



The Mirror Effect: Offline Professional Capital and the Legitimacy of Online Personal Branding

El efecto espejo: Capital profesional offline y legitimidad de la marca personal online

Roxana Tutaya, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Lima, Peru; CENTRUM Católica Graduate Business School, Lima, (Perú) (rtutaya@pucp.edu.pe) (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3615-3175>)

ABSTRACT

This study proposes the “mirror effect,” a phenomenon whereby online personal branding does not confer professional legitimacy autonomously but instead reflects and amplifies professional capital accumulated in offline contexts. While existing literature on personal branding has emphasized digital visibility and online self-presentation practices, there remains limited understanding of the conditions under which such visibility is interpreted as credible and legitimate. The objective of this study is to explore how offline professional capital is reflected in online personal branding and how it conditions its interpretation in terms of professional legitimacy. From a descriptive phenomenological approach, this study examines how Latin American professionals and executives experience the relationship between offline trajectories and digital recognition, as well as the criteria through which audiences interpret online visibility. The study is based on 26 in-depth interviews with professionals and executives from Peru and Colombia, analyzed following Moustakas (1994). The findings show that digital visibility is perceived as more credible when aligned with a previously recognized professional trajectory, whereas intensified online presence without sufficient offline grounding generates skepticism and reputational risk. This study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing online personal branding as a relational phenomenon and proposing the “mirror effect” as an explanatory lens. It offers implications for professional development and the strategic management of visibility.

RESUMEN

Este estudio propone el «efecto espejo», un fenómeno mediante el cual la marca personal en línea no confiere legitimidad profesional de manera autónoma, sino que refleja y amplifica el capital profesional acumulado en contextos offline. Aunque la literatura sobre marca personal ha privilegiado la visibilidad digital y las prácticas de autopresentación en entornos online, existe una comprensión limitada de las condiciones bajo las cuales dicha visibilidad se percibe como creíble y legítima. El objetivo de este estudio es explorar cómo el capital profesional offline se refleja en la marca personal online y condiciona su interpretación en términos de legitimidad profesional. Desde un enfoque fenomenológico descriptivo, se analiza cómo profesionales y ejecutivos latinoamericanos experimentan la relación entre la trayectoria offline y el reconocimiento digital, así como los criterios por los que las audiencias interpretan la visibilidad online. El estudio se basa en 26 entrevistas en profundidad a profesionales y ejecutivos de Perú y Colombia, analizadas según Moustakas (1994). Los resultados muestran que la visibilidad digital adquiere mayor credibilidad cuando se percibe como coherente con una trayectoria profesional previa, mientras que una presencia online intensificada, sin respaldo suficiente, genera escepticismo y riesgo reputacional. Este trabajo contribuye a la literatura al conceptualizar la marca personal online como un fenómeno relacional y propone el «efecto espejo» como lente explicativa. Ofrece implicaciones para la formación profesional y la gestión estratégica de la visibilidad.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Personal Branding, Digital Visibility, Professional Capital, Professional Legitimacy, Signaling, Phenomenology. Marca personal, visibilidad digital, capital profesional, legitimidad profesional, señalización, fenomenología.

1. Introduction

In contemporary discourse on personal branding, digital visibility is often presented as a direct route to professional recognition. Publishing achievements, sharing content, and maintaining an active presence on professional networks are associated with legitimacy, influence, and employability (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Trang et al., 2023). Digital platforms are thus framed as spaces where individuals manage professional identity and project themselves to broad audiences, functioning as “personal media” capable of generating visibility (Khamis et al., 2017; Petruca, 2016). Yet this narrative assumes that digital exposure alone generates professional value. In practice, this premise is problematic: some online personal brands achieve sustained recognition, while others—despite similar visibility—remain marginal or generate skepticism. This suggests that online personal branding does not operate as an autonomous mechanism of legitimation but is conditioned by factors that precede the digital environment.

This limitation becomes particularly critical in contemporary professional environments, where digital visibility is increasingly treated as a proxy for professional value, with insufficient consideration of the structural conditions that sustain legitimacy. Despite the expansion of research on personal branding, there remains a limited empirical understanding of how offline professional capital shapes the interpretation of digital visibility. Addressing this gap is essential to avoid overestimating visibility as a source of professional value and to develop more grounded interpretations of digital legitimacy. This issue is especially relevant in professional, educational, and media-related environments, where digital visibility increasingly shapes perceptions of expertise, authority, and employability.

To address this gap, this study introduces the Mirror Effect, conceptualized as a reflexive process whereby online personal branding does not confer professional legitimacy autonomously but rather reflects and amplifies professional capital previously built offline. From this perspective, digital visibility functions as a projection of professional trajectories accumulated outside the digital environment. Accordingly, digital interactions are not treated as neutral indicators of visibility, but as forms of social recognition shaped by audiences’ perceptions of professional credibility (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

This study positions professional capital as the structural basis of recognition projected onto the online personal brand. Following Hargreaves and Fullan (2015), professional capital integrates human, social, and decisional capital accumulated through offline professional practice. The analysis is framed through two complementary lenses: signaling theory (Spence, 1973), which explains why some forms of digital visibility operate as credible signals while others appear weak or unreliable (Connelly et al., 2011), and Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective, which conceptualizes online personal branding as a form of professional performance directed at specific audiences.

This study does not assess the effectiveness of specific digital visibility strategies or compare communication tactics across platforms. Rather, it examines the conditions under which digital visibility is interpreted as credible and legitimate in relation to previously accumulated professional capital.

From a phenomenological perspective, the objective of this study is to explore how professionals experience and interpret the relationship between offline professional trajectories and recognition in digital environments. Based on 26 in-depth interviews with professionals in Peru and Colombia, the study addresses the following research questions:

- (RQ1) How do professionals experience and make sense of the relationship between professional trajectories built outside the digital environment and recognition obtained in digital environments?
- (RQ2) How is the interpretation that audiences make of digital visibility when it is backed—or not—by a recognized professional trajectory experienced and understood from the perspective of professionals?
- (RQ3) What tensions are experienced and recognized by professionals when digital visibility and performance are perceived as misaligned with a weakly legitimized professional trajectory?

This study contributes to the literature by shifting the analytical focus from digital visibility as a strategic resource to professional trajectory as a structural condition of legitimacy, and by advancing the Mirror Effect as a framework for explaining how offline professional capital shapes the interpretation of digital visibility. It also provides empirical insights from Latin American contexts and implications for understanding professional legitimacy in digitally mediated environments.

The remainder of the article presents the theoretical framework, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusions.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Professional Capital and Offline Professional Legitimacy

This study conceptualizes professional capital as a key analytical lens for understanding the structural basis of professional legitimacy projected in contexts of professional visibility. Developed by Hargreaves and Fullan (2015), professional capital refers to the value professionals accumulate through the integration of three interrelated dimensions: human capital, social capital, and decisional capital. Unlike approaches focused on visibility, individual performance, or self-promotion, professional capital emphasizes the sustained quality of professional practice and recognition built within a field (Guo et al., 2025).

Human capital comprises knowledge, skills, experience, and demonstrable performance; social capital refers to relationships of trust, reputation, and recognition granted by peers and professional communities; while decisional capital refers to professional judgment, understood as the ability to make informed, ethical, and contextually appropriate decisions in complex situations. Together, these dimensions shape a form of professional legitimacy that cannot be immediately produced or simulated through mere exposure, but is built progressively through practice, consistency, and social validation (Tong & Razniak, 2017).

Although initially formulated in educational contexts, recent research has extended the applicability of professional capital to broader professional environments, including technology-mediated communities (Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011). From this perspective, professional legitimacy is constructed through practices, outcomes, and relationships developed prior to or independently of digital spaces. Professional capital is therefore conceptualized here as a structural condition of legitimacy and a basis for analyzing how trajectory, recognition, and visibility interact in contemporary environments.

2.2. Online Personal Branding as Social Performance

To explain how professional capital is projected and represented in digital environments, this study draws on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective. From this approach, social interaction is conceived as performance through which individuals shape self-presentation before audiences, using discourses, symbols, and behaviors to sustain a credible self-definition. The legitimacy of such performance depends not only on its execution but also on its consistency with previously recognized identities and trajectories.

In online personal branding, digital platforms function as public stages on which professionals represent identity through publications, narratives, achievements, discursive positions, and communication styles (Jacobson, 2020; Venciute et al., 2024). These practices can be understood as performative acts communicating competence, authority, and professional value to heterogeneous audiences. Performance is effective when the role represented is consistent with the identity socially attributed to the actor.

Recent literature reinforces this dramaturgical reading. Social media allows individuals to operate as personal media outlets, amplifying the performative dimension of professional identity by enabling them to curate content and narrate their trajectory over time (Jacobson, 2020; Venciute et al., 2024). However, digital performance is not evaluated solely on aesthetic or narrative form, but also on its consistency with perceived professional performance outside the digital environment (Hogan, 2010).

From this perspective, online personal branding is not an autonomous source of value, but a stage on which previously accumulated professional capital is exposed to processes of validation, amplification, or questioning. When alignment exists between offline trajectory and digital representation, performance reinforces credibility. When dissonance is perceived, the staging may be interpreted as artificial or opportunistic.

2.3. Digital Visibility and Signal Credibility

Signaling theory, introduced by Spence (1973), provides a key framework for explaining how digital visibility is evaluated under conditions of uncertainty, particularly when professional qualities are not directly observable. Signals help reduce uncertainty when they are interpreted as consistent with real attributes and observable trajectories, making them difficult to imitate and therefore credible.

In professional contexts, signaling theory has been widely used to explain how competence, credibility, and legitimacy are evaluated when direct performance information is limited. Empirical studies show that

legitimacy does not derive from the mere issuance of visible signals, but from the perceived consistency between those signals and previously constructed trajectories, experiences, and forms of recognition (Hogan, 2010).

In digital environments characterized by high information density, receivers interpret signals in a situated and relational way, relying on prior knowledge, professional references, expectations, and observable trajectories of the sender (Pahos et al., 2025). Signaling has thus been conceptualized as a bidirectional process involving both signal emission and audience decoding (Jost et al., 2026). In this sense, digital signals function as relational heuristics whose credibility depends on their consistency with accumulated and socially recognized professional attributes outside the digital environment.

In online personal branding, posts about achievements, expert positions, or success stories can be understood as attempts to signal competence and professional value. However, when such visibility is not backed by recognizable professional capital, it tends to be perceived as weak, redundant, or opportunistic, generating skepticism and even reputational damage (Wang et al., 2025). By shifting the focus from signal production to situated interpretation, signaling theory helps explain why certain expressions of visibility reinforce legitimacy while others generate questioning.

2.4. Conceptual Integration: The Mirror Effect as a Relational Framework

Taken together, the three theoretical perspectives developed here conceptualize the Mirror Effect as a relational and non-autonomous phenomenon of online personal branding. Professional capital provides the structural foundation of legitimacy, explaining how credibility is gradually constructed through accumulated experience, social recognition, and professional judgment in offline contexts.

The dramaturgical perspective explains how such capital is performed, represented, and communicated in digital environments through identity-oriented performances directed at specific audiences. From this perspective, online personal branding does not create professional value *ex novo*, but stages it in ways that can reinforce or undermine credibility depending on its perceived coherence with prior trajectories.

Finally, signaling theory explains how these performances are interpreted by audiences. Digital expressions of visibility function as signals evaluated not in isolation, but in relation to previously constructed professional capital, shaping perceptions of credibility, legitimacy, or skepticism.

In this sense, the Mirror Effect captures the interplay among offline professional capital, online performance, and audience interpretation, offering an integrated framework for analyzing how professional legitimacy is constructed, projected, and evaluated in digital environments.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand professionals' and executives' experiences of the relationship between digital visibility and professional trajectories developed outside the digital environment. Phenomenology is appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of how professionals attribute meaning to the relationship between offline professional trajectories and digital recognition, a process that cannot be adequately captured through performance-based or quantitative measures (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).

In line with descriptive phenomenology, the study focuses on identifying the shared essences of the Mirror Effect as experienced by participants, seeking to suspend prior interpretations and theoretical assumptions as much as possible. This methodological choice aligns with the study's aim to examine the conditions under which digital visibility is interpreted as credible and legitimate, focusing on meaning-making rather than the effectiveness of digital strategies.

3.2. Study Design

The study follows a descriptive phenomenological design based on in-depth interviews, consistent with previous interpretive research on personal branding, self-presentation, and professional visibility in digital contexts (Scheidt et al., 2020). This design facilitates access to rich narratives about complex professional experiences involving identity and symbolic processes. The study is part of a broader line of research on personal branding and professional visibility, which allowed the refinement of emerging findings through additional interviews.

3.3. Participants and Context

The empirical corpus consists of 26 semi-structured in-depth interviews with professionals and executives from Peru (N=17) and Colombia (N=9). Participants came from sectors including postgraduate education, nutrition, health and wellness, mining, logistics, technology, retail, consulting, and business management, and held executive, managerial, and leadership positions. A detailed overview is provided in Table 1 (available at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.31558279>).

The sample included 13 men and 13 women. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on professional experience, established career trajectory, and active—or deliberately moderate—participation in professional digital environments. This sampling strategy is common in phenomenological studies because participants are selected for their ability to contribute relevant experiences regarding the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2014). The diversity of sectors and contexts enabled the study to capture variation in experiences of the Mirror Effect.

3.4. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, allowing a flexible set of questions and deeper exploration of emerging topics (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews addressed professional trajectories, experiences in digital environments, and perceptions of visibility, recognition, credibility, and online self-promotion.

All interviews were recorded with informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. This procedure ensured fidelity to participants' narratives and facilitated rigorous analysis of experiential content (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

3.5. Data Analysis Strategy

Data analysis followed the guidelines of descriptive phenomenology proposed by Moustakas (1994), including repeated reading, identification of meaningful units, and grouping of common themes. Transcripts were analyzed using ATLAS.ti, which facilitated the systematic organization of codes, analytical memos, and conceptual relationships.

The analytical process aimed to identify experiential patterns in the relationship between offline professional trajectories and online recognition, as well as the conditions under which digital visibility is perceived as credible or questioned. Interpretation was carried out iteratively, progressively contrasting emerging findings with relevant literature once the significant structures of the phenomenon had been identified, in line with reflective qualitative approaches (Tracy, 2010). By adopting a phenomenological design, this study contributes methodologically by offering a nuanced understanding of how professional legitimacy is constructed and interpreted across offline and online domains.

3.6. Methodological Rigor and Ethical Considerations

To ensure rigor, criteria of credibility, internal consistency, and analytical transparency were applied (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Tracy, 2010). From an ethical standpoint, the study respected informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. Identifiable data were omitted or modified to protect participants' identities, and participation was always voluntary.

4. Results

The phenomenological analysis of the 26 interviews identified five interrelated experiential dimensions that explain how professionals interpret the relationship between offline trajectories and digital recognition. These dimensions provide empirical support for the Mirror Effect as a relational process through which professional legitimacy is projected, validated, or questioned in digital environments.

From the interviewees' perspective, online personal branding is not experienced as an autonomous source of legitimacy, but as a reflective process through which previously accumulated professional capital is projected, validated, or questioned in digital environments.

4.1. The Precedence of Offline Professional Capital

Participants agreed that credibility in digital environments is based on prior professional trajectories

built through sustained performance and recognition in offline contexts. Online visibility gains meaning when it reflects achievements and skills already validated in professional practice.

Several interviewees emphasized that digital exposure cannot substitute for a lack of professional solidity, stressing that online recognition is a consequence—not a cause—of value built outside the digital environment:

“If you’re not good at what you do, it shows. You can post a lot, but if you don’t have serious work behind you, people will notice” (Interview 6, Peru).

This idea was reinforced by other participants, who pointed out that digital visibility only amplifies what already exists in professional practice:

“Networks don’t make you professional. At best, they make you visible, but if there are no previous results, that visibility is not sustainable” (Interview 3, Colombia).

“First comes the work, then comes everything else. If there is no track record, the personal brand falls apart on its own” (Interview 21, Peru).

In this sense, accumulated experience and sustained professional performance guide the construction and interpretation of online recognition. A digital personal brand does not generate value on its own; instead, it amplifies or reveals the credibility established within one’s professional domain.

This dimension highlights the primacy of offline professional capital as a foundational condition of credibility, reinforcing the idea that digital visibility does not generate professional value independently, but reflects it.

4.2. Online Recognition as Symbolic Validation by Audiences with Prior Knowledge of Professional Performance

Participants described digital interactions, comments, reactions, or recommendations, not as impersonal metrics, but as symbolic validations issued by audiences with prior knowledge of the individual’s professional performance, either directly or indirectly. This knowledge may derive from shared experiences, professional references, field reputation, or trajectories observed over time.

The value of online recognition was associated less with the number of interactions and more with who validates and from what position they do so:

“It’s not the same when someone who doesn’t know you gives you a like as when a former student or colleague writes to you. They know how you work, they know your track record” (Interview 12, Colombia).

Other participants reinforced this distinction, emphasizing that recognition takes on meaning when it comes from professionally informed audiences:

“A colleague’s feedback is influential. It’s not just visibility, it’s real recognition” (Interview 8, Peru).

“Empty likes mean nothing. What matters is when someone who knows your path validates what you share” (Interview 17, Colombia).

In this way, digital recognition acquires symbolic value when audiences can contextualize the professional performance projected online, reinforcing the perception of the individual’s legitimacy.

This finding suggests that online recognition serves as a form of socially situated validation, in which the credibility of digital interactions depends on the audience’s prior knowledge of the individual’s professional trajectory.

4.3. Offline–online Consistency as a Criterion of Credibility

Another key emerging dimension was the perceived consistency between offline professional identity and digital representation. Participants noted that audiences constantly evaluate the consistency between what a person communicates on social media and what they have built throughout their professional career.

When such consistency is maintained, digital visibility reinforces credibility and professional authority.

However, when dissonance is perceived, for example, intense self-promotion not backed by recognizable achievements, the online personal brand can generate mistrust:

“When someone sells themselves heavily on social media, but in practice has no results, it’s quickly noticed. There is an inconsistency that generates mistrust” (Interview 9, Peru).

This perception was shared by other participants:

“People are not stupid. If what you show online does not match who you are professionally, it shows” (Interview 14, Colombia).

From participants’ experience, the digital environment is perceived as a space that amplifies or strains the professional identity previously constructed outside it, without being perceived as a substitute for that trajectory.

This dimension establishes offline–online consistency as a key evaluative criterion through which audiences assess the credibility and legitimacy of digital self-presentation.

4.4. Self-promotion without Substance and Reputational Risk

The interviewees expressed a critical stance toward self-promotion practices perceived as disproportionate, repetitive, or lacking professional substance. Repeated exposure to achievements deemed trivial or undifferentiating was associated with a loss of professional seriousness and counterproductive effects on reputation.

This phenomenon was described as a latent risk in online personal brand management:

“When someone promotes themselves too much, without anything really solid behind it, they end up tiring people and losing credibility” (Interview 15, Colombia).

Other participants added that this type of visibility can even generate rejection:

“There comes a point where so much self-promotion feels forced. Instead of adding value, it detracts from it” (Interview 5, Peru).

Thus, digital visibility can become a weak signal when it lacks recognizable professional capital, eroding the individual’s legitimacy rather than strengthening it.

This finding reveals that excessive or unsubstantiated self-promotion can function as a weak signal, potentially undermining professional legitimacy and generating reputational risk.

4.5. Digital Silence as a Secondary Manifestation of Professional Capital

Finally, digital silence emerged as a practice associated with established professional trajectories.

In the context of this study, silence was not interpreted as an absence of personal branding, but rather as a secondary manifestation of offline professional capital, especially in contexts where reputation and authority have already been widely validated.

Participants noted that, at certain stages of one’s career, not exposing oneself can communicate solidity, professional maturity, and reputational control:

“There comes a point where you no longer need to be posting everything. Your work speaks for you” (Interview 18, Peru).

“When your name already carries weight, you don’t need to prove anything on social media” (Interview 24, Colombia).

This finding shows that, for some participants, deliberately reducing online visibility is experienced and interpreted as consistent with career paths they perceive as already established.

This dimension suggests that digital silence may operate as an implicit signal of established professional capital, particularly in contexts where legitimacy has already been consolidated offline.

5. Discussion

The objective of this study was to understand how professionals experience the relationship between professional capital built offline and recognition obtained in digital environments. Based on a phenomenological analysis of 26 interviews conducted in Peru and Colombia, the findings suggest that online personal branding reflects, amplifies, or strains previously built professional capital, rather than generating it autonomously. This section discusses the results in light of existing literature and adopted theoretical frameworks, articulating the study's empirical contribution to contemporary debates on legitimacy, visibility, and professional self-promotion.

To interpret these findings, the study relies on an integrated conceptual architecture that articulates professional capital as a structural source of legitimacy, the dramaturgical perspective as a framework for understanding identity representation and professional performance in digital environments, and signaling theory as an explanatory mechanism for the credibility of professional visibility in contexts of imperfect information. From this perspective, the Mirror Effect describes a reflexive process in which online personal branding serves as a space for projecting and evaluating professional capital, rather than as a mechanism that independently generates it.

5.1. The Mirror Effect and the Centrality of Offline Professional Capital

The results confirm that professional capital built offline constitutes the structural basis of the legitimacy projected onto the online personal brand. This finding aligns with research on professional capital, which conceptualizes professional credibility as emerging from the integration of knowledge, social recognition, and professional judgment rather than from isolated acts of visibility (Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011).

Recent research has extended this approach beyond the educational sphere, showing that professional capital serves as a cumulative resource that structures identity, recognition, and influence within specialized digital communities (Guo et al., 2025). In these contexts, legitimacy derives not from mere online participation but from prior recognition of skills, experience, and professional judgment.

From this perspective, the Mirror Effect shows that digital visibility does not generate professional value but projects previously accumulated capital. While the literature on digital personal branding has noted that visibility is effective only when backed by recognized professional trajectories (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Scheidt et al., 2020), this study goes further by conceptualizing this relationship as a structured reflective process rather than a merely contingent one.

This finding advances existing literature by establishing offline professional capital not only as a contextual factor but as a structural condition that shapes how digital visibility is interpreted and legitimized.

Although Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital (1986) explains why prestige depends on social recognition within a field, the results suggest that in contemporary digital professional contexts, such recognition is more precisely articulated through accumulated professional capital as a socially constructed and context-dependent resource.

5.2. Symbolic Validation and the Role of Professionally Informed Audiences

A second contribution of the study is the conceptualization of online recognition as socially situated symbolic validation, whose value depends on the audience's prior knowledge of the individual's professional performance. This finding reinforces Bourdieu's idea that recognition acquires value when it comes from legitimate agents within the field (Bourdieu, 1986), extending it to the digital context.

Research on digital self-presentation and imagined audiences shows that users evaluate content in relation to the sender's credibility and the relational context of interaction (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Recent studies on personal branding in social media reinforce this idea, noting that perceived consistency among identity, content, and trajectory is key to validating personal branding (Matthews et al., 2026).

The findings of this study confirm and refine this logic by showing that digital interactions acquire meaning when interpreted by professionally informed audiences who can contextualize the actor's trajectory and performance. Thus, the Mirror Effect suggests that not all visibility or validation carries the same symbolic weight.

This contribution highlights that legitimacy in digital environments is not uniformly distributed, but relationally constructed through audiences' capacity to recognize and interpret professional trajectories.

5.3. Performative Coherence and Impression Management in Digital Environments

The importance participants attribute to the coherence between offline professional identity and its online representation can be explained through a dramaturgical perspective. From this view, online personal branding functions as a social performance through which individuals sustain a credible definition of the professional self before specific audiences.

The results show that alignment between professional trajectory and digital representation reinforces credibility. This finding aligns with studies showing that credible professional identities are sustained by continuity between past experiences and current roles (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Labrecque et al., 2011). More recently, Matthews et al. (2026) emphasize that digital visibility acquires professional value when it is perceived as a coherent extension of an already legitimized professional identity, rather than as a performative exercise disconnected from actual performance.

Conversely, when dissonance appears between digital representation and professional capital, performance loses symbolic effectiveness, and impression management becomes visible. In these cases, attempts to control perception are interpreted as compensatory strategies, generating skepticism or reputational damage. This dynamic confirms that impression management operates as a micro-level mechanism that regulates professional self-presentation, but whose effectiveness depends on the strength of the underlying professional capital.

This finding also dialogues with research on digital performance and microcelebrity, which warns that overexposure, intensified visibility, or unsubstantiated self-promotion can erode perceptions of authenticity, competence, and professional legitimacy (Hearn, 2008; Khamis et al., 2017). In professional contexts, these dynamics are intensified, as audiences are often peers, superiors, or colleagues in the same field who can evaluate the consistency among discourse, trajectory, and observable results.

From the perspective of the Mirror Effect, these results show that online personal branding does not function as a space for autonomous reinvention but rather as a reflective stage where professional capital is exposed, amplified, or questioned. Digital performance thus acts as a symbolic amplifier whose ability to strengthen or weaken credibility depends on the degree of consistency between professional identity, offline trajectory, and online representation.

This finding reinforces the idea that digital performance is not evaluated in isolation, but through its alignment with socially recognized professional identities.

5.4. Self-promotion, Weak Signals, and Reputational Risks

From a signaling perspective, digital self-promotion can be understood as a process in which the effectiveness of signals depends on their credibility and the difficulty of imitation. Recent research shows that recipients use signals as heuristics to assess competence and reliability when direct information is limited (Connelly et al., 2011).

In line with this literature, the findings show that when visibility is not backed by recognizable professional capital, signals are perceived as weak or opportunistic. Studies on digital commerce and leadership have shown similar patterns, in which aesthetic or social signals do not compensate for the absence of competence or experience signals (Wang et al., 2025).

This result is also in line with research documenting the reputational costs of excessive self-promotion in professional contexts (Bolino et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2015), but the contribution of the present study lies in showing that these costs do not derive solely from the frequency of self-promotion, but from its misalignment with underlying professional capital. Visibility thus functions as an amplifier of legitimacy or its absence.

This finding extends signaling theory by demonstrating that the credibility of digital signals depends not only on their visibility, but on their consistency with accumulated and socially validated professional capital.

5.5. Digital Silence, Professional Power, and Identity Maturity

Finally, the finding that digital silence accompanies established careers challenges the dominant notion of constant visibility. In line with studies questioning the imperative of permanent exposure in digital environments (Barley et al., 2011; Treem & Leonardi, 2013), the results show that silence may express professional power and identity maturity.

From the perspective of the Mirror Effect, digital silence represents a different way of managing visibility, possible when offline professional capital has already been sufficiently validated. This finding expands

the literature on personal branding and self-promotion by introducing silence as a legitimate and strategic practice, rather than a communicational deficiency.

This contribution suggests that reduced visibility may itself function as an implicit indicator of legitimacy in contexts where professional authority has already been established.

Overall, the discussion shows that online personal branding does not operate as an autonomous mechanism for building legitimacy, but rather as a reflective space in which previously built professional capital is projected, amplified, or questioned. By integrating professional capital as a structural source of legitimacy, identity performance as a mechanism of representation, and signaling processes as a basis for the interpretation of credibility, the Mirror Effect offers a relational framework for understanding how professional recognition is constructed and evaluated in digital environments.

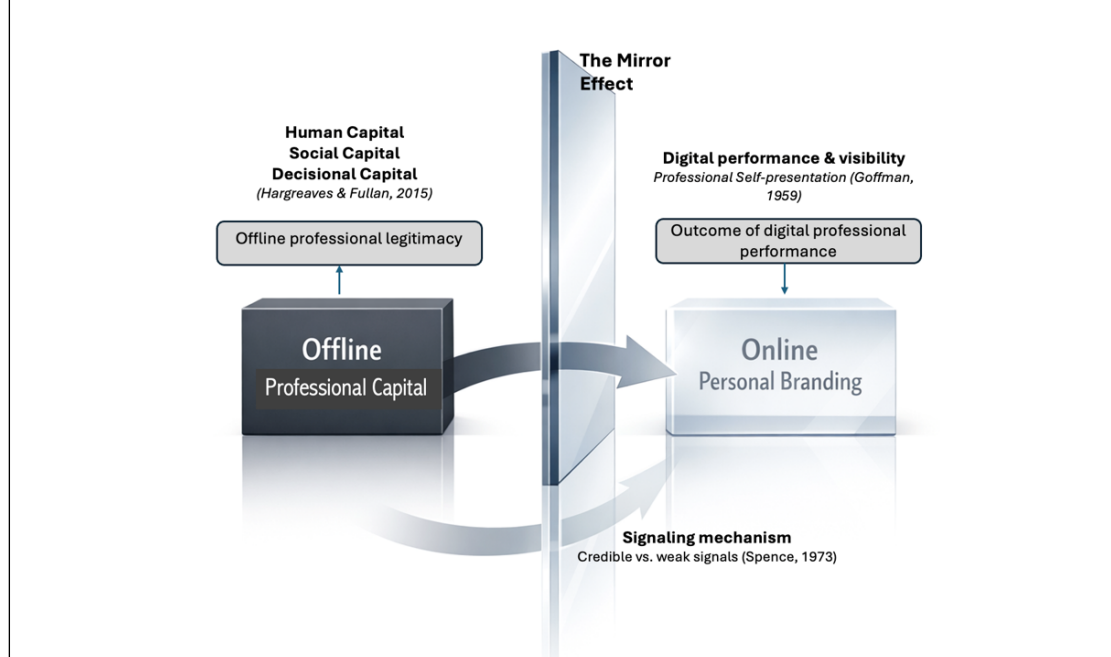
This integrated framework offers a novel contribution by positioning online personal branding as a relational and evaluative process, rather than as a purely strategic or performative activity.

This contribution is particularly relevant for Latin American professional contexts, which have been scarcely explored in the literature on personal branding, digital visibility, and professional legitimacy.

This study does not aim to evaluate the effectiveness of specific digital strategies, but to explain the conditions under which digital visibility is interpreted as credible and legitimate.

To conceptually represent the observed phenomenon, Figure 1 presents the Mirror Effect as an integrative model that illustrates the relationship between professional capital built in the offline sphere and its projection into digital environments. In this model, offline professional capital serves as the structural basis of legitimacy, while digital visibility and performance function as mechanisms that expose and amplify this capital. The credibility of this projection depends on signaling processes that allow audiences to interpret, validate, or question the professional value represented in contexts characterized by imperfect information.

Figure 1: The Mirror Effect: Reflective Amplification of Offline Professional Capital in Digital Contexts.



6. Conclusion

This study introduces the Mirror Effect as a reflexive process through which digital visibility does not autonomously generate professional legitimacy but rather projects and amplifies professional capital built in the offline sphere. By shifting the analytical focus from visibility as a strategic resource to professional

trajectory as a structural condition, the study provides a more precise understanding of how legitimacy is constructed and evaluated in digital environments.

The findings show that digital visibility is conditioned by offline professional trajectories and their consistency with digital representation. Rather than compensating for the absence of professional capital, digital visibility tends to make such absence more evident, reinforcing or weakening credibility depending on the alignment between career trajectory and online performance.

The study also demonstrates that online recognition acquires symbolic value when granted by professionally informed audiences who can contextualize the individual's trajectory. Digital interactions thus function less as neutral metrics and more as acts of socially situated validation. In this sense, digital legitimacy derives not from visibility alone, but from recognition grounded in previously constructed trajectories and reputations.

In addition, the results highlight the tensions associated with managing a personal brand in contexts where digital visibility is not supported by sufficient professional capital. Self-promotion disconnected from recognizable trajectories tends to erode credibility, suggesting that the effectiveness of digital self-presentation depends on its alignment with accumulated, socially validated professional experience.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the personal branding literature by articulating an integrated framework that connects three analytical levels. Professional capital explains the structural origin of legitimacy; the dramaturgical perspective illuminates processes of identity representation and performative coherence; and signaling theory explains how digital visibility is interpreted under conditions of uncertainty. This integration advances existing literature by conceptualizing online personal branding as a relational and evaluative process rather than a purely strategic or performative activity.

The study is interdisciplinary in scope, contributing not only to personal branding research but also to broader debates on professional visibility, communication, and training in digitally mediated environments.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that digital personal brand management cannot be approached in isolation from offline professional development. For professionals and leaders, digital visibility becomes effective when it reflects a coherent and socially validated trajectory. In practical terms, this implies that initiatives aimed at strengthening digital visibility should be accompanied by the development of professional credibility, track record, and socially validated expertise, rather than focusing exclusively on exposure or self-promotion techniques. For educational institutions and organizations, the findings highlight the need to move beyond approaches that promote visibility or self-promotion as isolated competencies and instead adopt frameworks that emphasize developing professional capital as a prerequisite for a credible digital presence. This has implications for curriculum design, professional training policies, and institutional communication practices in digitally mediated environments.

This study focuses on Latin American professional contexts, prioritizing interpretive depth over statistical generalization. Future research may extend the analysis of the Mirror Effect to other cultural and professional settings and explore, in greater depth, emerging dimensions such as the ethical dilemmas of self-promotion, reputational risks, and the tensions associated with the darker side of personal branding.

Overall, the findings suggest that digital visibility should not be understood as an end in itself, but as a reflection of professional capital built over time. By reframing personal branding through this lens, the study contributes to a more rigorous and sustainable understanding of how professional identity is constructed in contemporary digital environments.

References

- Barley, S. R., Meyerson, D. E., & Grodal, S. (2011). E-mail as a Source and Symbol of Stress. *Organization Science*, 22(4), 887–906. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1100.0573>
- Bolino, M., Long, D., & Turnley, W. (2016). Impression Management in Organizations: Critical Questions, Answers, and Areas for Future Research. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 3, 377–406. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-041015-062337>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The Forms of Capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Connelly, B. L., Certo, S. T., Ireland, R. D., & Reutzel, C. R. (2011). Signaling Theory: A Review and Assessment. *Journal of Management*, 37(1), 39–67. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206310388419>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books.
- Gorbatov, S., Khapova, S. N., & Lysova, E. I. (2018). Personal Branding: Interdisciplinary Systematic Review and Research Agenda. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, 2238. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02238>

- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Vol. 2, pp. 105–117). Sage Publications.
- Guo, S., Guo, X., Wu, X., He, G., & Wang, K. (2025). Enhancing social support: Role of professional capital in shaping identity-driven participation in online patient communities. *Frontiers of Engineering Management*, 12(4), 1094–1123. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42524-025-4222-z>
- Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M. (2015). *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*. Teachers College Press.
- Hearn, A. (2008). 'Meat, Mask, Burden': Probing the contours of the branded 'self'. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 8(2), 197–217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540508090086>
- Hogan, B. (2010). The Presentation of Self in the Age of Social Media: Distinguishing Performances and Exhibitions Online. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30(6), 377–386. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467610385893>
- Huang, Y.-A., Lin, C., & Phau, I. (2015). Idol attachment and human brand loyalty. *European Journal of Marketing*, 49(7-8), 1234–1255. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ejm-07-2012-0416>
- Ibarra, H., & Barbulescu, R. (2010). Identity As Narrative: Prevalence, Effectiveness, and Consequences of Narrative Identity Work in Macro Work Role Transitions. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(1), 135–154. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.35.1.zok135>
- Jacobson, J. (2020). You are a brand: social media managers' personal branding and "the future audience". *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 29(6), 715–727. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-03-2019-2299>
- Jost, M., Sajons, G. B., & Schmid Mast, M. (2026). Are women less convincing or perceivers biased? Understanding differential reactions towards men and women's intentions to exert influence. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 37(1), 101882. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2025.101882>
- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2), 191–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Sage Publications.
- Labrecque, L. I., Markos, E., & Milne, G. R. (2011). Online Personal Branding: Processes, Challenges, and Implications. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 25(1), 37–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2010.09.002>
- Marwick, A. E., & boyd, d. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, 13(1), 114–133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313>
- Matthews, A., Hine, A., & Weissmann, M. A. (2026). Can Online Content Indicate an Individual's "Real-Life" Personality? *Global Business and Organizational Excellence*, 45(2), 153–162. <https://doi.org/10.1002/joe.70006>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658>
- Noordegraaf, M., & Schinkel, W. (2011). Professional Capital Contested: A Bourdieusian Analysis of Conflicts Between Professionals and Managers. *Comparative Sociology*, 10(1), 97–125. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156913310X514092>
- Pahos, N., Polyportis, A., Kyriakopoulos, N., & Van der Heijden, B. I. J. M. (2025). The effects of personal brand equity on hiring recommendation: why, how, when...? *Journal of Brand Management*, 32(5), 458–475. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-025-00394-z>
- Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*. Sage Publications. <https://study.sagepub.com/patton4e>
- Petruca, I. (2016). Personal Branding Through Social Media. *International Journal of Communication Research*, 6(4), 389–392. https://ijcr.eu/articole/345_10%20Irina%20PETRUCU.pdf
- Scheidt, S., Gelhard, C., & Henseler, J. (2020). Old Practice, but Young Research Field: A Systematic Bibliographic Review of Personal Branding. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 1809. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01809>
- Spence, M. (1973). Job Market Signaling. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 87(3), 355–374. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1882010>
- Tong, W., & Razniak, A. (2017). Building professional capital within a 21st century learning framework. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 2(1), 36–49. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jpc-06-2016-0018>
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative Quality: Eight "Big-Tent" Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- Trang, N. M., McKenna, B., Cai, W., & Morrison, A. M. (2023). I do not want to be perfect: investigating generation Z students' personal brands on social media for job seeking. *Information Technology & People*, 37(2), 793–814. <https://doi.org/10.1108/itp-08-2022-0602>
- Treem, J. W., & Leonardi, P. M. (2013). Social Media Use in Organizations: Exploring the Affordances of Visibility, Editability, Persistence, and Association. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 36(1), 143–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2013.11679130>
- Venciute, D., April Yue, C., & Thelen, P. D. (2024). Leaders' personal branding and communication on professional social media platforms: motivations, processes, and outcomes. *Journal of Brand Management*, 31(1), 38–57. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41262-023-00332-x>
- Wang, Q., Li, X., & Yan, X. (2025). Digital charisma or human appeal: A comparative study on how streamers' multidimensional signals affect viewers' impulsive purchases in live commerce. *Decision Support Systems*, 201, 114581. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2025.114581>