“No one wants to see the hard work, so I only share the achievements”: How Brazilian professors manage legitimacy work on social media

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Context and objectives

The context of social media is reframing organizational practices (Alaimo; Kallinikos, 2021) and the research in management and organizational studies by presenting new contexts and practices (Bailey et al., 2022). In this sense, researchers analyzed multiple organizational practices that have been influenced by these digital systems, including the ones associated with workers, like the recruitment and selection processes (Vianna et al., 2025), the monitorment of their performance and behavior (Rahat & Nadeem, 2025), and even their health and personal habits (Elmholdt et al., 2021).

Moreover, one important topic to be explored is how workers are managing social media platforms regarding their challenges on workplaces and their contexts. For example, researchers observed the so-called gig-workers – like drivers – developing new resistance practices to manipulate the algorithmic control and interact with customers (Cameron; Rahman, 2021), and gay workers managing what they post or avoid to post on social media to deal with stigma in the workplace (Lauriano; Coacci, 2023). Nevertheless, despite the interest of researchers on how workers are managing social media and what they post or not – or what they make visible

or invisible – there is still a lack of research regarding management and organization studies academics and how they manage these technologies regarding their work. More specifically, we are interested in understanding the role of social media on how these workers legitimize their work.

Although most of management and organization studies academics around the world do not face the necessity of legitimize their work, our research context is Brazil, and Brazilian universities and academics in general were heavily attacked in the last decade – especially during Bolsonaro's administration (Former President from 2018 to 2022) – by multiple members of the society and public administration who questioned their work and associated them with illegal practices and fake news. In this sense, our research proposal focuses on the following objective: To investigate how management and organization studies academics manage legitimacy through visibility and invisibility practices in social media.

Theoretical background

Legitimacy work is associated with the efforts employed by organizations through real actions or transforming the meaning of existent acts when they are looking for differentiation and acceptance from the audiences (Deephouse et al., 2017; Suddaby, Bitektine, & Haack, 2017). However, research on legitimacy observed that organizational actors also develop strategies looking for their own acceptance and recognition among internal and external audiences, like other workers and society (Loos & Spraul, 2025; Murphy & Kreiner, 2020; Suddaby et al., 2019). In this case, even those professionals who carry out some taken-for-granted legitimacy - like ethics and compliance workers - develop strategies looking for being legitimized inside the organization both by superiors and subordinates (Treviño et al., 2014).

In this sense, previous research analyzed legitimacy work focusing on multiple contexts, strategies, and practices developed by individuals. For example, researchers analyzed the

context of transitional economies and how senior and new managers adopted different strategies to maintain and gain legitimacy by associating to legitimized individuals (such as former ministers) or highlighting the level of commitment of new ventures' entrepreneurs (Woldesenbet, 2018). Moreover, studies analyzing the legitimacy work practices usually focused on organizational practices, highlighting their decisions about what must be emphasized and avoided according to their audiences (Rueede; Kreutzer, 2015), making certain realities visible while rendering contradictions and tensions (Mulder, 2023).

Moreover, recent studies have increasingly conceptualized visibility not merely as what can be seen, but as a relational and strategic process through which actors shape what becomes observable, relevant, and legitimate to specific audiences (Brighenti, 2007; Thompson, 2005). From this perspective, visibility and invisibility are not oppositional conditions, but mutually constituted dynamics in which making certain practices visible simultaneously obscures others (Brighenti, 2007; Kupers, 2014). In organizational contexts, visibility therefore involves strategic decisions regarding what should be emphasized, exposed, concealed, or rendered peripheral according to audiences' expectations and evaluative standards.

This discussion becomes particularly relevant in digital environments, where social media platforms intensify and reorganize visibility dynamics through algorithmic systems, platform architectures, and audience interactions (Bucher, 2012; Flyverbom, 2016; Leonardi & Treem, 2020). In these contexts, visibility is no longer exclusively controlled by organizations or workers, but co-produced through continuous interactions involving users, metrics, algorithms, and platform affordances. Consequently, social media visibility becomes closely associated with legitimacy, reputation, and public evaluations, encouraging actors to strategically manage not only what they disclose, but also what they intentionally avoid making visible.

Although previous studies have explored how organizations strategically manage visibility in digital contexts (Barberá-Tomás et al., 2019; Vianna et al., 2025), less attention has been devoted to how academics manage visibility and invisibility regarding the legitimacy of their work. This gap is particularly important in polarized contexts such as Brazil, where academics became recurrent targets of moral attacks, misinformation, and public distrust. Under these conditions, social media may operate simultaneously as a space for legitimacy construction and as a source of reputational risk, leading academics to continuously calibrate what dimensions of their work, routines, political positions, achievements, and personal lives should become visible or remain invisible.

Method

To reach the objective, we are developing a qualitative research based on two waves of semi-structured interviews with a total of 32 Brazilian academics (10 interviews in the first wave and 22 interviews in the second wave). Data was collected in two waves between July 2024 and February 2025, using semi-structured interviews. In the first wave, we conducted ten interviews, and in the second wave, we conducted twenty-two additional interviews. Initial interviews were contacted through researchers' professional network, and participants were subsequently asked to suggest others, in a snowball sampling. The 17 interviews were conducted and recorded via Google Meet platform (Howlett, 2022), lasting between forty-five and ninety minutes. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, focusing primarily on the use of social media platforms by MOS academics. Interviewees were both early-career and experienced academics, working on public and private universities, and teaching on business and management courses. Moreover, all interviewees are users of, at least, three social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, and Linkedin).

Most of the interviewees are affiliated with private institutions, which may influence their social media usage patterns, especially considering factors such as organizational culture, personal branding, and professionalism requirements. Instagram is widely used among the interviewees, with some maintaining multiple accounts, separating personal, professional, and/or academic profiles. This indicates a concern with managing their image on social media. LinkedIn, although less popular than Instagram, is still used, reflecting a more competitive environment where professional visibility is valued. Although its popularity has decreased, Facebook is still used by the interviewees for social interactions and academic reflections.

We used broader questions during the first wave of interviews, adopting an exploratory approach, to understand how academics use different social media platforms, focusing on the professional use. Based on the findings from the first wave, we refined our research focus and shifted to explore specific aspects of MOS academics' use of social media platforms. In the second wave, for example, we asked more targeted questions such as "What kind of post do you produce and share in your social media to maintain or gain legitimacy? And why?" or "How posts about your academic achievements can help you to gain legitimacy?".

Our data analysis was guided by grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2006), employing a systematic approach to coding and constant comparison. We analyzed and compared data across all interviews conducted during the two waves of data collection, using constant comparative methods to develop focused codes (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Here it is important to mention that we began the research journey much before the interviews, by changing experiences between us about how we were using our social media and observing our colleagues doing it. Specifically, we observed our behavior on deciding what to post and what not to post, according to the moment and the career stage, and how those posts could influence our legitimacy work. And these experiences helped us during the data analysis and the

interactive activities and moves (Golden-Biddle, 2019) when conducting the interviews, reflecting our behavior, and consulting the literature. In doing so, we realized that while legitimacy on social media is usually analyzed through an organizational lens, our case highlights organizational stakeholders (MOS academics) marked by a continuous necessity to gain and maintain legitimacy by showing positive achievements and hiding what can be seen as negative. Thus, to achieve focused coding, we analyzed and systematically compared data and codes, refining them into focused codes (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021). During this process, it became evident that the relationship between academic and legitimacy work on social media evolved across multiple dimensions.

Findings and expected results

Until the moment our findings suggest three main analytical categories with the potential to produce relevant theoretical contributions: *Showing legitimizing content, Negotiating the visibility of conditionally legitimizing content,* and *Withholding non-legitimizing content*.

In *showing legitimizing content* we observed three main dynamics employed by MOS academics. First, most interviewees reported that they share their academic achievements as a way to legitimize their work. One of the academics, Nina, explained that she is a Professor in a private school, so she reported that "*(I) need to show (for her employer) that she is working and being relevant", so she needs to show "on Instagram, for example, when I have a paper indicated to an award or a publication. This is part of the job now*".

Second, academics mentioned that it is important to show the complexity of academic work. For example, Sheila mentioned that "*it is important to show people who think that we are only earning easy money and doing nothing, that there is a lot of work in our job. It is not only to teach and leave*."

And third, to show academic work is a way to gain institutional legitimacy. One of the academics, Geraldo, explained that this kind of content is not only an individual measure but its analysis became a way of defining the practices of his department: "*In our last (department) meeting we discussed how our individual posts were increasing the number of our followers, how students were reacting to it, and how the community was perceiving our posts. It is a way for us (academics) to be legitimized, but also for our department, the institution*".

Thus, in this category we are still working on understanding the practices they develop to increase how they show the legitimized content.

In the second category, negotiating the visibility of conditionally legitimizing content, we observed that academics continuously evaluate which forms of content may simultaneously produce legitimacy and reputational risks depending on audiences and contexts. First, some interviewees explained that they intentionally delay posts about conferences, travels, or leisure activities. Besides concerns regarding privacy and safety, they reported the necessity of transforming these experiences into "acceptable" or professionally valuable content before sharing them publicly. As one interviewee explained, "you cannot simply post because you are traveling; you need to show something useful, productive, or connected to work".

Second, academics demonstrated ambivalence regarding the visibility of personal life and informal content. While some participants avoid posting personal activities because they perceive social media primarily as a professional and academic space, others intentionally share aspects of their personal routines, hobbies, and everyday lives because these contents increase engagement and strengthen proximity with students and external audiences. In this sense, conditionally legitimizing content becomes continuously negotiated according to platform dynamics, audience expectations, career stage, and perceptions regarding what can enhance or damage academic legitimacy.

In the third category, withholding non-legitimizing content, we observed that academics strategically restrict the visibility of practices, opinions, and personal experiences perceived as potentially damaging to their professional legitimacy. Interviewees frequently mentioned avoiding political discussions, institutional criticism, personal frustrations, conflicts with students, and emotionally exhausting aspects of academic work. In highly polarized digital environments, many participants perceived public exposure as potentially risky, especially considering broader attacks against academics and universities in Brazil.

Moreover, invisibility was not limited to the complete absence of content, but also involved selective audience management practices. Several interviewees reported avoiding the publication of personal content in their public profiles while simultaneously sharing it through tools such as “close friends” lists, private accounts, or multiple profiles separating professional and personal audiences. In this sense, academics do not simply hide content, but strategically regulate its visibility according to different audiences and legitimacy expectations. These practices demonstrate that legitimacy management on social media increasingly involves not only producing visible performances of academic success, but also controlling who can access specific dimensions of personal and professional life.

The findings of this study have the potential to contribute to legitimacy work literature by demonstrating that legitimacy management in digital environments increasingly depends not only on what organizational actors make visible, but also on how they strategically regulate invisibility across distinct audiences and platforms. More specifically, the study suggests that MOS academics engage in continuous legitimacy work by displaying legitimizing achievements, negotiating conditionally legitimizing content, and withholding or selectively restricting access to non-legitimizing dimensions of their personal and professional lives.

Moreover, the study may contribute to discussions on visibility and social media by highlighting how academics actively manage audience boundaries through platform affordances such as multiple profiles and "close friends" lists. In polarized contexts such as Brazil, social media may simultaneously operate as spaces for professional recognition, institutional legitimation, and reputational risk, transforming legitimacy into a continuous process of selectively managing visibility and invisibility. In this sense, our findings suggest the potential relevance of understanding academic legitimacy on social media not only through what becomes publicly visible, but also through the strategic regulation of what remains partially visible, restricted, or invisible to broader audiences.

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