

THE ROLE OF INSTAGRAM IN SHAPING PERSONAL BRANDING STRATEGIES FOR CREATIVE FREELANCERS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Clara Monica Nathania, Wirania Swasty

Telkom University

Correspondensi author email: claramonican@student.telkomuniversity.ac.id,
wirania@telkomuniversity.ac.id

Abstract

In today's competitive digital landscape, creative freelancers increasingly rely on personal branding to differentiate themselves and attract clients. A key platform for this purpose due to its focus on visual self-presentation and audience engagement such as Instagram is needed. This systematic literature review (SLR) aims to synthesize existing research on how creative freelancers utilize Instagram for personal branding, identifying key strategies, challenges, and research gaps. Guided by PRISMA, the review analyzed Scopus-indexed studies published between 2015 and 2025. Thematic analysis revealed Instagram's dual function for freelancers: facilitating creative self-expression and serving as a strategic tool for visibility, engagement, and monetization. Freelancers leverage curated posts, Stories, and algorithm-informed practices to craft authentic yet marketable identities. However, a significant gap exists, as few studies directly address the intersection of Instagram, personal branding, and creative freelancing. The review also highlights challenges including emotional and economic pressures stemming from algorithmic visibility demands and aesthetic labor. Current literature is predominantly Western-centric and overlooks newer features like Reels and Guides. Future research should explore these gaps and develop inclusive, culturally responsive frameworks to support sustainable personal branding. This SLR contributes by analyzing existing patterns and identifying best practices relevant to both academic research and the practical branding efforts of creative freelancers.

Keywords: *Creative Freelancers, Instagram, Personal Branding, Systematic Literature Review*

INTRODUCTION

The rise of the gig economy has fundamentally reshaped creative work, enabling professionals such as illustrators, designers, and digital artists to pursue freelance careers beyond traditional employment structures (Vallas & Schor, 2020). Creative freelancers face structural precarity, competition, and algorithmic visibility pressures (e.g., shadowbanning, biased ranking systems) that demand relentless aesthetic labor and self-promotion, operating without institutional safeguards (Duffy & Meisner, 2023). Additionally, the number of followers affect personal branding which further specify the need to curate one's posts on social media (Dika et al., 2023). These demands elevate

personal branding which is a strategic effort to present and promote oneself as a marketable identity (Khedher, 2014), a concept broadly applicable beyond products to individuals and organizations alike (Swasty, 2016), from a supplementary activity to a core career function essential for navigating uncertainty and securing opportunities (Gandini, 2016). Consequently, social media platforms, particularly Instagram with its emphasis on visual communication, storytelling affordances, and commercial features, have become central tools for creative freelancers engaging in self-branding (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

While extensive research has explored Instagram's role in domains like influencer marketing (Lou & Yuan, 2019), consumer behavior (De Veirman et al., 2017) and general self-presentation (Manikonda et al., 2014) there remains a significant gap: few studies have specifically examined how creative freelancers strategically utilize Instagram to build and manage their personal brands. This lack of focus presents a critical omission in understanding how this key demographic adapts personal branding strategies to Instagram's evolving features and cultural dynamics within the freelance context.

Therefore, this systematic literature review (SLR) directly addresses the question: "How do creative freelancers use Instagram to build and manage their personal brands?" By systematically identifying, synthesizing, and analyzing existing literature, this review aims to uncover the specific patterns, strategies, challenges, and platform feature utilizations characterizing Instagram-based personal branding among creative freelancers. Following this introduction, which establishes the context and research gap, the paper details the SLR methodology, presents the synthesized findings, discusses their implications, and concludes by summarizing key insights and identifying avenues for future research.

Ultimately, this SLR contributes a crucial understanding of branding practices within the creative freelance economy, addressing a significant research gap and providing valuable insights for freelancers, researchers, and platforms interested in the intersection of creative work, precarious employment, and digital self-branding.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article presents a systematic review of research on Personal Branding, Creative Freelancers and Instagram. The reviewing process followed the PRISMA guidelines, specifically the PRISMA 2020 statement, which provides updated reporting guidance reflecting advances in methods to identify, select, appraise, and synthesize studies. PRISMA is a standard framework designed to enhance the transparency and completeness of systematic reviews and meta-analyses, ensuring that authors clearly report why the review was conducted, the methods employed, and the findings obtained.

The main reputable electronic database used to conduct the study search is Scopus.com. Keywords used such as "personal branding," "Instagram," and "creative freelancers,". Once the searching process is done, the author analyzed the retrieved papers by title and abstract. An eligibility assessment is performed by screening the full texts based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Exclusion and Inclusion Criteria

Exclusion	Inclusion
Corporate Branding	Personal Branding
Non-Instagram Platform	Instagram
Non-Creative Profession	Creative Freelancers
Non-Empirical	Empirical, Theoretical Studies
Pre-2015 Studies	Post-2015 Studies

The literature search was conducted in May 2025, therefore the publication year filter was set between 2015 and 2025 to capture the most recent available literature at the time of the search. This study generated a total of 107 identified articles. Then, 43 papers were selected based on filtering by open access, publication year between 2015 and 2025, and the English language. The titles and abstracts of the remaining 5 papers were evaluated. 5 papers were reviewed and evaluated as full text. And all 5 studies were eligible for inclusion in this systematic review. The PRISMA guidelines for the study selection are shown in Figure 1.

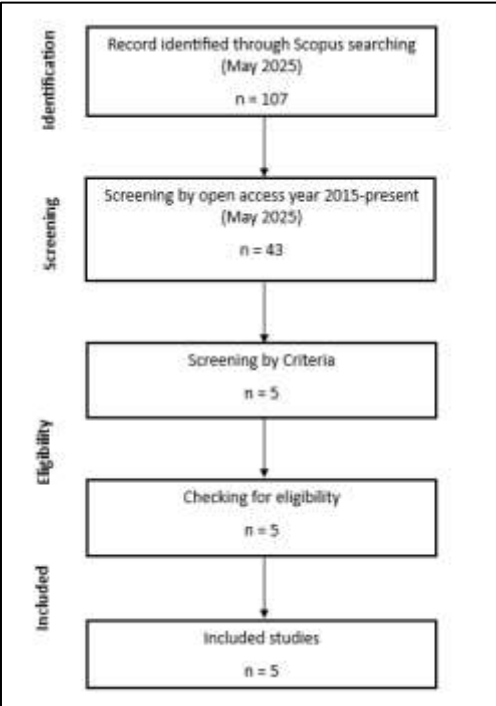


Figure 1. Systematic Review Flowchart

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by (1) Paper's Topic, (2) Contribution and Implications, (3) Instagram Usage Aspects, and (4) Freelance-specific Behavior. The analysis findings were then compared with existing practices and publications.

Results

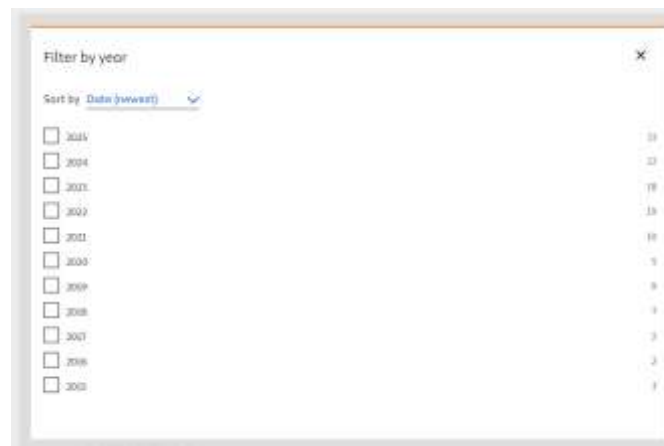


Figure 2. Number of Documents by Year

An analysis of search data from Scopus.com shows a steady increase in research on personal branding. The number of publications peaked in 2022, with 19 documents focusing on the theme of personal branding, creative freelancers and Instagram. This surge is likely linked to the platform's strategic features, the influence of digital culture, and the evolving landscape of professional networking. The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed a global shift towards remote work and digital interaction, prompting professionals to seek online platforms for visibility and networking. However, after 2022, the number of related publications began to show a little decline, possibly due to newer platforms like TikTok began to dominate personal branding strategies, especially among Gen Z. Researchers may have redirected attention toward these emerging spaces.

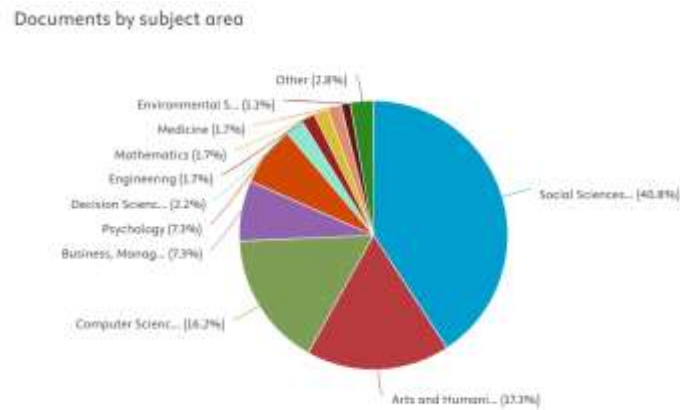


Figure 3. Percentage of Documents by Year

Most of the research on personal branding, creative freelancers, and Instagram falls within the fields of Social Sciences (40.8%), Arts and Humanities (17.3%), and Computer Science (16.2%), which together constitute the majority of publications in this area. In contrast, disciplines such as Business Management, Psychology, Decision Science, Engineering, Mathematics, Medicine, and Environmental Science have contributed fewer studies. This disparity may be due to the varying relevance and alignment of Instagram-based personal branding with the core concerns of each discipline. For instance, while personal branding is central to careers in the creative industries and social media contexts, it may be considered peripheral or less applicable in fields focused on technical, clinical, or empirical research goals. Furthermore, scholars in some of these disciplines may prioritize other forms of professional reputation-building that are not Instagram-centric or personal-brand-driven.

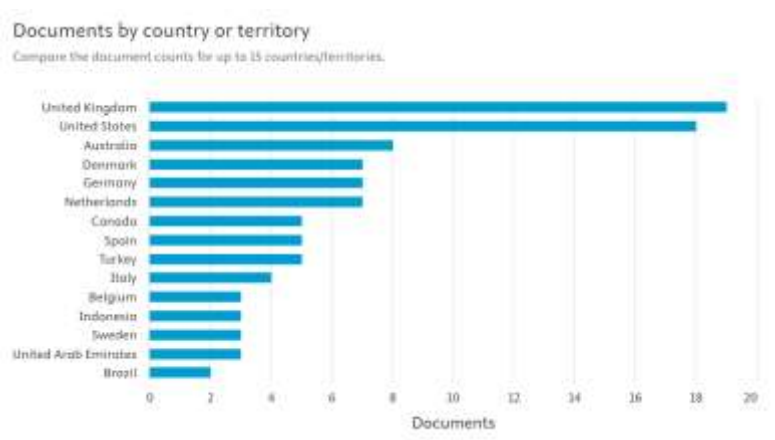


Figure 4. Number of Documents by Country

Geographically, the majority of research outputs come from the United Kingdom, United States and mostly European countries. The United Kingdom ranks first with 19 documents, while United States is in second place with 18 publications focusing on personal branding, Instagram, and creative freelancer. However, within the top 15 countries there are mentions of countries from the region of Asia namingly Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates in respective orders. Indonesia is ranked twelveth with 3 documents and the United Arab Emirates is ranked fourteenth with 3 documents regarding personal branding, Instagram, and creative freelancer.

Next, five papers that have been analyzed in-depth based on topic, methodology, contribution, and collaboration will be highlighted. To provide a comprehensive overview of the relevant studies, a table summarizing key information from the reviewed journals will be presented. This table includes data on the authors, year of publication, keywords, and study location, which can provide insights into the focus and findings of each research.

Table 2. Literature Description of Included Studies

Author	Year	Keywords	Study Location	Methods	Findings
Sophie Bishop	2025	Algorithms, art worlds, authenticity, creative labour, social media platforms	United Kingdom (UK)	Qualitative (Digital Ethnography and interviews)	Artists use influencer-inspired strategies for self-branding and optimization, but this also leads to anxiety and creative compromise.
Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund	2015	fashion blogging, self-branding, post-feminism, social media, Instagram	United States (US)	Qualitative (Content analysis and interview)	Bloggers perform self-branding using tropes of passion, glamor, and authenticity, while concealing the real work and pressures behind their content

Monica Ioana Lungeanu and Lorenza Parisi	2018	authenticity, fashion blogger, fashion partnership, influencer, Instagram, Romanian fashion sphere	Romania	Qualitative (Content analysis)	Bloggers strategically combine curated content and informal interactions to grow their brand, followers, and perceived authenticity.
Sara Sylvester	2019	Goffman; online identity; performance; fictive art; exhibition	United Kingdom (UK)	Qualitative (Visual analysis)	The study finds that Instagram supports the creation of credible, narrative-driven digital personas that blend art and personal branding.
Arturo Arriagada and Francisco Ibáñez	2020	social media, cultural production, self-branding, platformization, visibility	Chile	Qualitative (Interviews, content analysis, platform-sensitive approach)	Platform changes impact creators through shifts in communication style, intensified time demands, and new forms of negotiation within influencer marketing circuits.

Paper Topic Analysis

Paper Bishop (2023) examined the influence of Instagram on the self-branding strategies of creative freelancers, especially female and non-binary artists. The study uses digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews to reveal that artists experienced “influencer creep” as an approach to presenting themselves on Instagram.

Paper Duffy & Hund (2015) uses qualitative content analysis and interviews to study how top fashion bloggers construct “entrepreneurial femininity” on Instagram through self-branding strategies that blend visually-pleasing labor, passion-driven narratives, and carefully selected personal sharing.

Paper Lungeanu & Parisi (2018) gives insight about how Romanian fashion bloggers use Instagram to build personal brands by balancing visually-appealing pictures, authenticity, and social interaction through Feed and Story posts. This paper

performed a qualitative content analysis of their Instagram activity to study how it appeals across multiple customer interests.

Paper Sylvester (2019) investigates how feminist artists use Instagram to construct fictive personas for the purpose of artistic expressions and social critique.

Paper Arriagada & Ibáñez (2020) explores how Instagram's algorithm and features constantly reshape creators' brand subjectivities by communication style, time perception, and the commercial circuits they're part of.

Contribution and Implications

Paper Bishop (2023) shows that Instagram's platform culture reshapes creative work, increasing emotional and promotional demands, and deepening existing inequalities in visibility, recognition, and income for marginalized artists.

Paper Duffy & Hund (2015) reveals that behind the image of effortless success lies significant hidden labor, emotional discipline, and commercial pressure, particularly for women and challenging the narrative of empowerment often associated with digital self-branding.

Paper Lungeanu & Parisi (2018) highlights successful influencers blend curated content with casual interactions to appear authentic, showing that personal branding today relies on strategic storytelling, collaboration, and perceived relatability.

Paper Sylvester (2019) points out how Instagram enables transmedia storytelling and self-branding, revealing that digital personas can gain cultural and economic legitimacy while challenging traditional power dynamics in art and media. It is stated in

Paper Arriagada & Ibáñez, (2020) that platform changes reshape creators' brand subjectivities, demanding constant adaptation, high-frequency posting, and alignment with commercial metrics to maintain visibility and professional viability.

Instagram Usage Aspects

The participants in Paper Bishop (2023) used Instagram features strategically like selfies, emotional captions, time-lapse videos, and algorithm tests to improve reach and engagement, often modifying their content and process to suit the platform.

It is explained in Paper Duffy & Hund (2015) that Instagram is used as a primary tool for visual storytelling, where bloggers strategically stage passion-driven work, aspirational lifestyles, and selectively personal content to strengthen their self-brand and attract followers and sponsors.

Paper Lungeanu & Parisi, (2018) describes that bloggers consistently use Instagram's Feed for polished, brand-oriented content and Stories for spontaneous, behind-the-scenes engagement, while tagging, hashtags, and cross-platform promotion help boost visibility and growth.

According to Paper Sylvester (2019), artists strategically use Instagram features such as consistent visual themes, curated captions, and narrative arcs to build believable, engaging identities that function both as art and brand.

As was stated in Paper Arriagada & Ibáñez (2020), creators use Instagram tactically by posting daily content, leveraging Stories for authenticity and immediacy, and adjusting content style based on visual trends and algorithm performance to maximize engagement.

Freelancer-specific Behavior

Paper Bishop (2023) explains that freelancers were forced to blend personal identity with professional branding, constantly perform emotional authenticity, and self-optimize in the absence of institutional support treating visibility as critical to survival.

In Paper Duffy & Hund (2015), bloggers exhibit typical freelancer behavior which consists of managing all aspects of their brand independently, constantly working to remain visible, and navigating unstable income while performing aesthetic and emotional labor.

Paper Lungeanu & Parisi (2018) implies that these bloggers act like self-employed creatives by managing their own branding, monetizing content through partnerships, and using storytelling and community-building to gain credibility and followers.

Although Paper Sylvester (2019) focuses on feminist artists, its analysis of self-managed digital personas offers valuable parallels for creative freelancers that is to manage one's own visibility, crafting an authentic public image, and using social platforms to shape a cohesive personal brand.

Although not labeled as freelancers, the creators in Paper Arriagada & Ibáñez (2020) act similarly by managing their own brand, balancing authenticity with marketability, and relying on Instagram as a central tool for creative promotion and income generation.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review set out to explore how creative freelancers use Instagram as a platform for developing and managing their personal branding strategies. By analyzing five peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2025, this study synthesized key insights into the ways Instagram facilitates both artistic expression and strategic brand development for creative professionals, particularly in the fields of fashion, visual art, and digital content creation.

The review found that Instagram operates as a dual-purpose platform which are offering creative freelancers a space to express their artistic identities while also serving as a tool for visibility, engagement, and monetization. Key features such as Stories, curated posts, emotional captions, and algorithmic insights are actively employed to

construct authentic yet marketable self-presentations. However, these strategies are shaped by platform-specific pressures such as aesthetic labor, influencer culture, and ever-changing algorithmic demands.

Despite these insights, only 1 of the 5 studies directly focused on the intersection of personal branding, Instagram, and creative freelancers. This highlights a significant gap in the literature. Moreover, most research analyzed originated from Western academic contexts, with limited attention paid to cultural variation, accessibility, and emerging platform features like Reels or Guides. This suggests a lack of inclusive and actionable frameworks that address the unique needs of freelancers navigating visual self-branding on Instagram.

This review is limited by the small number of eligible studies, the Western-centric scope of existing literature, and the exclusion of non-English publications or non-open-access sources. Additionally, the review only captures studies indexed in Scopus and may not reflect all relevant research from adjacent disciplines or grey literature.

Future research should expand the scope of inquiry to include more specific creative fields, such as freelance illustrators, graphic design, photography and the likes in order to understand how personal branding strategies may differ based on the nature of visual work and audience interaction. In addition, future research also should expand the scope of inquiry to include more diverse cultural contexts, explore underutilized platform features, and distinguish between influencer-centric and freelancer-centric branding practices. By analyzing these patterns and real-world experiences more deeply, scholars can contribute to building practical, inclusive, and adaptable frameworks to support sustainable personal branding for creative freelancers in the evolving digital landscape.

REFERENCES

- Arriagada, A., & Ibáñez, F. (2020). “You Need At Least One Picture Daily, if Not, You’re Dead”: Content Creators and Platform Evolution in the Social Media Ecology. *Social Media and Society*, 6(3), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120944624>
- Bishop, S. (2023). Influencer creep: How artists strategically navigate the platformisation of art worlds. *New Media and Society*, 27(4), 2109–2126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231206090>
- De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2017.1348035>
- Dika, D., Sonni, A. F., & Sukmarini, A. V. (2023). Communication Strategy of Personal Branding of Instagram Celebrities in Building Credibility on Social Media. *Journal La Sociale*, 4(4), 249–258. <https://doi.org/10.37899/journal-la-sociale.v4i4.1654>
- Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities’ Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 68, 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.11.009>

- Duffy, B. E., & Hund, E. (2015). "Having it All" on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding Among Fashion Bloggers. *Social Media and Society*, 1(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115604337>
- Duffy, B. E., & Meisner, C. (2023). Platform governance at the margins: Social media creators' experiences with algorithmic (in)visibility. *Media, Culture and Society*, 45(2), 285–304. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221111923>
- Gandini, A. (2016). Digital work: Self-branding and social capital in the freelance knowledge economy. *Marketing Theory*, 16(1), 123–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470593115607942>
- Khedher, M. (2014). Personal Branding phenomenon. *International Journal of Information, Business and Management*, 6(2), 29–40. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380096541>
- Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer Marketing: How Message Value and Credibility Affect Consumer Trust of Branded Content on Social Media. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2018.1533501>
- Lungeanu, M. I., & Parisi, L. (2018). What makes a fashion blogger on Instagram? The Romanian case study. In *Observatorio (OBS*)*. <http://obs.obercom.pt>.
- Manikonda, L., Hu, Y., & Kambhampati, S. (2014). *Analyzing User Activities, Demographics, Social Network Structure and User-Generated Content on Instagram*. <http://arxiv.org/abs/1410.8099>
- Swasty, W. (2016). Branding: Memahami dan merancang strategi merek. PT Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Sylvester, S. (2019). The theatre of the selfie: Fictive practices of the instagram artist. *Body, Space and Technology*, 18(1), 61–107. <https://doi.org/10.16995/bst.315>
- Vallas, S., & Schor, J. B. (2020). Vallas2020- Understanding GIg Economy. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 46, 273–294. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-121919-054857>