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## Womenpreneurs in a Digital Environment: Utilizing Instagram to Build a Personal Brand

Michelle N. Nuñez

University of South Florida, michellenatalienunez@gmail.com

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Womenpreneurs in a Digital Environment: Utilizing Instagram to Build a Personal Brand

by

Michelle N. Nuñez

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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with a concentration in Media Studies  
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Major Professor: Artemio Ramirez Jr., Ph.D.  
Travis Bell, Ph.D.  
Kelli S. Burns, Ph.D.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this thesis to the students that have ever felt like giving up. Completing this thesis has been an experience of growth and learning and the strength that I have gained will be carried with me throughout the rest of my life. I understand what it's like to feel like the world is up against you, and I understand what it's like to feel like the world has your back. What I've learned, is that you are your number one fan. Of course, I have immense gratitude for my mother, sisters, family, friends, and professors that have supported me through this entire process. The truth is, the world does have your back and this life was meant to challenge you so that you can become all that you were meant to become. Cheers to the future.

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## **Abstract**

Personal branding on social media is a growing and expanding field. The present research works to uncover the processes and practices of womenpreneurs and the ways in which they utilize social media, specifically Instagram, to build and maintain their personal brands. Grounded theory is used to underpin the research and provide a basis of which the study is conducted. The review of literature provides the context necessary to support the methods of a content analysis and semi-structured interviews. There is a gap in research as it pertains to the conceptualization of personal branding practices on Instagram and the present study works to build a bridge to understanding these practices. Online presentation of the self is an expanding body of research in academia, and the present research works to contribute new knowledge surrounding the exploitation of the most popular visually based social media platform Instagram to create and maintain successful personal brands.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Personal branding has become a phenomenon that gives an opportunity to individuals to brand themselves in ways that was once reserved for those with resources. With the emergence of social media, business owners can now position themselves as experts and leaders within their industry. Personal branding at a macro level has been around for many years, dating back to many published works that began the movement toward branding oneself as the image of a company, rather than the company itself being the branded image.

This thesis examines a group of female digital entrepreneurs utilizing Instagram as a means to build their personal brands. The purpose of the study surrounds the need for understanding branding practices of successful entrepreneurs and the ways in which they use Instagram as a tool to build and maintain their personal brands, as well as obtain and nurture relationships with clients and prospective clients. Grounded theory was used to underpin the goal of this study and interviews took place with nine female digital entrepreneurs, referred to as “womenpreneurs”, to gain an understanding of their personal branding practices and viewpoints on what works with regard to Instagram as a personal branding tool.

The present research looks to create an understanding surrounding the personal branding practices of womenpreneurs as it relates to Instagram so to build a theory using the data collected. Women were selected as the demographic for the study because of their growing presence within the entrepreneurial fields and the lack of research involving women and their

business practices. Women are increasingly embedding themselves within the entrepreneurial fields and this thesis works to understand the branding practices that they utilize to build successful personal brands on Instagram.

This thesis is broken down into five chapters. Chapter two has a focus on the literature surrounding grounded theory, personal branding, Instagram, and identifies the research questions used as the basis for the present research. Chapter three reviews the methodology used for the research. Interviews were conducted with female digital entrepreneurs to understand their personal branding practices as it relates to Instagram and the tools they utilize to present themselves in the digital environment. Chapter four dives into the results of the study and works to provide a blueprint of the personal branding practices of the interviewees on Instagram. Chapter six discusses the results in a manner that supports the main goal of the thesis— to understand the practices of digital entrepreneurs in the social space. Finally, chapter five discusses the results of the study and identifies the limitations that were experienced within the study and concludes with a direction for future research on the topic of personal branding on Instagram.

## **Background**

Personal branding is a unique phenomenon that has grown exponentially over the last decade. According to Philbrick and Cleveland (2015), a personal brand is defined as “the combination of personal attributes, values, drivers, strengths, and passions you draw from that differentiates your unique promise of value from your peers, and helps those assessing you to determine if they should hire you or do business with you” (p. 183). A personal brand identifies and communicates who you are and provides context into the value you can contribute to the world.

Society has seen the growth of personal brands which has led to the building of reputable businesses and allowing these businesses to maintain brand loyalty. Everyone has a personal brand, but having it is not enough. In the past, branding efforts required extensive financial support for promotion to create brand awareness and afterward brand loyalty. However, the ideological and technical structure of social media has given rise to the opportunity for people to promote themselves as brands in a cost-efficient manner that is effective. Social platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook now provide the opportunity to manage personal brands easily (Karaduman, 2013). Extending a brand's profitable life is of critical importance and a personal brand builds the relationship necessary within the expanding business world to form brand equity and loyalty with its customers.

The business world is beginning to recognize the importance of controlling personal brands and is now offering strategic advice about how to project a desired personal brand identity through the use of different social media (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011). New applications and platforms have created an online environment that enables individuals to manage and maintain their personal brands, nonetheless, despite the importance of branding and the high adoption rate of social media, very few specific empirical studies have dealt with these issues (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2010; Hsu & Tsou, 2011). A personal brand allows an individual to present themselves through self-disclosure and the revelation of personal information that is consistent with the image one would like to give (Schau & Gilly, 2003). This self-disclosure is a critical step in the development of close relationships, and with social media acting as a very active and fast-moving domain, it is crucial to build upon guidelines that can be applied to any form of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). According to Brems, Broersma, Graham, & Temmerman (2016), "personal branding is thus a matter of knowing your skills and persona, and



presenting them on a well-arranged platter to others” (p. 445). Personal branding is the evolution of presenting oneself in a manner that attracts and sustains a personal audience based around the self. It is also noted by (Brems et al., 2016) that “personal branding by journalists on social media is still very limited and confines itself mainly to the United States” (p. 444). This statement is used as support in justifying the importance of personal branding in the digital world, however, the present study relates this to womenpreneurs and their branding practices on Instagram.

There is a gap in research regarding how female digital entrepreneurs are utilizing social media to build their brands. Liu and Suh (2017) noted that “little empirical research has systematically examined how people use social media as a tool to establish their branded-selves” (p. 12). The present study looks at female entrepreneurs because of the “rising number of women-owned businesses” and past research that has provided “modest evidence that overt discrimination that overt discrimination, or any systematic lack of access to resources that women may experience, impedes their ability to succeed in business.” (Fischer, Reuber, & Dyke, 1993, p. 151). Now, in the 21st century, women empowerment has grown exponentially, and the present study works to understand the processes they utilize for personal branding on Instagram. For the purpose of this study, a female digital entrepreneur will be referred to as a “womenpreneur” who utilizes digital media to build, grow and sustain her business. Social media is an ever-growing expansion of the online world and this thesis works to understand how it is used as a beneficial tool for womenpreneur’s and their personal brands. It is evident that social media platforms have established a public persona, and the power of a company's image is now in their hands (Engholm & Hansen, 2014).

Public relations have shifted in the 21st century, and it is important to understand the tools that are available in this new media market as a business wanting to build reputable relationships with their customers, potential customers, and the general public. The most cost-efficient way to do this is through the exploitation of social media and all of its untapped potential in personal brand building tools for womenpreneurs. The research in this thesis focuses on womenpreneurs who have established their personal brands and the ways in which social media is used as a tool to build and sustain the image that they have created. Personal branding lends itself to personal selling because personality traits often lead to sales success. This branding technique allows an individual to promote their strengths and build a relationship with their target audience (Labrecque et al., 2011). This thesis aims to shine a light on the personal branding and personal selling practices that are used to develop and grow a personal brand as a womenpreneur utilizing Instagram as a business tool.

There is little research within the domain of how social media, specifically Instagram, is being utilized in order to build strong personal brands. Social media is a growing aspect within the field of mass communications, and it is important to be aware of the implications of its usage in regard to building and maintaining personal brands. The concept of a personal brand began making its appearance in business literature at least in the 1920's (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). While there is a plentiful amount of literature regarding the nature of personal branding on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, there is little research surrounding the process of building and maintaining personal brands on the social networking site Instagram.

Personal branding emerged as a movement in the late 1990s (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). According to Labrecque et al., (2011), personal branding was first popularized by Peters (1997) and has become an increasingly important aspect of the digital age. Personal branding, or

self-branding as it is known in some research, is “central to self-branding is the idea that, just like commercially branded products, individuals benefit from having a unique selling point, or a public identity that is singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interests of target audiences.” (Khamis et al., 2017, p. 191). In today’s media environment, business practices have shifted with the parallel growth of digital technologies. From a marketing perspective, it is important to consider the wide-ranging possibilities that are present through the use of free and technologically advanced structures such as social media. As previously mentioned, social media provides the opportunity for womenpreneurs to promote themselves as brands in a manner that is much more cost-efficient than in the past.

As noted by Lair et al. (2005), “in many respects, the phenomenon of personal branding shares affinities with the self-help movements it drew from by offering a programmatic set of strategies for individuals to improve their chances at business success (p. 308)” The ideologies of self-help, self-management, and self-improvement dates far back to Carnegie (1936) and was extended by Covey (1989). The topic of managing one’s self to build relationships is far from a new concept, nonetheless, the purpose of this thesis will be to uncover the ways in which the concepts of self-branding have been utilized through social media as a means to build brand equity and an overall personal branded persona. Lair et al. (2005) states that while the self-improvement genre is used as a means for achievement, “personal branding seems to suggest that the road to success is found instead in explicit self-packaging: here, success is not determined by an individual's’ internal sets of skills, motivations, and interests but, rather, by how effectively they are arranged, crystallized, and labeled—in other words, branded” (p. 308). The topic of self-improvement seems to relate to that of personal branding in the sense that the individual working

to build a personal brand is attempting to display themselves in a particular way that is in favor of their overall business image.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

This review of literature is intended to justify the research methods being presented in this thesis by analyzing past research done as part of the body of knowledge relating to branding and grounded theory. While the body of research pertaining to personal branding on Instagram is limited and mostly consisting of studies done on Facebook and Twitter, this review of literature aims to provide the context necessary to venture into this mostly unrepresented domain of personal branding on social media.

#### **Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1965). Glaser's positivism training guided his ability to build codes and processes and Strauss determined to acknowledge the importance of qualitative research within social life. Together, they implemented the structures of grounded theory as a means to interpret social interaction and socially shared meanings. This theory works to discover and illuminate the various behaviors of human beings and use these behaviors to identify a symbolic meaning and understanding.

Blythe (2007) notes that "grounded theory approach to research operates under an interpretivist paradigm" (p. 285). The use of grounded theory follows a set of procedures, though it is not necessarily required to be followed in strict order by the researcher. Blythe refers to the words of Corbin and Strauss (1990) within his writing noting that grounded theorists share with many other qualitative researchers that while good science should be retained, redefinition is required to fit in the qualities of qualitative research and the complexities of social phenomena.

With this said, grounded theory is used to form a redefinition of the research process as it relates to understanding a new social phenomenon, such as the purpose of this thesis in unpacking the process of online personal brands on Instagram.

There is a long-term relationship involved with the researcher and with the data and the research itself may never be considered as finished (Blythe, 2007). This is due in part to the considerable amount of subjective analysis that is expected when framing a study using grounded theory, which “doesn’t attempt to arrive at an objective, generalizable truth: what it is intended to achieve is a development of theory” (Blythe, 2007, p. 285). Generally speaking, topics that have rarely been studied in its entirety best utilize grounded theory as a means of interpreting data.

In line with the interpretivist paradigm, the use of grounded theory allows for the emergence of themes during data collection and analysis, rather than the predetermined themes being presented at the start of a study. This theory is used to underpin research that looks to new and emerging topics, such as the topic of this thesis, personal branding on Instagram. Fournier (1998) conducted research that utilized grounded theory based on its “discovery-oriented” (p. 347) perspective. As with the goal of the present research, the general procedures of grounded theory were utilized in his study to understand brand relationship phenomena. Though this theory is used in place of former theories as explained by Strauss and Corbin (1998), Chen (2013) takes into account previous research conducted on the subject of personal branding and consumer-brand relationships when considering the data collected from his study. Similar to this approach, the present study also takes into account some prior research done on the topic of personal branding, however, Instagram as a personal branding tool has not yet been extensively studied as it has within this thesis.

Smith (2015) mentions that past research utilizing grounded theory with regard to social media, “confirms strategic communication imperatives... when communicating via social media, including humanizing a brand, seeking feedback through interaction, and relationship cultivation” (p. 289). The present research works to fill the gap in literature regarding social media usage as it relates to Instagram and entrepreneurial branding practices. It seeks to understand the brands of womenpreneurs and the relationships they aim to create with their audiences online. There is research within the domain of female entrepreneurship that points to the growth of women in the various entrepreneurial fields. In her article, Hila (2016) notes that women are increasingly becoming major players in the entrepreneurial field and uses the example of female entrepreneurs being represented on popular TV shows such as *Shark Tank*, a series featuring entrepreneurs pitching their business ideas in order to secure investment from a panel of venture capitalists.

While there are no academic articles that specifically utilize grounded theory to understand personal branding practices, the present study pulls from past research to understand its process of usage and forming of a new theory. This thesis aims to provide new knowledge within the academic literature pool that works to better understand social media and useful branding practices among female entrepreneurs. The research provides a new basis for understanding Instagram and its usage as a means to build reputable online brands.

### **Personal Branding**

Peters (1997) emphasized the potential of the Web and personal websites for building a personal brand, without understanding the branding potential of the social media giants that would develop later. The vast majority of employees, entrepreneurs, and freelancers can now build an image of themselves, their brand, and their company in an online environment that gives

way to accessing a credible and valuable voice that supports authority and expertise on any given topic. The importance of social media branding has grown due to the increase in traffic and readers. Job insecurity and budget cuts have also played into the encouragement that journalist now faces to build a personal brand of their own on social media (Brems et al., 2016).

In relation to the present study, social media provides the opportunity for womenpreneurs to promote themselves as brands in a manner that is much more cost-efficient than in the past. Personal branding is the culmination of components seeking to “contribute to the overall identity... consumers will form their own opinions of the brand (for good or ill) and will express this as the brand image” (Blythe, 2007, p. 285). In his study, Blythe identified six components of brand identity: brand personality, brand vision, brand culture, positioning, relationships, and presentation. Each of these components works to form an overall brand identity and provides direction for understanding the nature of personal brands. Arora and Stoner (2009) note that “brand personality recognizes the symbolic and emotional meaning that taps into consumer appeal and affects their purchase decisions” (p. 272). The overarching theme that is found throughout branding literature is the synergistic elements of emotion ties, personal and public appeal, and ultimately, brand loyalty.

The domain of personal branding lends itself to understanding online personas and their relevancy, contribution, and influence on consumer favorability. Arora and Stoner (2009) note that “consistent with this line of reasoning, consumers prefer brands that are similar to the consumer’s personality” (p. 273). Brand identities beckon support for the emotional favorability consumers experience regarding brand personality and brand identification (Arora & Stoner, 2009). With this said, it is clear to understand the importance of recognizing personal brands as part of an overall brand identity that connects individuals with their audience.



In past research, life experience has dictated an individual's experiences, attachments, and routines. Throughout his study, Fournier he build the necessary foundation for understanding consumer and brand relationships, brand loyalty, and using the expansiveness of people's lived experiences as a basis for the development of brand relationships (Fournier, 1998).

The present research looks toward the lived experiences of female digital entrepreneurs in how and why their personal brands have developed on Instagram. Using interview methods, these digital entrepreneurs are able to use their own voice to contribute to the present research in understanding their entrepreneurial efforts and digital self-presentations (Duffy & Hund, 2015). There is a value in research acknowledging individual points of view in order to form an understanding of personal brands. In their study, Duffy and Hund (2015) found that bloggers each attempted to make themselves appear as "real people" in order to connect with their audiences, though simultaneously adhering to the post-feminist ideal of "having it all" (p. 9). The present research looks to the notion of being seen as "real" online as a gesture to be authentic in each of the participant's field.

It was noted that, in regards to the research participants, "by discussing their social media activity, we want to analyze the reasoning behind their social media habits and the way they construct virtual identities" (Brems et al., 2016, p. 449). The results of this study found that three main elements comprised a personal brand. The first element is the stage. Using Goffman's theater metaphor, it is concluded that "a well-built stage can be a useful tool for producing and spreading news" (p. 455). With Twitter as the stage and its users the audience, journalists can cultivate a network of followers interested in their image and what they offer as a brand. This is important, especially for the freelance journalists that depend on their own market share to financially provide for themselves month after month. The second element found was the

audience. The article states that “breaking down the fourth wall between the media and the audience and increasing intimacy is essential in developing a personal brand” (p. 456). Each of the journalists commented on the importance of building and sustaining customer loyalty with their followers, whether that be loyalty to their personal brand (freelance journalists) or the network that they work for (employed journalists). The third and final element found through the results of this study was the performer. The researchers found that freelance and employed journalists branded and promoted themselves differently on Twitter, each presenting part of themselves as a way to connect with their audiences.

This perspective of Goffman’s metaphor supports in shaping the present study. In a similar approach to Brems et al. (2016), the purpose of this thesis is to analyze the branding practices of female digital entrepreneurs utilizing Goffman’s metaphor in understanding Instagram as their stage, their followers as their audience and themselves as the performer. In alignment with past research, the present study aims to explain the online presence of these digital entrepreneurs in a manner that invites the opportunity to understand how Instagram is being used to build their digital careers, personal brand and attract a global audience.

Molyneux and Holton (2017) suggest that journalists are now building and developing personal brands as part of their identity within the media field. The authors note that “the branding practices of these journalists, and indeed journalists more broadly, have yet to be thoroughly examined” (p. 2). This study supports the present research goals of understanding how womenpreneuers are building and developing their personal brands on Instagram as no studies have yet to look within this domain to understand the key branding practices amongst this demographic.

Technology and media evolution has guided the ways in which individuals must adapt to

the growing changes in their environment. Molyneux and Holton (2014) explain this adaptation where “branding is not a one-time event, however, and includes ongoing efforts to manage and maintain a product or entity’s image and identity, particularly in light of social media’s expansion (). In their study, they ask the broad question of why and how journalists seek to develop their personal brands outside of their organizations and how this new involvement of audience effects the newsgathering process. The present study asks the broad question of why and how womenpreneuers seek to develop their personal brands. Branding supports in creating intimacy between journalists and their audience and increases the elements of collaboration with other journalists to build news and relations. Personal branding among journalist also provides an opportunity to differentiate from their fellow news reporters in ways that allow for the expansion of their brand and unique messages to the world. The results from this study support in providing an underlying basis of support for the present study in that it aims to analyze the elements that consist of personal branding specific to womenpreneuers and looks to reflect the way in which these women differentiate themselves from one another.

Just as within the Molyneux and Holton study, the present study seeks to grasp an understanding of the evolution of participants’ branding practices, perceptions of branding, and beliefs surrounding branding in general. Each question asked during the interview has been guided by the individual conversation and resulted in the opening of new avenues to be explored with each interviewee. The dynamics of social media and the evolution of the importance of an online presence is analyzed through the branding practices of womenpreneuers. The method of interviewing provides the necessary context to examine an individual womenpreneur’s voice among many and their specific perceptions and branding techniques that work to make them different. The results of the Molyneux and Holton study found that the content of the tweets

analyzed was a reflection of the relationships that journalists desired to form with their audiences. Personal tastes and interests represented the processes of gatekeeping decisions among retweets. With this in mind, the present study looks to Instagram as a reflection of the relationships that womenpreneurs desire to create with their online audiences. It also works to understand the process and decisions that are made in regard to Instagram posts as a reflection to their ideal virtual image. It will also work to create an understanding surrounding personal brands and how womenpreneurs establish themselves as experts in their field through their brand.

Chen (2013) acknowledges the growth and development of personal branding and opens his article with the statement “existing literature examines how companies can utilize social media to build their brands. However, the phenomenon of branding online has rarely been examined from a personal perspective, despite its growing importance” (p. 332). Self-branding has now moved from an outside concept utilized by celebrities and politics to embracing the cultural evolution of new lifestyle trends that influence the importance of establishing credibility. This credibility translates through a successful personal brand that brings forth the opportunity to expand entrepreneurial efforts. Chen speaks to the concept of self-branding on social media as a crucial part of building individuality within saturated markets and establishing oneself as separate from the competition. The study results found that “the process of personal branding on YouTube mainly consists of the three stages: extract, express, and exude” (p. 338). First, the researcher found that the participants would extract their unique identity and attributes and use this as the basis for their video themes. Second, it was found that the participants would express themselves around the attributes they extracted from within themselves and this is seen as the formation of a personal brand, a YouTubers individualistic qualities that are expressed to the

public. Finally, the researcher found that the participants' main goal was to "attract worldwide viewers and to create a strategy for making their brand visible to the outside world" (p. 340). Pulling from the results from his research, the present study looks to Chen's article as a basis for personal branding practices on Instagram. Participating interviewees will be asked questions about their personal branding processes of extracting information, expressing information, and exuding information in a way that reflects their ideal personal brand.

Molyneux et al. (2018) express that "personal branding is key to building a career in journalism" (p. 1389). The key purpose of the present study is to highlight the aspects of online identity construction. The results of the study found that branding is a common practice among journalists and 95% of the Twitter profiles and 58% of the tweets studied contained elements of branding. It was also found that a large portion of U.S. based journalists' Twitter activity focused on promoting themselves, their companies, and journalism in general. The authors assumed that journalists' may feel that branding "is their best shot at maintaining relevance and establishing authority" (Molyneux et al., 2018, p. 1397). Furthermore, the study found that journalists are using social media to make appeals for attention and authority and Twitter can have a great impact on the social construction of journalists' personal and professional identities. In further developing the present study, we look to social media, specifically Instagram, as a means to appeal to audiences in ways that attract their attention and establish oneself as an expert in any given field.

## **Instagram**

In their past research done on social media, Alshawaf and Le Wen (2015) focus their writing on the growth of self-made reputations on social media. The authors define Social Media Mavens as public figures that emerge from digital platforms and reach broad levels of exposure

and utilize the study to understand their promotional tendencies on Instagram for building their personal brands. The questions asked of the research is: How does one construct their presence on a social media platform like Instagram to become a Social Media Maven? And how does this platform allow for the construction of a global digital reputation? This study, along with its research questions and purpose, provides a strong basis of which the present study functions. It aims to define the uses of Instagram among female digital entrepreneurs in a manner that sheds light upon the factors that are involved with their self-made online reputations.

Alshawaf and Wen note within their research that Instagram press reports it has over 300 million individual users and over 2,500 commercial accounts globally as of December 2014. This number has grown exponentially in the past few years and stands as the reasoning behind choosing Instagram as the tool used as part of analyzation for the present study. This is used to justify the assumption that Instagram is the ideal platform for building a global digital reputation. The platform is a dynamic and rich resource for researchers to study and very few have done so thus far. The authors note that being that this platform creates the potential for individuals worldwide to share reflective information about themselves and their lives, it has the ability to help in studying human behavior.

According to Statista, an online statistic market research, and business intelligence portal, as of June 2018, Instagram reached one billion active users, those who have logged into Instagram during the previous 30 days. Given the marketable potential of users on this platform, I believe that Instagram is an appropriate means of examining womenpreneurs' self-branding practices. In addition to this, Statista found in a recent study that 50.3% of Instagram users are female and 49.7% of Instagram users are male. With this said, I chose to use female participants

for this thesis to narrow the pool of possible research recruits, and due to the lack of literature surrounding both personal branding on Instagram and female entrepreneurship.

### **Research Questions**

According to Molyneux and Holton (2014), journalists are uninformed on how to build their brands. While the present study has a shifted focus on digital entrepreneurs as opposed to journalists, there is a lack of research regarding the process of building and sustaining a personal brand on Instagram. Similar to the process in the Molyneux and Holton (2014) study, the questions being asked will surround the evolution of Instagram branding practices, perceptions of branding, and beliefs surrounding branding among womenpreneurs. Additionally, new questions will be formed as interviews are conducted and data is collected in order to personally relate to each participant and their understanding of personal branding. With this said, the research questions for this study are as follows:

**RQ1:** How do womenpreneurs present themselves on Instagram?

**RQ2:** What are the professional and personal motives for womenpreneurs in building a personal brand to as part of their online business model?

**RQ3:** How do womenpreneurs perceive personal branding?

**RQ4:** What and how are Instagram's tool being used to build and sustain personal branding efforts?

The research questions have been restructured in the form of interview questions for participants and can be viewed in the appendix of this thesis. As a reminder, the questions asked during each interview are be based off the predetermined questions, however, additional questions have also been added/removed based on the data as each interview proceeds.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Method**

Each of the articles cited in the literature review of this thesis works to justify the methods used for the present research goals. Grounded theory framework underpins the present study through its attempt to understand and conceptualize personal branding on Instagram. This theory suggests that themes and information parallels can be deduced from in-depth interviews with research participants. Grounded theory is a general method of comparative analysis and, for the purpose of this thesis, is being utilized in an inductive way so to analyze and collect data in a simultaneous manner. Thus, affording a rich narrative that adds important discoveries about personal branding development on Instagram. As part of this research, in-depth interviews with womenpreneurs who utilize Instagram as a means to build their personal brands have been conducted. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using the online transcription software, Temi, with the consent of each participant and took place via Skype or via Zoom. In utilizing the approach by the Molyneux (2014) study, though this sample will be non-representative, it is not intended for generalizations, but rather as an indicative approach to how womenpreneurs are utilizing Instagram with regard to their personal brands.

As mentioned previously, Arora and Stoner (2009) note that grounded theory is a theory building tool, rather than a theory confirming tool. Additionally, the process described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as the constant comparative method is a method used in the present to analyze the data collected to develop a grounded theory. The phenomenon has been established as the self-branding practices of womenpreneurs on Instagram and the data collected has developed



themes. Glaser and Strauss (1967) note that data collection cannot be planned ahead of analysis. Finally, the process of purposive and theoretical sampling was utilized to identify possible research participants. One initial participant was selected through a recommendation from a professor on my thesis committee. Each participant following was found through the use of strategic hashtags and their Instagram business profiles.

In accordance with the guidelines described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), a form of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding was used to analyze the collected data. An open coding system aims to form possible categories, some of which were developed further with each new interview. Response saturation, also referred to as theoretical saturation or data satisfaction, is the basis in which “no new properties, dimensions, or relationships emerged during analysis” (Molyneux & Holton, 2014) and will act as the guiding factor for further interviews and analysis. Interviews were conducted until data saturation was found. Open coding is described as “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (p. 61). Axial coding is described as “a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories. This is done by utilizing a coding paradigm involving conditions, context, action/interactional strategies, and consequences” (p. 96). Finally, selective coding is described as “the process of selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development” (p. 116). As codes were formulated, this paradigm guided the subsequent theoretical sampling and themes that emerged within each interview. Upon collecting additional data, further data analysis and coding was conducted, and the insights inform the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of self-branding practices of womenpreneurs on Instagram. Results will be shared in a later section of

this thesis.

Based on past research, grounded theory is used to understand various social phenomena. Grounded theory was used in the present research to develop insights into the personal branding practices that have proven to be successful within womenpreneurs and work to share that development in a manner that provides new research to the growing body of knowledge surrounding social media and personal branding. Participants of the interviews were selected using both convenience and theoretical sampling methods. Within the present study, the first research participant was selected on Instagram using convenience sampling and the rest of the participants were selected using theoretical sampling and hashtags.

Similar to the Brems et al., (2016) study, participants for the present research have been identified through an analysis of the hashtags including: #personalbranding, #onlineentrepreneur, #digitalentrepreneur, #womenpreneur, #freelance, #entrepreneur, #digitalbranding, #womeneur, #bossbabe, #girlboss, and #bosslady. According to Saxton et.al., (2015), hashtags indicate topics or themes and represent an important function of social media communication. The hashtag is a powerful tool because of its participatory nature. It classifies messages, improves searchability, and allows for the linking of messages to existing knowledge and action communities. This is used as support for justifying the use of hashtags to identify and select the participants for this study. The various hashtag combinations follow the theme of personal branding and digital entrepreneurship and have allowed for a pool of individuals who self-identify as a female digital entrepreneur to be discovered.

In addition to the hashtags, convenience, and theoretical and sampling approach, selected participants were required to have a business Instagram profile that included their title, email, and link or description to their business/company. As mentioned previously, the collecting and

analyzing of data was conducted simultaneously with the dialogue of each preceding interview supporting in identifying the basis for future selected to participate in the study. As data were analyzed, codes and themes were identified and categorized, and theoretical saturation was reached with the data.

Eight interviews took place for the study and each averaged between 20 and 40 minutes. The interviews were conducted between January and February of 2019. One interview took place in person, four via Skype, and three via Zoom. Each interview was recorded and permission to use the recordings for the study was granted via the consent forms that were signed by each participant. The consent forms can be found in appendix A at the bottom of this thesis. The names of each participant were not used and instead “participant one,” “participant two,” and so on was used to identify each. The coding of each interview took place after each was successfully completed and then analyzed further upon the completion of all eight interviews. Coding was done by hand and emergent themes within each interview were written out and when themes were mentioned in other interviews, the researcher would take note of the similar theme until data saturation occurred for each category. One participant was found through the recommendation from a member of my thesis committee, another participant was selected by the researcher as she had been following this female digital entrepreneur for almost two years. The remaining six influencers were selected using specific hashtags that allowed for their accounts to be discovered via the Instagram app.

Each participant, aside from the participant that was recommended by a member of my committee, was first approached via email using the email provided on their Instagram accounts. The email laid out the dynamics, purpose and goals of the study. More than forty participants were emailed, and the response rate was low, thus leading to only eight eligible participants

being part of the study. Study approval was applied for through The Institutional Review Board and granted on January 24, 2019. All interviews were transcribed using the tool Temi and edited by the researcher.

The researcher started each interview off with a few details about herself and the study. The interviewees included: participant one, a self-employed copywriter and digital marketer. She began working as a journalist for a newspaper in Melbourne straight out of college. She went this route as it seemed to be the best option for her to learn what she wanted to learn and work with people who had been published in the New Yorker. She wanted to learn from the best and sought the mentorship of those who are already successfully doing what she wanted to be doing. Her brand aims to portray her as playful and smart.

Participant two, a self-employed productivity strategist. Her education has been a mix of lot of different things, including cinema and art, cultural management, and advertising. She began her early career stages in outbound marketing and worked in the music industry for seven years. Her initial dive into copywriting didn't align with what she wanted to do, so she began looking at ways that she could help female entrepreneurs. She decided what it was that these entrepreneurs needed and began working as a productivity coach.

Participant three is a self-employed online Spanish and English teacher. She received a degree in translating and interpreting and a master's degree in teaching Spanish as a second language. She immediately began teaching upon graduating and has worked at private centers, worked as a language assistant, worked as an English teacher at an academy, and began her freelance work helping university professors. Further into her career, she began researching ways to transfer what she was doing to the online space, so she started her own business teaching

Spanish and English online. She has been doing this for over two years and last summer launched a blog to help and inspire other teachers to move online as well.

Participant four is a self-employed writer and digital nomad. She studied biology and chemistry in college but realized that she didn't want to pursue a career in the field. She then took two years to herself to figure out what she wanted to do and learned that she loved to write and wanted to try and make money from it. She began teaching herself about understanding how to make money as a writer and how to become a good writer. She has been writing online for about five years and her writing background has been entirely self-taught and she now works with seven-figure entrepreneurs. She utilizes Instagram not as a means to attract prospective clients but to empower her community with the tools to also become a successful online writer and digital nomad.

Participant five is a self-employed health, life, business, and mindset coach. She studied psychology in college and upon graduating, became a flight attendant. She then found out about the world of coaching and began studying health coaching and started a blog. From there, she submerged herself further into the world of personal development and began studying life coaching and began a coaching business from there. As she coached, her clients were increasingly interested in how she was doing growing her business and how she could help them do the same, thus her business made the natural transition into business coaching.

Participant six is a digital business owner that began her entrepreneurial journey through learning from her father as he ran his own business. Her company produces care packages for women through a monthly subscription. In the past, she worked with a major company in Las Vegas where she ran social media accounts for several of their venues. She has experience in

marketing, web design, and social media and plans to launch a podcast talking to different women about mental and physical health.

Participant seven is a self-employed accountant. She earned her master's degree in tax and an undergraduate degree in accounting. She worked for a large company doing sales taxes and later began working for a CPA firm. She was inspired by others living an entrepreneurial lifestyle and wanted to have the ability to spend more time with her children, so she began her own business doing bookkeeping. She eventually began working with a client that was referred to her by one of the previous companies she worked for and became a virtual assistant as their accountant.

Participant eight is a self-employed accountant and consultant. Her personal brand aims to educate her community about several areas such as accounting and business, general financial education and awareness, and helping women understand the finances of their business. She utilizes Instagram as a means for attracting prospective customers and uses Instagram ads to target her ideal audience.

## Chapter Four

### Results

Each of the participants shared with the researcher information about how they grew into their roles as digital entrepreneurs. A common theme among the participants is their educational background being quite different than what they are doing as part of their career now. The researcher posed many questions such as: “what is your experience with personal branding and as a womenpreneur?” This question is tied to research question one and works to understand the perception each participant holds with regard to their experience with personal branding and being a female in the entrepreneurial field. Research question one asks: how do womenpreneurs present themselves on Instagram?

Participant five answered,

“Personal branding has been so important for my business. So, I knew nothing about personal branding before I started my business, but I just found the more that I was able to be myself and find a way to portray that online, the more my business grew. And essentially the more money I made... Everyone has a personal brand, right? It's just whether you actually put that online or not. But I think everyone should be working on building their personal brand, whether you're an entrepreneur, whether you're in a corporate role because it's, you know, it's just so important for portraying who you are and what you stand for and having a way of showing other people that and that just leads to more opportunities and more aligned opportunities coming your way.”

The researcher then asked the question:

“How would you describe your personal brand? How do you aim to present yourself online? Are there any challenges in doing so?” This question seeks to answer research question one and two together. Research question one asks: how do womenpreneurs present themselves on Instagram? Research question two asks: what are the professional and personal motives for womenpreneurs in building a personal brand to as part of their online business model? Participant six answered,

“So my personal brand is just auto. It's me. The way that I catered to Instagram and how I design it. One of the big things about Instagram, people are drawn to aesthetics... I think for what works for me and for my brand is people want to know, the people know that I'm always in something and they want to know what that is...”

Participant seven answered with,

“I want to basically be [the] friend that they can trust that has a skill that they don't have right. Relates to them... Cause I'm in their shoes, you know, it's me, but they're doing something else to make money. It's me.”

Participant eight mentioned,

“... I think that personal branding is very important and for me, it has been just trial and error. It has been a lot of reading, researching, looking at other people's brands and trying to see what works for us... My purpose is, whether you become a client of mine or not, to always educate you in several areas...”

Participant one answered,

“I went away and [figured out] how I want it to be presented because obviously, you know, it's really important to have an online personal brand because people want to do business with people and people want to do business with people that they know, like, and trust...”



Everything I post builds rapport. It makes me human and makes me connect with everyone more...”

Most of the participants described their personal brands as part of who they are in real life. They are interested in sharing what their audiences are most interested in, their lives. Through a personal brand, your audience is connected to you as a human being and is drawn to business through their ability to connect with you on a personal level. A personal brand removes the borders between a company and their customers; it is the bridging gap between the two worlds. Instagram serves as a crucial platform for business owners alike to connect what they do for a living with the life they are living on a day-to-day basis.

The researcher went on to ask, “What is your relationship to your audience and other womenpreneurs on Instagram?” This question is related to research question three and four. It works to understand the participants’ relationship to their audience and practices they utilize to connect with them. Research question three asks: how do womenpreneurs perceive personal branding? Research question four asks: what and how are Instagram’s tools being used to build and sustain personal branding efforts? Participant two said,

“So private messaging, commentating, knowing what they're doing so I can interact with them not only on my page but on their page as well. But what I do too, increase my exposure and my audience, since I'm a productivity strategist, I'm like also an automation nerd. So I try to automate everything that I can around Instagram [using] digital applications. Because it's a little bit time consuming, I need to be strategic how I'm going to use my time more effective[ly].”

Participant three answered,

“I like to address my audience in a very friendly way. Also professional, but I am someone that is approachable. And I like to interact with them. I like them to engage in my post and ask me questions. I love receiving feedback from them as well because I think it's very important to improve. I'm not scared of feedback. I like it. As long as it's respectful of course.”

Participant four answered with an interesting perspective on community stating,

“... Right now it's kind of like a one-sided conversation where people come to me to ask questions [about] what I want to do. I want to open that up into some type of community where everyone can help each other because I'm only one person and everybody has an insight within that community...”

Participant five also mentioned community saying,

“I feel like I have a close relationship with them [my audience]. Like I, um, I always think that they are the heart and soul of everything that I do. So I'm always trying to, you know, really add value to their lives and connect with them... I think of them as part of my community. Like we're all on our journey together.”

There was a common theme of community that each of the participants answered this question with. The relationship they strive to build and maintain with their audiences is developed through an awareness that they are part of a community that aims to support them in whatever aspect possible. For example, participant four is a writer and her community includes writers at different stages of their careers looking for inspiration and advice. A community is a basis for audiences to connect with one another under the guidance of an individual that is at the level they are aiming to be at within their careers.

The researcher followed this question by asking, “What are the benefits, in your experience, of online personal branding?” This question is related to research question three and four and looks to understand, from the perspective of each participant, the benefits of personal branding and their motives behind their personal brand. Participant four stated,

“It really showcases your understanding of the digital world crisis. If I was a writer and someone and I meet someone in a coffee shop, right? And they're like, well, what do you do? And I say, I'm a writer. And they're like, oh cool. The next question is always like, where do I find your writing? As a freelancer, I'm always striving for people. So it's like, well you can find it here, but my name is at the top. So instead I can say, oh well just Google my name and you'll find all of my writings, you'll find all my social media platforms. You'll find articles that I've [written] and featured and you know, I think that just really showcases as my expertise as a writer... And it really helps you to look good for clients.”

Participant six answered,

“There are many benefits [to] presenting myself online. One of them being that it opens me up to that community type atmosphere. Social media allows me to reach a lot of people in one post. Then it would let's say without social media, how would I be marketing, you know, going back a couple of years before social media was used for marketing, we were doing emailing, direct mailing meaning you would get things in your literal mail... Now we have an opportunity to reach a lot of people in one post, you know, digitally and it works, you know, especially the advent of Hashtags.”

Participant eight stated,

“I think this is from me serving others and this is me on my path. I think that having that personal brand, you’re an influencer, and that's really where I'm trying to go... But then I'm also trying to be on my other side of my personal branding for me as an accountant trying to be up there at the top.”

Participant three answered,

“I think it's very important. I think it's something you have to give a lot of thought... And the benefits of branding, specifically online, is that you can, of course, reach many more people than offline. For example, Instagram, there are so many millions, I don't know how many millions of users now but you can reach so many people, right?”

Answers to this question held a common theme in the sense that each participant views their personal brand as an extension of what they do and a way for them to easily connect with prospective clients. Through your personal brand, you are given the opportunity to reach a wide range of people, more so than what could be possible through only offline connections. Establishing a personal brand is seen as a tool that can catapult an entrepreneur’s career through the unlimited opportunities available for connecting with others interested in what they do. Each participant viewed their personal brand as an opportunity to present themselves as a source of information for their respective fields. A community is built around their expertise and ability to provide answers to the questions that come up within that community. Social media offers the chance to connect with likeminded individuals in ways that build authority within a space and utilize that space as a means to garner further business potential through prospective customers. A personal brand is essentially a showcasing of skills and past work that creates an environment where one can place themselves as a leader with leverage through a community that supports their efforts.

This brought the researcher to ask, “How do you utilize Instagram to attract prospective customers?” This question is directly related to research question five as it seeks to understand the process for attracting prospective clients and how their personal brands are managed for success. Participant four answered,

“Not really. My Instagram is mostly geared towards people who are interested in becoming a digital nomad instead of the writing, but like I said before, you can also see that I am an experienced writer and that I do work with high profile clients. So I do try and use it as both, but when it comes down to it, I choose to empower them.”

However, participant one said,

“Yeah... I also offer like a free link download you can click through. From there, I will always use relevant hashtags that my audience would be searching for if they're looking for someone like me. So I do use all of those things together to help, you know, trying to attract customers...”

Participant two also attracts prospective customers via Instagram stating,

“So that's atomized as well. So I have a message that is personal... What I do is I really try to interact with the other person. So I talk a little bit about me, some fun facts, and then I ask them a question. A lot of the times, the way that the message is [crafted], it really seems that I'm picking each one out and reaching to them like individually. That's not actually the case, but what I do is every response that I get and [it] then becomes personal... Because we need to think that when we're talking about prospect leads to make them convert, we need to have a very big audience or a number of prospects because of the conversion rates are lower, right? So I need to contact a lot of people. That takes a lot of time. So I thought,

okay, how can I be more effective in reaching out more with last time? So that's why I decided to do to use an automation tool for that as well.”

The answers to this question found a common theme in that, with the exception of participant four, a personal brand on Instagram is utilized regularly as a means for connecting with and closing new clientele. Instagram offers the opportunity to connect with an unlimited number of individuals, and automated systems such as direct messaging individuals upon them following you, are the top ways in which each participant found themselves claiming new clients through the platform. Social media is a means to share free content for your followers, which is known as content marketing. This free content eventually lends itself to client leads and the ability to share further content and information with audiences outside of the general free content that is being shared through a public personal brand. The marketing funnel consists of the top, middle, and bottom of funnel. Content marketing lies at the top of the funnel and leads into the following two funnels, eventually moving your audience through free and informative content, to understanding what you do and your brand, to purchasing your goods or services.

While social media provides the opportunity to connect with large numbers of individuals, there is a low conversion rate. Thus, in light of participant two’s answer, it is important to reach out to and connect with a large number of prospective clients to counteract the small conversion rates that those utilizing social media see when using these platforms as a means to close new client contracts. Automation is a common theme that presented itself through the data collected as many participants found this to be the best way to connect with as many people as possible without sacrificing numerous hours per day on the task. While some messages are automatized, they do not lack authenticity because these messages are tailored in such a way that those receiving them can assume the message was personalized for them. While the first message may not necessarily be

personalized, each of the following messages that are exchanged are. This creates an environment of trust and begins the relationship building process. Those who are not interested in you as a brand or business will tend to ignore your automated message and thus narrow down the pool of those who are interested.

Though the questions were asked in varying orders based on the direction and pace of each interview, the researcher eventually made the transition into the question, “What is your process of posting on Instagram and what tools do you utilize as part of this process?” This question is related to research question five as it seeks to understand the participants’ tool usage to maintain their personal brand. Participant one answered,

“... Engagement and all those metrics I'm going to be looking at, but I try to curate the six posts per week. If I can, sometimes I'm a bit like quiet for a while but I'll still be commenting and sharing, like looking at other people's posts... I just use a mixture of Plan, Planoly and Later... I'll use a mixture of content, like my own photos, things that I've found from other pages, you know, tagging other pages, [and] make sure they're getting credit. Everything reflects my umbrella brand and digital marketing. So I'll have personal things that I like. Some business tips will always be in there. I'll have curly hair photo[s] too, but everything will have to [tie into] the digital marketing in some way to offer my audience insight and value as well.”

Participant two answered the question stating,

“So I have a virtual assistant and I have a copywriter. So what we do is we do a hybrid between three platforms. My virtual assistant selects the pictures. She does a draft and then I approve... Everything is optimized from the very beginning. And what we've done is we tried to study a little bit about hashtags and see what hashtags work best. So we have groups

of hashtags that [we use] on each post and we kind of mix things around. So the algorithm of Instagram doesn't recognize that we're always using the same aspects.”

Participant three said,

“Well I plan... This week I'm going to ask questions about tools. Next week I'm going to ask questions about, I don't know about students, about the classes... But I also like to be spontaneous... I use Evernote. It's an application where I keep all my notes and I have a note for the Instagram hashtags and I just have to copy every time and paste on the posts. And then I add like two or three more specific hashtags for that post.”

Participant four also spoke to the spontaneity of posting and posting six times a week saying,

“So my process is I try to post every single day or at least six times a week. And that's like an actual published [post] and I'll put up a story at least once. And I tried to really show what am I doing that day. Like what am I interested in? ... The process is to just kind of honestly post as much as possible. And I recently started using Hootsuite to organize a little bit more and have automation around posting because, like I said, it can be a lot. As of right now, I'm mostly just like posting as I go and on the fly...”

Similar to participant two, participant five also has an assistant that supporting in posting duties saying,

“I don't actually use those scheduling apps or services because I've found that engagement tends to drop when I do use them, so I try [not to] use them, but I have an assistant that helps me with some of my posting and things like that. In place of using those services. Yeah. But I mean, I post and use hashtags. I use all the 30 hashtags that there are available. Oh, I do use a service that likes other people's content based on hashtags. It's called Firing Table.”



The overarching commonality that was found through the answers of this question was the need for a posting schedule, while also adhering to the need for spontaneity. The general rule of the thumb is to post at least six times a week. However, it is important to share your life on-the-go to keep your audience engaged with your life in and out of the business light. Most of the participants also utilized automated tools that post content for them on their behalf after scheduling the content for release. These tools seem to allow for an easier content schedule as participants can pay for a tool that will automatically share their content.

While consistency is important, the best way to come across as authentic and real is to give yourself space to post when you feel inclined to do so, along with also having a regular posting schedule. Additionally, hashtags are an important part of your content strategy on Instagram as a personal brand because they are a means for others on the platform to connect and discover your brand. This connection adds to the growth of your business and overall community. Various apps are utilized as a means to support a content strategy, along with applications that allow you to track your hashtag usage so to be efficient whenever posting. Additionally, these applications help with maintaining an awareness of the hashtags that you are using as Instagram's algorithm favors new hashtags for each of your posts. Participants found that mixed content is the best way to continually engage your audience and maintain a general interest in what you do.

The researcher continued the interviews asking, "Do you use Instagram Insights?" This question is also related to research question five as it seeks to understand the tools used to maintain the participants' personal brands. Participant one answered stating,

"Yes. Sometimes I do. Just to check out... I wanted to see what my audience [and] who my audience [was]. And what they were doing and what age group they were in and where they were living... I do find it a valuable tool."

Participant two said,

“... I use them as well and insights and metrics. I take a look at them. But for me, what's most important is not the metrics, but the leads that I get. So this is a business, right? So the leads that I get through direct messaging...”

Participant six answered,

“I have insights that tell me what's working, what's not, [and] what times work...”

Participant five was one of the two that did not actively utilize Instagram Insights stating,

“... I don't actually pay too much attention to the business insights because I've just found that like the more I kind of try and, I don't know, crack the code or whatever, I don't know, the less like authentic I feel I guess in my personal brand. So I'm just like doing it [at] the moment...”

Aside from participant five, each of the participants utilize Instagram Insights as part of their business model. These Insights provide detailed information about best posting times and also includes details about your audience. Metrics are important for understanding engagement and what is working (and what is not) regarding your content and the audience that interacts with it. However, while the use of Insights is obviously important, the need to remain authentic when posting, including posts that are done on-the-fly, is important to sustaining that connection with an audience. They know and like you as a human being, not only an entrepreneur with a personal brand.

Instagram Insights are a means of tracking on the platform what content is working and what content isn't. This allows for you to better understand your audience and what they expect and want from you. Gaining leads is an important part of utilizing Insights, however, these metrics can often be deceiving. While metrics provide social proof and support in understanding the

engagement that one might get on any given post, these numbers don't translate into leads and sustainable business. Attracting prospective customers is the goal of many participants, and while Insights can be used as a way to measure how well content is doing, it should not replace the importance of being authentic, understanding those consuming your content (your audience), and connecting with those interested in a manner that eventually leads them through a sales funnel.

The researcher then asked, "How do you measure the effectiveness of your personal brand?" This question is related to research question five as it seeks to understand the practices that are being used to maintain a personal brand and the extent to which those practices are measured.

Participant two answered stating,

"I want to say it's by the leads that [I] get. Apart from the DMs, I also have a free book and call on the bio link. That's the most important metric to me is to see how many people have clicked on the link."

Participant four said,

"It's not like a direct measure that I have. I really wish it was possible to set up that metric, but it's a personal brand. It's kind of like a billboard, right? You don't actually know how many people are coming close from it. But you know it's out there. So, I measure the effectiveness by how many followers [am I] getting. With my engagement, is it increasing?"

Participant five had the shortest answer stating,

"How much money I'm making."

Through the answers provided by each of the participants, it is clear that leads are an important aspect of growing and maintaining a personal brand. The effectiveness of the participants' personal brands can be found through the exposure and connections that come through and lead to a sale. While engagement metrics are important as an exterior aspect, the

most important dimensions of a personal brand, according to many of the participants involved with this study, is whether or not they are accruing leads and closing sales. However, it is important to also mention that some participants made it clear that they utilize social media, including their personal brands on Instagram, as a means to connect to their community and garner engagement such as likes, comments, and followers. Of course, these followers always have the potential to turn into a lead and an eventual client.

The researcher followed this by asking, “What does the daily maintenance of your personal brand look like?” This question also related to research question five and seeks to further understand how Instagram is used to maintain each participants’ personal brand.

Participant six answered,

“The daily maintenance of my personal brand looks like I wake up in the morning and I get fed my media through Instagram first. I open up Instagram first, I look at who commented on what, who I need to comment back to... Then I figure out what I'm going to post for the day... I like to have my post ready to go, I save them as drafts on Instagram. And then when it's around that time, I set a little reminder for whatever time I'm going to post it. And then that reminder goes off. And that's when I post my Instagram posts for the personal brand... And then I figure out to my hashtags.”

Having a shorter response, participant four said,

“[My] daily maintenance is to look at the numbers and look at the metrics. And then aside from that, it's to go in and just post something as often as I can. So I try and post on Instagram every day. I try and post to Quora every day and I try to post on Medium every day. So that means that I have one Instagram post, a few Instagram stories, one article on Quora, and one article on medium every day just to brand.”

Participant five answered,

“I’ll start out by engaging with people in my feed. I’m liking and commenting on their post and I’ll also kind of target people that I would actually like to be a client of mine... And then I just make sure that I post in stories throughout the day. I find that I get so much more engagement in stories than in the post in the feed. So I spend most of my time in stories and I make sure that I post something every day [in my] stories that people can engage with... and then I go in and respond to comments...”

There were similarities in the answers provided by each participant including that of checking daily on metrics and numbers of engagements on their posts. Some post on their stories and share comments and reactions to the stories of the individuals they follow. Each participant usually follows this with determining what their post for the day will be. However, this was only true for those who do not preplan their content in advance. Engaging with followers was a big theme found through the answers provided for this question and seen as an important aspect of daily maintenance of a personal brand.

Engaging with your audience seems to be the most important part of maintaining a personal brand. Many participants stress the value of directly communicating with those connected with their brand as this is a way to continually build rapport with those interested in what you do as a business. The goal with social media, and your personal brand, is to present yourself as an authoritative figure in a space and garner relationships that have the potential to lead to new business. Being that it has been mentioned numerous times by participants, it’s important to note that posting daily, and on various platforms, is crucial in gaining visibility and reaching a larger pool of people. By establishing this direct connection, you can work to build relationships that pose the opportunity for others to view you as a someone they know, like, and trust. You then

create a greater possibility to grow business with new clients that become attracted to your content, message, and brand.

As a final question, the researcher posed the question: “How you do view personal branding at large?” This question relates back to research question three as it seeks to understand how personal branding is viewed by each participant. Participant six answered,

“I think if you're going to be an entrepreneur and you're going to put a business out there, it's probably [good] to put a face behind it as well and get some personal tones out there so that there's a sense of, the people like to know that there's a real person.”

Participant one stated,

“I think it is really important that if you're going to be running a business, that you have your own personal brand if it's connected to your business... We like to see humans, we like to interact with them. People like doing business with people that they know, like, and trust and people that they recognize and know...”

Participant two said,

“I think we all are a personal brand, whether is it public or not... We have a very unique and special way of interacting with others. So, yeah, I think that everyone needs to look to themselves, especially in the business world, whether if you're working your business professional or a freelancer or a blogger or an influencer or whatever, you need to look at yourself and think, okay, who do I want to be? Who do I want to become? How can I improve? How can I improve who I am to become even better? But that needs to be aligned.”

Participant three gave insight on personal branding based on industry saying,

“I think it depends on your industry and you need to go in and understand like what industry you want to go into... You have to look at an industry and decide [if it] makes sense for

me to have a personal brand and is that personal brand going to help me make money and like position myself as an expert in my field? If the answer is yes, then you need a personal brand and start working on it immediately and start posting as often as you can because what you want to do is start creating that relationship with people as soon as possible... Definitely, something to take very seriously and to understand that you can use that as a resume and use it to get ahead of people who haven't been capitalizing on the opportunity.”

A commonality found through the answers provided for this question surrounded the notion that a personal brand is something that all individuals should utilize, based on their dominant industry. Your personal brand stands as a way for others to get to know you, your brand, what you do, and how you can help improve their lives through what you sell or do. Placing a face behind a name allows for a better connection with your audience and contributes to others knowing, liking, and trusting you as an authoritative source in your field.

Establishing and maintaining a personal brand provides the opportunity to be seen as a human being behind a business. Participants agree that people want to be able to personally connect with individuals and build a relationship with those they do business with. A personal brand allows you to become real to your audience and through this the know, like, trust factor can be leverage as a means that grows your business. While certain careers, such as brain surgery, might not find a benefit to building a personal brand, many other careers can and should utilize the power of a personal brand as a means to not only position oneself as a maven within a field, but also possibly connect with the millions utilizing platforms such as Instagram as bring in new and sustainable business growth.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion**

The main reason digital entrepreneurs utilize Instagram as a means to build their personal brands stems from the platform's versatility. Instagram is a visual platform that allows for users to share their lives with an audience directly. Each of the female digital entrepreneurs that were interviewed differentiated the ways in which they personally use Instagram, however, many similar categories were formed throughout the research analysis. For some, Instagram is a means to build and nurture prospective and established clients, and for others, it is a way to share their authentic lives with little intention of obtaining new clients from the platform.

Research question one asked: how do womenpreneurs present themselves on Instagram? Each of the research participants spoke to the importance of authenticity as a way to build their personal brands on Instagram. Participant eight stated,

“So on my personal brand, I want people to know I'm a grandmother, I'm a mother. I want them to know that I am an entrepreneur myself. So it's all about being realistic and authentic.”

There is an openness to the overall energy that Instagram radiates, and there is importance in understanding the way in which you want to be presented online. During more than one interview, participants mentioned that people want to work with people they “know, like, and trust” and Instagram provides this opportunity for digital entrepreneurs alike.

Participant one stated,



“... It's really important to have an online personal brand because people want to do business with people and people want to do business with people that they know, like, and trust.”

Gaining a follower on Instagram is far more long-lasting and harder than other social platforms. This is due to the fact that people choose to follow those who they “know, like, and trust” and can resonate with on an authentic and individual level. With regard to personal branding, this is maintained by various actions such as posting consistently, being authentic, providing value, and connecting with your audience. Facebook, unlike Instagram, can be easier to build a following. However, once you gain a following on Instagram, it is slim that you will lose their attention. This plays into the importance of why Instagram is a vital tool for digital entrepreneurs regardless of the business they own.

Along with authenticity, most participants spoke to utilizing Instagram as a means to build a community. Participant six mentioned that,

“there are many benefits [to] presenting myself online. One of them being that it opens me up to that community type atmosphere. Social media allows me to reach a lot of people in one post... Now we have an opportunity to reach a lot of people in one post...”

When authentic, those who resonate with your branding and purpose will be open to being part of your community. For example, participant four views her Instagram following as a small community of current or aspiring digital nomads with an interest in writing. Through her Instagram, she is able to answer questions and provide guidance for those who want to do what she is doing (traveling the world and writing full-time). As a writer, participant four mentioned that she is constantly asked about the topics that she writes about. Her Instagram is a basis for

individuals to learn about her, her life, and her writing style – all in one place. She aims to brand herself as an expert in the digital writing sphere and her Instagram allows for individuals interested in her to essentially figure out her and her business with ease.

Through each of the responses from the participants, they aim to build a community surrounding their field. As they place themselves as a leader in their industry, their community and authority as a brand grows and their identity as a womenpreneur is established in the eyes of their audiences. People will do business with people they know, like, and trust. A personal brand that build authority as an expert in any given field has the opportunity to grow a community of interested and engaged followers.

Based on each of the responses, a personal brand provides the opportunity to expand your reach as a brand and business. Your growth as a reliable source of information in your respective field translates into your audience knowing, liking, and trusting you. This then creates an atmosphere that attracts prospective clients that will ultimately grow your business. As an authority building piece, your personal brand is a way to showcase what it is you do as a business and creates a direct line of communication between you and your audience.

Participants agreed upon the importance of utilizing a personal brand as it allows much more opportunity to expand your reach and network than an offline space can provide. A personal brand allows individuals to connect on a personal level regarding the things they care about. While participant four uses Instagram as a way to connect people with her work and empower and teach others to do the same for themselves, most other participants regularly use Instagram as a means to obtain new and prospective clients. Instagram ads are used by participants regularly to target their ideal clients and their Instagram profiles are kept in top shape through regular posting and

scheduling. Utilizing Instagram as a means to build their client base leads into their intention to constantly refine their brand messages and stick with a consistent posting schedule.

A common theme that was developed through the participant's responses reflects the use of Instagram as a tool for attracting potential clients. Social media is now used as a means for marketing and building brand authority, which is reflected through the growth of business. Participant three also utilizes her personal brand on Instagram as a means to identify and convert clients stating,

“yes, I get some [leads from Instagram]... For example, because most of the content, I would say 90%, 95% is free content, is to just to help people, right? And the rest sometimes I publish like go to my website and subscribe to my newsletter... And these are the times [that] I get more subscribers or people then go to my website and maybe I get some sessions booked because I offer a consulting session... So yeah, I get some clients right now [through Instagram].”

Additionally, participant eight also uses Instagram as a means to close sales stating,

“I do [get clients from Instagram]...”

Each of the participants, aside from participant four, actively utilizes their personal brand on Instagram as a means to build their cliental. While participant four mainly uses her Instagram as an authority building piece, each of the additional participants state that Instagram is a source that is used to grow their business in more ways than only as a way to position themselves as an expert in their respective fields. Instagram is used as a way to connect with large audiences so to tap into them and use the authority they have built through their personal brand as a gateway to continually close client deals and ultimately grow their business.

The maintenance of each participant's personal brand was reflected through their diligent checking on metrics and engagements each day. Most of the participants began their day with understanding where their numbers were for the day and ensuring they were commenting, direct messaging, and liking content actively each day. Engaging with your audience is part of growing a trustworthy brand that allows for your audience to connect with you authentically. Responding and reacting to what your followers post is a way to grow their interest in what you do as a brand and provides the opportunity for their loyalty as a fan to grow as your brand does.

Participants aligned with the idea that posting six times per week is the ideal posting amount that is required to maintain an active Instagram page. While six times per week was the average, each participant spoke to the idea that spontaneity is also a key factor at remaining authentic. Posting regularly through the use of a schedule can, at times, feel somewhat inauthentic and robotic. Participants agreed upon the necessity to not only remain consistent with their posting, but to also incorporate a sense of posting "on the fly."

Instagram Insights, known as Insights, is part of Instagram's business tools and also a significant aspect of participant's daily maintenance regarding their personal brand. Insights gives user's information about their followers such as their location, age, and gender. Insights allows users to better understand the audience they are reaching on Instagram and the best times for them to post to reach that target. Participant two mentioned that while Insights is a good tool to better understand her audience, the most important aspect for her are the leads that she is receiving through the use of the Insights as a means to target those that would be genuinely interested in her business.

With the exception of one participant, each of the womenpreneurs utilized Instagram Insights as part of their business models in growing their brands. Post engagement and interactions with their audiences topped the list as a means for Insights as a way to gauge brand growth. Insights measures best posting times and divides audiences into segments that allows for easy targeting, the main use for it. Participants also mentioned various applications that are utilized to plan their posting schedule and gain an understanding of their audience so they are better prepared to market to them. Tying in with research question four, the virtual assistant was a tool utilized by a few of the participants.

At times, the posting and maintenance of Instagram can be time consuming, and when bombarded with the many different elements involved in running a business, participants mentioned it can get overwhelming if you do not have help. Therefore, a Virtual Assistant can help in researching, scheduling, and posting content. While a Virtual Assistant was not used by every participant, the common factor regarding those who did use a VA was the amount of time they have been running their own business. For instance, participant eight has a team of individuals that specifically works to research potential clients and craft personalized messages for them. Once there is traction in the relationship, she is able to take over and begin nurturing the relationship to the point of having them sign on as a client (or not). A Virtual Assistant lends the opportunity to outsource time consuming jobs so to allow more room for other activities that must take place as part of a successful business.

A virtual assistant seems to be growing as a normalized aspect in marketing and content creation. VA's provide entrepreneurs with the opportunity to outsource projects and duties to

capable individuals, such as freelancers, and allows for further free time to pursue other business matters such as acquiring leads and growing your brand in various other ways.

Hashtags were also a commonality within the responses of each participant that reflected their usage when posting content on Instagram. Many of the participants utilize the ability to use thirty targeted hashtags when posting as this is a means for others to discover you. Some participants mentioned using programs such as Evernote to keep track of their hashtags for easy usage, while others figure out their hashtags based on their post each day. Overall, it seems the utilization of hashtags is a vital piece in growing your personal brand and expanding the reach of your content. A topic that continued to present itself throughout conversations with each participant was the Instagram algorithm.

The algorithm used by the platform seems to change on a regular schedule, making it hard for users to truly understand the best practices that should be used when considering their posting schedules and the content that they should be posting. Participant one mentioned that the constant changes in Instagram's algorithm affects who sees a post, when time they see it, and is works off of who is online at the moment that you post. With these aspects constantly changing, participants found it hard to rely heavily on the algorithm and instead choose to form their own best practices and not allow themselves to get discouraged by the lack of engagement they see for a post. Instead, most use each post as a means to better prepare themselves for success on their next post. Aside from the algorithm affecting when their followers will see a post, they understand that not all of their content is going to connect or interest them every time and it is important to continue putting to practice the systems that work and trying your best to provide content that creates the biggest impact, while also staying authentic to their personal brand and overall message.

Finally, the overall importance of having a personal brand was touched on by each of the participants. Being personable is an aspect that a personal brand allows for as it is important for individuals to have the ability to connect with you as a real person, not just a business. It's crucial that your audience have the ability to put a face to the name of your business, especially as an entrepreneur. It's important that you use your personalized voice to differentiate yourself from others in your field and build that know, like, and trust factor.

A personal brand is an extension of your business and is what connects you personally to what is you sell or the service you provide. Your audience wants to connect with the human being the brand that is you. You place your own values into your brand and others are able to connect with that authentically. Your audience can come to your brand knowing more than just what you so as a business, but also as a person. Each individual interacts with the people around them in a specific way, and that is what will draw your audience to your brand as opposed to another brand that offers similar products or services. A personal brand provides the opportunity to establish who it is that you want to be and how you want to present that to the people that are attracted to your brand.

In closing, it's important to point out that grounded theory was used to underpin this research and the data collected works to develop a theoretical framework regarding digital entrepreneurship and personal branding. From the data, themes have emerged such as presenting yourself as authentic. Your personal brand should aim to portray someone your audience can know, like and trust. Building a community is another important factor when considering a personal brand. While most participants utilized Instagram as a means to discover new clients, it is important to understand that a community is an audience of people that consume your content and are interested in what you are doing. These individuals, whether or not they become clients,

should not be ignored. A community supports in positioning you as the expert in your field, another benefit that comes from building a personal brand surrounding your business practices.

Further, applications and virtual assistants should be considered when maintaining a personal brand. This is because of the time that it takes to consistently post. Applications can be used to schedule posts in advance, and virtual assistants can be used to eliminate these duties from your to-do list entirely. Thus, freeing up more time and space to pursue other important business matters. Additionally, being connected to both your audience and the space that you represent is crucially important. This also acts as a way to position yourself as an expert in your field and brings in opportunity to continued business growth through followers joining your community and potential clients signing up to receive your service or product.

Posting consistently was a theme that emerged from each interview, and six times a week was the overarching number of days that one should be posting to their personal brand page. While this number was mentioned generally across the board, spontaneity was also mentioned. Planning, scheduling and consistently posting can almost become robotic, thus, it is important to remain as human as possible. With this said, most participants spoke to the fact that they will post “on the fly” as they go about their days and week, not necessarily sticking to their designated posting schedule. Finally, Instagram’s Insights was a tool utilized by the majority of participants. While most used this tool, others utilized other applications to track their personal brands. A note taken from one of the interviews suggests that while Insights can provide you with details regarding the best times to post, it is important not to get discouraged if your post doesn’t do as well as you had thought. This is due to Instagram’s algorithm constantly changing and there not being a standardized way in which you can always post in a successful manner as the algorithm dictates who will view your post and when.



## **Conclusion**

While obtaining new and prospective clients is an important factor to many participants, the biggest intention with personal branding on Instagram stems further than the need for a follow to become a client or not. Instagram is a platform that allows for the self-expression of individuals in ways that allows for an audience to connect with them. Instagram is a means to build and nurture relationships with individuals in such a way that inspires and empowers them to achieve their own personal goals. Participants spoke of building a community and support system that exposes and teaches their audience the tools that are needed for them to succeed in a given field.

Each participant has their individual take on the benefits of building and maintain a personal brand on Instagram, and in the online space in general. Individuals connect with those they resonate with on a personal level, and Instagram has become a platform where this can be a reality. Authenticity, regular posting while also maintaining a sense of spontaneity, community building surrounding a specific niche, and understanding your target audience using Insights and various applications available today are the best practices that can be utilized to build a successful personal brand as a digital entrepreneur.

## **Limitations**

The small group of participants used for this study is not viable to provide a representative sample of female digital entrepreneurs. Additionally, the selected sample consisted of only female digital entrepreneurs and thus cannot count as a reflection of the male population or those who are entrepreneurs outside of the digital space. Finally, Instagram was the only tool used as part of the study, thus further research could potentially seek to analyze the

branding practices of female digital entrepreneurs on other social platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and Snapchat.

### **Future Research**

Future research could look at different social media platforms as a means to build personal brands such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. Additionally, males and those who are not entrepreneurs can be examined as a means to understand the personal branding practices that are utilized by those in other professions.

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## Appendix A

### Letter of Consent



### **Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk**

**Pro # 00038687**

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You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.

We are asking you to take part in a research study called:

**Womenpreneurs the Digital Environment: Utilizing Instagram to Build a Personal Brand**

The person who is in charge of this research study is Michelle Nunez. This person is called the Principal Investigator.

The research will be conducted at the University of South Florida.

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#### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is to examine how female entrepreneurs (“womenpreneurs”) are utilizing Instagram tools to build and maintain their online personal brand. How is Instagram used by womenpreneurs as a tool for personal branding? How is Instagram a means for attracting new business prospects? Much research has examined how professionals are using social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to build their personal brands, but little research has explored how entrepreneurs are using Instagram to build their personal brands.

#### **Why are you being asked to take part?**

We are asking you to take part in this research study because you are a female digital entrepreneur with a business Instagram account. You are part of the target demographic for this study and identify as a womenpreneur that utilizes Instagram as a platform to actively build and grow your online personal brand.

## **Study Procedures:**

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to:

- Take part in this interview that consists of two parts.
- The first part will ask you general demographic questions, including your age, education, professional background, experience with personal branding and as a womenpreneur
- The second part will ask you to answer a series of open-ended questions related to the ways in which you utilize Instagram to build and grow your online personal brand and business.
- The entire interview will take approximately 20-30 minutes.
- The interviews will take place in person if available or via telephone or Skype.
- With consent, all interviews will be recorded using an audio recording device, or using Skype's record feature if applicable, and recordings will be stored on the locked and secure computers of the primary investigator. The only individual with access to your interview responses will be the investigator. Your name and identity will not be linked in any way to any of the information you provide in the interviews unless clearly given consent to do so. Electronic data will be stored on a password protected computer for 5 years and will be deleted after that time period.

## **Total Number of Participants**

About 10 individuals will take part in this study at USF.

## **Alternatives / Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal**

You do not have to participate in this research study.

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

A subject's participation may be terminated by the investigator without regard to the subject's consent under the discretion of the investigator for reasons that interfere with the success of the study.

If a participant chooses not want to be audio recorded, they cannot participate in this study.

## **Benefits**

You will receive no benefit(s) by participating in this research study except potentially gaining a greater understanding about how Instagram is used by other female digital entrepreneurs to build and maintain their personal brand and business. Your involvement in this study will be a part of research that may benefit individuals who are interested in building their own personal brands and businesses using Instagram.

## **Risks or Discomfort**

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

## **Compensation**

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

## **Costs**

It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

## **Conflict of Interest Statement**

There is no conflict of interest involved in this study.

## **Privacy and Confidentiality**

We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. Anyone who looks at your records must keep them confidential. These individuals include:

- The Principal Investigator.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study, and individuals who provide oversight to ensure that we are doing the study in the right way.
- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research.
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, including staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name nor publish anything that would let people know who you are, unless given prior consent to do so.

## **You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints**

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an unanticipated problem, call Michelle Nunez at (407) 280-8802.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at [RSCH-IRB@usf.edu](mailto:RSCH-IRB@usf.edu).

## **Consent to Take Part in this Research Study**

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

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Signature of Person Taking Part in Study

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Date

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Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

**Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent**

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research subject has provided legally effective informed consent.

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Signature of Person obtaining Informed Consent

Date

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**Appendix B**  
**Questionnaire**

1. What is your background/expertise? How did you “get started” and what are your aspirations moving forward?
2. How do you aim to present yourself on Instagram? How would you describe your personal brand?
3. What are the benefits and the pitfalls, in your experience, of virtual self-presentation?
4. What are your creative production and promotion processes?
5. What is your view on the differences and/or similarities of personal branding and personal selling?
6. How do you view Instagram as a business tool? How do you use it as such?
7. How do you measure the effectiveness of your personal brand?
8. What are your personal and professional motives for the way that you present yourself on Instagram?
9. How do you view personal branding at large? How does it affect you and your entrepreneurial efforts? (reflections on branding and entrepreneurship)
10. What practices did you utilize to build your personal brand on Instagram? How do you utilize Instagram to maintain your personal brand? What are a few clear steps that could help clarify your process of developing and sustaining your personal brand?
11. How do you plan to continue building your personal brand?

12. What was the intention behind deciding to build a personal brand on Instagram? What were the driving forces?
13. How often do you practice the steps you explained previously regarding building your personal brand? What does the daily maintenance of your personal brand look like?
14. What is your relationship to your audience and other digital entrepreneurs on Instagram?