

Haute Ecole
« ICHEC – ECAM – ISFSC »



Enseignement supérieur de type long de niveau universitaire

Why and how to craft one's image as a freelancer or self-employed worker: Personal branding as a key success factor for business

Mémoire présenté par :

Caroline BOYER

Pour l'obtention du diplôme de **Master's degree in
Management Science**

Année académique 2021-2022

Promoteur :

Xavier DE POORTER

Boulevard Brand Whitlock 6 - 1150 Bruxelles

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Introduction

The era of the Covid pandemic has been marked with profound economic and societal changes that have impacted businesses large and small in more ways than one. Among them, the Great Resignation is a movement still spreading its tentacles across the globe to this day.

The Great Resignation, a term coined by organizational psychologist and professor at Texas A&M University Anthony Klotz, captures a phenomenon first observed in the United States but which had rapidly spread to other parts of the world such as European countries.

Described as a period of empowerment for workers, it has emerged as a consequence of the pandemic and lockdowns that ensued, which provided an opportunity for workers to take some distance from their jobs and rethink their working conditions as well as their work-life balance.

As 12.7 million of U.S. job holders handed in their resignations between July and September 2021 (Murphy, 2021), an interesting trend could be observed: the unemployment rate simultaneously decreased for the same period, dropping from 5.9% in June to 4.8% in September (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2022).

One of the possible explanations for this conjuncture is that workers increasingly turned toward entrepreneurship, a trend that had been active prior to Covid but became accelerated with the pandemic.

However, in the context of the attention economy, where consumers are constantly surrounded with an ever-increasing amount of information, standing out as a freelancer or self-employed worker has turned into a pressing challenge. Indeed, securing orders and capturing online visibility have become intricately linked.

This is where personal branding comes in.

At the crossroads between the fields of marketing, sociology, communication, psychology, and organizational behavior, personal branding is a rather new concept in the literature. Despite its novelty, the topic has gained significant traction in recent years, becoming an area of expertise of its own. Digital marketers especially have taken a keen interest in personal branding, as crafting a personal brand entails putting in motion many of the actions they lead such as building a social media presence and establishing a content strategy. As personal branding revolves around an individual rather than an organization and aims to increase their notoriety so they may reap a range of benefits from their reputation, it is a field specifically suited for solo business owners. In the context of this thesis, we offer the following definition of personal branding for freelancers and self-employed workers: “The process of advancing a freelancer or self-employed worker’s business prospects by positively influencing the opinion that the public holds of them thanks to a

carefully thought-out yet authentic communication strategy aimed at showcasing their expertise, purpose, and values.”

In this thesis, we will first explore the defining trends in the labor market since Covid hit, placing emphasis on the Great Resignation and the motivations that led millions of American workers to hand in their resignations. Then, we will examine how Covid has accelerated a shift which was already taking place prior to the pandemic: the advent of entrepreneurship and freelancing, clearly expressed in numbers. We will proceed to introduce another major societal and economic change intertwining with the multiplication of solo business owners on the market: the attention economy. As a direct successor to the age of information, the attention economy has shifted the rules for big corporations and freelancers aspiring to earn the preference of consumers. In this new competitive landscape, solo business owners are faced with both challenges and opportunities to seize. The main challenge they encounter resides in standing out amid a sea of information present online. To solve this burning problem, personal branding appears as a solution particularly suited for freelancers and self-employed workers.

The second part of this thesis will be dedicated to delivering a 7-step strategy to build one’s personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker. This delineated strategy entails adopting an optimal mindset and approach regarding personal branding, reflecting on one’s business to hone their personal brand, presenting oneself in the best way possible, building a strong social media presence, elaborating an impactful content strategy, mastering the art of storytelling, and developing a reliable network.

To elaborate this strategy and support the suggested best practices, seven experts in digital communication, who are freelancers themselves, were interviewed.

Estelle Ballot is the founder and host of the podcast “Le Podcast du Marketing”, ranked as number one French marketing podcast. In this podcast, particularly targeted toward women entrepreneurs, Estelle Ballot shares her expertise on a large range of digital marketing topics such as SEO, social media strategy, and emailing. Some of the guests she has received on her platform include Amy Porterfield, Pauline Laigneau, Matthieu Stefani, Grégoire Gambatto, and Edgar Grospiron.

Fabio Cavallini is a Personal Branding Expert who helps coaches, designers, and entrepreneurs to build a strong personal brand to attract the right audience to their business. His Instagram account @thefabiocaval has attracted over thirty-six thousand followers to this day.

Sophie Desbonnez is the creator of the Instagram account @rine.up, as well as the eponymous podcast. Her content is particularly aimed at women entrepreneurs and focuses on digital communication. Her expertise ranges from social media, through content creation, to brand identity.

Funsho Felix is a Brand Strategist, known on Instagram as @mr.funsho, and followed by nearly sixty thousand people. In 2020, he was featured in Yahoo Finance's top 10 Brand Designers doing things differently.

Charline Moussu, known on Instagram as @lapolichinelle, is a freelancer who helps artisans to develop their online communication. On her Instagram account, her three thousand followers eagerly wait for her advice on subjects such as how to build a professional website or creating a newsletter for example.

Stefanie Pinsley is a former Google Product Marketing Manager turned Personal Brand and Marketing Coach. Together, her TikTok and Instagram accounts gather an audience of over eighty thousand followers. Her areas of expertise notably include personal branding, marketing, and mindset.

Pedro Tavares, known as @socialwithpedro on Instagram, specializes in helping businesses and entrepreneurs grow organically on this same platform. On his account, followed by thirty-six thousand people at the time of writing, he delivers a large range of practical tips relative to Instagram, such as hooks to increase engagement, and content mistakes to avoid for example.

These seven freelancers, based in five different countries, all have in common the fact that they built their personal brands to grow their business. Beyond the knowledge they have acquired on personal branding through their own experience, they are also experts on digital marketing topics with a combined audience of over one hundred and eighty thousand followers on social media.

Their precious insights have greatly contributed to determine the best practices in personal branding presented thereafter.

Once the step-by-step approach to building a personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker has been proposed, a third axis of this thesis will focus on concrete ways to leverage a personal brand and track the results of one's personal branding efforts.

Finally, limits of this thesis will be laid out to provide additional information as to how to approach it.

I. The importance of personal branding for entrepreneurial success in today's world

A. The development of freelancing and self-employment, anchored in the attention economy

i. The future of work reimagined: The Great Resignation

In May 2021, Klotz, an organizational psychologist and professor at Texas A&M University, gave an interview with Bloomberg during which he evoked, and aimed to explain, the wave of resignations shaking the American labor market in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The term he employed to describe this phenomenon, the Great Resignation, has since spread like wildfire across the media internationally and continues to make headlines.

Some variations have even emerged, such as “The Great Reimagination”, “The Great Reset”, and “The Great Realization.”

Numbers are here to support what Klotz has identified as a distinct phenomenon. Indeed, the situation of the job market arises from a pattern of three indicators moving together: the number of resignations, the number of new job openings, and the number of layoffs. In order to dissect these circumstances, we can first look at the most striking signal on the American labor market: the number of resignations in 2020, and particularly 2021.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), 4 million of employed Americans resigned in April 2021. This number remained steady as summer began: 3.87 million of employed Americans resigned in June 2021. The statistic then proceeded to jump even higher in September 2021 as 4.4 million resignations were registered (Wall Street Journal, 2021).

In total, Bloomberg (2021) reports that over 24 million resignations were handed in between April and September 2021. This staggering number constitutes a record in American labor market history.

This trend continued even as 2021 came to an end, with an additional 4.5 million workers leaving their jobs in November. Throughout the year, over 38 million people resigned in the United States, out of which 40% had not found another job when taking the leap (Leparmentier, 2022).

These resignations were accompanied by multiples strikes throughout the country, with workers expressing their discontent at working conditions and salaries.

Simultaneously, companies were struggling to fill their ranks. Indeed, while workers were resigning in droves, unfilled job positions multiplied. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in its Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) that, on the last day of May 2021, 9.48

million positions were vacant. A number which increased to reach 10.07 million a month later. To provide an order of comparison, the number of unfilled positions in the United States in the fall of 2018, less than three years earlier, was of 7.57 million according to the same source.

To complete the triad of indicators pointing to a troubled American job market, layoffs and discharges decreased in 2021, coinciding with a record high number of resignations, and therefore, of unfilled positions.

It is worth noting that sectors have been affected to varying degrees in the context of the Great Resignation. The most harshly impacted industries were the hotel and restaurant industry, as well as leisure, retail, and health (Allard, 2022).

The Great Resignation, although finding its roots in the United States, has not been confined to the American territory. Indeed, a similar pattern could be observed in other countries, such as France and Belgium for example.

In Belgium, 2021 brought an almost equal increase in new and terminated contracts. Compared to 2020, the number of new work contracts increased by 31%, while terminated contracts rose by 32% (Klaster, 2022). However, what is interesting is comparing 2021 numbers with those from 2019. By doing so, we can observe that ended contracts (+18.1%) were more prominent compared to new contracts (+4.8%) according to the same source. Further, Klaster (2022) reports that terminated contracts in 2021 were resulting, in a staggering majority of 83%, from the worker's decision and not the employer's.

France registered a record high number of people who resigned from their job in 2021. Over the third quarter, the French Ministry of Employment (Direction de l'Animation de la recherche, des Études et des Statistiques, DARES) recorded more than 620 000 resignations. Moreover, if we compare 2021 resignation numbers with those from 2019, a considerable increase can be noted. Resignations jumped 10% in June 2021 compared to the same period in 2019 and rose by an impressive 20% in July 2021 compared to July 2019 according to the same source.

Meanwhile, an online movement called “Tang Ping” has swept over China (Landaz, 2022). This phenomenon criticizes the long work hours which are very common in the country. Some industries, such as the technology sector for example, often imply a weekly schedule of six working days, with a start time at nine in the morning, and a workday ending at nine in the evening according to the same source.

It would then seem that the Covid-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst around the world for reimagining work and has constituted an empowering time for employees in taking control of their work and personal life.

This assumption is supported by multiple economists and experts. Elise Gould (2022), senior economist at the Economic Policy Institute declared in a statement to Business Insider: “I

certainly think that the pandemic has led many people to reevaluate their work and their priorities and what they want to do.”

To examine the reasons which motivated workers to resign, the Work Institute, an American organization, led exit interviews in 2021 with 28 000 employees leaving their jobs in the United States and Canada.

Nelms, president of the Work Institute, reported interesting findings from this large interview program. He noted that in 2020, as the pandemic hit, resignations rose due to health concerns and family obligations. The Wall Street Journal (2021) reported similar conclusions regarding the initial wave of resignations, with workers citing their anxiety about Covid exposure, vaccine mandates, and limited child-care or commuting options as reasons for resigning from their jobs. According to a Kaiser Family Foundation survey in October 2021, 5% of unvaccinated adults shared that they left a job because of a vaccine requirement they were disagreeing with.

However, as resignations continued piling up in 2021, the motivations behind them started to change. Nelms notes that, upon examining the answers of respondents to the exit interviews led by the Work Institute, most of the resignations in 2021 were linked to career reasons, as people sought to either develop, or change their career completely. He also highlighted the fact that, despite the apparent salary motivations behind the wave of resignations, these were not prominent in the interviews, as only one out of ten people cited money as the main reason or fundamental cause of their decision to leave their employer.

In January 2022, D. Sull, C. Sull, and Zweig, who are an MIT professor, a founder, and a CEO respectively, published an article in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan Management Review to report on the five biggest predictors of employee resignations. To identify these predictors, they analyzed 34 million online employee profiles to recognize American workers who left their employer, whether by quitting, retiring, or being laid off, between April and September 2021. Further, they looked at the free text of more than 1.4 million Glassdoor reviews using a platform founded by two of the authors. Then, they proceeded to assess the frequency at which employees of each Culture 500 companies mentioned 172 topics and how positively they talked about each of them. This allowed the authors to gain an understanding of the topics which could best predict a company’s attrition rate, while adjusting it to the relevant industry. None of the top five predictors of employee resignations encompassed monetary motivations. Indeed, the number one predictor of an employee deciding to leave their employer was in fact a toxic company culture. The second identified reason was job insecurity and reorganization, which could be attributed to a large extent to the Covid crisis. The third, fourth, and fifth reasons were, respectively, high levels of innovation, failure to recognize performance, and a poor response to Covid-19.

It is worth noting that the resignations are not equally split across generations. In 2021, the company Adobe led a global study which involved 5,500 workers and small-business leaders. It uncovered that the largest part of the resignations came from members of the Generation Z as

well as millennials. Generation Z also turned out to be the generation least satisfied with their jobs and their work-life balance according to the study. Indeed, 59% of respondents from Generation Z expressed dissatisfaction with the job, and 56% were not pleased with their work-life balance.

A Qualtrics study performed provides further insights as to the main motivations of executives in France to leave their positions in the next twelve months. The results, published in February 2022 pointed to stress, salary, and the lack of evolution perspectives as the biggest predictors of resignations.

One could then ponder what, on the contrary, workers seek in today's context. It appears that flexibility would be top of the list according to several sources.

Research conducted by the Working From Home (WFH) Research Project argues that flexibility would be valued by workers as much as a 10% pay raise.

Generation Z seems particularly intent on prioritizing flexibility. Indeed, their frustration with a lack of flexibility in their job reveals just how important it is for them. 62%, therefore almost two-thirds, of respondents to the Adobe study previously mentioned part of Generation Z expressed that they felt the most pressure to work during "office hours" while they did their best work outside of these predetermined hours.

Klotz puts a major emphasis on flexibility, predicting that it will turn out to be a silver lining arising from the pandemic, saying: "Work will fit around our personal lives rather than our personal lives fitting around work." Klotz even goes one step further, by announcing that the companies which refuse to offer flexible working arrangements, and instead blame external factors such as government leadership, will be the "losers who struggle in the wake of the Great Resignation."

An additional question to be raised would then be: Is the Great Resignation still in effect, and if so, how long is it still going to last? A poll performed in December 2021 by ResumeBuilder.com which involved 1,250 American workers revealed that 23% of them were aiming to find a new job in 2022, while 9% had already secured one. Further, it looks like Generation Z will continue to drive the tide of resignations. Indeed, in the global Adobe study mentioned above, more than half of the respondents part of this generation said they planned on seeking a new job within the next year. In France, the previously mentioned Qualtrics study led with 500 employed people showed that 35% of them intended to search for a new job in the following twelve months, and 21% were unsure about their next move. Less than the majority of them then, 44%, intended to stay with their current employer.

Klotz, who originally put a name on the phenomenon of massive resignations, argues that it constitutes "a moment of empowerment for workers", and predicts that it will continue in 2022 and beyond. Indeed, he expects quit rates to remain higher than observed prior to the pandemic for two to three years. He cites two main factors behind his reasoning. The first is that he

considers turnover to be contagious, declaring: “When one employee leaves, others start thinking about doing the same.” The second reason is that, as companies adapt working situations in the wake of Covid-19, employees are likely to leave the jobs that do not suit them anymore, in favor of one which satisfies their expectations better.

If the wave of resignations initiated in 2020 continued in full force in 2021 (and is showing no signs of slowing down in the near future), while millions of positions remained unfilled with companies struggling to find staff, why are unemployment numbers not soaring in America?

Indeed, as we have previously covered, U.S. workers resigned at a steady rate throughout the spring and summer of 2021: 12.7 million people decided to leave the jobs between July and September. Meanwhile, unfilled work positions in the United States jumped from 9.62 million at the end of the second quarter of 2021 to 10.77 million at the end of the following quarter according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Interestingly, the unemployment rate in the U.S. actually declined from 5.9% in June 2021 to 4.7% in September of the same year (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2022).

The answer to this striking divergence in numbers could very well hide in the decision of former employees to start their own business.

ii. Freelancing and self-employment in full bloom: a shift accelerated by the pandemic

If resignations are piling up while unfilled positions are rising and unemployment numbers are decreasing in the United States, a rush toward entrepreneurship and self-employment could be the reason leading to this unique mix of trends.

Indeed, the Wall Street Journal sheds a light on the situation in an article published in November 2021, revealing that “the pandemic has unleashed a historic burst in entrepreneurship and self-employment.”

As we have covered, Covid has been a period of empowerment for workers, seeking greater flexibility in their job and a better work-life balance benefitting their mental health. In this pursuit, many former employees have chosen the path of freelancing and launching their own business.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of non-agriculture, self-employed workers, unincorporated people in the country increased from 8.93 million in February 2020 to 9.46 million in October 2021. Even though this number has since shown a slight decrease in the beginning of 2022, culminating at 9.26 million, there still remains an increase of over 330,000 new non-agriculture, self-employed workers, unincorporated people in the U.S compared to before the pandemic.

This trend diverges from what happened in the period of the 2008 financial crisis, which spurred a decline instead of an increase in the number of self-employed workers and unincorporated people. Indeed, while there were 9.58 million of them in July 2008, this number plunged by over 800,000 by the month of November of the same year to reach 8.76 million, as the financial crisis hit full force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

Another interesting observation which can be made regarding freelancing trends in the United States is that Generation Z seems to be leading the way. Indeed, according to the 2021 edition of the Freelancing in America Study, Generation Z represented the highest independent workforce participation of any age bracket since the launch of this study in 2014. Last year, 53% of Gen Z workers (ages 18-22) freelanced, while 40% of Millennial workers (ages 23-38), 31% of Gen X workers (ages 39-54), and 29% of Baby Boomer workers (ages 55+) did so. This information coincides with the fact that members of Generation Z lead the way as well in terms of job dissatisfaction in the context of the Great Resignation.

As the pandemic has encouraged workers to explore different and more flexible avenues in order to generate revenue, the idea of freelancing, which was once perceived as unstable, is becoming increasingly accepted. Indeed, Covid has shown that permanent employment is not necessarily more secure, and that a change in external circumstances could lead companies to fire workers overnight. In addition, the shift in perspective regarding freelancers also concerns their ability to find work. Previously, people may have regarded those who chose that path as a decision by default due to their failure to find a job as an employee. Instead, it now appears that freelancing is becoming increasingly accepted as an option picked with intention for the benefits it offers, notably including flexibility.

Meanwhile, firms seek this same benefit in order to be more agile during uncertain times. According to a study performed by Upwork, two-thirds of questioned CEOs have shared that agility is the new business currency. This reflects in their choice to hire freelancers at a rising rate. According to a Freelancer's "Fast 50" quarterly report, which looks at movements from the top 50 fastest growing and declining jobs on the site's global marketplace in North America, Europe and Asia, freelance job openings inflated over 25% during the second quarter of 2020 compared to the previous quarter.

Platforms such as Freelancer and Upwork, as well as Fiverr, have greatly benefited from this boost in demand, both from workers seeking to go freelance, and firms looking to hire freelancers. Fiverr, a platform founded in 2010 which aims to connect businesses with freelancers offering digital services, revealed excellent results at the end of 2021. Their revenue in the fourth quarter was \$79.8 million, which represents an increase of 43% year over year (Fiverr International Ltd., 2022).

Although the pandemic has propelled freelancing and self-employment, this shift toward these forms of work in the United States was underway before Covid hit.

Firstly, on the supply side, an additional 5 million American workers decided to go freelance in the span of five years ranging from 2014 to 2019, to reach a total number of 57 million by the end of 2019 (Djuraskovic, 2022).

This shift was also visible on the demand side. 48% of businesses hired freelancers in 2018, up from 43% in 2017 (Omprakash, 2022). Large companies such as Google led this change. As of March 2019, the tech giant hired more freelancers and contractors than permanent employees, with 120,000 of the former, against 102,000 of the latter on their payroll according to the same source.

Today, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, even more workers are considering offering their services as freelancers. Upwork's 2021 Freelance Forward survey sheds light on the present and future of freelancing. This survey gathered the answers of 6,000 U.S. working adults over the age of 18 (out of which 36% were freelancers and 64% were non-freelancers) between August 27, 2021, and September 29, 2021. It highlighted that freelancers contributed \$1.3 trillion to the U.S. economy in annual earnings in 2021. It also revealed that 56% of non-freelancers were likely to do freelance work in the future.

Workers currently considering freelancing may be emboldened by the satisfaction of those who have picked this path before them. Indeed, the 2021 Freelancer Study by Freelancermap provides encouraging insights into the situation of those who chose to go freelance. This survey gathered responses from freelancers operating in a total of 49 countries across the globe, such as Germany, Switzerland, Austria, India, Spain, Italy, Portugal and LATAM countries. On average, surveyed freelancers had been working as such for 11 years, and they were on average 36 years old with 12 years of work experience when they took the leap.

Overall, respondents expressed satisfaction regarding their earnings. Two-thirds of them (66%) were satisfied with their actual level of income, and 59% declared they earn more than their counterparts working full-time.

Further, respondents not only seemed confident in the midst of the pandemic, but also regarding future prospects. 62% of them said their economic situation was either "good" or "very good" in the context of Covid-19, and 69% did not fear a loss of livelihood because of the pandemic.

In the following part, we will look at the context in which freelancers and self-employed workers operate: the attention economy, which is crucial to better understand the opportunities and challenges they are presented with.

iii. The attention economy: land of opportunities and challenges alike for freelancers and self-employed workers

In order to examine the attention economy, we can look at it through the lens of its components.

First, the Cambridge Dictionary defines attention in three words: notice, thought, or interest. However, this description is rather limited. Indeed, it fails to explain the kind of notice, thought, or interest that attention implies, as well as its attributes. The American Psychological Association, on the other hand, provides a more thorough definition of attention, by interpreting it as “a state in which cognitive resources are focused on certain aspects of the environment rather than on others.” This definition is narrower in the sense that it points expressively to the limited nature of attention, and the fact that, once it is devoted to an appointed place, it cannot be simultaneously allocated somewhere else. Similarly, Kane (2019) reports as part of an article for Nielsen Norman Group that attention is a “selective focus on some of the stimuli that we are currently perceiving while ignoring other stimuli from the environment.”

Therefore, attention could be summarized as a thought or focus on a certain point, suggesting an opportunity cost as it cannot be directed in more than one place at a time.

The second part of the term attention economy is the word economy, which can be, by extension, related to the field of economics. The Department of Economics of the University at Buffalo defines economics as “the study of scarcity and its implications for the use of resources, production of goods and services, growth of production and welfare over time, and a great variety of other complex issues of vital concern to society.”

It would then seem that the words attention and economy would pair well together, given the limited nature of the former, which can then be considered scarce and precious.

It was the psychologist, economist, and Nobel Laureate Herbert A. Simon who officially coined the term attention economy in 1997, by highlighting the fact that the modern economy would become centered around human attention. According to the Berkeley Economic Review (2020), the same year, the economist Goldhaber pointed out that the material-based economy was transforming into an attention-based economy, due to the mass of information that was becoming freely available at the time.

Indeed, the attention economy has emerged as a direct result of the age of information.

As the web spread across the globe, education became increasingly accessible, and communication between people started flowing more easily than ever before. The matter of human attention, then, has grown crucial along with the advent of technology. Indeed, for centuries, humans had a limited access to information, making allocating their attention a much simpler task. With Internet connected devices taking over the world, a virtually unlimited number of possibilities and choices on where to assign our time and attention has surfaced. However, if access to information has been multiplied exponentially, the amount of time in our days and our capacity to focus our attention have remained unchanged.

Therefore, if access to information was once the limiting component for humans, the tide has reversed, and it is now our attention that limits us.

Simon pointed at the dangers of this imbalance between the available amount of information and our limited attention, which only deepens as the body of information available online keeps expanding over time while our capacity for attention remains the same, by stating that “a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.” This remark is well illustrated by the fact that a person navigating on Facebook using their mobile phone devotes on average a mere 1.7 seconds to a piece of content (Oracle, n.d.). The mass of information thrown at us on a daily basis forces us to make choices in the online material we consume. Attention has become, through its newfound colossal solicitation and limited nature, a precious commodity. The expression “to pay attention” embodies the monetary value that attention can take on.

Some companies, particularly in the entertainment sector, have monetized their customers’ attention. In order to access an ad-free experience while listening to music on YouTube or Spotify, users need to pay a monthly subscription fee. Similarly, TV is being progressively overtaken by streaming companies such as Netflix, which offer their customers a movie watching experience uninterrupted by ads in exchange for a paying subscription.

The tech giants designing our digital experience, as well as the businesses wishing to advertise online in order to take advantage of the nearly seven hours that Internet users spend on average using the Internet each day (Oberlo, n.d.), have understood the challenges posed by the limited nature of attention. Thus, they have adapted accordingly, aiming to grab the largest share of Internet users’ attention. Newspapers websites would be a good example. Indeed, they have become increasingly crowded with information, using a combination of text, images, and animations to attract the visitor’s eye and keeping them engaged for as long as possible. Further, websites and applications are now programmed to send notifications repeatedly to stay top of users’ mind.

While the race for the attention of Internet users intensifies each day, those at the finish line are growing more selective with the content they wish to absorb. Since web users are presented with more information than they could ever hope to consume, they show no qualms at neglecting the content that they do not consider as being valuable or interesting to them. Advertising is a prime example of digital material abandoned by users; indeed, if an online experience devoid of ads is now partly possible in exchange for a fee on websites such as Netflix and Spotify, the web remains mostly crowded with advertising. However, this does not mean that the omnipresence of ads is being rewarded with Internet users’ attention. The percentage of ads that were considered fully viewed with high attention dropped by a staggering 77 points, as it reached 97% in the early 1990s and is now less than 20% (Teixeira, 2014). Similarly, research conducted by Dentsu Aegis, the international communication agency operating in 143 countries, revealed in 2019 that only a third of ads get the full attention of their audience.

Furthermore, not only has consumers’ attention to ads plummeted, but their trust in them has also considerably decreased. As reported by Dentsu Aegis in 2018, a study by the UK think tank Credos hints that favorability toward advertisement has halved since the 1990s. This contributes

to explain the sudden and impressive expansion of influencer marketing in the second millennium.

The newfound capacity of consumers to avoid, consciously or unconsciously, advertisement bears a major challenge for businesses looking to reach them. Indeed, this era marks a shift in power from companies to consumers: the latter now pick the content they wish to consider instead of having it imposed on them.

As a result, companies have adapted to this change in dynamics and found innovative ways to communicate with new and existing consumers. Internet users' quest for valuable and interesting content has led to the expansion of inbound marketing. Hubspot, one of the leading CRM services worldwide, defines inbound marketing as "a business methodology that attracts customers by creating valuable content and experiences tailored to them." In an age where consumers are more selective than ever before with their attention, bringing them the content that is both most valuable and relevant to them has become the winning recipe for brands. Focusing on all the benefits that a product or service offers, as well as its attractive price, simply will not do anymore. Indeed, if information is at consumers' fingertips, they will be able to run comparisons with similar products or services quickly and easily; that is, if the product or service in question has captured their attention to begin with. Hence, brands are now turning social in order to create a relationship with their consumers, proposing tailored content that will catch their interest. Inbound marketing is notably achieved through social media, SEO strategy, content strategy, blogging, and email marketing. The rising importance of this form of marketing, which aims at "pulling" the customer in through content of interest to them rather than "pushing" the company's product or service, can be illustrated through the HubSpot State of Marketing Report shared in 2021, where HubSpot asked over 1,500 marketers about their marketing strategies and plans for 2021. When asked about their organization's primary approach to marketing, the highest-ranking response received was social media, followed by SEO, while content creation came fourth. The ranking of TV ads, coming in at the seventh position, would certainly have surprised marketing professionals forty years ago.

A landscape where customers' attention is not bought but earned has changed the playing field.

Now, businesses, multinationals and freelancers alike, are competing on the same platforms for consumers' interest, and their ability to stand out has shifted away from the power of their advertising budget. What matters most to consumers is now the quality, value, and tailoring of the content being offered, and the businesses that can deliver this content in the most appropriate way can be expected to be the winners in the attention economy.

There is, in this context, both encouraging and unfavorable news for freelancers and individual business owners.

The good news is that, as consumers' attention now flows more than ever toward the content that brings them the most value, freelancers and individual business owners stand a chance to

compete against large companies by showcasing their expertise while targeting a niche. Indeed, some of them have seen their business skyrocket after a video they produced went viral online. Furthermore, the depth of their advertising pockets has turned decreasingly relevant when such content can be created using equipment as basic as a smartphone, and its reach depends on social media algorithms which put individuals and businesses alike on equal footing, with the exception of sponsored content.

However, the spread of inbound marketing also means that businesses have flocked to social media and content creation en masse, crowding Internet space and rendering competition fiercer than ever as everyone is vying for users' attention. Furthermore, as organic social media content and blog posts can be created by virtually any person with an access to the Internet, for-profit companies are not only battling among themselves during TV advertising breaks: they are also competing for Internet users' attention against private individuals, such as their favorite celebrity sharing their latest song or a friend posting a picture of their son's graduation ceremony.

B. Personal branding as a key success factor for business for freelancers and self-employed workers

As we have covered in the previous section, Covid has spurred a wave of departures from companies, described as the Great Resignation. The pandemic has incited employees to redefine their expectations when it comes to work, and a portion of them has decided to take the route of freelancing and entrepreneurship as a result. Their newly created business would be anchored in the attention economy, begging the question of how to get themselves known and differentiated in a sea of information like never seen before.

Freelancers who participated in the 2021 Freelancer study by Freelancermap, despite being rather optimistic about their current and future prospects as previously mentioned, still share that their number one challenge remains project acquisition. Indeed, over half of respondents cited it as a concern.

This concern is further amplified by the fact that freelancers and self-employed workers, alone at the helm of their business, face competition among themselves that is arguably even fiercer than the one observed between companies. Websites like Fiverr, often used by freelancers to find jobs, put them in direct competition with one another. Yet, freelancers in a defined field often have similar skillsets, making it difficult to stand out in a sea of profiles promising comparable benefits.

Further, this already intense competition that freelancers face is likely to worsen due to current shifts in work environment. It is worth noting that if flexibility is a demand from employees which has been reinforced by the pandemic, it has also become a pursuit for companies. Indeed, the sanitary crisis has put in question the ability of workers to come to the office, and the Great Resignation has caused a staffing problem for certain firms. As a result, remote work can be

expected to become, if not the new normal, at least widespread and more frequent than it used to be pre-Covid. In the case that companies would be able to hire workers working from anywhere, a scenario made even more likely by the expansion of technology, it would also mean that the pool of talents they would hire from would dramatically broaden, causing the competition for remote jobs to increase.

Finally, freelancers and self-employed workers face a major challenge which is inherent to their status of entrepreneurs: managing their order portfolio. Indeed, Ballot insists that “being an entrepreneur entails working for one’s clients and it also means working on one’s company” (Personal communication, June 17, 2022). Therefore, if solo business owners are responsible for providing the designated product or service to their current clients, they are also in charge of the promotion of their business to acquire new ones. Neglecting the communication strategies which can contribute to continuously gain new orders can therefore have the potential to end in disaster, while implementing those communication strategies on a sporadic basis can cause strain both on an entrepreneur’s earnings and morale. Ballot points out a common pattern in entrepreneurship: communicating on one’s business when an entrepreneur needs clients, then slowing down on the promotion side once they collect orders, and the stress that can ensue when orders have been completed and they need to start communicating all over again to obtain new clients. Instead, she highlights the fact that the search for clients, namely communication, must be constant (Personal communication, June 17, 2022).

How can freelancers and self-employed workers implement a continuous communication strategy that allows them to differentiate themselves in the attention economy, where, moreover, geographical barriers have faded thanks to technology, allowing companies to hire workers from anywhere around the globe?

Personal branding could be a leading answer to this burning question.

Ballot argues that when it comes time to choose a freelancer to work with, personality is often the factor prevailing in the end (Personal communication, June 17, 2022). Indeed, she states:

Of course there is going to be a matter of skills, experience, offer, and price, but most often, we find ourselves in systems where all offers look the same and one of the main reasons why we will choose a freelancer or self-employed worker to work with rather than another is their person, their personality.

Further, Felix declares: “It’s kind of imperative, it’s not an option, it’s a necessity for every freelancer and creative to have a personal brand” (Personal communication, June 16, 2022).

What exactly is personal branding, and what are its purpose and benefits? We explore these concerns in the following parts.

i. Definition of personal branding

To approach the concept of personal branding, we may first identify the spectrum of fields to which it pertains, as well as known definitions.

A paper published in November 2018 by three Professors part of the Department of Management and Organization at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in the Netherlands aims to shed light on personal branding.

In the context of this research, they analyzed 100 papers on personal branding published in journals of different disciplines and proceeded to conduct a systematic literature review. The papers they looked at ranged in publication date from 2005 to 2017.

The professors established that personal branding was connected to multiple fields, namely marketing, sociology, communication, psychology, and organizational behavior.

Further, after looking at papers on the matter written over the span of a dozen years, they concluded that there is neither a universally accepted definition or theoretical model of personal branding.

The Professors then provided their own following definition, based on the papers they examined: “Personal branding is a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based in a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery.”

They also produced a definition for the term of personal brand, which says that a “Personal brand is a set of characteristics of an individual (attributes, values, beliefs, etc.) rendered into the differentiated narrative and imagery with the intent of establishing a competitive advantage in the minds of the target audience.”

To further refine the terms of personal branding and personal brand, let’s look at the definitions provided by some of the professionals interviewed in the context of this thesis..

Cavallini characterizes his area of choice as: “how you present yourself to the world in line to communicate your value and purpose, stand out and make an impact” (Personal communication, April 28, 2022).

Meanwhile, Felix (Personal communication, June 16, 2022) and Ballot (Personal communication, June 17, 2022) both insist on the fact that an individual’s personal brand can be assimilated to their reputation.

Indeed, Felix (Personal communication, June 16, 2022) describes personal branding as “your reputation constructed, consciously built by an individual,” and Ballot (Personal communication, June 17, 2022) states that “personal branding is your reputation, what people say about you when you are not in the room. In fact, it is often what people who do not know you say about you.”

They however diverge on one element: where Felix sees an individual’s personal brand as dependent on their communication, Ballot notes that, if a personal brand can indeed be influenced

through communication, it cannot be entirely controlled, considering that it depends on other people's opinions, which in the end cannot be managed.

Next, Pinsley defines personal branding as “creating an online platform for your niche where you share your expertise” (Personal communication, June 7, 2022).

Finally, Desbonnez defines personal branding as “putting oneself forward for the benefit of one's business” (Personal communication, June 16, 2022).

Taking into consideration these definitions, both from the academic literature and from interviews with experts, we can draw a picture of personal branding based on commonly agreed-upon characteristics of this concept.

Firstly, it appears that the process of building a personal brand emerges from the strategic intent of an individual and is based on their communication.

Secondly, the notion of image in the minds of other people appears, as a strong connection to the idea of reputation is put forward.

Consequently, personal branding can be perceived as sitting at the intersection between an individual's communication and the image that is created in the minds of their audience as a result.

Thirdly, personal branding clearly presents a defined aim, and for business owners this aim would be, most of the time, to advance their venture.

Based on the information presented above, we can therefore attempt to formulate the following definition of personal branding for freelancers and self-employed workers in the context of this thesis: “The process of advancing a freelancer or self-employed worker's business prospects by positively influencing the opinion that the public holds of them thanks to a carefully thought-out yet authentic communication strategy aimed at showcasing their expertise, purpose, and values.”

In an effort to delimit even further what personal branding is, it would seem relevant to go an extra step by looking at what personal branding is not.

Personal branding should not be confused with shameless self-promotion. Crafting one's personal brand does not entail bragging about your product or service.

Secondly, a personal brand is relative to a person, and is not to be assimilated to a business. Hence, the personal brand of a freelancer offering copywriting services will be separate from said copywriting services. A person's business is not who they are, and conversely, a business is not bound by their owner or founder. Even though an entrepreneur's image will influence and reflect on their business to varying degrees, it remains distinct. If the venture of an entrepreneur were to fail, their personal brand would live on.

Thirdly, a personal brand cannot address everyone. It is, instead, aimed at a particular audience. Krost (2020), an American marketing and brand strategist, highlights that “a personal brand is not a personal brand unless you have coined a niche.”

Finally, a personal brand is not a character or persona: it is indeed defined by its authenticity. Millan (2020), a digital marketing and personal branding consultant, warns against the dangers of crafting a personal brand which is not aligned with one’s true personality and values, stating: “it’s unfortunate to see when people build professional brands that are not who they truly are because when you meet them in person their personality doesn’t quite match.”

ii. Purpose and benefits of personal branding

In 2017, Cederberg suggests that “the purpose of a personal brand is to build an identity that associates specific emotions and perceptions with an individual while simultaneously managing these perceptions successfully.”

In addition, Lundberg (2020) argues that managing one’s personal brand is about controlling three elements: performance, image and exposure, in what she calls the P.I.E. A successful personal brand would then deliver results, create a positive image in the minds of others, and provide visibility to its owner regarding their target audience.

By combining these two approaches, we could conclude that the purpose of a personal brand for a freelancer or self-employed worker is to effectively demonstrate competence and leadership in their relevant field, which would result in the actors of their niche favoring them.

Beyond its purpose, personal branding offers a set of advantages that can serve a freelancer or self-employed worker well in their career. Indeed, if personal branding has gained traction in the beginning of the second millennium, it surely owes it to the many benefits that it grants those who actively seek to use it. Felix mentions that carefully crafting one’s personal brand is game changing, especially for a one-man business. When asked about the benefits that his personal brand brought him, he responded: “The opportunities I’ve seen so far, I really cannot mention them all” (Personal communication, June 16, 2022).

The advantages that honing one’s personal brand offer can be approached from two different perspectives: internal and external. Indeed, a personal brand arises both from the recognition and valorization of a person’s unique skills, and the image that this process creates in the minds of others.

First, we will examine the advantages that creating a personal brand bring to a freelancer or self-employed worker from an individual point of view.

As we will cover in the coming portion of this thesis dedicated to offering guidelines for creating one’s personal brand, this process requires an in-depth analysis of personal strengths and weaknesses, as well as skills and unique talents. From the formation of one’s personal brand then

results a heightened sense of self-awareness that will serve this person well in their career, helping them to identify the areas where they can bring the most value, as well as reap optimal benefits.

Beyond the more acute perception of their individual traits and own skillset, freelancers and self-employed workers who engage in the crafting of their personal brand will get to the bottom of their “why.” The “why”, or motivations behind a venture, is central to an entrepreneur’s journey. Indeed, it constitutes the very reason that pushed them to start their business, and if it is a crucial element at the beginning of their odyssey, it should remain so every step of the way. The beliefs, values and passions that an entrepreneur’s “why” represent is the fuel that will help them power through the challenges they will surely encounter as they grow their business. This motivation that arises, and which is unique to an individual, also happens to be at the heart of the process of defining one’s personal brand.

As one gains clarity on their personal brand, they will simultaneously acquire an understanding of the kind of content that falls into their tone and relevant field of expertise. Therefore, knowing one’s personal brand can act as a compass guiding a freelancer or self-employed worker on what content to create and share in order to strengthen their image in the minds of their target audience.

The fourth and final inner benefit of crafting one’s personal brand with intention is the motivation that it will provide a freelancer or self-employed worker to remain on top of news and trends in their field. Indeed, actively managing a personal brand requires to constantly demonstrate expertise, which is notably achieved by showcasing thought leadership in the chosen domain. In turn, this motivation to keep up with the latest developments in their industry can generate further benefits for freelancers and self-employed workers in the form of networking opportunities, as they seek to communicate with their peers and exchange ideas.

The inner benefits offered by the construction of one’s personal brand only constitute the tip of the iceberg: indeed, many external rewards can be expected to be reaped if such a venture is accomplished successfully.

White (2020) puts it in a concise and convincing manner by stating: “Having a personal brand makes everything in business easier, including getting sales, attracting investors, landing paid speaking opportunities, and booking highlevel meetings (all of which will help you make more money).”

The first, and probably most obvious, external reward of managing one’s personal brand resides in the increased name recognition. Indeed, crafting a personal brand is all about building reputation by constantly putting oneself out there, making a freelancer’s or self-employed worker’s name stand out. In a video by the Influencer Marketing Hub (2020), the speaker underlines the fact that “business has merged with celebrity culture.” This statement can be illustrated by the notoriety associated with the CEOs of some of the most widely known

companies worldwide. Indeed, the names of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Steve Jobs, and Mark Zuckerberg are arguably just as familiar to the public as the ones of the companies they established. Even though Tesla, Amazon, Apple, Facebook are in themselves massive brands across the globe, the personal brand of their founders are arguably even more powerful. Indeed, if Tesla has nearly 14 million followers on Twitter, the company's founder has over five times as many followers, with 81.2 million people eagerly observing his tweets as of April 2022. Meanwhile, nearly 120 million people follow Mark Zuckerberg on his own social network Facebook. Finally, Sara Blakely, the founder of Spanx, has over 1.7 million followers on LinkedIn, more than twenty-two times the follower count of her own company on the same platform. This can be explained by the fact that people, especially millennials and members of the Generation Z, trust people rather than brands.

The visibility gained through the process of actively crafting one's personal brand will in turn generate further advantages. Indeed, if a freelancer's or self-employed worker's name is front and center in the minds of their audience when they think of a particular field, then they will be more likely to cite this person's name in conversations and thereby amplify their reach.

Through the constant communication that building a personal brand entails, freelancers and self-employed workers get the opportunity to engage with members of their audience and create an emotional connection with them over time, which would not be possible to this extent by communicating only through the company's channels. Indeed, the personality of the entrepreneur which will transpire will enable them to create a sense of proximity and trust that is difficult to achieve when the messaging emanates from a faceless organization. If curiosity is a natural human instinct, it will create the desire for people to understand why the person behind the company created it, what were their motivations, hopes and dreams for it. Further, certain emotions can be more easily transmitted by a person rather than a firm's communication. For example, warmth and enthusiasm can be difficult to demonstrate as a company. Similarly, admiration is a feeling more likely to be inspired in someone listening to an entrepreneur's journey and achievements rather than a commercial recounting a business's results. Simply put, humans have a greater capacity at connecting with other humans than with organizations.

Thirdly, witnessing firsthand a person's skills and expertise through their actions and discourse is arguably far more convincing than if a brand were to evoke the benefits of its products in a piece of advertisement. In this way, a well-managed personal brand will contribute to build trust and credibility, two elements without which a client would take their business elsewhere.

As an entrepreneur acquires notoriety in their field by presenting themselves as a thought leader and constantly demonstrating their expertise, they will simultaneously get ahead of the competition. Indeed, building a personal brand is a process achieved over the long-run, and which never truly ends. This then requires a freelancer or self-employed worker to constantly showcase their talent and capacity in both understanding and solving their target audience's issue. With the name recognition that is generated comes the benefit of being perceived as a force to be reckoned

with within this particular industry. When deciding whom to turn to, clients are more likely to choose the person who is well-known in the industry as it can be interpreted as them possessing a notable know-how.

As freelancers and self-employed workers acquire name recognition, they will also be able to attract clients interested in their work and the results they showcase. This will save them resources, namely time, energy, and money, in contacting potential clients. Instead, their personal brand will act like a magnet, pulling the audience in. Moreover, if clients come to them in higher numbers, freelancers and self-employed workers will get an opportunity to choose from a pool of requests whom they desire to work with. They will also be in a better position to refuse clients who do not align with either their values or the budget they require for their services.

If demand for their product or service rises because of their personal branding efforts, freelancers and self-employed workers could also charge a higher price, resulting in increased revenues. In addition, if people are able to recognize the value offered, which is the purpose of personal branding, they will be willing to spend more. Once a freelancer or self-employed worker has the possibility of requesting a higher price, this will in turn grant them more flexibility in the way they manage their time, by making more money within a shorter period.

Another advantage offered by personal branding is the customer loyalty it can instigate. Indeed, as it constantly generates visibility, a business owner may stay top of their clients' minds, including after they have made a purchase. Further, they may broach a range of new topics as time goes by, which would be of interest to some of their previous clients: those could then decide to request their services once again in the context of new problematics. Finally, returning clients who are satisfied with a freelancer or self-employed worker's product or service will be more likely to recommend them, generating additional business without extra effort on the latter's part.

Speaking roles at conferences or webinars, interviews on podcasts and YouTube channels, invitations to industry events... These are just examples of the opportunities that can arise once a business owner has established their expertise through personal branding. Moreover, these will contribute to reinforce their image as a thought leader.

It is also worth noting that, whether an entrepreneur may be aware of it or not, and whether they like it or not, they have a personal brand. The nuance lies in whether or not they actively manage it. Indeed, their audience holds a set of feelings and an overall image of them in their minds. Therefore, crafting one's personal brand with intention contributes to create the image they want and not leave it to chance.

This image created by a business owner will last over time, and as previously mentioned, will live on even if their venture were to fail. As such, personal branding offers them flexibility in their career by leveraging their image in the long run.

If crafting one's personal brand with intention as a freelancer or self-employed worker then offers numerous advantages, failing to do so also presents risks.

The first risk is that, by neglecting the management of their personal brand, individual business owners may miss out on a share of their audience. Instead, their target customers may turn to competitors who benefit from a more solid name recognition.

The second risk is that freelancers and self-employed workers who do not actively craft their personal brand could not be considered for opportunities such as speaking engagements, or interviews, as they would not be recognized as thought leaders in their field. Indeed, they may possess the expertise to qualify as notable forces in their industry, but without sharing this knowledge and know-how with the world, they could remain unknown to a portion of their peers and the public.

A third risk resides in the management of their image. As previously suggested, any business owner has a personal brand, whether they are aware of it or not, as anyone they interact with will form a perception of them in their mind. However, if a freelancer or self-employed worker does not actively craft their personal brand, and engage in the reflection process that this entails, they may not be able to project the image they desire. Moreover, as they will not be purposefully preoccupying themselves with the impression they create, the gap between the perception they have of themselves and the image others hold of them could become considerably wide.

Finally, personal branding is particularly crucial for freelancers and business owners given that, as they are on their own managing their company, only they can represent their business. Ultimately, the product or service they deliver directly emanates from their unique skillset, which becomes necessary to showcase in order to create a relationship based on trust with their audience.

iii. Examples of entrepreneurs with strong personal brands

In order to approach personal branding in a practical way, and before moving on to attempt delivering recommendations toward the actions that contribute to building a strong personal brand, we will look at entrepreneurs who have been successful in this regard.

We will first examine four examples of American entrepreneurs with successful personal brands, before diving into the strong personal brands of three French women entrepreneurs.

Life and business coaches at the top of their industry are prime examples of excellence in personal branding. We will therefore first aim to analyze the personal brands of four American life and business coaches: Tony Robbins, Marie Forleo, Gabrielle Bernstein, and Mel Robbins. Neither freelancers nor self-employed workers, these coaches have built empires based on their personal brands, and the enterprises they have created depend on their image alone.

Anthony Robbins, known as Tony Robbins, is an author, coach, and philanthropist born in 1960. Out of the four coaches we will analyze in this part, he is the one with the largest range of products, as he branched out throughout his career. His favored topics now encompass personal life, personal finances, and health. In line with his diversified skill-set, his offering notably includes the signature events he is known for, such as “Unleash the Power Within” and “Date with Destiny”, which thousands of people worldwide have attended. He also offers 8 online training programs, which are subscription-based, and cover different areas of life, out of which relationships, health, and time management. As far as his image is concerned, Tony Robbins is known for his presence, through his loud and clear voice, and impressive posture as he towers well over six feet. Like the three following coaches, he is present on all major social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube, where he accumulates over 23 million followers. His top three platforms based on follower count are LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook. Regarding his digital content strategy, Tony Robbins is also present online through his website, where he evokes his mission, events, programs, and coaching. His website notably includes a blog section. Quizzes are offered to visitors of his website, such as “What’s Your Business Identity”, which allows him to collect email addresses, and keep his audience in the loop of his latest news. He also shares his expertise through his own podcast. On social media, Tony Robbins hasn’t amassed such as impressive following by chance. Indeed, he posts regularly, and, as of April 2022, he has shared a total of over 1200 posts on Instagram, and about 420 videos on YouTube. In order to further establish himself as an authority figure in his field, he has published a total of 7 books, among which the bestseller “Awaken the Giant Within.” Internationally recognized as a leading coach, Tony Robbins, similarly to the coaches mentioned below, benefits from an extensive network. Not only is he connected to other forces in his industry, including Marie Forleo and Lewis Howes, he also connects with thought leaders from various horizons by interviewing them for his podcast and YouTube channel. Finally, in terms of community, private Facebook groups are dedicated to the attendees of his conferences, which are organized by geographical area, as exemplified by the “Unleash The Power Within: Official Tony Robbins Australia & Asia Community.”

Next up is Marie Forleo, entrepreneur and philanthropist, famous for her role of host of MarieTV, her own weekly show. Marie Forleo’s offer mainly centers around three specific online trainings: “The Copy Cure”, a copywriting course, “B-School”, her star business course dedicated to entrepreneurs, and “Time Genius”, which is a live coaching program to help people take control of their time, energy, and attention. Marie Forleo is therefore known for her expertise in entrepreneurship, copywriting, and optimization of business owners’ personal lives. Her image crystallizes around her bubbly and warm personality, which also transpires in her personal fashion style, composed of colorful pieces in bright hues. Marie Forleo’s social media accounts boast a total of over 2.3 million followers. Beyond social networks, her content strategy extends to a blog and a podcast, as well as free resources such as audio and writing trainings, which she uses as lead magnets to collect email addresses. Finally, her powerful network is composed both

of the people she welcomes on her YouTube channel and podcast, as well as the industry leaders, including Oprah Winfrey and Mel Robbins, who invite her to talk on their platforms.

The third coach we will examine in this part is Gabrielle Bernstein, who also happens to be a speaker and author born in 1979. Gabrielle Bernstein's main focus is spirituality, and her audience is mostly composed of women. Her image is consistent with her field of expertise, as her tone is a balance of calm, gentleness, and strength. Overall, Gabrielle Bernstein's following on social media reaches over 2.7 million people. She shares her competence with her audience through these channels, posting massively on Instagram, with over ten thousand posts on her account. She also has her own podcast, and provides free resources on her website, such as quizzes and meditations, to gather the email addresses of the members of her audience and stay in touch with them.

The fourth and final personality we will look at is Mel Robbins, lawyer, television host, author, and motivational speaker. Mel Robbins is particularly known for her expertise in the field of habit formation. She is recognizable through her signature look which includes black glasses with thick frames. Her tone is both motivational and kindly, effectively boosting her audience. Present on all major social media platforms, she has a total of over 4.8 million followers. Like Gabrielle Bernstein, Mel Robbins is very active on Instagram, where she has shared over five thousand posts. She also uses lead magnets on her website, in the form of downloadable guides and worksheets. Her content strategy is complete with two books, which have contributed to establish her authority in her field.

Together, these four American entrepreneurs form some of the most influential coaches and motivational speakers worldwide, as shown by their combined social media following of an astounding 32.8 million people. Their personal brands present commonalities that are worth highlighting.

First, authenticity is a core characteristic of their image. These entrepreneurs all give a sense of showing up in the world as their best and truest selves, notably through their "tell it like it is" tone. Secondly, they all have established a strong social media presence by being extremely active on these platforms. They exhibit strong content strategies, not only on social media, but also through podcasts, and the books they have published. All, except for Marie Forleo, have been TED Talk speakers. To stay in touch with members of their audience and build a long-term relationship with them, they offer free resources as lead magnets, allowing them to transform some of their fans into paying clients. Their network is large and composed of thought leaders inside and outside of their industry, which they notably build through interviews that they lead and give. Finally, they extend their reach and engage with their audience through building community around their services, through Facebook groups for example.

To provide a different angle, we will now examine the case of three French women entrepreneurs with outstanding personal brands: Justine Hutteau, Jeanne Damas, and Gabrielle Caunesil.

Justine Hutteau is the founder of the company Respire, which star products are deodorants. Justine Hutteau started managing an Instagram account during her studies, where she shared her passion for running. This step allowed her to start building a loyal community of twenty thousand followers. In 2016, a doctor detected a tumor in her breast. This news led Justine Hutteau to question the safety of the components present in beauty products intended for daily use. Two years later, she launched Respire: a brand of organic deodorants with safe formulas. The enterprise met an immediate success and has kept on expanding ever since. Today, Justine Hutteau's community reaches over a hundred thousand followers on Instagram, and a hundred and twenty thousand followers on LinkedIn.

Jeanne Damas is a former model and influencer, as well as the artistic director of the fashion label Rouje, which she founded in 2016. Jeanne Damas' communication makes for a strong personal brand, with clearly defined values and imagery revolving around her native city: Paris. Recognized as an icon of the City of Lights, she is regularly featured in magazines such as Vogue and Elle, where she shares insights into her personal style such as her beauty routine and what she wears in a week. Beyond the communication done around her in the media, she also has an Instagram account with a million and a half followers. Her brand Rouje also garners an impressive following with nearly a million people keeping an eye on the label's posts.

Gabrielle Caunesil is a model, influencer, as well as founder and creative director of the fashion brand La Semaine Paris. Gabrielle Caunesil is very present on social media, where she particularly focuses on video content. She gathers an audience of nearly one hundred thousand followers on YouTube, over a million followers on Instagram, and her recently launched TikTok account already shows over a hundred thousand followers. In her content, Gabrielle Caunesil shares insights into her personal life including pictures and videos with her husband Riccardo Pozzoli. Further, she has taken her followers along on her pregnancy journey. She also invites them to witness parts of her daily life through videos where she gets ready to attend events for example. Beyond revealing aspects of her family life, Gabrielle Caunesil's content equally focuses on fashion, and she leverages her notoriety to promote her fashion brand La Semaine Paris organically. As of today, her company is followed by over two hundred thousand people on Instagram.

Looking at the personal brands of these three French women entrepreneurs, we can note, as is the case for the American life and business coaches presented earlier, similarities among them. First, they can all be considered as major driving forces in their companies' success. Indeed, they can count on large audiences that have followed them long before they started their entrepreneurial journey. As they built their brands, they harnessed the power of these established communities, and continue to do so today, in order to increase awareness surrounding their ventures. Secondly, their personal brands all comprise an inspirational element, through their personal journeys. Thirdly, they appear approachable, as they share, in varying degrees, parts of their personal lives which are relevant to their companies' domain. Ultimately, the robustness of these French women

entrepreneurs' personal brands is such that their names and stories are arguably known by the large majority of the people who are familiar with their respective companies.

Now that we have defined personal branding and its relevance in today's world, as well as prime examples of success in this endeavor, we will aim to provide a framework to build one's personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker.

II. Building one's personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker in 7 steps

In the first part of this thesis, we have established the importance of personal branding for freelancers and self-employed workers in the era of the attention economy.

As crafting one's personal brand aims at influencing in a positive manner the image that the audience holds of an entrepreneur, this process happens constantly and never truly ends.

Indeed, at every junction where a freelancer and a potential client meet, the personal brand of the former is at stake, with the latter forming an image of them in their mind.

Modeling a personal brand as a solo business owner can therefore be accomplished in various manners. In this part, we will highlight the seven actions we have identified as being the main drivers of a personal brand's crafting, and the best practices in each, from the writers on the topic and interviews with experts.

These seven steps are as follows: adopting an optimal mindset and approach regarding personal branding, reflecting on one's business, presenting oneself in the best way possible, building a solid presence on social media, creating a powerful content strategy, mastering the art of storytelling, and developing a reliable network.

A. Adopting an optimal mindset and approach regarding personal branding

The very first step to take as a freelancer or self-employed worker who has decided to craft their personal brand with intention is to adopt an optimal mindset and approach. Indeed, intentionally modeling one's personal brand is a process which impacts all areas of business and should be regarded as a long-term endeavor. Without certain qualities and choosing to adopt the view of a life-long learner, a freelancer or self-employed worker on this journey may decide to cut it short.

It is therefore crucial to accept the fact that building a strong personal brand is not going to happen overnight, but instead over the span of months and years.

Self-motivation is an attribute that should be part of a freelancer or self-employed worker's toolkit, both in their work and their odyssey of building a personal brand. According to the 2021 edition of the Freelancer Study, 60% of participants cited self-motivation as a relevant skill for freelancers, coming in at second place after communication skills.

Building a personal brand intentionally is entirely up to an entrepreneur: they may decide to dedicate resources, such as time and energy, to it, or not. Therefore, self-motivation is key, especially considering a solo business owner cannot reasonably expect to reap the rewards generated by their personal brand immediately.

The second quality to develop to build a strong personal brand is confidence. Indeed, if this process is about creating a positive image in the minds of others, then it starts with the image the entrepreneur holds of themselves. Self-confidence constitutes one of the most relevant skills as a freelancer for 50% of the respondents of the 2021 Freelancer Study, further anchoring this quality as essential for those holding this position. In order to cultivate self-confidence as an entrepreneur, Pinsley delivers several pieces of advice (Personal communication, June 7, 2022). First, she recommends leveraging the power of positive affirmations. Second, she advises to start journaling to defeat fear and limiting beliefs. In her own journaling practice, Pinsley notably writes down the fears she may experience and either reframes them or plays lawyer with them. She gives the example of the fear of judgement from other people: “People are going to judge me for this” and reframing it as: “I am going to inspire other people to be able to show up authentically as themselves because they'll see me doing it and that gives them permission to do the same.” A third tip Pinsley delivers to boost one’s confidence as a solo business owner is to create a favorable environment, for example by joining a group of other entrepreneurs and regularly meeting with them. This action would help freelancers and self-employed workers to not only feel less lonely in their daily challenges, but also to learn from other people who might have gone through the same ordeals in the past.

Curiosity is the third characteristic recognized as important for freelancers and self-employed workers crafting their personal brand. Indeed, if personal branding is about revealing one’s strengths and unique talents, it equally requires an acute knowledge and understanding of the audience at the other end of the receiving line. Moreover, honing skills and constantly staying on top of trends of an industry demands curiosity to position oneself as an expert.

In relation to the development of one’s curiosity, adopting a daring attitude can be precious in the process of crafting a personal brand. Indeed, to emphasize their uniqueness, freelancers and self-employed workers may lean into what sets them apart. This courage to be authentic, even if it goes against the status quo, will showcase the entrepreneur’s values and attract the audience that sees themselves reflected in them.

Being daring also means seizing opportunities when they appear and taking risks. Crafting a personal brand notably entails assembling a network of influential individuals, who are also recognized as thought leaders in their field. To build those relationships, solo business owners might have to go above and beyond to connect with them. A great dose of enthusiasm and perseverance, qualities often recognized as central for entrepreneurs, would also help them on their journey to becoming forces to be reckoned with in their domain.

The act of taking risks and adopting a positive attitude is also highlighted by Busch in his book *The Serendipity Mindset* (2020) as a key factor for creating favorable circumstances. According to the author, serendipity is a positive occurrence which results from a process where people are committed to seeing opportunities instead of negativity. It notably requires to be authentic: to show up as one’s true self in the world, to be perceptive, curious, and open-minded. Further,

when serendipity strikes, which is truly the result of someone's actions colliding with chance according to Busch, preparedness plays a key role.

Next, adopting a supportive posture, rather than a competitive one, regarding other members of an industry can contribute to nurture relationships with them. Since personal branding is all about putting forward one's unique set of strengths and talents, it entails recognizing that trying to undermine competitors isn't helpful, if not irrelevant altogether. Similarly, comparing oneself to other freelancers and self-employed workers in the same field perceived as more successful, because they have more followers on social media for example, is not only ineffective but also detrimental to self-confidence. Other entrepreneurs being successful does not mean there is only space for them to exist and thrive in the industry. Pinsley therefore recommends shifting from a scarcity mindset, which states that there is only so much to go around for all business owners, to an abundance mindset, where cooperation, on the contrary, multiplies possibilities (Personal communication, June 7, 2022). Finally, seeking collaboration instead of a destructive competitive approach has the potential to be extremely rewarding as it can result from opportunities emanating from a solo business owner's network.

Another winning approach to start building a personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker is simply to start, instead of putting it off. While preparing to occupy certain positions, which require several years of education and training, future self-employed workers can begin to craft their personal brand before they even officially start practicing. By being active in their domain and interacting with other members of their industry, showing interest and sharing ideas, they can start paving the way to notoriety in their field.

This last point of choosing proactiveness requires to ditch perfectionism, accepting that, as crafting a personal brand is a process that will bring a freelancer or self-employed worker to take a stance on a number of topics, through the creation of content and interaction with other experts, mistakes are inevitable. This brings us back to the fact that, as a life-long journey, constructing a personal brand with intention entails being a constant learner.

B. Reflecting on one's business to hone their personal brand

When asked about the mistakes that he sees freelancers and self-employed workers make when building their personal brand, Felix (Personal communication, June 16, 2022) declares:

A lot of them don't really take time to understand themselves. They don't really take time to understand their own person. Building a personal brand is more than just going on Instagram or Facebook and posting content, it goes beyond that. It's more about your own life, your own soul, your own essence. What is it that is pushing you, where are you going to? A lot of people go directly to expressing their personal brand, they don't start with refining it first.

Before embarking on the journey to actively communicate their personal brand, freelancers and self-employed workers should therefore self-reflect first.

Indeed, a personal brand has a purpose and is meant to serve the freelancer or self-employed worker actively honing it. To achieve this aim, the entrepreneur should know exactly who they are, what they stand for, how they are currently being perceived, and what is the image they ideally want to project. Like a captain leading a ship, a freelancer or self-employed worker cannot reach the position of thought leader in their industry if they do not know their ship—themselves, or draw a map clearly indicating their desired destination—the position they wish to occupy in their domain and the benefits they expect to reap from their personal brand.

i. Reflecting on one's aim in building a personal brand

As mentioned earlier, the process of building a personal brand can ultimately bring a collection of opportunities for freelancers and self-employed workers. To be truly effective, it is best however if solo business owners start out with a clear goal in mind of what they hope to achieve through the crafting of their personal brand.

Examples of goals that a freelancer or self-employed worker can pursue through the crafting of their personal brand include expanding their list of clients, increasing their revenue by charging a higher price, or obtaining recognition among their peers inside their industry.

To further the process of identifying one's objective in building their personal brand, Pinsley recommends looking at the emotions which fuel a solo business owner: "Really identify that more emotional core of why you're building a brand. Think about the end goal that this will help you contribute or contribute to, something that resonates with you" (Personal communication, June 7, 2022). Those goals can for example include financial freedom or securing more time for another project of theirs.

ii. Reflecting on the freelancer or self-employed worker one is

Schaadt (2021), Social Selling Consultant, Coach & Keynote Speaker, effectively summarizes the process of crafting a personal brand by declaring: "You first have to take an in-depth look at yourself. Then you take the personal brand to the outside world, build your network and maintain it."

If a personal brand is all about exposing how one's unique set of strengths and talents makes them the go-to person in their industry, then a freelancer or self-employed worker needs to know themselves inside and out.

To perform this work of self-reflection, the first component to look at would be experience. Experience encompasses all the marking events, both in their personal and work life, that have led them to where they are today. These pivotal events will play a role in helping a freelancer or

self-employed worker craft their personal brand, and later their storytelling. To dig into the experiences of their past that are relevant to build their personal brand, entrepreneurs may also look at particular projects they led, and people they collaborated with. They may include both successes and failures, for the former often does not come before the latter. Further, failures can be the defining learning experiences tipping the scales toward a fruitful breakthrough that will inspire those who hear about them and elicit admiration.

The second element to look at lies in the strengths of a freelancer or self-employed worker. Those strengths can be determined by looking at the tasks they consistently perform better than other people. Producing outstanding graphic designs for example would enter the realm of hard skills, while being able to convince people easily would pertain to the field of soft skills. Making a list of those strengths will help a freelancer or self-employed worker know exactly on what assets they can lean on and highlight as part of their personal brand.

Linked to the experience and strengths of an entrepreneur is their expertise. A professional's expertise can be described as the value they bring to their clients through the execution of their knowledge and set of competences. It constitutes the fundamental piece for freelancers and self-employed workers to emphasize in their communication, so they can position themselves as a leader in their industry and build a steel-strong personal brand. Sitting at the junction between their experience and their most acute skills, solo business owners can define their expertise through the problem they solve for their target customer.

Once a freelancer or self-employed worker has dug into their experience, strengths, and resulting expertise, a core question remains unanswered. Indeed, if the “what” of their business appears clear, the “why” should never be set aside. The “what” tells what a business owner or company can accomplish, while the “why” provides the reason behind their every action. The “why” is not only useful for a freelancer or self-employed worker to motivate themselves and push through the challenges they might encounter, but also a powerful incentive for consumers to choose to buy from a particular business rather than a competitor. In his famous 2009 TED Talk, Sinek explores the power of “why”, which Sinek characterizes as purpose, cause, belief. He also argues that it constitutes the motivation for entrepreneurs to get out of bed, but also the reason why people should care. Sinek offers that if a company is to communicate only through what they do and how they do it, their message will fall flat with audiences because it will lack the inspiring component offered by the “why.” This fact can be illustrated through a powerful statement he makes: “People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it.” This is the reason why Apple is able to sell phones, computers, MP4 players, while other companies are restricted to selling a particular product: because Apple’s customers buy the company’s drive for constant innovation and pick a competitor for their perceived expertise in making a particular product.

Based on their “why”, a freelancer or self-employed worker can then proceed to write their mission statement if they have not done so already. A mission statement sets out what a business owner or company aims to achieve through their activities, and the impact they want to have in

the world. A famous example of a company's mission statement would be the one of TED, which summarizes in two words the reason behind their organization's existence: "Spread ideas." Despite being short, this mission statement manages to effectively describe the role that TED plays, and to elicit feelings of curiosity and inspiration.

Once a mission statement has been established, the next crucial step is to write a vision statement. If the mission statement describes the commitment of a freelancer or a self-employed worker day after day, the vision statement draws the picture of the reality they ultimately aim to create. As an organization, Teach for America's vision statement captures the essence of the circumstances they aim to see emerge as a result of their work: "One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education."

The final step in reflecting on who they are and what they stand for as a freelancer or self-employed workers is to list their values. Dozens of values can guide entrepreneurs on their journey, such as humility, compassion, or integrity. Values make all the difference in an individual's personal brand as their unique set of values helps to distinguish them from other business owners. Freelancers and self-employed workers should still proceed with caution regarding their values by not getting their business brand values and their personal brand values mixed up. Upon asking Ballot about the number one mistake she witnessed in terms of personal branding, she mentioned that some solo business owners choose to incarnate one or several values that pertain to their business in their personal branding. Yet, she points out that this strategy is doomed to fail, considering personal branding is constantly expressed through an individual. Ballot explains: "We can only be absolutely authentic in what we will share in our personal branding, we cannot incarnate a value which is not our own, it will not work" (Personal communication, June 17, 2022).

iii. Reflecting on the current position of one's personal brand

Once the work of self-reflection on who they are as a person and business owner has been done, the next step at this stage would be to examine the current position of a freelancer or self-employed worker's current personal brand. During his TED Talk titled "Designing a purposeful personal brand from zero to infinity" (2017), Tran declares that "a personal brand is the intersection of perception and reality." It is therefore crucial to understand both the image freelancers and self-employed workers think they reflect, as well as the image they actually shape in the minds of those belonging to their audience. Indeed, a gap between these two perceptions often exists when a personal brand is not crafted intentionally, and if a freelancer or self-employed worker is not aware of the kind of image they currently project, they may not know the actions to take in order to create the desired effect in their audience's minds.

The appraisal of one's current personal brand starts with the contemplation of the image they think they reflect. In this pursuit, freelancers and self-employed workers can make a list of the

qualities they believe they are projecting and imagine stepping into the shoes of someone meeting them for the first time and making their judgement about them.

Next, an audit of one's current personal brand can be performed to grasp the image that other people hold of them.

The first way to perform this audit would be to understand their own digital footprint. In the Internet era, the initial instinct for many consumers is to search for answers online whenever confronted with an issue in their daily life. This also, if not especially, applies to purchasing decisions. Similarly, after meeting a professional at a networking event, the logical thing to do for many people would be to search for their new contact online and connect with them on LinkedIn in order to stay in touch. This means that, as a freelancer or self-employed worker, the top results that appear upon performing a search of their name in a search engine should be impeccable. Prior to crafting their personal brand with intention, the first step is then to be aware of the impression they currently create through their online presence, whether through their own channels such as their social media and website, or other people's content about them.

The second way to perform an audit of one's current personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker is to ask people for feedback. In this context, they could ask their family, friends, previous clients, and professional acquaintances to describe them and their business in three words. The more people they can question, the better, as they will have more feedback to work with and a larger pool of answers to compare with one another and draw conclusions from.

Taking into account the state of their online presence, and the feedback from the people that have crossed their path, freelancers can start the reflection process with a good idea of the image they currently project and appraise the eventual gap that exists with the image they are trying to create.

iv. Reflecting on their target audience and their target client

The fourth step of the reflection process is to carefully consider the target audience and target client a freelancer or self-employed worker is to serve.

Before pointing out the benefits of focusing on a niche and understanding the needs of its members, it is important to make two crucial points: solo business owners cannot serve everyone, and their target audience and target customers are not to be confused.

First, freelancers and self-employed workers, just like companies, big or small, cannot serve everyone. Not everyone is in need of the skills they can bring to the table: simply because their interest might not be aligned, or their need is fulfilled in a different manner, or if they already have honed these skills themselves and attained a level of mastery that could even be superior to the freelancer or self-employed worker offering those services.

Secondly, it is crucial to distinguish target audience from target client. To be able to leverage their personal brand, freelancers and self-employed workers should aim to target a public that is

broaden than only their desired clients. Indeed, the majority of the members comprising their audience is not meant to become their clients in the end, only a small portion does. Therefore, when establishing their social media or content strategy for example, they should start with their target audience, and then broaden the spectrum to touch a larger category of people who will be interested in their content. As Ballot highlights, the people making up most of an entrepreneur's audience and who will not turn into their clients play an important role as they act as leverage to attract more people, and therefore those who will ultimately make a purchase (Personal communication, June 17, 2022).

In order to craft a successful personal brand, reflecting on one's niche is a step that can absolutely not be neglected. Having a niche provides freelancers and self-employed workers with several advantages.

The first benefit of concentrating on a specific niche is that a freelancer or self-employed worker will have an acute knowledge and understanding of their target customer, so they know exactly how to adapt their messaging. A personalized messaging will be more impactful and generate increased interest from a particular audience, as its members will identify with the topics being brought up and the approach.

The second advantage offered by picking a niche as a solo business owner is that it will allow them to stand out. The narrower the field, the less professionals—and therefore competitors—will exist. In an already saturated marketplace and Internet space, it is then easier to gain visibility through differentiation.

The third advantage provided by specialization is the opportunity to establish a strong credibility. Indeed, when demonstrating knowledge and competence in a specific domain, freelancers and self-employed workers have a higher chance of becoming the go-to person in the relevant industry, as they will be identified as an expert. It is a widely accepted idea that concentrating one's time and energy on mastering a single craft leads to a sharp knowledge and know-how in this domain. On the other hand, striving to become an expert in a large field or many specific areas forces an individual to divide their attention, therefore limiting the acquired insights.

Finally, when asked about the key lessons she has learned throughout her journey to over eighty thousand followers on social media, and the things she eventually wishes she would have done differently when she started, the only element that Pinsley noted relates to the importance of selecting a specific niche (Personal communication, June 7, 2022). Indeed, she mentioned that if she could have done anything differently when she started out on social media, she wishes she would have niched down sooner, which is a strategy she believes would have resulted in higher sales from the beginning.

Therefore, it is crucial for solo business owners to determine with precision the niche they can best serve if they hope to craft a personal brand which will hit its mark.

To do so, they may consider the factors established in the previous part dedicated to reflecting on the unique professional that they are through their set of experiences and strengths, resulting in an expertise and acute understanding of a particular field, as well as their core values, to identify the target audience they wish to serve, and which can most benefit from their offer.

Once their niche has been determined, freelancers and self-employed workers should strive to acquire a profound understanding of their target audience. Pinsley highlights that, in the context of her work accompanying clients to uncover their niche, she helps them determine what their audiences care about, including their pains, such as their challenges, their struggles, their fears, their limiting beliefs, their unmet needs, as well as their pleasures, including their desired outcomes, their hopes, their wishes, their values and their dreams (Personal communication, June 7, 2022).

Once this is done, it is time to move on to the last step of the reflection process: situating one's desired personal brand.

v. Reflecting on the desired position of one's personal brand

Following the previous three steps, a freelancer or self-employed worker would have acquired an understanding of the person and business owner they are, the image they currently project, and the audience they serve. Prior to jumping into crafting their personal brand with intention, it is crucial to know the unique perception they want to create and the position they desire to occupy in their industry.

White (2020) puts it in the following way: "First, start with an evaluation of how others currently perceive you in your industry. Then, once you've been brutally honest, ask yourself how you would like people to see you in the future."

Based on their strengths, expertise, personal preferences, and goals, freelancers and self-employed workers may decide how they want to be perceived by their target audience. The desired image should indeed take into account their personality and communication style, as well as the place they wish to occupy in their sector.

In order to differentiate themselves further, and to define the role they would like to play in their industry, freelancers and self-employed workers may want to draw a perceptual map, a tool recommended by Pinsley (Personal communication, June 7, 2022). To make their perceptual map, solo business owners should identify the three competitors closest to them, then determine where there is white space: a corner of the market for them to own.

Following the reflection process, the next logical step in building a personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker would be to establish how to best present themselves to create the desired image in their audience's eye.

C. Presenting oneself in the best way possible

As prescribed by the definition of personal branding offered in the first part of this thesis, honing a personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker is the “process of advancing one’s business prospects by positively influencing the opinion that the public holds of them.” This entails both inner work to understand one’s strengths and unique expertise, as well as outer work of successfully showcasing those assets to create a positive image.

Therefore, if the first two stages presented above to craft one’s personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker focus on adopting an optimal mindset and understanding the current state of their personal brand, the step presented here sits at the junction between reflection and communication.

A personal brand crystallizing in the perception others hold of an individual, the first impression created by the latter through certain elements such as their clothing, tone, and marketing material is decisive.

i. The importance of image

When asked about the mistakes she witnessed freelancers and self-employed workers make when building a personal brand, the first response Pinsley formulated without hesitation referred to the unprofessional image some of them may unintentionally project through their online presence (Personal communication, June 7, 2022).

Indeed, she evokes the inconsistency that she has noticed at times in freelancers and self-employed workers’ image, notably online: “Their website looks kind of janky, their social media posts don’t have a consistent brand identity.”

Yet, a professional image can make or break the ability of solo business owners to secure leads and ultimately clients. Indeed, Pinsley explains: “If they don’t feel safe on your website, if they don’t feel a sense of security there, or they don’t feel like your online presence is giving off a professional feel because it’s not consistent, that’s a huge miss.”

Therefore, carefully crafting a professional image is a must when building a personal brand which materializes in the audience’s perception of a solo business owner.

ii. A business owner’s image transpires everywhere

Lok (2021), an entrepreneur and investor known to be a thought-leader in the field of personal branding, argues that an individual’s signature style encompasses multiple aspects, from their clothing to their color palette used in their communication and their tone.

Indeed, a solo business owner’s image is not solely formed through their profile picture on LinkedIn or their choice of clothing for a conference they may host: it transpires whenever they appear in person or online.

During in-person encounters, people will start forming a perception of a freelancer or self-employed worker based on their attire, attitude, body language, and tone. Further, this perception will stretch to include physical communication materials such as business cards. In the case of solo business owners offering their products or services in an office, the design of this space will also directly reflect on the image of their owner.

Online, every element of their communication will contribute to create the big picture of their image. This includes the design elements on their website and social media accounts (such as their logo and the fonts and colors used), their pictures, as well as the style and tone of their written messages (such as captions on social media, newsletters, blog articles for example).

When crafting their signature style, solo business owners therefore need to consider every piece of the puzzle that creates their image in the minds of their audience.

iii. Refining the elements of one's image to create a positive first impression as a freelancer or self-employed worker

Refining the elements composing one's image is as much about aligning to their authentic self as it is about considering their audience's expectations.

In crafting their signature style, solo business owners can first refer to their values. Indeed, their values can provide them precious insights into the kind of visual cues and tone that would suit them best.

Next, freelancers and self-employed workers may want to consider their audience when planning the elements constructing their image. This requires knowing their target audience thoroughly so they may communicate in a way that will resonate with them.

On one hand, solo business owners may want to craft their image, and especially their tone, in function of the feeling they want to elicit.

On the other hand, they could take into account the position they want to occupy inside their niche, notably by referring to the perceptual map previously presented. Then, they could translate those aspects into design elements and other materials composing their image.

Once the preparatory work for building a personal brand has been done, including adopting an optimal mindset, reflecting on one's business, as well as defining the desired image to project, freelancers and self-employed workers are ready to put their personal branding strategy into motion through concrete actions, starting with leveraging the power of social media.

D. Building a strong social media presence

The second millennium has seen the birth and rapid expansion of social media worldwide. While only two decades ago, an entrepreneur would rely heavily on print for their marketing efforts, digital now appears as the primary solution to get noticed by consumers and social media has

played a major role in this change of paradigm. Not only do these platforms allow for individuals to communicate seamlessly with each other through connected devices, they also provide a never-before seen opportunity for brands to connect and engage with their audiences. Freelancers and self-employed workers are prime examples of business owners who stand to benefit from the democratization of social networks, which can notably allow them to strengthen their personal brand.

Wikipedia defines social medias as “interactive digital channels that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks.”

Considering a personal brand is constructed through the interaction between an individual and their audience, social media then appears to be a leading solution for solo business owners to craft their image.

i. Knowing the social media landscape: platforms, formats, and tools

From the popularity of social media has emerged a range of platforms which allow Internet users to connect with each other. Several, boasting millions, if not billions, of users, appear as the leaders on a global scale.

For the purpose of this thesis, we will expose the six main social media platforms which are most widely used and relevant to the crafting of a freelancer or self-employed worker’s personal brand in 2022, wherever they may be operating on the globe. Those six platforms are: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok.

Created by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, Facebook can be considered as the first social media platform which gained worldwide traction. To this day, it remains the number one social network, with an impressive 2.91 billion monthly active users in the third quarter of 2021 (Oberlo, 2021). When looking at numbers on a more granular basis, 1.62 billion users are active on Facebook each day (Shepherd, 2022). In France, 3 out of 4 Internet users have a Facebook account, according to a 2021 report published by We Are Social and Hootsuite. As far as the age range is concerned, millennials are the most active generation on Facebook: last year in the United States, for example, 84% of them were active on the platform (Shepherd, 2022). Although Facebook may not be growing as fast as some of its counterparts, it is still a social network of interest for freelancers and self-employed workers alike. First, Facebook has a large captive audience. Secondly, changes and new features have been introduced in order to maintain its relevance, such as Facebook Business Manager, which allows business owners to manage their business endeavors on the platform, such as advertising which can be done with a very precise targeting.

The Meta group, which includes Facebook, expanded in 2012 through the acquisition of Instagram, a social network created two years prior. While Facebook has turned into a giant web of a platform, offering many services, Instagram focuses specifically on pictures shared by its

users, as well as content with a limited lifespan in the form of Stories, and the now increasingly popular short videos known as Reels. According to the latest report published by Instagram in 2022, the platform had a total of 1.386 billion users, making it the fourth largest social network worldwide. Further, over 500 million users connect on Instagram on a daily basis (Oberlo, 2022). In France, 39% of Internet users are also users of this platform (Oberlo, 2022). Instagram captures a younger audience, as 70% of its monthly users worldwide were under the age of 34 in 2021 (Hootsuite, 2021). This same pattern can be noticed in France, as 69% of Instagram daily users in October 2020 were between 15 and 24 years old, while 29% of users who connected on the platform daily were between 25 and 49 years old (Asselin, 2022). According to Hootsuite (2021), Instagram helps 81% of its users to make decisions before buying a product or service. This statistic makes the platform a central one in the digital strategy of business owners, big multinationals and solopreneurs alike. Further, Instagram benefits from a high interaction rate: four times higher than the one observed on Facebook for example (Oberlo, 2022).

Launched in 2002, LinkedIn has become the leading professional social network on the globe. The platform is indeed focused on the advancement of the career of its users and facilitating professional online networking. In February 2022, LinkedIn had over 830 million members divided among 200 countries, and half of them could be found either in Europe or North America (Asselin, 2022). According to the same source, in France, 24 million people were LinkedIn users in 2022, out of which 11 million were active on the platform each month. This means that a total of 84% of the employed population in the country had a LinkedIn account. Compared to Instagram and TikTok for example, which are favored by the Generation Z, the majority of LinkedIn users are Millennials. Taking the example of France, 57% of users are between the ages of 25 and 34, while less than 20% were between 18 and 24 years old (Asselin, 2022). Surprisingly, established professionals constituted a rather small portion of LinkedIn users in France, as users between the age of 35 and 54 years old represented 21.2% of total members according to the same source. For freelancers and self-employed workers working in B2B, LinkedIn is a social network of choice to let their personal brand shine.

The fourth social media platform which can be considered as a leading one worldwide, and a source of opportunities for personal brand growth, is Twitter. The social network, created in 2006, specializes in the sharing of short texts (although pictures and videos can also be published) which should not exceed 280 characters. Like LinkedIn, Twitter is especially interesting for freelancers and self-employed workers who work mainly with businesses.

YouTube is the fifth social network to be examined here. Created in 2005, the fact that Google acquired it a year later for \$1.65 billion demonstrates how promising it already was. YouTube has since fully realized its potential as it now boasts 2.2 billion monthly active users worldwide (Buffer Library, 2022). In France, 46 million people are active YouTube users each month (Oberlo, 2021). Particularly suited for medium to long video formats, YouTube can therefore be a key platform for freelancers and self-employed workers to share their knowledge and know-how, building their personal brand in the process.

The final social network to be considered in the context of this thesis is TikTok. Created in 2016, this app has known phenomenal growth over the past two years. TikTok has indeed gained its billionth user in 2021 and is set to continue on its winning trajectory. The platform specializes in the sharing of short videos, a particularly popular content format. A 2021 report published by We are Social and Hootsuite reveals that 21.9% of Internet users between the age of 16 and 64 years old in France are TikTok users. The platform is particularly preferred by a younger audience since Globalwebindex estimated that, in 2019, 41% of global TikTok users were part of the 16-24 age range. Considering the exponential growth of this social network, it is one that should be on the radar of freelancers and self-employed workers looking to establish their personal brand.

Now that the main social media platforms have been presented, it appears crucial for freelancers and self-employed workers to choose the one which best suits their needs and preferences in order to grow their personal brand.

If one could be tempted to expand their social media strategy across several platforms in an attempt to capture an audience as large as possible, this strategy can however be argued as less than ideal for several reasons. First, each platform attracts a different audience, as seen above, notably through the differences in the age ranges of users. To effectively strengthen their personal brand, solo business owners should therefore focus on the social network where their target audience is present. Secondly, social networks favor different content formats: where posts of a few lines of impactful text will be found on Twitter, short videos will be shared on TikTok. This hence requires distinct skills and approaches in order to reach success on different social networks.

Freelancers and self-employed workers may consider a set of criteria to choose the platform best suited for them.

The first criterion to examine would be to understand where their target audience is located. Indeed, deciding to build a personal brand on a social network where a professional's target audience is not present is like shouting into a void, and is sure to produce fruitless efforts.

The second criterion to contemplate is the format that not only best allows a freelancer or self-employed worker to share their expertise, but also the one they are most comfortable with. Indeed, feeling at ease with their chosen means of communication on social media is a key factor to create trust on their audience's part. The good news is that solo business owners have a spectrum of different content formats to choose from, allowing them to shine on social media no matter their preferred means of sharing knowledge and providing value. If a freelancer or self-employed worker is comfortable with writing text, they could decide to focus on sharing articles on LinkedIn or short and impactful tweets. As an example, a freelancer offering copywriting services for corporations in the food and beverage industry may choose to establish their personal brand on LinkedIn through the creation of articles relevant to this sector.

On the other hand, if a freelancer or self-employed worker were to have an aesthetic eye and a product to showcase, Instagram could be a wise choice. For example, a solo business owner selling handmade pieces of jewelry may concentrate their personal branding efforts on Instagram and TikTok, where they could share timelapse videos exposing the process of creating and making their products by hand.

Finally, if a freelancer or self-employed worker would prefer to provide value through oral communication, starting a podcast or a YouTube channel could be appropriate.

It is worth highlighting that, as of today, freelancers and self-employed worker may want to prioritize video. Indeed, social media as a whole is increasingly moving toward this format. This trend can be observed through the impressive rise of TikTok, and Instagram management's decision to prioritize reels, while YouTube introduced short video formats through YouTube Shorts. Moreover, videos offer the advantage of being easily repurposed across different platforms: short snippets can be shared on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube Shorts, while the audio can be used to create podcast episodes. Finally, video is a format particularly well adapted to the crafting of a personal brand considering it allows for visual and audio stimulation close to real-life interaction. A freelancer or self-employed worker may then be able to show their personality in an optimal way, in turn contributing to the formation of trust on the audience's part. Felix (Personal communication, June 16, 2022) praises video as a content format on social media by stating:

Video is a good example of content that connects with people. When people see your face on video, when they see how eloquent you are, the kind of confidence you show when you talk on video, it creates some sort of relationship, some sort of bond.

Finally the importance of video for solo business owners building their personal brand is also highlighted by the fact that, out of the three key pieces of advice that Cavallini would give them to start crafting their personal brand, learning how to speak on camera comes in second place (Personal communication, April 28, 2022).

Choosing a social media platform to strengthen one's personal brand is therefore a matter of successfully identifying their target audience's location, the format which will best allow them to communicate their expertise, and the trends that govern those platforms and ultimately influence the reach that a piece of content can hope to attain.

Once a platform has been chosen, it is crucial to identify the kind of content a freelancer or self-employed worker may choose to share on their account. A few major types of content can be wielded by solo business owners on social media in order to hone their personal brand. These particularly include posts that demonstrate knowledge both of their industry and their area of expertise. Examples of such content would be updates about their industry, actionable tips, and lessons learned along their entrepreneurial journey.

To complement these first elements regarding content to be shared on social media, we will dive into further details about the process of elaborating an impactful content strategy in the following section.

As far as tools that can be used to master social media are concerned, freelancers and self-employed workers can count on a range of free and paid programs.

The design platform Canva, existing in a free and paid version, can help freelancers and self-employed workers to create appealing visuals. These can for example include Instagram carousel templates, reels covers, and YouTube video thumbnails. The paid version notably includes the possibility to build a brand color palette, a feature which can be useful to reinforce consistency in the way a freelancer or self-employed worker shows up in their communication and therefore strengthening their personal brand.

To share visual content on their social media, freelancers and self-employed workers can also depend on Unsplash and Pexels, two platforms which propose a large range of copyright free pictures.

Maintaining a social media presence, although being an essential component to craft their personal brand, can be a time-consuming activity for solo business owners. To facilitate the process of posting their content by scheduling it in advance, several options exist today, such as Facebook Creator Studio, Hootsuite, and Later.

Finally, to leverage the power of analytics, freelancers and self-employed workers can assess the performance of their posts on social media, and therefore the results of their efforts in building their personal brand, by using several tools. Most major social media platforms offer the option to their users to look at analytics of their account (including Instagram and YouTube for example). Third party tools can also help to analyze the performance of an account's posts, such as Trend Hero and Not Just Analytics in the case of Instagram.

Now that we have investigated the different social media platforms that freelancers and self-employed workers can choose from to build their personal brand, as well as major content types, and tools, we will look into the best practices to strengthen a personal brand on social media as a solo business owner.

ii. Best practices to strengthen a personal brand on social media as a freelancer or self-employed worker

Businesses, large and small, have flocked to social media over the past decade in hopes of reaching their various goals, including increasing brand awareness, and building communities of engaged users.

With the high stakes implied by companies' success on those platforms, a myriad of recommendations and best practices have been and continue to be issued by social media experts.

In the context of this thesis, we will examine the best practices associated with the aim of building a personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker on social media.

The very first step that solo business owners should take upon deciding to craft their personal brand using social media is to operate an assessment of their current presence on social media, if they already have accounts on one or more platforms.

First, it is crucial to separate professional and personal accounts. Although sharing snippets of their personal life may be part of a freelancer or self-employed worker's personal branding strategy, notably to increase relatability and trust, using their public accounts on social media to share any detail of their personal life would clash with the image of expert they are trying to convey. At the end of the day, they are professionals, and their presence on social media should reflect this status.

Then, they should check the content that currently appears on their professional account or accounts. Their existing content should reflect the image they want to project, which has been defined in the previous stage. This entails deleting any previously shared content that does not align with the personal brand that the freelancer or self-employed worker wishes to build for themselves.

Finally, before getting started on their social media strategy, solo business owners should ensure that their profile, for example on LinkedIn, or their bio, such as on Instagram, is up to date. Further, on platforms such as Instagram, they may want to examine the accounts they are currently following, as those also reflect on their own image, and therefore unfollow any accounts that are either not relevant to their field of expertise or the image they wish to project.

Once the assessment of their current presence on social media has been done, and any adjustments that eventually needed to be made have been completed, solo business owners are ready to get started on crafting their social media strategy to build their personal brand.

A good place to start in order to formulate this strategy would be for them to choose wisely the platform they wish to focus on, based on the criteria previously presented, including the location of their audience and their preferred means of communication. Ultimately, the goal is to pick the social network which allows them to communicate their expertise to their target audience in the best way possible.

We will now zoom in on the best practices that could be applied to the two platforms particularly suited to craft a personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker: LinkedIn and Instagram.

LinkedIn being the social network of choice to form professional connections, it constitutes an interesting tool to leverage for freelancers and self-employed workers with other businesses as clients instead of the general public.

First, solo business owners should take great care in the formation of their profile. To do so, Lundberg (2020) issues several recommendations. First, he advises to get a professional picture

done. This ensures that if a person visits their profile for the first time, they will not be immediately put off by a picture which does not convey a professional image. Then, Lundberg formulates additional pieces of advice as far as the written content of their profile is concerned. To begin with, the headline should be customized. The headline being the second element that would probably be noticed by a visitor after the profile picture, it should clearly communicate the role of the freelancer or self-employed worker, as well as expressing their unicity. The summary that appears on their profile should then build on that. Their profile should also be complete with their previous experiences and skills. Finally, a differentiating factor contributing to build trust is the appearance of recommendations on a professional's profile. Indeed, those constitute a form of social proof.

Now that recommendations regarding their profile have been issued, a second key success factor to build a personal brand on LinkedIn is the activity of a freelancer or self-employed worker on the platform.

It is crucial to note that, even though it represents the essential first step, simply creating a compelling profile on LinkedIn will not be sufficient to stand out. It is how a solo business owner interacts and connects with other professionals on the platform that will sharpen their personal brand. Like with other social media platforms, engaging with the content of other experts in the same field will not only help to get noticed but also to build a reliable network. This latter element being decisive for the strengthening of a freelancer or self-employed worker's personal brand, we will explore it in a subsequent part.

Engaging with the content of other professionals that is relevant to a solo business owner's area of expertise can come in different forms: from simply liking a post, to commenting on it and adding to it. Another way to connect with other experts while building one's own personal brand would be to share their content. For example, Brand Credential (2021) suggests incorporating third party content to appear as a thought leader in the industry: someone that people can come to for the latest news and advancements in this particular sector. Further, the process of relying on other experts' content, with due credit, presents the advantage of being able to keep a consistent presence on LinkedIn. Indeed, sharing an existing piece of content does not require nearly as much time as creating a post or article from scratch. This means that freelancers and self-employed workers can remain top of mind by consistently providing value through a mix of their own posts and articles, as well as content brought by other experts in the same field.

Finally, Brand Credentials (2021) advises to leverage the opportunity to create polls on LinkedIn. Polls can be ingenious as they provide the space for an expert's audience to weigh in on a topic related to the industry. Moreover, this shows that a solo business owner cares about their audience's opinions, and is prone to encourage interactivity, further strengthening their relationship with their connections on the platform.

Now that we have covered the main best practices to build a personal brand on LinkedIn, we will dive into the tactics that can be used on another platform: Instagram.

Instagram can be considered as a social network particularly suited for freelancers and self-employed workers who wish to build a personal brand as many have found success on the platform. With an audience of over thirty thousand followers, Pedro Tavares is a prime example himself of a solo business owner who has managed to leverage Instagram to build a strong personal brand. Despite the rapid rise of TikTok, Tavares describes Instagram as a highly relevant and powerful tool with still a lot of potential (Personal communication, May 30, 2022). Further, he adds that Instagram can play a role in helping freelancers and self-employed workers build their personal brand as anyone, regardless of where they come from, what their skills are, or their industry, can use Instagram to leverage it in a way to provide value to a specific audience or persona (Personal communication, May 30, 2022).

Similarly to the case of LinkedIn, the first step to take for freelancers and self-employed workers who wish to build their personal brand on Instagram is to optimize their profile. Several factors are to be considered to do so.

To begin with, they should choose a searchable name. Indeed, when browsing Instagram, visitors are likely to type in the field of expertise they're searching for.

Next, picking the perfect profile picture should be a priority: a close-up picture with a plain background is often considered best as it helps to easily identify the account.

Often overlooked, the bio is a crucial element to polish in order to stand out on Instagram. The bio, if carefully and well crafted, can heavily influence the decision of a visitor to hit the follow button. The bio on Instagram is limited to 150 characters and should therefore be concise yet impactful. To be effective, a bio should answer the following questions: Who is the solo business owner? What is their area of expertise? What makes them accredited to speak about this subject? Who do they serve? What unique value do they provide? And therefore, what kind of content can followers expect to find on their account? The first two questions can be answered in the title chosen by the freelancer for their account. The third question can be answered through an achievement or a reward. For example, a freelance photographer specializing in fashion photography could include in their bio a statement such as: "Featured in Vogue and L'Officiel", while an interior designer could choose to indicate: "Transformed the homes and lives of +150 Los Angeles residents." Proof of expertise can also be expressed through length of experience. A wedding planner may want to leverage their experience by putting in their profile bio such an affirmation: "+10 years of experience orchestrating memorable weddings in Los Angeles County."

Another crucial element to include in the bio is a link which will invite visitors and followers to continue their journey with the solo business owner, for example by purchasing one of their products on Etsy. Instagram allows for only a unique link to be included in a profile bio. Therefore, freelancers and self-employed workers may want to consider using a service such as Linktree, which offers both free and paid versions. By wielding such a tool, solo business owners can use a single link to redirect potential customers to their other social media accounts, their

website, their blog, or their online shop. The essential link to include however would invite a visitor to download a lead magnet. As presented at the end of the first part of this thesis, a lead magnet is a powerful instrument used by the leading life and business coaches in the United States, as well as many other freelancers and self-employed workers occupying a variety of different professions. A lead magnet is a piece of content with tremendous value that business owners offer for free to their audience in exchange for their email address. Once they have collected email addresses of leads, freelancers and self-employed workers can then nurture these leads, leading them further down the sales funnel. Converting audience members to customers, an essential skill to hone in order to make a profit out of one's personal brand, will be covered in a later part of this thesis. Finally, one last interesting link option to consider in the context of personal brand building would be elements of social proof such as, for example, articles in which they have been featured by other authorities in their field.

The final important Instagram feature to utilize to complete one's Instagram profile as a freelancer or self-employed worker is Highlights. Highlights are bite-size pieces of content, either images or short videos, that appear right underneath the bio, and are organized under different categories. Those categories may be titled according to a solo business owner's preference. Specific Highlights categories particularly suited for the purpose of building a personal brand on Instagram could be: an "About Me" section, a section dedicated to their product or service, another presenting elements of social proof such as testimonial from past clients, a collection of answers to frequently asked questions, as well as behind-the-scenes of their daily life as a freelancer or self-employed worker.

Once their profile has been optimized, solo business owners may want to keep a few best practices particularly related to Instagram in mind to grow their personal brand on the platform.

Firstly, the Instagram algorithm values most, as of today, content that is shareable, as well as content which is savable. Ensuring that posts will either encourage people to share them with their relations on Instagram, or to save them to be able to refer to them later, is a key aspect of success on the platform.

Adding relevant hashtags is a way to maximize the chances that the content posted by a solo business owner will succeed in reaching its target audience. According to Queiroz (2022), hashtags used on Instagram can relate to different categories: the brand, such as #personal trainer; the content itself, for example: #workouttips; and the audience, such as: #busymoms.

A last tip which can be used on Instagram, especially for freelancers and self-employed workers working with clients in their geographical area, is to add their location (often the city) when posting, a feature available upon posting within the app.

Now that the best practices specific to building a personal brand on LinkedIn and Instagram have been exposed, we will cover the best practices for personal branding on social media at large.

First, it is essential to note that consistency is key on social media. Tavares mentions that posting regularly and interacting with his followers daily is the number one factor which has helped him build an audience of over thirty thousand people on Instagram (Personal communication, May 30, 2022). Indeed, it is the consistency with which a freelancer and self-employed worker is present on social media which will determine the chances for them building not only a following, but also the strength of their relationship with their audience. For example on Instagram, when a solo business owner posts daily and adds content to their Stories, this multiplies their interactions with their followers who have a chance to like, comment, and share their content. In turn, a higher engagement signals to social media algorithms that this account provides value, making it more likely to be pushed, on the Explore page for example in the case of Instagram. Finally, showing up consistently for one's audience demonstrates professionalism and helps to create trust, the quintessential factor for a strong personal brand.

In line with posting regularly on social media, a best practice to put in place for freelancers and self-employed workers would be to establish a routine. Such a strategy would not only help them to plan their posts in advance, leading to better consistency, but also to limit the time they spend on those platforms. Indeed, social networks, whether LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram or TikTok, are built to maximize the time that their users spend on them. Although these platforms can greatly assist solo business owners in building their personal brand, managing their accounts should not come at the expense of their other activities, including delivering and improving their product or service, networking, and dealing with administrative matters among many other tasks. In order to take advantage of the opportunities offered by social media, while keeping its harmful sides at bay, freelancers and self-employed workers can create a checklist of their desired actions to take whenever they open the application, such as posting one piece of content on their feed, answering their messages, answering the comments left on their posts, posting two or three stories (especially for Instagram), and engaging with one new account in their niche. Once each of these actions have been completed, they can exit the application without the risk of being sucked into a social media rabbit hole.

A third general best practice when it comes to building a personal brand on social media as a freelancer or self-employed worker is to show personality. Indeed, if people choose to follow the account of a business owner on these platforms, it is for one part due to the value they provide through the sharing of their expertise, but also for the person that they are. Showing personality then becomes essential to build a relationship with one's followers. Even though social media platforms have made for relationships to become increasingly dematerialized, they are still at their core about being social. In this context, the audience should clearly perceive that they are interacting with another human through the screen. This is the reason why individual employees are starting to take to social media in order to become ambassadors of their company: people would rather interact with humans rather a faceless organization. A good way to show personality on social media is to create content where solo business owners show their face, especially on video. Leveraging features such as Stories on Instagram also contributes to personalize an

account and bringing a human touch. Thirdly, personality can best be shown through storytelling. Indeed, the personal story of a freelancer or self-employed worker is very much human by definition and is what makes them unique, a fact emphasized by Pinsley (Personal communication, June 7, 2022). Storytelling occupies such an important place in personal branding for freelancers and self-employed workers that it will be further explored in a later part.

Next, social media being social by nature, a best practice to build a personal brand on those platforms is to focus on building a community, notably through interactions: both with their target audience and their peers. Tavares insists on the fact that community-building plays a major part when it comes to being successful on social media (Personal communication, May 30, 2022). He also mentions that, despite Instagram and TikTok being different in many regards, they are similar in the sense that they both value community-building. He therefore advises to prioritize relationships and connecting with people. Desbonnez also stresses the importance of engaging with others on social media in order to form a community, declaring: “The more you will aim to connect with people, the more people will naturally come to you as a result” (Personal communication, June 16, 2022).

Prioritizing relationships on social media can come in two main forms: the relationships built with a solo business owner’s audience, and the relationships they form with other experts in their field.

As far as relationships with his followers are concerned, Tavares makes a point of engaging with them as much as possible: “If you don’t take the time to build relationships with your followers, it’s kind of pointless” (Personal communication, May 30, 2022). Building those relationships notably requires answering to the comments left on his posts and the private messages he receives in the app. Despite the considerable amount of time it may take him to reply to every message, he still does it daily, affirming: “It takes a bit of my time every day to reply to DMs, but I feel like it’s worth it because people really value that.” Indeed, although it might be tempting to create content, sharing it and letting it be, this strategy simply is not enough to build a strong and resilient personal brand on social media. Tavares recommends: “Act in a way that you’re serving people. Some people just post and then disappear. They are not there to serve anyone; they are only there to serve themselves” (Personal communication, May 30, 2022). Freelancers and self-employed workers should regard communication on social networks as dual and not solely as a one-man or one-woman show: their followers’ reactions and input are just as important as their own contributions.

Creating meaningful relationships on social media does not stop at one’s audience, it also encompasses other thought leaders within their niche. Just like engaging with their audience is important, engaging with their peers is just as crucial. On one hand, this demonstrates that they have their finger on the pulse of their industry. On the other hand, it increases their visibility and chances of getting noticed by new audiences likely to appreciate their content through shared interests. Beyond engaging with their content, going a step further by actively collaborating with

them can be a fruitful plan of action. Indeed, content collaborations can contribute both to create a stronger content strategy and a wider network, two crucial elements for personal branding which will be developed in later sections.

A third form of relationship that relates to a solo business owner's presence on social media would be the connections that exist between their followers. According to Ballot, the members of an engaged community will first engage with the owner of the account (Personal communication, June 17, 2022). Secondly, and which is even better, they will engage among themselves. A dynamic of interaction and mutual aid could then emerge and make the solo business owner's influence spread beyond their own contributions.

Finally, focusing on interactivity on social media is a winning strategy because, not only can it help freelancers and self-employed workers to build meaningful relationships, but it also contributes to their own growth. Tavares (Personal communication, May 30, 2022) points out:

It's a social media app and you must be social. If you're not social enough, then your engagement is not as it should be, if your engagement is not great, your content doesn't get pushed within the app and it doesn't help you grow at all.

The fifth best practice related to personal branding on social media is to be prepared to handle the highs and lows of these platforms. Indeed, social media can bring the best and the worst of results as well as interactions. A viral video can transform the life of a freelancer or self-employed worker, seeing their business boom overnight in the best-case scenario. This situation happened to the author Alex Aster, an American novelist whom, after posting the idea for her book as a video on TikTok one day, woke up the next morning with over a million views on said video. Following the virality of this piece of content, she went on to sign a deal with a publishing house and, as of today, the book that she initially pitched in her TikTok video is trending at number one on Young Adult preorders at Barnes and Noble. If social media can bring great opportunities through increased visibility, this exposure to a large audience also multiplies the chances of "trolls" criticizing their person and content. White (2021) advises not to engage with trolls. Indeed, he argues that they are attention-seekers, and that engaging with them can turn into an endless conversation with slim chances of a favorable outcome. One should however be careful not to confuse messages simply written with harmful intentions with constructive criticism, meant to bring an interesting and relevant point to the table.

The final best practice that can be adopted by freelancers and self-employed workers aiming to build their personal brand using social media is to keep up to date with these platforms. Indeed, since the emergence of the major social networks less than two decades ago, the landscape has already undergone drastic changes. Social media moves at a rapid pace, and so do the trends associated with these platforms. Yet, if the characteristics of what makes effective digital content, as we will see in the next part, do not evolve nearly as quickly, those trends still impact the success of a social media strategy. The rapid pace at which social media develops can be illustrated through the rise of TikTok. In June 2018, TikTok had 500 million users globally

(Geyser, W., 2021). A mere three years later, the platform welcomed its billionth user (Sweney, M., 2022). Moreover, not only has the number of users skyrocketed, but the time that they spend on the app is also reaching record-high levels. In 2021, users spent on average 19.6 hours per month on the social network, according to data.ai. In order to build their personal brand through their social media strategy, solo business owners then need to remain up to date with the latest development regarding those platforms. Further, they should keep a keen eye on the changes that are operated to social media algorithms, as well as micro changes in the form of trends, including the music being used in videos, to maximize their chances of success.

Now that we have covered social media for personal branding purposes, we will aim to present another key strategy that solo business owners can wield to craft their image: content creation. Indeed, if a freelancer or self-employed worker were to create a strong social media profile, and interact in a meaningful way with other users, it is the content they share which is ultimately sure to make a difference according to Cavallini who states: “Content is king, it’s what will make you stand out every time, it’s the reason why people follow you” (Personal communication, April 28, 2022). We will therefore now look at content creation as a winning strategy for personal branding, as well as focus on issuing best practices in this regard.

E. Elaborating an impactful content strategy

As part of the move toward inbound marketing, the creation of content has gained traction as a key strategy for businesses large and small. Solo business owners, whether freelancers or self-employed workers, can leverage content creation to gain notoriety and build their personal brand. Moreover, as previously mentioned, content production is a prime example of a strategy which has evened out the playing field in the favor of small business owners. Indeed, the creation of content requires modest to no monetary investment while reaping extraordinary benefits if done well.

First, content creation can contribute to assert a solo business owner’s expertise. Indeed, this activity entails consistently sharing knowledge and know-how relative to their field. Yet, expertise and know-how are cited as the number one factor particularly important for freelancers’ success according to 87% of respondents to the 2021 Freelancer Study.

Secondly, a carefully thought out and well-executed content strategy can boost a freelancer or self-employed worker’s visibility and name recognition, which are key elements of personal branding. Indeed, impactful content, if done purposefully and by adopting the strategies that will make it stand out, will contribute to organically rank a professional’s website higher on search engines. Consequently, if an individual carries out a search on the web and notices a freelancer or self-employed worker’s website being ranked among the top results, not only will they be more likely to visit this website by the sole fact that it is visible, but they could also perceive it as trustworthy given its ranking.

Given these first two arguments, content creation can strengthen a solo business owner's personal brand by affirming their *ethos*.

The advantages of content creation for personal branding do not however stop there.

By authentically producing content and consistently providing value, an emotional connection between a solo business owner and their audience will also take shape. This therefore contributes to their *pathos*, which will be further reinforced by using storytelling techniques, covered in the following part of this thesis.

Finally, content creation shows commitment and proactivity on a freelancer or self-employed worker's part. In truth, establishing a content strategy is not a necessity for solo business owners, and therefore emanates of their own determination to do so. The fact that one would intentionally choose to create content shows that they are proactive, as well as willing to share their knowledge and know-how. Consequently, this action will set them apart from the competitors who do not put in place such a strategy and will contribute to keep them top-of-mind for their target audience.

If a freelancer or self-employed worker wishes to engage in the production of content to build their personal brand, going in with a plan and a knowledge of best practices will participate to make their efforts fruitful at the end of the line.

i. Crafting an impactful content strategy for personal branding: goals, formats, and platforms

First and foremost, an effective content strategy carried out for personal branding purposes should conform to the goal set out by the solo business owner for their personal brand.

As previously established, a freelancer or self-employed worker can expect to receive many benefits from the foundation of their personal brand. However, focusing on a core objective will allow them to focus their attention and actions where they can be most impactful and deliver the results they desire.

Moussu (Personal communication, June 14, 2022) highlights the need for the definition of goals by stating:

Everything should go in the direction of a common goal, and this goal should be defined from the start, such as increasing sales or growing one's community. Sometimes those are intricately linked, but we will not necessarily perform the same actions to attain them.

If a solo business owner decides to establish a content creation strategy to build their personal brand, this content strategy should therefore be aligned with their overarching personal branding goal.

When the goal of one's content strategy has been identified, the second step would be to know their target audience. It is once again crucial to understand that a freelancer or self-employed worker's target audience is different from their target clients, and that the majority of their audience is not meant to become clients as Ballot (Personal communication, June 17, 2022) argues:

When it comes to content creation, it is the audience that matters. Obviously, your future clients should be part of that audience, otherwise it does not make sense. However, you need to have an audience which is larger because it will act as a motor, making it possible for people to find your content.

Further, to attract this audience, producing content that matches their interests and challenges is fundamental. When asked about the definition of impactful content, Felix describes it as "content that you know solves a particular problem for your ideal audience" (Personal communication, June 16, 2022).

Moussu issues a similar statement by declaring: "You have to offer content that is interesting to your audience. To do so, you have to perform persona research: What are the problems of my target audience? What do they want to see?" Further, she underlines the fact that a content strategy also depends on the product or service that the solo business owner sells: "If you sell interior decoration, you can show pictures meant for inspiration, whereas if you are a yoga teacher, you can center your content around the benefits of yoga, or how yoga can help to relieve certain aches" (Personal communication, June 14, 2022).

Similarly to the formulation of a social media strategy for personal branding, the third step to crafting a content strategy would be to choose how and where to deliver it. Indeed, since the advent of online content, a collection of formats and platforms have emerged.

First, we can classify the different forms of content into four main categories: written, visual, audio, and video. Written content can take the form of articles which can be relayed on a blog or on LinkedIn for example. Visual content can be assimilated to pictures and designs, which can be, in the context of personal branding, primarily shared on Instagram. Audio content would be podcasts, which can be distributed on platforms such as Spotify, iTunes, or Audible. Video content could come in short and long versions depending on where they are shared: while Instagram and TikTok favor videos that are generally less than 30 seconds or a minute long, YouTube offers a place for longer videos.

To pick the format and platform best suited for a solo business owner's content strategy, the experts interviewed in the context of this thesis shared several pieces of advice.

First, Desbonnez recommends consuming content: "Go and see what exists out there on social media: on Instagram, on TikTok, as well as podcasts, blogs" (Personal communication, June 16, 2022). Ballot issues the same suggestion and adds that assessing the competition for each of these formats and platforms can be a factor which helps to make a decision. She insists that

determining whether fierce competition is good or not depends on a solo business owner's perception. Ballot (Personal communication, June 17, 2022) states:

Personally, I think that competition can be good as it shows that there is a need to be fulfilled. Not facing competition can also be an opportunity considering that if there is a need that hasn't yet been identified, a freelancer can dive into this area and succeed. Both cases are interesting, but an individual is not going to work in the same way depending on the environment.

If freelancers and self-employed workers can be overwhelmed by the number of different formats and platforms that exist in the realm of content creation, the good news is that they have a large range of options to choose from and can therefore find a solution that suits them best. Felix highlights the opportunities that exist today when it comes to the production of content by declaring: "The ecosystem has become so easy now. So I don't think there should be any excuse. There are so many ways to put out content" (Personal communication, June 16, 2022).

Ballot and Desbonnez both insist on the importance of a solo business owner enjoying the type of content they aim to create. Indeed, Ballot (Personal communication, June 17, 2022) states:

You should obviously choose a medium that works for you because content creation is a long-term strategy which will require a large investment, not only monetary, but also in terms of time and energy. You must enjoy it or at least be comfortable with the medium.

Desbonnez adds: "The more you will enjoy a platform and have fun, the better you will manage to produce original content that works" (Personal communication, June 16, 2022).

Further, Moussu highlights the fact that a freelancer or self-employed worker's personality should be considered when picking their preferred content format and platform (Personal communication, June 14, 2022). This piece of advice is even more relevant in the context of personal branding since an individual's personal brand is heavily reliant on their unique qualities that set them apart.

ii. Best practices to execute a content strategy for personal branding as a freelancer or self-employed worker

Before diving into the best practices to execute a content strategy for personal branding as a freelancer or self-employed worker, it is crucial to highlight a prerequisite for solo business owners establishing their online presence: their website. Indeed, if a content strategy will help them to gain visibility, it is essential to have a focal point where the public will be able to learn more about their new favorite blogger, podcaster, or YouTuber. The website of a freelancer should therefore present who they are, what they do, and why they do it, as well as provide insights into their unique story. The typical journey of a new client earned through the content creation efforts of a solo business owner will involve first getting acquainted with them through their content, then checking out their website, subscribing to their newsletter, and making a

purchase. The website of a freelancer or self-employed worker being often part of the chain of events, making sure that it is in place, that it looks professional, and that it is aligned with their personal branding strategy is therefore a must. As Felix highlights: “You need to have a well-designed website. This kind of thing would signal credibility to the people who are interested in working with you” (Personal communication, June 16, 2022).

Following the guidelines provided above, a solo business owner should be able to identify the platform and content format that suits them best. Focusing on those will allow them to reap optimal benefits. As argued in the previous part dedicated to social media, focusing on one medium is ideal to allocate all resources to one’s success on it. The same reasoning can be applied to content strategy. Consequently, if a freelance digital marketer decides for example to establish their personal brand notably through the creation of a podcast, staying concentrated on this content format, at least in the beginning, could help them to reach recognition quicker than if they decided to blog on the side as well. Moreover, as emphasized by the experts interviewed for this thesis, a content strategy is to be held over the long run and requires a significant time investment: dividing one’s attention across several content formats could then simply be unrealistic. There is however a means to maximize the reach of a piece of content as we will later point out.

Once a platform and content format have been chosen, the first and vital step to take would be to determine one’s content pillars. Content pillars can be defined as the four or five themes which will be discussed in the content offered by a creator. It is the combination of those complementary areas which will make a solo business owner’s content recognizable. To strengthen their personal brand, freelancers and self-employed workers can pick the content pillars which relate to their expertise in order to showcase it and be perceived as a leading force within their field. In her interview, Pinsley recommends determining what a freelancer or self-employed worker wants to be known for, which will influence the choice of their content pillars (Personal communication, June 7, 2022). For example, her main content pillars are marketing, branding, mindset, and success.

Secondly, a solo business owner should dedicate attention to the planning of their content. Content creation can be a rewarding strategy, but it is also demanding in terms of time and energy. This is where planning comes in. Like a social media strategy, a content strategy requires consistency. Oftentimes, a visitor of an Instagram page will not click the follow button if they do not feel safe on the page, yet this need for safety can be fulfilled to a large extent by the regularity with which an individual shares content. The assurance that a person will share a video on their YouTube channel every Wednesday at 10am CET can be perceived as a proof of their trustworthiness. Further, establishing a content calendar can be a way for a solo business owner to bring structure to their weeks when it comes to this specific activity of communication. The key for a freelancer or self-employed worker getting started with content creation would be to take this process one step at a time and not be too ambitious in the quantity of output they aim to produce. Also, Desbonnez recommends optimizing the process of content creation. She points out

that, as a solo business owner with their own work to generate, aspiring to create three Instagram posts a week when each requires an effort of three hours is simply not feasible and will lead to exhaustion (Personal communication, June 16, 2022).

When time comes to create the content based on the previously defined content pillars, some best practices can be kept in mind. First and foremost, all experts interviewed in the context of this thesis and questioned on what makes impactful content unanimously agree that the ultimate secret to success is delivering tremendous value. Cavallini cites giving away his secrets as one of the reasons he has succeeded on Instagram (Personal communication, April 28, 2022).

Meanwhile, Pinsley highlights: “The more value you can create for people without asking for anything in return, the faster you'll be able to grow an audience the more you'll be able to connect to people, and the more people want to connect with you” (Personal communication, June 7, 2022). The value resides in sharing the expertise of the solo business owner which solves a burning problem for their audience. This is notably one of the reasons why a thorough audience analysis as previously evoked should be undertaken. For service providers especially, a concern might pop in their heads: would providing great value for free discourage potential customers from actually making a purchase? Several interviewees provide reassurance on this matter. Cavallini (Personal communication, April 28, 2022) argues that content, even if it provides considerable value, will not be enough for the audience to apply it by themselves:

Even if you write a blog entry on your website giving away your secrets, it will be good but it won't be complete so they will learn but they will not learn everything and figure out the whole thing, they won't know where to start, how to implement it.

Indeed, content shared by freelancers and self-employed workers seeks to respond to a problematic pertaining to their audience, however it cannot and therefore does not answer the particular needs of an individual when it comes to this issue. Consequently, Moussu stresses that the problem lies more in finding ways to provide a significantly higher value in paid content rather than getting people to make a purchase (Personal communication, June 14, 2022).

While seeking to provide value through their content and establishing their personal brand in the process by proving their expertise, freelancers and self-employed workers should avoid a pitfall that can arise as a result: failing to make the knowledge shared accessible to the audience.

Tavares puts it this way: “The secret is for you to present highly valuable content in a way that is simple for everyone to understand regardless of their background” (Personal communication, May 30, 2022). Members of a solo business owner's audience will often have varying levels of familiarity with the topics being explored. Therefore, it is crucial to make the content as easy to understand as possible, so as not to deter those who are at the beginning stages of the learning curve.

The next best practice shared by interviewed experts is to deliver actionable content, devoid of superfluous elements. When talking about the actions that contributed to the success of his content strategy, Felix (Personal communication, June 16, 2022) states:

What I believe really helped me as well is that I don't share fluffy stuff, maybe at the start, I've been there but I've moved distance since then. Now I'm sure that I'm sharing things that I myself would want to read. I share things that I believe would solve a particular problem for my audience.

This declaration echoes with Moussu's testimony about her own journey on Instagram. For this reason, she recommends sharing practical content, which is clear, efficient and to the point, and that can be understood even by people who do not have much knowledge about the topic (Personal communication, June 14, 2022). As mentioned earlier, even if the content provides tips on how to put into practice the knowledge being distributed, it will not jeopardize an entrepreneur's ability to turn an interested lead into a paying client. On the contrary, demonstrating that a freelancer or self-employed worker knows exactly how to solve the problem experienced by their audience will only contribute to make the trust that the latter offers the former stronger.

To further distinguish themselves from their peers, solo business owners may want to inject personality into their content. Indeed, with the multiplication of digital content and the fact that other professionals might share similar knowledge, the perspective with which a topic is covered can be decisive. Moussu (Personal communication, June 14, 2022) declares:

If the person creating the content is funny, it is a quality which will stand out in their content, and that's what interesting. In the end, people often fear competition on Instagram, but each person has their own thing and there is space for everyone.

Another component of a successful content strategy for personal branding would be not to be afraid to experiment. Indeed, social media for example allows a content creator to collect feedback from their audience in the form of reactions such as likes, comments, shares and saves. Consequently, a good practice would be to consider analytics when creating content and adapt to the audience's expressed preferences.

Like on social media, a good practice to put in place as a freelancer or self-employed worker building their personal brand through content creation would be to collaborate with other experts in their field. A content strategy provides many opportunities to work with peers, for example by interviewing them in a podcast episode. Moreover, as previously mentioned, collaboration with fellow thought leaders in an industry will contribute to expand a solo business owner's network, resulting in multiple benefits as we will cover in a following section.

The final tip to create a solid content strategy that will boost a freelancer or self-employed worker's personal branding is to recycle their content. Recycling content is a method that is best not left ignored as it requires little efforts while having the potential to amplify the reach and therefore notoriety of a solo business owner. Video content is a prime example of a format that can be recycled in multiple ways. For example, a 10-minute YouTube video explaining a concept

can be adapted into a podcast episode, and the key moments can be shared as short videos on TikTok or Instagram.

With companies and solo business owners rushing to social media and content creation to boost their visibility, finding ways to stand out is becoming a central challenge for freelancers and self-employed workers amid a competitive digital ecosystem. A solution to this issue could reside in the use of storytelling. Felix states: “I think storytelling is a good part of posting content. Storytelling is very important” (Personal communication, June 16, 2022). The following section of this thesis and identified sixth step of the process to build a personal brand as a solo business owner will therefore focus on mastering the art of storytelling.

F. Mastering the art of storytelling

When building their personal brand through the creation of content on social media, freelancers and self-employed workers may find it difficult to differentiate themselves in this extremely competitive environment. Indeed, even though they may have a unique tone of voice and visual style for example, those elements will sometimes not be sufficient to grab the attention of visitors. This is even truer when considering that their peers engaged in content creation will often have a similar set of skills and expertise. Finding ways to stand out then becomes a pressing issue. According to Pinsley (Personal communication, June 7, 2022), the leading solution rests in a solo business owner’s story, as she states:

There's a lot of ways [to differentiate yourself as a freelancer or self-employed worker] but the biggest one is really your story because that's how people relate to you and ultimately that's what makes people choose you over a competitor.

What is storytelling exactly? In her podcast episode dedicated to the topic, Ballot (2020) argues that storytelling is the art of telling a story, so as to capture the attention of the audience. When diving into the offered definitions of storytelling in the context of personal branding, Dias (2018) declares that it is “the capability of each person to give meaning to their action, arouse enthusiasm around their projects and to make the value they stand for memorable.” Meanwhile, Cherry (2021) provides the following definition of personal brand story: “a cohesive narrative that encompasses the facts and feelings created by you, your brand, or your business.”

Now that we have established that storytelling can be a tool used by freelancers and self-employed workers to differentiate themselves and assert their personal brand, we will examine what makes storytelling so powerful and the practical ways for solo business owners to leverage it.

i. The importance and role of storytelling for freelancers and self-employed workers’ personal branding

Humans have always been fascinated by stories. In this day and age where Internet users receive an unprecedented number of stimuli, storytelling therefore proves to be more relevant than ever to grab an audience's attention, including in the world of business.

It is important to start by distinguishing a business brand story from a personal brand story. As exposed earlier in this thesis, entrepreneurs at the head of legendary businesses, such as Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg, boast a much larger following on social media compared to the accounts of their corporations. This is because people would prefer listening to other people rather than faceless entities. This observation is particularly applicable for solo business owners. Indeed, their image is strongly associated with the image of their business, and the line between the two often becomes blurry. Telling one's personal brand story as a freelancer or self-employed worker then has the potential to critically influence business prospects.

A solo business owner's storytelling can help them communicate who they are and provide insights into their personality: an element particularly important as, in accordance with Ballot's previously shared argument, personality is often an essential factor into a client's decision process when choosing a freelancer to work with.

The act of telling stories as a solo business owner also helps their audience to discern their leadership style, to grasp the values they stand for, and to better understand their product or service.

Finally, as personal branding relies on the perception that the public holds of a solo business owner, the latter should seek to influence their emotions. Yet, this is exactly the feat that storytelling, if done well, can perform. Kempf states in an article that storytelling influences people's emotions by triggering the release of several hormones, among which dopamine, oxytocin, and endorphins. Those hormones are associated with pleasure, affection, and calm respectively.

Emotions are also at the core of the connection that can be created and strengthened between a solo business owner and their audience and customers. Through the sharing of their challenges that they overcame for example, the public could develop a sense of admiration and trust.

Therefore, storytelling is a powerful tool to wield for freelancers and self-employed workers building their personal brand, as it will help them to assert their unicity, connect with their audience, and solidify trust. We will now aim to deliver key best practices relative to this pursuit.

ii. Best practices for leveraging the power of storytelling for personal branding purposes

Freelancers and self-employed workers can harness the power of storytelling for personal branding purposes in several ways.

First, we can identify two levels of stories that solo business owners may tell: their general personal story, which stands for their entrepreneurial journey, and the chapters of their story, which can be assimilated to snippets of their everyday life that they can spin to create stories on a regular basis. Both levels of story can be shared in different places. Their general personal story can be shared in the “about” section of their website, at conferences where they are invited to speak, during presentations at networking events, and succinctly in their social media profile bios. Meanwhile, the chapters of their story can be brought to light in their social media posts, and their content at large such as blog articles and podcast episodes.

To map out their general story, freelancers and self-employed workers can perform self-reflection work.

They may choose to start with brainstorming about a few examples of entrepreneurs who inspire them and whose journey move them. Then, they can seek to examine these stories and decompose them to identify the elements that they enjoy, may they be the structure of the story, the qualifying adjectives used, or the emotions that the story steers.

Then, they can look at their own journey as an entrepreneur. Indeed, Felix (Personal communication, June 16, 2022) highlights that the best storytelling an entrepreneur can produce comes from their own experience, testifying:

Most of the content that I put out comes from my own experience because I believe that if I don't share my experience, then it will become less of a story and people wouldn't relate to it because there is no life to it.

When examining their own experience, solo business owners can particularly observe the reason that led them to start their venture and the challenges that they overcame along the way. Next, they can consider the strengths and knowledge gained from those experiences, as well as the eventual rewards or symbols of recognition they earned as a result.

A similar approach can be adopted for the chapters of their story and their everyday challenges and experiences as entrepreneurs.

When examining the problems they have encountered and successfully overcome, solo business owners can simultaneously match those with the issues that the members of their audience, including their target clients, are facing. Upon hearing a story that directly demonstrates an individual's journey of overcoming a pain point they currently feel acutely in their lives, people would not only identify with the freelancer or self-employed worker telling the story, but also organically develop an interest and trust in this professional's competence. Cavallini (Personal communication, April 28, 2022) therefore states:

Being trustable is a matter of influence, but it is also a matter of showing them your experience and showing them that what you did works, and they can do the same. You

therefore become a role model because you have achieved something that they want to achieve.

Consequently, it is crucial to keep the audience in mind at all times as they will be looking for the value that the story holds for them. Matching the questions that the public asks itself to the expertise of the solo business owner can then be a winning strategy in the context of storytelling for personal branding.

As far as the act of telling the story is concerned, a best practice to keep in mind would be to connect on an emotional level first to hook the audience, and to deliver the facts supported by evidence subsequently.

Regarding the structure of the story, Ballot presents three main patterns for storytelling in her podcast episode dedicated to this technique.

First up is the Walt Disney pattern, which starts off with a situation where all is well before a catastrophe strikes. The hero then finds solace, but only temporarily before an event even more disastrous than the first occurs. Finally, the issue is solved, and all is well once again.

The second pattern follows the AIDA method, an acronym which stands for states that the storyteller will aim to successively trigger in the audience: attention, interest, desire, and action. This method used in copywriting will be further described in a latter section of this thesis dedicated to converting members of an audience into clients.

The third approach presented by Ballot is the PAS pattern, an acronym which stands for: problem, agitate, solve. With this pattern, the speaker will first evoke an issue experienced by the audience to grab its attention, then proceed to exacerbate the problem and dissect it. Finally, a solution will be offered, providing a sense of relief and safety to the public and a feeling of trust toward the storyteller.

Ballot highlights that the common key in these three patterns, as well as all effective storytelling, resides in emotion. It is indeed emotion which will grab the audience's attention in the beginning, and which will drive action in the end.

In her article on storytelling and emotions cited above, Kempf provides tips to trigger the release of beneficial hormones in an audience being told a story. First, she suggests introducing action, suspense, and unexpected items in a story to thrill the audience and trigger the release of dopamine. Secondly, she recommends incorporating social proof elements and accessible characters to establish rapport and trigger the production of oxytocin. This hormone is indeed released when a person feels empathy. Thirdly, she advises to make the audience laugh, and if possible, move, to make them generate endorphin, bringing along a feeling of relaxation.

As a way to further evoke emotions in the public, freelancers and self-employed workers may remember to infuse the energy and passion they hold for their purpose into their story so other people can feel it too.

Moreover, beyond showcasing the acquired strengths and competences that resulted from overcoming the challenges they encountered along their entrepreneurial journey, recognizing that demonstrating vulnerability can also be beneficial to their image rather than detrimental is essential. Pinsley (Personal communication, June 7, 2022) shares:

The other thing that helped me a lot was sharing my personal story and being vulnerable about what I was going through. Sharing things that maybe people would not feel comfortable sharing like when I had to take a leave of absence from my job, and I had such a bad burn out. When I shared that, that made me grow a ton, because I got a bunch of people DMing, so many people sharing their stories. But that also made me look and feel more human to those people on the other side of the screen. So being vulnerable, sharing your story, because again that gives other people permission to be OK with whatever struggle they're facing, because there's always someone else dealing with what we're dealing with.

Overall, to effectively strengthen a solo business owner's personal brand, a sense of consistency should exist in their storytelling. As they tell their story, their tone should reflect the one previously established in the reflection stage of their personal branding strategy. Consistency should also be found in the way a story is shared across platforms online, as well as in person.

Finally, a freelancer or self-employed worker should keep in mind that, as they keep growing and evolving as a person over time, so will their personal brand and their story. Regularly reviewing their story could then be considered a best practice for optimal personal branding.

As we have just covered, the act of carefully crafting and telling stories can contribute to a solo business owner's personal branding strategy. This technique can be used in different settings, such as when they introduce themselves to their peers.

We will therefore now move on to the last identified step to build a personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker: networking.

G. Developing a reliable network

Although personal branding is meant to positively influence the opinion that the public holds of a solo business owner and therefore does not entail the necessity of partnering up with peers, doing so can bring numerous benefits for one's personal brand.

As previously established, several experts interviewed in the context of this thesis advocate for a mindset shift when it comes to fellow freelancers and self-employed workers. Pinsley notably recommends shifting from a competitor mindset to a collaborative mindset, or from a scarcity mindset to an abundance mindset, and recognizing that there are enough opportunities to be shared among all players in an industry (Personal communication, June 7, 2022).

Networking can therefore be a winning strategy for one's personal brand. In this part, we will aim to cover the benefits brought by networking, how to craft and execute a networking strategy as a solo business owner, as well as suggestions of best practices.

i. The importance of networking for freelancers and self-employed workers' personal branding

A freelancer or self-employed worker's personal brand stands to gain from a reliable network for multiple reasons.

First, a strong personal brand is synonymous with name recognition and considerable visibility. Through the process of expanding their network, a solo business owner will necessarily meet a variety of people, then seek to engage with them, all the while making new acquaintances. Consequently, as more people will know of them and their work, there will be greater chances of their name being mentioned in conversations and spreading among different circles.

Secondly, as a freelancer or self-employed worker will connect with more and more of their peers, the opportunities to collaborate with them will multiply. As mentioned in the previous parts, collaborating on the creation of content with professionals in the same field will broaden the end audience. For example, a post done as a collaboration by two freelancers on Instagram will be shown to both of their audiences, so each freelancer will be introduced to the followers of the other, resulting in a mutually beneficial arrangement. In addition to the increased visibility, solo business owners will also gain the trust of the public more easily. Indeed, upon witnessing this kind of collaboration, the people familiar with a professional will be tempted to place a similar trust in the solo business owner they are partnering with.

Thirdly, solo business owners stand to benefit from networking as building relationships with people within their industry will allow them to refine their knowledge of their domain and to be up to date on its latest developments. Moreover, getting in touch with other entrepreneurs outside of their sector could also contribute to enrich their competences by sharing expertise regarding the management of a company.

Finally, due to the increased name recognition and acquired place among industry leaders, a set of opportunities could arise as a direct result of successful networking, from the chance to create guest content, to speaking at conferences.

ii. Crafting and executing a networking strategy

To maximize the benefits of networking for personal branding, a strategy can be intentionally crafted and executed.

The formation of meaningful professional connections does not happen by chance and requires time and effort for them to flourish. Therefore, allocating one's time to building the relationships that can bring optimal rewards for all parties is essential.

The crafting of an intentional networking strategy can then start with the establishment of objectives, meaning the benefits that a freelancer or self-employed worker expects to obtain from their networking efforts. In the case of networking being wielded for personal branding purposes, it is best to refer to the overarching goal set by the solo business owner for their personal brand, such as attracting more clients organically.

Next, they may perform an assessment of their current network. This network can comprise friends, family, professional contacts, as well as past and current clients. With their goal in mind, solo business owners may realize that some of their existing connections already have the potential to help them achieve it.

Once this assessment has been performed, they can start building a list of people in their field that genuinely inspire them and could help them to reach the next level of their personal brand development.

Then, freelancers and self-employed workers can research the places where they will be able to connect with those people. The good news is that the digital era provides an ever-increasing number of opportunities to easily find and contact other professionals. Social networks, including LinkedIn and Instagram for example, depending on the nature of one's business, often offer the possibility to send a message directly to the person concerned. Another option particularly suited to freelancers would be coworking spaces. Indeed, with the advent of digital nomadism, such places have sprouted around the globe promoting the gathering of professionals. Moreover, coworking spaces tend to attract people who are already open to the idea of connecting with others. Finally, those places allow to meet professionals from different fields and to expand one's horizons. Another option to consider to connect with solo business owners, whether of the same discipline or not, resides in business associations. Multiple types of business associations exist, including but not limited to chambers of commerce, industry associations, and associations of entrepreneurs. To meet other professionals specifically pertaining to their sector, freelancers and self-employed workers can also attend industry events. Those happenings can take the form of trade shows, meet-and-greets, as well as seminars. If possible and relevant, solo business owners may even look into helping to organize these events. In these occasions, they will encounter professionals occupying different positions, some of which may be complimentary to the one they hold. Additionally to connecting with other professionals, these events will give them the opportunity to stay on top of what is happening in their industry. Last but not least, solo business owners can keep an eye on the networking events being organized in their area.

Once they have established a list of people they wish to connect with, and the places where they may meet professionals who could help them to advance their personal brand, the next logical step would be to consider how to approach them and how to keep in touch with them afterwards. Whether in an online or in-person environment, there are a few ways to engage with other professionals. On LinkedIn, freelancers and self-employed workers may leverage their social media and content strategies to build their personal brand and connect with the people who could help them to advance it further. They can first publish articles of their own which could be of use for their peers. Beyond creating such content however, directly engaging with other people's content is just as crucial as previously established. Freelancers and self-employed workers should therefore adopt a proactive approach when it comes to networking and build the habit of commenting on their peers' posts, as well as sharing content that they think could be valuable to the people they know. Another way to quickly establish strong ties in their industry would be to invite other professionals with solid personal brand to star on their content platform. This kind of collaboration can take the form of an interview on their podcast or a guest post on their blog for example. As far as guest posts are concerned, solo business owners can also wield them in a more indirect manner: by offering to write some themselves for industry publications. Not only will this action contribute to crystallize their personal brand by providing them the opportunity to gain visibility and to share their expertise, but chances are that it will also help them to get noticed by their peers who may want to get in touch.

iii. Best practices in networking for personal branding

In order to reap optimal benefits from their networking strategy for personal branding, freelancers and self-employed workers may keep a few best practices in mind.

The first one would be to set monthly networking objectives. These goals can include for example, submitting articles to two industry publications, participating to one in-person networking event, or contacting three peers to offer to interview them on their podcast.

To alleviate the weight of the networking actions that need to be undertaken, solo business owners can complete their monthly networking targets with a checklist of activities and proceed to input them into their calendar. This way, they will have a global view of what their month will look like and once the time to complete a networking task comes around, they will be able to rely on their calendar to remember it and prepare accordingly.

To go a step further, solo business owner may consider partnering up with a networking buddy: a colleague they know and trust who also aims to expand their network. Both professionals could benefit from such as partnership as they could introduce their buddy to a connection of theirs, keep each other accountable on their networking goals, and attend events, which can be daunting at times, together.

In order to build meaningful relationships from the start, a best practice in networking consists in offering help rather than asking for help at first. Indeed, networking is meant to be a mutually

beneficial practice, and showing that one genuinely cares about the person they want to connect with is the best way to achieve this goal. A simple way in which a solo business owner can offer help to a peer would be to send them a recent article related to their specific domain of expertise. Further down the road, solo business owners can also help their connections by introducing them to one another.

Similarly, to show care and empathy to an interlocutor, a generally good practice in networking resides in sharpening one's listening skills. These can indeed be precious to fluidify the conversation and strengthen the connection.

Next, freelancers and self-employed workers may want to be prepared for the interactions they will have with potential contacts by knowing their elevator pitch by heart and keeping business cards on them at all times.

Shortly after a networking event or making a new connection, a best practice to cement it would be to follow up and keep in touch afterwards.

As far as their circle of connections is concerned, solo business owners could consider broadening their reach in three ways.

Firstly, they shouldn't be afraid to connect with competitors. Indeed, as Moussu puts it, competitors today can become partners tomorrow (Personal communication, June 14, 2022). In addition, Pinsley states that other people within one's niche are those who will help a freelancer or self-employed worker to grow the most (Personal communication, June 7, 2022). Those competitors certainly face similar challenges and share common interests as entrepreneurs in the same field. Collaboration could therefore bring new opportunities.

The second way to broaden one's networking horizons is to attend events outside of their city.

Finally, they can consider engaging with people outside of their industry. This strategy can be fruitful for several reasons: on one hand, those people may have connections within the industry of the solo business owner; on the other hand, a discussion with them may spark an idea outside the box. Indeed, when looking at circumstances from the perspective of an outsider who is new to a field, it can be easier to adopt an innovative point of view as one would have more distance and a different way of approaching events.

We have now covered the seven major steps identified in the context of this thesis for freelancers and self-employed workers to construct and execute their personal branding strategy.

As we have revealed in the first part, a solo business owner's personal brand can deliver multiple benefits. We will therefore now aim to present how they may leverage their carefully built image in order to maximize those benefits.

III. Leveraging one's personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker

This thesis wouldn't be complete if it did not include actionable ways to make a personal brand profitable, which is often the top reason why freelancers and self-employed workers choose to craft their own in the first place.

If a personal brand is not about pushing a product or service, or even for sales, an extended leads and customer list is a direct consequence of a well-executed personal branding strategy.

The steps presented above, such as building and nurturing a community on social media, implementing a content strategy, and expanding one's network, allow a freelancer or self-employed worker to establish their personal brand.

We will now cover concrete ways to leverage a personal brand in order to convert audience members into loyal customers, monetize one's image, and track the results of one's personal branding efforts.

A. Converting audience members into clients

i. A well-executed personal branding strategy organically contributes to conversion

Successfully crafting and executing a personal branding strategy will help a solo business owner to create traction and organically attract clients thanks to their image.

Moussu for example declares: "I have never prospected, all the clients I have secured have come to me through my content on Instagram." She adds: "If the professional has good content, the branding is solid, and they are friendly, theoretically all the ingredients are there for people to contact them" (Personal communication, June 14, 2022).

Felix shares a similar sentiment, saying: "When you are sharing your content, sharing your expertise, you are positioning yourself as an expert. When people see that you are the expert, they will come" (Personal communication, June 16, 2022). Further, he testifies that, in his own experience, not only has his personal brand contributed to attract clients, but it has also allowed him to set his desired fees:

For me I think it's a game changer, because I went from someone who used to collect orders where I'd be scared to charge a certain price, to being able to say "I am charging this amount for my clients", and my clients would agree because of the kind of value that they perceive from my brand.

Therefore, a personal branding strategy, if well executed, can spare a freelancer or self-employed worker efforts in finding people interested in their product or service.

This is especially critical considering digital advertising costs have significantly increased recently. In May 2022, AdSkate reported that Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have all shown a dramatic rise in their CPM (cost per thousand impressions) over the last year. While the CPM of Facebook and Instagram have respectively risen by 61% and 23% year over year, it is the cost increase noticed on TikTok's part which is truly impressive. Indeed, TikTok's CPM has grown 185% year over year.

Having the capability to attract clients through one's personal branding efforts is therefore a considerable advantage. Although this process tends to happen organically, there are still actions that can assist a solo business owner in boosting their conversion rate, and that they can put in place during the different stages of their personal branding strategy.

ii. A solo business owner's conversion process depends on multiple factors

Two principles should be first and foremost taken into consideration as far as conversion is concerned: not all members of a professional's audience are destined to become their clients, and conversion is heavily dependent on the model, product or service, and sales funnel of a freelancer or self-employed worker's business.

On one hand, and as previously evoked in the section dedicated to content strategy, not all members of a solo business owners' audience are meant to turn into buyers. Indeed, if the focus is placed on building an audience, it is because its primary purpose is to attract the people who will ultimately become customers. Therefore, Ballot (Personal communication, June 17, 2022) provides the following reassuring words:

Your audience is necessarily larger than your clients, so it is normal to convert only a small part of one's audience. It is absolutely not a failure to not convert one's audience, on the contrary. It is the reason you will have clients: because the audience is larger, and it is even truer in the context of content creation.

Cavallini (Personal communication, April 28, 2022) adds:

If you are gaining new followers it means people are interested in what you are putting out. Not everybody will be engaged and it's okay. Growing your followers helps you to find more people who are genuinely interested in your offer.

On the other hand, there is no such thing as a best way to convert, considering the conversion process is dependent on the business model, product or service, and sales funnel in question. Ballot affirms: "I don't have a single correct answer to provide as to how to convert because it entirely depends on the model, the sales funnels, and many other elements." (Personal

communication, June 17, 2022). Moreover, Pinsley states: “The conversion strategies are going to be very different depending on your product or service, your price point.” (Personal communication, June 7, 2022).

In order to optimize their conversions, freelancers and self-employed workers should therefore start by mapping out their sales funnel. A typical sales funnel will begin at the awareness stage, where a person discovers the business owner’s activity. The awareness stage is followed with interest, which then leads to consideration. Finally, a decision is made, and the individual ultimately makes a purchase.

As an example, let’s look at the customer journey in the case of a freelance social media marketer. Firstly, an individual may find their Instagram page while searching for content related to social media strategy on the platform. The individual consequently enters the funnel in the awareness stage. Next, they may explore the freelancer’s content and realize that it meets their needs by answering the questions they’re asking themselves about social media marketing. They therefore enter the interest stage and click the follow button. In time, they may click the link in the freelancer’s Instagram bio and download a freebie, such as a social media content calendar. As they provided their email address to receive the freebie, they will start receiving the freelancer’s marketing emails. Upon receiving a special offer, they could enter the consideration stage, and end up deciding to purchase a service.

Now that we have established that each solo business owner’s conversion process is unique and depends on factors such as their business model, sales funnel, and price point, we can attempt to deliver recommendations as to general best practices for conversions.

iii. Best practices to boost conversions

The first best practice for conversion as established above is for solo business owners to determine their business model and sales funnel. Indeed, once they have designed their sales funnel, they will know what needs to happen at each stage so that a person may move down their sales funnel and become a loyal customer. With this insight, they will be able to delineate the actions that need to be performed, and plan and execute accordingly.

The next best practice to boost conversions is to learn and apply copywriting basics. There is a reason copywriters are among the most sought-after freelancers: their skills are precious in guiding people down a business’s sales funnel. One of the most famous and acclaimed methods used by copywriters is the AIDA method. This method can be implemented in different contexts such as when writing social media captions, marketing emails, and even in storytelling as previously mentioned. According to the AIDA method, a message should aim to first attract the attention of the audience, then it should trigger interest, followed by desire, and finally action. To best utilize this technique, it is important to start with the end goal in mind: the action that the solo business owner wants the lead to perform. The action can be other than the act of

purchasing: it can also be downloading a piece of content, subscribing to a newsletter, or simply sharing a social media post. To encourage action, a call-to-action should therefore be placed at the end of the message. In the case of a social media post, a call-to-action to promote saves could take the form of: “If you liked this post, save it for later!”

A powerful tool used by freelancers to grow their email lists, nurture leads, and ultimately support conversions is lead magnets. Lead magnets are free pieces of content offered by experts in a certain field. To get access to this content which solves a burning problem experienced by a group of people or persona, they will provide their email address and receive it directly in their inbox. A lead magnet serves several purposes for a solo business owner: on one hand, it will allow them to showcase their knowledge and competence, on the other hand, they will be able to build a relationship and strengthen the connection with qualified leads by adding them to their email marketing list. An advantageous feature of lead magnets is that they can be declined in many forms. Some typical examples of lead magnets include ebooks, templates, checklists, short courses, webinars, masterclasses, discovery calls, and quizzes. Adopting a range of lead magnets, each fitting a stage of the sales funnel, can therefore be considered as a good practice.

Next, it is crucial to understand where leads are down one’s sales funnel. Indeed, at one point in time, different people will be at different stages of the sales funnel, moving at their own pace. In order to convert, Pinsley recommends identifying one’s hottest leads: the people who are interacting with a freelancer’s content the most, and that are showing the most interest (Personal communication, June 7, 2022). Once those people have been spotted, she points out that a solo business owner can then proceed to reach out to them when they have special offer and to give them a special discount.

Another best practice shared by Pinsley to support conversions resides in focusing on past clients (Personal communication, June 7, 2022). She explains:

You'll get the most sales from people who have already purchased from you, so I think a lot of people they get them to buy and then they kind of let them fall away and they're just trying to do more acquisition, but really what you should do is after someone purchases, then you offer them another offer that kind of helps them move further down the customer journey.

Indeed, the acquisition process is far more costly in resources, whether time, energy, or money, compared to the undertaking of selling an additional product or service to past clients.

The second to last selected technique to boost conversions is to generate emotion. Indeed, Ballot emphasizes that it is emotion which ultimately pushes people to act. She consequently advises freelancers and solo business owners who wish to convert to work on the emotion in their message. However, she doesn’t dismiss rational elements altogether, on the contrary. According

to Ballot, emotional components and rational ones should be wielded in tandem to maximize effectiveness. She clarifies (Personal communication, June 17, 2022):

The brain works like this: it needs emotion to move toward action, but then it will experience fear because the brain is meant to function this way: it is supposed to be afraid, so it will find reassurance in what is rational.

In the context of storytelling for example, a story beginning with emotional components will allow to grab the attention of the audience, while rational elements such as social proof factors will be a convincing middle, finally an ending hinting at the emotional transformation that the public could experience by resorting to the offered solution could adequately push to action.

One last best practice for conversion, especially relevant for freelancers offering their services, is to draw the line between the clients whom they may realistically serve and those who do not have a budget which reflects the value of the service proposed. Indeed, chasing conversions by lowering one's fees can put a solo business owner's financial viability at risk. Cavallini points out (Personal communication, April 28, 2022):

If you feel you can't work for the kind of budget that they have, don't work. Instead make a counterproposal with less service and with lower fees. Try changing your offer, or simply tell them that you can't do it.

Now that we have covered some of the identified best practices to convert as a solo business owner, we will look at practical ways to monetize one's personal brand.

B. Ways to monetize a personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker

A freelancer or self-employed worker can leverage the increased exposure and recognition that arise from their personal branding efforts in several ways. As they will start to be perceived as a trustable expert in their industry, they will be able to monetize their image by selling specific products and services on the side which we will now detail.

The first kind of product that solo business owners can sell to monetize their personal brand are digital products. Digital products come in various forms, such as online courses, masterclasses, e-books, and templates. These also provide a major advantage: once created, they can be sold online to a large audience with an automated process which requires little resources and limited maintenance. This type of paid content should however provide more value than the lead magnets offered for free by the freelancer or self-employed worker.

The second kind of product that solo business owners with solid personal brands can sell are premium content subscriptions. Examples of such paid content subscriptions include newsletters and blog articles, which dive deeper into the topics explored by the freelancer or self-employed

worker in their regular free content. Online platforms specifically dedicated to this type of subscriptions exist to make the process of selling them easier, such as Substack for paid newsletters, and Memberful for gated content, private podcasts, newsletters, communities, and online courses.

Another digital option that exists to monetize one's personal brand is to create a YouTube channel, if one hasn't already been created as part of a content strategy. Indeed, not only is video content particularly popular on the web, but YouTube offers the opportunity to earn revenue through the display of ads that are showed before and during the creator's video.

The fourth way to leverage one's image is to write a book. This strategy, used by celebrities and successful entrepreneurs, can be particularly suited for freelancers and self-employed workers with a strong personal brand. Indeed, their image tends to be closely associated with a specific area of expertise.

To go a step further and offer tailored content for high-ticket clients, solo business owners may opt to offer one-on-one coaching sessions and programs.

Next, brand deals can be considered to punctually receive revenue from the promotion of other businesses. Felix notably cites that securing brand deals has been one of the many benefits resulting from the construction of his personal brand (Personal communication, June 16, 2022). In the context of brand deals, solo business owners use their image to act as ambassadors to other brands.

Finally, freelancers and self-employed workers with a robust personal brand and a large audience can aim to gain speaking gigs. The competition being particularly fierce in this sector, the more specialized they are, the better. Indeed, owning a particular corner of the market will allow them to stand out and appear as the go-to person for a specific problematic.

C. Tracking results of one's personal branding efforts

As a personal brand evolves over time, and so does the business owner carrying it, measuring its progress is essential. Moreover, a freelancer or self-employed worker will invest a significant amount of time and energy in crafting and executing their personal branding strategy, notably by engaging in activities such as posting on social media and creating online content. Therefore, keeping track of the success of those endeavors ensures that those efforts are not wasted, and that action can be adjusted as needed.

Felix states: "To me, success depends on the person, the individual. Because when we're talking about personal branding, we're talking about you harnessing your reputation so that you can achieve a set of goals" (Personal communication, June 16, 2022). Therefore, the first step to track the results of one's personal branding efforts is to consider the goals that the freelancer or self-

employed worker established for their personal brand. Indeed, a personal branding strategy is supposed to deliver specific benefits that the solo business owner defines for themselves, such as securing more orders or building connections with other experts in their field.

Based on those objectives, it is relevant to establish and track metrics and KPIs. Examples of metrics to track over time include the number of followers on social media, the number of downloads of a lead magnet, or the number of subscriptions to a newsletter. To track those numbers, the tools and platforms used often offer an integrated analytics feature.

Next, solo business owners should aim to track where their traffic and sales come from. This will help them to assess the effectiveness of their actions on social media for example. Google Analytics can assist them in tracking a large variety of key metrics relative to their website.

An important benefit offered by the act of tracking one's numbers is that it will allow a freelancer or self-employed worker to adjust accordingly and recalibrate if necessary. For instance, if upon looking at their analytics in Instagram, they realize that a particular type of content or topic is overperforming, they will be able to focus on it to leverage this source of growth.

Finally a relevant strategy to adopt when building a personal brand is to keep an eye on one's e-reputation. A freelancer or self-employed worker can use the tool Google Alerts to receive alerts in their emails whenever new content relevant to them and their business is posted online. Google Alerts can for example help a solo business owner track the online conversations about them and their business, as well as uncovering feedback, positive or negative, from their customers.

IV. Limits of this thesis

Two limits are to be considered when referring to this thesis: the limited amount of academic literature on the topic of personal branding, and the absence of commonly accepted quantitative model to assess the effectiveness of personal branding in a solo business owner's entrepreneurial success.

First, although personal branding as a concept has gained significant traction online in the past few years, it remains a relatively new one in the academic literature. Therefore, this thesis has examined both the existing material on the matter of personal branding in the academic literature, as well as the digital content emanating from established professionals in the field of personal branding and marketing at large. The data retrieved from this second source of information has been carefully selected in order to include only reliable sources. Further, an inquisitive approach has been adopted to offer new and innovative perspectives, such as the proposed definition of personal branding particularly tailored to the case of freelancers and self-employed workers.

Secondly, there is to this day no quantitative model to evaluate the effectiveness of personal branding in a solo business owner's entrepreneurial success. To bridge this gap, this thesis led to the retrieval of qualitative data in the form of interviews of digital marketing experts, who are

freelancers themselves, and have built their personal brand as well as assessed the benefits they have gained as a result of this process.

Therefore, the limits faced during the realization of this thesis, mostly related to the relative novelty of the concept being examined, have constituted an opportunity to get a pulse on the subject directly from industry experts. As a result, has emerged the proposal of a practical way, relying on the experience of established professionals, to approach and apply the concept of personal branding as a solo business owner.

Conclusion

As profound economic and societal shifts collide on a global scale, personal branding appears to be a leading solution for freelancers and self-employed workers to stand out in a crowded digital environment, and ultimately keep their business one step ahead of the competition.

While the Great Resignation occurring as a direct result of the Covid pandemic has accelerated the movement toward entrepreneurship, more and more former employees choose to open their own venture.

However, the era of the attention economy proves to be a terrain of opportunities and challenges alike for these new solopreneurs. Now more than ever, businesses, large or small, are increasingly losing touch with traditional advertising, rejecting the “push” approach consisting in forcing their products and services into the minds of consumers, preferring instead the “pull” method, which prioritizes attracting them organically. We have therefore witnessed the birth and rapid expansion of inbound marketing, the success of which relies more on the capability to produce content of interest to the audience, rather than the depth of advertisers’ pockets.

Moreover, as Pinsley points out, we have entered the age of relationship-based marketing, where the notions of human connection and community take center stage (Personal communication, June 7, 2022).

In this context, solo business owners dispose of a unique opportunity to gain consumers’ preference through a carefully crafted and executed online communication strategy, highlighting the person that they are, their purpose, expertise, and values.

This is where personal branding comes in.

Personal branding for a freelancer or self-employed worker, as per the definition proposed in this thesis, is the process of advancing their business prospects by positively influencing the opinion that the public holds of them thanks to a carefully thought-out yet authentic communication strategy aimed at showcasing their expertise, purpose, and values.

With personal branding, a freelancer or self-employed worker’s communication efforts will therefore materialize as their reputation in the minds of their audience.

By building their personal brand, solo business owners can expect to reap a range of benefits, including, but not limited to, acquiring name recognition, connecting on an emotional level with their audience, boosting their credibility, differentiating themselves from competitors, securing a place among industry leaders, attracting clients organically, being able to charge a higher price for their services, and reinforcing customer loyalty.

In order to construct their personal brand, a seven-step strategy is advanced, nourished by the expertise and experience of seven professionals within the digital marketing sector interviewed for the purpose of this thesis.

This strategy can be divided in two parts: the crafting of the personal branding strategy which requires reflection, and the execution part which puts in motion a solo business owner's personal brand through concrete digital actions.

First of all, it appears crucial to start by adopting an optimal mindset and approach regarding personal branding. In this regard, self-motivation, confidence, curiosity, a daring attitude, positivity, and a supportive and collaborative approach are all qualities perceived as fundamental toward successful personal branding.

The second step consists in reflecting on five axes: the aim in building one's personal brand, the freelancer or self-employed worker one is, the current position of one's personal brand, the audience one serves, and the desired position of one's personal brand. A freelancer or self-employed worker will start with determining the aim of their personal branding strategy: the reason that leads them to embark on this journey, and the benefits they expect to gain as a result. They will appraise their own experience, strengths, expertise, purpose, vision, and values. They will also seek to precisely define their niche: their target audience and target client. Finally, they will assess their current reputation, and where they desire it to be.

As part of the third stage, a solo business owner will refine their image, starting with understanding that every appearance they make, whether in-person or online, contributes to construct the opinion the public holds of them. Then, they will aim to reconcile the image they wish to project with the elements it is comprised of, notably including their clothes, words, tone, body language, and graphic design aspects.

Once these first three steps have been completed, a freelancer or self-employed worker will be ready to move on to the execution of their personal branding strategy, starting with building their social media presence.

As social media has become a prime source of information and entertainment for billions worldwide, and the average time spent by users on those platforms is steadily increasing, it is a decisive cog in a solo business owner's personal branding strategy. Indeed, building a strong social media presence will allow them to gain visibility, share their knowledge, showcase their expertise, and to centralize their communication. Six major social media platforms can be considered to strengthen one's personal brand, depending on the nature of their business, location of their target audience, and preferred content format. Freelancers and self-employed workers primarily offering their products or services to other companies may consider prioritizing activity on LinkedIn, while those working with younger consumers could benefit from uploading video content on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. As far as the type of content is concerned, updates on an industry, practical tips, and lessons learnt along a solo business owner's entrepreneurial journey are all particularly relevant to establish one's personal brand using social media. While best practices on those platforms are many, we retain that for the purpose of building a personal brand, content should answer the target audience's needs relative to a problematic, show personality, and foster interactivity above all.

The fifth identified step of a solo business owner's personal branding strategy resides in online content creation. The move toward content creation coincides with the advent of inbound marketing. Engaging in this activity will allow freelancers and self-employed workers to assert their expertise and connect with their audience on an emotional level, which will in turn strengthen their credibility and the trust that the public places in them. Focusing on a single platform and content category, whether written, visual, audio, or video, can be considered as best practice, at least in the beginning, to maximize chances of success. Further, it is crucial to determine four to five content pillars around which the content will revolve, and to establish a routine so as to post content regularly. Most importantly, delivering tremendous value, meaning content that answers the target audience's needs and helps them to solve a burning problem they experience, is the key to content that will truly stand out. Exceptional content is also recognizable in the way that it is easy to understand for anyone, regardless of their level of mastery over the topic, and directly applicable. Finally, experimenting with one's content, and collaborating with other experts in the industry will allow them to take their content strategy to the next level.

With businesses large and small rushing toward content creation as the new golden ticket to engage with consumers and foster customer loyalty, online competition is fiercer than ever.

This underlines the relevance of the sixth step defined to build one's personal brand as a freelancer or self-employed worker: storytelling. A solopreneur's story is unique, and therefore constitutes their best asset to differentiate themselves among their peers. We distinguish two levels of storytelling for a solo business owner: their general personal story or entrepreneurial journey, and the chapters of their story, which can be assimilated to snippets of their everyday life that they can spin to create stories on a regular basis. One's entrepreneurial journey will not only help to build a relationship between a freelancer or self-employed worker and their audience, but it will also serve to communicate their purpose, values, strengths, and expertise. Upon recognizing their own struggles in the story told by the entrepreneur, and acknowledging that the latter has successfully overcome them, the audience will be inclined to develop a sense of affinity and trust. Consequently, matching the questions that the public asks itself to the expertise of the solo business owner can be considered as a must in storytelling. Further, emotion is the common factor among all storytelling that hits its mark and should therefore be wielded to attract the attention of the audience in the beginning and encourage action toward the end.

Although a personal brand revolves around a particular individual, failing to connect with peers could be synonymous with missed opportunities when crafting one. Hence, developing a reliable network is identified as the final offered step of a solopreneur's personal branding strategy. Indeed, a solid network can contribute to greater name recognition, deeper insights into an industry and therefore increased expertise, and access to various opportunities. As a network is not formed by chance, but rather conscious actions, a networking strategy can be put in place. During an initial phase, freelancers and self-employed workers will reflect on the benefits they expect to obtain from their networking efforts and the state of their current network. They may also brainstorm to find the spaces, in-person or digital, where they may meet the people they wish

to connect with, as well as concrete ways to engage with them. To execute their networking strategy, solo business owners may set monthly networking objectives and partner with a networking buddy. A best practice they might want to keep in mind is to start by offering their help, as relations are meant to be mutually beneficial. Finally, they can consider broadening their horizons by getting in touch with the professionals they consider as competitors, as well as people outside of their industry.

Upon carrying out their personal branding strategy, freelancers and self-employed workers will start to organically attract an audience that is genuinely curious about their field of expertise, including consumers who will be interested in purchasing their product or service. Despite the fact that conversions are heavily dependent on factors such as the business model, sales funnel, and price point, we have still identified a few best practices to promote conversions while building a personal brand. Those tactics include knowing one's sales funnel and optimizing it, applying key copywriting principles such as the AIDA method, introducing lead magnets, nurturing the hottest leads as well as past clients, and generating emotion to encourage action. Last but not least, solo business owners should draw the line as to which clients they may not realistically be able to serve based on their budget, in order to avoid undervaluing their services and putting their financial stability at risk.

We have recognized several ways to monetize one's personal brand. These involve, but are not limited to, offering digital products (among which online courses and e-books), selling premium content subscriptions (such as premium newsletters), creating a YouTube channel, publishing a book, offering one-on-one coaching sessions, taking brand deals, and speaking at conferences.

Finally, as a personal branding strategy will require a significant time investment, it is crucial to track the progress and results that it brings so that no efforts are wasted, and actions can be redirected if necessary. To this end, implementing KPIs relative to one's objectives for their personal brand can be considered as a good practice, as well as keeping an eye on analytics to determine the actions that produce optimal rewards.

To conclude, personal branding has the power to be a true game changer for solo business owners in today's ecosystem.

Building a personal brand can be accomplished through a carefully planned and executed strategy, with steps that will ultimately feed into each other to multiply their effect.

If done consciously over time, a personal brand will allow a freelancer or self-employed worker to organically attract clients that are aligned with their offer.

At the end of the day, crafting one's personal brand can be seen as a long-term journey meant both to be enjoyed and to celebrate one's hard-earned knowledge and competence enabling them to provide value to other people and the world at large.

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