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Beyond the Screen: Moroccan Women Crafting Digital Empowerment through Personal Branding in Social Media

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Abstract

This article investigates the concept of personal branding via digital platforms and its influence on Moroccan women's empowerment. By leveraging social networks, Moroccan women have cultivated a distinct digital identity, which helped them establish lucrative online businesses, leading to financial autonomy. Employing a feminist approach, we analyzed data collected from a sample of five prominent Moroccan bloggers and influencers, whose effective personal branding in social media drives them to "stand out from the crowd", transgress into the male-dominated digital world, overcome the pre-determined gender stereotypes, and set up a self-made career. The research explores how these women have created and marketed their personal brands, examining the strategies and processes that have contributed to their online success. Through a qualitative content analysis and a quantitative assessment of the reception and prospects of female blogging in Morocco, the study uncovers the empowering effects of personal branding on women's confidence, visibility, and economic independence. The findings emphasised the transformative potential of personal branding to enhance women's self-esteem, challenge societal norms, and create new possibilities for gender equality within the online sphere. Ultimately, the study contributes to gender studies literature by examining personal branding through a gender-centric lens and highlighting its benefits for women's personal, social, and economic well-being.

Keywords

Personal Branding, Social Media, Empowerment, Female Identity, Financial Independence

1. Introduction

The rise of social media has revolutionised interpersonal communication, offer-

ing users extensive opportunities to explore alternative sources of income (Pradhan & Singh, 2023). Moroccan women, discerning the immense potential within the digital realm, have proactively engaged with this medium to foster their social and economic development. They have established connections, built a substantial online presence, and even ventured into entrepreneurship. Success in social media demands innovation and proactive involvement, and personal branding emerges as a crucial factor in achieving these objectives (Jacobson, 2020). It has redefined how women interact, operate, and present themselves in contemporary society. Through digital platforms, personal branding has empowered ordinary women to defy societal stereotypes, leveraging their passions, talents, and competencies to drive social and economic transformations. Moroccan women have effectively utilised online profiles and content sharing to turn the virtual space into a platform for empowerment. Here, they take control of their narratives, lead their businesses, and garner widespread recognition for their achievements.

Personal branding (P.B.), which has taken hold only among marketing professionals and celebrities (Labrecque et al., 2011), is now practised by common female bloggers to gain fame and achieve economic growth. This socio-economic phenomenon (P.B.) in social sites has shaken the notion of women's invisibility in the technology industry as women become undoubtedly visible in the social networking spheres; they, therefore, realise impressive and recognisable accomplishments being followed by millions of people. The ability of ordinary women, let alone highly educated ones, to establish a solid personal brand and set up home-based businesses proves women's ability to initiate businesses and take advantage of technology.

In this article, we examine the significant role of social media and personal branding in transforming the lives of Moroccan women, facilitating their transition beyond conventional societal roles towards embracing innovative and liberating opportunities that align with global trends. The study delves into the experiences of five Moroccan female bloggers who have made their mark in diverse fields such as beauty, fashion, culinary arts, comedy, and broadcasting. Each case study reveals the strategic use of personal branding and social media to capitalise on personal talents and passions, achieving fame and establishing unique, profitable ventures. Notably, these bloggers have cultivated online communities with at least 850,000 followers, showcasing the potential for wide-reaching impact.

This research employs a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively understand several key objectives related to the empowerment of Moroccan women through personal branding on social media. Firstly, it aims to analyse the diverse impacts of personal branding on Moroccan women's identities and socio-economic status, recognising personal branding as a significant tool for empowerment. Secondly, the study seeks to identify and assess the strategies used by Moroccan women to develop and enhance their personal brands online. Additionally, it explores Moroccan female bloggers' perceptions and experiences, focusing on how personal branding intersects with cultural norms and gender expectations

within Moroccan society. The final objective is to offer practical insights and recommendations to support Moroccan women in leveraging personal branding in social media for their professional advancement and personal development.

1.1. From Branding to Personal Branding

Coined by Tom Peters in 1997, the concept of personal branding has evolved into a prominent social media phenomenon. It is linked with self-presentation, wherein individuals strategically build their social image, seeking to attract highly engaged followers by sharing daily activities, life passions, and personal as well as professional experiences. Although it is a "marketing-born and reared" concept (Gorbatov et al., 2018: p. 1), personal branding has become more engaged with social media technology. The latter provides accessible avenues for interaction, audience building, product or service promotion, engaging potential customers, and facilitating financial opportunities.

Recent studies in marketing and business indicate a shift in consumer preferences, where customers are not only interested in the products or services they purchase but also in the individuals behind the brand (Erskine, 2016). This shift has prompted companies to embrace personal branding strategies, aiming to showcase their industry expertise, highlight the skills of their employees, and articulate the values their business embodies. Consequently, there is a transformation in traditional marketing approaches, with companies increasingly prioritising the establishment of communicative relationships with their customers. Personal branding emerges as a distinctive marketing tool wherein employees leverage their character, talents, and attitudes to foster meaningful connections with customers, thereby influencing their choices. The essence of personal branding lies in the notion of employees positioning themselves as individual "brands".

A definition of the word "branding" is required for a better understanding of personal branding. Branding is "a set of tangible and intangible attributes designed to create awareness and identity to build the reputation of a product, service, person, place, or organisation" (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015: p. 1). An effective brand can set a company apart from its competitors and cultivate a loyal customer base. It is all about creating a recognisable logo or design that people associate with a particular brand without necessarily knowing who owns the company or created the product. Take Chanel, for example—almost everyone can identify their brand through their iconic logo, but only some may know about Gabrielle Chanel, the woman behind the fashion house. Similarly, Nike's Swoosh logo is universally recognised as representing the sports company, even without the name "Nike" present. However, only some know Bill Bowerman, the company's founder. The same can be said for Polo and Lacoste, whose brands are recognised by many who have yet to learn of their creators.

The owners of these companies have succeeded in creating strong brands to promote their business and gain their customers' trust and loyalty. However, they still need to market themselves as the products' creators. As such, they are excellent in branding rather than in self-branding. Conversely, other people have

been inventive in adopting both strategies of branding and self-branding, by which they engender great success. To name but a few, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey, Mark Zuckerberg, Kim Kardashian and many others are great examples of professionals who have adopted self-branding to promote their businesses. In addition, they have succeeded in developing a visual and social identity through talk shows, public speeches, interviews, and social media, through which they realise revolutionary achievements.

In light of these examples, a definition of personal branding is now more comprehensible. Personal branding holds diverse meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova (2018) grouped the definitions of the concept into two main categories: those based on the marketing theory and those developed from the studies of self-presentation behaviours.

In the marketing and business domains, personal branding is defined as how "employees want to be perceived by potential employers, clients, and professional peers in a way that will boost short-and long-term career prospects" (Parmentier et al., 2013: p. 373). Other scholars in the field relate the concept of personal branding to personal marketing, stating that personal branding is "an endemic human activity, from the employee trying to impress his boss to the statesman trying to win the support of the public" (Kotler & Levy, 1969: p. 10).

Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova (2018) posit that marketing scholars' definitions include words such as "product", "buyer", "seller", "market", "added value", "promise" and "differentiation". They associate personal branding with a product branding process, using similar terminology and directly applying marketing principles. On the other hand, personal branding as a "self-presentation behavior" is defined as a strategy by which individuals regularly work towards creating a brand based on credibility and trust to base impression on others (Belagatti, 2021). Scholars of this category tend to include words such as "impression", "reputation", "individual's strengths", "uniqueness", "image", "self-promotion" and "identity" (Gorbatov et al., 2018). As such, the definitions provided by this category of scholars are the most convenient for this research perspective.

In this regard, Werner Geyser's (2020) definition of personal branding is comprehensive and all-encompassing. It pertains to how individuals can promote themselves by highlighting their distinct combination of skills, experience, and personality. Personal branding necessitates narrating your story to mirror your behaviour, conduct, spoken and unspoken words, and attitudes. Personal branding is about proficiently marketing oneself to the public, gaining their trust, and growing profit.

Overall, this section outlines the evolution of personal branding from its marketing origins to its current significance in the digital world. It presents personal branding as an engaging self-presentation strategy illustrated by individuals who successfully combine personal and corporate branding elements. Additionally, the section differentiates between marketing-oriented and self-presentation-oriented definitions of personal branding, with a preference for the latter in the

context of this study.

1.2. Personal Branding on Social Media: A Catalyst for Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is defined as the process "whereby women become able to organise themselves to increase their self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their socio-political subordination" (Keller & Mbewe, 1991: p. 75). Women's empowerment subsumes many categories. For example, Mandal (2013) differentiates between five types of female empowerment: social, educational, economic, political, and psychological, which are significantly central to women's personal, social, and economic growth.

In today's digital era, personal branding serves as a valuable tool to advance empowerment and equality for women. It encompasses a range of proactive strategies through which women can employ their skills to boost visibility, confidence, and independence, thereby fostering essential socio-economic values. According to William Arruda, an expert in personal branding, "Women today need their brand because it provides them with stability, empowerment, value-creation, and recognition, all crucial for success in an increasingly dynamic marketplace" (Jayabalan, 2015: para. 3).

Given the continuous underestimation, oppression, indifference, and vulnerability women experience at the workplace, personal branding on social media becomes a crucial tool for women to assert themselves, gain visibility and break into online business. It offers an alternative resource for women to combat these challenges and find empowerment. William Arruda emphasises the critical role of personal branding for women in addressing persistent gender disparities in pay and opportunities. Women, faced with societal expectations and challenges, often find themselves emulating male counterparts in the workplace (Jayabalan, 2015: para. 8). However, personal branding empowers women to break free from traditional moulds, allowing them to define and communicate their values and assert their individuality in a way that aligns with their own strengths and accomplishments.

As a valuable space for self-presentation and business establishment, social media is pivotal in supporting personal branding efforts. Labrecque et al. (2011) highlight its significance in achieving personal branding goals. Embracing personal branding allows women to leverage their passions and competencies to define a target platform, reach the maximum number of followers, gain their trust, and start a digital remunerating career. When women establish a strong personal brand on social media that attracts followers, instils trust, and garners likes, they experience a sense of satisfaction and enhanced self-esteem (Frendika et al., 2022). This, in turn, leads to a high level of empowerment, fostering autonomy, independence, and self-reliance.

Studies consistently affirm the importance of personal branding for success in personal and professional life (Khedher, 2014; Peters, 1997). Women, in partic-

ular, stand to benefit across three levels. At the Personal level, personal branding helps them uncover their potential, pursue fulfilling careers, and boost self-assurance (Frendika et al., 2022). Socially, it is crucial for improving women's online presence, asserting their identities, building meaningful relationships, and gaining the recognition they deserve (Arruda, 2019). As a gender-neutral digital space, social media amplifies women's representation, empowering them to express their perceptions freely. It helps them develop trust in expressing their perceptions without feeling scared or uncomfortable due to the negative portrayal that has historically plagued them. Economically, a solid personal brand enables women to effectively turn their talents into economic value, managing their lives and careers. Through a strong branded self, women can set up their businesses wherein they become no more emotional labourers or consumers but responsible leaders of their self-made careers (Mehtab et al., 2017).

In essence, personal branding on social media emerges as a crucial empowerment tool for women, fostering independence, visibility, and the ability to overcome gender disparities, with broad benefits spanning personal, social, and economic aspects.

2. Methodology

This article employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies to enrich the investigation. The qualitative exploration focuses on the narratives and experiences of five distinguished Moroccan bloggers who have fostered personal branding on social media platforms to attain fame, garner substantial social capital, and achieve successful careers. To facilitate this, an interview guide was thoroughly crafted to probe into the bloggers' personal branding journeys, focusing on key elements such as the development of their online persona, content creation strategies, audience engagement practices, and the perceived impact of their digital presence on their personal and professional lives.

This guide, containing structured questions derived from an extensive review of related literature, was sent directly to the bloggers' social media accounts to ensure ease of access and response. The questions were designed to explore the empowering nature of personal branding for women's success, emancipation, and workplace integration, aligning with the research hypothesis.

Table 1 provides a descriptive profile of the interviewees. It contains information about the five bloggers' names, ages, marital status, areas of residence, fields of expertise, and the number of followers on various platforms.

The bloggers were selected based on their visibility, influence, and diverse areas of expertise within the Moroccan digital landscape, as detailed in the table provided.

The data collected is analysed through a narrative analysis process. We first try to understand the informants' practical experiences with personal branding in social networks to gauge the latter's socio-economic empowering effects on their lives and future endeavours. Then, we interpret the construction of the

Table 1. Demographics, expertise, and social media reach.

Name of the Blogger	Age	Marital Status	Area of Residence	Field of Expertise	Number of followers	Platform
Halima Filali	39 years old	Married	Meknes	Catering/Cuisine	6.79 M	YouTube
Abir Berrani	26 years old	Married	Nador	Fashion model Owner of a lash and fragrance brand	1.8 M	Instagram
Loubna Jaouhari	32 years old	Single	Rabat	Comedian/Humourist	2.4 M	Instagram
Rabab Azmani	35 year old	Married	Tetouan	Media animation/ TV Host	1.7 M	Instagram
Siham Bada (Sultana)	34 years old	Married	Marrakech	Fashion Design & B/io Beauty Products	834 K	Instagram

narratives. A feminist approach is adopted to demonstrate how gender binary oppositions can be revisited and changed. The approach is also employed to prove that women's invisibility and underrepresentation in technology and business play no role in their intellectual potential and capabilities. It is instead the result of the sociocultural norms and the process of socialisation, which has been proven to affect women's career choices and societal position. The long-lasting gender preconceptions make socialisation so difficult to counter that they have become deeply rooted in the culture of our communities. However, the most effective method to combat gender stereotyping and challenge gender socialisation is to portray women in independent positions, showcase accomplished female role models, and emphasise women's significant contributions to the advancement and prosperity of their communities.

The quantitative investigation in this study specifically focuses on elucidating the conceptualisation and perception of personal branding within the dynamic realm of social media. For this objective, a comprehensive survey questionnaire is conducted, reaching out to a diverse sample that includes high school teachers and university students in the Fez-Meknes region, Morocco. The survey aims to gather data not only on their general understanding and opinions regarding personal branding but also to explore the intricacies of its relevance to women's empowerment and its potential impact on their professional success. This deliberate choice of engaging teachers and university students, especially those majoring in gender studies, aligns with the study's overarching goal of delving into the academic discourse surrounding the concept of personal branding.

In addition to investigating the definitions and perceptions of personal branding, our questionnaire delves into the realm of women's personal branding content. This facet of our study aims to understand how bloggers' education shapes the content, determining whether it is perceived as trivial, meaningful, entertaining, or valuable. This exploration adds a layer of complexity to our understanding of personal branding, considering the educational background of those shaping the narrative. The questionnaire further contributes to the article's dis-

cussion section, seeking insights into whether personal branding is perceived as an empowering or objectifying practice. The collected data are analysed using statistical techniques, and the results are presented graphically to showcase participants' opinions on personal branding.

3. Analysis

3.1. Moroccan Women and Self-Branded Start-Ups: Financial Autonomy Achieved

Financial independence is pivotal for women's empowerment, with personal branding on social media offering a significant pathway. Through interpretive narrative analysis, this section highlights the varied experiences and motivations of the five informants, demonstrating their financial successes via personal branding.

Halima Filali, the first informant, transitioned from being unemployed to a celebrated YouTube chef in Morocco, leveraging her genuine personality and authentic Moroccan recipes to build trust and loyalty among over six million subscribers. Her journey began with a home-based online catering venture, using YouTube to share her culinary passion. Halima's commitment to authenticity, professionalism, and audience engagement underpins her online success, earning her gold shields and acclaim for her channel.

The informant's principles of honesty and credibility in food presentation have not only garnered a vast following but also opportunities for ad collaborations and culinary jury roles, always ensuring product quality aligns with her values. Halima's income from YouTube varies between $2000 and $10,000 monthly, depending on viewership, highlighting the financial independence personal branding has afforded her. She emphasises the importance of "an authentic performance, a professional focus, a target audience, and a blog platform" for online success (Interview, December 2019), incorporating the fundamental elements of personal branding: credibility, authenticity, and differentiation (Montoya & Vandehey, 2002).

Embodying Habermas's concept of "social intercourse", (Shalin, 1992) Halima and like-minded female bloggers have leveraged trustworthiness and rapport to advance their online businesses. Her principled approach and use of accessible Moroccan dialect have made her a go-to source for authentic Moroccan recipes, further elevating her international and national reputation.

Halima's narrative exemplifies the effectiveness of personal branding in establishing a prosperous online career and securing financial autonomy, encouraging women to embrace self-reliance by leveraging their talents and interests. Her widespread acclaim, including a feature on "The Al Jazeera News Channel" for her "Sellou Recipe", underscores her culinary expertise and highlights her role as an inspiration for women seeking to break free from traditional financial dependence through digital entrepreneurship.

Abir Berrani, the second interviewee, leveraged social media from a young age to become a successful entrepreneur in fashion and beauty. Inspired by icons

like Huda Kattan, Abir focused on personal branding to advance her career as a model and influencer. She underscores the role of personal branding in unlocking career opportunities, advocating for women to harness social media for professional growth (Interview, January 2020).

Abir's social media journey started with sharing fashion and beauty tips on Instagram and Snapchat, quickly translating into a lucrative career and widespread recognition. She became a sought-after face for Moroccan cosmetic brands and a promoter of traditional attire, amassing a significant online following. With over 1.8 million followers on Instagram, her primary platform, Abir, exemplifies growth through dedication and strategic content creation.

Abir, echoing Halima, praises social media for offering women a more inclusive and flexible environment, enabling them to showcase their skills and build successful brands. She attributes her success to controlling her work, a freedom less attainable in traditional corporate settings (Interview, January 2020). Her strategic use of affiliate marketing and brand partnerships led to the launch of her own "Abir Allure Lashes" and "Abir Musk Tahara Fragrance" lines, crediting her followers as the cornerstone of her achievements.

Human capital proves to be a privilege in social media to achieve financial autonomy, as exemplified by Abir, who attributes her online business success to her followers. In the digital world, "followership" is crucial to pin success (Kim, 2020). Influencers are paid for their ability to create, interact, communicate, and share with human capital. In turn, followers assist, support and guide their models for more effective endeavours. Abir's effective use of this dynamic has led to her financial independence, enabling her to own luxury assets and achieve economic self-sufficiency. She views her entrepreneurial journey as a path to women's emancipation, highlighting the link between financial empowerment and freedom.

Discovering a new field of expertise, Loubna Jouhari, the third informant, a talented and well-educated individual, used her strong personal brand on social media to fulfil her dream of becoming a self-made stand-up comedian. Leaving her career as a sales manager, she embraced digital empowerment to chase her passion for entertaining and bringing joy to others. Her natural humour and comedic talent have been integral to her character since childhood, ultimately leading her to prioritise her passion over her corporate job.

Despite her financial independence, Loubna needed greater visibility and empowerment in her workplace. She established her online comedy entrepreneurship, avoiding humiliation or control by creating humorous personas that resonate with daily Moroccan life, such as "Nariman, the materialist" and "Khadija, the gossiper". Her approach, valuing autonomy over traditional employment, has earned her over 2 million followers and numerous professional opportunities, including stand-up comedy gigs. This autonomy has not only enhanced her public persona but also solidified her financial independence, allowing her a comfortable life in Tangiers, thanks to her successful branding and enhanced performance skills gained from social media and public appearances. Her online

content significantly surpasses her previous corporate earnings, providing a steady income based on viewer engagement.

Loubna's success story illustrates how a well-crafted personal brand can elevate a woman's financial independence and career autonomy, making her a model for others seeking similar paths.

Siham Bada, the fourth informant, is a fashion designer who credits her fame to her active engagement through personal branding on social media. She cultivates a following for her brand, "Sultana", by consistently posting and interacting, aiming to convert followers into loyal customers. She believes creating a social media presence is crucial for any new business to build a dedicated customer base through regular communication (Interview, March 2020).

Siham, nicknamed Sultana after her brand, is happy to become highly skilled at personal branding to promote her fashion design industry and natural skincare products. She considers daily interactions and popular exchanges as key to expanding her reach and promoting her products. She highlights that live streams strengthen blogger/follower interpersonal relationships, which are highly effective in increasing a brand's loyalty in the target market. Sultana prefers to model her designs, believing they would be more credible for her business growth. She also provides tangible evidence for the effectiveness of her organic products by publicly applying them and showing their instant effects on her skin. Her audience/customers appreciated her credibility and hard work to market quality designs and products that meet their high expectations.

The booming of natural skincare and fashion products in social media highlights a growing desire among women for self-confidence and economic independence. This movement challenges traditional stereotypes, showing that women's interests in beauty and fashion can coexist with intellectual and financial pursuits. Sultana's journey exemplifies this trend; despite her affluent circumstances being married to a wealthy man, she chose to leverage her fashion design talents to become financially self-reliant. She advocates for financial independence as a cornerstone of women's dignity and empowerment, asserting that it strengthens their decision-making abilities, enhances self-respect, and builds confidence to tackle life's challenges.

Rabab Azmani, the final informant in this study, presents a compelling narrative of self-empowerment and financial self-sufficiency. Dissatisfied with her role in a multinational's public relations department, Azmani identified the workplace as imbued with systemic gender biases, hindering female progression within corporate settings. Seeking an environment where her capabilities could flourish without gender constraints, she turned to social media to establish her professional identity (Interview, March 2020).

Azmani leverages her commerce degree and real estate experience to build a solid personal brand and entrepreneurial presence on social media. She combines her content creation and community engagement talents to attract a large following by sharing lifestyle tips, motherhood advice, travel vlogs, and fashion insights. Her platform offers valuable information on shopping deals, earning

her over 1.6 million Instagram followers. Rabab states, "A successful blogger is a combination of an advice-giver, a journalist, and a fashion model" (Ibid, 2020), underscoring the multifaceted nature of her online influence.

Rabab took a calculated risk, confident in her abilities and interactive skills to engage a broad audience. She advises, "Amateur bloggers should enhance their social skills and diligently produce valuable content before pursuing profit." Her strategic focus on personal branding paid off, establishing a blogging business worth about $6000 monthly. Furthermore, Rabab's social media success and charismatic presence on camera culminated in realisingher childhood dream by hosting "Followers with Rabab", a talk show that delves into the success stories of renowned bloggers in social media.

Indeed, Moroccan women bloggers have revolutionised the business world in multiple ways. They have set up their digital enterprises without employees, formed partnerships without business managers, and attracted many customers without incurring advertising costs. The journey typically starts with a fervent passion that develops over time within a virtual space, modest facilities and technological devices.

3.2. Personal Branding & Social-Empowerment: Female Identity Reconstructed

Social media emerges as a communication and interaction platform, fostering new freedoms and identities. In this virtual space, physical aspects become less relevant, enabling women to develop new identities beyond conventional societal labels of dependency and incompetence. This alternative arena allows for creating innovative female identities grounded in recognised talents and skills, counteracting marginalisation with a strong, self-affirmed presence.

Female identity is defined as the intrinsic personal feeling of a female being (Stoljar, 1995). It refers to a set of characteristics of women derived from socialisation and social expectations that arise from biological traits and cultural classification. In the more specific context of gender studies, a woman's identity derives its ontological existence from the biological component of a female body and its cultural and social data.

Within the scope of the virtual sphere, a virtual identity can be defined as the personality and character created by an individual that acts as a link between their natural person and the virtual person they made of themselves (Hongladarom, 2011). According to Dr. Karema Alaq (Alaq, 2018: p. 55), virtual identity is referred to as the "alternative identity in the game of second life", which means that the virtual identity is the self-image that online users specifically create and develop to become their substitute identity (Alaq, 2018: p. 61). An identity that is built to be uniquely different from others and earns distinct characteristics from the new space wherein it is used to interact, discuss and debate (Alaq, 2018). Alaq elucidates that social media embraces multiple forms of action, self-organisation, and collective expressions of identity based on similar issues and enduring experiences. It also provides interactive platforms in which real and virtual identities

overlap.

The five informants have leveraged the unique opportunities of virtual space to craft identities that embody power, confidence, and independence. Through their interviews, they emphasise their talents, passions, and socio-economic achievements to forge a new, assertive female identity that contrasts traditional societal norms. Sultana and Halima, in particular, use their real names to enhance visibility and credibility, countering the notion that their online presence is solely for fame. Sultana articulates this balance, stating, "I do seek fame, but most importantly, I seek recognition" (Interview, March 2020), underscoring her desire for professional acknowledgement as a fashion designer. Halima, facing familial concerns about digital exposure, remains steadfast in using her real identity, reinforcing her commitment to authenticity and the importance of being recognised for who she truly is (December 2019).

Similarly, Loubna embraces her personal narrative, transforming her past as an adopted child into a source of strength through social media. This platform has not only allowed her to share her unique story but has also bolstered her self-confidence, paving the way for her to pursue her ambition of becoming a successful stand-up comedian without reservation.

Furthermore, each informant authentically presents themselves through profile pictures and live streams, embracing their actual appearances without succumbing to societal beauty standards. This openness invites a broader acceptance, allowing every woman, regardless of her physical features or conditions like cleft lips, vitiligo, anorexia, or obesity, to cultivate a new feminine identity focused on capabilities rather than appearance. Rabab highlights the role of personal branding on social networks in restoring her self-esteem amid her battle with Alopecia. Her audience's overwhelming support and empathy have empowered her to accept her visible bald patches, transforming a potential source of insecurity into a testament to her resilience. Bolstered by this support, Rabab continues to excel as an influencer, presenter, and advertising icon, illustrating the profound impact of genuine self-representation and community support in overcoming personal challenges and sustaining professional success.

All informants are committed to developing an identity that earns their audience's trust and loyalty by showcasing their authentic female identity, transcending conventional gender perceptions. They focus on their strengths, abilities, and uniqueness. Abir's response to the interview guide underscores this approach: "People are weary of the repetitive portrayals of women as victims, subordinate, and submissive. My objective as a blogger is to encourage women and girls to empower themselves through education, dignity, and financial autonomy".

Personal branding through social media allows individuals to articulate their struggles and achievements, empowering women to emerge from marginalisation, enhance their professional presence, and voice their perspectives. This approach enables women to showcase their talents, assert their self-sufficiency, and reclaim their genuine female agency, challenging the historical constraints on

their autonomy. This agency manifests as women confront, resist, and push back against the systemic inequalities that bind them. For instance, Halima transforms cooking, traditionally associated with women's domestic roles, into a profitable venture, redefining a gendered domestic task as a source of income. She contests the cultural devaluation of cooking as an unrewarded domestic activity. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity (Butler, 1990), personal branding on social media emerges as a performative approach enabling women like Halima to redefine their gender roles on their own terms, challenging the prescribed roles society has imposed on them.

In brief, social media have given broad possibilities for women to reinforce their self-confidence and voice out themselves without being bound by the classical determinants of identity in the real social world. Creating a new identity does not mean changing oneself; on the contrary, it means fostering the real, hidden, broken identity to be the strongest and the best.

3.3. Moroccan Women's Personal Branding Performance: Perceptions and Prospects

When it comes to personal branding, creating engaging content is essential for success. Bloggers must offer unique and valuable content to attract and retain active followers.

Given the paramount role of content in personal branding success, it is crucial to consider how the target audience discovers and evaluates it. Recognising the prevalent belief that female blog content is often perceived as trivial, we conducted a perception survey to gather people's opinions on content related to beauty, cuisine, and lifestyle. The survey yielded a mix of expected, unexpected, and even surprising findings. The sample for the survey consisted of 200 respondents, predominantly women (68.3%), aged between 18 - 30 (56.1%), and possessing a high level of education (95.1%). Notably, all participants firmly understood personal branding through social media platforms.

Based on this graph (Figure 1), a significant percentage of respondents find the content presented by women on social media platforms entertaining (44%) and useful (24%). Additionally, 22% described it as important, while only 10% considered it trivial. These results suggest that the content created by women is valuable, purposeful, and has a positive impact on the audience. Respondents provided favourable feedback regarding the content produced by women, crediting its success to various factors. Many appreciated the coverage of general trends, product reviews, and tips and inspirations pieces. Others valued sharing ideas for fashionable outfits and healthy recipes using locally sourced and affordable ingredients. However, a few respondents, albeit a minority, believed that women's content still supports gender stereotypes by primarily emphasising cooking, fashion, makeup, and physical appearance. Overall, the results validate the success of female bloggers in establishing themselves and cultivating social capital.
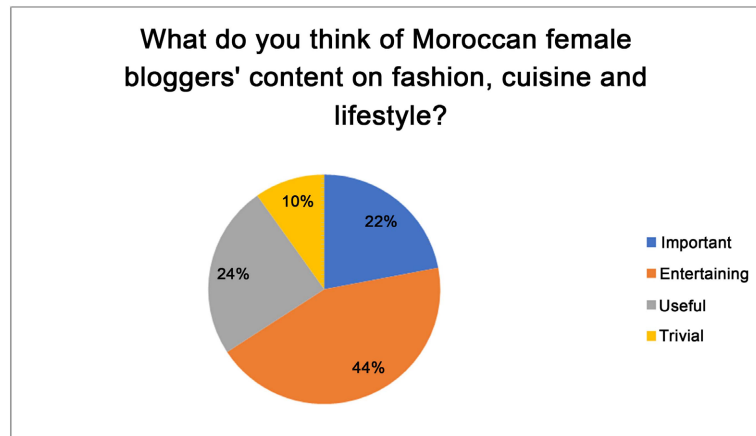
Figure 1. Exploring moroccan female bloggers' content.

In the realm of personal branding on social media, the educational level of bloggers plays a crucial role in capturing the attention and engagement of audiences.

Figure 2 shows that most respondents believe that women who engage in personal branding are literate, with a percentage of 96%. They justify their answers mainly by saying, "Anybody who understands the concept of self-branding has to be literate to promote their idea or product" (respondent 5). Other respondents claim that bloggers possess the necessary knowledge to handle technology. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that educated female bloggers are the most active and engaged users on social media platforms. The research reveals that most of the informants have achieved a high level of education. This indicates that a successful self-branding strategy requires some proficiency in information technology and cannot be developed from scratch.

Our analysis also explores who is more inclined to follow female bloggers on social media platforms. We asked about gender preferences among female bloggers' audiences to gain insights into demographic inclinations and factors influencing engagement and connection on social media.

Upon analysing the graph (**Figure 3**), it becomes apparent that most female bloggers' social media followers are women, making up approximately 65% of the audience. However, it is essential to note that a significant proportion of men, roughly 35%, also follow female content creators on different social media platforms. This wide-ranging audience demonstrates that catering, fashion, and cosmetics content appeals to both genders, indicating a shift in traditional gender roles.

Traditionally, cooking and makeup are activities mainly associated with women. However, in today's world, people of all genders embrace and showcase their expertise in these interests. It is becoming increasingly common to see men excelling in industries traditionally associated with women, such as cooking and beauty. They are taking on roles as experts in catering and beauty alongside their female counterparts. This trend in attitudes and involvement with these topics demonstrates a progressive and accepting view of gender roles within our society. It is worth noting that these interests are no longer exclusive to any gender.
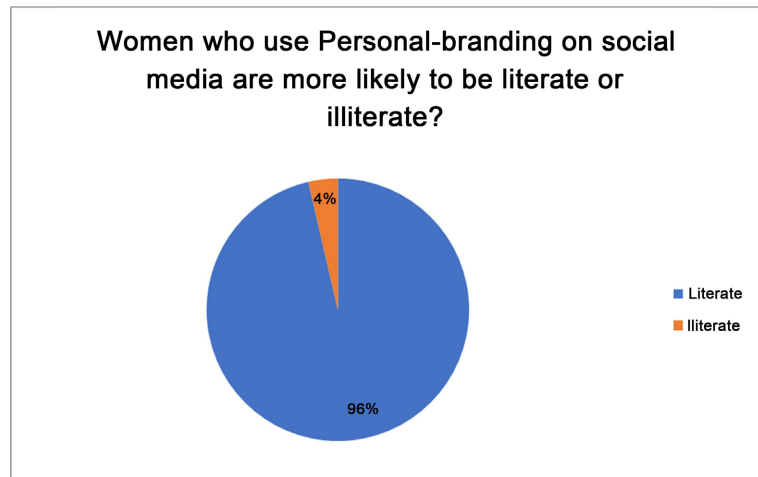
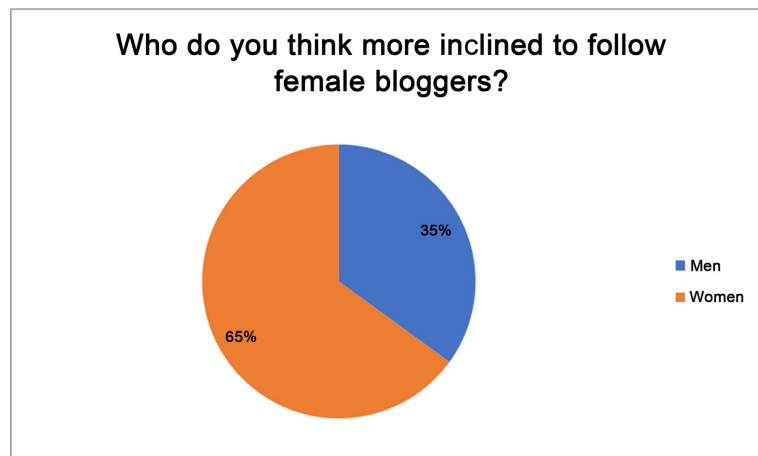**Figure 2.** A comparative analysis of literacy levels among women users.

Figure 3. Gender preferences in following female bloggers.

Social media has become a platform that brings people from different backgrounds together, enabling them to share their passions and talents without being limited by traditional gender norms. The growing interest in diverse content among men and women indicates the potential for a more accepting and equal society. Halima Filali's cooking content is popular among males and females, and she often receives requests for help or suggestions from men. Siham Sultana's natural beauty products are also used by male makeup artists, with Jawad Kanana being a committed client. Abir Berrani's lashes have also been sold to many male makeup artists. Loubna Jaouhari's humorous content and Rabab Azmani's inspiring content are appreciated and followed by people of all genders.

Women are reaping the benefits of personal branding by enhancing their communication skills, expanding their network, and promoting financial awareness and empowerment. Successful personal branding enables women to invest in profitable projects and attain financial stability and independence. According to the survey, 94% of respondents believe personal branding empowers women

(Figure 4).

Responders have explained their responses by saying that self-branding allows women to manage their image and business, leading to greater independence. Another respondent added that self-brandingenables women to express their needs, demands, and interests, giving them a more robust social and cultural voice.

Based on the chart provided (Figure 5), most participants (84.6%) consider financial independence the most significant result of personal branding for women. Additionally, 71.8% of respondents believe that self-confidence is the second most important outcome, while 66.7% ranked self-esteem as third. Developing communication skills was rated at 51.3%.

Drawing from graphical data and informant experiences, personal branding emerges as a significant empowerment tool for women, extending its benefits beyond individual growth to encompass social and economic advancement. It enables female bloggers to build fulfilling careers by highlighting their abilities and enhancing their confidence and communication. Moreover, personal branding offers a vital platform for women to voice their perspectives across diverse fields, allowing those from varied backgrounds to make their mark in the public arena. Countering conventional gender stereotypes aids women in capitalising on their skills for economic gains, paving the way for financial independence through social media ventures and entrepreneurship. Study participants are optimistic about personal branding's role on social networks in effecting positive change for women, underlining the need for consistent, genuine, and compelling content.

4. Discussion

Personal Branding in Networking Sites: Empowerment or Commodification?

Women's empowerment was and still is a controversial issue vehemently debated worldwide. Are women empowered and liberated from the predominant restrictions that confined and subordinated them for ages, or are they still under the authority and control of traditional power structures? There is no standardised answer to this question as women's emancipation is opened to different views and approached from various perspectives. Women's freedom is measured by multiple matters, including equality in rights and duties, freedom of speech, and, most importantly, freedom of control over their bodies and sexuality.

Huge strides have been made towards women's emancipation and gender equality in recent decades. Thanks to the feminists and women's liberation movements, women's issues were raised, and many reforms were taken to ensure women's human rights and freedom. No one can deny that women today enjoy a variety of equal educational, legal, and economic rights; however, socio-cultural equality still proves to be a far-fetched reality. Women's emancipation is still bothered by social, cultural and religious factors preventing females from complete gender equality and straight liberation.
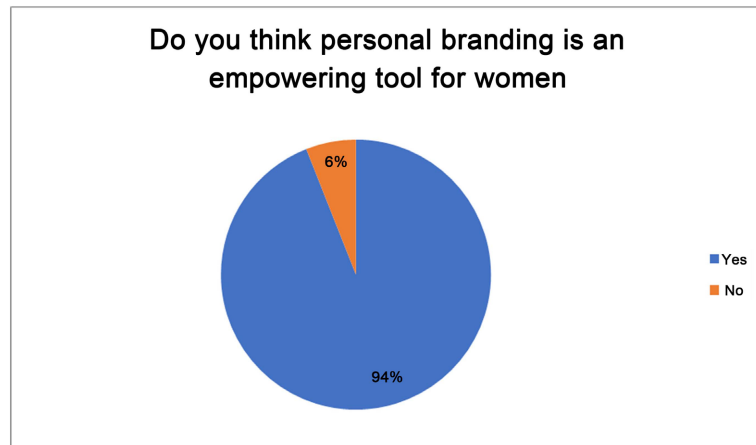
Figure 4. Perception of personal branding as an empowering tool.
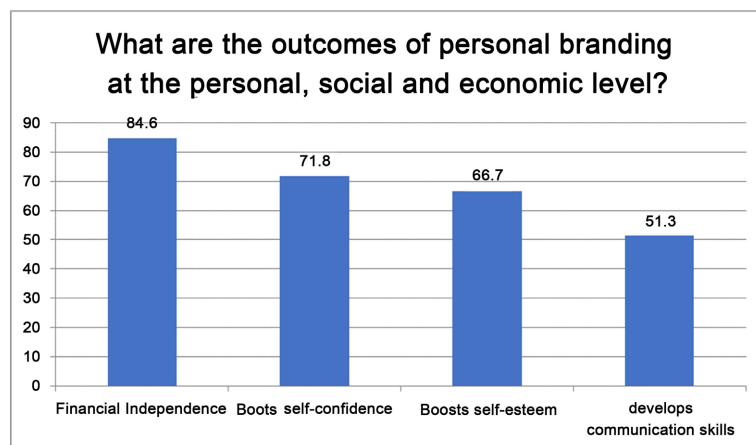

Figure 5. Personal branding outcomes: personal, social, economic.

As most successful bloggers resort to commercials and advertisements for more profit, they are sometimes obliged to abide by the traditional beauty standards directed by the beauty industry they work for. Many bloggers, particularly those specialising in modelling and fashion, become unconscious representatives of standardised beauty gurus. They affect their followers' perception of beauty and highly reinforce the traditional aesthetic of beauty ideals. As a result, their personal branding becomes gradually associated with their appearance rather than their personality or character. It is advertising that reinforces the classical image of female beauty, not self-branding, which was distorted to operate within the advertisement model.

As such, personal branding on social media started to be perceived as a commodification of the self and objectification of women rather than a means of empowerment. Naomi Wolf, a liberal American author and feminist, states in her best-selling book, The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women, that "beauty myth" is "the last one remaining of the old feminine ideology that still has the power to control women psychologically and covertly, undoing all the good things that feminism has done for women materially and

overtly" (Wolf, 1991: p. 10).

Naomi argues that beauty standards are used to discriminate against and physically and psychologically harm women. According to her, women are currently experiencing a violent backlash against feminism by highlighting the increasing rise of cosmetic surgery, food disorders and objectification of women's bodies in media. Women nowadays are under incredible pressure promoted by media and social media beauty and fashion bloggers to have the ideal body, skin and complexions that fit the universal beauty standards. However, personal branding still engenders significant personal, social and economic outcomes regardless of its usage by some beauty bloggers and celebrities who are more inclined to objectify themselves for money.

Personal branding transcends patriarchal beauty standards, focusing instead on character, personality, and the ability to influence others authentically. The female bloggers in this study do not prioritise beauty standards for professional promotion. Halima Filali emphasises that the success of her catering business stems from her skills and dedication, with social media recognition for her culinary talents rather than her looks. She highlights the importance of her recipes over her physical appearance (December 2019). Similarly, Loubna Jouhari asserts that success in comedy relies not on appearance but on artistic talent and humour. Her personal brand is crafted to stand out, attract audiences, and secure bookings independent of beauty (February 2020).

Personal branding is more established on how individuals market themselves and promote their careers. It is about identifying and communicating what makes someone unique, relevant and different. Those with distinctive personal brands based on skills, qualifications, and experiences will stand out and have the most chance to succeed compared to those with extravagant beauty. Even bloggers who specialised in fashion design, modelling and beauty cosmetics were against being successful only because they were beautiful. Siham Sultana contends, "There is no harm if women care for themselves and be interested in fashion. This does not decrease their dignity or objectify them.

On the contrary, an elegant, good-looking woman would be more confident about herself and her decisions". Within the same realm, Abir considers beauty a feminine weapon for women to assert themselves and boost their self-confidence. She claims that "every woman is relatively beautiful. I wear makeup and encourage my followers to do so to boost their confidence and self-esteem. I feel strong and pleased when I see myself beautiful. I use my branded self to promote my eyelashes and fragrance products professionally and respectfully. I no way objectify myself" (January 2020).

Fashion and cosmetics have been culturally regarded as degrading elements typically associated with women. When women wear makeup or show more enthusiasm towards fashion, they are assumed to do their gender and perform their femininity, which is devalued in various ways. However, women's femininity is not something that women should feel ashamed of and try to dismiss to prove their intellectual potential. A woman can be elegant, beautiful, profession-

al and intelligent at the same time.

In light of the informants' statements, self-branding has proved to be a motivating and empowering tool for women's social-economic sustainability. Nevertheless, advertising through branded selves traps women in the shell of objectification as they are assumed to use their bodies to promote their business. Unfortunately, women have continuously been oppressed, sexualised, and used merely for their looks and bodies for advertisement for decades. Consequently, it becomes stereotyped that women's self-branding is simply a process of commodification.

Determining whether personal branding empowers or commodifies women is difficult due to the benefits that the latter have gained from it. Nevertheless, drawing on the public attitudes we received through our survey, 58% of the 100 respondents (most female respondents) perceive personal branding as an empowering tool. In comparison, only 7 per cent say it reinforces women's commodification. Thirty-five per cent of the respondents claim it is a double bind phenomenon (Figure 6).

There are several reasons respondents suggest justifying their choices. Those claiming that personal branding is an empowering tool argue that it helps women pursue their passion projects in digital environments and opens the door for profound growth of independent employment for women. One of the respondents says: "I believe it is empowering because women are not limited to what society has to offer. Women are underpaid compared to their male counterparts when working for corporations. There is no limit to how much money you can make when you start your own business."

The second category of respondents presupposes that personal branding is twofold and argues that it empowers women who have sought to establish their projects relying on their skills and competencies. On the other hand, it is commodifying for those who use their personal brand as a by-product identity. The last category of respondents regarding personal branding as a commodifying tool has based their argument on the fact that women's body is involved in the process. These attitudes are mainly derived from the everlasting misconceptions about women regarding them as sexual objects. It can also be based on a misunderstanding of personal branding, as some people would link it with body branding while it is more associated with branding one's skills and talents, not the body.

Still, the survey results show that almost all the respondents appreciate and highlight the promising prospects personal branding provides women at the individual, social and economic levels. The following graph elucidates the respondents' opinions visualised on an Agree-Disagree Scale (Figure 7).

All in all, findings from this study predominantly view personal branding on social media as an empowering tool for women, facilitating self-expression and career progression. However, the results also underscore the necessity of critically addressing the potential commodification risks, urging a balanced approach to navigate between empowerment and the risk of objectification within existing
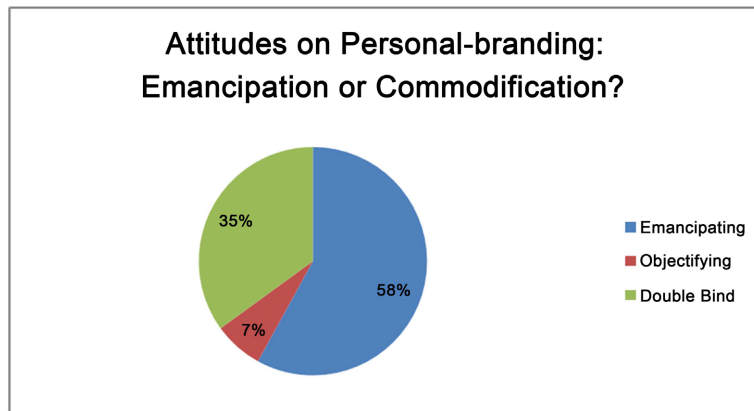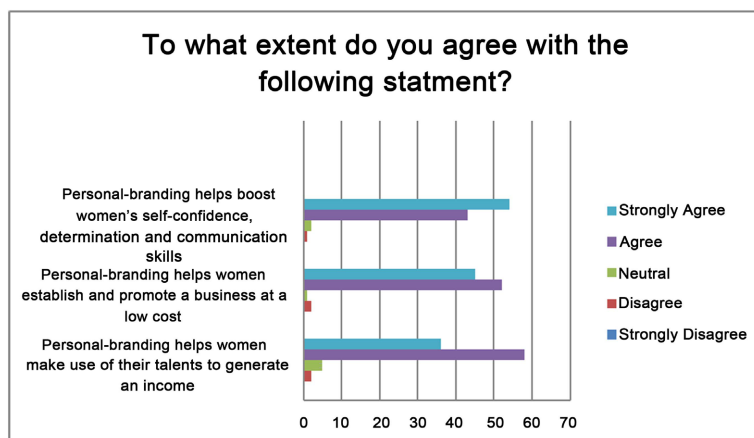
Figure 6. Attitudes on personal branding.

Figure 7. Perceptions of personal branding.

market and societal frameworks.

5. Conclusion

This article aimed to explore the various dimensions of personal branding, a concept originating in marketing, and its role in women's empowerment. We contended that personal branding through social media platforms offers an alternative strategy to women's personal, social and economic empowerment. Drawing on the experiences of five accomplished Moroccan female bloggers, our objective was to elucidate the promising outcomes and favourable prospects of personal branding on women's personal development and socio-economic progress.

The study employed a mixed methods approach, using inductive narrative analysis to examine five case studies and conduct a quantitative investigation. The selected individuals, interviewed through interview guides sent to their social media accounts, each contributed an inspirational and influential story that bolstered our overarching argument and hypothesis. Simultaneously, the quantitative investigation sought to unravel perceptions and prospects related to personal branding, employing a comprehensive survey questionnaire.

The combined data from narrative analysis and quantitative investigation em-

phasised the transformative impact of personal branding, facilitated by social media, on women's lives. This multifaceted empowerment journey involves the establishment of online businesses, the cultivation of constructive human capital, and the generation of significant financial value. More importantly, it helps women discover their latent potential and competencies, enabling them to forge a resilient identity beyond the confines of cultural socialisation.

Throughout history, women have grappled with unequal restrictions on their agency, resulting in pervasive gender biases and underrepresentation across diverse domains. Constrained by patriarchal ideologies in male-dominated societies, women often find themselves compelled to seek alternative endeavours to assert their identity and surmount barriers. Remarkably, our female informants have not only confronted these challenges but have further succeeded in embracing personal branding as a means of self-expression and empowerment.

In conclusion, this study illuminates the diverse impact of personal branding on women's empowerment within the digital landscape. Operating through interaction, posting, and sharing mechanisms, P.B. enhances visibility, empowering women to overcome historical constraints and bolstering self-confidence, prominence, and financial independence. This insight has far-reaching implications for academics, practitioners, and policymakers interested in fostering women's economic empowerment and advancing gender equality. Implementing strategies like promoting digital literacy, supporting entrepreneurship, integrating personal branding into education, and formulating gender-inclusive policies are vital for creating an empowering digital landscape for women.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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