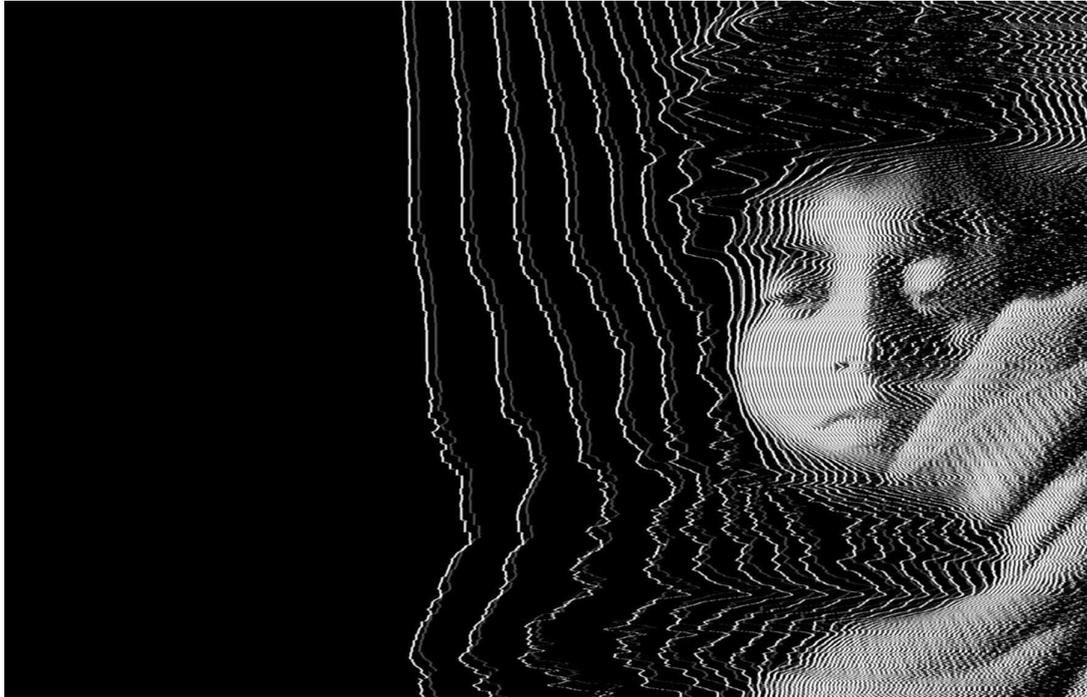


“She NFT navigating through the Male World”

Female Digital Artists’s use of Instagram to self-brand and promote their NFTs.

Figure 1



By IX Shells, 'Dreaming at Dusk', AvantArte

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“She NFT navigating through the Male World”: Female Digital Artists’ Use of Instagram to Self-brand and Promote their NFTs.

ABSTRACT

This study looks into how female digital artists utilise Instagram to establish their brands and showcase their NFTs (Non-Fungible-Tokens) in a field primarily male-dominated. Ultimately, it aims to answer the following research question: “*How do female digital artists use Instagram to establish their personal brands and promote their NFT artworks?*”. NFTs, blockchain-based assets, have completely changed the ownership and trading of art pieces, providing artists new opportunities for monetisation and self-expression. Despite the fluctuations of this young market, NFTs nevertheless reflect broader systemic issues, including gender disparities. This research focuses on how female digital artists face these challenges through self-branding on Instagram, a visual-based platform with an extended reach. By using a mixed-methods content analysis approach, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, the research analysed the Instagram profiles of selected female and male NFT artists, the latter of which was used as a control group. The qualitative analysis examined various profiles of visual-based elements, pictures, biographies, and captions. Instead, the quantitative analysis focused on metrics such as follower counts, following counts, and the frequency of use of emojis and story highlights. This comprehensive approach provided insights into the strategies or intentions of these artists regarding self-brand and self-promotion. The results indicated that female digital artists were more likely to blend personal and professional elements more frequently in their Instagram profiles than their male counterparts. They followed significantly more accounts, possibly indicating a more proactive engagement strategy that aims to foster community and some kind of reciprocal interaction. The female artists also use emojis and story highlights significantly more frequently than the male control group, adding depth to their visual storytelling and boosting engagement. These behaviours indicated a mix of self-expression and branding, portraying female artists as multifaceted and relatable figures within the NFT community. On the other hand, male digital artists often maintain a more polished and professional profile, mainly focusing on their art and technical skills. As they had a lower following-to-follower ratio, alongside minimal use of emojis and story highlights, it can possibly reflect their already established positions within the NFT landscape. Finally, this study demonstrates how female digital artists utilise Instagram for self-branding, self-promotion, and community building, to our understanding of art and gender differences. It also highlights the potential of NFTs in democratising the art world by giving marginalised artists a platform to showcase their work and challenge existing gender roles in the space.

KEYWORDS: Self-branding, NFT, Instagram, Digital Art, Self-promotion

Word count: 18015

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1. Introduction

The first NFT (Non-Fungible Tokens) art collection I ever saw was the one presented at the MOCO museum in Amsterdam on February 20th, 2022. I recall the collection being a modest one, yet I was mesmerised by it; I found the concept of NFTs so fascinating. The idea that a digital art piece could hold so much value and be owned by one single individual, despite the fact that digital content can be replicated endlessly, piqued my interest. Ultimately this exhibition was one of the inspirations for my master's thesis¹, which delves into the NFT landscape, specifically focused on the role of female² digital artists. While this initial fascination with these digital assets was caused by a personal encounter with an NFT exhibition, I soon realised that there was a broader conversation to be had. In January 2023, almost a year following my first NFT art exhibition, I had a conversation, in preparation for this thesis, with the two co-founders of ItaliaNFT, the first Italian NFT marketplace established in 2021. When I asked about any potential discrimination against women in the NFT space, they said that such discrimination didn't exist. Given that both co-founders were white males, their response reinforced my suspicion of a potential 'digital' gap and in general of gender differences, sparking my interest in exploring this issue further.

NFTs are blockchain-based digital assets and ensure the digital ownership of a variety of things such as videos, art, and contracts. They have been able to provide solutions for many digital artists and overall, the ownership of physical and virtual assets (Evans, 2022; Mekacher et al., 2022; Parham & Breitinger, 2022; Sharma et al., 2022). NFTs cannot be considered artworks in their own right. The term 'non-fungible token' in fact refers to a type of data encrypted unit on a digital ledger, thus a digital system that records transactions, most frequently an Ethereum 'blockchain'. Ethereum is one of the most popular blockchain networks and was established by Vitalik Buterin in 2013 to address the absence of smart contracts in Bitcoin's blockchain (Lambert, 2021; Parham & Breitinger, 2022). Since the year it was launched, several updated versions have been released to solve different issues encountered by its users. The decentralised nature of Ethereum allows for the use of smart contracts, which are utilised by many NFT projects to ensure the authenticity and ownership of digital assets (Lambert, 2021; Parham & Breitinger, 2022). As it consists of a specific data unit, an NFT is a "token" and it is "non fungible" as solely the owner of the NFT can access or transfer that specific data unit (Frye, 2021). As aforementioned, NFTs are created, or 'minted', using a decentralised network that generates new

¹ Upon revisiting the photos on my phone from the day of the exhibition to refresh my memory and pinpoint the exact date, I found images of the descriptions of artworks by Beeple and FEWOCiOUS. Despite not recalling these artists, it highlights the lasting impression NFTs had on me.

² In this paper when I mention female or male, it refers to which gender the individual identifies as and not the sex at birth.

'blocks' of data through the efforts of various nodes. Cryptography is utilised and these 'blocks' are linked together to store data, ensuring that each NFT is the only asset owned by a specific individual and that it is not interchangeable. This guarantee of authenticity and digital ownership is one of the main reasons why artists have been drawn to NFTs in recent years, despite their declining popularity (McAndrew, 2024; Mehr & Shahim, 2023; Parham & Breitinger, 2022). First created in 2014, NFTs have gained popularity in recent years due to their virality on social media, specifically as art pieces. The most infamous NFT artworks from when NFTs were at its most popular are some pieces from the collections Cryptopunks and Bored Ape Yacht Club. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, and the increased global online presence, the sudden surge in popularity of NFTs does not come as a surprise. They gained particular attention since the beginning of 2021, leading to steeply rising prices. The NFT market was first around \$605,000 in 2019, it then nearly reached nearly \$2.4 billion in 2022. Nevertheless, due to speculative trading and to its popularity on social media, it led to a dramatic rise and subsequent fall, experiencing a 50% drop to \$1.2 million in 2023 (McAndrew, 2024; Mehr & Shahim, 2023; Mekacher et al., 2022; Parham & Breitinger, 2022). Despite the recent drop, there remains a significant market for NFTs, the fluctuating popularity and monetary value emphasise the importance of investigating this recent phenomenon.

As briefly touched upon in the previous paragraph, social media has a significant impact on the NFT landscape. This does not solely manifest in terms of their popularity. Social media platforms, specifically Instagram, can play an important role in the manner digital artists brand themselves and promote their own art, especially in the NFT environment. NFTs are more prevalent on other social media platforms such as Discord, an instant messaging platform that allows individuals to call and message each other via the internet; the former has, according to their website, approximately 150 million users (Discord). Nevertheless, Instagram has approximately over 1 billion monthly users, significantly more than the Discord app, emphasising the potential extent of the reach of this platform and accessibility (Yu & Sharma, 2022). Instagram also allows artists to display their art pieces digitally, connect with their audience, cultivate a following, and self-brand in a way that is visually engaging. For female digital artists, the social media platform provides the possibility to establish themselves, gain visibility and challenge traditional gender norms within the tech and art industries that are predominately and inherently male-dominated (Gabriel, 2022; Syuleymanoglu, 2022).

Despite noticing a significant lack of literature dedicated to NFTs altogether, it presents an opportunity to explore NFTs in greater depth and contribute to the existing literature. While research on NFTs and blockchain technology has traditionally centred on their technical and economic implications for art, I wanted to shift the focus toward their social and cultural dimensions (Gabriel, 2022; Mehr & Shahim, 2023; Syuleymanoglu, 2022). Additionally, in regards to the self-branding practices of artists, this study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the ways female digital artists use platforms, specifically

Instagram, to navigate the NFT landscape and their practices. Moreover, the art market has historically been highly inaccessible to many marginalised communities (Michael & Reynolds, 2023), emphasising the importance of NFTs in providing more access and new opportunities for various artists, also due to the opportunity of anonymity.

This paper also contributes to the literature of different fields such as digital art, gender studies, and technology. In regards to the digital art field, it provides new insights on how emerging technologies in the art field such as NFTs are expanding it and offering new platforms for artists to express themselves. From a gender studies perspective, this research highlights the existing intersection of technology and gender. As in this thesis Instagram pages will be analysed as a self-branding tool, this paper also contributes to marketing and media studies. This study aims to contribute to the growing body of research on NFTs by focusing on female digital artists who produce, or mint, NFTs and their self-branding and promoting practices. By doing so, this study seeks to shed light on the potential of NFTs to promote diversity and inclusivity in the art world and tech industry.

Thus, the central research question of this study is: *“How do female digital artists use Instagram to establish their personal brands and promote their NFT artworks?”*. In order to answer the research question, content analysis was employed, both qualitatively and quantitatively. This method was chosen due to the possibility of analysing the visual and textual data extracted from the NFT artists’ Instagram page in a systematic way. Thus, it allows the exploration of the way artists present and brand themselves within the context of the NFT landscape. More information regarding the methodology can be found in the chapter outline.

Chapters Outline

In order to conduct this research, this thesis is structured as follows. The second chapter is dedicated to contextualising the thesis and laying the theoretical groundwork. The theoretical framework draws from the intersection between Science and Technology Studies (STS) and technofeminism, to observe how female digital artists navigate the NFT landscape. The literature review contextualises these themes by discussing the evolution of digital art as well as gender disparities existing in the NFT landscape and the role of Instagram as a platform for self-branding and community building.

Chapter three outlines the research methodology used to analyse how female digital artists use Instagram for self-branding. It explains the selection criteria employed to compile a list of artists, this chapter also details content analysis, qualitative and quantitative, and describes the coding protocol with Atlas.ti. Both female and male artists as the latter functioned as a control group. Furthermore, it also

discusses reflexivity and positionality, addressing potential biases that could influence the research and ensuring a comprehensive understanding of how these artists present themselves on Instagram.

The fourth chapter provides some contextual background of the selected artists. It provides some of their career accomplishments, noteworthy art pieces and significant collaboration, offering potentially some insights into their journey as artists and achievements. Subsequently, laying the foundation to understanding more deeply their self-branding practices and influences.

Following the contextual background chapter, the fifth chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the Instagram profiles of the female and male NFT artist. It explores various aspects such as profile pictures, biographies, followers and post content. It provides a qualitative as well as quantitative overview of the metric and content strategies and behaviours used by these artists to build their online presence.

Chapter six instead integrates the findings as well as the theoretical framework to discuss how female digital artists use Instagram to build their brands within the NFT landscape, specifically on Instagram. It points out how artists blend their profession with personal narratives, emphasising contemporarily the emotional labour that is present while they maintain their online presence and fabricate their online persona.

Finally, in the seventh and final chapter, the findings of the research are summarised. Additionally, it reflects on the potential implications of female digital artists' strategies and behaviours. The chapter also addresses the study's limitations and suggests potential new research, emphasizing the everchanging nature of digital art and the potential for NFTs to contribute to the art landscape and artistic practices.

2. Theoretical Framework & Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Digital Art and Technology Studies

Looking into digital art and technology studies can provide insights into how technology can shape the art world. Furthermore, it can give an understanding of how artists can use digital tools to create and distribute their NFTs and leverage platforms such as Instagram to showcase them. By studying these studies, it will provide a deeper understanding on the manner female digital artists use the platform not just to display their pieces but also to build their personal brands and engage with their audience. It will also allow me to understand the potential of NFT art to challenge traditional power structures in the art world and promote inclusivity and diversity within this environment.

The term "digital art" was first established in the 1980s to describe artworks created using painting programs developed on computers. Despite digital art first appearing in the 1980s it was not included in the art world until the late 1990s when the first digital art installations and artefacts began to be incorporated in the collections of some art galleries and museums. While there is no single definition of digital art, it can be broadly understood as the intersection between art and technology. As an umbrella term, digital art encompasses a wide range of artworks and artistic practices that cannot be easily defined by a singular set of aesthetics (Ghafariharivand, 2022). It is important to note that some digital art is created using digital technologies to produce traditional art objects such as photographs, prints, and sculptures. Other forms of digital art are "digital born" and are created, stored, and distributed entirely through digital technologies (Paul, 2022). This latter category is what I will be focusing on in this thesis. Furthermore, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization has defined digital art as the "conscious use of skill and creative imagination to produce artistic artefacts and cultural contents using new technologies" and Adérito Fernandes Marcos proposes digital art as: "art that explores the digital medium (tools, technologies, and contents) as a process or tool for creation, as an end-product (informative content and support), or as an artistic topic" (Marcos, 2007, p.98). This multifaceted understanding of digital art emphasises its ever-changing nature within the contemporary artistic landscape. Additionally, it highlights the significance of creative intent and artistic exploration within the digital realm, rather than just solely focusing on the technological aspect.

2.1.2 Gender and Technology

2.1.2.1 Technofeminism

Having established the context of digital art and technology studies, the next section of the text will be dedicated to the exploration of the gendered manifestations of technology, through the lens of technofeminism. As technology is predominantly a male-dominated domain, gender is embedded into it in a subtle and yet visible manner, thus it is not neutral (Bray, 2007; Wajcman, 2007). Furthermore, “symbols, metaphors and values” (Wajcman, 2007, p. 289) with masculine connotations have been incorporated within technology itself. Consequently, it implies difficulty in accessing the technology domain for women, even though it is not entirely inaccessible. Wajcman (2007) argues that technology is influenced by and influences gender relations. She aligns with the technofeminist perspective, which combines feminist studies with Science and Technology Studies (STS). This framework considers both the production and consumption of technology (Bray, 2007; Wajcman, 2007). Thus, for the data analysis in my thesis, both the production and consumption of Instagram are examined. Including aspects of the platform such as Instagram metrics and the way NFTs are promoted, as well as the artists’ self-brand.

Furthermore, Bray (2007), extends the argument by discussing that gender and technology co-produce each other, further nuancing it by stating that their interactions are performative and processual in nature. Drawing on Judith Butler’s (1988) concept of performativity, Bray views gender not as something fixed but rather as some kind of performance. It highlights the importance of behaviours and practices in terms of the way gender expresses itself in contexts of technology (Butler, 1988; Bray, 2007). Thus, analysis of the manner artists leverage things such as visual storytelling and interactive features to establish their personal brands and promote their NFTs. Processual perspective instead refers to the interactions being dynamic and unfolding over time. This aspect of the technofeminist framework, will allow for an analysis of the way female digital artists construct their brands and promotional practices (Butler, 1988; Bray, 2007).

2.1.2.2 Science and Technology Studies

This thesis will also make use of the domain of Science and Technology Studies, also known as Science, Technology, and Society (STS). It refers to the study of the scholarly study of science and technology from an interdisciplinary perspective of a wide range of social sciences and humanities fields born in the 1990s. When one refers to STS it refers to the study of the processes involved in the construction, development, maintenance, and change of scientific knowledge and technological artefacts. It also encompasses the study of the reciprocal relationships between science, technology,

society, and the environment, and how they co-constitute each other. This field emphasises how scientific and technological advances shape and are shaped by broader social and material contexts (Hess & Sovacool, 2020).

Given the technological nature of NFTs, it is essential to have a strong understanding of the intersection between gender and technology. Fox and colleagues (2006) discuss how technology can be associated with material objects and how its materiality can impact human activities; technology can both constrain and facilitate our actions. As technology has become an essential part of our lives, one encounters it in various spheres, physically and socially. Fox et al. (2006) stress the importance of comprehending how gender nuances cannot be separated from technological artefacts' design, meaning, and use. This is due to the fact that artefacts are "inseparable from the social meanings and practices associated with them" (Fox et al., 2006, page 2). Consequently, we can analyse NFTs and Instagram as technological artefacts with gendered implications, Fox and colleagues (2006) states that "if gender has been coded into a technology, that technology may reinforce gender patterns" (Fox et al., 2006, p. 2). If gender is coded into technology, it has the potential to reinforce gender patterns. While blockchain and the social media platform as the underlying technologies might appear as neutral, the design, ownership, and promotion of NFTs within online communities can reflect and potentially reinforce gender biases and demonstrate some gender differences in the use of Instagram.

2.1.2.3 Intersectionality

Intersectionality is an approach that does not separate the various social identities such as race, gender, and sexuality, but instead aims to observe the intersection of such identities. The term was first coined by Kimberè Williams Crenshaw in 1989 when criticising the legal realm for ignoring the overlapping systems of oppression and instead putting forward the notion of identity existing on a single axis (Nash et al., 2019). Additionally, this approach emphasises the interconnectedness of these forms of social discrimination and how they shape experiences of oppression and privilege. This must be kept in mind while researching female digital artists as they can face discrimination from a variety of sources, thus one has to maintain an intersectional perspective throughout the writing process and be mindful of it (Alper et al., 2016; Wekker et al., 2016).

2.1.3 Self-Branding and the importance of Community

Branding can take many forms and definitions. A brand, usually viewed as a marketing tool, with often the objective of self-branding to increase monetary gain, can be seen as a combination of attributes that are both tangible and intangible. These attributes are supposed to reflect the brand's

identity to the public and could be seen as a signifier of quality. Instead, branding refers to the act of developing an image or the desired image for the consumer, this can contribute to their satisfaction and loyalty. Branding has historically been associated with products specifically. Instead self-branding has a personal and more intimate quality to it (Kartik & Mishra, 2022). Self-branding refers to the way that individuals, in order to create a distinct identity and reputation, form a brand for themselves and manage and promote in a specific manner. With self-branding the individual needs to be aware at all times of their own strengths and unique selling points (USP) and utilise these factors to make them indistinguishable from others with a specific "brand" by utilising it with a strategy that has the aim of gaining visibility (Kartik & Mishra, 2022; Whitmer, 2019).

An essential aspect of self-branding is community. This is particularly the case currently as our existence is so centred within the digital realm, enabling individuals to connect with other like-minded ones without geographical constraints. If an individual, such as an artist or content creator, actively participates within a specific community, such as by establishing their presence and building relationships, it can increase their visibility and support (Whitmer, 2019). Furthermore, communities can provide individuals with collaborative opportunities that wouldn't be possible otherwise, content can be shared amongst them with the incentive of having similar interests or goals. In addition, an aspect of communities to not be underestimated is peer influence as it can have a significant impact on the manner in which personal brands are perceived by individuals and the interaction between the two (Whitmer, 2019). If positive interactions occur within a specific community it can foster a sense of trust and credibility in regards to the creator or artist, as well as create a loyal following. This loyal following ultimately is beneficial as it can amplify the reach and the impact of self-branding. This is the case as the community will advocate and support the artist or the creator's personal brand. Finally, communities are crucial for self-branding as they can be a source of constructive criticism and contemporarily, of validation. This is especially the case if one of the objectives of the artist or creator would be to refine their self-branding as they can get invaluable insights on the way their brand is perceived and opportunities for improvement. Overall, the presence of a community and consequently the engagement arising from it, are essential aspects of self-branding, as it can enhance a specific brand and establish a secure and genuine presence (Whitmer, 2019).

2.2 Literature Review

2.2.1 The Rise (and fall) of NFTs

Now that the theoretical framework has been discussed, it is necessary to first provide a brief history for a more thorough understanding of the topic in order to comprehend their significance and

potential implications. NFT sales witnessed a remarkable surge in 2021, reaching their peak popularity. However, over the past few years, sales have seen a rapid decline despite maintaining significant activity. Several networks, such as NFT18.com and Polygon, meticulously track every transaction involving NFTs on Ethereum. These platforms have emerged as invaluable tools, providing insights into the market's fluctuations over recent years. As previously discussed, NFTs are not just art pieces but also sports, music, and entertainment collectables. While the presence of NFT-like concepts can be traced back to the art world in 2010, the birth of the first minted NFT, "Quantum" by Kevin McKoy, occurred in 2014. CryptoKitties, one of the first NFT-related video games launched in 2017, brought significant attention to the technology. It allowed players to acquire, sell, and breed unique digital cats, showcasing the potential of NFTs as a tool for digital asset ownership. CryptoKitties were ultimately the collectables that first brought NFTs forward to the media attention (Mehr & Shahim, 2023). Nevertheless, in 2019, art-related NFT sales still represented a modest 12% of the combined value of those and collectables NFTs at around. By 2020, they had surged significantly, commanding a majority share of 67%. However, starting in 2021, collectables took the lead, dominating the market with an 84% share of the total value by 2023, leaving art NFTs trailing behind at only 16% (McAndrew, 2024).

Despite NFT art-related sales experiencing a significant decline since 2021, estimated at around 16% year-on-year, sales of art-related NFTs nearly reached \$2.4 billion in 2022, a sum that was still 100 times what it was in 2020. In 2019, the NFT market sale was around \$605,000, however thanks to its popularity on social media, it experienced a dramatic increase to \$2.9 billion due to speculative trading in early 2021. Just six months later the market experienced a significant downturn starting from 2022, due to the falling price of Ethereum (McAndrew, 2024). Consequently, it deterred many speculative buyers of art-based NFTs, prompting them to hold onto the art pieces acquired rather than resell them despite the monetary losses. This phenomenon resulted in a slowdown in resales. Previous research highlights a strikingly short average duration between the purchase and resale of art-related NFTs in 2021, standing at a mere 33 days, in stark contrast to the average resale period in the traditional art market, which typically spans 25 to 30 years. The value of the NFT art segment fell by a further 50% in 2023 at the sum of \$1.2 billion (McAndrew, 2024).

2.2.2 NFTs and Gender

Gender disparities in the NFT landscape reflect a broader systemic issue within the fields of technology and of the arts. Gaining a deeper understanding of these disparities provides context for analysing how female artists use branding to navigate the NFT space. Disparities regarding gender are noticeable in most fields, and the arts and culture are no exception. As a matter of fact, it was reported by Cameron and colleagues (2019) that between 2010 and 2015, at some of the most important auction houses, namely Sotheby's and Christie's, less than 10% of the fine art lots sold were by female artists.

In addition to highlighting the gender gap in the art market, the article's authors also discussed a report from 2015, which found that only 1 out of the 100 most expensive artworks sold that year was by a female artist. This underrepresentation of women in the arts is not limited to sales, as research conducted by the same authors revealed a gender differential among Yale graduates in fields related to access, such as education and market opportunities (Cameron et al., 2009). However, it is essential to note that discrimination in the arts and technology domains is not limited to gender. Other groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, may also face barriers to access and representation. Furthermore, technology, and consequently NFTs, has been formed within a racist and sexist context. Previous research indicates that the so-called crypto bro-culture persists in dominating NFTs as well as blockchain. This culture is defined as a "subculture that prioritises young men with obnoxious, toxic behaviour and above else, making it difficult to diversify an environment where bro culture is dominant" (Syuleymanoglu, 2022, p. 7). This sexist context is largely caused historically by the male dominance in the technology sector as well as the finance one, which have significantly influenced the development of blockchain and of the NFT landscape (Syuleymanoglu, 2022).

Additionally, Nguyen (2022) empirically analysed CryptoPunks, a popular NFT art collection. The analysis of the data revealed that the "Dark" skin NFTs were priced significantly less than the NFTs with "Light" or "Albino" skin, despite the former being rarer than the latter. The results of this study reveal the presence, unsurprisingly, of discrimination within the world of NFTs, further emphasising the lack of regulation. Consequently, technology marginalising minorities and specific communities also reinforces discrimination (Benjamin, 2019). These studies reveal and stress the importance of maintaining an intersectional approach throughout the research process. Understanding these systemic issues and working towards creating a more inclusive and diverse arts and technology landscape is crucial for promoting equity and opportunities for all. As NFTs are a form of technology, the rise of these assets has also raised questions regarding whether issues and reflections surrounding gender and technology are reflected within the world of NFTs, specifically in the digital art world. It was reported in the ArtTactic report that for 21 months between 2021 and 2022, female digital artists accounted for solely 5% of all NFT art sales. The intersection between technology, specifically observing NFTs, gender, and the art markets, could be fascinating and insightful due to the lack of research on this intersection. It has already been established that gender discrimination is embedded within technology, thus implicating it within the NFT landscape too.

Additionally, in their research, Zhang et al. (2022) explored the potential ethical issues that arise from CryptoPunks, one of the various NFT collections that have existed the longest. They found that inequality is prevalent both in the trading and generating stages of CryptoPunks, with 1.6 times more male CryptoPunks than female CryptoPunks. The study also revealed inequality within NFTs among individuals who use the social media platform Twitter, both in the generation and trading processes.

Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2022) reported a lack of censorship and ethical guidelines in the NFT market; this lack of regulation may contribute to the lack of diversity among NFT artists.

Given these findings, it is not surprising that there needs to be more diversity among NFT artists. However, some researchers have explored how NFTs can provide a more inclusive environment for Web 3.0 or Semantic Web. It refers to the most recent version of the internet that is decentralised and built on blockchains (Praful Bharadiya, 2023; Syuleymanoglu, 2022). Syuleymanoglu (2022) investigated how NFTs can provide a more inclusive environment by empowering women-led NFT projects. The author found that these projects mainly implement techno-centric and communication-centric practices to create social change in the environment, utilising technology as an empowering tool (Syuleymanoglu, 2022, p. 42). Overall, the issues surrounding gender and technology are not unique to the NFT world. However, the lack of regulation and censorship in the NFT market may exacerbate these issues. As NFTs continue to persist in the current art markets, it is essential to consider how they can be used to create a more diverse and inclusive art world.

2.2.4 Instagram as a Self-Branding tool

The social media platform Instagram allows individuals to share images and videos to a large audience. For instance, if their profiles are private, only the individual's following can view it, if it is public, anyone can access the account. This method of image sharing has not only completely changed how we interact with art pieces but has also empowered artists to create their own virtual gallery spaces (Mehr & Shahim, 2023). Artists have the unique opportunity in these environments to exhibit their work as well as offer peeks of their creative process. These virtual galleries spaces are a unique place for artists to engage directly with their audience. Additionally, they can receive feedback in real time, as well as support, and constructive criticism from their followers. As aforementioned, Instagram boasts an impressive user base of around 1 billion active monthly users, thus offering artists an unparalleled reach and potential audience (Mehr & Shahim, 2023). By making use of this platform, artists can not only showcase their artworks but also share some sort of behind-the-scenes of their artistic journey with their posts and stories, temporary posts that last 24 hours that can be viewed by tapping on the profile pictures of the users. This form of interactive approach can foster a sense of transparency however it can also transform the creative process into a form of co-creation and invite individuals to participate in the journey of the artist itself. Furthermore, Instagram can encourage excitement and anticipation around the artwork as it can function as a catalyst for the artworks exhibited on their pages, even more so if it goes 'viral'. Through regular updates and engaging content, artists can cultivate a loyal following, expanding their reach as well as attracting potential buyers and collectors (Mehr & Shahim, 2023). This engagement can lead to the formation of parasocial relationships, in which collectors feel a

deep connection to the artist and their work, further fueling their desire to support and acquire pieces from their favourite creators. In addition, all of this can occur without the artist having to depend on art critics, museums galleries, and curators. Overall, Instagram has the unique ability as a social media platform to create a dynamic virtual space for self-expression, audience engagement, and community building. It's a powerful tool that can launch artistic careers and foster deep connections between creators and collectors (Mehr & Shahim, 2023).

From a historical point of view, women have rarely been associated with the production of media, but rather with its consumption (Caldeira et al., 2018). Instagram and other social media platforms are very user-friendly and have been integrated into our everyday lives. Despite early technofeminist discussions depicting the internet in an overly optimistic manner, Instagram can be viewed as a self-branding political tool. Initially the internet, and thus social media platforms, were thought to be a space for “free and unrestricted experimentation with identity and gender” (Caldeira et al., 2018, p. 25). As Instagram is a platform where mostly visual content is shared such as images and videos, it can aid the analysis of gender representation. Furthermore, this social media platform is also widely utilised for self-branding practices and self-promotion (Caldeira et al., 2018). This is particularly the case among influencers, models, and artists. Another motivation for having selected Instagram is its institutional constraints as the platform's ‘Terms of Use’ restrict specific types of content, such as nudity, sexually explicit material, and violence. These restrictions mirror Instagram's ideologies and commercial interests, shaping the platform's gender representation politics. Additionally, Everyday activism can be practised by any individual with access to Instagram (Caldeira et al., 2018). This gives them the possibility to challenge dominant ideologies and stereotypes through means of asserting agency, experimenting with gender representations, and challenging traditional norms of femininity and masculinity. Finally, Instagram has both technological and cultural filters, which in turn can shape and constrain image-based representations. Additionally, these filters affect individuals on Instagram, from the way they present themselves, to what they decide to share on the platform, to the idealised and positive manner in which they portray themselves (Caldeira et al., 2018).

2.3 Research Question

As highlighted by the literature review, social media platforms such as Instagram play a significant role in helping like-minded individuals to connect as well as support personal identity formation (Caldeira et al., 2018). Instagram gives artists and creators the unique possibility to exhibit art without the support of organisations, such as museums and galleries. Additionally, the social media platform is an essential tool for these artists and creators for self-branding and can help foster a community consisting of supporters, such as buyers and collectors (Caldeira et al., 2018). Within the NFT landscape, these two aspects are essential for artists, especially female ones, to feel supported,

increase their visibility, and be presented with collaborative opportunities. There is a significant, yet limited, amount of literature on different aspects surrounding NFTs and the digital art market. However, there is a very finite amount of research that is focused on the artists themselves and their branding practices in an NFT context, it is mostly focused on the technical and economic implications of the digital assets. These concerns and issues identified led to the following research question: “*How do female digital artists use Instagram to establish their personal brands and promote their NFT artworks?*”. I am specifically interested in researching how female digital artists use Instagram to self-brand and promote their artworks. This research explores the intersection of gender, digital art and technology, focusing on the ways female artists navigate the male-dominated landscape. Despite the talent of female artists, they often experience underrepresentation and challenges that differ from the predominant male experience. I theorised that the Instagram pages of the artists would have manifested as a tool for self-expression, community building and development of their brand. Furthermore I also theorised that there would have been some gender differences between male and female artists in their self-branding practices and promotion of their art on Instagram.

3. Methodology

Initially, my intention was to interview artists, buyers, and experts. To find participants, I attempted to contact several individuals, as well as galleries and establishments in possession of NFTs, via email and social media platforms such as Instagram and LinkedIn. I believed that interviewing individuals involved in different manners with the NFT art market would have allowed me to have a more complete, nuanced, and eclectic understanding of the female digital artist experience within this sector. Examples include Sotheby's and Pace Gallery (specifically Pace Verso). However, I did manage to have a conversation with one artist, Elise Swopes, who provided valuable insights into her experiences as a black female artist in the NFT world.

Unfortunately, despite successfully initiating conversations with Elise Swopes, my initial attempts at recruitment yielded a disappointingly low response rate. This prompted me to explore alternative methods. Recognising Discord's significant presence in the NFT landscape, I expanded my search and joined the instant messaging platform. Communities such as Paris World (by Paris Hilton), World of Women, Bull Market Girlfriends, CryptoTechWomen, Tribe X, Iamverse, and Nudie Community caught my attention due to their focus on representation and inclusivity within the NFT realm, aligning with my research interests. However, upon joining these groups and expressing my interest, I encountered limited engagement from Discord users. It seemed that there was a reluctance to engage in conversations. This was likely due to privacy concerns and a natural wariness of unfamiliar researchers, despite my best intentions.

Due to the lack of response from artists and platforms, I decided to change my methodology and had to redirect my literature review. While initially researching artists for this thesis, I observed a significant online presence, particularly on social media platforms such as Instagram. These factors combined led me to shift to focus on analysing the self-representation and branding strategies of female digital artists on Instagram and their personal websites. In order to answer the research question: "*How do female digital artists use Instagram to establish their personal brands and promote their NFT artworks?*", content analysis was selected. Specifically, mixed methods as it offers a more balanced approach.

3.1 Content Analysis

Content analysis distinguishes itself from other qualitative analyses as it is methodologically explicit. Additionally, unlike more intrusive methods that involve direct interaction with individuals,

content analysis relies on pre-existing data, making it non-invasive (Rose, 2016). It consists of the systematic analysis of various types of data, such as textual, visual, or audio, to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within that specific data. According to the data analysed and the research objectives, content analysis can be quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. As organising and coding data, this type of analysis allows researchers to extract valuable implicit and explicit information, categorise it accordingly, and interpret and use coding schemes. By doing so, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the topic and generate new knowledge or insights (Kleinheksel, 2020; Stemler, 2015). Within content analysis, two further methodologies emerge. The first methodology, conceptual analysis, entails identifying and evaluating the occurrence and frequency of specific concepts across one or multiple texts. On the other hand, building upon conceptual analysis, relational analysis delves deeper by exploring the connections and relationships between different concepts identified in the data. This allows researchers to uncover underlying patterns and meanings (Rose, 2016; Harwood & Garry, 2003). Content analysis was first created as social scientists desired to analyse journalism from the emerging mass media, with the claim that this analysis would be “rigorous, reliable and objective” (Rose, 2016, page 85). Social scientists recognised the scale and the extent of the media reach and felt that no other method of analysis was able to do so, whilst being able to analyse large amounts of data. It has been argued that this method of analysis can help prevent bias to a certain extent as it does not rely on pre-existing categories (Rose, 2016). As this thesis is a mixed-methods content analysis, the quantitative content data analysis was also included in order to measure and quantify the engagement of both the female and male digital artists on Instagram, as well as their overall digital presence. Quantitative content analysis is a systematic research method that analyses textual, visual or audio content in order to identify patterns, trends and relationships within the data by making appropriate calculations and counting content (Stemler, 2015).

Despite this type of analysis being very beneficial due to numerous reasons, content analysis has however been met with criticism and concerns that should be addressed in order to provide a balanced overview of content analysis. One of the first criticisms of this specific methodology derives from its subjectivity, which relies on human interpretation to categorise and analyse the data, even though this is the case for many types of content analysis. According to the specific researcher, it could potentially lead to potential bias as the data is interpreted differently (Kleinheksel, 2020; Stemler, 2015). Further criticism of this methodology stems from the validity of content analysis. Some critics have argued that a potential lack of validity is caused by the nuances of the data not being captured by the coding categories. Finally, critics have previously discussed the limited generalizability. As the nature of the content of the data is very specific to the context, likely, the results born from this methodology do not apply to broader populations or settings (Kleinheksel, 2020; Stemler, 2015). Throughout the data collection and analysis, I attempted to be mindful of such criticisms, remain alert regarding potential biases, and maintain a reflexive approach.

3.2 Positionality and Reflexivity

As aforementioned, my interest in the topic of this thesis mostly stems from personal experience, being a self-identifying woman, was a further reason for interest in the choice of the topic. As this can imply some kind of bias on my part, throughout the writing process I attempted to be mindful of my own positionality as a female and maintain as much as possible a subjective outlook on the matter. Furthermore, my academic background is very much unrelated to Technology and Science Studies (STS), and prior to my master thesis, my knowledge and understanding of NFTs was limited. Thus, throughout the entire research and writing process, I ensured that I learned the blockchain and NFT realm as much as possible in order to interpret the data critically and reflexively rather than just in an observational way. This prior lack of knowledge was also an advantage as it forced me to handle the data with caution in an attempt to reduce the bias.

While selecting the artists for this research, I attempted to select artists that had a range of backgrounds, different from my own. Taking into consideration sexuality, ethnic background, age, and socio-economic status. Some of these factors, such as the latter, were difficult to establish due to privacy reasons. I aimed to ensure diversity among the artists to the fullest extent practicable. As a white female researcher, with a privileged background, I recognised thanks to the research for this thesis, the importance of bringing forth voices and individuals who could be marginalised or underrepresented. As previously discussed, maintaining an intersectional approach is essential to investigate the complexities and nuances of gender, race, and other intersecting identities within the digital art world, as well as their interplay. As aforementioned, I ultimately aim to contribute to a more balanced and nuanced portrayal of the female digital artist experience within the NFT landscape.

3.3 Participants

As I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of female digital artists who produce NFTs and their self-branding practices, I will also be observing a group of selected male digital artists that will function as a control group to ensure comprehensive analysis and allow for meaningful comparisons between the two groups. Initially, I conducted preliminary research on social media and art communities on Discord to gain an understanding of the current market and discover emerging and established artists. Following this I developed a selection criteria for the artist's preliminary research and confronted a series of websites. Firstly, they had to be female or male-identifying artists that mint NFTs. Secondly, they had to be present on social media, specifically Instagram, and had to have a following of at least

12,000 as I wanted the artists to have a notable presence on the social media platform in order to observe the community dynamics within their page. The final list of artists compiled of 5 female digital artists and 5 male digital artists. When I first compiled the list of the male digital artists as the control group I discovered to my surprise that several of the male artists that I initially intended to include in my research did not have an Instagram account. I theorised that perhaps this was the case as perhaps women necessitate more of a space to promote and exhibit their work, where they can build a community and feel supported based on the literature and theory (Caldeira et al., 2018; Whitmer, 2019). Furthermore, while compiling the male artists I also observed that there was a striking prevalence of white male artists from the United States amongst the various online lists that I consulted during my research. Despite my efforts to diversify the sample, based on factors such as sexuality, ethnicity, age and socio-economic status, in this instance was significantly more challenging in comparison to the female sample. This could perhaps be explained by intersectionality, suggesting that specific social identities, within the NFT landscape, in particular the ones of white males, can hold a position of greater visibility and privilege.

Additionally, I intended for the artist that I selected to have made a significant impact on the NFT landscape. I looked at various lists on the internet. I included research strings such as “leading NFT artists” and “most important NFT artists” to compile lists from online sources. Considering the significant lack of female representation on the general lists that I discovered, I had to include search strings such as “leading female NFT artists” and “female NFT artists”. Additionally, to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive study, as well as to capture a range of perspectives and experiences, I attempted to aim for diversity and representation for reasons previously discussed. While compiling the artists, I considered factors such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, age, and background. Additionally, for the female group, I reported the frequency of names that appeared in my search results. The following is a list of artists compiled from my research, which I will analyse in this thesis. I believe that each artist can bring a unique perspective to this research and has the potential to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the female experience in the NFT landscape, specifically on Instagram.

Female Group

- Elise Swopes @swopes
- Krista Kim @kristakim
- Maliha Abidi @maliha_z_art
- Itzel Yard @ix.shells

- Yam Karakai @yamkarakai

Male Group (control)

- Pak @muratpak
- Beeple @beeple_crap
- Tyler Hobbs @tylerxhobbs
- Dimitri Cherniak @dmitricherniak
- FEWOCiOUS @fewocious

3.4 Data Collection

To collect the data for this study, I employed a systematic approach using full-screen screenshots to capture the relevant elements of each artist's Instagram profile. I accessed the artists' accounts via my personal Instagram account on April 29, 2024. Given the exploratory nature of my research and the absence of similar studies, I aimed to document a comprehensive snapshot of each profile, focusing on elements like the biography, profile picture, the first 8 story highlights, and the most recent six posts, including pinned posts and reels. I opted to include only 6 posts per artist, as this was the maximum number available on Pak's profile (Pak, 2024), ensuring consistency across all profiles analysed. For each post that was part of a series or carousel, I chose to capture only the first image as a representative example of the series, providing a consistent basis for analysis. This method was chosen to balance the need for comprehensive data with the practical constraints of screenshot analysis. I decided against including Instagram comments in my data collection as, upon initial review, the level of engagement between artists and their followers was lower than expected, concluding this data as less useful for my study. The 97 screenshots collected were organised into folders on my laptop, each named after the corresponding artist. These folders were further divided into categories based on the artists' self-identified gender, labeled as "female" and "male." In hindsight, renaming the screenshots at the time of collection would have streamlined the organisation process and facilitated easier identification. Following the data gathering, I uploaded the screenshots into Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. This step allowed me to systematically code and analyse the visual and textual content from the Instagram profiles. I began by familiarising myself with the data, reviewing the screenshots, and noting initial observations. This preparatory work was essential for the subsequent coding process, which aimed to uncover patterns and themes relevant to my research objectives. This detailed approach to data collection and organisation ensured a solid foundation for analysing how female digital artists use Instagram to establish their personal brands and promote their NFT artwork.

3.5 Coding protocol

To analyse the data, I employed a thorough and systematic coding process using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. To ensure accuracy and thoroughness, I utilized a combination of different coding techniques, involved at different stages. I began the analysis with open coding, a method that involves immersing oneself in the data, by repeatedly reading or observing it, in order to identify certain concepts and meanings (Boeije, 2010). Each piece of data was examined to notice emerging patterns. Open coding gave me the possibility to develop a broad set of preliminary codes that reflected the diverse topics included in the content. After having established the preliminary list of codes through open coding, I shifted to axial coding. This method of coding instead involves the re-organization and re-categorisation of the existing codes based on their mutual relationship, allowing for a more structured analysis. This is possible also with the aid of visual tools if needed, such as diagrams or with a matrix, in order to visualise such relationships and connections (Boeije, 2010). During this type of coding, I identified core themes and sub-themes, allowing me to determine the dominant elements and the less significant.

Throughout the coding process, both descriptive and interpretive codes were utilised. The former were used to categorise explicit content, such as a specific event or brand the artists collaborated with. The latter, interpretive coding, were instead applied to capture underlying meanings and insights, such as the artists' self-branding strategies and the engagement with their audience. The combination of these two types of codes, I was able to identify the overlying as well as the nuanced aspects of the artists' Instagram profiles. In total, 117 codes were utilised, they can be found in Appendix A.

Furthermore, whilst the coding process, some codes were deleted or refined. For instance, initially codes related to racial discrimination were included, as these themes were expected to emerge. However, after the first few rounds of coding, no relevant data supporting these themes were individualised, leading to the removal of these codes.

In addition to the qualitative content analysis, I collected quantitative data focusing on specific metrics from the Instagram profiles. These metrics included follower and following counts, total number of posts, and the number of story highlights. These metrics were also analysed to provide a numerical perspective on the artists' digital presence and engagement strategies, complementing the qualitative insights. The data collected for the quantitative content analysis was subsequently analysed in SPSS, a statistical software, in order to calculate, organise and analyse the various metrics. Relevant statistical measures such as averages and frequencies were measured, were subsequently compiled in two tables, summarising the key quantitative indicators to support the overall analysis. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, multiple checks and updates were conducted throughout the coding and analysis

process. This involved re-evaluating the codes, reviewing the collected data, and making necessary adjustments to the analysis approach. These checks were essential in maintaining the integrity of both the qualitative and quantitative analyses, ensuring that the findings were not just robust but also credible.

4. Contextual background: The Artists

Before delving into the data analysis chapter, in this chapter I will provide further background regarding the NFT artists that have been included within the research, for a deeper understanding of their backgrounds and accomplishments. They are short in order not to overwhelm the reader and to maintain engagement. It is important to preface that the summaries below are based on information that is available to the public, they might not fully capture the artists' experiences or also be an accurate one.

4.1 The Female Artists

4.1.1 Elise Swopes

According to her private website, Elise Swopes is an American self-taught artist and entrepreneur renowned for her innovative approach to digital art, particularly her surreal cityscape photography (Swopes). She distinguishes herself as one of the first artists who exclusively uses her iPhone throughout the entire artistic process of creating NFTs, from capturing the image to editing and finalising the piece. Beyond her entrepreneurial ventures, she is committed to community work, leveraging her influence and resources to support various social causes. Swopes is also the founder of the Sunrise Art Club, a Web3 impact agency dedicated to empowering individuals and promoting inclusivity in the digital art space (Swopes). In addition to this, she co-founded Night on the Yard, a platform designed to provide incarcerated artists with the opportunity to engage with Web3 technologies and sell their own NFTs (Jean-Pierre, 2024; Swopes). Active on Instagram since 2011, she has maintained a significant presence on the platform, where she shares her art. Currently, Swopes serves as an evangelist for Adobe, a role that involves speaking at Adobe Max keynotes, advocating for Adobe's products and services, and requires a deep understanding and expertise in the field (Jean-Pierre, 2024).

4.1.2 Kristina Kim

Kristina Kim is a Canadian-Korean artist based in Singapore, known for incorporating vibrant colours within her artwork light and digital technology, specifically shifting gradients, with the addition of sound at times (About Krista Kim; Wikimedia Foundation, 2024a). She is also Vogue Singapore's metaverse editor and has collaborated with numerous artists such as Steve Aoki and luxury brands such as Lamborghini, Louis Vuitton and Mercedes Benz (About Krista Kim). Some of her most famous

artwork, *Continuum*, has been exhibited at Times Square in New York, meant to be a space for individuals to decompress during the Covid-19 pandemic, advocating for mental health. Krista Kim's main inspiration in fact was the Zen Gardens from when she lived in Japan for 3 years (Raphael, 2024). Despite this milestone, what brought her to the forefront of the digital art world was *Mars House*, the first ever NFT house that was also subsequently sold. She also founded the Techism movement in 2014, which explores the concept of digital consciousness and views technological innovation as an artistic medium (About Krista Kim; Raphael, 2024; Wikimedia Foundation, 2024a).

4.1.3 Maliha Abidi

Born and raised until her early adolescence in Pakistan, Maliha Abidi is a Pakistani-American multidisciplinary artist and author (About Maliha Abidi). At the age of 14, she and her family migrated to the United States and being an immigrant from South Asia has had a significant impact on her art (Ezzo, 2023). Her art is characterised by the use of bright and bold colours, in the hopes of attracting the public and making it engage with complex issues that impact the current society. She is an avid advocate for social justice, particularly on topics such as women's rights, female education, and mental health. She is also the founder of Women Rise NFTs, a collection of 10,000 fictional women's portraits, the earnings from these portraits contribute to charities such as the Malala Fund and The Girl Effect (About Maliha Abidi; Ezzo, 2023).

4.1.4 Itzel Yard

Itzel Yard, also known as IX Shells on NFT platforms, is an Afro-Caribbean artist and self-taught coder and generative artist born and based in Panama (Avant Arte -b; Unit London, 2024; Shrivastava, 2021). [Generative art utilises algorithms and autonomous systems in order to create artworks, which can be done via a computer program, a machine, and so on.] In 2021, she sold her NFT art piece '*Dreaming at Dusk*' and unexpectedly became the highest-selling female NFT artist, by selling it at \$2 million (Unit London, 2024; Shrivastava, 2021). Profits from the art piece went to Tor Project, a research education non-profit. She co-founded and leads Creative Code Art, an online community with the aim of supporting and facilitating networking with other emerging digital artists (Shrivastava, 2021). She has also collaborated with Algorithmic Justice League, PleasrDAO, Girls Who Code and with TOR multiple times, impacting both the digital art community as well as social impact initiatives (Shrivastava, 2021).

4.1.5 Yam Karakai

The French artist Yam Karakai, currently based in Portugal, is the co-founder and creative director of World of Women (WoW), a P.F.P. (profile picture) collection consisting of thousands of different female NFT avatars with the aim of inclusivity (World of Women). It was born out of frustration of wanting to be part of the emerging NFT movement however she could not find P.F.Ps that resembled

her. She desired for this collection to be representative of any woman (Fischer, 2022; NFTevening, 2024). While setting up WoW, she designed the avatars, and her partner planned the strategy and social media presence. Yam Karakai is also a United Nations Sustainable Development Goals ‘ally’ of the Action Campaign. This role consists of advocating and promoting the UN SDG through her art and engagement with her community (World of Women). Besides her involvement in social impact, she also sold one of her pieces whilst celebrating Women’s History Month through the prestigious auction house Christie’s (Fischer, 2022).

4.2 The Male Artists

4.2.1 Pak

The anonymous artist Pak, formerly known as Murat Pak, has been a digital artist for the past 20 years and is one of the leading NFT artists. Despite some speculation, his identity remains concealed (Sothebys; Wikimedia, 2024c). Pak’s art pieces are characterised by the use of geometric shapes and generative digital art, at times within his art one can find hidden messages. His highest-selling art piece ‘Merge’, was sold at the whopping \$91.8 million in sales, one of the highest ever selling NFTs. His art has been sold on various platforms such as Sotheby's, Nifty Gateway, MakersPlace, SuperRare, and Async Art (Wikimedia, 2024c). Besides their art, they are known for creating in 2014 Archillect, an AI with the purpose of being utilised as a curation platform. Pak is also the founder and lead designer of the studio Undream and is known for also creating a platform that permanently removes from circulation an NFT of choice by the owner in return of cryptocurrency (Sothebys).

4.2.2 Beeple

Pak is often credited with introducing NFTs to Beeple, also commonly known as Mike Winkelmann, an acclaimed artist born and raised in the United States (Wikimedia, 2024b). His most famous art piece, ‘Everydays- the First 5000 Days’ (Figure 2), made over the course of 13 years, is one of the most well known NFT art pieces and it was sold for \$69 million by the art auction house Christie’s, consisting of a collage of the first 5000 Everydays made (BEEPLE; Christies; Wikimedia, 2024b). The importance of this piece is threefold, it the first NFT art piece to be sold by such an auction house and additionally, it was the first ever NFT minted specifically for an auction house. Furthermore, it was the first NFT that was paid in Ether (ETH), the cryptocurrency of Ethereum. Beeple’s subjects can vary and they are utilised in absurd scenes whilst making political and social commentary (Christies). He has also made concert visuals for Billboard artists such as Justin Bieber, One Direction and Eminem (BEEPLE).

4.2.3 Tyler Hobbs

Tyler Hobbs, from Austin, Texas, is one of the pioneer generative NFT artists. He first worked as a software engineer at a startup in his hometown, until he started adding codes to his art. In 2014 he began blogging about his process and thanks to the blogging, he developed some sort of loyal fanbase, mostly other coders interested in his artistic process (Pace Gallery, 2024). His most famous collection is 'Fidenza', consists of 999 NFTs, each of these NFTs was generated by an algorithm coded by Hobbs, representing distorted Mondrian paintings (Small, 2022). Tyler Hobbs is also the co-creator of 'QQL', a collaborative generative art experiment, through which individuals have the possibility of generating NFTs with the algorithm (Gazelli Art House). His art pieces have been included in auctions by the renowned houses Christie's and Sotheby's and was the first artist to present an NFT exhibition at one of the Pace Gallery locations (Pace Gallery, 2024).

4.2.4 Dimitri Cherniak

Canadian artist Dimitri Cherniak began his involvement with crypto in 2014, and is too a generative NFT artist, in fact he considers automation as his "artistic medium" (Moco Museum). He is most commonly known for the collection Ringers, consisting of 1,000 NFTs automatically generated and characterised by geometric shapes. In 2023 one of his art pieces from that collection, Ringers #879, also nicknamed 'the Goose', was sold for \$6.2 million by Sotheby's and reported it as "the second most valuable work of generative art ever sold at an auction" (Avant Arte- a). He is also reknown for creating a unique p5js, a library for creative coding, script that automatically produces one-of-a-kind pieces of art. Like Tyler Hobbs, his background stems from engineering, in terms of his education as well as career (Artnet).

4.2.5 FEWOCiOUS

The 20-year-old Victor Langlois, also professionally known as FEWOCiOUS, first began creating digital art at the ripe age of 13 in Las Vegas, his hometown. For the artist it was a means of escapism, as he was dealing with loneliness, a difficult family life and coming to terms with being transgender (FEWOCiOUS). After selling his first NFT at the age of 17, he was able to move to Seattle where he continued his career as an NFT artist. FEWOCiOUS started gaining a following when he began selling his NFTs on the online platforms of SuperRare and Nifty Getaway. In 2021, to celebrate "Pride Month", he hosted an auction alongside the auction house Christie's that sold for \$2.16 million (FEWOCiOUS). His art is characterised by pop surrealist elements with the use of bright and vibrant colours, meant to reflect his emotional state at the time of the art piece creation (CryptoArt). He uses his Ipad to create his digital art however he also uses more 'traditional' art making tools such as paint and canvases. One

of his famous NFT collaborations was the design of a pair of NFT sneakers with RTFKT and each sale in the auction came with a tangible pair of shoes (Christies, 2021).

5. Results

Table 1. Instagram metrics

Artist	Number of Post	Number of Followers	Number of Following	Number of Stories	Profile Details
Beeple	3,448	2.2M	1,038	6	High post activity, humorous and approachable bio.
Dmitri Cherniak	619	16,000	469	0	Focuses on automation in art, concise professional bio
FEWOCiOUS	1,691	58,700	2,941	10	Includes personal and professional details, high post activity
IX Shells	48	30,800	3,681	56	Concise bio emphasizing her art and affiliations with Sotheby's
Krista Kim	980	56,400	6,374	8	Focuses on Ai, Metaverse, and blockchain
Maliha Abidi	472	79,500	570	24	Multidisciplinary artist with a strong focus on advocacy and international presence
Pak	6	12,300	1	0	Minimalist bio, emphasizes anonymity and art
Swopes	2,476	269,000	2,933	88	Balanced personal and professional bio, high engagement
Tyler Hobbs	1,114	36,800	780	17	Primarily art-focused bio with references to own projects
Yam Karakai	42	14,800	619	4	Emphasizes diversity and storytelling in her own art

5.1 Profile Pictures

Every single female NFT artist included themselves to some capacity in their own profile pictures. Some female artists added a less clear self-image profile picture such as Elise Swopes and Krista Kim (Kim, 2024; Swopes, 2024). The former included her full figure not facing the camera and the latter used an image of her face being partially concealed by her art. All of the other artists featured

as their profile pictures their own clear images. It is worth mentioning that the profile picture is the only instance in which the artist IX Shells includes her own image in her profile (Yard, 2024). Instead, the male digital artists used either their art, a digital portrait of themselves or their symbol as their profile picture. Pak is an example of the latter, as his profile picture is his symbol, a simple black ring with a white background (Pak, 2024). Other artists, such as FEWOCiOUS and Dmitri Cherniak, used abstract and artistic elements in their profile pictures (Cherniak, 2024; FEWOCiOUS, 2024). Tyler Hobbs instead made a digital portrait of himself (Hobbs, 2024).

5.2 Followers & Following

Table 1 is a brief summary of the Instagram metrics of the various artists part of my thesis. Included are the number of posts, followers, following and story highlights from the day of the data collection. One can observe that generally, female artists have a higher number of followers in comparison to the male artist. However, the average number of followers for male artists ($M=424,760$, $SD = 944,805.89$) was significantly skewed due to Beeple's exceptionally high follower count (2.2 million). Excluding Beeple, the average for male artists drops is significantly lower. (Beeple, 2024). The female artist follower average is calculated to be 90,100 ($SD = 94,857.34$) whilst the male artist follower average is 424,760, despite the male artist having the largest following after Beeple is FEWOCiOUS with 58,700 followers (Beeple, 2024; FEWOCiOUS, 2024). Swopes doesn't have as high a follower number as Beeple, however it is around the substantial number of approximately 269,000 (Swopes, 2024). All the other artists ranged anywhere between 12,300 (Pak, 2024) to 79,500 (Abidi, 2024). Regarding the number of accounts followed by the artists, there was also a range. The anonymous NFT artist Pak follows only one account, while the artist Krista Kim follows 6,374 accounts (Kim, 2024; Pak, 2024). The female digital artists followed significantly more accounts than the male group, almost 3 times as much. The former group followed on average 2,835.4 ($SD = 2,255.59$) accounts while the latter group followed on average 1045.8 ($SD = 1,308.71$), indicating for the women a high following-to-follower ratio and possibly a higher reciprocal engagement, and a lower one for the men. Only the artist Maliha Abidi had a low ratio in comparison to the other female digital artists as she followed 570 accounts while she has a following of 79,500 (Abidi, 2024).

Table 2. Instagram metrics analysis

	N. of Posts average	N. of Followers average	N. of Following average	N. of Stories average	N. of Bio word count	N. of Emojis used
Female Artists	1607.2	90,100	2835.4	36	17.2	18.5
Male Artists	1375.6	464,760	1045.8	6.6	11.4	1.4

5.3 Instagram Biographies

Female artists tended to have longer biographies that include professional as well as personal information. In contrast, male artists' biographies were shorter and more focused on their professional achievements, with less emphasis on personal aspects. The average word count for female biographies was higher ($M = 17.2$, $SD = 6.98$) compared to male biographies ($M = 11.4$, $SD = 7.64$). Pak had the shortest biography with only 2-3 words, while Maliha Abidi had the longest biography with 23 words (Abidi, 2024; Pak, 2024).

Regarding more specifically the content of the Instagram biographies of the artists, one could observe more differences amongst the two groups. Female digital artists were more likely to include in their profiles both professional achievements as well as personal aspects. As a matter of fact, Swopes included in her bio her career at Adobe, her advocacy work and where she was located "CHI ✈️ NYC" (Swopes, 2024). In a similar manner, Maliha Abidi also listed her various professional titles and geographical locations. (Abidi, 2024). Furthermore, several of the female NFT artists emphasized in their biographies their own involvement in community projects and social impact work. This is exemplified by several artists, such as Maliha Abidi including in her biography her being the founder of @womenrisenft, highlighting her commitment to empowering women within the NFT landscape (Abidi, 2024). Similarly, Yam Karakai in her profile included her role as a UN SDG 'ally' (Karakai, 2024). Women however also included professional achievements and affiliations with various prominent organizations. As a matter of fact, Kristina Kim included in her Instagram biography her involvement with the World Economic Forum and IX Shells included her affiliation to the art auction house Sotheby's (Yard, 2024). Female artists also included aspects of their own culture in their biographies, exemplified by Yam Karakai, whose biography is situated on the right side of the page, imitating arabic and including an arabic word. Furthermore, IX Shells also defined herself as a "Caribbean Glitch" (Yard, 2024).

Male digital artists instead focused more on their art and various other projects rather than other aspects of their own identity or personal life. Pak had a very minimal biography however he included Archillect, his AI curation platform. Some artists focused on their profiles on their artistic medium and processes (their craft). Tyler Hobbs in fact describes in his biography the artistic process behind his NFTs, saying how he works “with algorithms, plotters and paint” (Hobbs, 2024). Similarly, Dmitri Cherniak included in his biography that “automation is [his] artistic medium” (Cherniak, 2024). The male artists instead were more focused on their ongoing NFT projects, such as Beeple that includes in his Instagram biography “16+ years of everydays”, a reference to his infamous series. Tyler Hobbs also mentions his ongoing projects, such as ‘*Fidenza*’ and ‘*QQL*’ (Hobbs, 2024). Overall the male digital artist placed less emphasis on their own personal achievements but instead more on their professional milestones and artistic methods.

5.4 Caption and Post Content Analysis

The content of the male artists usually was concentrated on their art and its promotion. The artists Pak and Dmitri Cherniak only posted their artwork on their Instagram page (Cherniak, 2024; Pak, 2024). Furthermore, the artist Tyler Hobbs mostly focused on posting his NFTs; however, he also posted his first artwork book “Order/Disorder”, and promoted it in collaboration with Unit London, the art gallery that published the book (Hobbs, 2024). The only male artist who had a distinguishable approach to Instagram, compared to the other male artists, was FEWOCiOUS. In fact, only 1 of his posts were solely dedicated to the presentation of his art (FEWOCiOUS, 2024).

Overall female NFT digital artists included themselves more in Instagram posts in comparison to the male digital artists. The artist Swopes was the artist that included herself the most in her posts, in tutorials on how to utilize Adobe, or also simple reels (Swopes, 2024). The artist Yam Karakai not only included herself in several of her posts, she also included her partner in two of those (Karakai, 2024). The male artist FEWOCiOUS was the male artist that included himself the most in his posts, he had only one post which was solely dedicated to his art, his Instagram account is mostly a visual personal diary or blog, acting closer to an ‘influencer’ on the platform rather than utilizing it for art promotion. It is noteworthy that he also has a separate account solely dedicated to his art (FEWOCiOUS, 2024).

The male artists were usually more focused on showcasing and presenting the artwork rather than adding personal elements to their Instagram pages. In fact, the artists often opted for minimalistic captions, this is exemplified by Pak’s captions that were simply the title of his artworks, consisting of either one or two words long, such as “Complexity” (Pak, 2024) or “The Cube” (Pak, 2024). Similarly,

Dmitri Cherniak's captions were also the title of the works, however some were slightly longer, examples of such titles are "Questions for Nannies" and "Recursive Ringer Eclipse" (Cherniak, 2024). Interestingly, in one instance he did not include the title of the art piece nor a caption altogether. Beeple, compared to the aforementioned artists, had a more recognisable and distinct style in his caption posts and artwork titles, as he consistently used all-caps titles for his posts, such as "UNDER THE RADAR" (Beeple, 2024). Nevertheless, in other posts dedicated to events he had longer captions, offering a brief description of his event "Digital Art Death Match" (Beeple, 2024). Artists like Tyler Hobbs in his captions would not only present the artwork title, however he also would discuss the process of the NFT and mention the other artists that contributed to the algorithms that produced the art piece (Hobbs, 2024). Tyler Hobbs would also directly address his public and encourage the users to join his Discord page (Hobbs, 2024). As previously discussed, FEWOCiOUS, had a different approach to his Instagram page compared to the other male artists (FEWOCiOUS, 2024). This was also reflected in his captions, in which he blended brief personal anecdotes to informal professional updates. Examples were "studio dayzzzz" (FEWOCiOUS, 2024) and "painted my jeans, had banana pudding & saw a cool movie & cool statues" (FEWOCiOUS, 2024), in which he employed an informal tone, briefly detailing the content of the Instagram carousels, and updating his followers on the progress of his creative journey.

The female artists had significantly longer captions and often included both professional and personal content. When discussing their NFTs, they would instead usually go in more detail compared to the male group, with an approach similar to Tyler Hobbs. Only except Swopes, when posting her artwork she would adopt a very minimal caption consisting solely of her artwork titles, not providing any further information, mimicking some of the male artists' captions. Nevertheless, her other caption posts were significantly lengthier, specifically her pinned post. The post was dedicated to her new job offer to Adobe. Maliha Abidi, in her post described in detail her invitation by Outernet Global to display her own work in one of the "largest public spaces in Europe" (Abidi, 2024). She also references another artist featured in this study, Kristina Kim, as inspiration, mentioning how she, alongside another artist, had the opportunity to exhibit her artwork at Art Basel and at the Moma. She is also one of the only artists which make use of hashtags, such as '#outernetgloba' "#thisislondon" and "#publicartspace" (Abidi, 2024).

5.5 Pinned Posts & Story highlights

The number of posts varied significantly among artists. Beeple had the highest number with 3,448 posts, while Pak had only 6 (Beeple, 2024; Pak, 2024). The average number of posts for female artists was $M = 1,607.2$, $SD = 1,039.60$, and for male artists $M = 1,375.6$, $SD = 1,245.31$. The most noticeable difference of Instagram metrics between the two groups was the number of story highlights. Female digital artists had significantly more story highlights ($M = 36$, $SD = 29.18$) compared to male

artists ($M = 6.6$, $SD = 6.61$). The number of story highlights of female digital artists ranged between 4 and 88 story highlights, Kristina Kim and Swopes respectively (Swopes, 2024). Male digital artists had either a few or no story highlights, such as Pak and Dmitri Cherniak, with the exception of Tyler Hobbs had, at the time of the data collection, 17 story highlights (Cherniak, 2024; Hobbs, 2024). Swopes had the most with 88 story highlights, while Krista Kim had 8 (Swopes, 2024; Kim, 2024). The most active male artist was Beeple with 3448 posts, and the most active female artist was Swopes with 2476 posts (Beeple, 2024; Swopes, 2024). Each of them had a high posting rate, and also a high following account. Beeple had however a significantly lower number of story highlights in comparison to Swopes (Beeple, 2024; Swopes, 2024).

The content of the story highlights also varied according to the gender of the artist included. Male artists were predominantly focused on showcasing their partnerships and ongoing projects. For instance, Tyler Hobbs had several ones dedicated to his generative art project ‘*QQL*’, such as “*QQL Monthly*” and “*QQL: Ananalog Sets*” (Hobbs, 2024). Similarly, Beeple included a few story highlights dedicated to his art underneath the name ‘bad stuff.’ and “+++” (Beeple, 2024). Contrastingly, female digital artists tended to blend both professional and personal content in their story highlights. While Krista Kim’s highlights were mostly strictly professional, such as “*PRESS*” and “*CONTINUUM*” (Kim, 2024), one of her art projects (reference back to the chapter), most female artists also included personal aspects in their story highlights, alongside the professional one. This approach is evident in IX Shells and Swopes, who featured their attendance to Art Basel events in Zurich and Miami respectively (Yard, 2024; Swopes, 2024). The latter also included as one of her story highlights “*Family*” (Swopes, 2024), she is the only artist which also included familial content. Additionally, she included a “*Q&A*” story highlight indicating direct engagement with her audience (Swopes, 2024). Maliha Abidi’s story highlights further illustrate the aforementioned blend of personal as well as professional themes (Abidi, 2024). One of her highlights was named “*Girl’s Education*” (Abidi, 2024), in which she advocates for Aghan girls’ right to attend education, reflecting her commitment to social causes and empowerment. Similarly, her inclusion of one of her projects “*Pak for Women*” (Abidi, 2024), emphasizes, once again, her ongoing dedication to empowering women and supporting gender equality through her platform on Instagram. In a similar manner, Yam Karakai posted a story highlight, ‘*WoW*’, named after her ongoing project *World of Women*, contemporarily highlighting her focus on supporting women whilst advertising her art. The artist also included as one of her highlights a reference to her evolution as an artist underneath the art history highlight named “*Art journey*” (Karakai, 2024). As female artists include multifaceted story highlights, it both promotes their professional achievements as well as their personal journeys and advocacies.

Several of the artists also included fashion-related stories, highlighting collaborations or personal interests in fashion. This is exemplified by the artist FEWOCIOUS that included the design of a NFT

pair of shoes, Krista Kim had a story highlight named “FASHION” (FEWOCiOUS, 2024; Kim, 2024) in which she included partnerships within luxury brands such as Hermes and Louis Vuitton. Similarly, Beeple included a story highlight simply named “LV” (Beeple, 2024) after the highlighted other collaborations with prestigious names, specifically art auction houses such as Sotheby’s or Christies. For instance, FEWOCiOUS included in his story highlights collaborations with both of the art auction houses, naming the stories after the respective auction house (FEWOCiOUS, 2024).

Female artists also pinned significantly more posts in comparison to their male counterparts. Pinned posts allow users to ‘pin’ up to 3 specific posts for an indefinite amount of time, highlighting those posts as they would be the first posts that users would access once on the artists’ pages. Every single female digital artist, except IX Shells, had at least one pinned post (Yard, 2024). They often highlighted significant achievements and artworks. In fact, Maliha Abidi included in her pinned posts the achievement of creating an illustration for the New York Times, similarly Krista Kim ‘pinned’ her art being included as a moving cover for Haper Bazaar’s 10th anniversary art issue (Abidi, 2024; Kim, 2024). Additionally, pinned posts in female profiles often blended both professional and personal content. This is exemplified by Yam Karakai as the artist also included as her pinned post a personal image (Karakai, 2024). Opposingly, almost no male digital artist included a pinned post, solely Tyler Hobbs included only one pinned post in his profile, showcasing a physical copy of one of his NFTs, printed on concrete (Hobbs, 2024).

One of Maliha Abidi’s pinned post was also an NFT part of an upcoming series, titled “Khuwaab ki Tabeer: Interpretation of a dream” (Abidi, 2024), the first part of the caption is in Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, where her family is originally from before they moved to the United States. The inclusion of her native language highlights her cultural connection as well as the personal connection to the NFT, further emphasised by post being pinned.

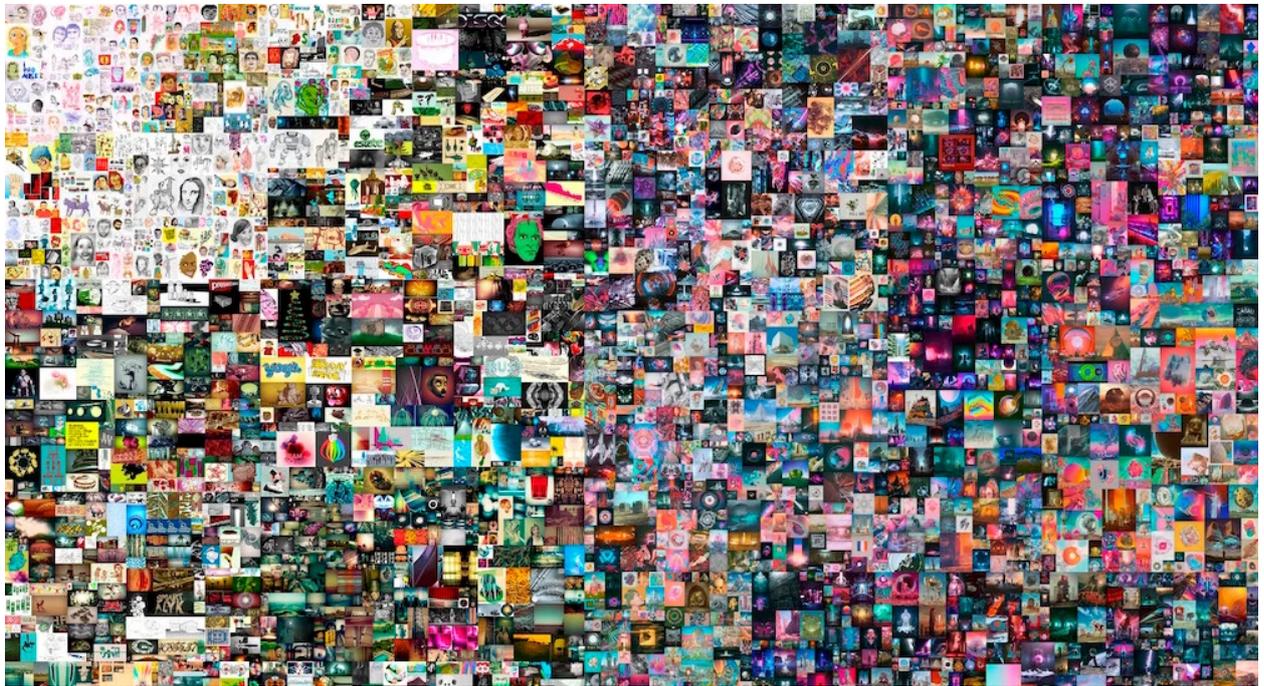
5.6 Emojis and Likes

Emojis were utilized at least once by the female digital artists, either in their post captions, as title for their story highlights, within their bios. Every single woman used an emoji at least once whilst out of the male group only 2 out of the 5 male artists used emojis at least once. Not only the women all used emojis at least once however they also used them significantly more, Emojis were used more frequently by female digital artists. On average, female artists used 18.5 emojis (SD = 11.73), whereas male artists used 1.4 emojis (SD = 2.88). Two instances of frequent emoji usage by artists are Elise Swopes, who used 30 emojis, and Yam Karakai, who used 26 (Swopes, 2024; Karakai, 2024). Only two male artists, Beeple and FEWOCiOUS, used emojis, with counts of 7 and 2, respectively (Beeple, 2024; FEWOCiOUS, 2024). Some artists also deactivated the number of likes being visible to the rest of the

public. The artists Dmitri Cherniak and Yam Karakai also deactivated the option of commenting on all and some of their posts respectively (Cherniak, 2024; Karakai, 2024).

6. Discussion

Figure 2



By Beeple, 'Everydays- The first 5000 days', Artnet

In the following discussion, the main findings of the study will be explored which aim to answer the research question: “*How do female digital artists use Instagram to establish their personal brands and promote their NFT artworks?*”. The findings are interpreted, utilising the theory in order to understand the nuances in how these artists navigate their digital presence. The analysis revealed different strategies and practices that distinguished female from male digital artists in their use of Instagram. Female artists often blend personal and professional content, engage more deeply with their audience, and leverage storytelling and visual elements to build a multifaceted brand. In contrast, male artists tend to maintain a more minimalist and professional focus, emphasising their technical skills and artwork.

The ratio of following-to-follower varied significantly amongst the artists, however as previously discussed, the female NFT artists followed more accounts than the male artists. A higher following account can potentially suggest proactiveness and overall an effort from the artist’s part to actively engage with the community, creating a support system, fostering connections and building a reliable

network. As the male NFT artist had a lower following number it might imply less of a need of building a community, in order to establish themselves and to be known within the community. It also suggests a selective approach in regards to their engagement. A lower user following on Instagram likely indicates a lower engagement rate with users. As a matter of fact the artists that had the highest following were the artists who were the most active on Instagram, such as Beeple, Swopes and FEWOCiOUS (Beeple, 2024; Swopes, 2024; FEWOCiOUS, 2004). As previously discussed, there was a range regarding the number of posts, this can indicate a difference in strategy of the artists. Usually, frequent posting causes the algorithm to favour the content users. A high posting frequency can maintain follower engagement and additionally, attract new followers. This could also potentially explain to some extent the high followers counts of artists such as Swopes and Beeple (Beeple, 2024; Swopes, 2024). Contrastingly, Pak had a very limited number of posts, had no story highlights and followed only one account, his AI platform Archillect (Pak, 2024). His anonymity and low engagement on Instagram, suggests an alternative yet deliberate choice to maintain a 'low-profile' and possibly focusing on elements such as exclusivity and intrigue.

6.1 Blending of Personal and Professional Elements

The results of the thesis revealed that NFT female digital artists had the tendency of combining both personal and professional elements in their Instagram profiles. This can be seen through the numerous instances of the content of normal and pinned posts, story highlights and biographies within these pages. The frequent use of pinned posts by female artists suggests a strategic approach to highlight key milestones and personal narratives, creating a deeper connection with their audience. The story highlight feature also helps encourage long-term engagement and the promotion of the artists' brand. Additionally, Elise Swopes' inclusion of a "Q&A" story on her profile not only enhances the engagement with her followers, but it can also provide valuable insights into her creative process (Swopes, 2024). This interaction promotes a sense of community and mutual value, reinforcing her presence as both an artist and an accessible individual. Overall the high story numbers of female digital artists indicate that the choice of story highlights is sporadic, giving a more personal feel to their profile. The personal aspects included within the female instagram profiles and the frequent updating might suggest the presence of emotional labour, for the maintenance of their persona and community. Insead the low number of story highlights from the male artists emphasises higher levels of curation of such stories and focus on their art, rather than other personal aspects.

Such practices exemplify how female artists use Instagram to create a multi-dimensional brand, making their art and themselves more relatable and approachable to their audience. In contrast, the minimal use of pinned posts by male artists indicates a preference for letting their current and recent work speak for

itself, maintaining a streamlined and focused presentation. Overall, male NFT artists were more focused on their technical expertise and their artistic projects, maintaining a presence on social media that is more professional and less personal (Cherniak, 2024; Hobb, 2024). Through the lens of technofeminism, female digital artists could potentially use the platform to challenge traditional gender roles. As Wajcman (2007) argues that gender and technology co-produce each other.

6.1.1 Biographies and Implications

As aforementioned, some of the artists included aspects of their own culture within their biographies. By doing so, it implies that the artists themselves place importance in these aspects of their persona, branding themselves. Contrastingly, male artists' posts were often more formal and focused on their art and professional achievements. This difference in communication style aligns with traditional gender norms and expectations, where women might adopt a more "feminine" and expressive approach to communication, while men maintain a more reserved and professional demeanour. The male digital artist FEWOCiOUS, represents in his approach to his own Instagram page as an anomaly amongst the male digital artists. As previously discussed he includes his art and himself in his page almost equally, his profile is very much personal as it is professional. Being such a young artist is likely another reason why he has such a presence on his Instagram page. Younger generations are more comfortable than older ones in utilising Instagram as a platform where they can express themselves and form a community (FEWOCiOUS, 2024). Female digital artists had the same approach. Their use of their Instagram pages and specifically of their biographies aligns with the idea of performativity, in which gender is viewed as a dynamic performance (Butler, 1988; Bray, 2007).

6.1.2 Self-Inclusion in Posts and Profiles

The addition of personal images can provide some further insights into branding strategies employed by artists and various gender differences. By adding their own images and including their faces, it can give users a sense of authenticity and relatability that would be more challenging to achieve in other ways, thus making the artists appear as more genuine and approachable. Furthermore, it can deepen the parasocial relationship previously mentioned, fostering a sense of familiarity and trust by establishing a personal connection with the users.

As every female artist includes themselves in their profile alongside their art, they enhance their own brand as they associate their own personal images with their art. Not only this enhances their personal brands but also makes them more memorable and allows users to identify them more swiftly. As their brand becomes more recognizable, not only towards their audience but it also increases overall their visibility in the industry, to other fellow NFT artists, buyers, critics and others within the NFT/ digital

art community and the broader art landscape. As this landscape is a mostly male-dominated industry, the female NFT digital artists might include themselves during their self-branding processes as a way to assert themselves in this environment. Male digital artists may place a higher value on privacy compared to their female counterparts. Despite the fact that the identities of all of the artists, except from Pak, are known. Furthermore, their profile might appeal more to users who are primarily interested in the work of the artists rather than the artists themselves. Male artists, as discussed in the previous chapter, utilised their Instagram platform more as a space where to share their NFTs and showcase their art, rather than utilising it as a some sort or personal blog and including themselves. The lack of themselves indicates that their platform is closer tied to a professional persona rather than a personal one.

6.1.3 Storytelling

As previously discussed, female digital artists were the main users of emojis, while their male counterparts were less likely to utilise them. Emojis have a high visual appeal, potentially attracting visitors and followers and encouraging them to engage more with their posts, via likes, comments and shares, allowing the artists to build a strong online presence. Perhaps the frequency of emoji usage could potentially reflect female digital artists unconsciously aligning with gender norms and expectations by adopting a more “feminine” communication style. This could also be the case as it can aid emotional expression of the artists themselves in a rapid manner. Additionally, these pictograms can also be utilised by artists in an attempt to soften their profiles, giving their online persona a more approachable and friendly appearance. Finally, the usage of emojis can be a form of visual storytelling, as aforementioned they have a strong visual aspect to them, creating a specific narrative and engaging the audience in their content. This aligns with how female artists blend professional and personal aspects to brand themselves, using storytelling as a tool to connect artistic achievements with ordinary moments, making their profiles more engaging and relatable.

6.1.4 Social Impact and Personal Values

As previously discussed in the results, the female NFT artists included in this research were more involved in social impact work compared to their male counterparts. Overall they were more involved in initiatives that specifically focused on underrepresented groups and in initiatives that empowered and connected with other fellow artists. Women have often been at the forefront of charitable organisations and community-based initiatives, and this is reflected in the results of the thesis. This involvement can be explained both by the perpetuation of traditional roles, however also by the necessity of creating communities and networks on which they can rely on and find a safe environment to counteract systemic gender biases. This is especially the case within a male dominated world with a “crypto-bro” culture, as identified by Styuleymanoglu (2022), reflecting broader patterns of gendered

access and participation. Women risk potential marginalisation, thus their involvement in social impact community based projects and organisations can also provide support and advocacy. By fostering environments in which collective action and mutual support are encouraged also thanks to strong community bonds. Furthermore, it is likely that as the female artists showcase their advocacy and social impact work, it will attract more like-minded individuals with similar values. Through these efforts towards social impact causes they also promote inclusivity and diversity within the NFT landscape itself. The involvement in social impact enhances their brand but also advocates for greater representation in the industry. Furthermore, the artists position themselves as women in leading positions and as bringers of change within the NFT community. This not only enhances their credibility as artists but also increases their influence and reach within the landscape.

6.2 Promotional Tactics

Every single female digital artist and some male digital artists used to some extent story highlights. Usually, an Instagram story is not visible after 24 hours thus, by utilising highlights, it allows artists to permanently keep content that is more engaging and interactive, compared to Instagram posts. This gives them the possibility of encouraging long-term engagement with their followers, especially in instances where stories include ongoing projects and updates. Allowing for enhanced visibility and visibility amongst Instagram users. This feature was utilised mostly by female digital artists in different ways. One of the main uses of this specific feature was to highlight and showcase specific artworks, often their most infamous pieces, this is exemplified by Krista Kim's '*CONTINUUM*' as it was one of her main highlights (Kim, 2024). By adding their pieces to their stories, they allow their users, as well as potential buyers, to swiftly access this sort of digital selected portfolio and promote their NFTs. By promoting themselves thanks to collaborations with museums and auction houses it can increase their credibility and perceived values, in the eyes of the users. Increasing the possibility of buyers.

6.2.1 Partnerships and Collaborations

Male and female NFT digital artists, as previously discussed, both included their partnerships with prominent art auction houses, such as Sotheby's or Christie's, and renowned museums such as the Moma (Yard, 2024) Nevertheless, the female artists did present these partnerships and other collaborations more frequently than the male ones. By branding themselves in association with such prestigious organisations it can enhance in the users' eyes their credibility and prestige as artists. As they highlight, through their stories and posts, such partnerships, it can also increase the perceived value of their artworks. Furthermore, by aligning their own personal brand with these established entities that are also incredibly respected by the broader art landscape, it reinforces their own brand's quality and legitimacy. Additionally, it aids these women to position themselves as leading figures within NFT and overall digital art communities and temporarily potentially counteract potential biases within this

male dominated digital environment. Another potential explanation for the display of the partnerships and collaborations could be the desire to engage the community, potentially fostering a sense of pride amongst the users.

Despite the recent fluctuations in popularity, non-fungible tokens (NFTs) continue to maintain a significant presence in the art market, underscoring their enduring impact and relevance. While the initial popularity surrounding NFTs may have decreased, their continued relevance highlights their force in the landscape of digital art and blockchain technology, and overall in the art world. Moreover, the ongoing discussion surrounding NFTs serves as a crucial reflection point for the art world, offering valuable insights into the intersection of digital innovation, artistic expression, economic dynamics, and gender representation. Instagram resulted from the analysis as a space for artists to shape their online personas and promote their art pieces, making it an important component of the NFT landscape and of digital art. By blending personal and professional content, engage in community work and make use of visual storytelling can indicate a transformative potential of this social media platform and further challenge traditional gender norms.

7. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to answer the following research question: “*How do female digital artists use Instagram to establish their personal brands and promote their NFT artworks?*”. Through a mixed-method approach to content analysis of female and male artists’ Instagram profiles, It emerged that digital artists utilise the social media platform Instagram in order to construct and promote their own personal brands as NFT artists. Professional titles, thematic focus, affiliations with organisations and visual elements are utilised to build credibility amongst consumers and engage with their audience. Additionally, they utilised the social media platform to establish themselves in a male-dominated technology domain while blending both personal and professional elements in their Instagram profiles. This thesis demonstrated the subtle ways this platform can act as a tool for self-branding. Furthermore, it does not only deepens our understanding of the NFT landscape but also hints at broader societal issues related to accessibility, representation, and digital innovation in the art world.

Despite the recent fluctuations in popularity, non-fungible tokens (NFTs) continue to maintain a significant presence in the art market, underscoring their enduring impact and relevance. While the initial popularity surrounding NFTs may have faltered, their continued relevance highlights their pioneering force in the landscape of digital art and blockchain technology, and overall in the art world. Moreover, the ongoing discussion surrounding NFTs serves as a crucial reflection point for the art world, offering valuable insights into the intersection of digital innovation, artistic expression, economic dynamics, and gender representation. It's noteworthy to consider the gender dynamics within the NFT space, as both creators and collectors, and to analyse how gender intersects with the creation, distribution, and valuation of digital artworks. Rather than viewing the current state of NFTs solely as a decline in popularity, it can be interpreted as a specific moment in time for the evolution of digital art, prompting reflection on the sustainability and longevity of emerging artistic practices. Thus, while NFTs may no longer be part of major headlines, their legacy could potentially function as a catalyst for future innovative forms of digital art, reminding academia and the industry the transformative power of technology within the creative landscape.

The capacity to adapt and successfully make use of emerging technology of any type can determine the success or failure of artistic organisations and individual artists in the current cultural landscape (Habsary et al., 2021). Moreover, the increasing digitisation and innovation in arts management present significant opportunities. These advancements enable greater accessibility, audience engagement, and

funding diversification, thereby enhancing the vibrancy and sustainability of the arts sector (Fanea-Ivanovici & Pana, 2020). However, digital transformation also introduces new ethical considerations and legal challenges. It becomes even more imperative for arts management professionals to embrace responsible practices that prioritise transparency, ethical use of technology, and protection of intellectual property rights. By navigating these challenges in a thoughtful and proactive way, the arts management community can harness the full potential of digitalisation while upholding ethical standards and preserving the integrity of artistic expression for generations to come. Instagram can serve as a more familiar and accessible platform for those interested in involving themselves with NFTs, in comparison to other platforms such as Discord and NFT that could initially intimidate newcomers. By utilising Instagram, female digital artists give the possibility for NFTs to be more approachable and inclusive towards marginalised communities, especially towards women who might feel hesitant about approaching the more technically complex aspects of the NFT space.

Even though NFTs are providing new ways for artists to monetise their work and guarantee the ownership of their art, a significant drawback exists and should be mentioned. One particularly significant one has been the environmental impact of NFTs. As blockchain technology is utilised, a noteworthy amount of energy is necessary in order to support the NFT minting process, as well as buying and selling one. This utilised energy implicates a significant increase in carbon emissions and thus exacerbating and contributing to the environmental crisis that is already affecting us globally. Many artists that have sold or bought NFTs have also critiqued this environmental aspect of NFTs. Each Ethereum transaction, including NFT transactions, requires over 260 kilowatt-hours of electricity, equivalent to a U.S. household's 9.05-day usage. Remarkably, a single NFT transaction emits nearly 150 kilograms of CO₂ (Calma, 2021; Garnett, 2022; Lambert, 2021; McAndrew et al., 2023).

7.1 Limitations

Despite this thesis having several strongpoints, throughout the writing process and upon reflecting on its entirety, some limitations emerged. Nevertheless, they do not significantly penalise the research but rather potentially serve as prompts for future research. Despite the qualitative and quantitative content analysis of the artists' Instagram pages providing valuable insights on self-branding and NFT promotional practices, the data could have been more rich with the addition of interviews. This qualitative method allows for collecting data that constitutes in-depth exploration of the participant's experiences and further nuancing my thesis by revealing artists' (Charmaz, 2014). As previously discussed this qualitative method of analysis was already attempted yet did not succeed. Taking this argument further, had this project been approached as a longitudinal study, I would have prioritised establishing a stronger presence within the Discord communities before attempting recruitment. Building trust and rapport could have potentially mitigated their hesitancy observed

towards me as an external individual rather than as a member of the community. In hindsight, during the initial planning phases of this thesis, I overestimated the ease of participant recruitment within these online communities.

Furthermore, due to time constraints, the selection of artists selected was relatively small, this poses another limitation and causes to an extent a lack of generalisability of the findings. While these artists demonstrated interesting self-branding practices as well self-promotion, they do not necessarily reflect the broader NFT artist population. The lack of generalisability is especially the case in terms of the geographical concentration of male artists, predominantly located in the United States. This prevalence could potentially be explained by the presence of Silicon Valley. In general the technological infrastructure in the US gives artists the possibility to create and advertise their art pieces online. As the Silicon's environment is very tech-savvy, it could potentially foster higher levels of engagements and encourage interest with digital art and NFTs. The overall prevalence of NFT artists in the US could also be dictated by a higher level of cultural acceptance in regards to pursuing a career as an artist. Furthermore, the male digital artists were mostly a homogenous group with similar backgrounds, with the exception of FEWOCiOUS. A more varied and larger sample would have added to the research different experiences and unique strategies of NFT artists across multiple cultural contexts.

In addition, a further limitation is in regards to the data analysed. Firstly, social media metrics are very dynamic and constantly changing. As these metrics were not periodically updated, it is not an accurate representation of the current branding strategies of the artists but rather of the data collection day. Moreover, as my dataset was extracted from a social media platform, it might have overlooked other self-branding strategies employed by the artists and promotion on other platforms. Secondly, although story highlights were observed, another limitation is that I did not analyse every single one posted by the artists, nor its frequency, but rather stated their general content. Lastly, I did not include the approximate dates of posting, which would have provided a more accurate understanding of the artists' posting frequency.

Finally, as previously discussed, technology such as Instagram and NFTs can be constraining as well as reinforce existing discriminating structures (Benjamin, 2019; Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). This duality of technology implies that while Instagram offers novel opportunities for enhanced visibility and engagement, it also continues to perpetuate biases and discriminations. This is not a limitation strictly limited to my own thesis, but rather, it can be seen as inherent while studying social media platforms and technologies with a social context.

7.2 Future Research

Future research could address a few of the gaps located in the limitations of the thesis. As previously suggested, a longitudinal study could uncover artists' changes in self-promoting practices as well as their trials and errors in that regard. Furthermore, by examining the sales figures alongside the specific branding and promotional practices over the course of an extended period of time, researchers can discover valuable information about market dynamics, investor behaviour, and the underlying factors influencing NFT value. Intuitively, a more exhaustive analysis of story highlights as well as observing the chronological aspect of posts can provide a clearer image of artists' behaviours on social media. Furthermore, a significant portion of this thesis was focused on gender differences amongst the artists. Future research could be focused on investigating how NFTs can promote both inclusivity and diversity in different contexts. Specifically focusing on the representation of various marginalised groups in different geographical locations and analysing barriers to the access of the NFT landscape and other challenges experienced. The NFT landscape provides a range of opportunities for further investigation, presenting several different possibilities for future research. From exploring the changing dynamics of ownership on the internet and investigating how the intersection of gender, technology and art offer exciting paths to explore. Blockchain and overall technology will continuously evolve, and thus, there are various possibilities provided by NFT. With the growth of the NFT market it is essential for researchers to delve into these areas uncovering new insights and increasing our understanding of this quickly evolving digital landscape and continuously advocating for diversity and inclusivity within the digital art world. As NFTs continue to redefine digital ownership and expression of the arts, ongoing research is essential to navigate and positively shape this everchanging field.

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