

The Instagram Architect: Social Media Branding Vs. Real-World Professional Ethics

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Abstract- *In the digital era, the architectural profession is increasingly influenced by social media platforms, particularly Instagram, where visual storytelling dominates. While this shift has created opportunities for architects to expand their visibility, engage clients, and express creativity beyond traditional boundaries, it has also raised ethical concerns about authenticity, misrepresentation, and professional responsibility. This article explores the tension between self-promotion and professional ethics within architectural practice, focusing on the Nigerian context. Through case studies, interviews, and content analysis of popular architectural Instagram accounts, the study investigates how architects curate their online personas, the risks of exaggerated or unverified project claims, and the consequences of prioritizing aesthetics over professional substance. The paper critically assesses whether the pursuit of online fame compromises the architect's duty to clients, colleagues, and the public. It also evaluates the role of regulatory bodies like ARCON and NIA in addressing the evolving challenges of professional conduct in the digital landscape. Findings suggest a growing need for ethical guidelines tailored to digital branding and recommend strategies to harmonize online visibility with integrity in practice.*

Indexed Terms- *Architectural ethics, Instagram, social media branding, professional conduct, digital identity, Nigerian architecture, ARCON, NIA*

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has become a transformative force in the architectural profession, redefining how architects present their work, engage clients, and shape their public image. Platforms such as Instagram offer architects a visual-centric medium to display design concepts, completed projects, work-

in-progress, and even lifestyle aesthetics. This digital exposure has democratized marketing and expanded client reach, especially for younger and emerging professionals who may not yet have built a traditional portfolio or client base (Piven & Perkins, 2018).

However, the rise of the “Instagram Architect” has brought ethical questions to the forefront. The curated nature of online content often emphasizes aesthetics over process, glosses over the complexities of real-world execution, and sometimes blurs the line between inspiration and intellectual property infringement. In extreme cases, architects may present concept renders as built works or exaggerate their involvement in large-scale projects to attract attention and clients (Orr, 2020). This misrepresentation, although popularized by digital culture, conflicts with the ethical standards upheld by professional bodies such as the Architects Registration Council of Nigeria (ARCON) and the Nigerian Institute of Architects (NIA), which emphasize honesty, transparency, and accountability in professional practice (ARCON, 2021).

This article critically examines the emerging tension between online self-promotion and professional ethics within architecture, using the Nigerian practice environment as a focal point. It explores how Instagram is reshaping the boundaries of ethical behavior in architecture and asks whether the profession's existing codes of conduct are equipped to handle the challenges of a highly digitalized, image-driven landscape. By analyzing case studies, interviews with practicing architects, and posts from popular Instagram accounts, this study highlights both the opportunities and ethical dilemmas inherent in digital branding. It concludes by proposing recommendations for reconciling digital visibility with ethical responsibility, thereby aligning modern

marketing practices with the enduring values of the architectural profession.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Rise of Digital Media in Architectural Practice
The integration of digital platforms into professional practice has transformed how architects communicate their work. Social media, especially Instagram, now serves as a visual portfolio and marketing tool, replacing or supplementing traditional means of promotion such as printed portfolios, award submissions, and referrals (Piven & Perkins, 2018). The platform's image-centric nature aligns well with architecture's visual appeal, allowing architects to reach wider audiences quickly and cost-effectively. Scholars have identified this shift as part of a broader trend toward "design democratization," where visibility is no longer confined to elite publications or academic institutions (Miller, 2019). This evolution is especially impactful in developing contexts like Nigeria, where many young architects bypass gatekeeping institutions by directly engaging with clients through social media.

2.2 Ethical Standards and Professional Conduct in Architecture

Architectural ethics are built upon principles such as honesty, accountability, competence, and client trust. Professional regulatory bodies like the Architects Registration Council of Nigeria (ARCON) and the Nigerian Institute of Architects (NIA) have clearly defined codes of conduct to guide practitioners (ARCON, 2021). These codes stress the need for truthful representation of one's qualifications, roles in projects, and outcomes. However, these frameworks were primarily designed for traditional practice models, not the fluid, informal nature of digital platforms. Research indicates that the ethical dimensions of online behavior are largely underregulated, creating a grey area where architects may unintentionally or deliberately mislead their audience (Orr, 2020).

2.3 Instagram, Aesthetics, and the Problem of Representation

While Instagram has empowered architects to control their narratives and amplify their work, it has also led to a new kind of performative practice. Orr (2020)

describes this phenomenon as "architectural self-curation," where architects selectively showcase only the most photogenic elements of their work, often edited or rendered to perfection. This practice can result in unrealistic expectations from clients or the public, and even distort the true architectural process. In Nigeria, where regulation enforcement is relatively weak online, such representations can lead to false advertising, undercutting the credibility of both individual architects and the profession as a whole (Okonkwo, 2022). Consequently, there is a growing need to examine how ethical codes can be adapted to address the nuances of digital exposure.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the ethical implications of social media branding among architects, with a focus on Instagram usage in the Nigerian context. A qualitative approach is appropriate due to the exploratory nature of the research, which seeks to understand lived experiences, motivations, and professional perceptions rather than to test hypotheses or quantify variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Data Collection Methods

Two primary methods were employed for data collection:

i. Semi-Structured Interviews:

In-depth interviews were conducted with ten practicing architects in Nigeria who actively use Instagram as part of their professional branding strategy. The selection criteria included a minimum of three years of professional experience and a public Instagram profile with architectural content. Interviews were guided by open-ended questions relating to self-presentation, client interactions, ethical considerations, and awareness of ARCON/NIA regulations.

ii. Content Analysis of Instagram Profiles:

A content analysis was carried out on fifteen Nigerian architectural Instagram accounts, focusing on the type of content shared (e.g., built projects, concept renders, lifestyle imagery),

frequency of posts, engagement metrics (likes, comments), and the presence (or absence) of disclaimers or ethical declarations. The selection aimed to include a range of individual architects, small firms, and large practices.

3.3 Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling method was used to identify architects whose Instagram presence plays a visible role in their professional branding. This non-probability sampling technique ensured the inclusion of participants who are most relevant to the study's objectives (Etikan et al., 2016). Snowball sampling was also employed during interviews, where participants referred colleagues with strong social media engagement for potential inclusion.

3.4 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were thematically analyzed using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. For the Instagram content, a descriptive coding framework was used to categorize visual content and accompanying text, examining recurring ethical patterns or red flags (e.g., lack of credit, exaggerated claims).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed consent before interviews, and anonymity was ensured using pseudonyms. No direct quotes from Instagram profiles were used without permission. The study also adhered to the ethical guidelines of the host university and followed the professional ethics standards set by ARCON and NIA. Since the research touches on professional conduct, care was taken to avoid defamatory or accusatory language in reporting findings.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Overview of Interview Findings

Interviews with ten Nigerian architects revealed that Instagram is widely used as a strategic branding tool, especially among younger professionals. Many participants viewed the platform as a low-cost, high-impact means to showcase their creativity, gain clients, and remain relevant in a competitive industry.

However, while participants recognized the advantages of digital visibility, 80% admitted to selectively curating content, prioritizing aesthetically pleasing visuals over technical information or context. One respondent noted, "If it doesn't look perfect, it doesn't make it to the feed," highlighting the emphasis on presentation over process. Furthermore, only three out of ten architects reported including project disclaimers or attribution when posting concept designs or collaborative works. This suggests a low awareness or intentional disregard for ethical boundaries around crediting work and informing viewers about what is built versus imagined, a concern raised in prior studies (Orr, 2020; Okonkwo, 2022).

4.2 Instagram Content Analysis Findings

The content analysis of fifteen Instagram profiles supported interview results. Approximately 70% of posts analyzed were photorealistic 3D renders, with limited captions explaining project status, authorship, or context. In some cases, users presented concepts with hashtags such as #ProjectCompleted or #NewBuild, though evidence suggested the projects were unbuilt or speculative. This supports existing critiques that Instagram encourages a "hyper-curated reality" that may border on misrepresentation (Miller, 2019). Only 4 out of 15 accounts used any form of disclaimer or ethical statement, and none referenced regulatory standards like ARCON or NIA codes of practice. Interestingly, follower counts appeared to correlate with visual appeal rather than professional transparency, indicating that ethical diligence may not be rewarded on social media platforms. This presents a conflict between professional ethics and digital success.

4.3 Discussion of Emerging Ethical Tensions

The findings reveal a growing disconnection between digital identity and professional accountability. While Instagram is an effective marketing tool, its use raises several ethical red flags — including uncredited work, exaggerated claims, and a lack of clarity about project realities. These findings reflect the "representation crisis" described by Orr (2020), where online personas may mislead clients or peers, thus violating core ethical principles such as honesty and integrity.

In Nigeria's context, where professional regulatory enforcement is limited online, the risks of unethical branding are heightened. ARCON's code of conduct (2021) explicitly warns against misleading advertising, but without digital-specific enforcement, architects operate in a regulatory blind spot. This gap necessitates updated ethical frameworks and training that address online branding in professional practice. Moreover, this situation can have real-world consequences: clients misled by curated content may lose trust in the profession, while young architects may feel pressured to "fake it till they make it" online, undermining authentic growth and mentorship (Okonkwo, 2022).

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The emergence of the "Instagram Architect" reflects a larger shift in architectural practice, where personal branding and visual storytelling are increasingly central to professional identity. While platforms like Instagram offer architects unprecedented access to audiences and potential clients, they also present new ethical challenges. This study found that many Nigerian architects use Instagram to promote their work with minimal attention to transparency, accurate attribution, or project authenticity. The curated nature of Instagram content, coupled with the pressure to appear successful and creative, often leads to the misrepresentation of services, exaggeration of experience, and blurring of personal and professional boundaries.

Despite the existence of professional ethical guidelines from ARCON and NIA, there is a significant gap in regulation and enforcement when it comes to digital spaces. Most architects interviewed in this study were either unaware of these ethical expectations in the context of online self-promotion or knowingly bypassed them for strategic visibility. These findings underscore the urgent need for professional bodies to adapt their codes of conduct to contemporary media practices and address the ethical implications of online branding in a visual-first digital age.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Digital Ethics Guidelines for Architects

ARCON and NIA should develop and publish specific digital media ethics guidelines tailored to social platforms like Instagram. These should define acceptable practices, such as accurate representation, proper attribution, and clear disclaimers for conceptual work.

2. Mandatory Professional Development on Digital Branding

Continuous professional development (CPD) programs should include training on ethical digital marketing and social media use. Architects must be equipped not only to market themselves but to do so with integrity and professionalism.

3. Verification Badges for Registered Architects

A system of digital verification for licensed architects, possibly embedded in their Instagram profiles, could help users distinguish between regulated professionals and non-licensed individuals, enhancing transparency and public trust.

4. Client Education on Digital Portfolios

Awareness campaigns targeted at clients and the public should emphasize the differences between renders and built projects, encouraging critical engagement with online architectural content.

5. Further Research

Future studies could explore this issue across other regions in Africa, compare Instagram practices between licensed and unlicensed practitioners, or assess the legal implications of misleading online content in professional disputes.

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