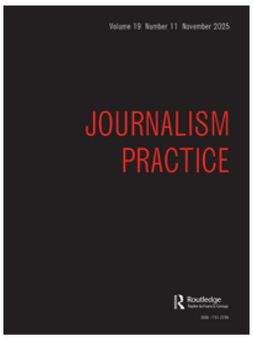

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"Express Yourself!" But Which Self? Investigating Role Negotiations and Boundaries on Journalists' Personal Instagram Accounts

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ABSTRACT

This study explores journalists' role negotiations and perceptions of boundaries on their personal (yet public) Instagram profiles. While journalism research often assumes that such profiles function as professional self-branding tools, such assumptions overlook the platform culture of Instagram and the fact that many journalists – especially younger ones – initially used the platform for private purposes and may continue to do so. Drawing on 15 qualitative interviews, the study investigates the roles journalists believe to perform on their profiles as well as the relevance they attribute to it (RQ1) and the contextual factors that influence the performance of their journalistic role (RQ2). The findings reveal a wide spectrum: Some journalists treat their profiles as journalistic spaces, some consider them private, and others navigate in between. Role negotiations often occur in moments of context collapse, as audiences from private and professional spheres converge. In such moments, journalists reassess their self-presentation, which can result either in a consolidation of the private focus or a reorientation towards their professional identity. Four contextual factors were found to influence these negotiations: Perception of a representative function, felt responsibility through visibility, pressure to protect oneself and one's journalistic image, and the need for personal branding.

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Introduction

The relevance of Instagram for journalistic purposes is undeniable. News outlets continue to expand their presence on the platform (Hendrickx 2023; Schützeneder and Graßl 2022), audiences increasingly use it for news-consumption (Newman et al. 2024), and many journalists use Instagram to establish a professional brand or expand their reach (Bossio 2023; Mellado and Hermida 2022). The latter has been shown to prompt ongoing negotiations of journalistic roles, as norms and practices are redefined (Hermida and Mellado 2020; Raemy, Hellmueller, and Vos 2024).

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Instagram is rooted in a private, lifestyle-oriented context. It is typically used to share personal insights, document daily life, and construct an authentic, though curated, self-image (O'Donnell 2018; Romero Saletti, Van Den Broucke, and Van Beggelaer 2022). As a result, some journalists blend professional content with personal or private content, such as insights into their personal backgrounds or hobbies, to appear not only professional but also authentic and approachable (Mellado and Hermida 2022). This personalization is often interpreted as a strategic branding move: a way for journalists to capitalize on their independence, expand their audiences, and gain professional advantages (Bossio 2023; Mellado and Hermida 2022).

However, while these strategic elements are certainly present and have become normalized within role negotiations, I argue that this framework alone is insufficient to explain all forms of journalistic self-presentation on Instagram. I content that two core issues complicate the view that Instagram use would be exclusively strategic or professional. First, Instagram remains a platform primarily used to share private insights and stay connected with peers (O'Donnell 2018) – especially among young adults (Romero Saletti, Van Den Broucke, and Van Beggelaer 2022). Second, having a public profile or mentioning one's occupation does not necessarily mean that journalists themselves view their profile as a professional space, especially when they are just entering the profession and may be in a transitional phase. Research shows that young adults use Instagram to document moments from their lives, stay in touch with their peers, and mark both everyday experiences and personal milestones (Romero Saletti, Van Den Broucke, and Van Beggelaer 2022; Sheldon and Bryant 2016). Accordingly, typical content might include vacation photos, outfit posts, or casual videos with friends, as well as academic achievements such as completing a thesis or graduating. As individuals transition into professional life, the nature of these milestones may shift to include starting a new job, attending a first conference, or—within the context of journalism—publishing a first article.

From this perspective, work-related posts do not necessarily signal a conscious shift toward professional self-branding. Instead, they may represent a continuation of personal storytelling, with professional achievements simply becoming the next chapter in an ongoing personal timeline. Therefore, it seems overly simplistic to assume that profiles of journalists are automatically interpreted as professional spaces, necessarily shaped by the (intentional) ambition of branding or that it undermines the other social roles that have been central to the profile for years – especially considering that the audience, which heavily influences role performance, does not transform overnight.

In short, journalists may not always aim to perform and focus on their professional role on Instagram. Instead, they might foreground other social roles—friend, fashion enthusiast, sports fan, or member of another profession—each with its own logic and values, even when their journalistic identity is visible.

This, however, raises two central questions: First, about the spectrum of interpretation regarding the platform, meaning what social roles are accepted to be performed on Instagram by journalists and second, what factors then make these individuals perform or focus on their journalistic roles, when they (re-)negotiate their use of Instagram.

To address these questions, I begin by discussing the relevance of negotiation practices regarding the boundaries of journalism by referring to the metajournalistic discourse and the theory of role negotiation. I then argue for the need to examine not only shifting

journalistic practices, but also the contested boundaries of journalism itself—particularly as they play out on journalists' personal Instagram profiles. This discussion is grounded in the platform's social affordances and current research. Finally, I present findings from qualitative, in-depth interviews with 15 German journalists who maintain public yet personal Instagram profiles through which they are identifiable as journalists. Their reflections shed light on their personal negotiations and the factors that influence such negotiations, which in an aggregate ultimately play into a wider metajournalistic discourse that addresses the unclear boundaries of the journalistic profession within the digital sphere. Germany serves here as a representative case for Western journalists in democratic contexts.

Metajournalistic Discourse and Journalistic Role Negotiations

The investigation of acceptable journalistic norms, practices, and roles has been shaped by the discursive turn in journalism studies (Carlson 2016; Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Vos and Ferrucci 2018). Within this turn, the *metajournalistic discourse* (Carlson 2016) and the theory of *role negotiation* (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017; Raemy, Hellmueller, and Vos 2024) have emerged as particularly influential frameworks.

The metajournalistic discourse describes the discourse around journalism in which actors negotiate appropriate knowledge, practices and actors by either justifying or challenging them (Carlson 2016). These negotiations shape what is understood to be journalism, influence public perceptions of the profession, and serve as the foundation for claims to authority and legitimacy. Such discourse unfolds through practices of definition-making, boundary-setting, and legitimation, which collectively determine who qualifies as a journalist, what counts as journalism, and which behaviors are deemed appropriate or deviant. Boundaries, in this context, function as exclusionary tools (Carlson 2015). Carlson (2015) distinguishes three types of boundary work: *expansion*, which incorporates non-traditional actors; *expulsion*, which excludes deviant ones; and *protection of autonomy*, which defends journalism from non-journalistic encroachment.

Similarly, the theory of role negotiation builds on the premise that journalistic roles, like journalism itself, are discursive constructions (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Roles are considered a core component of journalism's professional identity, signaling what is considered acceptable practice. However, these roles are not static. Instead, they are dynamic, context-dependent, and subject to reinterpretation (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Role negotiation, therefore, draws attention to "how journalists are interpreting basic assumptions about what journalism is and how they are negotiating specific contexts of practice" (Raemy, Hellmueller, and Vos 2024, 4910), such as challenges brought forward by technological or social changes. Moreover, this approach further calls for attention to different levels of analysis, emphasizing the micro level as the space where individual journalists reinterpret or revise institutional scripts. Here, journalists negotiate how institutional roles intersect with their personal identities (Raemy and Vos 2021; Raemy, Hellmueller, and Vos 2024). In other words: "Negotiation in a journalistic work context means interpretation and improvisation at the perception level where journalists decide among alternative possibilities" (Raemy, Hellmueller, and Vos 2024, 4914).

In this light, the question of how journalists negotiate the meaning and use of their individual Instagram profiles can be understood as a prime example of role negotiation.

Once communicated, these individual negotiations may extend beyond the personal level and influence broader metajournalistic discourse, ultimately contributing to the ongoing redefinition of what constitutes acceptable journalistic practice and the boundaries of journalism.

Journalists' Individual Instagram Profiles

Much research in recent years has investigated how journalists negotiate the boundaries of acceptable practice in the context of social media. These studies are typically motivated by two interrelated challenges journalists face on such platforms:

First, social media has facilitated the rise of new actors who also distribute news and, whether intentionally or not, compete with journalists for jurisdiction over the domain of news. These so-called peripheral actors (Hanusch and Löhmann 2023) or interlopers (Eldridge 2018) often trigger boundary work (Carlson 2015), through which normative guidelines are renegotiated to maintain journalistic authority. A prominent example, especially relevant on Instagram, is boundary work in the context of lifestyle journalism. The emergence of lifestyle influencers – who follow similar practices and values and compete for the same audiences and advertising revenues—has prompted lifestyle journalists to engage in boundary work to retain their authority (Cheng and Chew 2024; Maares and Hanusch 2020; Perreault and Hanusch 2024). Beyond this, Instagram has also prompted broader adjustments in how news is produced and distributed, often discussed under the umbrella of innovation (Schützeneder and Graßl 2024).

The second challenge concerns how journalists negotiate their professional roles in light of the distinct affordances of each platform. Platform affordances are defined as "the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms" (Ronzhyn, Cardenal, and Batlle Rubio 2023, 3178). To match these affordances, journalists engage in negotiation processes and adapt their practices (Bossio 2023), which in turn contributes to shifts in the broader boundaries of journalism by redefining acceptable practices (Carlson 2015). These changes affect both journalists' practices within the institutional context (e.g., Anter 2025) and journalists' individual accounts.

So far, research on individual accounts has primarily focused on two phenomena: (1) personal branding and (2) the personalization of journalists, with the latter often considered a result of branding efforts and platform affordances.

The interest in personal branding is closely tied to growing instability in the journalism profession, which compels journalists to engage in self-promotion "to maintain relevance and thus keep their job or secure a new one" (Molyneux, Lewis, and Holton 2019, 837). These efforts can be divided into institutional, organizational or individual branding (Molyneux, Lewis, and Holton 2019). Institutional branding refers to strategic attempts to strengthen the profession as a whole, while organizational branding involves journalists presenting themselves as ambassadors of their outlets – often prompted or required by the outlets themselves (Bossio and Sacco 2017), which hope to benefit from their journalists' followers (Sorce 2021).

Individual branding, by contrast, refers to journalists creating an independent brand to advance their personal goals. Brems et al. (2017), argue that building a strong brand and

attracting a wide audience helps journalists gain visibility and independence – an aspect especially crucial for freelancers (Norbäck 2022) – and allows them to become news and opinion hubs, thereby increasing their market value and gaining independence from their current employers.

However, not all journalists engage in branding. Whether they do depend on their individual alignment with branding strategies, career orientation, available resources, and psychological factors. This includes whether they "feel peer pressure to practice branding, that the market indicates its importance to them, or that they 'just know' it is something they must do" (Molyneux, Lewis, and Holton 2019, 851). Nevertheless, branding on social media is often accompanied by the personalization of journalists (Brems et al. 2017), the second major focus of research in this area.

Many studies investigated how journalists adapt to the new social media logics and paid specific attention to the negotiation of personal insights, self-expression and thus the deviance from the detached, objective and often faceless reporter. Social media profiles exist outside the institutional setting and are designed for people to express and stage themselves in any way they want, at any time (O'Donnell 2018). As a result, some journalists blend professional content with private content, such as providing opinions or insights into their lives to be perceived not only as professional but also as authentic and approachable individuals, thereby supporting their branding efforts (e.g., Bossio 2023; Brems et al. 2017; Hermida and Mellado 2020; Laor and Galily 2020; Mellado and Hermida 2022).

This dynamic is particularly evident on Instagram, which lacks a strong tradition of journalistic use compared to *X*, has a more personal and visually curated character, and encourages greater individualization (Bossio 2023). However, there remains no consensus among journalists about how to use Instagram. Some argue that individualization undermines credibility, while others consider it necessary for being "acknowledged as an 'authentic' member of online communities" (Bossio and Sacco 2017, 539), *especially* when engaging in branding efforts.

Thus, social media – especially platforms like Instagram – continues to be a site where the boundaries of journalistic practice and role interpretation are actively (re)negotiated. Yet one aspect is consistently overlooked: the personal negotiation of whether and when a journalist's *individual* public Instagram profile should even be considered a site of professional performance. This question opens up new avenues for understanding how journalists navigate the profession's boundaries in relation to their private lives. Given that journalists are agents of boundary construction and continuously negotiate between professional roles and personal identities, I argue that the very question of *whether* their profile constitutes a journalistic site must itself be up for negotiation. Two points substantiate the relevance of this claim: Instagram's platform culture, particularly the social dimension of platform affordances, and existing research, which suggest that journalists' understandings of the platform vary widely.

When examining Instagram's affordances at the social level, it is essential to recognize its original and still dominant focus: self-expression, self-imaging, and staying connected (O'Donnell 2018). It is a people- and emotion-centered platform built for curated glimpses into private life, and private photos remain among the most common content types (O'Donnell 2018). This is especially relevant for young adults. According to a survey among graduate students, the strongest motivation for using Instagram is learning

what one's network is doing, followed by documenting one's life and displaying creativity (Sheldon and Bryant 2016). Similar motives were found by Romero Saletti, Van Den Broucke, and Van Beggelaer (2022), who interviewed young adults. These included: (1) showcasing one's identity and activities, (2) checking what friends and other figures are doing, (3) documenting personal experiences, (4) entertainment, (5) maintaining or building relationships, (6) following trends, (7) emotional coping, (8) validation, (9) information seeking, and (10) impacting others. Some also reported professional uses, defined as "references of using Instagram to have a platform to promote themselves, their work, their art, for entrepreneurship, to become an influencer etc." (Romero Saletti, Van Den Broucke, and Van Beggelaer 2022, 1381). However, the results nonetheless demonstrate that it is rare for (young) individuals to use Instagram solely for professional purposes.

While among journalists Instagram has become a tool for work and self-promotion, the assumption that at least some use it primarily in private ways remains plausible for two further reasons: the rise of journalists who grew up with Instagram and the sampling decisions and findings of recent studies.

The first argument echoes the point made in the introduction: as more young journalists enter the profession—many of whom have long used Instagram in a personal capacity—it seems natural that some continue doing so, at least initially. Especially when their audience still reflects a private context, expectations regarding role performance remain tied to the private identity. Over time, however, as their audience grows and becomes more professionally oriented, tension might arise. While individuals usually seek to keep audiences separate (Goffman 1959), social media collapses these contexts into one—a phenomenon Marwick and boyd (2011) term *context collapse*, where previously distinct audiences merge and differing self-presentation strategies become untenable. Though largely studied among private users (boyd 2010, 2014; Costa 2018), I argue that this concept is highly relevant to journalists' social media performances and likely drives boundary negotiation processes.

The second argument refers to statements made by other scholars. For instance, in justifying her sampling strategy, Bossio explains that "profiles that were 'personal' were excluded; that is, they did not indicate that they were a journalist in their profile description, *or* [emphasis added] they only posted about their personal lives, friends and family" (2023, 1777). This not only confirms the existence of journalists who emphasize non-professional roles on Instagram but also reveals a research gap: the frequent disregard of whether journalists consider their profiles as journalistic spaces in the first place, since most studies have only explored changes *within* journalistic roles (e.g., Bossio 2023; Mellado and Hermida 2022, 2024). One exception is the study of Bossio and Sacco, who found that some journalists were "creating separate 'personal' and 'professional' social media accounts – or choosing specific platforms for either personal or professional content" (2017, 534). However, their study did not account for the specific affordances of Instagram.

Therefore, within this study I am to investigate journalists' individual negotiations of their public Instagram profiles and its connection to journalism by asking the following research questions:

RQ1: What roles do journalists believe they perform on their personal Instagram profiles, and what relevance do they attribute to them?

RQ2: What factors lead journalists to perform and focus on their journalistic role?

Methodological Approach

To address my research questions, I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with 15 German journalists, all of whom have public individual Instagram accounts where they can be identified as journalists. This includes all journalists who clearly indicate their profession either in their profile bio or through visual content. The characteristics of the participants were purposefully varied to provide a diverse sample according to the maximum variation approach (Palys 2008). Specifically, I aimed to include interviewees with varying levels of professional experience, differing visibility on their respective media platforms or channels, different institutional settings (State-funded versus private media), and coverage of different beats with distinct journalistic norms. Additionally, I sought out participants with different extents of employment outside of journalism, which could result in varying professional roles performed online. I also considered differences in reach and age to capture varying levels of familiarity and engagement with Instagram and its typical social affordances.

As a result, the sample includes journalists from different types of media platforms (TV, radio, online, and social media), covering diverse topics (e.g., general news, politics, sports, travel, conflict, and war). The interviewees range from anchors, news presenters, and reporters to freelancers from both private media as well as public-service broadcasters. The sample also includes participants with varying levels of popularity on Instagram, with follower counts raging fewer than 1000 to over 30,000. The ages of the interviewees range from 24 to 57 years old, thus including interviewees who have known Instagram before entering the journalistic career. An overview of the interviewees' characteristics is presented in Table 1.

The first round of eight interviews was conducted between June and September 2022. After an initial analysis of these interviews and to achieve theoretical saturation, as well as to account for potential changes in this fast-evolving platform environment, an additional seven interviews were conducted between November 2023 and February 2024. Theoretical saturation was considered reached when the interviews no longer provided substantial new insights (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The second round of interviews proved particularly valuable for validating and refining the initial findings. Given the dynamic

Table 1. Information on the participants' demographics, work, and Instagram profiles.

Name	Age	Reach on IG	Visible appearance on media	Resort/Thematic specialization
J1	25–30	2.000–2.500	Videos online media library	Travel
J2	25–30	1.000–1.500	Presenter Instagram news channel	General news
J3	25–30	1.500–2.000	No	None
J4	25–30	>30.000	Videos online media library, host of a journalistic Instagram channel	Lifestyle
J5	30–40	1.000–1.500	On-Air reporter TV	Sports, football
J6	30–40	1.000–1.500	TV news magazine host	General news
J7	40–50	1.000–1.500	On-Air reporter TV	General news
J8	30–40	<1.000	On-Air reporter TV	War and conflicts
J9	25–30	3.000–3.500	No	Foreign affairs/foreign policies
J10	20–25	1.500–2.000	No	Social affairs
J11	25–30	<1.000	No	None
J12	30–40	1.000–1.500	No	Politics, culture
J13	40–50	<1.000	No	Politics
J14	50–60	1.000–1.500	No	Culture
J15	25–30	2.000–2.5000	Videos online media library	None

nature of social media and the shifting expectations toward journalists' self-presentation on Instagram, this temporal gap allowed for the identification of more stable negotiation patterns and role perceptions over time. In this way, the newer interviews helped to distinguish between temporary fluctuations and more persistent dynamics in how journalists perceive and perform their roles on the platform. The interviews lasted from 26 to 84 min, with an average length of 57 min. Most participants preferred to conduct the interview via Zoom; four opted for telephone interviews, and one preferred an in-person interview.

I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because they allow for a deeper understanding of the interviewees' rationales, with the frequent use of open-ended questions enabling them to express their independent thoughts (Adams 2015). Moreover, the interview guide, which contains the various topics and questions to be addressed, provides a possible narrative structure while also allowing for follow-up questions, unexpected transitions between the topics, and flexibility to adapt the interview's structure. This enables interviewees to reveal their own narratives (Adams 2015; Galletta 2016), making it a suitable method to discover negotiation processes (Raemy, Hellmueller, and Vos 2024).

During the interviews, I covered several core issues. I began with a *reflection on the origin and development of their profiles*, asking when and for what purpose they created their Instagram profiles, how they would describe their profiles, and whether they have additional profiles. In a second part focused on *role overview*, I asked which roles the interviewees believe they perform on their Instagram accounts, followed by a *role characterization section*. Here, for each role, interviewees were asked to explain how it influences their profile and under what circumstances they believe such a role becomes more prominent. The next part focused on *identity management*, exploring boundary setting and the potential desire for additional profiles, followed by a section on the *imagined audience* where journalists were asked to describe their followers and how they influence their content (for reference see Marwick and boyd 2011). Then I asked the interviewees about *Instagram specifics*, such as how they perceive Instagram compared to other social media platforms and the relevance of personal Instagram profiles for a journalistic career. Finally, I asked the interviewees for a summary of their self-perception on Instagram and concluded with an open question ("Is there anything you'd like to add?").

After the interviews, all recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts were imported into the qualitative research software MAXQDA for a content analysis following Mayring (2015). The analysis began with categories derived from the dimensions of the interview guide, along with additional inductive categories that were used to classify the interviewees' experiences, such as classifications of the contextual factors influencing their role performances.

Findings

Aligning with the literature (Hermida and Mellado 2020; O'Donnell 2018), the interviewees perceive Instagram as a platform that, unlike LinkedIn or X, calls for a more personal approach to self-presentation. As a primarily visual platform rooted in superficial, light feel-good moments and aesthetically pleasing content, Instagram typically features personal insights that reflect users' daily experiences, personal perspectives, and tastes. While all interviewees generally shared an understanding of this platform culture, they held differing views on whether their personal public profiles—which were their primary

Instagram accounts – should be considered journalistic or fall within the boundaries of journalism. These differences become particularly apparent when examining the various social roles, they perform on Instagram and the significance they attribute to these roles (RQ1).

Performing Journalism – or Not?

In general, the number of roles the interviewees believe to perform on their individual Instagram profiles varies greatly. Some people claim they would only perform one single role, while others' profiles turned into a melting pot for various roles. These range from professional roles – including the journalistic role as well as additional professional identities (e.g., business founder, podcaster, media trainer) – to private roles, such as presenting a generic personal self or engaging in hobby-based identities that come with their own norms, practices, and communities (e.g., musician, hobby athlete, sports fan).

All interviewees mentioned the journalistic role. However, the degree of importance attributed to it and the influence it exerts on their self-presentation varies substantially.

At one end of the spectrum are journalists who regard their profiles as journalistic in nature, characterized almost exclusively by their professional identity. Some had downloaded Instagram solely for professional reasons—a tendency particularly prominent among older journalists seeking to stay up to date—while others opted to create separate profiles for their non-journalistic roles. The latter was especially common among younger journalists and those who originally used Instagram for personal purposes. This decision was often driven by the perception that other roles, especially private ones, are too incompatible to merge with their journalistic identity. This is particularly common among journalists covering hard news. For example, J9, who works in the foreign policy beat, explains:

> In my job, I deal a lot with serious issues. Imagine I would post three times about Ukraine, about war, destruction, and suffering, and then after that, I post a picture of me on vacation, partying. That would seem strange to me. (J9)

A little more moderate, yet close to the end of this spectrum are journalists, who still consider their journalistic role to be their main focus, but also perform other roles – most often their generic private self. Consistent with the literature, those who engage more in their professional roles often view their private role as an add-on encouraged by Instagram's platform culture or the desire to present a more holistic self, which they believe can be beneficial (Bossio 2023; Mellado and Hermida 2022): "Of course, I think it helps. You can create more sympathy if you do not just post one professional photo after another but mix in something more private" (J5).

On the opposite end of the spectrum are those interviewees who see their profiles primarily as private spaces. In their view, any performance of professional or journalistic roles is merely a by-product of sharing personal life updates. J10 for example explains:

> I've been working a lot recently and that's why you see a lot more work-related content, but that's also due to the fact that that's what I'm doing currently. That's what Instagram is for me. I show what my life looks like in that the moment.

Additionally, some explain that having been journalists for such a long time, their professional and private roles are sometimes difficult to separate:

> The private and professional identity very often blend into each other. Even in private settings, I ask different questions than my friends who aren't journalists. This curiosity about topics and content naturally merges with my private persona (J12).

As a result, aspects of their professional identity are so internalized that they have become a part of their personal role, which they "can't abandon" (J3). A particular example is the desire to share only verified information, an ideal stemming from their journalistic profession that is now also seen as a private ideal by many interviewees:

> I think this is related to professional ethics and personal idealism – not making things up and posting them. I would never do that, even when it comes to opinions and this stuff. But honestly, for me, that is just common sense […] And I would stick to that in private conversations with friends as well (J6).

At the same time, journalists who see their profiles primarily as private spaces reject the idea that they must adjust their behavior because of their professional identity. J12, for example, clearly states that she expects others to understand that her Instagram account is not a professional site: "I only have 1600 something followers. So yes, that's my wish. That [on Instagram] I'm still considered my private [and not professional] self." These journalists argue that journalistic norms – aside from those they have personally internalized – should not apply to their private profiles. This is particularly true for the norm of objectivity or neutrality:

> I know that on my personal profile, I have the freedom to say everything that is legally allowed. […] and I know that I am not editorially bound. I know that as a private person, I can and am allowed to have every opinion I have. And I would say that is quite important to me, too (J3).

These individuals value their freedom of editorial constraints and consider their profiles to be private, not professional spaces, despite the profiles being public: "I am allowed to show my values on my private profile. […] I do not have to maintain a balance" (J12). Again, this stance is most frequently observed among younger journalists who have grown up with Instagram and have always used it for personal purposes. They significantly diverge from the professional focus often assumed in earlier research and reject the idea of self-branding for career advancement. Instead, they believe to use the platform for personal expression, to stay in touch with friends, and to document their lives —much like regular users (O'Donnell 2018; Romero Saletti, Van Den Broucke, and Van Beggelaer 2022).

Interestingly, some of these interviewees describe moments of disorientation, often triggered by *context collapse* and Instagram's growing relevance as a professional platform. These experiences are particularly common among participants from the second sampling round. In response, they reflect on their practices and consider how to manage or resolve arising tensions. Some suggest using clearer markers, such as disclaimers ("private only") or logos, though they also express skepticism about their effectiveness. Others argue that distinguishing between personal and professional content is ultimately a question of media literacy and thus a skill the audience must develop.

In some cases, these moments of disorientation lead to a reorientation—prompting a stronger emphasis on the journalistic role. For instance, J2 explains that she initially uses her profile to stay connected with friends and share private content. However, as her visibility increases in her new role as a presenter, and as more people—including supervisors—began to follow her, she started to rethink what is appropriate to share. As a result, she reduces the amount of personal content and considers creating a separate private profile if her follower count continues to rise.

That being said, if a profile is not created explicitly for professional purposes from the outset, then experiences of *context collapse* can cause uncertainty which in turn triggers negotiation processes. As a result, journalists either endorse their private focus, or experience a reorientation toward their professional role. However, it remains unclear what exactly influences whether this negotiation results in a consolidation of the private stance or a redefinition of the profile in line with their journalistic identity. Therefore, I will now have a look at the contextual factors, that influence the negotiation and performance of the journalistic role (RQ2).

Contextual Factors for (Re-)Negotiation

Throughout the interviews there were four contextual factors that could be identified as strengthening the performance of the journalistic role on journalists' personal Instagram accounts or fostering a reorientation of their profiles towards a journalistic focus: (1) *the perception of a representative function*, (2) *felt responsibility through visibility*, (3) *pressure to protect oneself and one's journalistic image*, and (4) *the need for personal branding*.

1. Perception of a Representative Function:

Journalists who (start to) perceive themselves as representatives of a media outlet tend to adhere more strictly to their journalistic roles on Instagram. This perception is especially strong among those who work closely with a particular outlet. They often see themselves as the "face" of the outlet and believe that the audience cannot or does not separate their identity from that of the organization. J7 for example explains:

> I know this is my personal account, but the people who do not know me, will perceive me as [the media outlet]. That means they do not see me as a private person interested in something. They look at the profile and see: 'Ah, he is from [media outlet].' and bam, you are in that role. You can try to say, 'But that is my profile!', as much as you want.

They feel responsible for maintaining an outlet's image and, therefore, start to align their performances with it, as suggested by the idea of organizational branding (Molyneux, Lewis, and Holton 2019). Moreover, those who are more visibly associated with a media outlet feel this responsibility even more strongly. Some participants also express that this sense of responsibility extends beyond representing an outlet; it involves general perception of journalism as a profession, thus aligning with the idea of institutional branding (Molyneux, Lewis, and Holton 2019):

> It is simply because we have a special responsibility. And this responsibility does not only last from nine to five pm. We do not have a nine-to-five job. This special responsibility of journalists, last 24 hours a day. And you should behave according to that (J8).

They argue that the damaged reputation and credibility of the media make it necessary for journalists to think about the way they present themselves:

> Especially now that the image of journalists has become so bad and is often dragged into the mud by certain circles, I think it would be good when someone observes this critically and demands of us 'Watch what you're doing, how you present yourselves' (J14).

2. Felt Responsibility through Visibility

Closely connected to the representative function, journalists who are more visible, either due to their media roles or their follower base, feel a heightened sense of responsibility. They believe that their visibility makes them akin to public figures, like politicians or business leaders, and thus they should be more conscious of how they are perceived:

> I would say that journalists are in the public eye, much like politicians, business leaders or those active in the cultural scene. They certainly have a different responsibility or should be more aware that they are perceived in this role, or perhaps even solely in this role (J7).

However, many still view their profiles as somewhat personal or even private spaces due to the independent nature of their accounts and their control over the content. This perception is particularly strong among younger journalists who initially started using Instagram for private purposes and is often a reason to remain a private focus on their profiles:

> I mean officially, far from my own opinion, it is definitely public. I set it up like this, I added my job, and I mentioned the projects I am working on. Effectively it is a public profile. (…) But for me, it is hard to see that because it has always been my profile (J3).

3. Pressure to Protect Oneself and One's Journalistic Image

Several participants mentioned that their Instagram performances are influenced by the need to protect themselves and their professional image. They recognize that they could face shitstorms and that their profiles could become targets for attacks or abuse, prompting them to be cautious about the content they share.

> If I do a piece or am broadcasting live, people search me on Instagram, and then I am immediately public. And that is something my profile needs to be steeled for (J7).

This was especially prominent, when individuals observed colleagues facing such issues. To mitigate risks, they adhere more closely to norms of impartiality and limit private information that could potentially expose them to harm. J15 for example says: "It already starts with the fact that I do not want that anyone can conclude where exactly I live, just for the case of a shitstorm."

4. Need for Personal Branding

Whether the interviewees perform their journalistic role and with what relevance attached to it, also depends on the *perceived need* for personal branding. Particularly freelancers often mentioned the need for personal branding, aligning with current research (Brems et al. 2017; Laor and Galily 2020; Norbäck 2022). They see it as an opportunity

to be "better known by potential employers" (J14), be "booked more often, as they know you exist and do good work" (J3), and to be "independent from a single media outlet" (J15). Moreover, once again a generational factor was raised. Especially the younger interviewees emphasized the importance of their public Instagram accounts for advancing their careers. They view their profiles as essential for being considered for jobs, and some have already benefited from what they post. While some participants believe job opportunities are tied to showcasing their skills, interests, and personality, others highlight a different factor they see as defining their market value: follower numbers.

> Even if it is unrelated to your competence or skills, it is true that if you have a lot of followers and a strong presence, media outlets – because they are companies at the end of the day - know that. So, of course, they are also more likely to hire you or ask, 'Do you want to work with us?' Because they know you have a reach, you have a community. And that brings more clicks and more readers (J10).

Or as J4 puts it: "Big media companies want big profiles because big profiles automatically mean free clicks and advertising space".

However, this trend puts considerable pressure on journalists to grow their profiles, even when their accounts were originally intended to be private or non-journalistic. As J3 explains: "It simply exerts immense pressure because you can already see that people who have a following are preferred". Especially for moderation and host jobs, where the person is the face of the product, the Instagram reach seems to be increasingly significant:

> For a while, I wondered if being in front of the camera was a path for me. But then I kept hearing, 'To be in front of the camera, you need a significant number of followers. That is the essential thing.' And that deterred me (J11).

Many participants expressed concerns about this growing emphasis on audience reach, particularly because they fear that highly skilled journalists who do not focus on building their follower count may be overlooked, regardless of their talent. Moreover, several journalists noted that even if they wanted to grow their following, they lack the time to do so or refuse because they see it as unpaid overtime.

J15 highlighted another issue with the increasing demand for large Instagram followings. He criticizes how media outlets encourage or even pressure journalists to build a following while absolving themselves of responsibility if a large profile leads to negative outcomes:

> On the one hand, they say 'Establish yourselves as a personality, find a community, bring your topics, and it helps with research if you have a large community. Use this role-model function and be a great figurehead for public broadcasting.' On the other hand, they say, 'And everything is your responsibility, and if you make a mistake, it could cost you your job'.

He called for greater protection when a journalist's profile grows mainly due to external pressure to attract an audience for their (potential) employer.

Another frequently criticized aspect of this new focus on Instagram reach is the trend of media outlets hiring influencers for journalistic positions, regardless of their qualifications: "It cannot be right that influencers with ten thousand followers get the job, regardless of whether they are even capable of performing journalistic work" (J14). Or as J4 explains:

> I think a big challenge is that many media outlets or editorial offices consciously buy in people because of their audience reach and even hire or contract people who do not master the journalistic craft. But this job is a craft. And if I am a content creator or an influencer, or whatever you want to call it, that does not automatically mean I am doing good journalism.

That this development is particularly relevant for younger generations was also confirmed by older interviewees. They noted that while Instagram may not be as crucial for their generation, since they have already developed their networks and profiles, it holds significant potential for younger journalists to gain visibility and build a reputation:

> I think especially for young journalists it is a massive chance. […] Because you can win fame independently of the classic gatekeepers, build up a specialization or a reputation, and you can, of course, increase your market value. So, you can turn the tables in the end. It is not you who wants the job at [media outlets], but they want you (J7).

Conclusion

As Instagram has evolved into an increasingly journalistic platform (Schützeneder and Graßl 2022) and personal branding has become a growing trend among journalists (Molyneux, Lewis, and Holton 2019), scholars often assume that journalists' personal (yet public) Instagram accounts are inherently journalistic. Consequently, they analyze these profiles to examine how journalists navigate and negotiate their professional roles online, how these roles evolve, and – more broadly – what "distinguish[es] journalist social media users from everyday users" (Sorce 2021, 905). In doing so, they frequently overlook the possibility that journalists themselves may not view their Instagram presence as journalistic at all, but instead see it as a space where they act as ordinary, private users.

This oversight is especially problematic given Instagram's platform culture and its affordances that encourage personal and lifestyle-oriented content (O'Donnell 2018; Romero Saletti, Van Den Broucke, and Van Beggelaer 2022). It becomes even more relevant in light of the growing number of younger journalists who have grown up using Instagram primarily for private purposes, long before entering the profession. Against this backdrop, this study set out to explore the different roles journalists perceive themselves to be performing on their personal Instagram accounts—including the degree of importance they attribute to each role (RQ1). Given the large share of journalists who also use Instagram for professional reasons, the study further aimed to identify the contextual factors that influence the extent to which journalists enact a journalistic role on the platform (RQ2).

The findings reveal a broad spectrum of how journalists interpret their personal Instagram accounts. On one end are those who consider their profiles to be journalistic, often seeing their private persona—if included at all—as merely complementary or instrumental for branding purposes. On the opposite end are those who strongly reject a journalistic framing of their accounts, presenting their profiles instead as non-journalistic spaces, outside editorial oversight, and the journalistic boundaries.

These diverging perspectives reflect different outcomes of individual negotiation processes (Raemy, Hellmueller, and Vos 2024). Importantly, the data also sheds light on the reasons behind this diversity. Often, the key difference lies in the original purpose for which journalists created their accounts. Journalists who joined Instagram for professional reasons—typically older journalists—tend to use their accounts primarily for journalistic

purposes. In contrast, many younger journalists who initially used Instagram privately do not easily abandon this form of usage, even after entering the profession.

Yet, many of these journalists' report experiencing *context collapse* (Marwick and boyd 2011): a merging of private and professional spheres that brings conflicting role expectations and diverse audiences into the same digital space. This experience often triggers moments of disorientation and initiates new negotiation processes. These may either reinforce a private orientation or prompt a redefinition of the profile with a stronger journalistic focus.

Whether a journalist leans toward maintaining a private presence or shifting toward a more explicitly professional one appears to depend on four contextual factors: (1) *Perception* of a *representative function*, (2) *felt responsibility through visibility*, (3) *pressure to protect oneself and one's journalistic image*, and (4) *the need for personal branding*. The last factor emerges as particularly influential. Many younger journalists report that follower numbers on Instagram are increasingly viewed as a metric of professional value. They express growing frustration with how reach, rather than journalistic competence, is becoming a decisive factor in hiring decisions. This development is seen as confirmed by the growing tendency of media outlets to recruit influencers for journalistic roles—an approach many participants view critically, raising concerns about the shifting priorities in journalism.

In sum, this study highlights that personal Instagram profiles of journalists cannot be analyzed as journalistic spaces per se. Rather, they are dynamic, individually negotiated sites where journalistic and private roles co-exist, compete, and evolve – shaped by both platform affordances and broader professional developments.

For future research, it would be valuable to focus on how particularly younger journalists, who had been using Instagram long before their journalistic careers began, perceive the platform, and to further explore the significance of follower numbers in securing job opportunities within the field of journalism. Additionally, it is crucial to examine how followers perceive the role performances of journalists. Given that most participants in this study do not exclusively perform a journalistic role, it would be important to investigate whether followers can distinguish between the various roles these journalists perform, or if they attribute all actions to their journalistic identity, since this distinction may have implications for the public's broader perception of journalism.

Finally, while the sample in this study is diverse in terms of follower counts, ages, and areas of expertise, it is limited to journalists operating within a German, thus western, democratic context. Future research should explore how journalists in other contexts - especially those marked by different levels of public trust in the media, or different journalistic values and practices – perceive their roles and responsibilities on platforms like Instagram.

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