MASTER'S DISSERTATION

ONLINE PERSONAL BRANDING IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE PANDEMIC:

THE PERSPECTIVE OF DIFFERENT ADULTHOOD DEVELOPMENT STAGES

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Thesis dissertation presented to IPAM, to fulfil the requirements necessary to obtain the master's degree in Global Marketing carried out under the scientific guidance of Moe Bagheri.

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Developing a thesis on a complex and ever-changing topic is not a simple task. However, I believe that the results achieved in this study can be relevant for professionals from different areas who intend to study or develop their personal brands in the digital environment. This work would not have been possible without the support of my supervisor, Moe Bagheri. Thank you for your patience and guidance throughout these months. I would also like to thank Professor Fernando Santos for his constant availability and always having a positive and encouraging outlook throughout the process. Finally, I would like to thank all the participants that volunteered to participate in my study - without your kindness and availability, this study would not have been possible.

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"Your brand is what people say about you when you are not in the room."

Jeff Bezos, 2012

Abstract

The COVID-19 global pandemic has changed the way people live and work. The digitization already observed in recent years was further accelerated by the consequences brought by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Professionals from different areas and ages were forced to interact with digital tools and platforms to continue their work at a distance. In addition to these changes, the pandemic brought doubts and uncertainties in professional careers. The need for adaptation was, therefore, even more fundamental for professionals worldwide.

Assuming that online personal branding is a valuable strategy for professional differentiation and for attaining a satisfactory career, this qualitative study intended to study different topics within this theme, interviewing individuals from different adulthood life stages.

As one of the first cross-sectional exploratory studies on this topic, to the best knowledge of the author, it was possible to understand the perceptions of different audiences, of different ages, and necessarily at different life stages, and draw valid conclusions regarding online personal brands from a broadcaster and receiver perspective.

The results suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic acted as an antecedent to the development of online personal brands, as people intensified their use of digital platforms and tools during that period. Still on the use of digital platforms, the different adulthood life stages indicated that they already used the platforms for professional purposes and were used to follow online personal brands. Being with it, aware of what brings them closer and further away from the brands, the benefits, and challenges of developing this activity. Nevertheless, participants' perceptions differed according to age.

Concerning the relationship of developing an online personal brand as a company employee, the results show that despite all the benefits pointed out to both parties resulting from this activity, this action can trigger tensions. The most significant tension factor pointed out seems to be competition related to the personal brand's operation sector. Finally, regarding the future of online personal branding, the results show that it will tend to grow in the future and will be influenced by the legal and technological restrictions that these platforms and those who use them will be subject to. The preferred communication format of the online personal brand will be video, social networks as the platform of choice to develop the personal brand, and the characteristic that the brand must have to be successful is authenticity.

At the end, the limitations and future avenues for research will be presented.

Resumo

A pandemia mundial COVID-19 alterou a maneira como as pessoas vivem e trabalham. A digitalização já observada nos últimos anos foi ainda mais potenciada pelas consequências trazidas pelo vírus SARS-CoV-2. Profissionais de diferentes áreas e idades foram obrigados a interagir com ferramentas e plataformas digitais de forma a darem continuidade aos seus trabalhos à distância. Além destas mudanças, a pandemia trouxe consigo mudanças e incertezas nas carreiras profissionais, a necessidade de adaptação por parte dos profissionais é por isso, ainda mais fundamental.

Acreditando que o desenvolvimento de uma marca pessoal online é uma estratégia válida para a diferenciação profissional e para o alcance de uma carreira profissional satisfatória, o presente estudo qualitativo pretendeu estudar diferentes tópicos dentro desta temática, entrevistando indivíduos de diferentes fases da vida adulta.

Sendo um dos primeiros estudos de natureza transversal nesta temática, no melhor conhecimento do autor, tornou-se possível perceber as perceções de diferentes públicos, de diferentes idades e necessariamente em diferentes fases de vida e tirar conclusões válidas no que toca às marcas pessoais online de uma perspetiva emissora e recetora.

Os resultados sugerem que a pandemia COVID-19 atuou como um antecedente para o desenvolvimento de marcas pessoais online, à medida que as pessoas intensificaram o uso de plataformas e ferramentas digitais durante a pandemia. Ainda sobre o uso de plataformas digitais, os indivíduos de diferentes fases da vida adulta indicaram que já utilizam as plataformas online para fins profissionais, estando também acostumados a seguir marcas pessoais online – tendo por isso, consciência do que as liga e as separa das marcas, os benefícios e desafios de desenvolver estas marcas, embora as

perceções variem conforme a idade. No que toca à relação do desenvolvimento de uma marca pessoal online enquanto trabalhador de uma empresa, apesar dos benefícios apontados para ambas as partes, os resultados mostram que o setor em que a marca atua e a consequente concorrência desenvolvida pode ser o principal fator de tensão entre as duas partes. Por fim, e no que se refere ao futuro das marcas pessoais online, os resultados apontam que estas marcas vão tender a crescer em número no futuro e as plataformas e quem as utiliza serão condicionadas pelas restrições legais e tecnológicas. O formato de comunicação preferencial para a marca pessoal online será o vídeo, as redes sociais como plataforma de eleição para o desenvolvimento da marca, e a característica que a marca deverá ter para ser bem-sucedida é a autenticidade.

No final desta dissertação, serão apresentadas as limitações do estudo, assim como sugestões para investigações futuras.

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Introduction

The year 2020, made everyone rethink the way they live and the way they work. To contain the spread of COVID-19, governments worldwide set limitations and regulations to stay home and keep the social distance.

Since the beginning of this pandemic, many changes can be noticed at a social, organizational, and individual level. As such, the need to adapt to this extreme situation was fundamental. Companies and individuals moved to online services and products and started engaging in new business networks to those detached by the pandemic, accelerating the digitalization of the work process that we were already witnessing in the past few years.

From the analysis of a survey of 5000 workers in the United States, (Bick et al., 2020) realized that 35.2 percent of the inquired professionals worked entirely from home in May 2020, up from 8.2 percent in February 2020.

Once Covid-19 has made digital transformation obligatory for all businesses and sectors, (Fletcher & Griffiths, 2020) thought that it was imperative to analyse and theorize what would constitute the work after this pandemic. Assuming that the companies and future jobs will be increasingly digital, it is essential to understand how individuals of different adulthood development stages can excel in this environment, be responsible for their career planning, and self-development. (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016) suggested that to stand out in this challenging global market and possibly have additional job opportunities, regardless of the individual's environment, it is essential to create and develop personal marketing tools, and everything starts with a personal brand. All individuals have a personal brand, something that sets them apart from the crowd.

Knowing how to communicate these characteristics to the people which the individual interacts with can be beneficial both personally and professionally.

The concept of the personal brand first appeared in the article "The brand called You", where (Peters, 1997) conveys the idea that we are the CEO of our own company. Since then, the theme has gained relevance, first in self-help books and later in the appearance of the first personal websites. All this due to the perception that, since our brand will always exist, the owner should have control over it (Kaputa, 2003) - without this control, others will be able to define the personal brand. The individual may lose the control of how he is perceived and his consequent reputation or lack thereof.

Concerning the digital environment, (Albright & Simmens, 2014) believe that the growth of online personal branding can be due to the growth of social media that has allowed individuals to use the internet to build and encourage self-presentations. In line with that, a study developed by (Donelan, 2016) found that when engagement levels rise, so does the number of motives for utilizing social media, as well as the perceived number of successful outcomes, such as contributions to professional success. Furthermore, organizations have understood that conventional marketing strategies can no longer sustain that, and the fact that social connectivity is becoming the key to marketing (Geho & Dangelo, 2012).

Although developing a personal brand is being increasingly suggested to individuals from different sectors, enhancing this action can create conflicts when developed by a company's employees. (Gorbatov et al., 2018) suggested that more research about the management attitudes towards employee personal branding is necessary, avoiding possible personal-institution tension.

Despite the numerous advantages and motivations for developing an online personal brand, such as differentiation, promotion of qualities, and specific and oriented

communication (Kaputa, 2003; Schwabel, 2009; Shepherd, 2005), it is fundamental to study not only the benefits of developing a personal brand but also, the challenges and negative aspects that can be accompanied with this activity (Gorbatov et al., 2019).

Since behaviour and objectives change over the adult life span, more studies are required about the potential changes over the adult life span in terms of perceptions and views over these thematic (Minor-Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2020).

Based on the future research suggestions of past researchers on this thematic, this study aims to understand the perspectives of different adulthood development stages about online personal brands. Bearing this goal in mind, the following six research questions were established:

I.   What is the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on online personal brands?
II.   What are the perceptions about online personal brands?
III.   How would individuals project an online personal brand?
IV.   What are the challenges of developing an online personal brand?
V.   What is the point of view of professional adults in building a personal brand while working for a company?
VI.   What will be the future of online personal brands?

A qualitative approach was employed to permit an in-depth understanding of the perspectives over online personal brands by different adulthood development stages. For this study, 12 individuals were interviewed. The sample was divided based on their age into the 3 following adulthood development stages adopted from the conceptual model of (Roschk et al., 2013):

- Youthful Adulthood (18-27).

- Early Adulthood (33-40).

- Center Adulthood (46-60).

The dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first chapter offers a literature review with the objective of gaining a better understanding of the state-of-the-art in the domains covered in this research. It is separated into sub-chapters that cover several subjects that are important to comprehending the study's progress. The technique used and the research procedure are defined and explained in the second chapter. The study's findings are presented in the third chapter through analysis of the interview questions. The discussion and analysis of the results are presented in the fourth chapter. Finally, the fifth chapter, will presents the study's key conclusions, including theoretical and practical implications, as well as the study's limitations and possible future research directions. In the sixth chapter, the bibliographical references that helped to compose this study can be consulted.

1. Literature review

This chapter will start with the dissertation' initial motto, the pandemic's impact on professional careers. Then the concept of personal branding and its importance in the current situation will be introduced, from its origins to today's digital evolution - including the role of social media, brand process construction, and challenges that an individual may face during the process. After this, the development of a personal brand as an employee of a company will also be addressed. Finally, the last section will address the importance of studying individuals' perceptions of different ages and an explanation over the adulthood development stages model used in the study. This analysis will help to understand the current knowledge on these topics.

1.1. The repercussions of the pandemic on professional careers

At the end of 2019, the first SARS-CoV-2 infected citizens in Wuhan City, China, were reported (WHO, 2021). After the first infections, the virus responsible for the disease, commonly known as COVID-19, quickly spread to countries in the Asian continent. As a result of an increasingly globalized world, the virus quickly spread to the rest of the continents.

Due to the lack of global knowledge about the virus, such as the way it spreads and the lack of security measures, contagion rapidly reached worrying levels, which led to declaring a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2021, by the director-general of the world health organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (WHO, 2021).

With the arrival of the first studies and security measures, governments worldwide started the first awareness campaigns and later the confinement of their populations to stop the chains of contagion. The measures, although harsh, were essential to prevent the collapse of the health units and reduce the harmful impact of the virus (Gombos et al., 2020).

All these events brought uncertainty, doubts, and essentially a different way of living and interacting. In less than a year, the world began to redefine the simple concept of "going to work", as remote work and social distance have changed how we perform our professional roles (Hite & McDonald, 2020).

The sudden social changes due to the pandemic brought a need for a quick adaptation by companies and professionals. Businesses have had to restructure their teams and rethink how they operate in the market to maintain their businesses and the jobs of their employees.

To understand how many US workers shifted to remote work in the months after the pandemic outbreak, (Bick et al., 2020) ran an online survey with 200 respondents. The study showed that of all those working in May 2020, 35.2 percent worked entirely from home, while only 8.2 percent in February 2020 reported doing so. Furthermore, of all employees regularly commuting in February 2020, only 43.7 percent continued to do so in May 2020, while 28.6 percent reported working at least once a week from home, and 27.7 percent were no longer employed in May 2020. These numbers showed how rapidly companies have decided to make this shift to keep their professional obligations and the high number of jobs losses over this period.

A study developed by (Umar et al., 2021) showed that Covid-19 had a favourable impact on the Gig Economy - described as people who sell their labour through apps, also known as platforms (Taylor et al., 2017). Since Covid-19, the average daily tasks/jobs submitted and filled on platform economics has increased.

In addition, the McKinsey report about the future of work after COVID-19 (Susan Lund, 2021) shows that the extent and character of workforce transformations necessary in the years ahead will be hard, given the predicted concentration of job growth in high-wage jobs and reductions in low-wage occupations. In their post-COVID-19 scenario, more than 100 million workers, or one in every sixteen, will need to find a new job by 2030 across the eight focal nations (Susan Lund, 2021).

More than that, Covid-19 has had a significant impact on how people engage with one another. The digital footprint and dependency on the Internet and technology usage have grown due to the pandemic, at least temporarily (Nagel, 2020). Individuals and corporations are interacting electronically more than ever before due to global lockdowns and social alienation.

Imagining that this digital environment will result in a more competitive environment for attention and job opportunities, the need to have a robust online presence is even more fundamental. According to an article on Forbes by (Castrillon, 2020), this is the reason why personal branding is so important right now. "It will assist you in standing out from the crowd and making the most of the online arena. Concentrate on what you can control - your personal brand - and you will be more prepared for life after COVID-19".

1.2. Personal Branding

Job applicants have always tried to sell their personal brands to recruiters through resumes and in job interviews (Parks-Yancy & Cooley, 2016). Even though some individuals are not aware of or assume it, everyone has a personal brand that they constantly try to convey to those they interact with.

The importance of personal brand has grown in popularity over the last fifteen years as a recurring topic in popular discourse and academia, under the titles of personal branding (Wee & Brooks, 2010), human branding (Close et al., 2011), personal marketing (Kotler, 2005), self-branding (Marwick, 2013), and self-marketing are all terms used to describe how people promote themselves (Shepherd, 2005). To offer a new definition that takes into account interdisciplinary data, (Gorbatov et al., 2018) analysed 100 papers on personal branding, synthesizing all definitions of individual branding stemming from diverse disciplines and areas of studies and introduced the following definition: "Personal branding is a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based in a unique combination of individual characteristics, which

signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery" (Gorbatov et al., 2018, p.6).

Some practitioners claim that personal branding is like product and service branding, which is backed up by academic research (Labrecque et al., 2011; Shepherd, 2005). The main goal in common, is to capture and promote the qualities and individuality of a person to a target audience (Kaputa, 2003; Schwabel, 2009; Shepherd, 2005).

Accordingly, (Arruda & Dixson, 2007) defines personal branding as a three-stage process that includes:

1.   Identifying the person's value proposition.

2.   Developing a strategy to precisely communicate the value proposition.

3.   Putting the strategy into action to make the personal brand effort visible to the target viewers.

Many authors have also emphasized the necessity of showcasing one's strengths, values, ambitions, and personality when it comes to the characteristics of the personal brand (Montoya & Vandehey, 2002; Rampersad, 2008). Furthermore, (Rampersad, 2008) suggested that to "create a favourable emotional reaction" an individual must create a personal brand story and a clear brand promise. In addition, a personal brand should be developed based on the public perceptions of the personality and the branded individual's ability to form relationships with their target audience (Rampersad, 2008) (Gandini, 2015). As a result, personal branding also includes a person's reputation, often known as their brand image (Gander, 2014; Holloway, 2013).

According to (Arruda & Dixson, 2007), a great brand, whether personal or corporate, has three fundamental qualities: 1) clarity, 2) consistency, 3) constancy. (Arruda & Dixson, 2007) showcases personal brand recognition worldwide as an

example: "Oprah Winfrey is one of the most successful, visible, and consistent personal brands in the world, both commercially and personally." Furthermore, personal branding is incomplete without sincerity (Arruda & Dixson, 2007; Labrecque et al., 2011; Montoya & Vandehey, 2002; Rampersad, 2008). It appears that an individual strategically controls his or her brand by combining all components of personal branding and conveying them to the public (Rampersad, 2008).

In sum, constructing and developing a personal branding includes undertaking different exercises to be noticed by others (Gorbatov et al., 2019). The idea is being personally responsible for having control over communication and consequently the perception of others about what we do (Labrecque et al., 2011). Although employment is the common goal of personal branding, it is not exclusive - people have been self-branded for several reasons such as dating, establishing friendships, or merely for self-expression (Shepherd, 2005).

1.3. Online Personal Branding

Pioneering research on internet use points out that interactions in virtual environments such as texting, gaming, and interaction allow users to express themselves and explore more intimate aspects of their personality that would be highly conditioned in physical interactions (Labrecque et al., 2011). Through anonymity and the eradication of physical barriers, such as ethnicity, gender, physical capacity, and socioeconomic status, which can hinder identification, digital spaces allow increased open communication (Eleanor, 1997; Sherry, 1995).

In addition, digitalization and free access to information create more qualified and updated professionals in different areas, making the professional world even more competitive than before (Vallas & Cummins, 2015). For many years, individuals have tried to create and develop strategies to stand out compared to the remaining competitors in their area of operation (Vallas & Cummins, 2015). The development of a solid and coherent personal brand can be the solution for achieving differentiation (PwC, n.d.).

In the digital era, the idea of personal branding was first popularized by (Peters, 1997) in his article "The Brand Called You". Once considered a technique used only for celebrities (Rein et al., 2006), businesses, and political leaders, online resources have made personal branding a vital marketing tool for ordinary people (Shepherd, 2005).

Everything started with websites. The personal website has emerged as a significant space for self-expression and self-presentation and to learn more about and with others since technological advancements have fuelled internet development (Vazire & Gosling, 2004).

As the Internet started growing, providing better and easier resources that automate processes and enable users to create content, the development of online personal websites and social media profiles have grown very fast (Labrecque et al., 2011).

Nowadays, everyone can upload text, images, and videos from a technological device to the web and reach millions in a matter of seconds. In this way, digital platforms have become the ideal forum for personal branding (Labrecque et al., 2011).

Finally, personal branding emerged as an intentional individual professional conduct in response to the increased prevalence changes in the labor market and the employer-employee relationship, as well as the use of new communication technology in many aspects of people's lives and work (Vallas & Cummins, 2015). Personal branding,

as a flexible career strategy for packaging and presenting one's professional identity to fit the demands of the target audience (Gioia et al., 2014; Parmentier et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2005), is a critical component of professional success in these new types of employment (Gioia et al., 2014; Parmentier et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2005).

1.3.1. The role of social media on online personal branding

As the use of social media marketing grows more widespread, a new technique has arisen, including the strategic use of the channel to develop a solid personal brand. According to (Reynolds, 2011), social media has had a more considerable influence on personal branding than the previous technique, primarily focused on communication style and look.

At its roots, social media was a web instrument for individuals to be associated with friends, and afterward, it has been embraced by businesses that realized this might be a modern communication strategy that may lead to reaching out to potential clients (Petruca, 2016). Researchers and marketers have been studying how to use the Internet strategically to establish a great brand since its widespread adoption. We live in an era of unprecedented openness, whether we are talking about business or personal branding. Individuals are implicitly branded by their online information, which leaves a digital imprint (Labrecque et al., 2011).

In addition, (Liu & Suh, 2017) emphasize that the practice of personal branding provides excellent opportunities and autonomy for social media users. Given that traditional branding processes imply financial investment, one of the advantages of social media platforms is cost savings. Social media provides a platform and structure that

allows individuals and businesses to promote very effectively (Karaduman, 2013). Individuals can now build personal profiles on various platforms, allowing them to develop and display themselves to a broader audience (Holt, 2016; Labrecque et al., 2011). This may thus be seen as a means for individuals to create their personal brand identities, according to (Labrecque et al., 2011).

The (eBizMBA, 2021) provided a ranking in October with the four most popular social media worldwide with Unique Monthly Visitors in order, which are Facebook (2,200,000,000), YouTube (1,850,000,000), Instagram (1,100,000,000), and Twitter (375,000,000). Although all these platforms are included in the same technological section, they have different characteristics and are designed for specific audiences individually.

Since social media shortens the distance for those we intend to communicate with, it is fair to theorize that it may be an advantage for those who intend to develop a personal brand. When ordinary branding endeavours require significant financial investments, social media offers the opportunity to an individual to advance oneself as a brand in a cheap way (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

1.3.2. Building an online personal brand

The social media platforms used for personal branding are diverse, the most common, and the most discussed platforms in the literature - Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter, each having their strengths and weaknesses (Evans et al., 2017; Johnson, 2019; Kang, 2013; Labrecque et al., 2011);. At the same time, the researchers above agree on an important aspect. Regardless of the social media platform used for

personal branding, an individual needs to develop a strategy first. Otherwise, the efforts of all brands will be wasted. In this sense, (Kang, 2013) claim that posting on social media without a clear strategy is confusing – Being, therefore, a requirement for a robust individual brand strategy. In addition, many researchers (Evans et al., 2017; Johnson, 2019; Kang, 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Labrecque et al., 2011); asserted that to established strategies and priorities, it is necessary to carefully select online channels accordingly in the process of building individual brands.

When it comes to establishing and marketing a brand on social media, the content is also fundamental (Gensler et al., 2013), and it should be relevant to the target audience, consistent, and helpful, as well as have a call to action. Research from (Ashley & Tuten, 2015) has shown that informative, vibrant, and engaging (de Vries et al., 2012) branded content tends to promote positive interaction among users in the form of "likes," "comments," "sharing," and higher sales (for product-related material).

Developing a coherent narrative identity is the basis of a brand to be marketed (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016). When developing the narrative, it should be considered that even if the explanation is about the brand, it is essential for the audience that the individual needs to be associated with, so the viewers can feel part of the process and related to the communication. Furthermore, to be successful with the personal brand, a reliable appearance should be used in all the present platforms (Petruca, 2016). Having a dynamic role on social channels such as consistently posting is also critical to provoke impact and maintain and grow an audience (Petruca, 2016).

1.3.3. Challenges for developing an online personal brand

Personal branding comes with its own set of challenges, most of which originate from the complexity of the online environment. One key difference lies in the challenge of segmentation for personal branding. While the digital age promotes the freedom to explore multiple selves (Sherry, 1995), a personal branding message should be clear and consistent, according to experts, to create an air of authenticity. As a result, if a person intends to develop numerous brands for different consumers, challenges may occur. Furthermore, it becomes essential to suppress stories that dilute the branding message to avoid branding failures (Shepherd, 2005). Failures may also become apparent during a first face-to-face meeting if a person does not match the other's expectations (Frost et al., 2008; Labrecque et al., 2011).

People's digital footprints are created by information discovered on the internet (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007; Madden et al., 2007). Some information is beyond a person's control, but most of it is carefully created and posted (Labrecque et al., 2011). To solve these occurrences, (Smith, 2018) asserts that being proactive about how the brand gets promoted on social media, therefore affecting the information others discover, is key to make the difference.

According to a (CareerBuilder, 2018) survey, 70% of employers use social media to screen candidates during the hiring process, and 43% of employers use social media to check on current employees, which can make a sound calling card when investigating the recruiter (CareerBuilder, 2018). Nevertheless, these platforms can also cause the candidates not to be selected (CareerBuilder, 2018; Ward & Yates, 2013). Once the personal brand accounts usually have free access, recruiters can check them and might not relate with the shared content. If a recruiter feels that some visions and ideas go counter to what the company stands for, the candidate may be excluded from the selection process (CareerBuilder, 2018; Ward & Yates, 2013).

1.4. Employee personal brand

The shaping of a personal brand can be divided into two types - employer branding and personal branding (Miles & Mangold, 2004).Employer branding is shaping the personal brand of an employer with a view toward employees. Internal employer branding is directed toward current employees (and to business partners and suppliers). It is intended to impart the system of corporate values as to be able to deliver goods or services based on these values, which should, as a result, translate into customer satisfaction. Also conceptualized by (Miles & Mangold, 2004, p.68) employee branding as "the process by which employees internalize the desired brand image and are motivated to project the image to customers and other organizational constituents".

External employer branding is directed toward potential employees and is intended to convince them that the given workplace represents the values they expect. In addition, external employer branding increases the number of applications an employer receives and improves their quality (Foster et al., 2010).

Personal branding is also advantageous to employers; organizations should encourage individuals to have strong personal brands since it is helpful to the company. Strong companies constantly strive to attract talent and keep it if possible. Human resources are not only the driving force for success but also the leverage to maintain it. "The Most Important Asset - Your people" could not be found in the book (Kotler & Keller, 2009). An employee's personal brand may be considered an indirect part of internal marketing because it must be involved in selecting, transferring, and delivering the value of the client (Kotler & Keller, 2009).

Employees that can represent their company at conferences or events are improving themselves and gaining visibility for the company. When employees are seen

as trustworthy leaders, they may help attract new clients and keep existing ones (Castrillon, 2020). It also represents an excellent opportunity for employees to come forward, showcase their skills, and develop them in emerging market opportunities. Such markets provide the necessary context for self-development that is always open to justice (Vosloban, 2013) on new ideas, innovations, and unique strategies that can contribute to the wealth of the economy

Even though it is increasingly advisable to create and develop personal brands by individuals, it is vital to understand if this action can trigger a conflict of interest between the individual and the institution one represents. It is crucial to keep in mind that too much personal branding success may be seen as threat by some bosses (Lisa and Alan, 2011).

1.5. Perspectives over personal branding from different life stages

In a study about the management of online personal brands in the context of web 2.0, Lebrecque (2011) pointed out that, despite the age of the sample used in the research was quite similar at that time, the branding issues results presented by the younger sample did not seem to match to those perceived by the older sample. These results made Lebrecque (2011) believe that age could be a decisive factor in what concerns branding issues and efforts and social judgments where individuals are inserted. The author recommended that a study that could assess different age perceptions would benefit future research.

When it comes to motivations to develop a personal online brand, job seeking is undoubtedly one of them. In an investigation that aimed to understand the relationship

between these two themes, (Minor-Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2020) concluded their importance for early career applicants, recommended that actions such as active activity in the social networks of their potential employers, and increased attention to the content that they produce which may be harmful to their brands can bring professional benefits. However, they also believed that future studies should also be done on mid-late career applicants.

1.5.1. Stages of adulthood

The developmental stages of adulthood were established within the Hypotheses of Social Aging (Levinson, 1986), which allude to changes in social connections and social roles experienced by individuals within the course of their life (Moschis, 1994). These changes occurred in response to significant life occasions. By acknowledging the seminal system of (Levinson 1986), adulthood comprises stages isolated by five-year-long move periods. Youthful adulthood's first stage (18 to 27) begins challenging individuals into professional life, attempting to discover their purpose in society, and confronting different sentimental connections (Ertel et al., 2009; Orth et al., 2010) .The second stage, early adulthood (33 to 40), is when individuals usually begin a family and yearn for progression in professional life, which requires broad social assets and is very time-consuming (Cushman et al., 2005). The third stage, center adulthood (46 to 60), often marks the peak in professional and private life (Roschk et al., 2013). Taking care of their loved ones regularly requires the broad utilization of budgetary assets. Children may start life on their own; however, they still require reinforcements until they are stabilized in their professional positions. In this stage, individuals also need to prepare their savings

in case they cease. The fourth and last stage, late adulthood (+ 65), is characterized by important life occasions, such as resigning from work, and emotional occurrences like dealing with the death of loved ones (Levinson et al., 1978).

A study developed by (Roschk et al., 2013) found that the influence of justice perception on post-complaint satisfaction was moderated by age. By comparing the effect sizes of three-justice aspects at various ages. Using the same conceptual model described before, the present study envision a moderating impact of these phases on opinions of online personal branding based on the developmental stages of adulthood (Roschk et al., 2013). In other words, the study explores the theory that respondents' perceptions, ideas, and feelings about online personal branding may vary depending on the moderator's levels - Youthful, Early, and Center Adulthood.

2. Methodology

This chapter will present the methodology employed in the research. It is developed into four sub-chapters that present in detail the methodology used. The first sub-chapter starts with explaining the purpose of the study and displaying the research questions, followed by the selected approach in the second sub-chapter, data collection techniques, and data sources in the third chapter. Finally, in the fourth chapter, an explanation of the data analysis process in detail will be presented

2.1. Purpose and research questions

This cross-sectional qualitative exploratory study aims to understand the perceptions over the online personal branding from three different adulthood development stages (Young, Early, and Center Adulthood) in the post-pandemic period. Although there was a fourth adulthood life stage, Late Adulthood (+65-year-old), it was not included in this study. It was understood that they would not be primarily active professionals, especially relevant for the present study. The research questions are defined below:

I.   What is the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on online personal brands?

II.   What are the perceptions about online personal brands?

III.   How would individuals project an online personal brand?

IV.   What are the challenges of developing an online personal brand?

V.   What is the point of view of professional adults in building a personal brand while working for a company?

VI.   What will be the future of online personal brands?

Table 1 presents the structure of the interview used in the study, as well as its relationship with the research questions presented above.

Table 1 - Interview structure

Interview question	Research Question
What do you use online platforms for?	III

About personal branding online. What makes you follow a certain personal brand?	II
What are the advantages of developing a personal brand online?	II
What are the disadvantages of developing a personal brand online?	IV
What are the barriers to developing a personal brand online?	IV
How do you imagine producing content for your personal brand online?	III
What do you think would be the relationship between a company and an employee who develops, outside the workplace, a personal brand online?	V
How do you think online personal branding will be 10 years from now?	VI
What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on online personal branding?	I

2.2. Approach

Since the study's main objective is to understand how individuals from three different adulthood life stages perceive online personal branding during the post-pandemic period, it was decided to use a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews. The general aim of using semi-structured data collection interviews was to gather data from the sample who have had personal experiences, behaviours, opinions, and beliefs relevant to the subject of interest (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

2.3. Data collection techniques and sources of the data

As stated before, semi-structured interviews are an efficient data collection tool for three main reasons: 1) to gather qualitative, open-ended data; 2) to explore the

opinions, feelings, and perceptions of participants about a specific subject; and 3) to dig deeply into personal and often sensitive issues (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This data collection method is driven by a list of follow-up queries, probes, and feedback on topics or questions. The interviewer should generally modify the order and language of the questions to better suit the context of the interviewee and the interview.

It has been stated that good interviewees are those who are available, eager to be interviewed, experienced, and informed about the subject of interest (Hatch, 2002; Whiting, 2008), Nevertheless, and since this was an exploratory study that intended to understand the perceptions given by individuals in different adulthood life stages over online personal brands, , it was decided to apply convenience sampling, being the most popular form of non-probabilistic sampling, mostly because it is misused (Edgar & Manz, 2017).

Regarding the suggestion that the size of a sample should depend on the target, sample homogeneity, theory, quality of the interview, and analytical strategy (Malterud et al., 2016), it was decided to include 12 individuals. The only eliminatory factor for participating in the study was the respondent's age being in accordance with the different adulthood development used in the research. The sample contemplated an equal number of men (n = 6) and women (n = 6), whose interviews were organized into three groups, according to age:

- Youthful Adulthood (18-27);
- Early Adulthood (33-40);
- Center Adulthood (46-60).

Table 2 presents a summary of the interview participants including their age, profession, and marital status. To ensure the anonymity of the sample, as well as of their testimonies, codes were created for each respondent (A1 – Youthful Adulthood; A2 – Early Adulthood; A3 – Center Adulthood; F – Female; M – Male.).

Table 2 - Characterization of the sample by code, age, profession, and marital status

Participant code	Age	Profession	Marital Status
A1F1	23	Student	Single
A1F2	25	Graphic Designer	Single
A1M1	24	Account Manager	Single
A1M2	25	Student	Single
A2F1	39	Project Manager	Married
A2F2	38	Personal development - psychology	Married
A2M1	37	Writer - Traveller	Married
A2M2	36	Professor – Manager	Married
A3F1	50	Medical information delegate	Married
A3F2	49	Head of Communications	Married
A3M1	47	Nonverbal Language Specialist	Married
A3M2	50	Head Business Excellence	Married

The sample was recruited by sharing some posts on LinkedIn, which allowed the sample to be built by the participants' own will, where the only condition to participate in the study was to require the age previously established in the adulthood development stages.

Resulting from the pandemic of 2020 and the consequent mobility restrictions, interviews were conducted on the Zoom platform and in Portuguese to allow interviewees the comfort and ease of being specific and talking about the topic in their native language. Before starting the interview, it was necessary to contextualize the theme and purpose of the study very briefly and make the interviewee comfortable. Permission to record was also requested, thus allowing greater attention and focus with the respondent, with no breaks for notetaking by the interviewer. The integration of personal data of the participants in the study was also requested, with the possibility of those remaining anonymous. However, all participants gave their data to the study without constraint.

Before moving to more challenging or in-depth questions, most interviews began with a simple, context-setting question (Britten, 2006). In the case of this study, an explanation was done about the concept of online personal branding and some examples of online personal brands present in Portugal. When the interviewee did not give the necessary details to the questions, follow-up questions and prompting techniques were used (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Effective probing allowed the respondent to generate more data without inserting new ideas into the conversation. The Zoom recording was then examined and transcribed for data analysis.

An interview guide was developed based on past research limitations and future research recommendations. The interview guide can be found in Table 1, and the foundations and respective authors for the interview questions can be found in table 3.

2.4. Data analysis

The interview transcription was done manually, and the type of transcription used was the edited transcription - where the organization and editing of the text is allowed to improve the reading and clarity of the text (Delve, 2021). During this process, some grammar was edited, some parts of the interviews that did not answer the questions designed for the study were removed, and others summarized. All these actions made it possible to develop clearer transcripts and facilitate the analysis process.

The technique of methodically categorizing excerpts from qualitative data to uncover themes and patterns is known as qualitative coding (Delve, 2021). It allows semi-structured data, such as transcripts from in-depth interviews made in this study, into themes and patterns for analysis (Delve, 2021).

The analysis is more systematic and rigorous if coded with qualitative data. It allows the ones involved to be more transparent and reflective (Delve, 2021). It also permits the researcher to uncover insights that are truly representative of the data and the human stories surrounding it (Delve, 2021).

For this study, it was decided to choose the inductive approach. Allowing the creation of codes as the reading/analysis of the data was going. This approach is used when the interviewer derives its codes from the data and if the theory emerges from the raw transcripts without preconceived notions, theories, or structures (Burnard, 2006). This time-consuming approach is even more relevant when dealing with an exploratory research such as the one presented in this dissertation, as it allows studying topics where there is very little information (Burnard, 2006) and when the objective is to come up with a new theories, ideas or concepts (Delve, 2021).

Within the inductive approach to qualitative data analysis, the method used for this study was thematic content analysis, where analysing transcripts, identifying themes within the data, and gathering examples of those themes from the text are all part of the method (Burnard, 2006).

To analyse the transcripts of the 12 interviews made, the Delve program was used in the beginning, a software dedicated to the analysis of qualitative data. According to (Delve, 2021) there are 5 reasons to select Delve for qualitative data analysis: 1) Platform is easy to use; 2) It has an intuitive interface 3) It gives the permission to observe the data from different dimensions; 4) It has a flexible coding system; 5) It offers you a way to find representative and less biased results.

For the coding process, the transcripts were intensively read before beginning of the procedure. Since the transcripts are informative and do not offer explanations (Pope et al., 2000), it was necessary to explore and interpret the information shared by the participants. Later, the collected words and phrases were joined, allowing the easy cut of repeated ideas, reducing the number of categories (Burnard, 1991; Burnard, 2006).

As stated before, the first analysis round of transcripts was carried out in the Delve program, and the following 26 codes were identified: Advantages; Affinity; Barriers; Blog; Clubhouse; Content; Covid-19 impact; Disadvantages; Dribble; Facebook; Feelings; Future; Instagram; Institutional relationship; LinkedIn; Online platforms use; Pinterest; Podcasts; Reluctance; Snapchat; TikTok; Twitter; Vimeo; Website; WhatsApp; YouTube.

After the first coding phase, it was possible to understand that the themes emerging in the answers were specific and came from different questions present in the interviews. The specific content in each code were reviewed again. There was also a need to re-check some moments of the interviews and correct specific ideas shared by the

sample. After being familiar with the transcripts, it was apparent that the first codes developed involved different themes, creating the need to redo the coding process.

Table 3 illustrates the rationale for the construction of the questions presented in the interview used in the study. In the table, passages from past studies can be found where the need for studies in certain themes is expressed, as well as their authors.

Table 3 - Rationale for the construction of the questions presented in the interview used in the study

Interview questions	Foundations	References
Adulthood development stages	"Future research should examine how internet/social media personal branding affects the employment of mid-late career individuals, compared to early career job seekers. The findings would contribute to the personal branding research by including a broader age demographic of employment seekers."	(Minor-Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2020)
	"While personal branding is largely discussed by industry professionals, there is a need for empirical research on personal branding that examines how various professions experience personal branding."	(Jacobson, 2020)
	"Additional research should include more heterogeneous evaluators and extend the framework to various cohorts and cultures. The Internet is a global medium, so understanding how cultural factors influence personal brand actions could offer insights for companies operating internationally. Moreover, our findings suggest that personal branding efforts vary according to a person's life phase, which suggests that a longitudinal perspective would be helpful."	(Labrecque et al., 2011)

1. What do you use online platforms for?	"But no known research has been conducted examining how motivations for social networking site usage changes or remains the same over time."	(Stockdale & Coyne, 2020)
	"As the use of social media platforms has exploded in recent years it is important to develop knowledge of what exactly are the needs and motivations why people use the social media platforms. This becomes increasingly important when more and more businesses and not-for-profit organizations start using these platforms as part of their daily business processes. Better understanding the needs and motivations could help organizations to design services using social media platforms that meet the needs of their customers. As many organizations are currently in the early stages of exploiting the possibilities of social media developing this understanding can provide them with guidance to move forward."	(Hallikainen, 2015)
2. About personal branding online. What makes you follow a certain personal brand?	"As with all marketing communications, it is important to tailor the style and content to the needs of the audience. Many employers still prefer to use more traditional channels of communication, and so research will need to be carried out beforehand to establish how best to interact in these circumstances."	(Harris & Rae, 2011)
3. What are the advantages of developing a personal brand online?	"It is important to understand what the antecedents and outcomes are of creating a personal brand."	(Gorbatov et al., 2018)
4. What are the disadvantages of developing a personal brand online?	"However, several authors highlighted the "dark side" of personal branding, future studies should investigate	(Gorbatov et al., 2019)

	the deleterious impacts of personal branding for individuals, teams, and organizations"	
5. What are the barriers of developing a personal brand online?	-	-
6. How do you imagine producing content for your personal brand online?	-	-
7. What do you think would be the relationship between a company and an employee who develops, outside the workplace, a personal brand online?	"However, several authors highlighted the "dark side" of personal branding, future studies should investigate the deleterious impacts of personal branding for individuals, teams, and organizations"	(Gorbatov et al., 2019)
	"Our review reveals that a small group of researchers specifically point in the direction of studying the person vs. organization tension resulting from personal branding. Given the discussed tensions between personal and organizational, the managerial attitudes toward employee personal branding call for further research of organizational practices (e.g., guidelines, communication) and employees' activities (e.g., co-branding, signaling)."	(Gorbatov et al., 2018)
	"Finally, it is important to bear in mind that personal branding can be too successful – at least in the mindset of some organisations that may see effective brand builders as a threat. As an employee of one of these dinosaurs, raising a personal brand profile effectively may lead to suspicion and scepticism, especially if the brand appears to eclipse that of more	(Harris & Rae, 2011)

	senior managers, or even the brand of the organisation itself."	
	"Whether organizations benefit from having employees actively engaging in personal branding is still a matter for further research."	(Gorbatov et al., 2019)
8. How do you think online personal branding will be 10 years from now?	-	-
9. What is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on online personal branding?	"It is important to understand what the antecedents and outcomes are of creating a personal brand."	(Gorbatov et al., 2018)

The second coding phase was done following the same rules as the first phase. Therefore it was possible to join similar categories (Pope et al., 2000) and create subcategories to recognize a pattern and draw conclusions from the participants' answers, specific to the theme presented in the interview questions and specific for an adulthood development stage. However, this second phase was done manually, analysing a specific question at a time, one adulthood development stage at a time. Nevertheless, it is essential to point out that in some interviews, the answer given in a certain question was inserted in other interview question answer - hence the importance of the initial transcription of the recordings, and subsequent full reading of the interviews.

Once all these steps have been completed, and although this was necessarily the most subjective step, it was essential to carry out a rigorous personal verification of the results achieved.

3. Findings

In the present chapter, the results of the study will be presented. The categorization process of the codes extracted from the interview transcripts, along with a scheme, will be explained for each question. Next, a table will show the different codes extracted and the number of times they were repeated, along with excerpts from the participants conversation - each of these will be related to a specific adulthood development stage.

After the analysis, the results are explicitly transmitted to each adulthood development stage, and at the end, a global analysis is done if allowed.

3.1. What do you use online platforms for?

After analysing the participants' responses and building the codes, it was necessary to develop categories. Referring to Figure 1, the online platforms use – is divided primarily between ludic (recreational) and professional purposes. In ludic, the use of the platforms is assumed without any professional purpose on the part of the user. In professional use, there are two subcategories: active and passive professional use – here is, the concrete actions that professional empowerment make, which separates them from those that use online platforms to benefit from the information and opportunities of others indirectly.

Figure 1 - Categorization and subcategorization process of the codes presented in the question "What do you use online platforms for?"
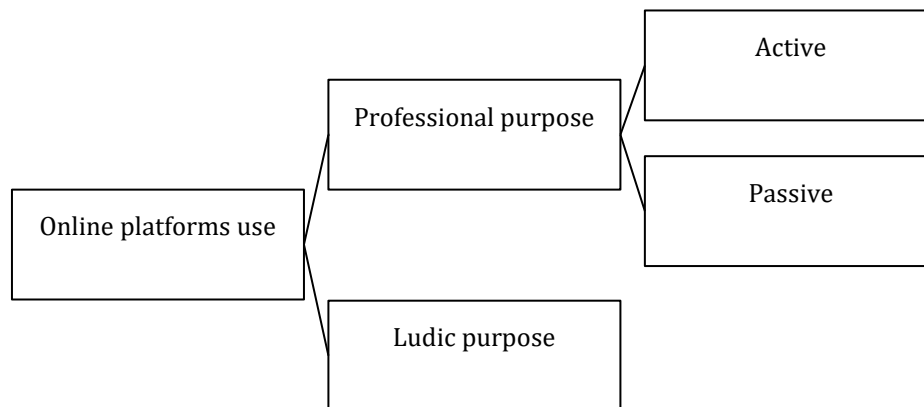
In Table 4, the codes will be presented and excerpts from the interviews from which they were taken for the specific adulthood development stage. All the data is related to the interview question: "What do you use online platforms for?".

Table 4 - Frequency of the codes collected in the question "What do you use online platforms for?", divided by adulthood development stage

What do you use online platforms for?		
Adulthood development stage	Codes	Empirical excerpts
Youthful Adulthood (18-27)	**Passive:** #inspiration(2x) #follow trends #job opportunities(2x) #track companies #ideas discussion #work groups	A1M2: "Gosto de interagir com pessoas das minhas áreas de interesse para partilhar ideias".
	Active: #promotion #networking #presentation	A1M1: "Dar-me a conhecer a nível profissional, acredito que podem surgir novos projetos e oportunidades".
	Ludic Purpose: #news(2x) #texting(2x)	A1F2: "Inspiração pessoal e profissional, acompanhar tendências, comunicar e promover o meu trabalho".
Early Adulthood (33 to 40)	**Passive:** #personal development(2x) #information	A2M2: "Tenho cuidado como utilizo e me exponho nas plataformas". "Os conteúdos devem ser adaptados e específicos a cada plataforma"
	Active: #networking #professional exposure(2x) #information sharing #sales	A2M1: "Com o tempo fui começando a comercializar os meus produtos".
	Ludic Purpose: #texting #photography content	A2F1: "Enriquecimento pessoal, estilo de vida". "Juntar o entretenimento com conteúdo interessante".
Center Adulthood (46 to 60)	**Passive:** #understand others market positioning(2x) #follow trends #networking #ideas discussion #project an image #follow competition(2x) #enhance creativity	A3M2: "Utilizo o LinkedIn por motivos profissionais, utilização sistemática, manter o network do trabalho, trocar opiniões".

| | **Active:** #exposure #support for the audience #positioning | A3F1: "Sigo outras pessoas com uma formação maior que a minha, para perceber como se posicionam no mercado, como comunicam, de forma a criar ideias novas" |
| | **Ludic Purpose:** #texting #news(2x) #feel younger #photography | A3M1: "Cada plataforma tem um contexto". "Publico conteúdos adaptados e específicos ao publico". |

Youthful Adulthood

In the following adulthood development stage, within the purpose category, specifically in the passive sub-category, the sample's codes that showed more frequency were #inspiration and #job opportunities. Interviewees point out that they use digital platforms to be inspired by the content shared by others, which can enhance their personal development, form opinions, and discuss ideas. Finding employment opportunities is another indicated purpose for using these platforms.

In the active sub-category, the codes presented were #networking #promotion #presentation, where no repetition existed. Respondents point out that using platforms for presentation and promotion can be beneficial professionally since their audience is more up to date on what they do, and job and sales opportunities can be more significant. Networking is pointed out by the ease of getting in direct contact with people who can give an opinion, advice, or from whom they can learn professionally.

In the recreational purpose category, the codes most frequently presented were #texting and #news. In this case, digital platforms seem to be great tools to communicate

efficiently with friends and professional network and to always stay on top of the latest news.

Overall, it was concluded that 4/4 respondents already use online platforms for professional purposes. However, only 3/4 claim to do so actively.

Early Adulthood

In this adulthood development stage, within the purpose category, specifically in the passive sub-category, the code that showed more frequency among the sample was #personal development (2x). Participants believe that these platforms can be a source of personal enrichment and learning.

In the active sub-category, the code presented with more frequency was #exposure(2x). This exposure can lead the audience to be more attentive and get to know their work, buy their brand services and products, and to establish national and international relationships.

In the recreational purpose category, the codes most frequently presented were #texting and #photography content. Regarding playful use, respondents point to the possibility of communicating with friends and family and sharing and consuming photographic content.

Overall, it was concluded that 4/4 of respondents already use online platforms for professional purposes. However, only 3/4 claim to do so actively.

Center Adulthood

In the following adulthood development stage, within the purpose category, specifically in the passive sub-category, the codes that showed more frequency among the sample were market positioning(2x) and #follow competition(2x). In this case, the interviewees believe that the use of digital platforms allows them to follow the actions of the competition - it allows them to develop creativity and draw new ideas.

In the active sub-category, the codes presented were #exposure #support for the audience and #positioning. This exposure can lead the audience to be more attentive and get to know their work. The support is based on passing on knowledge about their area of expertise to those who follow them to clarify doubts and answer questions. Finally, the positioning is based on the strategic way they use the platforms to adequately project an image for their audience.

In the recreational purpose category, the code presented with more frequency was #news(2x). The sample points to check news as the primary purpose of using these platforms when it comes to entertainment.

Overall, it was concluded that 4/4 of respondents already use online platforms for professional purposes. However, only 3/4 claim to do so actively.

General results

After the global analysis of all the adulthood development stages, it can be argued that there is already a solid professional purpose for using this type of platform. Although all reported that they still use them for recreational purposes, most of the sample seems

to realize the benefits of professional use. However, it is essential to emphasize that not all those who use the platforms for professional purposes do so in an active manner, that is, one that implies direct action on the part of users. Inspiration from the content and people that follow seems to be the most relevant passive professional purpose, and exposure to the active professional purpose. In addition, it is important to reinforce the idea of platform segmentation. Many respondents pointed out that certain content or actions only make sense on a certain platform, according to this idea, some respondents believe that in the future people will decide to fully professionalize on a certain platform and use other platforms solely for ludic purposes. Finally, when it comes to recreational purposes, contact with friends and family and viewing news are the most presented actions.

ipam Marketing Leads Business</image>

3.2. About online personal branding. What makes you follow a certain online personal brand?

In this question and based on the interviewees' answers and experience regarding the consumption of content by online personal brands, the results were divided into 3 categories: 1) Motivation - a key element to understanding what makes someone follow an online personal brand; 2) Attachment - essential to understand which characteristics/actions captivate the audience, and on the other hand; 3) Alienation - what makes the public no longer follow a certain online personal brand.

Figure 2 - Categorization and subcategorization process of the codes presented in the question " About online personal branding. What makes you follow a certain online personal brand?"
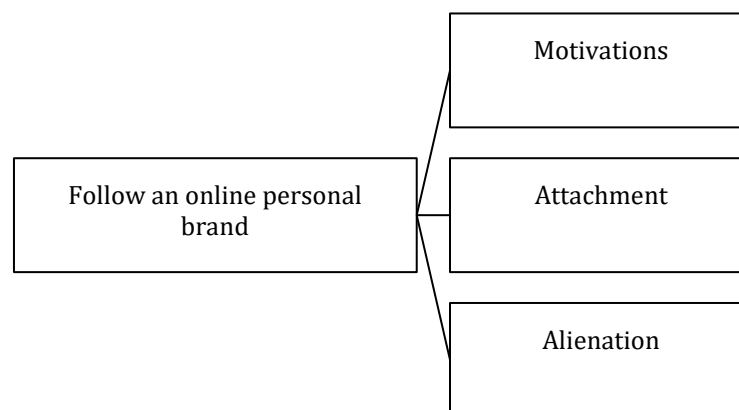
In Table 5, the codes will be presented and excerpts from the interviews from which they were taken for the specific adulthood development stage. All the data is related to the interview question: "About personal branding online. What makes you follow a certain online personal brand?".

Table 5 - Frequency of the codes collected in the question "About personal branding online. What makes you follow a certain online personal brand?", divided by adulthood development stage

About personal branding online. What makes you follow a certain online personal brand?		
Adulthood development stage	Codes	Empirical excerpts
Youthful Adulthood (18-27)	**Motivations:** #inspiration #value adding	A1M1: "Eu gosto de pessoas que abordem temas que me identifico, que contem uma história, contudo, não aprecio excesso de conteúdo."
	Attachment: #interaction(2x) #connection(2x) #storytelling(2x) #honesty #vulnerability #fast consumption content #empathy	A1F2: "Tenho de me identificar com o que a pessoa faz, tem de existir uma ligação. Essa ligação vem da interação, cria empatia com o público".
	Alienation: #excess of content #forced interaction	A1F2: "Partilha de conhecimento por parte da marca".
		A1F1: "Partilhar feedback do público sobre a marca pessoal, cria confiança"
Early Adulthood (33 to 40)	**Motivations:** #value adding(3x) #out of the box #community sense	A2M2: "Deve existir uma coerência na comunicação ao longo do tempo, a internet não perdoa". "Gosto de seguir pessoas fora da caixa, que me tragam algo de novo".
	Attachment: #clarity #fiability #objectivity #credibility(2x) #humility #personal reflexions(2x) #consistency(3x) #humanity #vulnerability(2x) #transparency #interaction(2x)	A2M2: "Privilegio sustentabilidade em detrimento de opulência". "Apesar de me identificar com demonstração de vulnerabilidade e fragilidade, acredito que não seja fácil demonstrar para o próprio"
	Alienation: #ostentation #commercial posture(2x) #narcissism	A2F1: "Não sigo contas onde a vertente comercial é muito visível". "Não gosto de

		seguir conteúdo narcisista". "Procuro interação, partilha, sentido de comunidade".
Center Adulthood (46 to 60)	**Motivations:** #value adding(4x) #positioning	A3M2: "Gosto de consistência, nas ideias e nos valores". "Não aprecio conteúdo extremamente comercial". "Mau conteúdo, é aquele que não tem utilidade, relevância, e que não aporta nada ao público."
	Attachment: #interaction #credibility #values #authenticity #informal communication #personal content(2x) #creativity #empathy #community sense	A3F1: "Não gosto de demasiado conteúdo, não consigo acompanhar". "Procura nas marcas pessoais algo novo - que me acrescentem uma nova perspetiva, que impulsionam a minha criatividade.". "Sinto que conteúdos pessoais, promovem mais interação".
	Alienation: #seek of admiration #commercial posture #excess of content #restrict communication	A3M1: "Sigo pessoas que me fazem aprender, não sigo concorrência porque me posso desviar - tentação de copiar". "Eu não posso agir contrariamente àquilo que partilho, às ideias e ideais que transmito".

Youthful Adulthood

The motivation to follow a personal brand seems clear, #value adding for the audience it is essential to learn something with the personal brand, to be able to discuss ideas and points of view. What seems to develop a deep connection with a personal brand is interaction(2x), connection(2x) and the storytelling(2x). For this group, proximity to a personal brand is fundamental. The way work is communicated is also considered. One of the participants explains how an online personal brand changed his perception of trust

about the company that the person had created. When it comes to alienation from the brand, #excess content and #forced interaction seems to be the most told among the participants. This audience seeks authentic content, seeming to place more importance on content quality than quantity.

Early Adulthood

The main motivation to follow a personal brand is the #value adding(3x), the possibility of learning something new from someone, acquiring knowledge in a certain area. What seems to develop a strong connection with the brand is the #consistency(3x), the participants explain the importance of consistency in what the personal brand publishes and defends - in terms of values and ideals. A3M1: "Eu não posso agir contrariamente àquilo que partilho, às ideias e ideais que transmito".

Regarding alienation from the brand, this audience does not appreciate a #commercial posture(2x), where their attempt to sell to the audience can be easily noticed.

Center Adulthood

In the Center Adulthood life stage, the main motivation to follow a personal brand is also the #value adding(3x), like Early Adulthood, this group likes to have the possibility of learning something new from someone, acquiring knowledge in a certain area. What seems to develop an attachment to the brand is the #personal content(2x), this group points out that personal content seems to bring more interaction, people want to know

in more detail who they follow. Like the other groups, this group does not appreciate an #excess of content and a #commercial posture, they added that #restricted communication also pushes them away, when they do not feel integrated in a certain communication/content.

General results

In all age groups it was clear that they follow personal brands in search of knowledge, to enhance their lives both on a personal and professional level. The differences in what develops attachment to a personal brand is different, however, the excess of content was something pointed out by all groups in terms of causing alienation from these brands such as a strong commercial posture.

3.3. What are the advantages of developing a personal brand online?

After reading and analysing the transcripts of the participants, the findings are divided by the advantages of developing an online personal brand into 3 categories: 1) optimization and personal development - as the name indicates, the advantages that provide to an individual's personal evolution; 2) public perception - are the advantages for the individual from the perception of his audience; 3) outcomes - seeks to select the practical results from developing an online personal brand.

Figure 3 - - Categorization and subcategorization process of the codes presented in the question "What are the advantages of developing a personal brand online?"
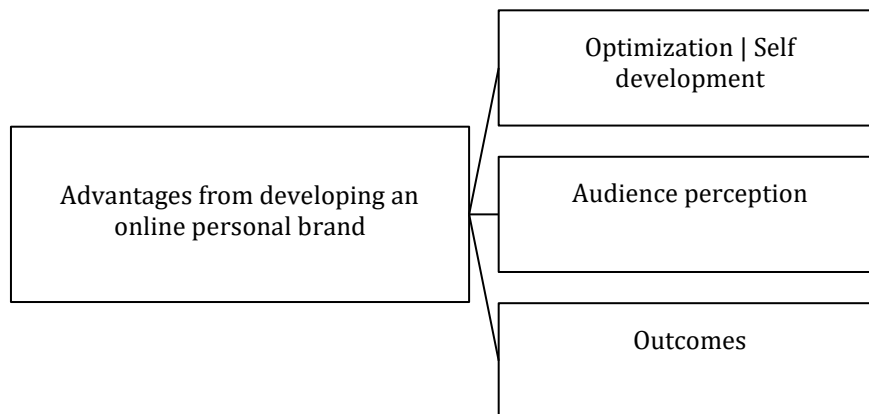
In Table 6, the codes will be presented and excerpts from the interviews from which they were taken for the specific adulthood development stage. All the data is related to the interview question: "What are the advantages of developing a personal brand online?".

Table 6 – Frequency of the codes collected in the question What are the advantages of developing a personal brand online?", divided by adulthood development stage

What are the advantages of developing a personal brand online?		
Adulthood development stages	Codes	Empirical excerpts
Youthful Adulthood (18-27)	**Optimization | Self-development:** #feedback **Public perception:** #perceived proactivity #become an example #credibility #perceived success **Outcomes:** #network(2x) #partnerships(2x) #economic benefits(2x) #job opportunities	A1M2: "Atrair, reter e fidelizar seguidores". A1M1: "As pessoas são percebidas como proativas, aquelas que mais querem trabalhar". A1F2: "Dar-te a conhecer, definires os teus valores e o que pretendes transmitir".
Early Adulthood (33 to 40)	**Optimization | Self-development:** #feedback #allow yourself to be strategic #be more competitive **Public perception:** #notoriety(2x) #become an asset(2x) **Outcomes:** #network #job opportunities #exposure #economic benefits(2x)	A2M2: "Notoriedade, autoridade, reconhecimento numa determinada área. Isso vai trazer clientes". A2M1: "Gosto de ter o feedback das pessoas e sentir que estou a inspirar alguém". "A competitividade ajuda-me a ter maior qualidade naquilo que partilho". A2F2: "A capacidade de comunicar de forma mais específica, a mais gente".
Center Adulthood (46 to 60)	**Optimization | Self-development:** #allow yourself to be strategic(2x) #stimulation of creativity #get out of the comfort zone **Public perception:** #notoriety	A3M2: "Benefícios monetários, networking". A3M1: "Autoridade, facilita a comunicação daquilo que fazes".

	Outcomes: #economic benefits #network(2x) #job opportunities	A3F2: "Posicionamento no mercado, caso esteja à procura de emprego".

Youthful Adulthood

Regarding the advantages in terms of personal development, this group believe that the #feedback received from the public can help to improve their work and the way they communicate. When it comes to public perception, positive perception can come in many forms: #authority, #credibility, and #success. Finally, in terms of practical results, the possibility to create #networking(2x), and eventual #partnerships(2x), as well as #economic benefits(2x) are the most mentioned.

Early Adulthood

In addition to the #feedback present in the previous group, this group points to the possibility of #being strategic and #be more competitive as an advantage in terms of personal development, explaining that as platforms have more people working in the same niche, this increases their effort. At the level of public perception, this group says that #becoming an asset(2x) and #notoriety(2x) are the main advantages, making the personal brand appealing to the public. Like the previous group, #economic benefits(2x) seem to be the main practical result of developing a personal brand.

Center Adulthood

When it comes to personal development, #allow yourself to be strategic(2x) seems to be the major advantage, allowing the brand to control the way it communicates, who it wants to reach and carve its way. At the level of public perception, #notoriety seems to be the biggest advantage. Finally, in terms of practical results #network(2x) is pointed out as the greatest advantage.

General results

For all age groups the main advantages resulting from developing an online personal brand were the monetary benefits and network as outcomes, from the public perception notoriety and credibility. Finally, self-development advantages, capacity of becoming strategic and the feedback from the audience were observed.

3.4. What are the disadvantages of developing a personal brand online?

Regarding the disadvantages of developing an online personal brand, and the analysis of the responses from the sample, two categories were created: 1) personal level - these are the direct disadvantages for the individual and which are under his control; 2) public level - are the indirect disadvantages, those in which the online personal brands lose control after the brand becomes public.

Figure 4 - Categorization and subcategorization process of the codes presented in the question "What are the disadvantages of developing a personal brand online?"
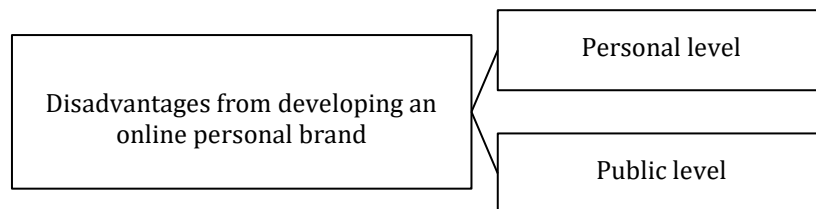
In Table 7, the codes will be presented and excerpts from the interviews from which they were taken for the specific adulthood development stage. All the data is related to the interview question: " What are the disadvantages of developing a personal brand online?"

Table 7 – Frequency of the codes collected in the question "What are the disadvantages of developing a personal brand online?", divided by adulthood development stage

What are the disadvantages of developing a personal brand online?		
Adulthood development	Codes	Empirical excerpts

stage		
Youthful Adulthood (18-27)	**Personal level:** #neglect personal life #psychological effects(2x) #predisposition to make mistakes #become vulnerable **Public level:** #exposure(3x) #lack of privacy #criticism(2x) #internet footprint	A1F2: "A única vantagem é a exposição que pode criar vulnerabilidade". A1M2: "Maior exposição, e consequentemente, mais exposto à crítica" A1M1: "Ao ter mais exposição pode descurar a vida pessoal - saúde física e mental".
Early Adulthood (33 to 40)	**Personal level:** #frustration #psychological effects(2x) #predisposition to make mistakes **Public level:** #internet footprint #criticism #negative public perception #lack of privacy #content sharing conditioning #loss of communication control	A2F2: "Perda da privacidade em detrimento da ambição de alcançar várias pessoas". "Ao espelhar aquilo que somos podemos ser alvo de críticas" A2M2: "Uma vez na internet, para sempre na internet". A2M1: "Passarmos a ser geridos por aquilo que devíamos gerir. Sermos obrigados a partilhar conteúdo com que não nos identificamos ou que não nos apetecia".
Center Adulthood (46 to 60)	**Personal level:** #frustration #responsibility **Public level:** #exposure(4x) #time spending(3x) #criticism #work overload #lack of privacy #internet footprint #unpredictability of communication #content sharing conditioning	A3F2: "Exposição pessoal, sem saber onde essa informação vai parar". A3M2: "Excesso de trabalho, dispensar tempo custa bastante". A3F1: "Exposição em demasia, gestão de tempo". "Frustração, desalento, desespero quando não interagem com os teus conteúdos".

Youthful Adulthood

For this group, the personal disadvantages are the #psychological effects(2x), which may be linked to the public disadvantage of #exposure(3x) and and more easily targets of #criticism(2x).

Early adulthood

As in the previous group, the main disadvantage at a personal level is #psychological effect(2x), since the pressure and anxiety in the process of developing a personal brand is pointed out. At the public level, many disadvantages were pointed out related to exposure as # lack of privacy and #digital footprint, accentuating the idea that the internet does not forget what you did months before and how it can affect future projects by associating with others that did not go well, but also the #conditioning, explaining that after some time, the brand can adapt to what the public wants/demonstrates what they want to see, thus ceasing to publish what they want, shaping their behaviour and action. A2M1: "Passarmos a ser geridos por aquilo que devíamos gerir. Sermos obrigados a partilhar conteúdo com que não nos identificamos ou que não nos apetecia".

Center Adulthood

In this group, the most frequently mentioned disadvantages were at the public level, #exposure(4x) and #lack of time(3X), since the creation and development of content requires effort and dedication.

General results

Although there was no prominent disadvantage, all groups point to the same disadvantages: criticism, loss of privacy, internet footprint, audience conditioning and psychological effects. A2M2: "Uma vez na internet, para sempre na internet".

3.5. What are the barriers of developing an online personal brand?

Regarding the barriers to developing an online personal brand, the answers led to the creation of two categories: 1) short term - these are the first challenges in creating an online personal brand; 2) long term - these are the challenges that are present in maintaining the personal brand when it is already established. It is important to state that depending on the person, some codes may be present in both categories.

Figure 5 - Categorization and subcategorization process of the codes presented in the question "What are the barriers of developing a personal brand online?"
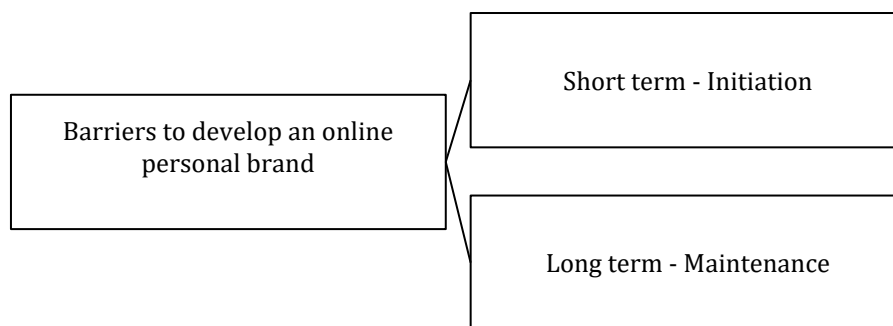
In Table 8, the codes will be presented and excerpts from the interviews from which they were taken for the specific adulthood development stage. All the data is related to the interview question: "What are the barriers of developing a personal brand online?".

Table 8 – Frequency of the codes collected in the question "What are the barriers of developing a personal brand online?", divided by adulthood development stage

What are the barriers of developing a personal brand online?

Adulthood development stages	Codes	Empirical excerpts
Youthful Adulthood (18-27)	**Short term | Initiation:** #exposure(2x) #money #lack of technical skills #lack of credibility #family and friends #physical appearance #afraid of others opinion	A1M2: "Ser reservado, falta de credibilidade na área" A1M1: "Vergonha, medo da opinião dos outros, o que acaba por reter a sua ação".
	Long term | Maintenance: #money #family and friends #self-judgement(2x)/mutability	A1F1: "Aparência física pode condicionar em algumas áreas"
Early Adulthood (33 to 40)	**Short term | Initiation:** #mindset #lack of technical knowledge - lack of mentors(2x) # availability of time(2x) #define what we want to communicate	A2F1: "Não estar à vontade com as ferramentas digitais". "Organização do tempo". A2F2: "Necessidade de trabalhar com alguém que apoie a nível técnico".
	Long term | Maintenance: #market saturation #technological advances hard to keep updated	A2M2: "A velocidade e o dinamismo da informação é muita alta e difícil de acompanhar"
Center Adulthood (46 to 60)	**Short term | Initiation:** # availability of time(3x) #self-doubt-lack of confidence(2x) #exposure	A3M1: "Falta de paciência, sucesso imediato não existe"
	Long term | Maintenance: #lack of patience	A3F2: "Não o faço por 2 motivos: Falta de tempo e porque tenho receio de não ser bem interpretado em alguma das minhas ações"

Youthful Adulthood

As it can be seen, the Youthful Adulthood life stage presents the exposure(2x) as an initiation barrier to develop an online personal brand and self-judgement(2x) in the maintenance process. This can be explained by the fact that this is a group that is still starting a professional career, has not acquired as much knowledge, and does not feel confident about their knowledge and the way to communicate their personal brand.

Early Adulthood

The Early Adulthood life stage presents the #availability of time(2x) and the #lack of mentors(2x) as the main barriers, these two can be considered in both periods, initiation, and maintenance. The participants point out these barriers due to the difficulty of keeping up with the new information that circulates every day on a given topic, in addition to the very accelerated development of the digital platforms on which they must work.

Center adulthood

In this group, #availability of time(3x) is again the most mentioned barrier, as well as #lack of confidence. Lack of time will affect the production of content and attention to a process that should be consistent, some also point out that they do not feel confident to move forward with this process, either because others may not find what they share interesting or become misinterpreted.

General results

Although some barriers are similar in all groups, a difference can be seen by age group in terms of the main barriers to developing a personal online brand. Nevertheless, #avaitability of time seems the most common in all groups.

3.6. How do you imagine producing content for your personal brand online?

This question intends to understand the perspectives of building an online personal brand. Initially the results were divided into two categories: 1) Purpose - to understand the main objectives of building an online personal brand; 2) Content strategy. Then the second category is divided into two sub-categories: a) Format - which seeks to understand the most chosen formats to create content; b) Platforms - discover the online platforms of choice for building an online personal brand.

Figure 6 - Categorization and subcategorization process of the codes presented in the question "How do you imagine producing content for your personal brand online?"
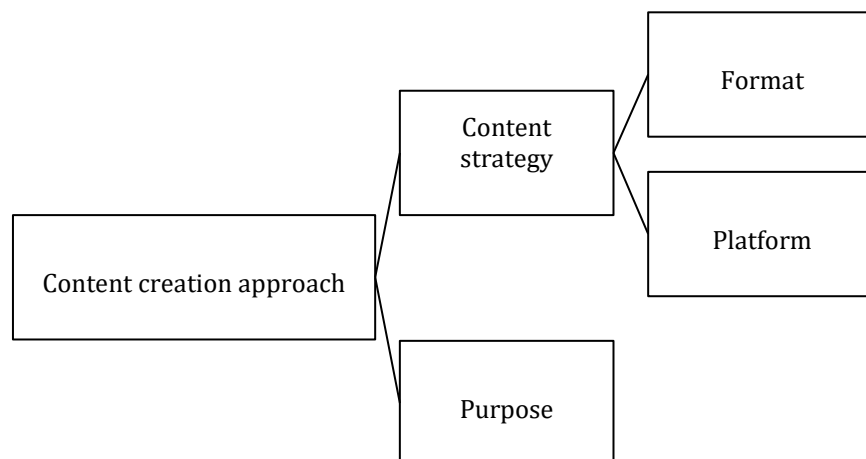
In table 9, the codes will be presented and excerpts from the interviews from which they were taken for the specific adulthood development stage. All the data is related to the interview question: "How do you imagine producing content for your personal brand online?".

Table 9 – Frequency of the codes collected in the question "How do you imagine producing content for your personal brand online?", divided by adulthood development stage

How do you imagine producing content for your personal brand online?		
Adulthood development stages	Codes	Empirical excerpts
Youthful Adulthood (18-27)	**Purpose:** #experimental #multicultural #community oriented #space for debate #sustainable growing #authentic	A1M2: "Passar uma imagem de uma vida normal, com um crescimento sustentável"

A1M1: "Usaria mais o LinkedIn".

A1F2: "Muito experimental e multicultural, criar uma comunidade, convergir experiências, conhecimentos e opiniões". |
| | **Platform:** #LinkedIn #Instagram #YouTube | |
| | **Format:** #text #podcast #vídeo(2x) #image | |
| Early Adulthood (33 to 40) | **Purpose**: #commercial(2x) #share experiences #reflexive #network | A2M2: "Partilho conteúdo sobre a minha área. Trabalho a imagem de forma a projetar aquilo que quero que os outros pressionem de mim - objetivos comerciais"

A2M1: "Conteúdo escrito reflexivo, exposição de experiências de viagem".

A2F2: "Foco naquilo que vende". |
| | **Platform:** #website(2x) #Instagram(2x) #Facebook | |
| | **Format:** #vídeo(2x) #podcast #text | |

Center Adulthood (46 to 60)	**Purpose:** #exposure #positioning #political intervention #discussion #public clarification #current contents #educate(2x)	A3M2: "Os meus conteúdos pretendem influenciar quem os lê, mas essencialmente aumentar o nível de exigência dos decisores políticos "
	Platform: #LinkedIn(2x) #Instagram(3x) #Facebook #Twitter	A3F1: "Comunicação prática" "Lives para explicação, tutoriais".
	Format: #text #vídeo(2x) #blog	A3M1: "Desenvolvo os meus conteúdos para o meu "eu" do passado - curioso, quer saber mais sobre o tema".

Youthful Adulthood

In this age group, it was not possible to draw a solid conclusion about what would be their purpose when developing a brand, as it differs from the participant. However, it is evident to see that social media are the online platforms of choice and the #video(2x) format would be the most used content to communicate.

Early Adulthood

In this specific group, the purpose #commercial(2x), the participants from this group seem to have a clear intent to take monetary benefits from their personal brands.

The digital platforms of choice to build their brands are #social media(2x) and #website(2x). Finally, the #video(2x) format also remains the most frequent.

Center Adulthood

In this age group, the main purpose for developing a personal brand is focused on the objective to #educate(2x) the public in areas where they consider they have some experience. The digital platforms of choice for developing their brand are social media, and video(2x), as in the other groups presented above, is the preferred format for communicating.

General results

The purpose of developing an online personal brand differs in different groups, however, there is a predominance in the use of social media as the ideal platform to develop an online personal brand, and video content seems to be the format with the most perspective to be used in all age groups.

3.7. What do you think would be the relationship between a company and an employee who develops, outside the workplace, an online personal brand?

For this interview question, and after careful analysis of the transcripts and construction of the codes, the results are divided into two categories: First 1) Opportunities - where they seek to remove the positive aspects of developing a personal online brand in the business environment. This category is divided in 2 subcategories: a) Company level and b) Employee level. The second category, 2) Premises - here they seek to point out which aspects should be considered in order not to create conflicts/tensions with the employer by the online personal brand.

Figure 7 - Categorization and subcategorization process of the codes presented in the question " What do you think would be the relationship between a company and an employee who develops, outside the workplace, an online personal brand?"
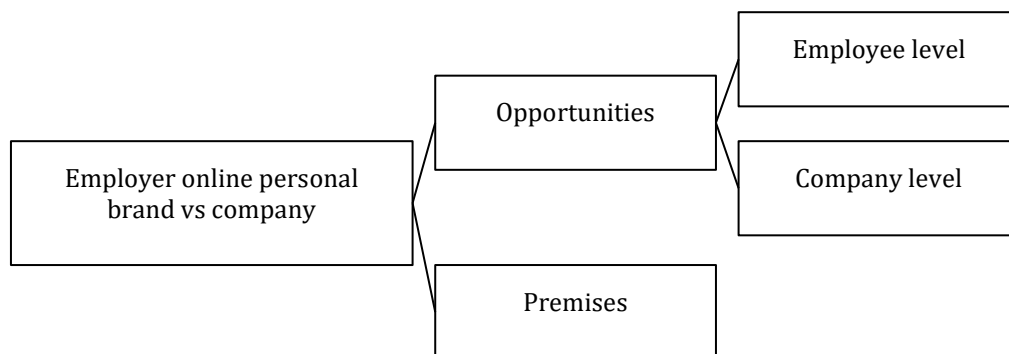
In table 10, the codes will be presented and excerpts from the interviews from which they were taken for the specific adulthood development stage. All the data is related to the interview question: "What do you think would be the relationship between

a company and an employee who develops, outside the workplace, an online personal

brand?".

Table 10 – Frequency of the codes collected in the question "What do you think would be the relationship between a company and an employee who develops, outside the workplace, an online personal brand?", divided by adulthood development stage

What do you think would be the relationship between a company and an employee who develops, outside the workplace, an online personal brand?		
Adulthood development stages	Codes	Empirical excerpts
Youthful Adulthood (18-27)	**Company level:** #higher performance **Employer level:** #personal development **Premises:** #work ethic #target audience #competition(2x) #communication #credibility #align values	A1M2: "Penso que seria gratificante e benéfico ter um funcionário que se desenvolve a sua marca pessoal, contudo, tinha de ser credível e transparente para não afetar a empresa" A1M1: "Depende da área, há setores mais sensíveis" A1F2: "Acho que em Portugal, não se recebe muito bem a colaboração com outros projetos além da empresa, é uma mentalidade retrógrada".
Early Adulthood (33 to 40)	**Company level:** #collaboration #personal brand capitalization **Employer level:** #collaboration **Premises:** #competition(3x) #align values(2x) #professional area	A2M2: "Ser ou não ser da mesma área, faz toda a diferença" A2F2: "A empresa deve capitalizar a marca pessoal do funcionário".
Center	**Company level:** #higher	

Adulthood (46 to 60)	performance #positive inputs	A3F2: "O funcionário quando comunica deve sempre falar em seu nome, isso é uma barreira que deve ser acautelada"
	Employer level: #personal development(2x)	A3F1: "Tenho reparado que pessoas que começam estes projetos, ao fim de algum tempo acabam por se descolar de uma coisa ou outra".
	Premises: #personal brand speak for herself #guidelines #company size #time spending(2x) #professional area #competition	A3M1: "Se for na mesma área de negócio, não é possível, não é honesto. Sente-se que se pode perder a pessoa".

Youthful Adulthood

For the Youthful Adulthood life stage, the main benefit for the employee is the personal development which can positively impact the performance of the company. However, they believe #competition(2x) can be a point of tension between the two parties.

Early Adulthood

For this age gap the main benefits for the company is the #personal brand capitalization and the reciprocal #collaboration which can positively impact the development and performance of both parties. However, they believe #competition(3x) and #align values(2x) should be taken into consideration for a healthy relationship. They also point out that the professional area in which the person is developing the personal brand is very important to make a fair judgment of the situation.

Center Adulthood

In this age group, the benefits to the company and employee are like the Youthful Adulthood age group. The most common point of conflict is #time spending(2x), as organizations do not want the employee to waste time with their personal brand that they could offer the company. Once again, the interviewees point out that the professional area is fundamental in the existence or lack of conflicts with the institution.

General results

In general, all groups believe that developing a personal online brand enhances the individual's development and this will obviously bring benefits to the company, namely in terms of performance. However, the respondents point out that the niche where brands may be communicating, especially when the business area is the same, can be a point of tension between both parties. The alignment of values is essential for a healthy relationship.

3.8. How do you think online personal branding will be 10 years from now?

To understand what the future of online personal brands will be, the analysis of the interviews revealed three categories: 1) Content future characteristics - seeks to understand the perceptions of what the content of brands will consist of in the future; 2) Brand future characteristics - seeks to understand which values and personality will prevail in the future; 3) Variables responsible for the change - intends to understand which variables will cause changes in this issue.

Figure 8 - Categorization and subcategorization process of the codes presented in the question "How do you think online personal branding will be 10 years from now?"
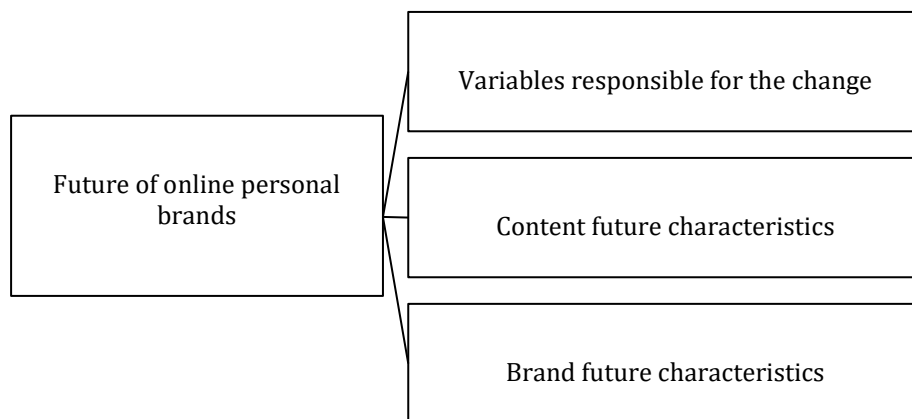
In table 11, the codes will be presented and excerpts from the interviews from which they were taken for the specific adulthood development stage. All the data is related to the interview question: " How do you think online personal branding will be 10 years from now?".

Table 11 – Frequency of the codes collected in the question "How do you think online personal branding will be 10 years from now?", divided by adulthood development stage

How do you think online personal branding will be 10 years from now?		
Adulthood development stage	Codes	Empirical excerpts
Youthful Adulthood (18-27)	**Variables responsible for the change:** #augmented reality #technological evolution(2x) #platforms policies(2x)	A1M2: "As marcas vão procurar pessoas autênticas e credíveis". A1M1: "Vais segmentar as plataformas digitais com objetivos pessoais e profissionais" A1F1: "As marcas pessoais vão depender das tendências sociais e da evolução das políticas/restrições das plataformas".
	Content future characteristics: #platform segmented	
	Brand future characteristics: #careful #consistent communication #personal #interactive #authenticity #credibility	
Early Adulthood (33 to 40)	**Variables responsible for the change:** #loneliness #platforms evolution	A2F1: "Queremos ligações e isso só se consegue com autenticidade". A2F2: "As pessoas vão estar cada vez mais isoladas, e estas plataformas têm de promover essa proximidade e humanidade". "Consumo mais imediato e apelativo a nível visual" A2M2: "Vai depender muito da evolução das plataformas". "As pessoas vão ter cada vez mais uma voz ativa".
	Content future characteristics: #fast consumption content #visually appealing content #encompassed content	
	Brand future characteristics: #proximity #humanity #authenticity(2x) #active voice	
Center Adulthood (46 to 60)	**Variables responsible for the change:** #longevity/legacy #technological advances #mix of physical and online presence	A3M1: "Vão ser mais acessíveis, a nível de conteúdo, a nível de informação". A3F2: "Ser genuíno, estamos a passar de marcas

	Content future characteristics: #accessible #strategic #public more exigent #society causes(2x)	muito trabalhadas para marcas mais normais/autenticas".
	Brand future characteristics: #quality #informal communication #humanity #ambitious #authenticity	A3M2: "Seguramente a nossa presença física e digital vai se confundir muito mais no futuro". "As plataformas vão se alterar, mas a utilização vai ser cada vez mais estratégica e profissional e quem consome vai ser mais exigente."

Youthful Adulthood

The Youthful Adulthood life stage thinks that the future brand characteristics will be the #authenticity, #interactivity and #credibility, and the professional and personal content will be #platform segmented. In addition, they believe that the future of these brands can be impacted by the future platforms #platforms policies and #technological advances.

Early Adulthood

The Early Adulthood life stage thinks that the future brand characteristics will also #authenticity(2x). #Fast consumption, #visual appeal and encompassing content were also pointed out. Moreover, they believe that the future of these brands can be impacted by #loneliness and #technological advances.

Center Adulthood

This age gap thinks that the future brand characteristics will be the #authenticity and #humanity. The content will address #social causes(2x). They also believe that the future of these brands can be impacted by the #mix of physical/digital presence and #technological advances.

General results

Overall, all respondents believe that online personal branding is here to stay. Regarding the characteristics of these brands, all age groups point to authenticity as the main future feature that will be assured. As for the factors that can affect the changes in these brands, the platforms technological and policies advances where they are inserted, will always be the factor that will more likely cause change and adaptation.

3.9. What is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on online personal brands?

In general, this question seeks to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic may have impacted online personal brands. Initially, the results were divided into two categories: 1) Outcomes - to understand the perceptions of the interviews at the level of the practical results of the pandemic in the brands; 2) Behaviours – The second category is divided into 2 sub-categories: a) Content consumers perception - what are the perceptions of online personal brands' content consumers; b) Content creators' perception - what are the perceptions of online personal brands' content producers.

Figure 9 - Categorization and subcategorization process of the codes presented in the question " What is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on online personal brands?"
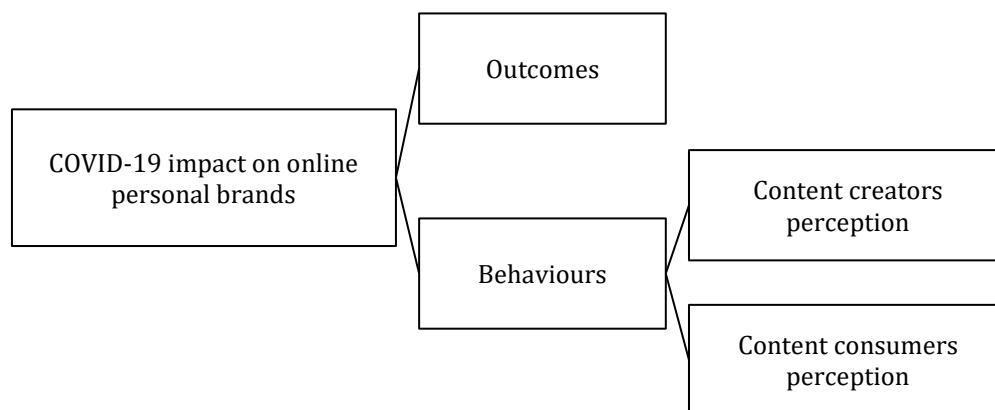
In table 12, the codes will be presented and excerpts from the interviews from which they were taken for the specific adulthood development stage. All the data is related to the interview question: "What is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on online personal brands?"

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Table 12 - Frequency of the codes collected in the question "What is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on online personal brands?", divided by adulthood development stage

What is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on online personal brands?		
Adulthood development stages	Codes	Empirical excerpts
Youthful Adulthood (18-27)	**Outcomes:** #increased number of online personal brands	A1F1: "Acho que favoreceu a autopromoção, o tempo de exposição e as atividades nas plataformas digitais".
	Content creators' perceptions: #delivery of value	A1M2: "A pandemia expos as pessoas ao digital e isso fez com que muita gente desenvolvesse a sua marca pessoal"
	Content consumers perceptions: #increased exposure #increased online consumption(3x) #self-promotion #most critical audience	A1M1: "O público ficou mais crítico e temperamental".
Early Adulthood (33 to 40)	**Outcomes:** #increased number of online personal brands (2x)	A2M2: "As pessoas tiveram mais tempo para estar no digital, e consequentemente criar conteúdo. Senti que tive mais amigos a desenvolver as suas marcas pessoais".
	Content creators' perceptions: #redefining their own personal brands #increased content creation	A2F1: "Incerteza, perda de empregos, maior contacto com o digital - levou as pessoas a ter uma presença mais forte e dedicada ao personal branding".
	Content consumers perceptions: #increased online consumption(3x)	
Center Adulthood (46 to 60)	**Outcomes:** #impact people globally #business digitalization	A3F1: "Evoluíram muito, tiveram essa necessidade. Houve muito mais marcas a nascer e a comunicar, a pandemia limitou o contacto
	Content creators' perceptions: #communication redefinition	

	Content consumers perceptions: #increased exposure #increased online consumption #increased digital knowledge	pessoal, as pessoas tiveram de arranjar uma alternativa". A3M1: "Impacto brutal. A pandemia obrigou as pessoas a irem para o online, há a possibilidade de impactar mais gente e de forma global". A3F2: "Houve um grande impacto. Existiu a necessidade de as pessoas acelerarem o conhecimento e a utilização das ferramentas online, a todos os níveis. As pessoas acabaram por se expor mais, porque não o podiam fazer fisicamente."

Youthful Adulthood

The Youthful Adulthood life stage noticed an increase in the #number of online personal brands during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of behaviour of content consumers emphasize the #increased online consumption(3x) and a more #critical spirit. In terms of content creators, the intention to #deliver value is also noticed.

Early Adulthood

Like the Youthful Adulthood, this age gap also noticed an #increase in the number of personal brands online during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of behaviour of content consumers emphasize the #increased online consumption(2x). In terms of content creators an #increased content creation and #brand redefinition was pointed out.

Center Adulthood

The Center Adulthood life stage noticed #business digitalization, understanding the opportunity to impact people globally during the COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of behaviour of content consumers they the #increased digital knowledge and consequently #increased online consumption. In terms of content and like the Early Adulthood age gap, this sample noticed an #increased content creation and #communication redefinition by content creators.

General results

In general, all groups perceived an increase in the number of online personal brands, the increased digital awareness that impacted the increased consumption of digital content. Finally, by the content creators, they noticed a redefinition of the brand. However, many interviewees reinforce the idea that quality will determine the evolution and success of personal brands.

3.10. Results Summary

After an in-depth analysis of each question, as well as the coding analysis process. The Table 13 summarizes the results obtained from different interview questions, for each category and for each adulthood development stage.

Table 13 - Summary of the results obtained from the different questions for the different adulthood development stages.

| Interview question	Codes categories	Results		
		Youthful	Early	Center
What do you use online platforms for?	Professional purpose	Job opportunities and Inspiration	Personal development and exposure	Follow competitors
	Ludic purpose	News and texting	Texting	News
About personal branding online. What makes you follow a certain personal brand?	Motivation	Inspiration	Value adding	Value adding
	Attachment	Interaction, feel of connection and storytelling	Consistency	Personal content
	Alienation	Excess of content and forced interaction	Commercial posture	Commercial posture and excess of content
What are the advantages of developing a personal brand online?	Self-development	Feedback	Feedback and the capacity of being strategic	Capacity of being strategic
	Audience perception	Credibility	Notoriety and become an asset	Notoriety
	Outcomes	Network and economic benefits	Economic benefits	Network and economic benefits
What are the disadvantages of developing a personal brand online?		Exposure and psychological effects	Psychological effects and conditioning	Exposure, time spending and conditioning

What are the barriers of developing a personal brand online?		Exposure and self-judgement	Lack of knowledge/mentors and time	Lack of time and confidence
How do you imagine producing content for your personal brand online?	Purpose	Not conclusive	Commercial	Educate
	Platform	Social media platforms	Website and social media platforms	Social media
	Format	Video	Video	Video
What do you think would be the relationship between a company and an employee who develops, outside the workplace, a personal brand online?	Company	Higher performance	Personal brand capitalization and collaboration	Higher performance
	Employer	Personal development	Collaboration	Personal development
	Premisses	Competition	Competition	Time spending and competition
How do you think online personal branding will be 10 years from now?	Variables	Technological and policies evolution	Technological evolution and loneliness	Technological evolution
	Content characteristics	Platform segmented	Fast consumption	Society causes oriented
	Brand characteristics	Authentic and credible	Authentic and humanitarian	Authentic and humanitarian
What is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on online personal branding?	Outcomes	Increased number of online personal brands	Increased number of online personal brands	Impact people globally
	Content creators	Value delivery	Brand redefinition	Communication redefinition
	Content consumers	Increased online consumption	Increased online consumption	Increased online consumption, exposure, and digital knowledge

In Figure 10, the conceptual model for this study will be presented.

Figure 10 – Conceptual model of the study
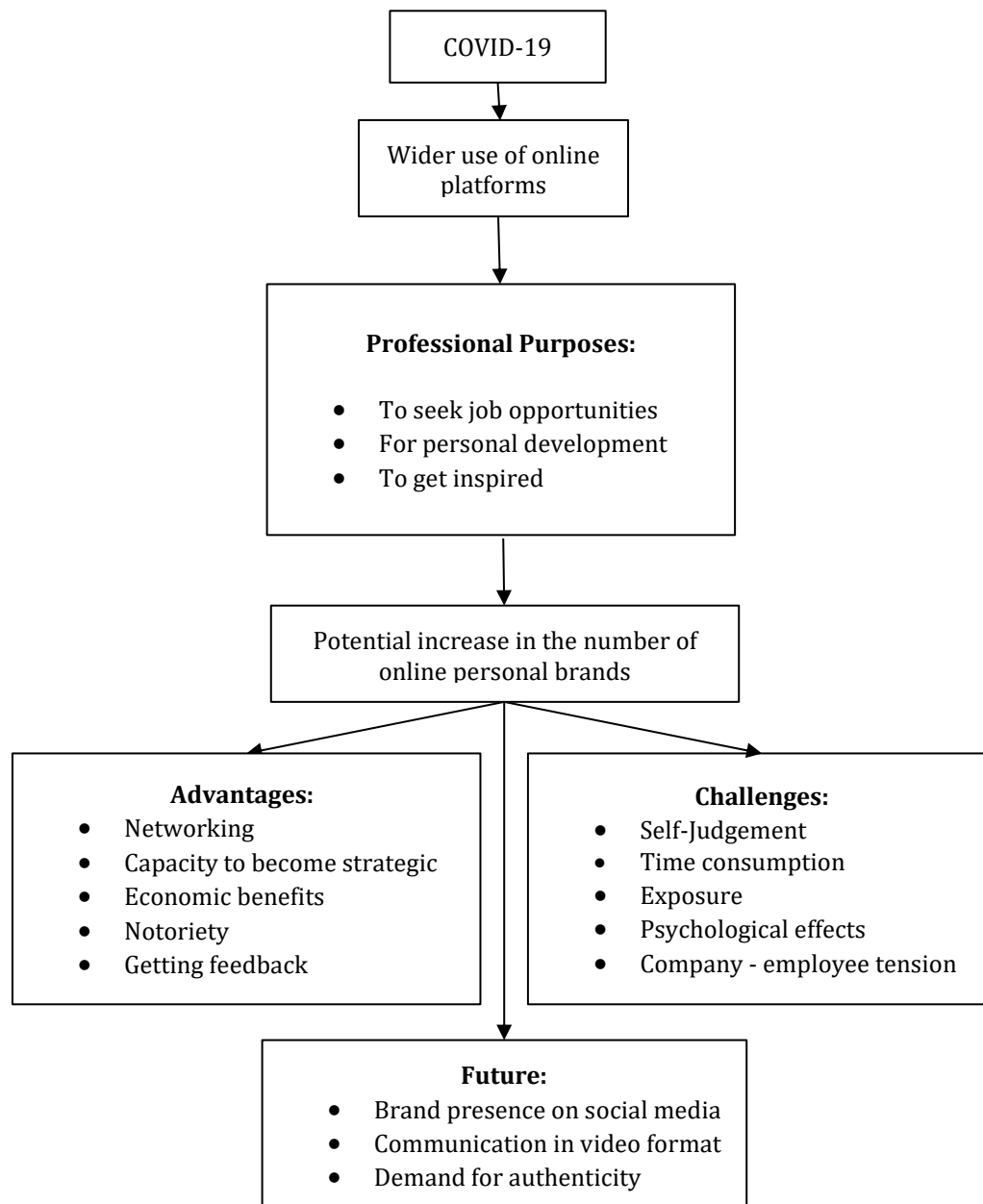
The conceptual model begins with the impact of COVID-19 on people's lives and consequently, digitalization. By prompting professional and personal adaptations to the context of a pandemic (e.g., lockdown, uncertainty), COVID-19 may have had a role to play

on the availability of the user to interact with digital platforms for a wider range of purposes, specifically professional ones. Participants referred their primary professional purposes for the use of digital platforms to be personal inspiration and development, as well as the search for employment opportunities. The realization of these possibilities may have increased the number of online personal brands.

Nevertheless, the process of developing an online personal brand is complex, presenting challenges and benefits along the way. In the future, the number of personal brands is expected to grow and to have social media platforms as their primary development platform. Video is likely to increase as a preferred communication format. Finally, for online personal brands to be maintained and become successful over time, the public will increasingly demand for authenticity.

4. Discussion

In the present chapter, the discussion of the results of the study will be presented. After analysing the results, it is essential to interpret and examine them. This process is monitored and compared with the literature review outlined earlier to present the possible contributions made and the agreement or contradiction with past studies on this subject.

The results will be discussed, answering the research questions in a sequential way that allows the best chain of ideas, making sense of the study's objectives, and facilitating the reading process. This cross-sectional exploratory study is intended to contribute to the existing literature on online personal brands - by interviewing individuals from different adulthood development stages and realizing their perspectives over online personal branding.

4.1. What was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on online personal branding?

Individuals are increasingly enabled to work in the digital environment (gig economy) where (Ganidini, 2015, p.124) argued that "self-branding in the knowledge economy is a device for self-promotion in the pursuit of self-realization". The pandemic we have been experiencing in the past two years and the consequent digital acceleration registered by various sectors and professionals made studies and contributions on online personal branding even more pertinent since professionals of various ages had to adapt to this new reality.

When asked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on online personal brands, most of the participants believe that the pandemic has boosted digitalization, claiming that because businesses had to reinvent themselves, remote working forced people to interact more with the digital environment and its platforms, increasing online content consumption and the number of online personal brands. All of this may have made people to realize even more the potential of the digital environment, which thus far have not been explored thoroughly mainly by older adulthood development stages that, may have caused an increase in efforts to develop a personal online brand. These results support the theory that the pandemic may have contributed to an increase in personal brands in the digital environment and their popularity, constituting an antecedent to their development. This statement makes sense if the pandemic period and consequent period of professional uncertainty can trigger behaviours aimed at adaptation and career achievement aspiration. In line with that, (Gorbatov et al., 2019) revealed that career achievement aspiration was the primary antecedent for people to engage in personal branding. In the study of other scholars, personal branding was also positively associated

with perceived employability and professional satisfaction (Arthur et al., 2005; Boudreau et al., 2001; Greenhaus et al., 2008).

Accordingly, and for many job seekers, the global digitalization trend means the opportunity to offer their skills and competencies across industries and companies (Gorbatov et al., 2019). Individuals today frequently switch jobs and companies, as well as engage in novel employment relationships such as freelancing (Kuhn, 2016; Van den Born & Van Witteloostuijn, 2013) temporary and contract working conditions (Davis-Blake & Uzzi, 1993), and retraining or mid and late-career changes (Rice, 2015; Robertson, 2017; Wöhrmann et al., 2014). Online personal branding, constituting a valid strategy for enhancing professional careers in the digital world, further reinforces the study's relevance of the possible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic over different adulthood life stages.

In addition to these practical results, there were also impacts on creators and consumers of personal brand content. The Youthful Adulthood group believes the pandemic has triggered an offer of value from creators when it comes to content creators. Delivering value and its importance will be discussed later as a fundamental action to impact and sustain the interest of a certain audience. The Young and Center Adulthood groups believe the pandemic has impacted the redefinition of brands - this may have happened given the disruptive situation we have been in over the past few months, which may have led many individuals to rethink what they were doing and communicating.

On consumers of online personal brand content and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, all age groups are unanimous that consumption has increased significantly, as consumers knowledge about tools and platforms increases - as people have been closer to the virtual world in recent times. In addition, the Youthful Adulthood group also mentioned that it perceived more temperamental consumers. This may have been due to

the increase in content and a more knowledgeable public about the content and personal

branding efforts - increasing the scrutiny of these brands and their radius of action.

4.2.   What is the perception about online personal brands?

Motivations, attachment, and alienation:

Understanding why an individual follows a particularly personal brand is essential for reaching a specific audience. Realizing what creates a connection and what motivates the audience to follow a particular online personal brand can help improve the quality of the brands and their content, primarily when we draw lessons from individuals of different ages. This is the contribution that the study intends to offer to this theme.

Our results provide relevant information regarding the motivations for following a personal brand online, about what triggers a connection for a specific brand, and finally, what causes alienation - what leads the person to stop following a specific brand or lose interest in what it communicates. The reputation and position of successful individuals achieved over time seem to be the combination of expertise and "connectedness", making them attractive to other players in the same area. "An authentic personal brand, therefore, delivers both a track record and a promise of the ongoing delivery of value" (Harris, L. 2011, p.20). In all age groups, the participants stated that they follow personal brands searching for knowledge/value-adding to enhance their lives personally and professionally.

When it comes to the attachment to a personal brand, the Youthful Adulthood group points to the possibility of interacting as one of the most substantial reasons - the interaction makes the audience feel closer to the brand, so there is also the possibility of exchanging ideas. The Early Adulthood group points to consistency - consistency is vital in any area. A brand must consist of what it stands for, its values, and be consistent in delivering value to its audience.

The results of this study are in line with the study by (Ashley & Tuten, 2015), who concluded that informative, vivid, and engaging brand content (de Vries et al., 2012) encourages favourable user engagement. It can be assumed that this brings the audience closer to the personal brand.

Regarding the consistency discussed above, the results and testimonies from the Young Adulthood group also agree with the conclusions of (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016), which indicate that the basis of a marketable brand is the creation of a coherent narrative identity.

Finally, the Center Adulthood group points to sharing personal content - some interviewees assume that knowing a little more about the brand they follow, and its intimacy brings them closer because it also conveys authenticity in the way the brand communicates. In terms of causing a departure from the brands, the excess of content pointed out by the Youthful and Center Adulthood and a commercial posture in Young and Center Adulthood.

Advantages over developing an online personal brand:

Definitions of personal branding are consistent with the positive intentions of personal branding. Some researchers agree that personal branding main purpose is to "create a favourable impression" (Lee & Cavanaugh, 2016), "attractive" (Omojola, 2008) and "to be conventionally valid, credible or desirable (de la Morena Taboada, 2014).

Research shows that personal branding helps individuals achieve positive career outcomes, including social capital (Gandini, 2015; Jaring & Bäck, 2017; Tarnovskaya, 2017), financial rewards (Close et al., 2011) and career opportunities (Parmentier et al., 2013); Schlosser et al., 2017), which goes according to the results of this study. All studied

groups point out as practical results of the development of a personal online brand, the possibility of creating a network and possible monetary benefits. For individuals, there was also evident that personal branding leads to a variety of beneficial outcomes, such as enhanced credibility, visibility, prestige (Gorbatov et al., 2018), which is also in line with the results of the study on the advantages related to the public's perception, where the sample is in agreement on an increase in credibility (Youthful Adulthood), the possibility of becoming an asset for projects and organizations and increased notoriety (Young and Adulthood Center).

A study developed by (Vițelar, 2019), on the use of social media for personal branding in Generation Z Romanians points out that 48% of the respondents believe that a personal brand is enabling them to showcase their communication skills, personality, and passions. These results and other studies including (Farhana, 2012; Harris & Rae, 2011; Johnson, 2019; Kang, 2013; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018) where it was shown that to build a strong personal brand an individual should develop the strategy and actions to guide their brand, also seem to agree with the results of the present study, once when it comes to self-development advantages, respondents from all groups agree that being able to, not only receive feedback from their audience, but also the ability to be strategic in building and developing their personal brand are the main advantages. In sum, the ability to understand where our best qualities are, whether in terms of communication or in other areas and explore them in favour of our brand it is fundamental for the brand to succeed.

After analysing the findings of all Adulthood development stages groups, the researcher could understand that the importance given to personal branding is general among the groups, which goes in accordance with the conclusion of (Kang, 2013) who says that personal branding is critical for everyone from new grads to entrepreneurs, as

it may be the difference between landing a job and ending up at the bottom of a file or

instilling the essential confidence in investors to trust your company.

4.3. What are the perspectives of developing an online personal brand?

Online platforms usage:

If the pandemic impacted the way people use digital platforms, and the fact that the usage of these platforms has grown significantly in recent years, it is understandable that communicating in these digital channels has gained considerable relevance in different areas. Studying the purposes and motivations of engaging in digital platforms from different adulthood age gaps can contribute to a better understanding over the theme of online personal branding - whether at the level of personal brands and their audiences.

Although this interview question included all types of digital platforms available such as websites, blogs, and forums, most of the participants point out that social media platforms as the ones they use the most - which is in line with previous research that alleged that people are increasingly using social media platforms to promote themselves to others (Antheunis & Schouten, 2011; Duggan et al., 2015), since they have become a regular element of everyday life (Perrin, 2015).

When asked about the motivations to use online platforms, and despite the prevalence of recreational purposes in all the samples, most respondents assume that they already use digital platforms for professional purposes. Thus, reinforcing the idea that the use of digital platforms for professional purposes is increasingly common among individuals of different ages, and that these platforms do not only consist of entertainment platforms. However, the focus of the study is online personal branding -

using digital platforms for professional purposes may not necessarily include the objective of developing a personal online brand - the division made in this study between active and passive professional purposes. However, it lacks a scientific basis and requires further research since the categorization of some actions is quite ambiguous and depends almost exclusively on the purpose and perception of those who practice it.

Development of an online personal brand: purpose, platform, and content format

After looking into the results of online platforms usage and understanding that most of the sample already understands the features and benefits of using them in a professional context, it is possible to theorize that they may have the will to interact with personal branding. Once, the perception of affordances by users is crucial to any consideration of them to do it (Norman, 2013). People are unlikely to engage in a specific conduct if they do not perceive or comprehend that it is feasible. Perception of affordances is influenced by the perceptibility of system features or design, as well as user characteristics that may affect the probability of noticing or understanding certain affordances (Gaver, 1991).

The results regarding the purpose to develop an online personal brand in the Youthful Adulthood group were not very conclusive, indicating that this group does not seem to have an accurate understanding of what they intend to do with their personal brand online. The Early Adulthood group presents the commercial purpose as the most frequent. Finally, the Center Adulthood group has as its main purpose to educate the public on a certain topic. About the platform where they could develop their personal

brand, social networks are the dominant platforms in all groups, only the Early Adulthood consider the use of websites at the same frequency. Video content seems to be the format with the most perspective to be used in all age groups. Understanding the perspectives of developing a personal brand and its contents can allow us to draw lessons about the most effective way to communicate to these audiences.

4.4. What are the challenges of developing an online personal brand?

Disadvantages:

When asked about the disadvantages of developing a personal brand, the objective was to look for the possible negative resulted from this activity. The psychological effects were pointed out by the Youthful and Early Adulthood groups - which may be related to the exposure to the brands, and consequently, criticism. Thus, they are becoming more vulnerable. Many interviewees also pointed to the issue of internet footprint, the concern that everything we post online invariably does not disappear or is difficult to hide, and personal brands may become hostages of what they have done or become associated with in the past. A relatively recent example was Kevin Hart that can be compared to the previous result, who after being accused of homophobia by his audience, confronted by having joked about his personal social media accounts for years, was turned away from presenter at the Academy Awards ceremony (Daw, 2020).

The Young and Center Adulthood pointed out the conditioning as the main disadvantage. Some respondents pointed out that sometimes they feel forced to do or publish something they do not want or the contrary. Because they fear not meeting the expectations/needs of either the platform where they are, or of their audience. This result is in agreement with the conclusions of (Vallas & Christin, 2018; Vallas & Cummins, 2015) which pointed out that the challenges associated with the persistent pressure to engage in personal branding, can lead to losing personal identity (Holton & Molyneux, 2017).

Finally, the Center Adulthood group also adds time consumption. What goes on is also in line with past research (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016) that consider the development

of a personal brand as something complex, that requires time and dedication to manage and maintain throughout till becoming a central career focus.

Barriers:

Despite all the advantages that can come from developing an online personal brand, it is necessary to realize that it is not a simple task. After analysing the results, it can be concluded that the main barriers to developing a personal brand online by the Youthful Adulthood group is exposure and self-judgement. These results can be explained by the young age of the interviewees, in addition to this, their experience in a certain area is not yet high. So there is perhaps the fear of talking about a certain topic and becoming a personal branding failure (Labrecque et al., 2011). Exposure can also be a more recurrent problem in young people who are more self-conscious and are afraid of criticism from friends and acquaintances.

Lack of knowledge/mentors and time are the main barriers identified by the Early Adulthood group to interact with personal branding. Despite being a current theme in recent years, personal branding is still a new job skill (Gorbatov et al., 2018), that needs unique abilities like technical, metacognitive, creative, and critical thinking (Lorgnier and O'Rourke, 2011) which is still a lack of professionals in the areas that can support individuals to develop their brand. Also, since digital tools and platforms are constantly changing (Harris & Rae, 2011), as well as an increase in the existence of the public, the very guidelines of what a personal brand should be and do are constantly changing - a good adaptability capacity is therefore essential. In addition to good technological adaptability, developing a personal brand requires effort, dedication, and time (Harris & Rae, 2011). As a result, we can hypothesize that people with superior digital skills, who

can discover their own points of competitive differentiation and creatively transform them into compelling narrative and imagery while doing so strategically and in a socially appropriate way, have a better chance of professional and personal success (Gorbatov et al., 2018).

Finally, the Center Adulthood group points to lack of time and confidence as the main barriers to developing a personal brand online. Like the previous group, lack of time is again a noted barrier, which can be explained by the fact that these groups are probably at the peak of their professional careers - with an increase in time and dedication to these projects affecting the rest of their time for dedicate themselves to this activity. On the other hand, the lack of trust can be related to the lack of updating with the themes and essential tools to develop a brand in a digital environment, thus feeling refrained from doing so.

4.5. What is the point of view of professional adults in building a personal brand while working for a company?

Despite the benefits of developing a personal brand as an employee of a company, it is fundamental to study the possible tensions that can appear after the development of this brand. Understanding this can help professionals and organizations to deal better with this kind of occurrence.

If all contact between an organization's employees and its customers constitutes a form of marketing, then all customer contacts also constitute self-marketing or at least provide opportunities for self-marketing (Shepherd, 2005). Employees and their brands are constantly showcased in the market.

Studies have found that social media may be utilized successfully for marketing operations (Liang & Turban, 2011; Stephen & Toubia, 2010). However, for many organizations, social media application is still in its early stages, focusing on presence rather than integration into everyday business activities, and firms are expected to progress through several phases of social media maturity (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010).

Authentic personal brands are sought after by companies because of their ability to leverage their potential to benefit the organization and its career advancement (Harris & Rae, 2011). In addition to the employee's personal development, Chen (2014) found that those who did self-promotion were happier at work than those who did not. (Gorbatov et al., 2018) predicted that personal branding would positively relate to job satisfaction because personal branding and self-promotion are self-expressive behaviours.

Despite all the advantages for the individual and the company that come from encouraging the development of the employee's personal brand, recalling the BBC lawsuit between Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand, (Harris & Rae, 2011) point out that personal brands can use their power to damage their organizations. In an increasingly digital world, this can be even more relevant - individuals and the power they have through the simple expression of their opinion can be fatal for some institutions.

In this study and in line with past research addressed above, the respondents believe that developing an online personal brand enhances the individual's skills development, which will bring benefits to the company, namely in terms of the company's increased performance from a personal brand capitalization. Despite the results, the participants' tensions varied a lot depending on the professional area. A factor that also seems to affect the interviewees' judgment is the competitiveness between the two parties, and if the employee's personal brand does not act in the same niche/target audience, there does not seem to be tension - the opposite does not seem to happen.

In addition to the competition discussed above, the Center Adulthood group points out that the attention given to the time dedicated to the company and the personal brand can create tension between the two parties. It is important to remember that personal branding success can be overly successful, some organizations may think influential brand builders can be considered a threat. Raising their personal brand may also lead to suspicion and scepticism, especially if the brand appears to be outperforming more senior management brands or the organization's brands (Harris & Rae, 2011).

4.6. What will be the future of online personal brands?

About the future of personal brands, and specifically about the variables responsible for the future of this theme, all groups studied were unanimous about the impact of the technological evolution of platforms and policies. We have been witnessing a constant mutation of social media platforms, especially when it comes to their tools, and this will certainly impact the way personal brands communicate. In addition, data and advertising restrictions will also play a key role in how brands change over time. It should be noted that in addition to these two variables, the Young Adult group also referred to loneliness as a variable that will impact the future of personal brands - this can be explained by the way in which the pandemic exacerbated this problem and made people experience more and more time alone and depend on digital platforms. However, one cannot say that this will be directly related to an increase in personal brands in this environment.

Regarding future content characteristics, the responses were different within the studied sample. The Youthful Adulthood group points out that the content will be segmented by platform - in addition to the idea that each platform should have specific content or content adapted to it, respondents believe that in the future the personal and professional persona will not mix on the same platform. They explain that people will have platforms with a more playful nature and others where the use will be exclusively professional - this can be explained by a possible conditioning that users may have of not being comfortable sharing content that may be more personal and that imply their perception as professionals.

The Early Adulthood group points to fast-consuming content as the future of personal branding - this might make sense, as it is something that has been promoted

even by the new tools and platforms that have emerged lately. As it is the case with stories on Instagram, TikTok, and the Reels in response from Instagram - keeping people willing to compulsively consume this type of content.

Finally, the Center Adulthood group believes that the content of online personal brands will be about social causes, something we have been seeing lately. Digital platforms also allow access to information and quick updates of world events, and one of the ways to develop our personal brand is to express our opinion on a certain subject. Communication about social causes can be a topic that creates more empathy with the audience that watches the content, not only because it can be something easier to relate, but also more people can have an opinion on a social issue than something more specific of a certain area of knowledge.

Regarding the characteristics of the personal brand, the interviewees of the age groups are unanimous, the brands must be authentic, credible, and humanitarian. This agrees with the idea of who stated that personal branding needs to be authentic - an individual cannot develop a personal brand on the surface where the goal is to feed the ego. This coupled with building a brand on the work of others, will not make it lasting in the long run (Harris & Rae, 2011). Although, the digital era encourages people to explore many identities (Turkle 1995), advise that a personal branding message should be clear and consistent to create an authentic perception by the audience. In accordance, (Liu & Suh, 2017) believe that authenticity can be one of the most relevant factors when it comes to differentiation in social networks.

5. Conclusions

This chapter will offer the study's final conclusions in the form of answering to the research goals, as well as a concluding perspective on the findings. The theoretical as well as practical contributions of the work are then addressed. Finally, the study's limitations and future research directions are outlined.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

Covid-19 pandemic as an antecedent for developing online personal brands

To the best knowledge of the author, thus far - this was the first work to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on online personal branding. Past research concluded that individuals' development of personal brand has as its primary objective professional satisfaction and consequent personal fulfilment. The pandemic experienced in the last two years, and the consequent professional instability, triggered an immediate need for adaptation by professionals from different areas and of different ages. The need to interact with digital platforms and their benefits was one of the most verified. All these actions made the public perceive the benefits of developing an online personal brand, which is reflected in the increased number of brands and efforts that the sample has perceived in recent months.

Accordingly, this study confirms the theory that the COVID-19 pandemic may have acted as antecedent to the creation and development of online personal brands.

Online platforms used from different adulthood development stages

Although the creation of social media platforms was initially intended to be a pure entertainment space, this study theorizes about the increased professionalization purposes of these platforms. The analysis of the results shows that most individuals already use digital platforms with professional goals, as they are increasingly aware of their tools and the personal professional benefits they can derive from their use.

What to avoid when developing an online personal branding while working in a company

The present study addressed a familiar yet sensitive theme. The development of a personal brand as an employee of a company, outside the company, brings several benefits to the self and the institution. These benefits have already been addressed by researchers in the past, as also confirmed in this study. However, it was necessary to understand the tension that could generate conflicts between the two entities.

After analysing the results, it is evident that the professional field where the personal brand's is acting has a significant impact. When the employee develops the personal brand in the same area of the function that they performed in the company, this can create a problem of competitiveness and consequent tension between the two parties – the individual and the company. This study confirms the theory that tensions arise from developing a personal brand online outside the company. Contributing with the concrete tensions perceived by employees from different areas

The future of the online personal branding

The future is uncertain. However, online personal branding is here to stay. A trend already observed that may have been positively impacted by the pandemic, and although the number has grown, brands' quality is what will dictate their longevity.

Technological and legal constraints will undoubtedly impact what the online personal brands of the future will be. Authenticity, a trait already so appreciated in the present by the increasingly demanding consumers of these brands' content, will be a feature that will impact the durability and perception of trust in the online personal brands of the future.

Regarding trends in the practice of online personal branding, this study reinforces the theory that social media platforms will be the platforms of choice for developing online personal branding, with video as the primary communication format. As for the purposes of developing a personal brand, it is ambiguous in the Youthful Adulthood group, and in the Early Adulthood group, the commercial purpose is the most pointed out. Finally, in the Center Adulthood group, the will to educate/instruct on a specific topic seems to be the more prevalent.

5.2. Practical contributions

Reasons to be followed

For those who want to develop a successful online personal brand and create a community of supporters, it is essential to define those who want to communicate with and understand what the audience is looking for when following an online personal brand. The present study was able to perceive that, although the motivations for following personal brands vary according to different age, adding value is the common motivation throughout the three age groups.

Brand connection is maintained by interaction with the public (Youthful Adulthood), consistency (Early Adulthood), and personal content (Center Adulthood). On the other hand, too much content makes it difficult for the public to follow a brand (Youthful and Center Adulthood), and a solid commercial aspect creates a disconnection with the brand (Early and Center Adulthood).

What to expect when developing an online personal brand

The present investigation confirms that developing a personal brand online can benefit the individual. Mainly at the level of personal development, public perception - increasing notoriety in a certain area, and thus becoming an asset to the market. Finally, at the level of practical results, a personal brand has the possibility of being strategic and responsible for who to have an impact on and how to do it. The brand can also hope to create a relevant network and take monetary benefits from this activity.

Online personal branding challenges

Despite the observed and demonstrated benefits of developing a personal brand, this study also contributes to the possible challenges that this activity can entail.

At the level of the disadvantages, the individual can expect, in addition to a considerable dedication of time, an increase in exposure that may consequently bring critics to their activity, and thus a greater risk of developing psychological effects such as anxiety.

Developing a personal brand online is not easy, and some barriers have prevented many people from developing this activity. The results revealed that the Youthful Adulthood age group perceives exposure and self-judgment as the main reasons for not developing it. The Early Adulthood group points to time availability and the lack of technical knowledge as the main barrier. Finally, the Center Adulthood group also points out the lack of time and low self-confidence that prevents them from developing their brand.

5.3. Limitations and future research

As with any study of this nature, some limitations urge caution in interpreting our findings. First, some of the measures are self-reports about perception and are subject to biases common to these methods.

Another limitation of the study was related to the generalization of the approach to digital platforms. Although it was presented as a positive contribution to online personal branding research regarding the perceptions of audiences of different ages covering all types of digital platforms available on the market, future studies should try to assess the personal perceptions of specific platforms. Although our sample mainly addresses personal testimonials over social media platforms, their objectives and behaviour vary depending on the social media platform, which was noted in the analysis of the transcripts.

As the average life expectancy has been increasing, and the longevity of professional careers, future studies should analyse the perceptions of older adulthood development stages, such as late adulthood (+65 years-old).

Concerning the results on the relationship between the company and the employee's brand, although not intentionally, this study only analysed employees' perceptions. Future studies should strive to analyse a sample that also includes company's perceptions and opinions, for example, top management and CEOs opinions about the practice of personal branding of their employees outside the company.

To conclude, although this study brings contributions on different topics of interest in online personal branding and the inclusion of different adulthood development stages, future studies could be specific to a particular topic. The density of analysis that some aspects deserved was invariably reduced by the massive number of

topics to be addressed in this recommendation. Moreover, this deserves much more scientific attention. It can contribute to a more sensible prior construction of a study of this nature and bring even more solid and relevant scientific contributions to such an interesting and evolving topic.

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