficulty of approaching Instagram in a strategic way.

4.2 Increasing Visibility

While the previous chapter is meant to provide a general understanding of how the participants approach Instagram, the following chapters will give insight into the three key purposes of the photographers’ social media use within their career management that emerged from the data. Starting with the first major theme, this chapter focuses on the process of increasing visibility for the artists and their work, which was recognized by several participants as the most important reason for their use of the platform. In particular, the photographers utilized Instagram for marketing purposes such as promotion and self-branding and highlighted its applicability as an online portfolio.

4.2.1 A Tool for Marketing

In contrast to recent trends within marketing approaches of arts organizations who increasingly shift their focus from the artistic product to the consumer (Massi & Piancatelli, 2020), most photographers observed in this study remained centered on finding an audience for their art rather than adjusting their work to what is desired on the market. Nevertheless, several respondents highlighted the difficulty of maintaining artistic autonomy while engaging in marketing activities on the platform. This became especially evident when the participants were asked about their use of “Instagram Insights”, a tool that can be accessed through business accounts, revealing information about who one’s audience is, how they interact with your

profile, and what their preferences are (Zantal-Wiener, 2022). While this data can be valuable for adjusting marketing strategies, most photographers mentioned that they would not let it impact their work. Samuel, however, framed this as a challenge:

I don't use it to work strategically. Um, it's more out of interest. [...] But of course, there's also the problem that it very quickly pushes you to only do things that are pleasing, because you're simply dependent on it. Because the whole concept just doesn't make sense if you do things that aren't pleasing. Then nobody sees them. (Samuel, 25)

In general, the interview data revealed a certain hesitancy from the photographers when asked about their marketing strategies on the platform. In contrast, however, the online observations show strong marketing efforts by almost all participants, especially when it comes to promoting and branding activities. This discrepancy is likely to be connected to the challenge of consolidating career-oriented social media use with bohemian ideas of artistic identity. In this context, several of the photographers therefore show similarity to Lindström's category of the "bohemian identity/entrepreneurial behavior artist" (2016, p. 50), focusing on the expression of bohemian values in the conversations, while engaging in entrepreneurially oriented behavior on Instagram.

4.2.1.1 Promotional Strategies

Within marketing strategies, promotional activities are generally used for three different purposes: to raise awareness for a product or service; to remind an audience of its existence and advancement; or to convince people to buy a product or service (Thackeray et al., 2008). The observations of the photographers on Instagram have shown that the participants utilize the platform for all these three purposes, although some appeared more pronounced than others. Additionally, the artists not only promoted their photographs on the platform, but also used Instagram for the promotion of exhibitions and events that they participated in, as well as to provide exposure to the work of other artists and art-related services. Most interviewees hereby agreed that promoting their own work is vital for advancing in their artistic careers. As Klara emphasizes:

When it comes to photography, I think that if I don't praise myself, then no one will [laughter]. And that means I have to present my stuff with enthusiasm and try to get people excited about it, just as I am myself. (Klara, 45)

Most of the promotional content published on the photographers' Instagram accounts fulfills the purpose of increasing awareness for the artists' works. When promoting their photographs,

many of the observed artists provided additional information about the meaning behind the projects, the process of creating, the artistic technique, or shared personal experiences as well as stories connected to the photographs. Hereby, the way of communicating this information varies between the artists and ranges from formal project descriptions to what appears as more personal, emotionally written texts. Leon mentioned that he enjoys writing about his projects and sharing background information, since he feels like it lets him connect with his audience in a deeper way. Similarly, Klara, as shown in the quote above, hopes to engage the online audience by conveying her own excitement about her work. On the other hand, Laura, for example, reported to often experience difficulty when trying to write about her photography: “I have a lot of photos where I don't write anything and that's basically just because I don't know what to write [laughter].” Therefore, the artist mainly provides short information about her photographs, often consisting of a title and year of creation.

A challenge that was highlighted by some interviewees in the context of promoting artworks concerns choosing the right moment for projects to be exposed to an often large online audience. One respondent in particular expressed concern that promoting new work on Instagram too early could decrease its exclusivity, especially when planning to do an exhibition with the same photographs:

I wait super long to post something [...] because I don't want to post my work too early. Because if I apply for an exhibition, then I don't want my work to already all be on Instagram because then they could just go to my Instagram instead of coming to the exhibition and it won't be as exclusive as I think it should be. So I think it's a balance, to show work on Instagram and also to save something or not show it. (Laura, 21)

At the same time, however, the respondent also highlighted that publishing some of the new material on Instagram before an exhibition can be beneficial for catching the viewers' attention and inspiring them to visit the event. In a similar way, Leon stated that during his last project, which lasted over two years, he tried not to share too much of the work on any platforms, “unless I felt like it's crucial to get some funding or some attention that could help the development”. Hereby, it becomes clear that some of the participants indeed approach promotional activities in a strategic way, deciding carefully what to share and when to share it.

When it comes to increasing awareness for upcoming exhibitions, the promotional material often consists of behind-the-scenes content, showing the process of preparing and planning for such an event. In particular, this is used by the photographers to promote exhibitions in the days leading up to their opening. Prior to the photography festival in

Rotterdam, for example, the participants were continuously sharing impressions of the preparatory work done for the event, including the process of editing (Story Post 1), printing and transporting artworks, as well as the exhibition installation (Story Post 2).



Story Post 1: “Prepare the Photos to Print” (February 2, 2023). Source: Instagram Account Ilse.



Story Post 2: “19 pieces that I created in complete solitude and that came to life through a swim” (February 7, 2023). Source: Material Collected Through Netnography.

Furthermore, many of the posts promoting exhibitions were designed to create anticipation, providing the audience with small impressions of the artworks or exhibition spaces that can increase the audience’s excitement about the event. Hereby, several photographers published so-called “sneak peeks”, as exemplified by Story Post 3, which is a broadly applied strategy in the social media marketing of companies and brands (VSLB Inc, 2021). Publishing small bits of information about the artwork before its exposition helps with keeping the viewers’ attention until the date of its full release.

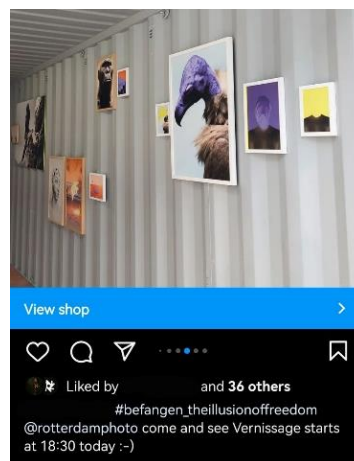


Story Post 3: “Sneak Peek” (February 7, 2023). Source: Material Collected Through Netnography.

The promotional strategy that stood out most in the interviews concerned the photographers reminding the audience of their work and updating them on the advancement of their artistic activities and projects. Several of the interviewed photographers recognized updating as one of the major opportunities provided by social media. Hereby, the immediacy of information, the easy accessibility and handling of the platform, as well as the possibility of subscribing were seen as the main facilitators for a fast and simple way to show that one is “still active and making work” (Ilse). In this context, Instagram was also considered to gain advantage over the use of a website by allowing the photographers to reach their followers without them having to actively search for information. Alec, for example, stated this as a reason for why he tends to refer people who are interested in his work to his Instagram account rather than his website:

The biggest advantage of Instagram [...] is that they will keep on seeing your work coming up again and again, whereas when you give the website, the problem is that they will open the website, they will look at it, and then they'll probably close it. [...] And then maybe an hour later they already forgot your name, they're not going to find it again. (Alec, 36)

The respondent continued by emphasizing the importance of showing the audience one’s most recent activities, making them aware of the progress made within one’s artistic work. The advantage of sharing information in an immediate way also became evident when looking at the activities of the photographers on Instagram. During the Rotterdam Photo Festival, for instance, artists made use of this for reminding their audience of the event, sharing impressions of what is happening on the actual festival site, as well as inviting the viewers directly to join them at the exhibition. As an example, Profile Post 1 shows how Klara reminded her audience of the festival’s opening, inviting them to “come and see”.



Profile Post 1: “Come and see” (February 11, 2023). Source: Instagram Account Klara.

In the interviews, some of the photographers furthermore highlighted that posting their work on Instagram offers a “non-invasive” way for them to update their audience on their progress. Leon, for example, emphasized that “otherwise, I would have to call every person that I know and then just like tell them about the [new photography] book and, you know, create like awkward situation”. Similarly, Alec mentioned that Instagram would allow him to remind relevant gatekeepers that he met in the offline world of his work without having to regularly contact them directly:

Because how many emails can you send? Like you can't send an email every week and then they're going to block you or something. You kind of need an excuse of new work or something to reach out to people again saying “Hey, I'm sending you an update. I've done this and that.” But with social media, you can keep your name in their minds like every day. (Alec, 36)

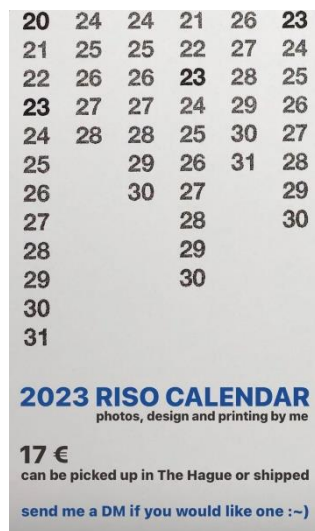
The least occurring promotional activity of the photographers on the online platform appeared to be the direct advertisement of artworks that can be purchased. When taking the interview data into consideration, this seems likely to be connected to the general perception that Instagram does not provide a very lucrative source of revenue-making. Samuel, for instance, expressed doubt about the profitability of selling artworks via Instagram:

Maybe it's more appearance than substance. [...] I realize, yeah sure, if I send something out and say I sell pictures, then I might get one or two inquiries. Which is certainly more than if I had no exposure, but it's also not like it's a top income. (Samuel, 25)

Similarly, Klara, the only participant of the study who uses the feature of the Instagram shop, felt like the income she made by offering purchase options on her profile did not “justify the work” she put into setting up the shop. On the other hand, however, some respondents reported to value social media for allowing them to make the sale process more spontaneous and informal. This is one case where the “disintermediating nature” (Haynes & Marshall, 2018, p. 1977) of social media becomes apparent, allowing artists to directly sell their work to their audiences. Laura, for example, recounted that she was surprised by how quickly people responded when she posted a purchase offer for a calendar with her photographs on her Instagram story two years ago:

I only posted it on my Instagram story once and then they were all sold out because people were replying like, “I want to buy one, I want to buy one, I want to buy one”. So then it went super quickly and that's basically how I sold them. (Laura, 21)

Realizing that “it's a nice way for a bit of income”, the respondent decided to continue selling the calendars over Instagram. Information about the product, including price, shipping, and product pictures (Story Post 4 and 5) were originally published in the artist’s story and afterwards have been stored in her story highlights to extend the audience’s access to it. This has been observed on the profiles of several photographers, some of whom even created specific story highlights titled “shop”, “for sale”, or “prints”, listing all artworks that were available for purchase. Generally, the viewers were then asked to “send a DM” (direct message) if interested in further information or acquiring the product, also shown in Story Post 4.



Story Post 4: “Riso Calendar“ (February 14, 2023). Source: Instagram Account Laura.



Story Post 5: “Riso Calendar“ (February 14, 2023). Source: Instagram Account Laura.

4.2.1.2 Self-Branding

The need to distinguish yourself from the countless other image providers on Instagram was widely recognized by the interviewed photographers. As the main reasons, the participants emphasized the presence of strong competition from both professional photographers as well as the increasingly creative general online community, and the velocity with which content on Instagram is distributed and viewed. Leon, for example, highlights, that “Instagram is full of trash, you know, so to have people notice your work, especially if it's people that didn't know you [...], that's a big success”.

When asked about their strategies for distinguishing themselves on Instagram, several of the artists, however, mentioned that they first and foremost rely on the quality and style of their photography to make them stand out. Only one respondent talked in more detail about their strategic approach to self-branding as an artist. The process of constructing a brand on Instagram appeared to start with the choice of a username, followed by the profile picture. While

most of the observed photographers chose to go by their full name, some complemented it by the addition “photography”, and very few used a pseudonym. Furthermore, within the observed sample of 82 photographers, only four used a logo for their profile picture. Ilse, being one of them, feels like the logo increases her recognizability as a photographer: “If I’m doing just a photo, I don’t know whether people will see that I’m a photography brand or just another person. So that’s why I chose to do the logo.”

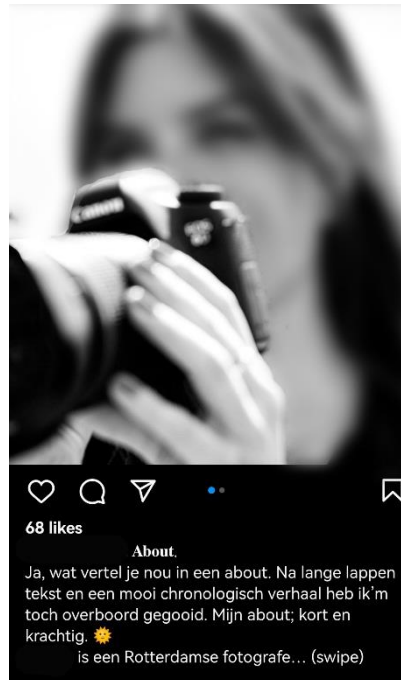
After that, self-branding can pervade all activities and therefore the entire appearance of the artists on the social media platform (Petrides & Fernandes, 2020). While literature on artistic careers hereby increasingly highlights the significance of constructing an artistic persona for branding purposes (Duffy et al., 2017; Gandini, 2016; Tomiuc, 2015), the opinions of the interviewed photographers hereby diverged strongly. Especially when it came to merging the professional and private identity, thereby offering the audience insight into the photographer as an individual, different approaches became visible. Chun-Li, for instance, highlighted the importance of showing the connection between her life as a person and artist:

I realized that I don’t want to split my real life from my work because it’s really connected to each other and I decided to share everything I have in mind in my life. It’s still not like my nudes or bikini pictures are there [laughter]. It’s still kind of more modest. But yes, I’m combining it because it’s really important to share who the person is behind the pictures you see online. (Chun-Li, 34)

On her Instagram account, she therefore shares what inspires her, what her day-to-day looks like, and tries to offer the audience a glimpse of who she is as a person. Other respondents, however, reported to struggle with finding the right balance between showing too little and too much of their personalities. Contrary to the idea of shifting “the interest from the work of art to the artist’s lifestyle” (Tomiuc, 2015, p. 9), these participants showed a certain reluctance when it comes to presenting themselves and their lives on Instagram. “I didn’t choose to be an influencer, you know”, emphasized Ilse in this context. Although she was one of the few photographers in the sample who actively introduced themselves to their online audience through posts like the one shown in Profile Post 2, she reported to do so with difficulty.

However, what can be seen in that post and stood out from the online observations in general, is that when the participants published pictures of themselves, these images mostly showed them taking photographs, carrying a camera, or posing in front of their exhibited artworks. This can be seen as supporting the process of constructing an artistic persona, strengthening their external identity as photographers. Klara, hereby, highlights that showing

herself while photographing would be one of the only reasons for her to publish pictures of herself on Instagram.



Profile Post 2: "So what do you tell in an About. After long pieces of text and a nice chronological story, I threw it overboard. My About; short and sweet. [...] is a photographer from Rotterdam ... (swipe)." (February 26, 2023). Source: Instagram Account Ilse.

4.2.2 Function as Online Portfolio

In addition to being used as a promotional tool with which photographers can actively raise awareness for their art, Instagram was particularly recognized for its suitability as an online portfolio that can be easily accessed by anyone interested in the artists' works. In this context, the Instagram profile becomes a carefully curated space, which is meant to convey professionalism as well as employability, and function as a representation of the photographers' activities, achievements, and unique artistic style.

4.2.2.1 Professional Appearance and Reputation

First of all, an Instagram profile was recognized to gain legitimizing power for some of the photographers, which appeared especially important for individuals who are still in the process of building a reputation in the field. In particular, follower numbers as one of the first and most protruding pieces of information on an Instagram profile were mentioned by some participants as relevant factors for strengthening one's artistic reputation. These perceptions align with

arguments presented by scholars like Gandini (2016), who considers the “measurability” (p. 135) of reputation to be one of the most significant changes within the contemporary artistic labor market initiated by the use of social media. Samuel, for example, felt that his high follower numbers and the curated appearance of his profile strengthen his position amongst other photographers:

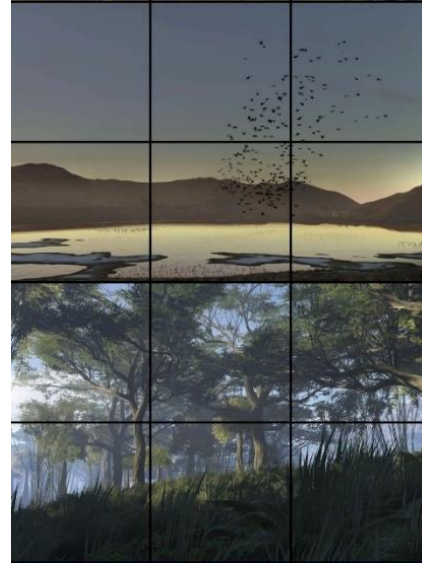
Instagram legitimizes me to take on assignments that were originally left to professionals who studied photography. That's the thing, if you just do good things on there, you have a business card that you can give to anyone. (Samuel, 25)

Furthermore, when it comes to the construction of a professional appearance and the improvement of artistic reputation, research has often emphasized the importance of stylistic consistency (Skaggs, 2022). Transferred to the environment of Instagram, this appears to be done by keeping a coherent profile design. Highlighted by almost all interview participants, a consistent profile appearance seems to be a necessity when using Instagram as an online portfolio. Both Laura and Chun-Li, for instance, reported that they often select their posts based on how they will fit into the overall appearance of the profile. While Laura hereby stated that she had a set of rules that every post has to follow, Chun-Li emphasized, “I'm trying to make a really visually nice feed on Instagram. [...] So even if I have something new but it doesn't fit really well in the current situation, I'm leaving it for next time.”

On some of the observed Instagram accounts, the importance of a visually appealing profile design even appeared to restrain its use for other purposes. As illustrated by Grid 1 and 2, some photographers based their profile appearance on a design that requires every single post to fulfill a specific function. Posting white squares in between other content (Grid 1), for example, has been observed as a common strategy amongst photographers on Instagram when curating their profiles. As these designs, however, limit the amount of information that can be shared with each individual post, the photographers hereby seem to lose flexibility in what they can offer their audience.



Grid 1: Unique Profile Design (February 6, 2023). Source: Material Collected Through Netnography.



Grid 2: Unique Profile Design (February 13, 2023). Source: Material Collected Through Netnography.

4.2.2.2 The Challenge of Setting Limits

One of the main difficulties that the interviewees pointed out in this context, was to limit oneself to one profile design, leaving out material that does not fit the visual appearance or does not speak to the intended target group. Ilse, for instance, highlighted the challenge of showing the diversity of her photography endeavours while simultaneously keeping a coherent profile appearance. As her main focus is on black-and-white portraits, she considers it difficult to incorporate colored photographs without disrupting the profile design: “I want to show how diverse I am, but I also want to show my style. So that's why the black and white is what I choose. To try to not make it super chaotic.” In a similar way, Laura decided to create a second Instagram account where she can post more freely, also sharing images that might not live up to the standards she sets for her main photography profile:

I have another much smaller Instagram account where I just share random pictures which I take on my phone, which I find nice [laughter]. I just decided that here are no rules, I can just post whatever I want. [...] So it's more of a visual diary maybe. [...] And I think so far it has worked out really well, because sometimes I get the need of sharing some of the photos I take on my phone, because I like them as well, uhm, so then I have this other place to put all of those. (Laura, 21)

The challenge of how to deal with several simultaneously existing target groups was especially pointed out by the participants who worked on both commercial and artistic photography projects. Most of them hereby stressed the importance of keeping these two activities and their

audiences separate, avoiding what boyd (2011) calls the collapse of different contexts. Similarly to Laura, Leon solves this by using a different Instagram account for his commercial work. Judith, who just set started using Instagram a couple weeks before the interview, on the other hand, was still reflecting on how to navigate this duality:

On my Instagram account, which I have now created for my art career, I would be reluctant to post things that I do as a freelance photographer, because that has nothing to do with my artistic work. [...] They are like two different client groups or audiences. I don't even know if I want to tell one of them what I do in the other. I was already thinking, oh God, do I need two Instagram accounts now? So it's a big question, do you actually need hygiene in your own Instagram account? How strict do I actually have to be there? (Judith, 41)

4.2.2.3 Making Use of the Instagram Structure

Additionally to maintaining a coherent style throughout the profile, the photographers made use of some other features that Instagram offers them to improve their profile's function as portfolio. Although the predetermined structure of the Instagram profile does not allow for much flexibility, there are some elements that can be used to organize its content.

The profile description, or "bio", for instance, allows users to add a name, pronouns, 150 characters of text, and some links to external webpages. This opportunity was taken by most photographers to introduce themselves and their work. Hereby, the participants generally provided information about where they were based, artistic interests, photography education, upcoming exhibitions, awards and prizes they had received, and competitions they had won. Furthermore, most profiles included links to the artists' websites, or sometimes to other social media profiles. Some photographers also indicated openness to work opportunities or collaborations. Therefore, the profile description can be considered a useful feature for artists to show where their general interests lie, as well as demonstrate competencies, skills, and achievements they have gained over the course of their careers. Some examples are shown below in Profile Description 1 and 2.

Photographer
Fine Art & Portrait Photography / limited
editions. Awarded, exhibits & works international.
Amsterdam based. Bookings: info@
🔗 2 links

Profile Description 1: (February 15, 2023). Source: Material Collected Through Netnography.

Next : @rotterdamphoto 2023
FRESH EYES Photo Talent 2022 @gup.magazine
Stereosis photography school @stereosis
_photography.school
📘 Facebook profile

Profile Description 2: (February 15, 2023). Source: Material Collected Through Netnography.

Another feature that appeared to be commonly used by the photographers to structure their profiles, is the option of “pinning” posts to the top of the profile. This allows users to select up to three posts that will remain in the first row of the profile, even when new posts are published. At the time of the interview, Chun-Li and Leon, for example, had both used this feature. For Chun-Li, it was an additional element that could help her organize the visual appearance of the profile. Leon, on the other hand, reported to have chosen three posts that he considered to be most representative of his artistic style and give an idea of the photography he is interested in.

4.3 Building Relationships

The results of this study show clearly what has been laid out by theory: “Networking, networking, networking” (Laura) is seen as one of the most relevant practices for contemporary artists and can be significantly supported by the use of social media. For the photographers, Instagram is seen to facilitate relationship-building on different levels and with various audiences. The goal can be to get in contact with new people, confirm connections made in the offline world, or maintain and strengthen existing relationships. Hereby, three distinct relationships stand out, namely between the artists and their general following, gatekeepers, as well other artists.

4.3.1 The Artists’ IG Following

When only drawing on the interview data, connecting with the general audience on Instagram appeared to be least pronounced within the photographers’ online relationship-building practices. In particular, when it came to the question of active communication, most respondents stated that they only rarely get in direct contact with their fans. Klara, for example, reported that the reactions she receives from her audience are usually rather modest. She hereby emphasised, “You know, I’m not like an influencer who somehow has 500,000 people who follow me and cheer or cry at everything I say”. In a similar way, Chun-Li mentioned that she is more often approached by people who like her work offline than on Instagram. In her opinion, this is due to the general culture of communication on Instagram:

I guess sometimes people just don't want to write anything online. Because I think it's also part of the Instagram life when you're just scrolling through all the images and you're like tapping and giving likes [...]. And you think that's already enough communication with an artist [laughter]. (Chun-Li, 34)

This is not to say, however, that the photographers do not value these small interactions with their audience. Likes, comments, or even followers are regarded by several respondents as

important indicators for growing connections. The participants' perceptions hereby align with what Boyd (2011) emphasized within the theory of social networking sites as networked publics, arguing that small elements of communication on these platforms should not be disregarded in their value for confirming relationships.

In contrast to the interviews, the observations online showed more ways in which the photographers connected with their audiences. Interestingly, these were mostly based on building bridges between the offline and the online world. Individual photographers, for instance, shared pictures or memories of offline interactions with their fans which can be seen as a way of confirming newly found connections and transferring them onto the online platform. Moreover, Instagram allowed the photographers to enter certain conversations with their audiences, that might not have been possible to start offline. Following exhibitions or other events, for example, many of the artists made use of the platform to thank their audience for attending and expressing interest in their art. Hereby, the style of communication used by the photographers appeared especially relevant. Next to using rather informal language, they often addressed their audience directly by applying phrases such as "Thank you so much for coming!", or "Hope to see you again soon and tell you more about my project!". Similarly, when artists promoted their upcoming exhibitions, they could extend invitations directly to their fans, saying "Hope to see you there!" or "Come over and say hi!".

Furthermore, continuing relationships with fans on Instagram, also allowed the photographers to follow up on requests or questions they received from their audience offline. Chun-Li, for instance, mentioned that during exhibitions, visitors often expressed interest in how her photographs are made. She then reacted to this by publishing behind-the-scenes material on her Instagram account, showing the audience the process behind her art.

I met lots of people who told me that there is some kind of magic and they want to know what is behind it. [...] So I share it and I think that makes a really good connection between the work you've done and you as a person, you as an artist, and the people watching it. I think it's a really good bond between all of us. (Chun-Li, 34)

4.3.2 Networking with Gatekeepers

When it comes building and maintaining relationships with gatekeepers from the photography field, networking, in the way it is defined by theory, became more apparent on Instagram. Once again, however, most of the participants emphasized that they mainly use social media as a tool to continue connections made in the offline world, keeping in touch with relevant individuals who have the potential to offer work opportunities, such as festival organizers, gallerists,

curators, or editorial directors. Some photographers also mentioned, that these are the main accounts they follow on the platform, in order to keep their activities on Instagram primarily focused on staying updated on what is happening in the photography sector.

As already mentioned in the chapter on promotion, some interviewees considered the activity of updating to be crucial for keeping in touch with gatekeepers. Hereby it appears to constitute an advantage for the photographers that one single post can simultaneously reach several important individuals, facilitating networking in a faster and easier way (Richmond et al., 2011). Alec also emphasized that the continuity of networking via Instagram allows him to build deeper relationships and earn the trust of relevant individuals:

Personal relationships are everything in the business. I came to find that out. It's not just about how good you are at taking photos, because there's a lot of people who are good at taking photos. It's more about knowing each other, wanting to work with each other and, you know, a sense of trust. [...] So I just try to build those relationships over time and then slowly things seem to start happening. (Alec, 36)

The online observations showed another important networking strategy, namely the photographers mentioning and tagging the accounts of gatekeepers in their posts. In general, this stood out as one of the most common ways of displaying and strengthening connections with others on Instagram and will therefore also be discussed in the next chapter on relationship-building between artists. When it comes to gatekeepers, the photography festival in Rotterdam can be used as a prime example to demonstrate how the participants used tagging to strengthen their relationship with the festival. Both before, during, and after the festival most of the observed photographers published posts with material related to the event where they mentioned the festival account, exemplified in Profile Post 3. Posts like these are likely to increase the awareness of the festival organizers, or at least the person in charge of social media, for the connection that exists between them and the photographer. When mentioned in a post, the festival account often reacted by reposting the content in their Instagram story, which appeared like a form of acknowledging or confirming the relationship. Furthermore, these activities can lead to a mutual subscription between the festival account and the photographer, thereby entering into a longer-lasting connection. What must also be mentioned at this point, is that these activities can provide a way for the participants to accumulate reputational capital (Gandini, 2016) and strengthen their brand (Duffy et al., 2013) by displaying relevant social connections within the photography field to their online audience.



Profile Post 3: “Loved being part of @rotterdamphoto 2023” (February 14, 2023). Source: Instagram Account Samuel.

4.3.3 Connecting with other Artists

Nex to keeping in touch with fans and gatekeepers, the process of creating and nurturing connections with other artists stood out from both the interviews and the observed activities of the photographers online as the most pronounced form of relationship-building on Instagram. Whether it is about the exchange of knowledge, reciprocal promotion and support, or even the possibility of collaborations, there seemed to be general agreement amongst the participants of this study that artists must work together to succeed in the field. These perceptions can be interpreted in connection with arguments presented by scholars such as Gandini (2016) or Wyszomirski & Chang (2017), who emphasized that solidarity within artistic communities becomes increasingly important since institutional support is mostly lacking in the contemporary arts sector.

During Rotterdam Photo’23, for instance, several of the photographers posted content in which they raised awareness for the work of other festival participants. Story Post 6, for instance, shows the start of several story posts, in which Alec presented some of his favorite artworks from other photographers at the festival. Stories like these often resulted in a repost by the respective other artists. Doing this allows the photographers to combine their audiences, therefore extending their reach through reciprocal promotion. When asked how Alec himself feels about other artists reposting his work, for instance, he emphasized:

Oh, I love it. I would love everybody to do it obviously. First, because obviously it means that they liked it enough to share it in their stories; and second, just because of pure reach and algorithm purposes, you know, you show your work to more people, you reach more people [...]. And yeah, also to create a community. (Alec, 36)



Story Post 6: "Some of my favourite among the other exhibits here at @rotterdamphoto festival..." (February 11, 2023). Source: Instagram Account Alec.

In contrast to relationship-building with fans and gatekeepers, which has mainly been about upholding existing connections, the interview participants also expressed more openness towards entering new relationships with other artists on Instagram. Several interviewees, for instance, reported that they had approached other photographers on the platform to ask about their artistic work and experiences within the photography sector. Furthermore, some participants talked about collaborative projects with other artists that originated from Instagram. Hereby, the exchange often exceeded the photography field, leading to collaborations between artists from different disciplines. Klara, for instance, shared her story about how she received a text for her photography book from an artist she contacted via Instagram:

For my last book I simply asked an artist whose work I really liked, if he wanted to write a text for my book and he spontaneously said yes, even though he didn't know me and he didn't even want the big money for it, but he was just like "Yes, of course! We have to stick together. Here you have the text." So yes, that was very cool. (Klara, 45)

Another opportunity that was highlighted by some participants in the context of connecting with other artists on Instagram, was the possibility to maintain relationships across national

borders. As artists are known to often switch places due to the project-based nature of their work (Woronkowicz & Noonan, 2019), international networks can be especially relevant for their careers. Staying in touch with all artists that one meets in the course of a career, however, can be difficult, as Judith mentioned. Since setting up her Instagram account, Judith therefore particularly enjoyed reviving former connections she made in various stages of her artistic career:

I have had several stations, professionally and in life, and important people have always fallen by the wayside when I moved on. I'm not good at keeping close contact over the distance. But now, all of a sudden, people show up again, also from the professional field and that's super good. I have the feeling that a lot could happen and there are suddenly all these possibilities [...], that's great. (Judith, 41)

4.4 Becoming Informed and Inspired

Closely connected to the activity of relationship-building with other artists is the opportunity to gather relevant information and creative inspiration online. Several of the respondents emphasized that by bringing all different actors from the art world together on one platform, Instagram provides crucial insight into the sector, including upcoming events and exhibitions, as well as aesthetic trends and developments within the arts. Judith felt that the field of photography becomes “more permeable” on Instagram, allowing information and visual impressions to flow faster and reach artists more easily than through magazines, newsletters, or websites. The photographer hereby especially appreciated that Instagram reduces the need for actively searching for information and rather passively offers customized content which is likely to fit the artist’s interests.

In this context, the platform was also considered to be one of the major sources to make artists aware of current work opportunities. Given the enormous number of users, including a pool of potential clients, and the high pace of content distribution, some participants felt that using Instagram significantly increases their chances for finding artistic assignments. As the online observations showed, the connection to other artists played an important role here as well. Especially in their Instagram stories, some participants consistently shared information about open calls for artists, thereby drawing each other’s attention to artistic opportunities.

The story feature in general appeared to provide a good way for the photographers to reach out to their followers and ask them for information. Leon, for instance, used the immediacy and extensive reach of story posts to find models for his photography projects. Furthermore, he frequently gathered ideas and recommendations from his audience, for

instance, regarding shooting locations (Story Post 7). Other artists were also observed to ask their followers questions about the photography process or equipment, building on their online network of photography enthusiasts.



Story Post 7: "Best places for outdoor shooting in Berlin?" (February 27, 2023).
Source: Instagram Account Leon.

Chun-Li furthermore recognized Instagram to be particularly useful for collecting information and knowledge from other fields. As her photographic work with still lifes is strongly based on the composition of various objects and materials, she is always on the lookout for inspiration from other crafts. The photographer emphasized, that the platform enables her to find these people and their work without knowing precisely where to look for them. Chun-Li hereby points out a crucial advantage of social media that has also been highlighted by Richmond et al. (2011) in the context of online networking, namely the possibility to gather knowledge from areas that are not easily accessible offline:

It's not about photography, because I'm trying not to get inspired through photography. I'm trying to find like new florists and flouristique ideas there, or the guys who are making furniture and working with materials, because these fields are pretty far from mine and I don't know where to find those people. I mean the platforms they use to share their portfolios and their names are not familiar to me, because I work in an absolutely different field, and I can't know everything [laughter]. Instagram helps me to find those people who have a pretty similar mindset, but work in different fields. (Chun-Li, 34)

However, using the platform as a source of inspiration, has also made many participants more aware of their competition, often resulting in feelings of anxiety and stress. Leon, for instance, highlighted that on Instagram “there's always going to be someone else photographing similar things” and that artists must find a way to not get intimidated by that. Similarly, Klara described the process of becoming inspired through the platform as a “mixed blessing”. While it would sometimes be extremely motivating for her to follow the artistic progress of other photographers, at other times it would be “creatively exhausting”, making Instagram equally a driver and damper for creative development.

5 CONCLUSION

Following the more detailed presentation of the results that emerged from this research project, this chapter will now circle back to the original research question: How do photographers use Instagram in the process of establishing an artistic career?

The theoretical contextualization of the photographers' social media use within the dynamics of the contemporary artistic labor market has proven valuable to gain a better understanding of how artists generally approach their careers nowadays and what role social media can play in this context. There seemed to be overall recognition among the participants that the responsibility for advancing one's career lies with oneself, making Instagram a useful tool for increasing their agency in determining the direction of their career paths. As the results have shown, Instagram was particularly appreciated for enhancing visibility, allowing the photographers to connect with their audiences, gatekeepers, and other artists, as well as providing a source of inspiration and information. Nevertheless, the study also revealed certain challenges that, in some cases, limited the extent to which the photographers could use Instagram as a tool in their careers. At the core of this was the ongoing negotiation between entrepreneurial and bohemian artistic identities, followed by a perceived reduction in agency due to complex platform-specific dynamics, such as the algorithm or the general overload and fast nature of imagery on Instagram.

In comparison with previous research on the use of social media in contemporary artistic careers, some topics particularly stood out from this study. Although entrepreneurial competencies and tasks are increasingly acknowledged as requirements for leading an artistic career nowadays, the results of this study align with arguments that bohemian values are still impacting the career decisions of many artists (Gerber, 2017; Lindström, 2016). On Instagram, the participants saw themselves confronted with several challenges that could lead them to compromise their artistic values, especially when it came to the need for adjusting their content in order to become popular on the platform. As the photographers recognized that Instagram mainly provides visibility for what the majority wants to see, most of them disregarded the idea of achieving high popularity on the platform in exchange of being authentic to their work and identity as artists.

This also impacted their marketing and networking strategies on the platform. Aligning with the results of a study done by Haynes & Marshall (2018) on the social media use of musicians, most photographers focused less on reaching new people on Instagram, and more connecting with their already existing audiences. In the context of networking, the platform was especially valued for strengthening and maintaining relationships that were made in the offline

world. Although the participants reported that most influential people and institutions of the photography field can be found online, they still felt that it is important to establish the initial contact with them in person rather than reaching out on Instagram. After that, however, the platform was appreciated for allowing to continue these relationships, often over long distances, and periods of time, and especially in the form of updating. Once connections are confirmed through mutual subscription, the photographers can keep in touch with them simply by posting content. Instagram thus makes it possible for artists to maintain large networks of contacts without having to invest in each relationship separately. Respondents recognized this form of networking as a way of staying in the minds of relevant people, thereby increasing the likelihood of being considered for job opportunities as they arise.

The possibility of subscribing to profiles also appeared to be a crucial factor for the platform's relevance as an online portfolio or business card. In contrast to other portfolio options, such as the website, Instagram was recognized to increase the chances that viewers visit the photographers' profiles more often and thereby stay updated on their progress. Therefore, it was particularly important for the artists to keep a unique and stylistic coherent profile appearance, leading to a lot of curatorial responsibility on their Instagram accounts.

Finally, in comparison to previous studies, the overarching significance of networking with other artists and strengthening the artistic community through Instagram appeared as an unexpected result of this research. This aligns clearly with the theoretical claims that institutional support structures are increasingly lacking in the contemporary arts sector and artists must often rely on each other for finding work opportunities (Gandini, 2016; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). However, it also became evident that this is not only about career support, but also about the exchange of knowledge between individuals with similar artistic interests, allowing them to inspire each other and enter valuable collaborations. The affordances of the platform hereby make it possible for the photographers to reach out to individuals from other artistic disciplines, career stages, and even countries, thus, expanding their social circle in a way that would not be easily done offline. Following an argument presented by Gill & Pratt (2008), networking in this context seems to be "less about 'schmoozing' the powerful" (p. 18) and more about socializing with like-minded individuals who can provide support, inspiration, and motivation to drive each other in their artistic development.

There are, however, also some limitations to this research. Considering the long-standing theorization of the art world as a closely cooperating network of actors, who not only work together in assigning value to artistic products, but also in evaluating the careers of artists (Becker, 1976), a significant limitation of this study regards the focus on only one perspective

out of this web of actors, namely that of the artists themselves. Especially the exploration of reputation-building as one of the key pillars of artistic careers was found to demand the integration of further perspectives, including that of experts, gatekeepers, tastemakers, and audiences. Only the consideration of all these actors' perceptions can give insight into the impact of Instagram on the reputation of artists, thereby also revealing the extent to which the platform is being taken seriously within the art world.

Furthermore, as one participant has emphasized during an interview, it is important to know who is in charge of the social media accounts of gatekeepers to understand the online networking processes with these actors. As it becomes more common for institutions in the cultural sector to have designated employees in charge of social media (March, 2022), directly reaching relevant individuals through Instagram can be difficult for the artists. By exploring social media networking practices further from the perspective of gatekeepers, future research could therefore contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact that these platforms have on the process of building and maintaining relationships between different actors of the artistic field.

Another issue that did not come up as much as expected, given its extensive discussion in theory, was the democratizing effect of social media for artists' careers. While some of the photographers indeed talked about Instagram as an easily accessible and low-cost platform compared to other opportunities for showing work to larger audiences, they did not address the question of democratization much further. This can potentially be connected to the sampling method for this study. Limiting the sample to photographers that were selected to exhibit at the Photography Festival in Rotterdam means that all participants already gained a certain recognition by traditional gatekeepers, thus not having to depend on social media alone to develop their career. Furthermore, although the sample did not solely include artists based in Europe, the study presents a Eurocentric perspective on the issue. This can be limiting for the exploration of the democratizing effect of Instagram in the sense that most respondents work in similarly structured and well-developed artistic fields, disregarding the impact social media can have on artists who want to develop their careers in environments that provide less institutional opportunities (Komarova, 2018). It could therefore be beneficial to base future research in this context on more diverse samples in terms of nationality, as well as artists whose careers are primarily developed online.

Lastly, the results of this study must also be discussed in the context of social media being a rapidly evolving environment, constantly changing the dynamics and routines of the online population (Laestadius & Witt, 2022). Throughout the interviews, several participants

expressed uncertainty about how Instagram's increasing focus on video material will change the role it can play for the work of photographers and how it will affect their practices on the platform. Most of the respondents saw this as a challenge, since adapting to a new medium would require investing even more time and resources in their social media use. Although the head of Instagram, Adam Mosseri, released a statement this year saying that they will work on achieving a better balance between video and photo content on the platform (Welch, 2023), the increasing desire for video content appears to be well on its way. It will therefore be especially relevant for future research to explore how artists are responding to these changes and whether they will alter the significance of Instagram for the careers of photographers.

This study thus not only provides answers to the question of how photographers use Instagram in the process of establishing careers as artists, but also raises many new issues in this context. Overall, this thesis contributes to the fundament for further research into the constantly evolving dynamics of artistic careers, the impact of social media platforms on the practices of artists, and the general development of the contemporary artistic landscape.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF THE INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

| Name (Pseudonym) | Age | Based in | Occupational Status | Instagram Followers (06/2023) |
|------------------|-----|-----------------|---|-------------------------------|
| Laura | 21 | The Netherlands | Student | 2,017 |
| Ilse | 27 | The Netherlands | Full-Time Photographer | 938 |
| Leon | 32 | Korea | Full-Time Photographer | 7,888 |
| Alec | 36 | USA | Freelance Photographer, Photo-Editor, and Teaching | 2,132 |
| Chun-Li | 34 | Lithuania | Full-Time Photographer | 9,223 |
| Samuel | 25 | Austria | Freelance Photographer and Architect | 44,9K |
| Klara | 45 | Germany | Freelance Photographer and Part-Time Graphic Designer | 494 |
| Judith | 41 | Germany | Full-Time Photographer, both Freelance and as Employee at a Company | 135 |

APPENDIX B: EXAMPLE OF THE OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

| Date | Observation | Format | Context Information | Methodological Reflections | Theoretical Reflections |
|------------|--|----------------|--|-----------------------------|--|
| 08.02.2023 | <p>The participant shares a blog post of a service called "pictr" which is connecting creative individuals and assisting with entering creative competitions. "Pictr" mentioned the Photography Festival in a blog post and promoted it. The participant shares this blog post and mentions "pictr" with a heart emoji. Another participant shared an article by a photography newspaper that wrote about the Rotterdam Photo Festival and mentions their Instagram profile in the story post.</p> | Story | | Possible Interview Question | <p>Networking</p> <p>Why are they mentioning the profiles of these other actors? Is it a way of indicating quality (that can be recognized by the follower numbers of the other profile → e.g., what seems to be a popular newspaper) or do they also want to catch the attention of the other actors by mentioning them? (consider: the others receive a notification when someone mentions them in a story, etc.)</p> |
| 08.02.2023 | <p>The participant posts a story including a (random) cat picture and a notification informing the participant that one of his posts about the photography festival has been mentioned in nine story posts by other individuals. The participant adds the text "Thanks for all the love guys" and a heart emoji, expressing gratitude about others promoting his work.</p> | Story | | | <p>Look at literature exploring common Instagram behavior or strategies (like the one paper about tagging strategies). It seems very common and almost expected to repost stories where someone mentions you. It feels like a way of acknowledging or even showing appreciation that another person promotes your work.</p> <p>→ "Regramming" (https://blog.sendle.com/how-to-repost-on-instagram) "Regram content to support a brands reputation or credibility. Regramming a post by a social influencer that shows that person wearing or using your product is a valuable form of social proof." (internet)</p> |
| 08.02.2023 | <p>The festival account of the Rotterdam Photo'23 does so-called "Take overs" where some of the participants take over the account of the festival for a couple of days (here: two days) and share some of their pictures with descriptions about the project that they will exhibit at the festival. This seems to be a common practice that I also know from my previous experience with competitions.</p> | Instagram Post | | | <p>Promotion = this can help the photographer access a broader audience since the competition is likely to have more (or other) followers on their profile.</p> |
| 09.02.2023 | <p>On the first day of the photography festival many participants posted pictures of their container at the festival, mentioning the opening hours of the festival in the caption of the pictures. Some of the participants hereby also add texts like "Be welcome!", "I want to invite you to ...", "Hope to see you in Rotterdam!", etc.</p> | Posts | Today starts the Rotterdam Photo'23 Festival | Possible Interview Question | <p>Audience communication → who is the audience? Who is the "you" in these sentences?</p> |


APPENDIX C: OVERVIEW OF THE COLLECTED MATERIAL

| Method of Data Collection | Material | Amount / Length |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Online Observations | Written Fieldnotes | Three Weeks |
| | Screen-Captured Images | 429 Images |
| Qualitative Interviews | Interviews + Verbatim Transcripts | Eight (Average Length = 56 Minutes) |

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

| | |
|--|---|
| Project Title and Version | Social Media and Contemporary Artistic Careers: An Exploration of How Photographers Use Instagram in the Process of Establishing an Artistic Career |
| Name of Principal Investigator | Antonia Wechner |
| Name of Organisation | Erasmus University Rotterdam – Erasmus School of History, Culture, and Communication. |
| Purpose of the Study | I am inviting you to participate in this research project about the Instagram use of photographers in the process of establishing an artistic career. This research is part of my master thesis project. The purpose of the study is to gain further insight into the role of social media for the development of artistic careers in contemporary times. Furthermore, by specifically focusing on the photographer, this project introduces a new research subject, complementing previous work dealing with career strategies of other visual artists or musicians. |
| Procedures | <p>You will participate in an interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. You will be asked questions about your work and aspirations as a photographer as well as your use of Instagram for your artistic career. Sample questions include: “What are you currently doing to further your career as an artist?” and “Do you consider Instagram to be important for receiving feedback on your work?”.</p> <p>To participate you must be at least 18 years old.</p> |
| Potential and anticipated Risks and Discomforts | There are no obvious physical, legal, or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time. |
| Potential Benefits | Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you. As a result of participating, you may better understand the role that Instagram plays within the photography field as well as the opportunities and threats of using Instagram to further your artistic career. |
| Sharing the Results | If you wish to be informed about the results of the research, these can be shared with you on request after the completion of the master thesis project. The expected date for this is mid-July 2023. Furthermore, the research findings will potentially be shared more broadly, for example, through publications and conferences. |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Confidentiality</p> | <p>Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request.</p> <p>This research project involves making audio recordings of the interview with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., journal articles and book chapters). In the case of publication, pseudonyms will be used. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location in the researchers' offices or on the researcher's password-protected computers and will be destroyed within ten years of the initiation of the study.</p> |
| <p>Right to Withdraw and Questions</p> | <p>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalised or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</p> <p>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the primary investigator:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Antonia Wechner 667008aw@eur.nl @masterresearchwechner</p> |
| <p>Statement of Consent</p> | <p>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</p> <p>If you agree to participate, please sign your name on the next page.</p> |
| <p>Audio Recording</p> | <p>I consent to have my interview audio recorded.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> no</p> |
| <p>Secondary Use</p> | <p>I consent to have the anonymised data be used for secondary analysis.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> yes</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> no</p> |

| | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Signature and Date | NAME PARTICIPANT | NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR Antonia Wechner |
| | SIGNATURE | SIGNATURE  |
| | DATE | DATE |

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you again for participating in this interview. At first, I want to tell you once more what this is about. For my master thesis project, I'm looking into the use of Instagram in artistic careers of photographers. During the interview I will ask you questions about what your work as a photographer looks like, what your aspirations and goals are, and how you use Instagram within your work. If you don't understand a question at any point or you would like me to explain it further, always feel free to interrupt and ask me about it.

Introduction

- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and what you do?
- When did you start doing photography? What sparked your initial interest in photography?
- What role does photography play in your day-to-day life?
- How would you describe the kind of photography you're doing?
- Would you define yourself as an artist? Why (not)?
- Have you undergone any training as a photographer?

Working practices

- What is your occupational status? Is being a photographer your main job?
- Do you work as a freelance photographer?
- If yes, what do you like and what do you dislike about working freelance?
- (Do you have other jobs on the side?)
- What does a typical week for you look like?
- How much time do you spend on artistic practice? And how much time do you spend on non-artistic activities that are still connected to your work as a photographer?
- Can you describe what your work as a photographer looks like? What activities does it include?
- (Apart from creating artworks, can you think of other activities that you have to do for your career as a photographer?)
- How would you weigh these activities in terms of importance?
- What are the parts of your work as a photographer that you particularly like? And are there things that you must do but don't really like doing?
- How do you usually find work opportunities?

Career Aspirations

- How did you get to the current point in your career?
- How would you define success as an artist? (What would it mean for you to succeed as a photographer?)
- What would you say are the most important skills for a photographer in order to succeed in the field?
- What are you currently doing to further your career as a photographer?

Entrepreneurship

- As you mentioned, you do the majority of your work on your own, so besides creating, you also have to promote your work, market your work, establish connections within the field. So would you say that to some extent you're also an entrepreneur? Why (not)?
- Do you have some previous experience/training in the field of entrepreneurship?
- Have you ever felt like it's hard to balance your artistic and entrepreneurial goals? (What comes first to you?)
- What means of promotion do you use to increase visibility as an artist?

Instagram

- Do you remember when you started using Instagram for your photography work and why?
- Do you keep your photography profile and your private Instagram profile separate? Why (not)?
- Do you consider the activities on your Instagram profile part of your work as a photographer?
- What do you like and dislike about using Instagram for your work as a photographer? (opportunities/threats)
- In your experience, how important are Instagram metrics (numbers of likes, followers, etc.) for your success as an artist?
- Do you feel like Instagram can help you with finding work and exhibition opportunities?
- Can you think of any other important information that Instagram can provide for your photography career?

- Which other photographers do you follow? Which profiles do you find attractive and what do you like about them?
- How would you say does your Instagram profile differ from your website? What do you prefer using?
- If someone asks about your work, do you usually give them your website or your Instagram?
- Do you use the additional features that the business profile on Instagram offers, for example the Instagram statistics?

Networking

- What value do you put into building a network? And how important is Instagram for you in this context?
- Do you often get asked about your photography Instagram profile? If yes, who is asking?
- Have you ever been approached by someone on Instagram who was interested in your work?
- Do you feel like Instagram can help you reach important gatekeepers of the photography field?
- Do you feel like Instagram can help you with entering the international photography scene?

Audiences

- When you share something on Instagram, who do you think of as your audience? Who do you want to see your posts?
- Do you also actively interact with your audience on Instagram? How?
- Do you feel like you can reach a different or a broader audience by showing your work on Instagram?
- Do you consider Instagram to be important for getting feedback on your work?
- How does it make you feel / What does it mean to you when people post images, videos of your work on their Instagram and mention you in these posts?

Self-Branding

- As there are many photographers on Instagram, I imagine there's also a lot of competition – so how are you trying to distinguish yourself as a photographer from other Instagram accounts?

- Do you think it's also important to let your audience get to know you as an artist on Instagram (and not only your artworks)?

Monetization

- Do you feel like Instagram offers you (or increases the) opportunities to make money as an artist? If yes, which?
- Have you ever sold your work via Instagram? How did you do that?

Inspiration

- Would you consider Instagram to be a source of inspiration for your photographic work?

Examples for Account-Specific Questions

- Why did you decide to pin these three pictures to the top of your profile?
- I see that you don't really use hashtags. Why is that?
- I see that at a certain point you decided to set all your pictures in a white frame on Instagram. Can you tell me why you started doing that?
- I see that you post Behind-the-scenes material every now and then on your Instagram profile. Would you say it is important for you to show your audience the process behind your photographs? Why (not)?
- Most of your posts only include very short captions or none at all. Is this something that you do intentionally?
- I see that you are currently posting a lot of content on your new photography book. Would you say Instagram is well suited for drawing attention to new work?

APPENDIX F: EXAMPLE OF THE THREE-STEP CODING PROCESS

| Online Observations & Instagram Data | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Selective Code (Theme) | Axial Codes (Categories) | Open Codes |
| Building Relationships | Relationship with Audience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Picture of Artist with Audience ▪ Picture of Artist with Buyer ▪ Artist Reposting a Post by Fan ▪ Artist Directly Communicating with Audience ▪ Artist Seeking Support from Audience ▪ Artist Providing Material that the Audience asked for |
| | Relationship with Gatekeepers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tagging Gatekeepers ▪ Tagging Rotterdam Photo Festival ▪ Artist Expressing Gratitude for Participating in Event ▪ Artist Reposting Content by Gatekeeper |
| | Relationship with Artists | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Picture of Artist with other Artists ▪ Tagging other Artists ▪ Promoting the Work of other Artists ▪ Congratulating other Artists ▪ Reposting other Artists' Posts ▪ Exchanging Information with other Artists |
| | Relationships with Others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Tagging People Involved in the Artistic Process ▪ Tagging Sponsors ▪ Promoting Services used within the Artistic Process |
| Interview Data | | |
| Selective Code (Theme) | Axial Codes (Categories) | Open Codes |
| Building Relationships | Relationship with Audience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Importance of Feedback ▪ Lack of Feedback ▪ Lack of Communication ▪ Not having "Fans" |

| | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Easier to Approach Each Other in the Offline World |
| | <p>Relationship with Gatekeepers</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Following Mainly People from the Photography Sector ▪ Tool for Updating Relevant Individuals ▪ Being Visible for Gatekeepers as Main Goal ▪ Staying in the Mind of Gatekeepers ▪ Option of Subscribing as Opportunity ▪ Artist Was Contacted for Work Opportunity |
| | <p>Relationship with Artists</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Instagram Provides a Sense of Community ▪ Looking up other Photographers ▪ Following mainly other Photographers ▪ Importance of Community for Career Success ▪ Looking for Collaborations ▪ Networking with Artists ▪ Staying in Contact with Artists ▪ Reposting as Pushing Each Other |

APPENDIX G: RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CODES

