

Standing out while fitting in
How business students understand and practice personal
branding

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Miina Tikkanen

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Author Miina Tikkanen

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Objective

The aim of the study is to provide understanding on the phenomenon of personal branding in the context of Finnish business students. More specifically, the research looks into how the business students understand the phenomenon on four different aspects: what personal branding is, why it is practiced, where it is practiced and how it is practiced. The latter is still divided into two sub-topics: how business students practice personal branding, and how they think it should be practiced in order to help being hired. In addition, the research looks at the greater, underlying reasons behind the development of the phenomenon.

Methodology

The study is qualitative and interpretative in nature. Twelve single semi-structured interviews were conducted with final year business students at Aalto University. The interviewees represent two distinct majors: marketing and economics. Six students of both groups were interviewed. The transcribed interviews were then analyzed using the thematic data analysis method.

Key findings

The key findings of the study include identifying strategies and methods that business students use for branding themselves. The analysis shows that personal branding is about constantly finding the right balance between goals, audiences and communication, and the phenomenon is perceived as highly audience- and context-specific. Individuals increase cultural and social capital to acquire field-specific knowledge and networks, which can then help the individuals in standing out while fitting in. However, as personal branding is first and foremost personal, there is no one-size-fits-all strategy, but individuals need to find their own, best way to practice branding.

The findings also show that while being such an individualistic approach, the understanding of the phenomenon varies greatly between the students. Interestingly, no perceivable differences were found between the two major groups. Despite social media being widely present in personal branding, the students still prefer the traditional offline world for branding themselves.

Keywords brand, personal brand, personal branding, recruiting, standing out, fitting in

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1 INTRODUCTION

“But nothing is valuable if it doesn’t stand out” (interviewee)

1.1 Background

Today’s job market is highly competitive. Technological development, increased global competition and the recent the economic downturn have resulted in less open positions being available. Should an open position occur, many of those are filled based on existing networks, both to reduce the amount of work for recruiters as well as to better ensure the applicant’s fit and capabilities. While the world of employment is becoming ever more competitive for the job seekers, it is that also for the companies. With technology replacing traditional tasks, the work performed by the people has become more knowledge-intensive, requiring more sophisticated skills than in the past (Smith & Rupp, 2004). Hence, organizations need to find the right fit – and not only an employee (O’Leary, et al., 2002). Therefore, being hired requires standing out from the crowd – and more than ever before. It is important to show the world why one should be hired, and what are the individual strengths and skills that make one unique. It is about personal branding.

Standing out in job search is an especially timely issue for students who are looking for their first job after graduation. Having excellent grades, being active in the student union and possessing a great CV is nowadays rather a norm than an exception among ambitious business students. How can one stand out if everyone looks the same? With successful personal branding, one can have higher chances in landing the desired job, as well as better possibilities for career advancement, reaching a higher salary level and other professional advantages that may follow. Personal branding advocates and academicians declare that anyone can have a brand (Labrecque, et al., 2011), and by developing it successfully one can position oneself in the highly competitive job market to stand out from the crowd in a valuable way (Parmentier, et al., 2013).

The phenomenon of personal branding may have existed for longer, but the actual term was popularized in the end-1990s by the management guru Tom Peters with his famous article “The Brand Called You” (Peters, 1997). In the 2000s the popularity of the phenomenon grew rapidly, and a whole new management and employment consultation business evolved around personal branding. Today, a simple Google search provides a large list of websites, training programs, coaches, as well as books

and magazines devoted for the topic (Lair, et al., 2005), and even companies like PwC (Pwc, n.d.) publicly give “personal branding advice” for potential employee candidates.

The rise of social media has been a large influencer on the increased importance and popularity of personal branding. Social media offer important platforms for branding, and with the low technological barriers of entry it is easy for individuals to affect their public image. (Labrecque, et al., 2011) On the other hand, also employers have entered the social media in the last few years, and hence recruiters nowadays very often look for additional information about the candidates on web 2.0. Combined with the other changes in the world of recruitment – such as the increased usage of various candidate testing methods, increased use of temporary staff members as well as even advertising vacancies only in the social media sphere – further increase the need for individuals to present themselves in a positive light and to stand out.

However, the topic itself is still little researched in the academia, especially in conjunction with research on recruiting (Parmentier, et al., 2013). The most important marketing and management journals, such as *Journal of Marketing*, have this far almost ignored the phenomenon, and most existing research can only be found on less distinguished journals. Also, no research seems to yet exist in the Finnish context. Close, et al. (2011) have produced one of the few empirical academic researches about personal branding in a setting where the critical audience – university staff of marketing department as employers – is well familiar with the phenomenon. Parmentier, et al. (2013) research how people effectively build brands when competing for work in an established organizational field and how the jobseekers try to manage their brands in order to increase their opportunities. The newly published research by Holmberg & Strannegård (2015) provides the most comparable empirical research to mine, as they study how Swedish business school students utilize their school’s name in building personal brands.

Previous research has pointed out that every single person has a brand, without wanting or not (Hearn, 2008). In addition, if a person does nothing to manage one’s brand, someone else may do that instead. Therefore, knowing how to manage one’s brand is crucial. (Shepherd, 2005) Thus, despite the importance of personal branding in being hired, and especially for those who are only trying to establish their professional presence, there is a clear research gap on how business students perceive the phenomenon. My research aims at providing a deeper look into how students understand personal branding, and how they are practicing it themselves.

Thus, in this research I will be handling the importance of standing out especially for professional purposes, and how young business students could increase their chances of being hired by practicing personal branding.

1.2 Research aim and question

Many self-help books on personal branding, such as Kaputa's (2005) "*U R a Brand*", offer detailed and concrete advice on how to build a powerful brand, but such books are often criticized for simply stating the obvious or either going too far with their "must-do's" for individuals to be willing to follow. Such self-help books often seem to be directed for those aiming at top manager positions, even though personal branding could be beneficial for everyone looking for a job. Hence, I find it important to examine what "ordinary" individuals, soon-to-be graduates (MSc) perceive the phenomenon and how they see they could the benefits of practicing personal branding for themselves, at their stage of life and career.

The aim of the study is to provide a deeper understanding of personal branding: how Finnish business students understand the phenomenon, how they are practicing it, and how they see personal branding could help in being hired. The research is qualitative and interpretative by nature, since it is seen as the most suitable method for producing new information on a matter that is little researched in the academia. I research the topic from the perspective of business students who are graduating within one year, as the topic of finding a job is especially current for them.

Thus, my research question is as follows:

How do final year business students understand and practice personal branding?

In order to respond to this, I divide the problem into the following sub-questions:

- 1) How do final year business students understand personal branding as a phenomenon?
- 2) How do business students practice personal branding themselves?
- 3) How should personal branding be practiced in order for it to help in being hired?

Since there already are plenty of guidebooks for how to do personal branding, I do not wish to produce yet another one. Instead, I am concentrating on how the students perceive the phenomenon and how that is visible in their lives. I study the interviewees' perceptions, and based on those I aim to form a

general idea of how the phenomenon is understood by students at the verge of entering the professional life. More specifically, I am concentrating on Finnish business students who study at Aalto University School of Business.

1.3 Research method

I carry out this research following the qualitative and interpretative research approach. This approach was chosen, as the topic is very little discussed in the academia, and qualitative research is usually seen as the best method for providing novel understanding on a relatively new phenomenon (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). I am interested in finding out what kinds of meanings young business students give for the phenomenon of personal branding, and how the topic is present in their lives. In addition, I want to find out how the students perceive the importance of the phenomenon for recruiting.

The research data is produced by twelve in-depth single semi-structured interviews, which are then analyzed using the thematic data analysis. I chose this method, as I wanted to give freedom for the interviewees to talk more freely than following a strictly defined question poll, but as the phenomenon is novel and likely less known for the interviewees, I also wanted to rely on a pre-set outline to ensure all important topics are covered. The interviewees are soon-to-graduate final year business students, and they represent two different majors: marketing and economics. The two major groups were chosen, as I find it interesting to see whether field-related differences can be perceived in the understanding and practicing of personal branding.

The students' understanding, opinions and personal relation to the phenomenon of personal branding are discussed during the interviews. The data is then interpreted by using the classical thematic data analysis. The analysis is guided by the thematic framework formed based on the existing literature, but the interpretations also simultaneously guide and shape the literature analysis. Moreover, it should be noted that the interpretation of data is based on my pre-assumptions and interests, as well as on the choices that I as the research have made throughout the process.

1.4 Important definitions

In this research, the following terms are widely present: brand, person brand, and personal branding.

Brand: The term “brand” or “branding” is traditionally associated only to consumer products as a communication strategy. Due to the grown importance to stand out, branding no longer limits only to consumer product brands. (Lair, et al., 2005) In this research, I use the following definition for brands: *“Brands can be viewed and analyzed as cultural artefacts, as resources and carriers of meanings, produced and consumed in and through processes and practices of representation.* (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p. 10),

Person brand: Person brands, personal brands, or human brands, offer an extension for the traditional understanding of brands. Parmentier, et al. (2013, p. 374) provide a rather simple definition for a person brand: *“A person brand can be considered the set of associations that a group of people identify with a particular person”.*

Personal branding: With its complex nature, producing one single definition of personal branding is difficult. Lair, et al. (2005, p. 309) describe personal branding from the job search perspective: *“The concepts of product development and promotion are used in personal branding to market individuals for entry or transition within the labor market”.* Other academicians concentrate on the process aspect of capturing uniqueness; Shepherd (2005, p. 602) defines personal branding as an *“inside-out process that serves to encapsulate the current strengths and uniqueness of the individual in relation to a targeted market”.* Hearn (2008, p. 198) similarly emphasizes consciousness but also includes storytelling: *“Self-branding involves the self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries”.* This definition is, however, quite difficult for the reader to grasp. Therefore, in this research I use the definition by Montoya, (2002, p. 7, cited in Hearn, 2008, p. 206):

“Personal branding is about taking control of the processes that affect how others perceive you, managing those processes strategically to help you achieve your goals”.

This definition is simple for the reader as well as comprehensive enough, including the possibility for also other than career-related goals, and emphasizing that personal branding is practiced by the person self.

1.5 Structure of the research report

To approach the research question, my report consists of theoretical and empirical parts. In the theoretical part, I will first shed light on the background of personal branding and why it has evolved. Then, I will analyze the previous research on the phenomenon of personal branding and form a theoretical framework to contrast with the empirical research. In the second part of the research, I will first present my empirical methodology in chapter three, and then present the empirical findings in chapter four. Lastly, I will present the most important empirical findings contrasted with theory in the Conclusion chapter.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review consists of three parts. In the first part I attempt to shed some light on the background of personal branding phenomenon: why standing out and eventually personal branding has become such an important matter for individuals looking for jobs, and how personal branding has gradually evolved. In the second part I will aim at giving a general look on the literature about personal branding. I am not providing detailed instructions for personal branding according to the literature, but rather taking a broader perspective on what personal branding is, why it is done, where it takes place, and how it should be carried out. Finally, I will summarize the chapter and present how this theory will be used in approaching the empirical part of the study.

The literature review is based on several academic articles, as well as a few books and the periodical article by Peters (1997) who introduced the term *personal branding* to the greater public. Eight articles stand out as the most important for this research: Lair, et al. (2005) mainly describe the birth of personal branding and why it has evolved. Shepherd (2005) continues on the same path but also handles self-marketing as well as the challenges and problems involved in both. Also Hearn (2008) describes the evolution of the phenomenon, in addition to illustrating how the branded self is a *commodity* that is offered for sale and how personal branding is present everywhere. Parmentier, et al. (2013) take on the question posed by Kotler and Levy (1969) and Shepherd (2005) to examine whether the traditional product branding techniques can be applied to person brands as well, whereas Close, et al. (2011) carry out an empirical research on the relation of personal branding and gaining desired employment. Dutta (2010), Marwick and Boyd (2011), and Labrecque, et al. (2011) approach the topic from the digital point of view.

2.1 Competitive world and the increased need to stand out

In this section, I will first look at the trends and possible factors behind the increased need for job seekers to stand out – these are the major trends caused by technical development, and the changing recruitment practices. Then, I will describe the development of *people* brands in general, after which I will clarify the difference between self-marketing and personal branding. Finally, I will describe how the concept of personal branding gradually evolved and rose to the knowledge of the wider audience.

2.1.1 Major trends of change

The need for individuals to stand out in the job market has increased especially in the post-Fordist era of late 20th century, as predominant changes have been noticeable in two major areas: firstly, in the world of communication, and secondly, in the employment market (Hearn, 2008; Lair, et al., 2005).

The way of communication has changed predominantly due to the advancements in information technologies (Lair, et al., 2005; Aral, et al., 2013). The internet, e-mail, social media, online networks and discussion groups provide alternative ways of communication for the individuals in addition to the traditional methods. Hence, individuals are much more connected to each other than before (Aral, et al., 2013), especially through social media (Ollier-Malaterre, et al., 2013). According to Rampersad (2009), this has led to the trend that the feeling of familiarity is becoming more important as individuals rather work with someone they trust and feel connected to; the importance of networks has increased. In addition, Hearn (2008) and Lair, et al. (2005) emphasize the effect on corporate communication in relation to the changing world of communication. The technological advancement together with economic globalization and the emerging new arenas of competition cause turbulence for corporate communication, and the ever-increasing amount of messages via multiple channels requires innovative ways of communication for the organizations to stand out (Lair, et al., 2005). In other words, the world economies are becoming increasingly integrated and interdependent (Lair, et al., 2005), and the global competition more intense (O'Leary, et al., 2002).

The increasingly complex nature of the corporate communication (Lair, et al., 2005), the so-called networked organization (Hearn, 2008), has been simultaneously accompanied by the **growing instability in the employment market**. Privatization of public services, technological replacement of jobs, restructuring, outsourcing of non-core functions, and industrial relocation among others are partly to blame for the diminishing number of jobs in the Western world (Lair, et al., 2005). In addition, the technological revolution is changing the structure of careers in general, as individuals are likely to work for multiple organizations during their career, and thus need to apply for jobs more often (Rampersad, 2009; Smith and Rupp, 2004). The information economy has thus proved a lot less certain for the individual employees than the former era of industrial economy (Lair, et al., 2005). Work being more knowledge-intensive, more specialized skills and competences are needed from the employees; simply being smart is not enough, but one has to be able to learn, adapt and easily work in social settings (O'Leary, et al., 2002). Individuals need to show more “entrepreneurial mind-set”

at workplace, implying greater willingness to take risks and showing personal responsibility, self-reliance and boldness in all their actions (Hearn, 2008).

The rise of the networked organization and the “entrepreneurial” workplace, combined with the mediatization of the world in general have thus caused that it is more important than ever for individuals to stand out (Hearn, 2008). Individuals need to be able to communicate and formulate who they are, what they stand for and what makes them special (Rampersad, 2009). Additionally, this standing out and communicating one’s suitability to a position is at its greatest especially in the beginning of one’s career, as one has to convince possible employers or customers of the hiring decision. The need for standing out is also greater than normally when wanting to switch job for a reason or another. (Twedt, 1964)

Next I will analyze the possible relevance of recruitment practices to the increasing need for personal branding.

2.1.2 Changing recruitment practices

As the need for personal branding is strongly linked to job search, it is important to look at possible changes in the world of recruiting as well. Technical advancements and more intense global competition have also shaped organizations’ recruitment practices. As companies nowadays have access to almost the same technologies, people working with those technologies make the difference (Smith & Rupp, 2004). Hence, individuals looking for jobs need to be able to demonstrate more sophisticated skills (see 2.1.1), but also employers need to be better able to assess the candidates’ potential. Also, as employees of today tend to stay with the same employer only for a few years, recruiting has become a more frequent task. It is more important than ever for companies to find the right fit instead of only an employee. (O’Leary, et al., 2002) Therefore, it is only natural that recruiting practices are changing and thus increasing the need for individuals to stand out. The first two changes are especially linked to digitalization, whereas the latter two merely to the increased global competition.

Firstly, digitalization and especially the rise of social media have established new channels for recruiters to look for information on the applicants (e.g. Aral, et al., 2013; Harris and Rae, 2011). Berkelaar and Buzzanell (2015) argue that most employers nowadays practice *cybervetting* – using the Internet to gain informal information about the applicants and thus to supplement the formal information provided by the applicant directly. This includes looking for the applicants on social

media platforms, as well as checking the search engine results on any information about the applicant on the Internet (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015).

The reason for practicing cybervetting is, besides it being generally possible, that employers have become more skeptical about the information provided by a traditional job application (Weiss & Feldman, 2006). When looking for new employees, recruiters face uncertainty in terms of the candidates' skills and fitting to the organization, especially if the person is at the starting point of one's career or not known by the recruiters. Hence, recruiters look for intrinsic and extrinsic brand cues about the person, in the lack of better information of the "quality" as an employee. Intrinsic cues are attributes of the person, such as previous experience or personal characteristics, while extrinsic cues refer to features that are externally linked to the person, such as brand associations provided by other people or the previous employer/institutions. (Close, et al., 2011) Trustworthy and sufficient information is crucial for effective personal selection and in order to find the person that actually meets the organizational needs now and in the future (Dipboye, 2014), especially when the less important tasks are more often automated or outsourced (Lair, et al., 2005). Now the online world offers more tools to examine these cues.

However, there is a vicious cycle in employers looking for applicant information online: The primary reason may have been to acquire more honest information, but as the job seekers are aware of this, they also put effort in giving a preferable image online. Hence, both parties' actions affect one another, and it is questionable whether the information employers find online is more trustworthy than that on the application. Nevertheless, online search provides additional information for the recruiters – while giving the job seekers a channel to present themselves. Berkelaar and Buzzanell (2015) also note that recruiters utilize cybervetting, since candidates are *less likely* to practice *extreme* impression management, unlike in a job interview situation, for example. As a consequence, the importance of non-work-related information, such as interests, hobbies and interpersonal interactions, may have increased in personnel selection in general (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015).

Secondly, the rise of online channels has also caused that jobs are nowadays advertised online (Smith & Rupp, 2004). In the last few years ads have shifted to social media, it offering an efficient and cost-effective way to recruit new employees. Hence, the time and money spent on social media recruiting is rising and the equivalent on traditional recruiting decreasing. (Welsch, 2012). As a consequence of employers moving online, job seekers need to better take care of their social media presentations.

Thirdly, there is a general trend of moving towards greater use of contingent staff members to manage in the more intense global competition. Temporary positions allow better allocation of resources for the companies, but cause trouble for individuals needing to apply for jobs more often or competing for fewer permanent positions. Fourthly, more testing and evaluation systems are used to assess candidates to ensure the best candidate fit. These technology- or internet-based tests aim at assessing both work-related competencies as well as personality features such as interpersonal and social competencies. (O'Leary, et al., 2002) Thus, individuals need to be able to give a superior image compared to other applicants in order to be hired.

All in all, the changing recruitment practices caused by technical development have increased the need for individuals to stand out and express their personality and skills in job search. Figure 1 summarizes the cause and effect relation of the global developments and trends affecting personal branding: technical development and the economic globalization have caused increasing complexity in the world of communication as well as growing instability in the employment market. Together these major trends have shaped the recruitment practices to better meet the needs of the employers in finding the most suitable employees. All in all, these changes have affected that it is ever more important for individuals to stand out in the employment market.

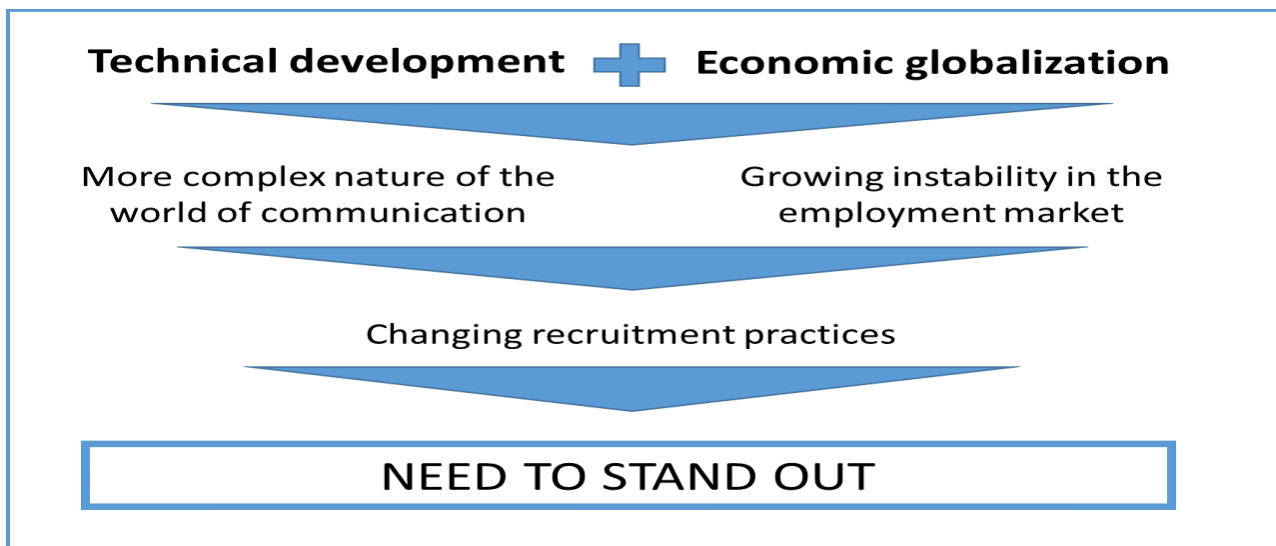


Figure 1: Trends affecting the increased need to stand out

2.1.3 Evolution of people brands

Personal branding to its current extent may be a rather recent phenomenon, but actors, musicians, athletes and other celebrities have been practicing branding and self-marketing for decades (Parmentier, et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2005). Branding of people has similar targets to product branding: making the person to stand out from the crowd in order to reach profits, which are usually financial. Celebrities like Madonna and Oprah Winfrey make great business with only their names, as both carry strong people brands, a “product” for sale, for whom others are willing to pay (Lair, et al., 2005). Similarly, CEOs of large corporations as well as leaders in politics are often regarded as branded persona (Khedler, 2014). For them, profits may be monetary but also aim at simply greater brand recognition for gaining wider support at political elections, for example.

Apart from traditional celebrity, politician and business leader brands, standing out from the crowd and the presentation of oneself has been largely visible in the media business in the past decades. Actually, there is a whole sector in the entertainment business that has evolved around the idea of self-branding: the reality TV, for which self-branding serves as a central theme (Hearn, 2008). Many of the individuals who have developed person brands via reality TV may have then later become celebrities. Naturally, a person brand does not need to become famous, but branding being so strongly present in the entertainment business mainly demonstrates the importance of people branding and the presentation of self in order to succeed. The rise of the social media, constantly reachable broadcast media and the web in general has caused that more and more often we construct reality through media; for example, there are websites that hire professional photographers to post pictures of parties at night clubs around the world, and anyone browsing on the web can then see these pictures of people (Hearn, 2008). Such pictures may affect the perceived image that the viewers get of the people on the pictures – which thus affects the brand of the individuals photographed (Hearn, 2008).

This branding of self has stretched its importance out of the celebrities and entertainment business as well – namely towards normal individuals looking for jobs. This development is natural, as the problem of standing out in job search has been known for decades. Already Twedt (1964, p. 73) raises up the topic by writing about marketing professionals who *“when challenged with selling the most important product in the world – themselves – forget everything they now”*.

2.1.4 Difference between self-marketing and personal branding

The developments described this far have caused a greater need for individuals to stand out in job search. Therefore, one could easily be content with the act of marketing oneself and one's skills. Personal branding is indeed often mixed with self-marketing, although there is a fine difference between the two; personal branding is a lot more comprehensive way of standing out than that of only marketing oneself.

Promoting of oneself is nothing new (Lair, et al., 2005), while personal branding is a more recent phenomenon (Hearn, 2008). Parmentier, et al. (2013) point out how already Kotler and Levy (1969, p. 12) talked about personal marketing as a typical "*human activity from the employee trying to impress his boss to the statesman trying to win the support of the public*". Twedt (1964) does not use any particular term, but points out how promotional techniques of products can be used in marketing of individuals as well. More often this phenomenon is perhaps referred to as *self-marketing*, but there is lack of consistent terminology. Shepherd (2005) defines *self-marketing* to consist of marketing activities that individuals take to make themselves known in the marketplace, such as to gain beneficial employment. According to him, many self-help gurus argue that self-marketing is actually a must-do-activity for everyone looking for employment, such as for new university graduates searching for a job. However, Kotler and Armstrong (2008, p. 201), use the term self-marketing with a completely different purpose, that is to refer to the trend in which consumers take more responsibility in determining the brands and products they buy, and use "*person marketing*" as consisting of actions to create, maintain and change attitudes or behaviors towards people in order to build reputations (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008, p. 222). However, person marketing can have some connotations to personal selling or specifically to celebrity marketing (Shepherd, 2005). Hence, I opt to use the term "self-marketing" here.

Parmentier, et al. (2013) parallels the term *self-marketing* with personal branding. However, I would keep these two terms separate as Shepherd (2005) specifically writes about them both. According to him, there is a clear difference; in self-marketing, career advisers often encourage individuals to improve their skills in order to become more attractive in the job market, whereas personal branding advocates emphasize working with what one has and to make that sound unique and special, instead of suggesting a complete make-over to respond to the market needs. In this sense, self-marketing is more linked to traditional marketing as it aims to reply to consumer requirements – such as products are shaped. (Shepherd, 2005) Also other sources, such as Llopis (2013), state that personal branding

is more than self-marketing: a brand should represent the value that one is able to consistently deliver to others or those one should serve.

Rampersad (2009) reminds that buying decisions are mostly based on trust and emotional connection: people buy the products or services they feel related to and which they are confident about. According to him, this is what branding is about: the expectations, image and perceptions by others. Thus, branding is a more powerful, effective and sustainable way to beat competitors than pure sales and marketing, and this can be applied to people as well (Rampersad, 2009). Thus, I would claim the key difference between personal branding and self-marketing is that the first is the combination of what one is and wants to represent to others and the identity a person has, while the latter is the promotion of that brand. All in all, the terms are vague and intertwined. For the purpose of this study, I will keep the difference as explained above.

Therefore, it makes sense that self-marketing should be extended to the whole package – branding of individuals, and then carrying out marketing actions to promote that brand. This includes the actions of marketing, but also goal setting, building of the brand and maintaining of it by several actions that are not necessarily considered as marketing. Personal branding is more than just marketing oneself. From this on, I will solely talk about personal branding, though the phenomenon naturally includes some aspects of self-marketing as well. Next, I will thus present how the concept of personal branding has evolved.

2.1.5 Evolution of the concept personal branding

“It's time for me — and you — to take a lesson from the big brands, a lesson that's true for anyone who's interested in what it takes to stand out and prosper in the new world of work.” (Peters, 1997, para. 3)

Personal branding has slowly developed as a response to the changed corporate and working environment as a way for individuals to stand out (Hearn, 2008). In the 1980s a new genre, the self-help industry of management communication, began to develop in the USA. The movement bases on the idea that individuals can better succeed in the business world by engaging in a process of managing their own self-improvement. (Lair, et al., 2005). The roots are seen to trace back to the famous *“How to Win Friends and Influence People”* by Dale Carnegie (1981); after the 1981 revised version numerous authors have followed the lead, such as Covey with his book *Seven Habits for Highly Effective People* (1989, cited in Lair, et al., 2005, p. 308).

The personal branding phenomenon evolved as a next step to the self-help industry (Lair, et al., 2005), and since the 1990s experts and practitioners (e.g. McNally and Speak, 2002; Roffer, 2002) have talked about person brands as people positioning themselves when entering the job market or looking for advancement (Parmentier, et al., 2013). In general, branding of people is not new; in some way, the phenomenon has existed even since the 1800s as the personal adverts (for e.g. mail-order brides) appeared in the newspapers (Hearn, 2008). Some also argue that personal branding was indirectly handled already in 1959 by Erving Goffman in his book *“The presentation of self in everyday life”*. It is also argued that Ries and Trout (1981, cited in Khedler, 2014, p.31) introduced “individual branding” in their book *“Positioning: The Battle for your Mind”*, in which the authors emphasize how an individual can benefit one’s career by using a certain positioning strategy.

Personal branding was finally popularized in the late 1990s as influential management gurus, such as Tom Peters and Peter Montoya, presented the concept as a way to compete and gain power in the world of unstable job markets (Hearn, 2008). The term *“personal branding”* was originally introduced by Peters (1997) in his article *“The Brand Called You”* on a trendy management magazine FastCompany. Some controversy lies on this, however, as also Montoya claims to have pioneered the concept (Lair, et al., 2005). Nevertheless, *“The Brand Called You”* is since then referred to by all academicians on their work on the topic (e.g. Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005; Parmentier, et al., 2012).

Thus, personal branding emerged as a response to the changing environment, connecting the developments of the increasing complexity and chaotic nature of the employment world and world of communication (Lair, et al., 2005). Personal branding is a way to compete and gain power in the unstable work-world of flexible capital (Hearn, 2008), as it offers strategies for its practitioners to stand out, be it for corporate communications or potential employment (Lair, et al., 2005). Therefore, personal branding is important also for the companies promoting their actions; it is individuals who sell or buy the product or service of a company (Smith & Rupp, 2004). However, in this research I concentrate on personal branding practiced by individuals for the purposes of their own.

The phenomenon of personal branding shares many basic principles with the self-help movement in general, as individuals are offered a set of strategies to improve themselves to succeed in the business life. However, personal branding takes a step forward from the traditional self-help management movement, as instead of focusing solely on *self-improvement* to achieve certain goals, or on *self-marketing* to promote oneself, personal branding underlines explicit *self-packaging* – branding – as the road to success. (Lair, et al., 2005)

“We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You” (Peters, 1997, para. 4)

Peters’ famous quote summarizes his core message of the article: as we live in the era of the individual, it’s extremely important to take care of one’s own brand – the same way as companies understand the importance of a product brand. Indeed, during the end-1990s and 2000s the article has been followed by a steady flow of self-improvement books by multiple authors, web sites, and even self-help courses and consultancies that encourage individuals to market themselves and their brands (Lair, et. al, 2005; Shepherd, 2005). According to Lair, et al. (2005), at least 15 largely popular self-help books on personal branding were published between 1997 and 2004 (e.g. Peters, 1999; Montoya and Vandehey, 2003). Montoya is also said to have issued a quarterly magazine on Personal Branding (Lair, et al., 2005), which is, however, today not to be found on Google search.

It is no surprise that the personal branding movement found its beginning in the USA, where the “professional packaging movement” has a long history. The development of consumer branding to company branding and eventually to personal branding represents the linking of marketing culture with the “mythos” of the American individual; *“In a world of change and opportunity, you can create and recreate yourself so as to be the master of your own destiny”* (Lair, et al., 2005, p. 313). Like the American mythos of individual enterprise, personal branding is a highly individualistic approach as it claims one can take control of one’s own destiny by recreating and branding oneself (Lair, et al., 2005). In a way, I would thus claim that personal branding actually represents the famous American dream, according to which anyone can succeed and attain wealth by their own actions – and thus be “masters of their own destiny”.

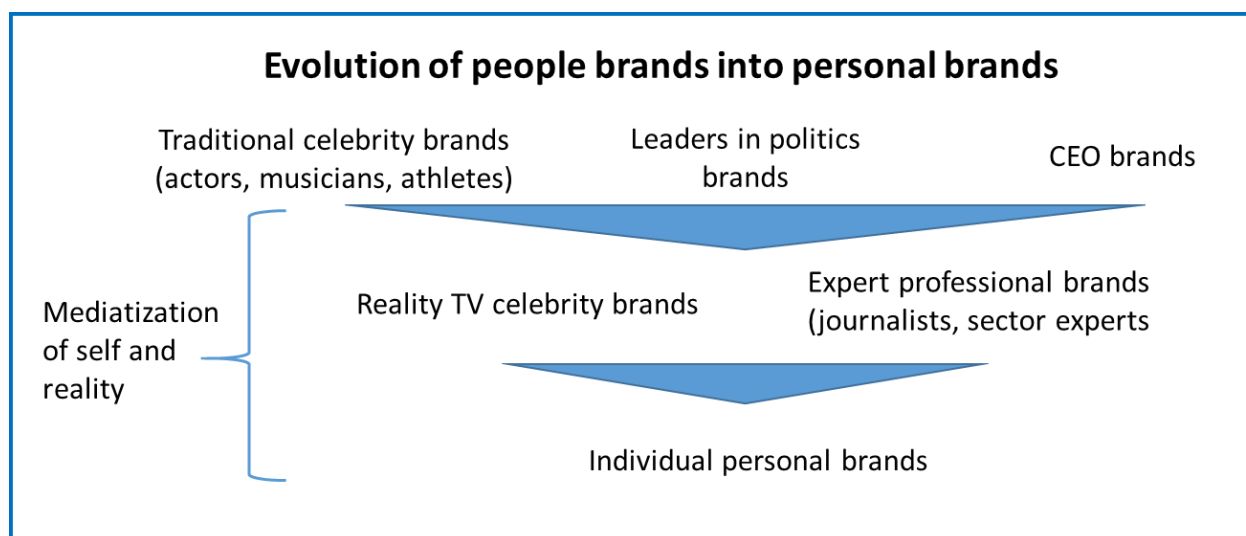


Figure 2: Mediatization of self and reality, and the development of people brands into individual personal brands

Figure 2 illustrates the evolution of people brands: traditional celebrity, politician and business leader brands have been followed by reality TV and expert professional brands along with the mediatization of self. Gradually, this mediatization of reality has reached all of us. In this era of “flexible accumulation”, investing in image building plays an important role: one has to be visible, and therefore branding has become the core activity of capitalism (Hearn, 2008). Personal branding by “normal” individuals is thus a logical extension to the previous forms of people branding, and responds well to the increased need to stand out (Lair, et al., 2005).

2.2 The personal branding phenomenon

In this section I will analyze how the existing literature presents the personal branding phenomenon. I will approach the matter from four different angles: what it is, where it happens, why it is done, and how it is and should be done.

2.2.1 What is personal branding

“Big companies understand the importance of brands. Today, in the age of the individual, you have to be your own brand. Here’s what it takes to be the CEO of Me Inc.” (Peters, 1997, para. 1)

Despite that personal branding is based on the pillars of product branding and marketing, there is very little academic literature on *personal branding* (Shepherd, 2005). Hence, no consistent terminology exists for personal branding either, and the differences and terms are vague. Some academicians and experts talk about *“personal branding”* (e.g. Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Parmentier, et al., 2013), and respectively some about *“human branding”* (e.g. Close, et al., 2011), while others about *“personal branding”* and *“self-branding”* in parallel (e.g. Hearn, 2008). However, all these terms imply the same - that product branding can be applied to branding humans to help them succeed in their career and other aspects of life (Parmentier, et al., 2013).

2.2.1.1 Defining personal branding

Personal branding as a phenomenon is a complex and difficult term to describe. In general, personal branding aims at *“capturing and promoting an individual’s strengths and uniqueness”* for those audiences targeted (Labrecque, et al., 2011, p. 39), and thus adds value to who one is, for both the individual and stakeholders (Montoya, 2005, cited in Shepherd, 2005, p. 599).

Personal branding can be seen as a *way to improve oneself* and serve others, as described by many personal branding experts (Graham, 2001, cited in Hearn, 2008, p. 206). Advocates like Arruda and Peters describe personal branding as needing to recognize and develop one’s unique qualities and what makes one different, similarly like a product, and to use these qualities as selling points (Lair, et al., 2005, p. 320). Therefore, personal branding theories are sometimes linked to the theories and models of *personal development*. However, Shepherd (2005) argues there is a slight difference between personal branding and personal development: the former aims at *capturing* the strengths and

unique aspects of an individual in relation to others, as stated above, and thus not necessarily require improving one's skills. Therefore, the process follows an inside-out pattern; an individual *can* aim at improving one's skills if wishes so, but does not have to develop certain skills in order to brand oneself. (Shepherd, 2005) Nevertheless, these views do not need to be controversial but rather complementary.

Most academicians emphasize that instead of self-improvement, the key action in personal branding is *explicit self-packaging*: the internal sets of skills, motivations and interests of an individual do not lead to success as such, but what matters is how one organizes, clarifies and labels those sets (Lair, et al., 2005). Personal branding is about *presenting oneself* to others (Vallas & Cummins, 2015), *according to the situation* (Schau & Gilly, 2003). This is similar to product branding: no product or service sells only due to its features, but those features need to be *communicated* in an attractive and clear way. In other words, great personal branding requires great communication in the relevant channels. This is due to branding being *persuasive* by nature: traditional branding aims at persuading customers to buy the product or service and to believe in the brand. Personal branding, similarly, aims at persuading other people to "buy" your brand – for example as an employee. (Hearn, 2008)

In such self-presentation, an individual projects the perceived *self-image* to the outside world by different means (Hearn, 2008). Perceived self-image, or self-concept as Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) call it, is the perception an individual has of self, consisting of multiple aspects and dimensions. According to Sirgy (1982), self-concept can also involve dimensions of an "ideal self", referring to how a person would like to be; as Holmberg and Strannegård (2015) state, personal branding aims at producing an *attractive* and consistent self-image. As self-concept is closely linked to *identity*, Shepherd (2005) argues for the relevance of identity theory as part of a theoretical framework of personal branding. Lair, et al. (2005, p. 312) agree, as "*branding is so well suited to present images as identity*". Identity can be described as how one defines oneself as a person, and how one connects to other people and social groups. Signs and symbols are then used to express one's identity or multiple identities, such as personal and professional identities. (Schau & Gilly, 2003) Such actions then transfer the identities into a brand in the eyes of others (Lair, et al., 2005; Labrecque, et al., 2011). It can thus be concluded that identity and self-image are central aspects of personal branding.

Thus, a personal brand is not who one is but the *public projection of one* – the image, personality and abilities, such as in the case of product brands, as argued by many personal branding experts (e.g. Montoya, n.d., cited in Lair, et al. 2005, p.324). The academicians agree on the idea. Hearn (2008)

emphasizes that a personal brand is foremost an *image*, as personal branding is about *creating a saleable image or narrative* by using cultural meanings and images. This can be contrasted to the cultural industry: reality TV shows as well as those in charge of celebrity branding invent narratives about the people and thus produce branded personas (Hearn, 2008). Thus, personal branding is the *commodification* of oneself, as individuals create a commodity of themselves for strategic purposes (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). For example, job seekers position themselves as commodities offered for sale in the employment market (Hearn, 2008). Also Rampersad (2009) writes that branding, personal and product alike, is about creating a brand identity which is associated to certain perceptions and images, and that way influencing others. Branding being a heavily narrated process, the role of communication is again emphasized (Hearn, 2008).

If a personal brand is “an image” or “the public projection of one”, then personal branding also has a *social* aspect, as identity and self are constituted through interaction with others (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Holmberg and Strannegård, 2015). Also, the brand or the image of a person is formed in the eyes of others (Hearn, 2008). Therefore, personal brands crucially need other people to be formed. In addition, Hearn (2008) argues that personal branding is *constant* as it happens wherever one is present. According to that definition, we are branding ourselves at *every moment* when any kind of social contact takes place for others to perceive and analyze our actions.

Hearn (2008) argues that personal branding is a highly *conscious* process aiming at self-presentation for preferential gains. However, the author also notes this is not always the case, as everything we do affect our personal brands. Personal brands are positioned and affected either consciously (by explicit information expression) or by the context and usage (by implicit information expression) (Hearn, 2008; Labrecque, et al., 2011). Personal branding may thus be *unconscious* when individuals do not control the distribution of information, such as when someone else shares information of a person online, or when the person acts “along the feeling” – that is not consciously thinking of the consequences of every single action (Hearn, 2008). Even posting a photo on Facebook, buying food from a supermarket or carrying a store-branded plastic bag communicates something about an individual.

Therefore, as personal branding is constant and even unconscious, our personal brands are actually formed by everything we do: the fundamental principle of personal branding is thus that *everything and everyone can be branded* (Peters, 1997). Every single person has some kind of a brand, no matter how “ordinary” or old we are, and what is our position or field of business (Hearn, 2008). Everyone has a chance to stand out, learn, improve and build up their skills, and thus brand themselves (Peters,

1997). However, this fundamental principle also involves a flipside: while everyone can be branded, everyone also has a brand, without wanting it or not. Therefore, it is recommendable to manage one's own brand; if one does not, others have the power to create and modify the brand of a person (Khedler, 2014).

Often personal branding is linked to financial gains and professional success, as will be handled later on. However, I would claim such a claim is a rather constricted view on personal branding, as the professional and financial success are always subjective, depending on an individual's hopes and values. Rather, external symbols of success, such as status and wealth, are rather a possible path to the more important aspects of success. Therefore, personal branding, when done consciously, is about *taking control of how others perceive you* and strategically managing those processes that affect the brand, in order to *achieve goals* (Montoya, 2002, cited in Hearn, 2008, p. 206). According to Graham (2011, cited in Hearn, 2008, p. 206), building a personal brand is about *taking responsibility for one's own happiness* by putting one's gifts to their best use and thus creating a life of great value. Lair, et. al (2005) also refer to personal branding as a method of taking lead of one's own economy and success, instead of only taking what's given; hence, personal branding is seen as a proactive method for success. In addition, personal branding could be thought of as *reputation management*; Harris and Rae (2011) argue that in the world of today, success in the job market requires understanding of networks and how to deploy those effectively online and offline. Thus, it could be said that personal branding is about *taking control of one's life*.

Based on the literature the following summary of personal branding can be comprised:

Personal branding adds value for the person through explicit self-packaging, is the public projection of one, happens constantly and sometimes unconsciously, by everyone, and can be called as taking control of one's life.

Figure 3: Summary of what is personal branding

In this study the focus is on conscious practicing of personal branding, as the idea is to find out how personal branding could be utilized in job search. **Therefore, from now on the term "personal branding" is mainly translated into conscious personal branding, unless told otherwise.** However, even such conscious personal branding is naturally influenced by factors that are not consciously thought of. Next, the different affecting factors are briefly handled.

2.2.1.2 Factors affecting a personal brand

"When you're promoting brand You, everything you do — and everything you choose not to do — communicates the value and character of the brand." (Peters, 1997, para. 31)

According to the self-concept theory, individuals behave in multiple ways to enhance and maintain their self (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012). As mentioned, the researchers and advocates agree that all our actions constitute how we are perceived by others and thus formulate our brand (Peters, 1997; Hearn, 2008). This is also the underlying prerequisite for that everyone can be branded. Therefore, a personal brand is affected by everything perceived of the person by others. Even what one does not do is a part of one's brand. (Hearn, 2008).

Personal brands are affected by our communication that others perceive through our speech and behavior. However, communication can also be indirect; also physical signs such as visual identity affect the brand. (Hearn, 2008) People tend to link looks with a person's capabilities and personality, especially when meeting a person for the first time (Kaputa, 2005, pp. 67-74). Thus, everything one wears (e.g. t-shirt, Levis jeans), eats or drinks (e.g. Starbucks), or carries along (e.g. a designer pen or a handbag), play a role (Peters, 1997).

In the era of web 2.0, branding is inevitable when participating in social media. All presentation of oneself online, in Web 2.0 applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, and Youtube, or even on Google, all have an impact on the personal brand as well as make it possible to create a brand. (Labrecque, et al., 2011) All these websites include some information, or "inventories" of the individual's selves, and everything what one posts or doesn't post there affect the brand (Hearn, 2008). Thus, managing one's personal brand has become a must in this digital era, especially if one wants to succeed in professional life.

Similarly, lifestyle and everyday life have a tremendous effect on an individual's personal brand (Shepherd, 2005). Therefore, choices taken in life such as the choice of university can be considered as brand cues (Holmberg & Strannegård, 2015). As Marwick and Boyd (2011) point out, even a trivia night at a bar or a dinner with a partner builds a person's brand. Therefore, trying to create a brand that does not correspond to the true oneself is difficult, as one should extend such actions to all aspects of one's life.

As brand associations affect a person's brand (Close, et al., 2011), even where one works (Lair, et al., 2005), studies (Holmberg & Strannegård, 2015), or the people to whom one is linked – for example

friends, colleagues, family and contacts on social networking sites – may influence the personal brand (Hearn, 2008; Labrecque, et al., 2011). Close, et al. (2011) define the latter as human co-branding; such co-branding can have a positive effect on the partner, especially when the other partner is well-known, as the positive associations (perceived expertise and other features) may transfer to the less-known brand.

2.2.1.3 Criticism towards the phenomenon of personal branding

It is interesting that the academicians talk very little about the possible negative aspects of personal branding, even though there is a flipside of the coin as well. Lair, et. al. (2005), Shepherd (2005) and Vallas and Cummins (2015) take up a few of such points.

First, personal branding may seem pretentious sometimes. However, Lair, et al. (2005) argue that still, individuals don't need to feel guilty as branding is necessary in the world of today. Second, branding personal branding is often thought of as “faking” – so pretending to be something one is not (Vallas & Cummins, 2015). Third, one may need to make sacrifices in daily life as an effort to not to send mixed signals of the brand. This then risks the authenticity of the personal brand as well as the general freedom to act the way one wants, if too many compromises in communication are made. (Montoya, 2005, cited in Shepherd, 2005, p. 599).

Fourth, the personal branding phenomenon may cause great pressure for the individuals. Along with personal branding becoming more popular, it also becomes more crucial for everyone to practice in order to stand out and to communicate the value one can provide. Many personal branding experts and consultants stress the matter vividly on their articles and websites – that one must be a brand. (Lair, et al., 2005) Also, as Lair, et. al. (2005, p. 318) point out, the personal branding movement relies on “*the image of an independent, resourceful, creative, and aggressive professionals*”, and individuals practicing personal branding should be agile in the changing job market, respond to any opportunities that arise, and be able to motivate and promote oneself. Little room for presenting authentic selves is left due to the high pressures of what one should do and express. This may set tremendous pressures for individuals in the job market, as not everyone is outgoing and comfortable acting the same way as the norms suggest. Lair, et al. (2005) point out how in reality, everyone can benefit from personal branding, even though the phenomenon is more linked to those “stereotypical personal branders”.

Fifth, the efficacy of personal branding is often lifted up to a level that cannot be supported by logic or evidence, and therefore Lair, et al. (2005) indirectly admit that one should not take the advice by personal branding advocates word-by-word. Firstly, having a brand does not guarantee business success, even though Peters (1997, para. 8) declares that “*everyone has a chance to stand out*”. However, there are thousands of stories of brand failures. Secondly, the personal branding expert Arruda (n.d., cited by Shepherd, 2005, p. 597) states on his website: “*What makes you unique, makes you successful*”. This, however, is by no logic true, since only being unique does not lead to success, and unique aspects can also be negative. Also, the limited amount of visibility decreases the efficacy of personal branding. With millions of individuals looking to stand out with their personal brand, only a very tiny fraction of the total population benefits from most of the public awareness. There is very little empirical evidence that personal branding would be the optimal way of gaining visibility in the business environment, unless one already is a well-known character. In addition, there is a question whether personal branding will be beneficial for others than the early adopters, as returns are bound to diminish when more and more people engage in branding themselves. (Shepherd, 2005)

2.2.2 Why is personal branding practiced

The ultimate reasons for why personal branding is done are linked to the evolution of personal branding; it is seen as a response to the requirements set by the increasingly crowded world of communication and economic turbulence (Lair, et al., 2005). Personal branding is done to *stand out from the crowd* (Shepherd, 2005; Holmberg and Strannegård, 2015), which is required to *gain material profit* and *produce cultural value*. These are seen as the underlying and interlinked goals for practicing personal branding (Hearn, 2008).

The existing literature shows that the motivational factors behind personal branding are mainly job and career-related. However, some of the factors are linked to private life and self-realization. All in all, these factors base on the human desire for economic, cultural and social capital (Khedler, 2014).

2.2.2.1 Professional purposes

Personal branding is strongly linked to job seekers using branding to compete in the employment market (Lair, et al., 2005), and thus to increase their professional opportunities (Parmentier, et al., 2013). The phenomenon, and thus the multiple services and guidebooks, are advertised with the selling point that a personal brand is a differentiator in the increasingly crowded marketplace – that is the job market (Shepherd, 2005).

Perhaps the most obvious motivation is to *be hired* (Holmberg & Strannegård, 2015). This includes gaining employment both when entering the job market and when in transition of jobs (Lair, et al., 2005; Labrecque, et al., 2011). Thus, personal branding is also done with the eye on *career advancement* (Vallas & Cummins, 2015). This does not only imply changing employers, but the motivation may also lie in career advancement within the current organization; with personal branding, one's potential for more demanding tasks may be better noticed (Shepherd, 2005).

Close, et al. (2011) assume that the human brand cues in career sense matter most in the case of new “products” – as in entering the job market for the first time, or when having little field-specific experience. In addition, personal brands are seen to matter especially in the early stages of the hiring process, as the hiring institutions often receive a large number of applications, and such human brand cues can help in standing out from the large pile of applications (Close, et al., 2011). Nowadays personal branding is perhaps more important than ever for job seekers due to the increased competition (Lair, et al., 2005). Also, employers are likely to search online for information about the

applicants, and this information should be such that encourages the employers to choose the person for the job (Harris & Rae, 2011).

Personal branding is also done to gain *influential power*. Dutta (2010) describes how some degree of personal branding is extremely important for individuals in leading positions to influence large groups of people outside of their natural impact area. Only by using social media, such as featuring a Youtube video, CEOs can tremendously increase the publicity of their company and thus the power of their own personal brand (Dutta, 2010). In addition, networking as a part of personal branding is done to acquire field-specific social connections and thus increase the field-specific social and symbolic capital (Parmentier, et al., 2013).

Career-related factors are often linked to the return on economic capital, as personal branding may be done to reach *financial success*. Personal branding can increase one's "personal value" and thus maximize employability, which may then increase the financial earnings. (Khedler, 2014) According to Lair, et al. (2005), many experts on the topic take quite a radical view when trying to emphasize the importance of personal branding for financial success. The advocates such as Kaputa (n.d., cited in Lair, et al., 2005, p.321) claim that personal branding is inevitable in order to *survive in the economic turbulences*, and the demonstration of one's ability to add value for the company can provide some degree of security. Thus, it can be concluded personal branding is done in the hope of financial gains.

Linked to professional purposes is the *fear of not practicing* personal branding. Shepherd (2005) argues that the major selling proposition for practicing personal branding is that if one does not practice personal branding, someone else may be doing it instead for the person as every person has a brand of some kind. Labrecque, et al. (2011) state that the power should not be given to others, and Vallas and Cummins (2015) also emphasize that individuals do not have much choice; if they do not brand themselves, they will be branded by their "competitors", other job-seekers.

2.2.2.2 Other purposes

Personal branding isn't always limited to professional life but can also help in other aspects of life. Personal ads on dating websites are a very clear form of personal branding, as individuals leaving the ads want to show their best (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Thus, personal branding also matters in establishing social relationships, such as marriage, dating and friendships (Hearn, 2008; Labrecque, et al., 2011). In addition, personal branding is sometimes done purely of the desire to express oneself.

Hence, *what* personal branding is collides with *why* in this case. Personal branding is done for self-realization – in which case the primary motivation is not how others see oneself. (Labrecque, et al., 2011)

Other purposes for practicing personal branding may be the will for *personal growth*, such as educational endeavors (Schau & Gilly, 2003), or the wish to enhance *public image* or *social status* of oneself, which is then done through self-presentation. These are linked to cultural respectively symbolic capital. (Parmentier, et al., 2013) However, personal growth motivators may also fundamentally aim at professional advancement (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

2.2.3 Where does personal branding take place

Personal branding and the presentation of self requires communicative actions to create images of self (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). It is, as said, constant, and takes place everywhere one is visible (Hearn, 2008). However, the communicative actions vary in terms space. Hearn (2008) cleverly uses Peter's (1997) core thought "Me Inc", which illustrates an individual being one's own boss at the company of oneself, twice as the paragraph title on her article. Her separation is of utter importance when describing where personal branding as a phenomenon takes place in the physical sense: Me Inc. and Virtually Me Inc. Thus, in this section I will briefly look at the specific places where personal branding happens.

Originally, the personal branding that evolved in the late 1990s was focused on individuals' conduct in business rather than that on online identity (Lair, et al., 2005). However, social media becoming a part of people's everyday lives has shifted the focus online (Hearn, 2008). Digitalization is perceived as an accelerating driver for the phenomenon and very little academic research exists on the topic before the rise of social media. Therefore, it is only natural that online channels are so dominant in the literature and research on personal branding in the offline world stays quite limited.

2.2.3.1 Offline world

In general, the offline world is characterized by face-to-face communication. This is often seen as the most interactive and genuine method of communication, as body language and other physical signals can be taken into consideration in addition to verbal communication (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Such places for personal branding are basically *all places* where one is present in everyday life (Shepherd, 2005), and where one has some social contact with others to present oneself in a way or another (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Personal branding happens visibly in *job applying* situations (Close, et al., 2011). Branding takes place in written form in the application itself as well as in physical form in the actual job interview (Close, et al., 2011; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). However, as personal branding is also often linked to career advancement within the company, personal branding happens generally *at workplace* (Shepherd, 2005).

Academicians also emphasize the importance of networking for personal branding (e.g. Hearn, 2008; Dutta, 2010; Harris and Rae, 2011). Although they mostly refer to *networking* in the online channels,

this can be applied to the offline world as well; branding takes place wherever one is able to meet people and build professional relations (Dutta, 2010).

Not all communication in the real life world is naturally face-to-face, as broadcast media (e.g. newspapers and TV) also take place offline. This broadcast media is a great platform for personal branding, as it provides access to greater audiences than face-to-face situations; for example, Close, et al. (2011) show in their research how published articles in field-specific journals benefit personal brands in the academic environment.

2.2.3.2 Online world

People often choose to present themselves through the digital world. Virtual representation can be kept as very important for personal branding today, as it offers a rather easy way of showing “that something” one has to the rest of the world (Hearn, 2008), and online applications offer tools for managing and fine-tuning a personal brand (Labrecque, et al., 2011). The reason for the choice of using digital media is often the *freedom for expression*, as the digital world is independent of proximity in time and space allowing 24/7 communication (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Labrecque, et al. (2011) also talk about the possibility for anonymity and not being restricted by real-world boundaries such as appearance, race, gender, physical abilities and socioeconomic status. However, anonymity is naturally purposeful only when branding oneself for self-expression instead of in search of a job, for example. In addition, with technological barriers diminishing and more and more people present in the online world, the web has become a great platform for personal branding (Labrecque, et al., 2011).

Any information available of persons online, such as on the websites of organizations of sport teams or on online broadcast media, are places for personal branding (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). However, such branding is marginal, and broadcast media especially are available only for a fraction of individuals, usually those well-known by the public. Therefore, the online channels in personal branding mainly refer to web 2.0, channels available for everyone. Thus, it can be said that LinkedIn, Facebook and other social media applications have revolutionized and equalized personal branding.

Social media combines the elements of highly interactive face-to-face communication and broadcast media, the opposite extreme of non-interactive communication (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). These media allow a global, affordable, interactive, transparent, open, non-hierarchical and real time way to do personal branding, and with its low barriers to entry, social media even offers an easy way to

become “famous” if one wishes so (Dutta, 2010). Hence, social media is perceived to be an extremely influential tool for personal branding (Labrecque, et al., 2011), which serves both professional and personal reasons (Ollier-Malaterre, et al., 2013). As Dutta (2010, p. 130) points out, “*social media are here to stay*”, changing the way how business is done and people are perceived. Media and channels are changing faster and faster as time passes, and the channels of today are likely to disappear in relatively short time. Still, as new applications and channels arise constantly, the actual phenomenon of social media and interactive communication on the web is most likely to live. The importance of social media for self-presentation is also demonstrated by the fact that several important articles on personal branding concentrate only on these channels (Dutta, 2010; Labrecque, et al., 2011; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). It has even been claimed that the real values show up more clearly in the online world than in real life branding situations, as presentations online are there at all times (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Social media consist of multiple channels that can be used for the purpose of personal branding. Such are for example blogs, online discussion forums (Labrecque, et al., 2011), and different social networking channels (Hearn, 2008). *Social networking sites* are perhaps the most widely known platform of social media. Networking sites such as Facebook, allow users to create their own, somewhat unique virtual space, where they can express themselves to other people by crafting the public profiles, posting pictures and even very private information about themselves, as well as connecting with others. Simultaneously, such social networking sites represent a form of popularity contest in terms of the amount of contacts. This accumulation of friends can be explained by the assumption that social networking sites are seen as inventories of branded selves, with these branded selves then becoming commodities to collect and “consume” in the social marketplace. (Hearn, 2008) Such “inventories” of various selves also serve recruiters of today, as it is easy to check personal information about applicants (Hearn, 2008; Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015).

However, the features of the networking sites like Facebook are highly constrained and thus allow less self-representation than personal websites. Still, limiting options available for users makes comparing of individuals easier. (Hearn, 2008) LinkedIn offers a heavily career-oriented platform for social networking, as job seekers use LinkedIn to find employment and to build professional networks (Dutta, 2010). Dating services platforms, then, offer a completely opposite place for personal branding for non-professional purposes (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Blogging, personal websites (Schau & Gilly, 2003) and *microblogging* are other examples of social media used in personal branding (Labrecque, et al., 2011). Blogging and personal websites allow

individuals to construct digital collages of their self-concepts to present themselves (Schau & Gilly, 2003). The microblogging platform Twitter offers a dynamic and interactive place for self-presentation in form of short text updates to one's network or those searching about the topic. As the audience in Twitter is mostly unknown, varying self-presentation based on audience is difficult and requirement of reciprocal communication is nonexistent. (Marwick & Boyd, 2011)

Due to research limitations and the assumption that the readers of this research are mostly familiar with the mentioned social media channels, I will not go into more details about any of the channels. Also, details about the channels are not relevant for this research as a whole.

2.2.4 How should personal branding be practiced

”Along the way, if you're really smart, you figure out what it takes to create a distinctive role for yourself — you create a message and a strategy to promote the brand called You.” (Peters, 1997, para. 16).

How personal branding should be done is perhaps the most difficult aspect to reply to; how can a person develop a powerful personal brand? As Shepherd (2005) brings up indirectly: there is no one-size-fits-all theoretical framework for personal branding. Branding people is not a straight-forward process, since trying to manage multiple audiences and brands may cause challenges of authenticity, and personal brands evolve over time according to life situations (Labrecque, et al., 2011). Existing research on *how* personal branding should be done is very limited and concentrates on discussing the different aspects that should be considered when branding oneself. Also, some of the important articles on the topic (e.g. Peters, 1997; Lair, et. al, 2005; Shepherd, 2005) have been written a decade or more ago; therefore, these naturally concentrate less on the nowadays important online world but rather on the phenomenon as a whole. However, the self-presentation strategies somewhat differ for the two worlds, as Schau and Gilly (2003) point out; therefore, personal branding is always situation specific.

The academic literature does not provide any direct step-to-step advice but such advice is still based on the personal branding guidebooks of the self-improvement genre. The literature often criticizes the frameworks and advice presented by the advocates, as those are often seen to base on hype-ridden intuitive and informal approaches (Shepherd, 2005). For example, Rampersad (2009, p. xiii) boldly states that the personal branding model presented on his book will ensure *“self-awareness, happiness, and enduring marketing success”*. Also, the techniques are highly based on traditional product branding methods, which academicians don't see as perfectly suitable for people (Shepherd, 2005; Parmentier, et al., 2013). Hence, the purpose of this section is to put the existing academic literature together, with their advice and critique on guidebooks, in order to provide general view on how personal branding could and should be done – and which can then be adopted according to the situation, person and need. This section focuses especially on practicing personal branding for *professional* reasons.

2.2.4.1 The underlying strategy: standing out while fitting in

The ultimate reason for practicing personal branding, as discussed in previous chapters, is to *stand out* in a positive light. Peters (1997; 1999) and other personal branding experts straightforwardly advice individuals to use techniques developed for product branding when branding themselves. Traditional product branding seeks for points of differentiation, which involves having a unique selling point – something that is attractive for the consumers and completely different in relation to competing brands (Keller, et al., 2002). Peters (1999) describes that a personal brand offer signs of distinction, while Schau and Gilly (2003, p. 387) write that personal branding is about “*the self as distinguished from others and unique*”. Thus, personal branding, like product branding, is often linked to differentiation.

However, this is something that causes discussion among researchers; whether differentiation can be applied to people the same way as to products, and whether such differentiation is enough to position a person in a valuable and aspiring way. Already Kotler and Levy (1969) examined whether the principles of traditional product marketing could be transferable to marketing of people. Shepherd (2005) continues the pondering, and notes that according to traditional marketing principles the individuals would be obligated to respond to customers’ needs and modify their brands according to those. Shepherd (2005) notes this could work against constructing a truthful image and thus cause conflicts in credibility. Hence, the author questions the view by the advocates, and Parmentier, et al. (2013) finally respond to the call to closer scrutinize whether these traditional product branding techniques can be applied to person brands as well. They tactfully criticize personal branding experts about offering too extreme advice related to finding the unique selling proposition and challenge the predominant assumption that personal branding should be based on portraying points of differentiation similarly to product branding. They conclude that for person brands, the conceptual equivalent of differentiation should rather be thought of as *standing out*, and that one should approach with caution the traditional advice by the advocates. Complete differentiation by providing uncommon value, like in product branding, may not be beneficial for people looking for employment, as brands may cause credibility if differentiating too much. (Parmentier, et al., 2013)

Instead, one needs to stand out from the competitors in the field. This can be done by acquiring more of field-specific cultural and social capital, such as formal education and networks. Thus, people brands should position themselves as standing out from others because of having higher levels of the type of capital required in the field than what their competitors can show. Hence, instead of *unique selling proposition* one should rather talk about *higher levels of social and cultural capital* when

branding people. (Parmentier, et al., 2013) Here the *why* personal branding is done collides partly with *how*, as cultural and social capital are also seen as reasons for practicing personal branding.

However, even when applicable in a modified form to person brands, alone standing out may not be enough to form desired personal brands for a certain occupation in an established organizational field. People brands need fit into the institutionalized expectations of the field – be it marketing, law, medicine or actors. (Parmentier, et al., 2013) This can be contrasted with points of parity in product branding, which implies meeting the functional standards that consumers expect from the products in that specific product category (Keller, et al., 2002). Peters (1997; 1999) suggests abandoning the traditional résumé and replacing it with a “marketing brochure” for one’s brand. However, as Parmentier, et al. (2013) point out, doing something too exceptional may damage the individual’s brand and credibility. In that sense, a job seeker should demonstrate *fitting in* to the industry norms, values and tastes. Thus, there should be a balance of standing out and fitting in (Parmentier, et al., 2013). Deephouse (1999) describes this as “strategic balance”: being similar enough to competitors while being different enough. However, some occupations may have fewer settled shared understandings of the expected features, and thus these claims of standing out and fitting in don’t apply to all fields. Therefore, the correct way to do personal branding is field-specific, and the skills and capital acquired should be so as well. (Parmentier, et al., 2013)

Thus, the traditional techniques of product branding offer a good starting point for people brands, but those practices should be adapted considerably. Based on this, the underlying strategy when developing a personal brand should be to *collect higher levels of field-specific cultural and social capital in order to stand out from the competitors while fitting in to the industry norms.*

2.2.4.2 Attributes of an effective personal brand

A personal brand, like any brand, should be *simple* and clear (Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque, et al., 2011). Therefore, an individual should find a targeted *focus* – how one wants to present himself to others – and then build the brand on a few pillars (Shepherd, 2005). A focused brand is easier for audience to remember, and an unfocused brand can cause difficulties, as the brand may be perceived as unclear (Labrecque, et al., 2011).

In addition, a brand has to be *coherent*. People often tend to develop multiple roles in personal, social and working lives, which may lead to multiple brands – for example as a mother, marketing professional or as the dinner party organizer of a group of friends. According to Shepherd (2005),

this is natural for the human mind, and thus such developing of multiple personal brands is not necessarily negative. However, one has to be careful not to present differing brands to the audience or multiple audiences, as this may lead to brand conflict (Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque, et al., 2011). Hence, an individual should decide on the focus and align the different roles accordingly (Shepherd, 2005).

Many academicians stress the importance for a personal brand to be *authentic* and reflect the true self (e.g. Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque, et al., 2011). Also the personal branding experts stress the importance for an authentic brand: As Montoya (2002, p. 16, cited in Hearn, 2008, p. 205) writes, the personal brand should be based “*on the person’s true character, values, strengths and flaws*”. Rampersad (2009, p. 17) continues that the brand should be based on the life dreams, passions, characteristics, one’s own life philosophy and generally in everything one believes in. Acting authentic is especially important, as personal branding happens in everyday life (Hearn, 2008), and failing to reflect the true self online or in a job application may come out when meeting in the offline world (Labrecque, et al., 2011). Hence, Dutta (2010) also highlights the importance of acting authentic when branding oneself in the online environment. Moreover, authenticity is linked to coherency, as building an authentic brand may be difficult if one is used to having multiple roles and thus projecting multiple brands (Shepherd, 2005).

2.2.4.3 Defining goals and audience

In order to fully benefit from personal branding, branding should be carried out strategically (Dutta, 2010; Labrecque, et al., 2011). This is especially important in the social media environment, as employers often search for candidate information online (Dutta, 2010), and many channels are used for both private and professional purposes (Ollier-Malaterre, et al., 2013).

Lair, et al. (2005) point out how personal branding advocates often advise to set targets and develop plans, but give very little attention to self-reflection as a starting point. The authors argue that this self-reflection is in place; one should first and foremost carefully define *what one truly wants from life* (Lair, et al., 2005). In addition, one should identify the individual *strengths* that contribute to the desired brand image (Shepherd, 2005). However, some personal branding advocates also argue that an individual should form the brand based on the market needs (Shepherd, 2005). This view is not only in conflict with authenticity but also with the defined principle that individuals cannot be branded the same way as products (Parmentier, et al., 2013). Therefore, Shepherd (2005) suggests performing *critical self-auditing*: identifying one’s strengths should be done with a full understanding of the

target market, one's competitors, as well as one's current brand state. This can be carried out by multiple means; such as by searching for one's presentations online (Dutta, 2010) as well as examining oneself in the real life, in order to realize possible lacks or inconsistencies in the presentation of identity (Labrecque, et al., 2011). Responding to the market needs can hence be understood as identifying distinct features, in terms of cultural or social capital or other strengths, that make one stand out in relation to competitors. Based on such self-auditing and identifying of future hopes, one can define the preferred *brand identity* – how the person wants to be perceived by others (Labrecque, et al., 2011).

According to Dutta (2010), the level, tools and content of personal branding should be then based on finding the right personal mixture of *wanted impact* and *effectivity*. Even though the author concentrates on branding in social media, I would claim this principle can be applied to personal branding in general. Thus, a personal branding strategy requires defining the right **balance between personal vs. professional goals** and **private vs. public target audience** (Dutta, 2010). This is, again, especially important for the online channels, as in the offline world the division between public and private is clearer and more clues of the expected audience can be found (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Balancing the hopes then sets a basis for choosing the right channels and message to distribute.

2.2.4.4 Developing the brand by increasing social and cultural capital

After setting one's goals – what one wants to become and achieve – it is time to act. Academicians (e.g. Parmentier, et al., 2013; Holmberg and Strannegård, 2015) emphasize how increased social and cultural capital may help in standing out. If the targeted personal brand requires higher levels of such capital, one should aim at increasing those to develop one's brand.

Social capital is described as those “*weak and strong tie connections that can be used to access resources and opportunities*” (Parmentier, et al., 2013, p. 375). In other words, one should acquire valuable social networks that may help both in current tasks as well as gaining new opportunities. Parmentier, et al. (2013) argue that such developing of networks is critical for building and enhancing a professional personal brand. Also Dutta (2010) points out how *networking* and using of existing networks, both internal and external, is one of the simplest ways of building a brand. Networking provides access to both field-specific social capital as well as increases the symbolic capital by positive associations; similar to products gaining higher status when sold by higher-status retailers, a person that is associated to higher-status network members may benefit from positive upward affiliations (Parmentier, et al., 2013). Networking is especially important in brand building for job

seekers; according to O’Leary, et al. (2002), a significant amount of job searchers are hired through existing networks.

Cultural capital refers to, for example, knowledge, expertise, skills, and education that help one to gain acknowledgement or even reach a higher status in society. This can be contrasted with learning and especially field-specific learning. (Parmentier, et al., 2013) According to the study by Holmberg and Strannegård (2015), standing out in job search especially requires having the necessary skills and competences, and hence investing in cultural capital is important. Their study on Swedish business students’ personal branding demonstrates how the students use multiple ways of increasing cultural capital. For example, students may pursue a double degree, acquire international experience, and actively participate in extracurricular activities to gain valuable leadership, organizing and work experience (Holmberg & Strannegård, 2015). However, it ought to be kept in mind that such improving of skills does not need to take place in order to brand oneself, but can be beneficial if the brand target requires that.

2.2.4.5 Communicating the brand

Naturally, the cultural and social capital then need to be communicated in a powerful way to the target audience (Hearn, 2008) – this is the act of *brand positioning* (Labrecque, et al., 2011). As branding is a communicative act and the brand forms in the minds of other people, one should pay a lot of attention on the message spread through various channels. Like in all branding, the message of the brand has to be *rhetorically persuasive*. One should be able to encapsulate their top qualities into a couple of outstanding attributes to help them gain a “top of the mind” status in the minds of their target audience. (Hearn, 2008). Therefore, advocates like Arruda (2005, cited in Shepherd, 2005, p.591) and Montoya (2005, cited in Shepherd, 2005, p.599) suggest creating a personal brand statement that summarizes the added value of one’s brand in a compelling manner. In addition, *revealing something of one’s personality* is thought of as a way to appear more authentic and genuine (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In the offline world this is more naturally acquired, but the online world requires one to specifically take communicative actions about the personality, if wanting to present that.

On the other hand, the message should communicate the added value that one’s brand can give to the audience (Hearn, 2008). Therefore, Marwick and Boyd (2011) argue the message should be *attentive to the audience*. They explain that while being a “*should*” in personal branding, this also happens quite automatically: people tend to communicate and present themselves differently based on the

social context, as communicative partners differ in social norms and expectations. Therefore, one should present those skills and abilities that are valued by the target audience (Hearn, 2008). In job applying situations, this also implies that an individual needs to show behavioral and field-specific fit to the organization (Parmentier, et al., 2013). Hence, Schau and Gilly (2003) add that brand presentation is also *situation-specific*.

However, if presenting *oneself differently for different audiences*, there is the risk of the brand being perceived as incoherent (Shepherd, 2005). This issue is especially prevalent in the digital age, when the increased usage of mainstream social media technologies makes it possible to have multiple selves, and even require for variable self-presentation as different platforms are used for different purposes and thus include different expected audience (Shepherd, 2005; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). As Ollier-Malaterre, et al. (2013) argue, the key reason for why individuals navigate between multiple identities in the online world is that they want to maintain and enhance professional relationships as well. This sets limits to coherence of presentation, and having several brand identities may be poisonous for the individual, as the competing brand identities of a person may contaminate one another (Shepherd, 2005).

Communicating of one's brand is therefore highly dependent on the decision on the level of attentiveness to audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) – which naturally is impacted by the goals of personal branding and whether the expected audience is private or public (Dutta, 2010). Hence, in branding oneself, the message should be modified thus that one finds the right **balance of personal (authentic) vs. informational (attentive to audience) message content** (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). As Marwick and Boyd (2011) describe, Twitter users have to balance between strategically targeted tweets and personal information on their tweets, and thus the communication depends on choosing between being attentive to audience by responding to expectations or by expressing personality and passions with truly authentic messages. The decision of what to post and what not to post is also perceived as one of the key challenges in practicing personal branding in the digital in the research by Labrecque, et al. (2011).

Based on these decisions of balance, one can define the channels where to spread the brand message. Naturally, this includes all offline and online channels mentioned in the previous chapter. In addition, demonstrating one's skills is an efficient method for spreading the message (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Holmberg and Strannegård (2015) argue how simply possessing certain features is not enough, but individuals need to *show* their skills and intellect. For example, if one is a fairly good programmer, one could create a website simply to show that off (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

For personal branding, it is especially important to be present on social media, especially in higher management positions (Dutta, 2010). This is due to multiple reasons: Firstly, social media is a low-cost platform to gain visibility (Hearn, 2008), build a personal brand, as well as build, maintain and strengthen relationships. Secondly, it is possible and easy to engage with others (employees, peers, customers or wider public) transparently and directly, such as job seekers use LinkedIn to find employment and to build professional networks. Thirdly, social media lets one learn from instant information and frank feedback. (Dutta, 2010) Therefore, academicians like Dutta (2010), Labrecque, et al. (2011), and Harris and Rae (2011) advice individuals to use social networking profiles, personal web sites, blogging and microblogging, and video and photo sharing sites as well as even search engine optimization techniques and discussion forums when practicing personal branding. Especially for professional purposes, one should identify the most important media to be present and interact with members. However, branding oneself on social media is not without its pitfalls either; one should keep in mind that information shared online is never completely private and cannot be erased (Dutta, 2010). Therefore, branding in social media should be carried out strategically and planned – just like all personal branding.

2.2.4.6 Need to control, evaluate and brand consistently

Making decisions of the audience and message content is similarly about practicing *boundary management* – that is controlling one’s brand. Again, this is especially prevalent in the online environment, as in many platforms one is able to choose what information to reveal, and even controlling the information visible for different audience groups is possible (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). According to Ollier-Malaterre, et al. (2013), there are four distinct strategies to choose from. First, *open boundary management* refers to little degree of the control as well as message. This implies the messages are more authentic with little planning of the content, and the audience is not controlled. Second, *audience boundary management* refers to controlling who sees what, but the message content itself is not controlled. Third, *content boundary management* concentrates on preferential and thus controlled message content, while audiences are not controlled. Fourth, *hybrid boundary management* combines the audience and content management. Thus, the latter requires also most effort and conscious thinking when wishing to brand oneself. These four levels of control are illustrated in the figure 4 below.

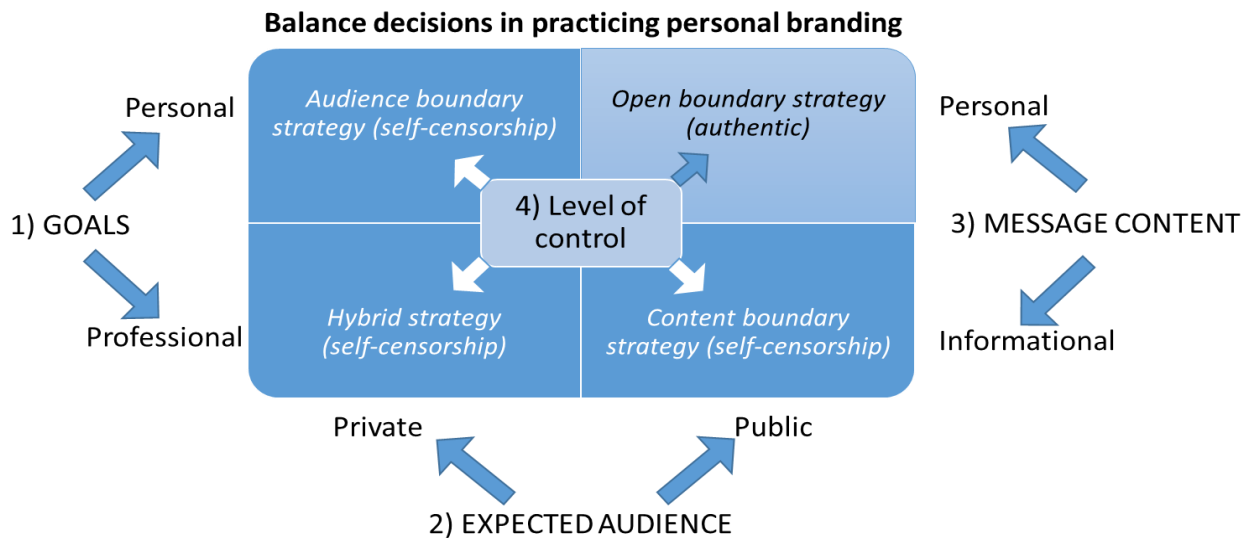


Figure 4: Control of self-control (communication) based on goals, audience and message content

Ollier-Malaterre, et al. (2013) point out how such controlling also helps in making a division between professional and personal brands, what is often seen as important especially for jobseekers. However, they also note that tighter boundaries may cause to the brand to appear passive (message control) or less likely to be found (audience control). One has to, here again, decide on the balance between increasing awareness of oneself and privacy.

However, controlling the brand may cause issues with authenticity. This is especially the case in the online environment where information is so easily available for everyone. As attentive messages are based on assumptions about the expected audience, there is a great possibility that the imagined audience differs remarkably from the assumed one. Therefore, individuals may try to present only such information that is likely to look positive for all relevant audiences. Self-censorship – so controlling of the brand – occurs when refraining from discussing certain topics on the online media, for example, which then leads to now showing the true self. (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) Even though Marwick and Boyd (2011) study personal branding only in the social media environment, I would dare to extend this boundary management issue to the offline world as well, as such can clearly be seen in a job interview situation, for example.

Still, some degree of brand control is beneficial and should be carried out especially when branding oneself professionally – as in the mentioned job interview situation. For example, Dutta (2010) suggests that an individual should google himself regularly, and compare the results with the results received by googling one’s colleagues or friends. In the digital world physical clues are missing,

which makes self-censorship to some degree easier. On the other hand, the online world also requires information to be available, which limits the degree of control. As Labrecque, et al. (2011) point out, it is impossible to completely control a personal brand. Therefore, in order to retain a high enough degree of control while following the “attentive to audience” principle, an individual needs to find a **balance between high** (emphasizing or de-emphasizing certain factors to certain imagined audiences) **vs. low** (projecting the authentic personality) **degree of self-control** (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

In addition, personal branding should be practiced consistently (Shepherd, 2005; Dutta, 2010; Labrecque, et al., 2011). This is especially important – again – for the online world, as in the offline world constant branding happens naturally (Shepherd, 2005; Dutta, 2010). Therefore, one should decide on the *timely effort* one is prepared to invest, and commit to that (Labrecque, et al., 2011). For example, Twitter requires almost daily interaction, while a blog can be maintained once in two weeks. Hence, one has to consider the resources available. (Dutta, 2010)

To close the circle Labrecque, et al. (2011) as well as Dutta (2010) suggest assessing the impact of branding efforts by evaluating the brand image perceived by others. However, assessing can only yield approximate results, as one cannot be certain of how others feel; personal brands are always subjective, as they are being formed in the minds of others (Hearn, 2008). This assessing resembles the self-auditing done to define brand identity, particularly assessing the current stage of the brand. Personal branding is – thus – no straightforward process, as all factors are interlinked and constantly changing. Therefore, also assessing of brand image should be constant.

As can be seen, practicing personal branding requires multiple decisions and trade-offs. Thus, it can be seen that personal branding is not a straight-forward process, as established, and requires making humane compromises. Analysis of existing academic research reveals personal branding is heavily about balancing between different expectations, needs and wants.

2.3 Chapter conclusion

In this chapter the theoretical background of personal branding has been covered. In the first part the factors affecting the evolution of personal branding were handled. Technical development and economic globalization have caused the world of communication to change, as well as increased the instability in the employment market, which have then caused changes in the recruitment practices. All these factors have increased competition in the world, and hence it is more important than ever for individuals to stand out. Such trends have gradually caused the development of self-marketing into explicit self-packaging – that is personal branding.

The second part of the literature review handled the phenomenon of personal branding from different points of view – what, why, where and how. As could be seen, the phenomenon is extremely complex and difficult to define. A personal brand is affected by all our actions, happens almost everywhere and is practiced for multiple reasons. The requirements for branding – being simple, clear, focused, coherent and authentic – are sometimes difficult to combine with being attentive to audience, as one is not supposed to present multiple identities (Shepherd, 2005). In addition, one should aim to stand out while fitting in to the industry norms. Thus, in this sense branding people is much more difficult than branding products – and again there is no one right way to do personal branding. Therefore, it is interesting to examine how final year Finnish business students understand the phenomenon – as well as how they practice branding themselves.

The empirical research will be carried out following the same thematic structure as in the literature review: a) what, b) why, c) where and d) how. The latter is perhaps the most difficult and extensive to comprehend, and therefore the framework I use in the empirical analysis is built around *How*, the other aspects (what, why, and where) only lightly illustrated. The theoretical framework I have built is illustrated in figure 5: the blue-themed parts demonstrate the personal branding process (How): First, the goals – either personal or professional – are set based on the strengths and wants. Second, one has to define the expected audience private or public. Third, based on these choices the message content is decided by balancing informational and personal content. These three choices of balance then define the level of control on the message (see chapter 2.2.4.6); for example, if the expected audience is public but the wanted message content is informational, content boundary management is used. Then, these decisions are interlinked with the choice of channel – especially whether offline or online, and the brand message should be persuasive. Simultaneously social and cultural capital may be included in the message content, and on the other hand, a persuasive message may positively affect

a person's social and cultural capital. At all time, brand image should be evaluated, so that new goals could then be defined if necessary. This is the process of standing out while fitting in – so the underlying strategy of personal branding.

However, the four themes – what, why, where and how – can also be included in the framework. This is because actually, standing out while fitting in is exactly what personal branding is about. Similarly, the goals describe why the person practices branding, and the choice of channel refers to *where* branding happens. And – all of this then together forms the how-aspect.

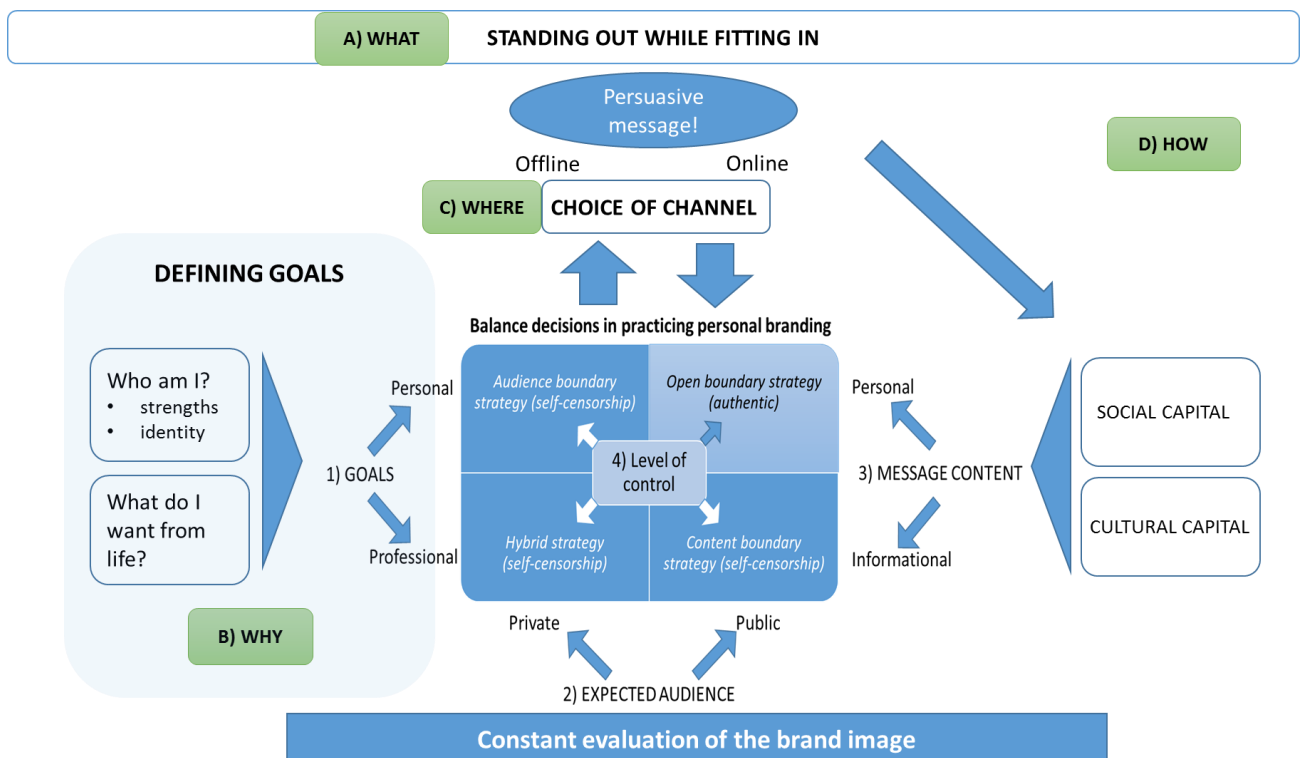


Figure 5: Thematic framework the empirical research

This framework will thus be used in the following sections. However, naturally also the underlying reasons behind personal branding will be discussed. The figure 1 in chapter 2.1.2 could therefore be added on the left side of the figure leading to defining the goals, but I opted to leave it out to increase readability. Next, I will present the methodology part of the research.

3 METHODOLOGY

This research handles the meanings that Finnish final year business students give to the phenomenon of personal branding. The topic has not been widely covered in academia, and therefore little empirical research has been done. It will thus be interesting to find out how this research can contribute to the existing literature on the field. I aim to shed some light on how the students understand the phenomenon of personal branding, how they think it should be practiced and how the phenomenon is present in their lives. In this section, I will present the methodology of the empirical part of the study. First, the research approach is justified, after which data collection and analysis methods are presented. Finally, the quality of research is assessed.

3.1 Research approach

“Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3)

Due to the research topic and aims, I chose to carry out the empirical part following the qualitative approach. Personal branding is a highly subjective phenomenon, which each individual see differently via their own, distinct understanding. Qualitative research usually takes the perspective of individuals and does not aim at producing results that can be generalized to the same extent as in quantitative research (Koskinen, et al., 2005, pp. 31-32). Also, as personal branding requires social interaction and is always context-specific, it makes sense to take the qualitative approach which aims at understanding different phenomena through social and cultural construction. In addition, qualitative research is often seen as better suitable for constructing novel information about a less researched phenomenon, such as personal branding. As I do not aim at explaining causalities but rather to make sense of the phenomenon as a whole, qualitative research approach seems justified. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 4-5)

As stated above, the aim of this study is to provide further understanding on the phenomenon of personal branding and explain how the final year Finnish business students perceive the matter. Hence, the research seeks to understand both *human perceptions* (what, why, where, and how) as well as *human actions* (how they are practicing it). Therefore, the research approach is more precisely

interpretative, having foundations from both phenomenology and hermeneutics. Interpretative research studies how people understand social events and settings, and it allows many possible interpretations of data as meanings are regarded subjective. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 19-20) This approach thus fits well the foundations of personal branding as a social, on-going and subjective phenomenon.

In qualitative research, it is common to first produce empirical data before familiarizing oneself with theory, which differs from quantitative research. Such research model is inductive, and theories are the outcome or research. The opposite model, deduction, proceeds from theoretical hypotheses as a basis for empirical analysis. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008, p. 136) However, often qualitative researchers mix these approaches by familiarizing themselves with previous literature and the phenomenon before producing empirical data. This is done to form a general idea of the phenomenon in hand, how and what to research, and how to produce data and formulate possible interview questions. Still, empirical data guides the focus of the research and theory in the final work. (Koskinen, et al., 2005) In this research I am following the latter described, *abductive* method of mixing theory and empirical data as a starting point (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 23). In the beginning I read a lot – anything I could find written on the topic in various academic journals, periodicals and other online materials (such as blogs, self-help websites, social media, firm websites). I believe this gave me a wider view on the whole phenomenon of personal branding and thus helped me structure and specify the themes for empirical data collection and further the analysis.

3.2 Data gathering method

The empirical data of this research consists of twelve semi-structured in-depth single person interviews with Finnish business students who are on their final year of study at Aalto University School of Business. Interviews as data producing method was chosen, since interviews are often the only method to capture the meanings people give to different phenomena and which is also timely efficient (Koskinen, et al., 2005, p. 106). As brands are subject to the image formed in the mind of the individuals, methods not involving direct inquiry (such as ethnography) would be poor in serving the research purpose (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p. 10). However, it should be noted that interviews do not guarantee access to the minds of other people, as Moisander and Valtonen (2006, p. 71) point out. Instead, the authors describe that interviews, as a form of social interaction, are

affected by the context and how the interview is perceived by the interviewee and interviewer. Therefore, one should keep in mind the interviews can never be interpreted as objective.

The reasons for choosing *personal* interviews are multiple. Firstly, even though focus groups and group interviews are often more timely efficient, these also include social influence by other group members. Social dynamics, social desirability and groupthink affect the responses, and thus the data provided may differ from personal interviews. (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p. 73) As I was interested in the interviewees' personal opinions and perspectives, I did not want to take the risk of a debate between group members and thus more dominating persons pushing their opinions through at the cost of more adaptive members staying quiet. Secondly, as the topic was likely to be only vaguely familiar for most of the interviewees, I did not want to cause them extra pressure of needing to express their ideas in front of a larger audience; some interviewees might have chosen not to present their thoughts at the fear of "saying something stupid" and thus revealing their unawareness of the topic. Thirdly, as the interview topics included sharing information about their personal features and behavior, namely expressing how they practice personal branding and how they perceive their own brands. A group environment could have decreased the quality of the responses, as the interviewees are likely to be more hesitant about sharing such personal stories in front of other people. Therefore, I saw personal interviews to better fit my research aims. However, it should still be kept in mind that also personal interviews are somewhat affected by the social relation between the interviewer and interviewee, as stated above.

In addition to choosing personal interviews, there were also distinct reasons to follow the *semi-structured* interview method. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 82) point out that semi-structured interviews are often regarded as the best interview method when little previous research exists on the phenomenon: with only lightly planned questions, the interviewees themselves are able to raise ideas and aspects that would not come out in strictly planned interviews. In such cases, the discussion evolves, and new interesting topics raised by interviewees can be taken up also in the following interviews. As the phenomenon was quite new to myself as well, I felt such gradual development of interviews as important. On the other hand, semi-structured interviewing technique allows the interviewer to make sure that the desired topics are covered and thus the interviewer can retain the control the discussion (Koskinen, et al., 2005, pp. 104-105). Having first familiarized myself with the existing literature, I had already formulated specific themes and topic in my mind, which I then wanted the interviews to cover. In addition, semi-structured interviews also provide some degree of comparability between the interviews unlike with the completely unstructured interview method. As

the goal of the research is to compare the views and that way form some general idea of how the phenomenon is perceived, the interview choice seems justified.

The interview outline was formed based on the general themes and aspects that emerged from the literature: what, why, where and how personal branding is done. This structure is then visible in the whole study and guided compiling the literature analysis as well. In addition, I wanted to find out how personal branding shows in the lives of the interviewees, and hence one section was devoted to that. Also, the interviewees' views on recruiting were asked briefly. All themes were accompanied with a few subtopics, in order to assure that no important aspect was left out of the interviews. (For interview outline, see Appendix A). The interviewees were specifically asked not to prepare for the interview, since I wanted to find out their current understanding of the phenomenon. In addition to the actual interviews, I made notes about the interviewees' responses and behavior during the interviews to help interpret their opinions.

Interviewees

Altogether 12 interviews were carried out with the duration varying between 45 and 75 minutes and averaging at almost 63 minutes. All interviewees are close-to-graduate (within one year) marketing or economics students at Aalto University on their 5th to 7th study year, and their ages range between 23 and 28. Six students of both majors were interviewed. Five of the interviewees are female and seven are male. Initially, I had intended to interview ten students, five of both majors. However, at the advent of the two last interviews I felt that saturation was not yet reached. Therefore, I agreed on two additional interviews, during which it was notable that the replies had begun to repeat themselves.

The interviews were carried out between 25th November and 9th December 2014 and took place at various locations depending on the interviewee and the time of day. I felt it was important to find a relaxed and quiet enough spot for the interviewees to talk as freely as possible, without any interruptions or additional stimulus. Hence, the interviews were carried out at my home, at an interviewee's home, at cafes, at the university and even at a quiet pub. The twelve interviews resulted in 755 minutes of recording and 151 pages of transcribed text.

The reason to interview students from two particular majors instead of a broader batch or respectively only one major was out of pure interest. I wish to find out if there are any visible differences between the stereotypically very distinct groups. As there are only six representatives of each group, no larger generalizations can be made, but the results are suggestive. While the marketing students may have

discussed the topic during their studies or are – hypothetically – at least generally well aware of the basics of branding, the economics students have less likely heard of the term at their university lectures. The topic of personal branding is neither handled, nor even mentioned in the textbook “Principles of Marketing” (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008), which was used at the introductory course taken by all but one interviewee on their first year of studies. Therefore, it is interesting to find out whether any distinct differences could be found.

My pre-assumption was that marketing students would perceive personal branding as more important in recruitment than the economics students. This is naturally due to personal *branding* being contrasted with traditional branding, and while practicing of it includes marketing of oneself. Also, marketing students are often required to be smooth users of the digital channels, and in general good at promoting whatever is the subject – be it themselves. Economics students represent a more traditional branch, in which digital presence of individuals is not as highly required yet. In addition, their future jobs are less likely to involve aspects of marketing and branding.

However, the research findings show that differences between the student groups are much less existent than expected. Rather, there are great differences between the individuals. To organize my thoughts, I re-grouped the interviewees into five smaller groups of 1-3 people and placed these groups on a line based on their opinions and understanding about the phenomenon. One end represents the most positive, engaged and aware attitude towards the phenomenon, while the students at the other end are more skeptical, little engaged and present perhaps a little less comprehensive view of the whole phenomenon. This division helped in realizing that the differences of thought between majors are almost non-existent and usually insignificant, and no greater generalizations can be drawn based on the business major. Instead, the findings further illustrate the individualistic nature of the phenomenon. Therefore, I opt not to put too much emphasis on the major when presenting the analysis results. Those differences that are noteworthy will then be specifically emphasized.

3.3 Data analysis method

When analyzing qualitative data one tries to make sense of the phenomenon, to which the empirical material gives access (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Usually, the analysis of qualitative data begins already during the data producing process (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 128). I noticed this myself as the interviews went on – little by little certain interesting aspects started to arise, on which

I specifically paid attention in the following interviews. Analysis then aims at clarifying the data and thus producing new information about the topic (Eskola & Suoranta, 2001, p. 5).

In this research, I analyze the data based on thematic analysis. Thematic analysis aims at making sense of the phenomenon by grouping the data into distinct themes. I had a clear understanding of what I was looking for in the data – covering the pre-set themes of what, why, where and how, as well as the personal aspect of the students. Thus, I am merely interested in the contents of research data as I want to combine the replies provided by multiple interviewees, instead of presenting individual stories. Therefore, thematic data analysis seemed as most natural.

All interviews were carefully and transcribed soon after the interview day. The transcribing was made word-to-word, only emitting the “ah” and “oh” sounds. After this, I started reading through the texts. During the first time of going through the data, I simply read the material like a novel without making any notes. This helped in memorizing what had been discussed in each interview. However, as Moisander and Valtonen (2006) point out, the process of data analysis is time consuming and usually the beginning includes a great amount of frustration and uncertainty. Indeed, even though I had a good idea of what I was looking for in the data, getting started with the actual analysis proved to be rather difficult. Hence, I decided to try a few different data interpretation methods to begin the process. I used coding, tabulation and summarizing, as well as made notes on the printed interviews and searched for similarities and differing opinions. After going through the transcribed interviews for multiple times, I finally had a better idea of which method seemed to work best and decided how to start interpreting the data.

Then, I began the analysis by colour coding the transcribed interviews according to the predefined 5 themes of what, where, why and how, as well as how the students practice personal branding themselves. One additional theme which I had not initially thought of arose from the data: the background and underlying reasons for the whole evolution of the phenomenon. The last interview theme, recruiting, was merged in the themes handling “why is personal branding done” and the “evolution of the phenomenon”.

After this, each theme was handled one at time. All coded excerpts that handled that specific theme, such as “what is personal branding”, were picked up from each transcribed interview and moved to one word document. Then, I began grouping the excerpts according to the structure set by the literature review, using subheadings and even smaller topic-headings. Little by little the numerous excerpts started to form into logical paragraphs and then further into small pieces of analysis, and

only the most descriptive excerpts were left in text. Until this point, the interviewee numbers had been kept visible on each excerpt to make comparing of the two major groups possible. When finalizing the analysis on each chapter, the interviewee numbers were omitted to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.

The empirical findings were reflected with the literature throughout the analyzing process. As the analyzing went on, I noticed a need to modify the structures of both empirical findings and the corresponding literature review to better meet the logic that arose from the analysis. Thus, I followed the abductive method, in which empirical findings shape the literature analysis and whole research structure (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Finally, I reached the point of being able to combine the findings of each theme and thus forming conclusions. The data analyzing process helped in acquiring a more thorough understanding of how personal branding is perceived by business students. Central findings include that personal branding is about constant balancing of goals, audiences and messages, and thus the underlying strategy for practicing personal branding forms as "standing out while fitting in" (originally by Parmentier, et al., 2013). As highly individualistic, audience- and context-specific approach, there is no one-size-fits-all strategy but everyone has to find their own, best way to practice personal branding.

When presenting the data, I often use direct excerpts from the interviews to illustrate the ideas and opinions of the students. As I try to mostly present the essential and most interesting thoughts, I have sometimes opted to leave out irrelevant or uninteresting parts of the discussion and continue the excerpt as it turns relevant again. Such parts are marked with three dash lines "---". However, all such examples belong to the same short discussion, implying I have only left out maximum of a few sentences. Some of the excerpts are difficult to understand out of the context, and therefore I have added elaborating words inside square brackets "[addition]".

3.4 Research evaluation

The quality of academic research is traditionally evaluated based on the criteria of *reliability*, *validity* and *generalizability* (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). However, such criteria are not perceived as perfectly functional in qualitative research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 291). Proving quality and trustworthiness of research may thus seem difficult, and no one universal framework for assessing

the quality of qualitative research exists. To assure the quality of this research, I aim to compare the views and base my quality evaluation on studies by several authors.

The traditional criteria of *reliability* is widely used in quantitative research and refers to the degree of yielding results independent of the method, procedure or tools used at each time of studying. In other words, reliability describes whether the results can be replicated. *Generalization*, then, implies the extent of sample research findings that can be extended to wider context. *Validity* refers to as whether the researcher's descriptions and explanations represent the reality. In other words, validity implies whether the results are "right". (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 292-293) Sometimes also objectivity is linked to the term of validity (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, pp. 24-25).

However, there are several problems with the traditional criteria for quality when evaluating qualitative research. Firstly, qualitative research is contextual by nature (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008, p. 186). This sets difficulties for reliability, as replicating the research results is seen as difficult and not even sought after. Secondly, qualitative and interpretative research assumes there is no one "reality", but rather multiple ways of interpretation can provide valuable findings. Truth and social reality are seen as culturally constructed through interaction and complex power networks. Therefore, it is impossible to present "right" results as truth is always context-specific and dependent on cultural understandings. (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, pp. 24-27) Thirdly, qualitative research is never value-free, as information is produced by *interpreting* data. Analysis is hence always subject to the researcher's evaluations and pre-assumptions. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008, p. 137) In general, all choices made throughout the process about the method, data and findings, as well as choices of interpretation – what to include and how to interpret data – influence the results. Therefore, also validity seems as badly suitable criteria. (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p. 151) Lastly, with its subjective nature, qualitative research does not directly aim at generalization (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p. 28). Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2008, p. 186) therefore call for cautious usage of traditional criteria in qualitative research. Also, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 290) even point out that using the traditional criteria of quantitative studies in qualitative research often leads to poor-quality research. Therefore, I decided to abandon the traditional criteria of reliability, validity and generalization and look for better suitable quality criteria for qualitative research.

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 294) suggest that instead, qualitative research could be evaluated with a better suitable concept of *trustworthiness*, which can be based on four aspects: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. *Dependability* implies that the researcher should offer enough of information about the research process as well as assumptions and interpretative

choices made along the process. Contrasting the research with existing literature provides *transferability*. Thus, instead of generalization, similarities in structures and findings are looked at, which can then help in gaining a wider understanding of cultural structures and practices (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, pp. 30-31). *Credibility* refers to how logical the links are between observations and categories, so whether another researcher could come close to similar results on the basis of same data. Lastly, *conformability* is about linking data to interpretations and findings in order to justify that interpretations are actually based on empirical research. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 294)

Also, Moisander and Valtonen (2006, pp. 26-27) point out that one could take a broader view when looking at the traditional criteria. According to them, reliability can also refer to the overall practice of research, and validity can be understood as something that is based on the audience, as the academicians and other readers ultimately judge the interpretations made by the researcher. Thus, as there is never one single truth in qualitative research and that everything depends on the context, the authors challenge the researcher to evaluate and form their own criteria, which best fits the particular research.

For the purpose of my study, I have tried to meet the criteria of trustworthiness in terms of research quality. In this chapter, I have aimed at describing the research process and my own pre-assumptions, as well as justified the choices taken so that the readers see a logical whole. Also, I reflect the empirical findings with the existing literature throughout the research, in the attempt to show similarities as well as provide new information. While basing my empirical research on existing literature, I have also let the empirical findings to shape the literature analysis in order to provide better transferability. Also, I use excerpts of research data to increase credibility and conformability.

In addition, as the quality of research is greatly affected by the processes of producing and analyzing data, I have put special attention on quality of data (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2008). Throughout the research process I have taken several actions to assure good quality of data. I started my data gathering process by assessing the suitability of my interview outline and what kind of responses the different questions would raise. Hence, I carried out one pre-interview. This proved very useful, as I was able to notice some unclear and difficult question formulations as well as create a better-prepared outline as a whole.

In terms of interview replies, I believe my previous experience in interviewing gathered through voluntary work and other researches helped in getting more honest responses, which also increases the quality of data. However, as Moisander and Valtonen (2006, p. 71) argue, one can never be sure

whether the interviewees are telling the truth, and the authors point out the real-life examples expressed by the interviewees are not necessarily their own. These examples may be borrowed from friends or stories made up. However, I do not see that the interviewees would have great motivation for not speaking the truth, as the interviews are handled anonymously. Rather, there is a risk that the interviews have left something unrevealed. Also, due to the topic of the research – personal branding – I do not necessarily need to acquire the interviewees' honest opinions, as everything they present is branding and hence valuable data, as pointed out by Holmberg and Strannegård (2015).

However, to increase the likelihood of hearing honest stories, and especially to encourage the interviewees to share their thoughts and opinions, I perceived an existing relationship to be rather important. The phenomenon of personal branding is still not that well-known. Many may feel insecure with talking about an unclear topic, which may result in less data being produced in an interview. Also, building trust between the interviewer and interviewees is important for the quality of data (Koskinen, et al., 2005). Therefore, all chosen interviewees are either my friends or acquaintances. Unlike in quantitative research, in qualitative research it is common to diminish the distance between the researcher and participants. Closer relation to the participants is justified by wanting to include the participants' opinions on the research subject and have their voice heard; this demands some degree of familiarity and understanding between the participants and researcher. A diminished relation can be seen as important also due to the researcher being an active participant in the research process. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, pp. 56-57). I presumed that with a closer relationship, the interviewees would speak more freely and without feeling embarrassed to reveal their opinions on a vague subject. Also, it was easier for the interviewees to build some initial trust and thus feel more natural in the interview situation, as they already knew me beforehand.

However, being close to some of the interviewees can also negatively influence the research quality. A common problem when having a close relationship with the participants is the confusion of what one knows intuitively and what rises from the research evidence. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 58) I aim at reducing such misinterpretation by being more careful when interpreting the data produced with those interviewees whom I consider as my close friends.

In addition, I tried to assure data quality by other means as well. Firstly, I assured the interviewees of anonymous handling of data as well as always tried to make the situation comfortable for the interviewee by starting with a little small talk. Second, I continued the data collection until saturation was reached, which included carrying out two additional interviews after the initially determined set of ten. Third, I transcribed the interviews carefully very soon after carrying them out. And lastly, as

the initial interviews are in Finnish, I placed a lot of attention on translating the excerpts and quotes. I regarded this as especially important, as possible errors in translation may cause the interpretation to change from that of the original language (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p. 28).

In this chapter, I have aimed at carefully describing the methodology of my research as well as the research process as a whole. In the next chapter the empirical findings will be presented.

4 FINDINGS

This section focuses on presenting the empirical findings of the research. First, I will describe the analysis results on the background of personal branding and why it has evolved. Then, I will handle the students' perceptions of each theme separately – what, why, where and how. The "how" section will consist of comparing "*how they practice*" and "*how personal branding should be practiced*".

4.1 Behind the scenes of personal branding

The aim of this section is to describe what the interviewees see as the underlying reasons for the evolution of personal branding, and how they see this phenomenon in relation to recruitment. The analysis shows that the students understand how the phenomenon of personal branding and the need to stand out has far more complex route causes than one would quickly think.

(1) *In the world of today it is extremely important to stand out.*

No direct questions about the reasons behind the development of the phenomenon were asked from the interviewees. Questions such as "*why is personal branding being done*" and "*what is its role in recruitment*" yielded multiple more obvious responses such as "to gain employment" or "it is a must thing to do" (see chapter 4.3). However, eight of the interviewees started pondering the more distant, greater reasons for the birth of the phenomenon at some point of the interview independent from the theme handled. This is especially interesting, as ten of the twelve interviewees specifically emphasized their lack of theoretical understanding of the topic. The ability to raise up underlying root causes does, however, illustrate that the students are well aware of the topic – at least unconsciously. None of the factors was mentioned by all eight interviewees who brought up the underlying reasons, but rather there was great dispersion between the replies. This, however, can be explained by the lack of direct interview questions. No explicit differences could be found between the replies of different majors, though the topic was brought up by three marketing respectively five economics students.

(2) *Somewhat everything moves so much faster these days. So this personal branding is linked to that as well.*

According to the analysis of research data, there are several factors that have contributed to the phenomenon of personal branding. These factors can be categorized under two major trends: digitalization and the changing work environment. These trends are affected by even larger changes

in the world, namely technical development and the economic globalization, as Hearn (2008) and Lair, et al. (2005) point out. Together these trends contribute to the growing importance of standing out, especially in order to gain desirable employment – and this is where personal branding comes into picture. Excerpts 1 and 2 above illustrate how the interviewees have understood the two major reasons for why personal branding has evolved in the practical level: the fast-moving world including technological development, and the need to stand out in the ever more competitive environment. Thus, the findings on the two trends – digitalization and changing work environment – will next be presented.

4.1.1 Digitalization

The analysis of interview data shows that the students perceive digitalization as one of the main trends for the birth of personal branding. Digitalization as a reason was directly mentioned by four interviewees but explicitly by everyone.

- (3) *I don't know if it's like that, but I could imagine that a concept like personal branding, or at least how it's used these days, could be new. It's likely that such a thing didn't exist in the 60s yet. When there was only this physical world. I claim that the birth of this or at least its development is strongly linked to people's lives being online so much nowadays. Which means that its significance is enormous.*

- (4) *Well world changes, and you must keep up with the change. Which I as a marketing student... so this own personal brand, it must be this digital revolution and all these trends in general.*

The two quotes above illustrate how the interviewees see digitalization as the cause for the birth of personal branding. As they state, people's lives are heavily moving towards the online world. Another interviewee describes that "*the Internet is revolutionizing the world*", and more specifically, our communication and connectedness. In the online world it is possible to spread messages to multiple recipients simultaneously as well as to reach people who would be out of scope by traditional means (Aral, et al., 2013). "*I think it is so much easier these days. It's easier to reach people.*" Boundaries of communication are much looser than before, which naturally allows individuals to use different methods more than ever before: anyone can write a blog, while an opinion text is harder to get published on a newspaper. In addition, most interviewees brought up the aspect of easy

communication online. However, it should be kept in mind that personal branding does not only consist of online communication, though digitalization has greatly influenced the rise of the phenomenon. Indeed, digitalization and living in the virtual space have especially changed the *nature of communication*, as it has become independent of place and time. Also, the quantity of messages has increased above the levels that could have ever been imagined before the rise of the information economy (Aral, et al., 2013).

The analysis shows that the interviewees clearly regard personal branding as a somewhat new phenomenon. The student in excerpt 3 comments that how such a phenomenon probably didn't exist in the 1960s, and the student in excerpt 4 talks about the need to keep up with the changing world. Some of the interviewees respectively point out how the change is ongoing and it cannot be known how the future will develop. *"In 50 years it might be a completely different thing than today."*

Besides increasing the opportunities and modes of communication, the students also lifted up other consequences of digitalization. The following excerpt illustrates how the students perceive that the increased amount of networks has affected the rise of personal branding:

- (5) *Well if you think that this is a dynamic process, so it's likely that this has not been done so much before, or I don't know. But maybe it's exactly that networks are diversifying, opportunities increasing and in general the amount of interaction between people increases.*

Thus, as the networks grow and interaction between people increases, consequently more possibilities arise. According to the student, it is nowadays easier to present one's capabilities and persona to a larger crowd. Therefore, branding in the online world is regarded as more effective than in the traditional offline world. The phenomena are interlinked; increased networks have also caused people to increasingly practice personal branding. Indeed, almost all interviewees emphasized the importance of networks in practicing personal branding. According to the interviewees, people's networks are widening far beyond the limits set by the offline world, and online networking sites such as Facebook allow individuals to have even thousands of connections, which would be rather impossible in the offline world. Networks are very much linked to the increasing complexity in the world of communication, which is seen as a stepping stone to the development of personal branding (Lair, et al., 2005; Hearn, 2008; Rampersad, 2009).

4.1.2 Changing world of employment

The change of the work environment in general is seen as another root cause for the development of personal branding. In my analysis I was able to identify three interrelated concepts that emerge from the data: a) nature of work is changing, b) which leads to tougher competition of work, and c) which both have led to recruitment practices to evolve. These all are likewise linked to the technical development and digitalization. With knowledge-intensive work increasing, people are being substituted by machines (Smith & Rupp, 2004), and at the same time, online platforms are increasingly used in recruiting (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015). Next I will handle these three different concepts.

4.1.2.1 Changing nature of work

First, the general change of the nature of work is seen as an affecting factor for the birth of personal branding.

- (6) *Okay this maybe goes a bit too deep, but it sprang to my mind that even the nature of work is beginning to change, in general. We are all the time moving towards that direction that such very simple jobs, in which it's enough to have someone who just sits and types, that kind of jobs don't exist that many anymore. Because already now we can develop programs that take care of the whole bookkeeping of a firm without a single person touching it in ten years. So the new jobs will be such where that kind of attributes matter which are linked to how you express yourself, since automated systems and machines cannot do that.*

That the nature of work is changing was brought up by only three students directly, all of them being economics students. However, more interviewees talked about the effects of the online world and social media on work in general. In excerpt 6 above, the student points out how the number of “simple” jobs is diminishing due to automation and machines doing the work. This goes along with the fact stated earlier of technical development affecting the work environment in general. People are replaced with machines, which has contributed to the less stable work environment than in the previous decades (Lair, et al., 2005).

In addition to technical advancements at work, the interviewees also brought up how the whole concept of career is changing; instead of having a career in one company, especially younger workers tend to switch employer every few years. However, individuals not only apply for jobs more often

(Smith & Rupp, 2004), but due to this development recruiting has become more a important task also for the employers (O'Leary, et al., 2002). Thus, the students generally perceive the world to be changing rapidly.

- (7) *It's not that long and your employer changes. Whereas in the old days branding took place within that one company, and you advanced up the ladder. Mainly it happened by bringing out your own attributes, and you looked those would get you. You could think that if we go back to that two-part model, so that these shorter employment contracts and changing of employer have brought...*
- (8) *It's very much moving towards that direction when you don't just trust anymore that you simply start working and work for the same company until retiring, but that you develop yourself all the time. And then it's like every year the firm decides if it will buy your brand again.*

The student in excerpt 7 describes how employees have traditionally advanced up the ladder within one company, but now the work relationships are getting shorter and shorter. Mobility between jobs and organizations may make working more interesting, but this also increases uncertainty; individuals cannot be certain of their future employment. In excerpt 8 then, the student especially describes how the need for personal branding wells from uncertainty; “*you don't trust*”, “*you develop yourself all the time*”, and “*every year the firm decides if it will buy your brand again*”. Excerpts show how the time span is indeed shortening from a lifetime contract to as little as less than a year employment. Individuals not only need to show but be prepared to take risks in decisions related to work (Hearn, 2008).

4.1.2.2 Tougher competition due to the changing nature of work

The second change in the work environment that emerged from the data is the ever increasing competition in the job market. Curiously, only half of the interviewees, and only one marketing student brought up the increased competition as at the background of personal branding, even though all interviewees talk about the need to stand out as a reason for practicing personal branding (see chapter 4.3).

- (9) *There is so much more competition in everything these days.*

(10) *Today the job market is so competitive, you have to be able to show your capabilities.*

Excerpts 9 and 10 above illustrate the general feeling of the interviewees: technical development and thus the diminishing the number of "simple" jobs naturally create more competition for those positions remaining. As one interviewee describes, one has to stand out to get those few jobs left after automation conquers field. The effect is the same when outsourcing non-core functions (Lair, et al., 2005). In excerpt 11 then, the student talks about work of today being more specialized; this leads to that tasks that previously required 10-20 employees can nowadays be carried out by one single person. The student describes how one has to apply for more sophisticated jobs, and with less of those existing the competition is tougher. However, this student is hopeful that with time more people-intensive jobs will be created. The same interviewee later on points out that "*the new jobs that will be created*" will require human capabilities that cannot be performed by machines, such as "*how you express oneself*". "*People need to have skills that are more demanding than just the normal things*". Thus, the decreased number of simple jobs is linked to the increasing need to practice personal branding. Also O'Leary, et al. (2002) and Lair, et al. (2005) argue that individuals need to be able to show specific features to the possible employers in order to be hired.

(11) *Mainly the work is more ever more specialized. If before it's been that, or let's take some accounting department at some company. So earlier there could have been for example ten people, or even twenty, who work with some simple bookkeeping tasks. They don't necessarily have to signal anything very special in order to get the job. The process is likely just such that you have a degree paper, which shows you know how to do bookkeeping, that's a proof on a paper, so you get the job. There were so many of that kind of jobs, since every company has their bookkeeping tasks, so people work for that. Now they only need one person [to do that], so the crowd will have to apply for other jobs that exist. Which means, for example, business communication, or at some treasury trading desk, where you are on the phone all the time, or something more sophisticated. At first it's more difficult to get that kind of jobs, but then again these jobs will increase as firms have more resources to develop those.*

(12) *But for example in that sense, as you see how the application piles are increasing and the numbers of applicants are beginning to be absolutely impossible.. So in that sense, so that you can stand out from the crowd, I could see it helps a lot.*

The students also feel that as competition increases, the amount of applications that the employers will have to handle is getting enormous. Therefore, standing out is even more important.

4.1.2.3 Changing recruitment practices

When analyzing data, also a third factor related to the change of the work environment could be found: changing recruitment practices in the last few years. The students widely link this to digitalization as well as the technical advancements decreasing traditional, simple jobs and thus making the right employee choice more important for the employers. This statement is also backed by literature (O'Leary, et al., 2002).

- (13) *From that pool that you have found, you have to choose someone who fits you the best. And you have to take into account whether the person has the skills to do that, and whether you and your organization will get along with the person, and how motivated the person is. Or if the person would be capable of doing the job but has no motivation to work, then there's no point to recruit him, for whichever task you are looking for someone.*
- (14) *It's exactly about employer and jobseeker meeting. I don't want to think that I would somehow be tested whether I'm good enough to carry out a specific task. I am. But it's about that, per se, or I think it's mostly about that how cultures and values meet. And in what kind of work environment and work atmosphere you feel good, and what kind of a person can do the job from the recruiter's point of view. For example, completely different kinds of people get by at the tax department of a Big Four company than at some advertising agency. Exactly that kind of people who love routines, who are really thorough in their work, and who have that one thing they do perfectly, but then they have that large safety net doing all other tasks.*

The two excerpts above illustrate how the interviewees perceive recruiting. In the first excerpt, the student lists many features that affect the recruiting decision; instead of just finding someone who's capable of doing the job, the organization needs to think of the interpersonal chemistries as well as the motivation to work. In addition, the interviewee in the second excerpt brings up the need to fit with the culture and values of the organization. This is a very valid point and reflects the same that all interviewees bring up when discussing *how* a personal brand should be formed (see chapter 4.5): that people should be true to themselves. Many interviewees mention personality as an important factor in hiring decisions, and finding the "right match" is actually mentioned by ten interviewees.

The interviewees contrast recruiting with “matching”, “a puzzle”, or even with looking for a relationship: *“Someone has said that recruiting is like going on a date. It's about looking for the right person.”* Indeed, it is utterly important for organizations to find employees that actually meet the organizational culture and needs (Dipboye, 2014). With the non-core tasks being increasingly automated or outsourced, and the people-intensive jobs becoming more demanding, finding the right person to perform the task and fit to the organization as a whole is more and more crucial (Lair, et al., 2005).

The interviewees also point out that the changes in the recruitment practices are quite recent, namely having appeared in the last few years, as described in excerpt 15. Indeed, companies increasingly search online for information about the persona in addition to work-related aspects (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015) as well as use more of psychological testing in order to make “the right” choice for that exact organization (O’Leary, et al., 2002). Many interviewees talk about more demanding recruitment processes of today by referring to *“many days of interviews”*. It could be argued that the recruitment processes in general have become more demanding due to the possibilities offered by increased digitalization.

(15) *And in my mind, or unfortunately I have studied for so long that I have clearly noticed, especially in the last few years, that suddenly people have these video interviews and such. This was not the case when I started studying, or only at the most innovative companies. Now even banks want these, which is completely...it doesn't make any sense. But I guess everything goes forward. Or this is very much linked to this overall digitalization and how the virtual world has advantage, or not and advantage but something like that, over the physical world. I think this all is very much linked to that.*

The interviewees understand that the changing recruitment practices are much connected to the general trend of digitalization and the online world offering opportunities that are not reachable otherwise, as brought up in the excerpt above. Despite the interviewees showing a clear understanding on the need for more careful recruiting decisions and optimizing of processes, the students still criticize the digitalization of the recruitment processes. *“As more and more people have to go there, as those [jobs] require more sophisticated skills, as the firms need to get an idea of what you can do, instead of only having a degree paper in front of them.”* Another student states: *“I've heard of the weirdest processes lately. Multiple days of recruitment, you have interviews and all kinds of speed tests and whatever, you almost have to jump up and down.”* The student uses the latter as a metaphor

for describing how the person feels about the new, emerging recruitment practices being much more demanding than one would hope.

However, all interviewees understand the fact that recruiting is actually a difficult task for the firm and requires a lot of resources. "*Recruiting. A firm looks for an employee. It's a cost for the firm, it's difficult. It can go wrong.*" Especially the last point has affected the recruitment process to undergo many changes in the last years: the recruiters want to ensure better results than before.

All in all, the students understand that the technological advancement has resulted in digitalization and the gradual change of recruitment practices. Job candidates are searched online and their personalities and capabilities are evaluated more in depth than before. Therefore, the need for job seekers to practice personal branding is also increasing. Next I will look at how the students perceive the whole phenomenon of personal branding.

4.2 What is personal branding? - student perspective

The purpose of this section is to make sense of how the interviewees understand the phenomenon of personal branding from the viewpoint of *what* it is. The analysis of the data shows that the students' views of personal branding are very versatile, and one complete picture is difficult to form. This goes well in line with the literature analysis in chapter 2.2.1; personal branding is extremely difficult to define. The shortage of literature on the topic shows in the students' replies, as almost everyone mentions they have no theoretical knowledge on the matter; only one marketing student, admits to have heard of the topic on a university lecture.

In this section I will first present what general ideas the students have about the topic and how they understand the phenomenon. Second, I will analyze what factors and tools the students feel that belong to personal branding and what it comprises.

4.2.1 Personal branding from four different angles

- (1) *All of our being is personal branding in the end. Everything we do, especially in public, is in some way personal branding. Because everyone has some sort of an interest to present oneself as a bit better person than one really is. Personal branding then, or how I understand it, has some sort of professional dimension, so there is a reason for why we want to look a bit better to the outer world than what we really are. Or at least emphasize those good sides. So maybe it's more target-oriented than in everyday life, in such everyday flattering.*

The analysis shows that the students see personal branding as a very complicated phenomenon that is difficult to grasp. The differences in understanding between the major groups are a lot smaller than expected. According to my pre-assumption, the marketing students would be more aware of the phenomenon, the affecting factors and feel more positive about it. Instead, there are rather great differences between each individual. Some economics students think more alike the "stereotypical" marketers as I understand it, and vice versa. This shows again how an individualist approach personal branding is, and that there is no one-size fits all scheme to be applied (Shepherd, 2005).

- (2) *What it is... well today it is, or what first comes to my mind is all this social media management.*

Excerpts 1 and 2 above illustrate how differently the students began to approach the topic. Indeed, the first thoughts about the topic itself vary considerably: a few students immediately talk about marketing of oneself, another few about conscious self-presentation and two about pretending to be someone one is not, while some talk about job hunting. Two students even bring up celebrity brands as their first thought, as those are often linked to personal brands (Lair, et al., 2005). Some students reply quite thoroughly, with a comprehensive viewpoint from the beginning, like the interviewee in excerpt 1. Others are more hesitant about what to reply – and a few even question whether they are talking about the right topic. However, the only perceivable difference in the replies that can be linked to the major is that only three economics students initially link personal branding to social media presence (like in excerpt 2). However, also these three interviewees widen their perceptions as the interviews proceed.

Although the responses by all interviewees begin to resemble one another along the way, the range of ideas that arise and points of emphasis are rather broad. Based on my analysis I was able to identify four larger sub-themes of how the students see personal branding and what features belong to it:

- 1) *Self-presentation aspect*: branding is about telling your story in a positive light
- 2) *Image aspect*: brand is an image created by others
- 3) *Consciousness aspect*: branding is mostly conscious and target-oriented process
- 4) *Practicing aspect*: branding happens constantly by everyone

Next, I will look at these aspects more in detail.

4.2.1.1 Self-presentation aspect

The analysis shows that all the students see personal branding as some form of self-presentation to the outside world. The opinions vary, then, how this presenting of oneself is understood – as simply expressing oneself, sharing one's story, or of promoting oneself, or even as pretending to be something one is not.

- (3) *The way I see it, is that as a marketing person I all the time, or if I cannot market myself I cannot market anything. So mostly it is that according to the situation and my own view, I bring myself forward in various lights and situations and emphasize myself differently in different media and also in face-to-face communication, so [emphasizing] some certain aspects at a certain moment.*

The student in excerpt 3 summarizes the idea brought up explicitly by most students: "*I bring myself forward in different lights and different situations*". Personal branding is seen as presenting oneself to others through different methods and bringing up features of oneself, such as interests and way of life. "*It's how you express yourself to the others*", as stated by another interviewee. A few students also explicitly mention that personal branding, while being self-presentation, is about "*telling your story*". This implies that presenting ones *personality and characteristics* is equally important as presenting *ones experience and background*, as is brought up by many. Personal branding can also be seen as expressing one's status to the world. While presenting oneself, telling the personal story or expressing a status, one communicates to others and spreads some kind of a message. Hence, personal branding is about communication, as brought up by majority of the interviewees. "*Branding is that we try to communicate all the time which reference groups we belong to and what we do*"; in other words, we present who we are. Personal branding is thus a heavily narrated process, and in order for the brand to succeed it has to be communicated in an attractive way (Hearn, 2008).

Over half of the students of both majors also refer to marketing of oneself. As handled in chapter 2.1.4, self-marketing and personal branding are not complete synonyms for each other (Shepherd, 2005). However, as the interviews proceed, it can be noted that most students refer to marketing as a part that belongs to the whole phenomenon of personal branding and thus do not directly parallel it to self-marketing. Instead, the students refer to marketing to emphasize the promotional aspect – that personal branding aims at showing one in a positive light. Excerpt 3 illustrates this as well: the student talks about marketing oneself, but then contrasts this marketing with bringing oneself forward and highlighting of oneself.

Also, the student notes that marketing of oneself is the most important marketing action: "*if I cannot market myself, I cannot market anything*". This thought aligns with the famous quote by Peters (1997) – that one has to be the head marketer of oneself. The same thought shows up with almost identical use of words in three other interviews with marketing students. Hence, in this case the major of study may have some kind of an impact: only the marketing students feel the marketing of oneself is important, while others rather refer to the phenomenon as marketing of oneself, without taking a stand on its importance.

As can be seen in excerpt 3, the students also feel that personal branding aims at bringing up *certain* features of oneself. This implies that in personal branding, one deliberately brings up some parts more explicitly than others. The analysis shows that personal branding aims at showing oneself in a positive light, and the features brought up are usually not only positive but such that the audience may want

to hear: "for example in job interview, you don't necessarily show all your characteristics and features but you choose the best and try to highlight those". The students note this happens often even without a direct aim, as "it is the tendency of human kind" to present oneself positively. The same shows up in excerpt 1, as the student talks about "being a bit better than you really are" and highlighting the good sides. One student refers to "polishing yourself", and that personal brand would be the "representative you". Thus, the students clearly see personal branding as explicit self-packaging: by communicating certain skills, interests and other characteristics to the outside world, one presents oneself in a positive light (Lair, et al., 2005). Also, as brought up by referring to a job interview, the students also hold personal branding as situation-specific, as "showing oneself in a positive light" depends on the context. This is also noticed by Schau and Gilly (2003), who state that personal branding is about presenting oneself according to the situation.

As said, the analysis shows there are great differences in how the students see this presenting of oneself. Five interviewees describe that the brand is *who one is*, while two consider the "brand" mainly as something *one pretends to be*. The rest see personal branding as something in between, as in excerpt 4. Even though the replies are again quite well distributed across the two majors, only one economics student considers the personal brand as what one is. Despite this division of brand being *who one is* – *something in between* – *what one pretends to be*, the matter is not simple; also those interviewees who regard brand as *who one is* see personal branding as showing oneself in a positive light to the audience. The difference is that those who regard brand as *who one is* describe that "you are the brand", and that the brand consists of all actions by the person, everything one does or how one behaves. For those who are most skeptical, personal branding consists of actions one systematically does in order to brand oneself positively – and that these interviewees do not consider *everyday being* as branding. Therefore, they regard that a person may present oneself a little differently than what one really is.

Thus, the differences in students' perception are dependent on **whether branding is considered 1) as an on-going action of being and including more deliberate actions, such as showing oneself in a positive light, or 2) consisting of actions that are deliberately done but not all the time, and only aiming at showing oneself in a positive light.**

All points of view are somewhat intertwined and there is no one clear border line, as also those who consider the brand as *who one is* admit that sometimes people try to fake their brands.

- (4) *It is different, to some degree, whether you present yourself as you or if you brand yourself. --- My girlfriend has for example said that she started to become distressed at some point as she was trying to be someone else than herself [at university]. So I would not say that those two are completely the same.*
- (5) *There are people who always act 100% as true themselves. But I claim that is rather an exception, or at least minority.*

The analysis shows that those who generally feel more positive about branding and see branding as natural, do not emphasize this more than a couple of times. The matter is the opposite for those who are more skeptical; in four interviews, the aspect of “faking” or “pretending” keeps repeating. These students talk about “acting according to a role”. They also separate how it is more difficult to brand oneself when surrounded by the people who are the closest to one: *“And you cannot brand yourself endlessly among your inner circle of friends and family, as then that will already lead to your bluff nearly breaking.”* The student’s view is quite radical, referring to “bluffing”, faking. Excerpt 4 illustrates how the student separates personal branding from being who one is to some degree; the interviewee describes how another person started to feel troubled about trying to pretend to be something one is not – thus not being true to oneself. However, the student also adds that these are not two completely separate subjects; and the term causes confusion for many interviewees. In excerpt 5, the interviewee refers to those people being very rare who never try to pretend something. Similar results are also visible in the research by Vallas and Cummins (2015); personal branding is often linked to “faking” oneself.

- (6) *So maybe then a few years ago --- I somehow saw this as much more ruthless, and well not exactly as bluffing but still, as much more ruthless than I see it now, understanding the phenomenon a lot better. It doesn't have to be anything special, it's simply natural to practice personal branding.*

Despite the different perceptions, all interviewees actually agree that people sometimes pretend to be something they are not, especially if trying to impress the other party, like in a job interview. However, those interviewees who see a personal brand as *who one is* do not regard this “pretending” as a dominant part of the phenomenon. About half of the students regard personal branding as natural, which shows in excerpt 6. In this case, the opinion has changed; the student also used to feel really negative about branding, but now considers it as natural.

- (7) *Maybe that what I have been this far talking about is about branding oneself specifically as an employee. But of course you can broaden the view to brand yourself as a friend or family member or whatever.*

Three interviewees also bring up how a person can have multiple brands, which are linked to roles in life. As seen in the excerpt above, people tend to act differently according to the reference group they operate in: at work, with friends or even within the family. Indeed, personal branding is used to express multiple identities according to the situation (Schau & Gilly, 2003). According to the analysis, this is not controversial to *brand being who one is* but rather complementary, again: *"Those are like product brands within the parent brand"*. Thus, the students perceive the multiple brands that are role-dependent can operate under the same "overall brand", which simply alters according to the situation. Also Shepherd (2005) argues that having multiple identities is not necessarily negative, as long as those are aligned.

4.2.1.2 Image aspect

- (8) *Your personal brand is by every viewer. It does not exist as a subject, but you can only imagine that you create some kind of a personal brand for yourself. But in reality, the brand is always formed depending on how the [message] recipient sees it.*

Linked to presenting of oneself, almost all interviewees explicitly note that personal branding is about forming a mental image in the eyes of other people, and implicitly this is brought up by everyone. The personal brand is formed by the other people, which is illustrated in excerpt 8: *"your personal brand is by every "*. The student also remarks how one can aim at creating a brand, but the outcome is always dependent of the audience. As the students describe, one can *"try to bring up such features that support the image you try to create"*. Thus, it can be said that the students feel one can never fully predict the results of one's own personal branding actions, and that a person's personal brand can vary significantly depending on who is to describe it. It is about *"what kind of image you give about yourself on different aspects overall"*. This is supported by existing literature as well – a personal brand is the public projection of one (e.g. Lair, et al. 2005; Shepherd, 2005; Hearn, 2008). Personal branding can thus be thought as a public phenomenon: it needs other people, as no brand is formed alone: *"branding requires a certain public element to it, so wherever there are people around you"*. Thus, personal branding requires social contact (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

- (9) *A brand is always something that is not concrete. It is a lot more than my CV, it is somehow what my story is and who I am. I see it as a very abstract matter. It's a feeling. I would say that a personal brand is a feeling.*

As a mental image, the analysis shows the students also feel branding as an **abstract feeling**, as brought up by half of the interviewees as well as in the literature (Hearn, 2008). This is illustrated in excerpt 9; a personal brand, or any brand, is nothing concrete, and a personal brand is much more than only the experience of the person. Hence, this quote summarizes the essence of personal branding well: *“a personal brand – it's a feeling”*.

4.2.1.3 Consciousness aspect

Whether personal branding is conscious raises controversy among the interviewees. In the beginning many students talk about personal branding as *“conscious actions taken for specific purposes”*, while only a few note that personal branding is practiced *“sometimes also unconsciously”*, because *“everything we do especially publicly is in some way personal branding”*, like brought up in excerpt 1. Excerpt 10 illustrates how some actions that one takes, for example in the online sphere, affect how the brand is perceived by others, even if the person wouldn't consider his or her actions as branding. Thus, branding is regarded as branding even without a concrete aim.

- (10) *Well Facebook is a good example, as there someone wants to, for example, take a stand and emphasize how one may be politically active, while someone else tells more about hobbies and how you have been running and so on. So there is a message that you want to bring. You don't necessarily regard it as branding. I would see that it is still [branding]. Even though a person does not need to aim at it, but it can still be counted into branding.*

This is again linked to how the students see personal branding in general: if branding is held as “what one pretends to be”, it is also regarded as conscious. If branding is held for who one is, then the actions are also understood as partly unconscious. The opinions develop during the interviews, however, as the phenomenon is discussed more in depth. While only three marketing and two economics students considered personal branding as sometimes unconscious from the beginning, at the end altogether nine interviewees explicitly conclude that personal branding actions can also be unconscious. Thus, the analysis shows that the majority of the students feel that personal branding is often conscious, but sometimes unconscious as well, at least to some degree. The same is argued by

Hearn (2008); personal branding is a highly conscious process, but sometimes the person lacks control of the distribution of information, or simply acts along the feeling.

- (11) *After all no one is a good guy only in order to benefit somehow, but it's just much nicer to be nice to people in general. It doesn't matter if it's that granny at the checkout line or whoever. And I know for sure that even if I didn't smile to that granny on the line, my future would not change a lot. But it's a lot nicer that way. But then in personal branding, I could smile at that cashier lady because my life could greatly improve if I smile at her today, and then I smile at her again in three days, and on the fifth day I would offer her my phone number. So that is a lot more target-oriented personal branding. So I would bring "planning" or consciousness into the definition quite strongly. Or I would clearly divide it in two. Those discussions at sauna [about professional targets] – there's no aim to take oneself forward with them, but at some point they might. But then there's the other side, which is much more target-oriented and which I do consciously and systematically. But not necessarily always, but often consciously and planned, and with a professional aim.*

Excerpt 11 illustrates this division into conscious and unconscious branding. Conscious personal branding is usually linked to career or even personal life-related aspirations. All of these – unconscious and conscious, as well as personal and professional view – are described in the excerpt; being nice to the granny is unconscious and personal, smiling at the cashier lady conscious and personal, discussions at sauna unconscious but may lead to professional benefit, and lastly, also conscious branding with professional aims is mentioned. When branding is practiced consciously, it is considered as "a plan" and a series of "systematic actions". This shows up in all interviews, either explicitly – "It is a plan then when you feel that you are not ready and you have a target which you want to reach" – or implicitly when referring to showing oneself in a positive light – "you systematically bring up your good features for a certain purpose". Target-orientation is visible even so that some interviewees define personal branding as a "goal". "Maybe the first thing that comes to mind is a goal or aim to maximize your chances of reaching a target. Personal branding is a way to practice this". This is natural, as personal branding is often – also in this research – defined as a way to reach one's goals (Montoya, 2002, cited in Hearn, 2008, p. 206).

The analysis shows that professional life and career are very heavily linked to personal branding by all interviewees. This is illustrated in excerpt 11 as well as elsewhere (e.g. excerpt 1) when talking about job interviews or career-related aspects, for example. Career-related personal branding is also linked to planned and conscious actions, since often professional situations are where one tries to

impress the audience the most – so to show oneself in a positive light. Personal branding is seen "*more target-oriented in career aspects than in everyday life situations*". Professional achievements are in the core of personal branding, and that is also the concentration of this study.

4.2.1.4 Practicing aspect

(12) *But after all, personal branding is everything, every person has a brand, independent of who they are and what they do and what kind of social media presence they have.*

(13) *Well, for sure everyone does it in their own way. Without being conscious of it. Almost everything in self-image links to building your own brand.*

All the previous aspects affect the students' perceptions of who practices branding. The analysis shows how the majority sees that everyone brands themselves, in some way or another, as illustrated in excerpts 12 and 13. In excerpt 12 the student notes how *every person* has a brand, regardless of who they are. In excerpt 13 it is brought up how branding happens *all the time* by everyone, although one may not be aware of that, as everything one does is linked to self-image and branding. Hearn (2008) explicitly states that personal branding happens constantly. Most interviewees also ponder how people practice personal branding without knowing the existence of such phenomenon – as expressing oneself is natural to humans. Seven of the students bring this up, while other three state that everyone can brand but do not necessarily act so. No correlation related to major can be seen, but the dominant factor is what is counted into personal branding – whether personal branding is something that has to be practiced deliberately. As one interviewee brings up "*there are many layers of personal branding*". Those more target-oriented layers, so branding with an aim, happen mostly consciously. That kind of branding is not practiced by everyone, or at least by some to a very small degree, as many of the students point out.

However, the opinion by the majority of students is that "*every person is a brand*" – but "*those who are good at networking benefit the most*". This shows up in a lot of answers; personal brands are mostly linked to sociable and "*visible*" personalities, who can "*sell themselves*" well. Thus, the interviewees link personal branding most strongly to the traditional stereotype of personal brands, a view that is also strengthened by Peters' (1997) "everyone can be a brand" view.

According to the analysis, some of the interviewees seem to feel a lot more strongly (negatively) about personal branding, and some believe they do not practice it at all. However, I would argue that every person practices personal branding in some way, though not necessarily thinking that they are branding themselves. As one interviewee notes. “ *But that [whether personal branding has ever helped the interviewee in getting a job] is because, in my mind, personal branding is only about that, that you think what you present about yourself to the audience at any given time.*”

All in all, based on the analysis the students feel that personal branding is about **presenting oneself** to the outside world in order **to create an image of oneself** in the eyes of others, and doing that either **consciously or unconsciously, everywhere all the time by everyone.**

From this on, I will refer to personal branding as deliberate actions, and concentrate especially on personal branding with an aim – especially in job search.

4.2.2 What factors affect my brand?

Personal branding, as many students understand it, is not always consciously done. Therefore, there are multiple factors that affect one’s personal brand – and can thus be regarded as *doing* personal branding as well.

(14) *All of our being is personal branding in the end.*

The analysis shows that the factors that affect a person's personal brand are plenty. Perhaps the broadest definition is brought up by six students, of which five marketing and one economics: that **everything one does** is personal branding, as illustrated in excerpt 14 above. One student also points out how *"branding is likewise everything we don't do"* – a view that is brought up by Hearn (2008) as well. Hence, it could be said that marketing students regard personal branding as a wider whole than the economics students. This may be explained by marketers being more familiar with the concept of *branding* in general, and thus may better understand all actors that affect it, while economics students may think branding as more doing-oriented, that is as actions that are taken. However, this is all speculation.

Looking more into detail, the affecting factors mentioned in the interviews can be grouped as follows: *behavior and communication, physical signs, decisions in life, and people and places* one is associated with.

(15) *And all your opinions on the whole, what you talk, what you write in public for example, everything. I think everything what you reveal about yourself belongs to it, no matter if you are just anybody or a public figure.*

Behavior and communication in different situations, such as job interviews, is brought up by all interviewees. This includes how one acts, what one does, how one expresses oneself through behavior and communication, how one speaks, and what and how one communicates. Communication and behavior in professional situations are especially emphasized, and one student even notes that the type of *humor* affects. *Public opinions*, as mentioned in excerpt 15, are brought up by four students. Such public opinions are about sharing ideas, which strongly affects as what kind of a person others see one, "*whether it would be at a seminar or in a local newspaper*". In general, the students see that everything that a person communicates or shares about oneself to the public affects the brand, as illustrated in excerpt 15: "*I think everything what you reveal about yourself belongs to it*". This can be summed up by "*everything that relates to how the person...is*". As concluded, personal branding is an image that forms in the eyes of others, and hence our communication and behavior affect our brands (Hearn, 2008). Thus, "*how people see you*" is what defines a person's brand.

(16) *All my physical traits that are out there. All my self-images in different media, of course. Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter would be important but I don't have it, and should have from the point of view of personal branding, I think. And then it is... well everything, it is your CV, what color of titles do you have on your CV, what kind of CV picture you have, whom you know, whom you say you know, and what hobbies you have, what you tell are you hobbies. And just in general how you express yourself.*

Physical signs can be described as "*everything what others see of you*". This includes both in media and in the offline world, as illustrated also in excerpt 16. Digitalization is widely present in the interviews, as all students see social media as a highly influential factor on a personal brand. This can be seen in excerpt 16, as different social media channels are specifically mentioned, and the interviewee states how it is important to use those channels. Half of the interviewees talk almost solely about social media and other factors are only briefly mentioned, which indicates how strongly they link social media and "*what can be found of you online*" to the evolution and practicing of personal branding. Also researchers such as Dutta (2010) and Labrecque, et al., (2011) emphasize the importance of digital traits on one's personal brand.

(17) *Social media may affect it in that way. Or I don't believe that anybody wants to like a page about which someone could think that "terrible, why she likes that", for example. Or if it is*

in conflict with your own thoughts, so of the person who likes the page. Or this social media creates this kind of image outside to the people who do not know you very well.

The power of social media's impact on the personal brand is illustrated in excerpt 17 above. People who are concerned about how they are seen by the outside world, that is how their brand forms, may pay more attention to their usage of social media. *"It defines you as a person quite a lot, especially if you are active there"*, as described by one interviewee. Thus, even liking a page can be interpreted by others as something that affects one's brand. Excerpt 17 also illustrates how social media is especially seen to affect how one's brand looks like for those who do not know one well.

Other physical signs are for example one's CV and the job application, which are brought up by a few interviewees, and also illustrated in excerpt 16. Again, personal branding is strongly linked to job search. Half of the interviewees link clothes and accessories to personal branding as well, which are also mentioned by Kaputa (2005). The students describe how people practice some sort of personal branding through items: *"they for example buy a Louis Vuitton bag"* and try to express themselves through being associated to certain clothes, bags and thus a certain style.

(18) *So if the person is for example a doctor, this can create an image that the person is clever, works for an important matter, is trustworthy, wise and so on. But then again, if the person is a stripper, so of course that creates an image that what is your problem. That well I'm sorry, but my first impression is that why do you do that. It gives a cheap impression of you.*

Decisions in life include major decisions like profession, work experience, hobbies, interests, and education, as well as products one chooses to consume. Each factor is brought up by four to seven interviewees. The reason why such choices are seen to affect the brand can be explained as such: *"everyone cannot do everything, and hence we form some kind of a profile"* through how we communicate about these decisions in life. Indeed, lifestyle and everyday decisions affect a personal brand (Shepherd, 2005). Excerpt 18 illustrates how choice of profession affects the perceptions by others, that is the brand image they form; in this case, a doctor is perceived as *"trustworthy"* and *"smart"*, while a stripper as *"cheap"*. A few interviewees also feel that some may even choose the major at business university based on how this affects the personal brand: *"for sure some 'finance bulls' [finance students] at our university have chosen finance just because it's cool when you're a successful investment banker and earn a lot and spend a ton everywhere and drive that expensive car"*. However, the few interviewees who bring such an example up state that this is not common but rather a stereotype. Similar results are simulated in the study by Holmberg and Strannegård (2015), in which a university's reputation has been one of the major reasons for the students to choose that

study institution, and jobs are mainly searched among companies with strong brands and good reputation.

- (19) *Well that is exactly some kind of personal branding that they want to create a certain image of themselves to the outer world, and therefore they go to a certain place. Particularly to that place, so it's not the same if you go to Pub Pete or if you go to the nightclub Namu, because it is that kind of a place among that certain type of people, so you have to be there and you have to go there show yourself around.*

Many students also note that the **people and places a person is associated** with affect brand. This overlaps with decisions in life, as choice of university and employer can also be seen as place associations. People are brought up in excerpt 16: “*whom you know, whom you say you know*”. This comprises the people one chooses as friends, family members, as well as people one knows. The first two are mentioned only by four marketing students, but the latter, which is linked to networking, is brought up by almost everyone. Networking is indeed an important aspect of personal branding, which is handled more in the following chapters. Physical places, as handled in excerpt 19, are pointed out by a few students – such as cafés or bars one goes to. In the excerpt above, it is noted how the people “*go especially there*”, because a certain place is seen to communicate a certain type of brand. “*You must go there*” in the excerpt illustrates how such place-associations may be important for the brand. In Holmberg and Strannegård’s (2015) study, the school’s reputation is seen to positively contribute to one’s personal brand when applying for jobs. Two students also noted how even one’s home and what a person has there may matter, though less often in professional sense: “*a friend, who brought a large number of books once, admitted he has never read and will never read these books, but they look nice, and people who visit will think he’s smarter than he is.*” Also academicians (e.g. Hearn, 2008; Labrecque, et al., 2011; Close, et al., 2011) widely emphasize the impact of brand associations on a person's brand.

All in all, personal branding is an extremely multidimensional and broad concept, and the opinions on what affects it vary. All interviewees perceive that *behavior, communication and social media presence* influence a personal brand. Most students also see *networking* as an important factor. Dressing and appearance, a person’s physical CV, profession, as well as hobbies and interests are mentioned by half of the interviewees, and also the people and places one is associated to by some.

4.3 Why do I brand myself?

In this section why personal branding is done from the students' point of view is handled. First the motivational factors behind are looked at.

The analysis shows that the students heavily link the reason to do personal branding to the *need to stand out*. As discussed in chapter 4.1, the interviewees see the world of today as increasingly competitive; all but two students bring up standing out as the goal of practicing personal branding; *“but nothing is valuable if it doesn't stand out”*.

- (1) *It's that a product is recognizable and especially it can be set apart from the competing products without a brand. So that it sticks to your mind, you can memorize it and you get an image that it's trustworthy and familiar.*

Many of the students bring up that personal branding aims at making oneself *recognizable* and *memorable* – features that make a brand stand out. Personal brands are contrasted with product brands, as illustrated in excerpt 1; a brand that is memorable is usually also perceived as *familiar* and *trustworthy*. Thus, such brands that gain a *“top-of-the-mind status”* in the minds of consumers are usually the most successful. This applies to people as well, and personal branding actions aim at making oneself memorable, in all aspects of life (Hearn, 2008). As one of the students states, *“sticking into the mind is probably one of the greatest drivers for branding oneself”*.

Based on the analysis, the reasons for wanting to stand out and thus practicing personal branding can be divided into career-related factors and private life -related factors. In general, the interviewees emphasize career-related factors more than those of private life, but also the latter are brought up to a surprisingly large extent. One interviewee even expresses that *“I see this from such a social psychological angle, it's really difficult to think of this from the career point of view”*. This could signal the perceived importance of personal branding in job search; the students perceive branding as important to some extent, but many are still reluctant to start performing deliberate actions that only aim at polishing the brand in front of potential employers, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

4.3.1 Standing out to be hired

- (2) *Nowadays it's so difficult to make it even to the recruiting process. Getting a job interview is really difficult. In that sense this personal branding is in quite important position, so that you could somehow stand out from the group of applicants.*

Being hired is the most obvious reason for practicing personal branding, as mentioned by all interviewees. *“I feel it's so much more difficult to find a job these days, as there is so much more competition in everything. It feels like you must brand yourself to get a job”*. Getting a job is described as a competition needed to be won, and with personal branding, one can demonstrate why one should be hired instead of the other applicants. Personal branding is thus used to compete in the job market, in order to be hired, especially due to the increased competition (Lair, et al., 2005). The excerpt 2 illustrates how personal branding is especially considered important in order to be chosen to the job interview – a strong personal brand can make one to *“stand out from that pile of applications”*. Personal branding actions, especially in the digital sphere, are seen to *“add meat around the bones”*, referring to give the recruiters more information about the applicant in addition to the CV and cover letter. Hence, the students feel that personal branding may be most helpful at the early stages of the application process, as Close, et al. (2011) point out.

Thus, the students feel that personal branding is done in order to *be noticed*. This refers to both being noticed as an applicant as well as in the cases of being “headhunted”. Many interviewees point out that the latter especially is one of the greatest reasons for practicing personal branding in the online environment: *“I've heard that many recruiters look at those [channels] when looking for people”*.

- (3) *Professionals, those who are already in expert positions for sure practice personal branding, because – well – it opens doors.*

Career advancement in general is brought up by the majority of the students, which Vallas and Cummins (2015) and Shepherd (2005) also state as the reason for practicing personal branding. As demonstrated in excerpt 3, personal branding is seen to *“open doors”*, and thus branding is practiced even when not directly looking for a new job or promotion. Also Parmentier, et al. (2013) state that personal branding may help in finding unexpected, interesting opportunities, both within and outside of the current employer. The reasons for the wish to advance in career may be purely ambition-based, but also return on economic capital may be on the background (Khedler, 2014).

- (4) *The only reason why I want to do this is that now that I start applying for after-graduation jobs, I need to lift my professional presence away from this little girl, or student [image], or so that I'm not student girl anymore but really a hardcore [professional] woman.*

The analysis shows that personal branding is more important for some job seekers than others; *the stage of career* as well as the *nature of the job* affect. More than half of the interviewees state that personal branding is especially important in the early stages of career, such as students looking for their first job after graduation. Getting the first job is seen as even more difficult, and often the people are still trying to build their professional self. Personal branding can help to stand out as credible future professionals, as illustrated in excerpt 4; personal branding is used to express professionalism and a shift towards the working life. The same thought is brought up by Close, et al (2011). Similarly, students looking for summer jobs may want to “*polish their public image*” in order to get a job. Half of the interviewees also point out that in the later stages of career the “*career will start to flow*”, and thus the importance of active personal branding decreases. However, two interviewees see the matter from the opposite point of view:

- (5) *It's not that important, or I don't think it's very important at least if I think about myself, that I graduate and look for work, so then it's not important. --- but later in career I see that its significance grows. And when our profile strengthens, meaning we have had certain kind of jobs.*

Excerpt 5 illustrates how personal branding would make more sense at the later stages of career as one then has some “profile” to present. One is then seen to have “*more experience to build their brand on*”, which is also linked to the “*opening of doors*” aspect. Three interviewees combine both viewpoints and feel that personal branding is as important “*at all stages of career*” – both due to standing out when looking for the first job, and to gain access to opportunities, people and resources that could otherwise prove difficult. This view is in line with Close, et al (2011), as they argue that personal branding is only *most* important in the early stages of career, but one can benefit at other stages of life as well.

- (6) *Its importance varies according to the job. Maybe in those tasks that require a lot of networks, and that you know different people, like as a salesperson, it's really important that you know people and can demonstrate you know them. --- For example in some clerical worker positions, I don't think it's very important then. So it's important to practice in such jobs where you can clearly show that you are more valuable because of your brand. Maybe in expert or supervisor positions.*

As for the nature of job, personal branding is seen as more important for business students and professionals than for those in operative technical tasks or blue-collar professions. However, the perceived importance within business field also varies, and as most important personal branding is seen in such particular tasks in which one can “*clearly show that you are more valuable*” with one’s brand, as illustrated in excerpt 6. If one is looking for a job that involves a lot of social contact with others or networks in general, then personal branding is more important to practice, for example in a supervisor position or when working with sales. Personal branding is also seen as important for expert positions, but then mainly for demonstrating this expert knowledge. In addition, the students see that personal branding is more important for being hired and advancing on one’s career in the field of marketing, as *personality* is seen to have a greater impact on work performance than in some less people-oriented tasks. After all, as a marketing professional “*you need to be able to market yourself in order to market something else*”.

On the other hand, career-related reasons are also linked to personal branding being a “must”, as brought up by the majority of the students. *Social pressure* is behind this; while others practice it, one must as well (see also section 4.2.3). By pressure, the students refer to the “*need to be a certain kind of a person*” as well as need to act in a certain way, such as practice networking. “*It creates pressure to do the same things as others, because you know everyone else does that as well.*” This is emphasized especially by those students who have less of relevant work experience, are not certain about their professional aspirations, or who are not as active in presenting themselves on social media. “*I think many business students live in the illusion that you have to be a super person in all aspects of life*”. One student even states that as more and more people are beginning to actively practice branding, “*at some point you just need to do it or you stand no chance*”. Thus, personal branding is a social phenomenon also in this aspect (Hearn, 2008). The must as a reason for practicing personal branding can be linked to the “fear” of not practicing it (e.g. Shepherd, 2005); although none of the interviewees expresses this, the fear may be a subconscious reason.

- (7) *I would like to start approaching this from the angle that why do people feel one must do it. I believe it’s practiced only because you must do it. That everyone feels that you must have that certain presence. If talking about branding in professional life sense I mean. I don’t think that anyone really wants to, or why would anyone really want to for example share some career articles on LinkedIn? Who would really be interested in doing that at home on a Thursday night? No, people really want to watch How I met your mother and eat ice cream and be with their families and loved ones and take their dogs out. What is it that makes us wake up terrified in the middle of the night that “nooooo I have my title wrong on*

LinkedIn!” What is it? I believe one does it only because you think that everyone does it and you think it’s a must to do it.

The student in excerpt 7 brings up an interesting notion by questioning *why* people *feel* that they must practice personal branding just because others do so. The student describes that people “feel” they must have a presence, which can be translated to both online and offline presence. The student points out how many of the actions taken due to personal branding seem like such that people would rather not take – sharing articles on LinkedIn in this case. The student does not imply that the brand would be fake, but rather that people take on actions they would rather not spend time on, and feel like it is a must in order to brand themselves. Similar kind of feeling can be perceived in most of the interviews. Thus, personal branding is perceived as a “chore” or a series of chores that are mostly taken because one feels one *has to*. The student in excerpt 7 continues: “*It may of course help you forward in some [career-related] situations, if you do it right*”.

Other career-related motivational factors are brought up only by a few students. Gaining credibility as a field expert is linked to gaining of cultural capital. Also, networking as an important part of personal branding is practiced in the career-sense as brought up by one student; by acquiring valuable contacts, a person can increase the field-specific social capital. Increasing social and cultural capital as motivators for personal branding are also brought up by Parmentier, et al. (2013). In addition, two students mention that a business leader status may make practicing of personal branding essential, as these people are followed in the media and are expected to act according to the company image. Otherwise, a brand conflict may arise as the personal brand shows contradictory message in relation to the company brand (Shepherd, 2005). Also Dutta (2010) emphasizes the need for business leaders to practice branding. In addition, *finding the right job* is brought up by a few interviewees. Personal branding is seen as a *tool* that helps recognizing the strengths and professional desires. After all, “*every jobseeker wants to find a job where they enjoy working*”.

4.3.2 Looking good in front of others

While the interviewees link personal branding mostly to professional life, all but two students also bring up private life-related motivational factors. Firstly, personal relations and especially establishing new social connections are seen as an important driver. The analysis shows that then personal branding is practiced both to “*find people who think like you*” as well as to impress others. In these situations, personal branding is used to reflect certain characteristics of oneself to

communicate the brand. Such branding happens especially when looking for new friends and connections, and when meeting people for the first time. Also dating and finding a partner are mentioned by a few; in looking for a “*dating partner or even a one-night stand, it is all about personal branding*”. Also Hearn (2008) and Labrecque, et al. (2011) note that personal branding is practiced with the purpose of establishing social relationships. “*Actually all longer or even shorter personal relations*” are seen as motivators to brand oneself, but especially in the beginning stage.

Nine interviewees also bring up self-expression as a reason for personal branding. According to the analysis, this can be divided into two categories: the first one is about self-realization and purely self-related desires, while the second is about looking for social acceptance and acknowledgement. Personal branding can help in “*forming a clearer image of self*”, which is used in building one’s identity. “*It could be thought of how a 15-year-old is searching for his identity*”. Hence, personal branding can help in finding “*your own thing*”. Thus, self-realization is an important motivator for personal branding (Labrecque, et al., 2011).

- (8) *Maybe people have some kind of a need to look good in front of other people. Maybe the culture has moved towards that direction, especially at our business school, that you just cannot go to school wearing a hoodie. You have the kind of feeling as if you would have to show that you belong here.*

Expert 8 illustrates a situation when personal branding is used for social acceptance – here through wearing appropriate clothes. In general, people have a need or want to tool good in the eyes of others, as brought up in excerpt 8, which is also linked to wanting to gain social acknowledgement. Social media, for example, can be used to create an image in which “*my friends think I’m a cool guy*”. Individuals want to lift their status and thus increase their symbolic capital (Parmentier, et al., 2013); “*People like to be respected*”.

Thus, the analysis shows that personal branding is practiced for multiple reasons, both professional and private-life related. However, the students see professional reasons as more important, and those are the ones I am also most interested for the purpose of this research.

Hence, it can be summarized that for professional purposes, personal branding is practiced in order to **1) stand out from the crowd when looking for a job, 2) be noticed and given new opportunities without looking, and 3) advance in career within and outside of the company.**

4.4 Where do I brand myself?

In this section I will look at where the interviewees perceive that personal branding happens. As stated, ten of the interviewees see that personal branding happens “*everywhere where you meet people*” and “*in everyday life*”, “*at situations where you present yourself*”. The social aspect shows up, and the students have understood that branding actions happen at all places where the brand can be communicated to others in one way or another, independent of whether that is done consciously (Schau & Gilly, 2003; Hearn, 2008). Here the “everywhere” is opened up to find out some concrete places and platforms. The aim is to provide a general look of the places where personal branding happens instead of going closer into details.

- (1) *Generally I see that, or how I explain reality to myself, that humans have, as long as there has been civilization, lived in the physical world. Everything that has happened is there, and the scale up to which you can act at a point of time is in that one place. Now this virtual world has come on the top of it, where these economies of scale are unbelievable. You can spread your message everywhere unbelievably efficiently. It has come on top of it, and it's increasingly important.*

All the students bring up that there is a clear division of personal branding being practiced in the offline and online worlds. The excerpt above illustrates that the students also understand the impact of the online world on personal branding. The student mentions economies of scale, and the same idea can be perceived in the replies of all interviewees; the focus of personal branding has changed from offline to online, just as the literature suggests (e.g. Hearn, 2008).

The aspect *where* is dependent on how the students understand personal branding in general. As said, most of the students see the phenomenon to happen everywhere and all the time, even unconsciously, while a few consider personal branding only as planned actions, usually related to professional life. An example of the latter is presented by a student who feels that personal branding is even difficult and “*extremely occasional*” in the offline world, because “*it requires inside knowledge of where potential people move around*”. Thus, this student links branding to planned actions that require access to other than public spaces.

- (2) *For sure some people behave differently at school than somewhere else. At workplace even more strongly. I would think that at work you want to strongly keep a different kind of brand image of yourself than at free time.*

In addition, the analysis shows that *where* personal branding takes place, how it is done and with what aim all affect one another. Excerpt 2 illustrates how the students understand personal branding as dependent of place: branding at university usually is carried out with different aims than that at workplace, and in the latter individuals usually pay more attention to how they present themselves. Thus, personal branding is dependent on place (Hearn, 2008).

The analysis of data shows that the opinions on preferred environments for practicing personal branding, offline or online, are quite mixed. While all students admit that the online world offers effective ways as stated above, many are far more in favor of personal branding in the traditional world when it comes to career-related purposes. In general, all interviewees feel that unless one is a public person or has access to mainstream media, face-to-face branding is *most powerful*, but online channels permit more *efficient* allocation of time and resources. *“I feel that a personal brand shines the best live”*. Therefore, the right mixture of both channels is needed.

4.4.1 Personally there

When talking about the offline world, the students agree that personal branding takes place at those places where one can have social contact with others, and face-to-face communication is mentioned by many. Thus, a certain kind of *public* element is required in branding. Specific places that are mentioned are job interviews, university, work-related seminars, and one student even notes that branding happens at home in the form of how one decorates the house. Thus, this demonstrates the in general the students have a good understanding how branding really happens almost everywhere with social contact (Schau & Gilly, 2003)

- (3) *The first thing that comes to my mind are job interviews. I used to go to interviews a lot last spring when I looked for work, and seriously you could see anything there. At one group interview for this big company, for example, there were people who came there, well not in jogging pants but almost. And the habitus was such that let's not sit straight but just collapsing on the chair. --- And then this person says in the interview that "I need, or I don't know, I need a job and this sounds kind of interesting".*

Career-aspect shows up greatly in the interviews, as every interviewee links personal branding to getting a job and events related to professional life, as illustrated in the excerpt 3. The excerpt above illustrates this with *job interviews* mentioned as important places for personal branding; there one has a concrete target of getting the job, and all energy can be concentrated on self-presentation. In this

case, the person in question did not succeed in branding himself, as the interviewee recalls the person in a negative light, self-presentation not meeting the norms set by the place. If similar self-presentation would have taken place somewhere else, say at university, the brand could have been perceived differently. Hence, the place where branding takes place really matters (Hearn, 2008). Interestingly, job interviews are explicitly brought up only by half of the interviewees, and as few as two mention that branding takes place at the current workplace. However, I assume this finding is simply due to the students considering the whole phenomenon as career-related, and hence take these spaces for granted. After all, job applying situations are such where personal branding is widely present (Close, et al., 2011).

In addition, the students perceive that branding to takes place in written form on an application and CV. *"It's your CV, what color of titles you have there, and what kind of a picture you have there"*. Indeed, some offline spaces for personal branding are other than face-to-face communicative situations (Close, et al., 2011).

- (4) *I think that one good way, if we think of the work world, are field-related events and such. If you can get to those to talk, that will follow, or sometimes it feels like it doesn't even matter what you say there and people will already get this wow feeling.*
- (5) *Well for sure at that kind of company events, and career fairs. --- Those are really good for presenting yourself. There are these company dinners at our school, those are simply great, and you get to talk to the people personally.*

The analysis shows that interviewees also see various career-related events, such as *career fairs*, and *networking events* by companies, as well as all kinds of field-specific seminars as great places for personal branding. According to the analysis, there are two ways to look at the events: *public speaking opportunities* at professional events *vs. networking opportunities* at both professional events and those organized for students. Excerpt 4 above illustrates the public speaking opportunities, which were brought up by only two students. The student describes the power of such public speaking by *"it doesn't even matter what you say there"*. These are seen as great platforms to illustrate one's expertise on a certain matter as well as public speaking and presentation skills. Excerpt 5 illustrates the more often mentioned aspect of participating in career-related events: the networking aspect. The student emphasizes that such events offer the best way to make an impact, as one gets to *present oneself* and *talk to people personally*. Indeed, the overall analysis of data shows that despite all other platforms available for personal branding and the online platforms being easiest to use, all interviewees considered personal communication as the most powerful tool for branding oneself.

Presenting oneself and networking with people at seminars and networking events are therefore of uttermost importance, as is suggested also by Dutta (2010) and Hearn (2008). In addition to networking events, one student mentions that personal branding happens at organized networks that operate both offline (as events) and online (maintaining the network): *“It is this kind of professional network for women in the business field, so that they meet each other and network”*.

In addition to career related places, the interviewees also brought various other places where personal branding can be encountered. More than half of the students briefly mention university-related personal branding. According to the interviewees, branding at university happens at lectures, group working situations, as well as in student life. Especially important are the beginnings of studies, lecture series, as at those times one specifically encounters large number of *new* people. Other examples of places for personal branding that were mentioned were for example print media, cocktail events, cafés, clubs and parties. This again illustrates that the interviewees see personal branding happens everywhere, often also outside the professional context (Hearn, 2008; Labrecque, et al., 2011).

As the places for personal branding in the offline world seem to be endless, also the border between private and professional life becomes blurrier than in the online world. This is, as a few interviewees note, due to one not being able to control oneself at all times in real life unlike in the offline world. Most often the students perceive such blurred division through network-thinking: according to them, most often valuable networks and connections are found without any specific purpose in mind:

(6) *And I know that the people in the [football] team, despite all my stupid jokes in the locker rooms, I’ve done some kind of an impression and they don’t think of me as a complete asshole. --- I believe that all those discussion on the sauna benches would have helped me in getting a job, if I had decided to look through them”*.

(7) *He just called his friend that hey, shall we have coffee, and he got a job. Simply because his friend had a firm and they were just looking for someone.*

Excerpts 6 and 7 illustrate how personal branding takes place at hobbies and even when meeting casually with friends for a coffee. In the former, unconscious personal branding in a private-life setting could have actually resulted in professional gains. In the latter such unconscious branding has even led to getting a job, as the employer considered the person’s brand as suitable for the task. All

in all, it could be said that personal branding in the offline world happens everywhere, in public and private place with any social contact, despite of the aim (Hearn, 2008)

4.4.2 Virtually there

As brought up in chapters 4.1 and 4.2, digitalization is widely present in the interviews. According to data analysis, the dominant factor for why online platforms are increasingly used in personal branding is the easiness: *“it is nowadays so much easier, unless you are a really big character otherwise and go talk around everywhere”*. This student refers to the need to be publicly known person to gain visibility with traditional methods, but in the online world everyone can express themselves, despite their publicity status or number and quality of contacts in the real world. In excerpt 8, another student remarks how *“you can spread your message everywhere unbelievably effectively”* in the online world. In addition, virtual sphere eases the targeting of message as it increases *“the accuracy of how you can aim it”*, as also brought up in the previous section. Freedom of expression and independency of time and space make up the benefits of using digital channels in personal branding (Schau & Gilly, 2003). The students feel that online tools equalize personal branding, and make it possible for anyone to create a well-known brand.

- (8) *Like suddenly this Benjamin Peltonen -kind of thing, that you just put pictures online. And suddenly he is a celebrity and does music.*

In the excerpt above the student refers to a phenomenon in which a Finnish teenager boy started posting pictures of himself on the popular social media platform Instagram. In a short while, he gathered a great number of followers around the world and quickly became a celebrity known by the wider media in Finland, resulting in professional advantages as well. (Nyt, 2014) Although this study is not concentrated on celebrity brands, this is a great example of the power of the online channels for building personal brands and making oneself known by larger groups of people, achieving the goals wished.

The data analysis shows that students perceive personal branding in the online world to take place mostly via *social media platforms*. The social networking sites Facebook and LinkedIn are brought up by everyone. Facebook is clearly seen as a platform where the targets are not as defined and may vary. *“On Facebook, a good example is that someone wants to for example take stand on political issues, and someone else talks more about hobbies, having gone running and so on.”* While mostly serving such private life purposes, a few students note that Facebook is also an important networking

tool with students who have studied in the same field, as those may be one's future colleagues, or even recruiters. Even though all the students state they use Facebook solely for private life purposes, many note the image given there still matters. This is again linked to the importance of networking, especially with social media offering a great platform (Dutta, 2010).

LinkedIn is seen as a fully goal-oriented space, as its main purpose is to act as a professional platform for personal branding. LinkedIn, as well as Facebook, is perceived as something that almost everyone has. An interesting discussion can be perceived among the interviewees: while most believe that LinkedIn is a must-place to be present in terms of personal branding, many of them also criticize its usefulness. LinkedIn is seen as a “*static CV which is always available*” where “*you list all your skills what you know at least a bit of*”, but the information about competences is not always seen that reliable. As most regard it as a CV, LinkedIn's “*function is to make recruiters interested of you*”. Indeed, LinkedIn being a highly career-oriented platform it is mostly used for professional networking.

- (9) *You can for example start a blog. Write something about marketing. For example this [name removed] from our school, who works at some advertising agency. He has quite a strong personal brand. He has written a lot of blog posts on the "Markkinointi & Mainonta" [Marketing & Advertising] magazine, and he has had some quite radical opinions as well, which have apparently led to a lot of discussion on the discussion forums. --- He has clearly given an image of himself that he's some kind of a marketing guru. But he isn't that necessarily, but he writes that blog and he has expressed his ideas there.*

Blogs as good platforms for branding are mentioned by majority of the interviewees. This is due to multiple reasons: First, blogs are seen as a great place for presenting one's competences: “*Maybe the largest demonstration of expertise is some kind of a professional blog*”. Excerpt 9 illustrates how personal branding in blogs gives the impression of expert knowledge for the readers – “*at least I get an impression*” – and thus the brand is formed and strengthened in the minds of the readers. This happens despite that the impression may be exaggerated or fake, as the student notes “*he isn't that necessarily*”. Second, personal branding in blogs is seen as a place to present personality; the interviewee in excerpt 9 notes how the blogger has aroused discussion with radical opinions. Majority of the interviewees emphasize that showing the *personal* side of the brand is a very important aspect of personal branding in general, as also backed by Marwick & Boyd (2011). Blog offers a place for being “*funny and sharp*”. Also, as noted in excerpt 9, blogs as platforms for personal branding need not be personal blogs but also those of corporates can be used. The latter may increase the size of

potential audience, as the initial audience is likely to be much greater. Third, the interviewees see blogs as a good place for sharing knowledge; this implies that in addition to showing competence, one may also learn oneself via discussions and thus develop the brand. Therefore, blogging may, despite being a place for presenting the brand, serve as a method of increasing social and cultural capital (Parmentier, et al., 2013); also in excerpt 9, the reference to a “marketing guru” implies that blogging has provided increased social status.

(10) *Maybe for a student or a recent graduate it's a bit pretentious to be writing a blog, because you don't necessarily yet have any set field substance knowledge, about which you would know so much that it's worth to start blogging. Twitter is an easier way to engage in discussions and show that arising potential.*

The analysis shows, however, that in order for blogging to make sense one has to have gathered enough of field-specific knowledge, as stated in excerpt 10. Hence, the interviewees feel that blogs as a place for personal branding serve better in the latter stages of career, or whenever such specific knowledge has been achieved. The microblogging platform Twitter, which is brought up by almost all interviewees, is seen as an easier place to start branding oneself (as in excerpt 10). Many interviewees praise Twitter, such as in excerpt 11, and as reasons they mention that 1) it's easy to approach and reach people, also those in important positions who one would otherwise not be able to interact with, and that 2) it provides a method for learning. As also Marwick and Boyd (2011) point out, twitter offers a dynamic and interactive place for self-presentation.

(11) *Well that Twitter is my favorite, I would be there. And that's because I think that there, or always when you do something related to professional career, it would be nice if you could also learn while benefitting from it.*

Despite almost everyone suggesting Twitter as a good place for branding, the students also point out how the platform's usefulness is field-specific; Twitter is generally seen as more important for those in the marketing field. Field-specificity shows also in the sense that three marketing students perceive Twitter as the best place for online personal branding, while others merely see it as one of the platforms available in addition to other, more important spaces. The differences of perceived usefulness can be explained by the differences in expected audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2011): only the few marketing students believe their future employers may require them to use Twitter, while others believe being present on Twitter could serve as a benefit, but is more likely irrelevant for the recruiters.

(12) *I think one student had made this video of himself on the internet. ---some Prezi presentation of yourself, website, that's what I've hear. So basically your CV has a link to some website, and then there's a short interactive presentation in which you can navigate what you want, so it's no PowerPoint presentation that goes in the set order, but you can sort of zoom in to certain parts.*

Besides Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and blogs, other online personal branding platforms were only brought up by one or a few interviewees. Such were firm-hosted webinars, personal websites and interactive online CV forms (video, Prezi presentation), as illustrated in excerpt 12. The students lifting each platform up regarded those as somewhat beneficial, though usually providing only marginal benefit. In addition, the picture-posting applications Instagram and Pinterest as well as the video service YouTube are seen platforms for showing one's artistic side.

4.5 How do I and should I brand myself?

While personal branding as a phenomenon is difficult to understand, *how* personal branding is done is perhaps even more difficult to describe with its multiple affecting factors. In the previous section, *where* personal branding happens was handled. The platforms for practicing are interlinked with *how*, and therefore those should be kept in mind when reading this section.

In this section, I will compare the two aspects of *how*: how the students understand personal branding should be done, and how they then actually practice it. First I will explain how the students understand that *they* are practicing personal branding.

4.5.1 What is a good personal brand like?

Before discussing how the students practice branding and how they think that should be done, it's important to present some general guidelines for *what kind of a brand* the students feel one should aim at. The interviewees' thoughts agree with those of literature (Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque, et al., 2011): majority brought up that the brand should be focused and clear, coherent and authentic.

- (1) *Since a human being cannot be everything in the end. Or then it evokes a shady image in my opinion. An image that you want to do everything and you succeed in everything. It is really hard to say, what kind of tasks you could give to this person, if he knows everything already. In my opinion, it's important to be focused.*

Focused and clear was brought up by four marketing and three economics students. The students emphasized that one should focus on a few central aspects that are most important for the particular person brand. This is reasoned in the excerpt 7: one cannot be everything, and if one tries so, this may rather lead to negative results. As the interviewees state, one should "*find cohesion*" instead of "*swinging to all possible directions*". In that sense, focusing is also about "targeting" the brand: "*It should bring out the good parts and leave out the unnecessary parts*". A few students note that this is important as "*if there is too much information the important one will get lost*". The same is brought up in the excerpt 1, as then it is more difficult for potential employers to spot the greatest value that the person could provide for the employer, for example. Hence, the students suggest the same as Shepherd (2005) and Labrecque, et al. (2011): a personal brand should be built on a few pillars to avoid the brand to be perceived as unclear.

- (2) *Well, let's say that if you are on LinkedIn where you want to give a certain image of yourself. To make it work and to make people believe that image, you have to be like that everywhere.*

Half of the students also underline the coherency of the brand. Many bring up the power of social media, which allows multiple presentations of oneself simultaneously. As the excerpt 8 demonstrates, a brand is most credible when the self-presentation at different channels communicates a similar image of the person. However, the students also note, similarly to Shepherd (2005), that a person naturally has multiple dimensions and different channels are often used for different purposes. Therefore, especially *"the channels that are essential for job search should represent a similar kind of image"*.

- (3) *I think it should be the best version of you. In my opinion, it's not a good thing if it doesn't match reality at all, because then it would be difficult, I could imagine, difficult to maintain, if you were some kind of a character all the time. But I would say it's the best version of you. Because then when you are at the office, negative things of you show up, which you haven't shown in the interview, I would say that it's normal. No one says that at the interview.*

Authenticity seems to strike as the most important feature for the personal brand, brought up by nine students. The degree of authenticity divides the opinions into two stands: while three students emphasize that the brand should represent the "true self" and *"the person should be the brand"*, most interviewees see that the brand should rather present *"the best version of you"*, as illustrated in the excerpt 9 above. The former view is backed by the students' own experiences: *"I've been twice told that I got the job because the way I acted in the job interview gave exactly the same impression as my job application had given"*. The "best version of you" view, then, is explained by people in general trying to look a bit better than they are – for example in a job interview – as also brought up in the previous chapters. The students see such *"polishing of the truth"* as normal, since *"everyone does it"*. Therefore, they state a personal brand should rather be *"in line with your personality"*. However, the two views are not necessarily controversial, as also those who call for the "true self" admit one should not bring out the negative aspects in a job interview.

An authentic brand is also seen as easier to maintain, as brought up by four students. The students state that keeping up an unreal brand will get distressing and difficult, and may lead to difficult situations if lacking coherency. Therefore, the brand should be such that *"you have resources to keep"*. This is especially important as personal branding is done every day by all actions (Hearn, 2008). Also, authentic brand is seen to base on the true strengths, which is seen to help in succeeding with the

brand. *“It’s terrible if you suppress your strengths or your characteristics a lot”*, as often those distinct characteristics are the greatest source of distinct strength. The same requirements for the brand to be authentic and base on the true strengths of the person are also reflected in the literature (e.g. Shepherd, 2005; Montoya, 2002, cited in Hearn, 2008, p.205).

- (4) *“After all, the jobseeker and employer are both looking for each other. So sometimes I feel that is this personal brand just a purposefully built paper doll in between, which represents a dream employee. And then the employee and the job do not really match, as in between lies your personal brand.*

Lastly, although a few students see that *“sometimes it may be good to play a role”*, for example when in need of a job, most interviewees argue that a brand should always match with the position and therefore present the true self at job interviews, as illustrated in the excerpt 10. Hence, the overall opinion about authenticity could be concluded as such: *“in the long run I think it’s the best to brand you as a person as exactly like you feel yourself.*

The analysis shows that in general, all the students also act according to these principles, or at least this is how they claim; while a few may be lacking focus or the brand, due to not knowing what they want in the future, all the students seem to present such a brand image that is coherent across channels and represents their authentic self. Naturally, the level of authenticity varies, but none of the students admits to try to pretend something they are not.

4.5.2 Do I brand myself?

Based on the analysis, the students can be divided into two different camps according to whether the students state to practice branding. The first group consists of those who admit that they do practice personal branding to some degree, mostly for professional purposes. The second group consists of those who claim not to brand themselves, but then note that some of their actions may be seen as branding, even though not consciously practicing it and thus regard the actions as branding. Indeed, the stories told by the students reveal they everyone practices branding to some degree, for example by attending field-specific events.

- (5) *I have consciously tried to brand myself away from it. I was looking for different types of jobs, and I realized that I had to explain my [country X] -specialized background at many job interviews. I developed a background story that I’m consciously trying to move away*

from it. In reality I couldn't care less whether I would work with this country related stuff or not at the end, but I felt like that was a part of my brand. And even now I am telling you, even if I could honestly speak out, so I am telling you that I consciously tried to move away, even though I just tried to look for something to pay my rent with and to get food on the table. At job interviews for many times. I tell the same story to so many people, saying that I have been doing that specific country thing for such a long time, and I don't want to get stuck there for the rest of my life, and now that I am graduating it's a good time to let it go and do something else, broaden my perspective. As if it had been my long-term goal.

Three marketing and two economics students admit to practice personal branding with conscious actions. Excerpt 1 illustrates this: in this case, the student has strived to brand oneself out of the current role, and has compiled a story around this "hope". The reason for such branding has been the wish to be hired, and therefore the student has modified the message according to the *audience* needs. The student also brings up that "*I couldn't care*" what job he lands. Therefore, such modified story is not necessarily against the authenticity principle, as the student would have been happy to work with other tasks as well.

- (6) *Well mostly I have, if I'm thinking of the beginning of the business school... Then it was like pretending. Not completely, but I was pretending to be interested in anything related to business and economy. Which is actually not a big lie. But exaggeratedly interested, like many people are in my opinion. The focus has shifted to that I find it much nicer to be myself and to snort around...*

In addition, one economics student notes that he used to practice branding in the beginning of studies, but nowadays places very little or zero attention on branding. This is illustrated in excerpt 2: after a while, the student has later on realized that "*it was like pretending*". The student has, through self-examination, recognized to rather enjoy acting exactly according to the feeling, without trying to be something one is not. However, as stated in chapter 4.2, there are several viewpoints on how branding is perceived – and some of the interviewees see that branding is not always about pretending but can also be seen as *who one is*.

- (7) *That is really difficult for the reason, that as you know, I don't really think such things in life or when looking for jobs. I don't think that I have to project a certain image of myself, or that someone would get a certain image if I do this or that. I am not consciously choosing those large things that would give that desired image.*

The second group, then, features students who *place a lot less attention on branding themselves*. Three students of both groups communicated such a view during the interviews. As illustrated in excerpt 3, the students do not consciously perform actions in order to give a specific view of themselves – or so they state. The student in the excerpt above states not to consciously choose such actions that would give *"the desired image"*. However, I would argue the same as brought up by many interviewees: everyone brands themselves sometimes, without thinking about it, as there are always certain situations in life when one tries to look good in front of the others, such as in a job interview.

- (8) *But even though I don't think about it, I am still doing it nevertheless. That if I applied for a job at a company, that would be e.g. in the media industry, I guess I would create that certain professional image of myself, that I have been working in the movie industry, or been in contact with persons from this or that industry.*

Excerpt 4 illustrates how the students also later admit to brand themselves sometimes, though not consciously paying attention on it. As the student in the excerpt states, *"I am still doing it"*, and explains such branding happens especially when looking for a job. The student also notes that *"well I am on LinkedIn and I have a few recommendations there. So in that sense yes, I do brand myself"*. Thus, branding takes place even without actively planning it. Also, one student brings up not to practice branding otherwise, but always paying attention on visual identity, especially at work: *"I kind of try to build this professional imago"* through wearing appropriate clothes. Therefore, it can be concluded that all the interviewees practice personal branding, to some degree or another. As Hearn (2008) point out, branding is not always conscious, but all our actions affect our brands.

In addition, all the interviewees were asked to tell about their own brands – *who they are*. The stories varied extensively in length; a few talked for multiple minutes, while two students had trouble coming up with more than a few sentences. This may indicate that these students are not fully certain about their brand identity which they want to project to the world. The other student actually points that out explicitly by stating that *"this is the most difficult question of the interview"*. The student also changes the direction of his story at some point, ending with the words *"terrible, existential crisis"*. However, it is also possible that the students did not feel comfortable with sharing more information for the research; it is likely that the brand story told would have been more extensive in a job interview situation, for example.

Interestingly, when asked to describe their brands, only two students explicitly state to have multiple brands, as presented in excerpt 5. However, Shepherd (2005) remarks that people very often present

multiple identities according to the role in a group. Later on, this can also be perceived in most of the responses by the students.

- (9) *Well it depends whom I'm with, whenever. With the group of friends I have one brand, in another group another kind of a brand. And then in the hobby group one more brand, as it is beneficial to create some kind of a distinctive brand there as well.*

In addition, the students were asked to present a “tagline” of their brand. Only six of the interviewees – as many marketing and economics students – were able to come up with a professionally-targeted line on the spot, such as “*internationally-oriented all-around marketing talent*”. The interviewees admitted they had nothing prepared, as can be seen in excerpt 6, and many pointed out how this kind of a punchline, or tagline, would be important to have. Only one interviewee stated to have such prepared, including aspects of both the study background as well as the current job.

- (10) *The first thing that comes to my mind is "a man that doesn't know what he wants", though that's not very good for branding...*

However, to protect the anonymity of the interviewees, I opt to leave out the further illustrations of what the students describe their personal brands to be. For the rest of the chapter, I will first concentrate on *what kind of a brand* the students feel like it's important to seek, after which I will explain *how* the students brand themselves, and how they think that should be done.

4.5.3 If I brand, how do I brand?

The analysis shows that the interviewees' opinions on how personal branding should be practiced are as versatile as the literature also suggests; there is *no one-size-fits-all* strategy in personal branding (Shepherd, 2005). This is reflected throughout the interviews, as all respondents bring up their own, personalized views on how to practice branding. Many also state this out loud; personal branding is practiced well when “*you do it in a way that is the right for you*”.

- (11) *Identifiable, of course. But I don't think it's too bad if your personal brand is not identifiable, because many people are alike with others. There may even be groups of personal brands --- And in those groups these persons can then somehow be distinguished from each other.*

Half of the interviewees emphasize how a personal brand is most valuable when standing out and thus “*producing value*”. However, a few students also point out how the specific industry or even the company matter, as “*everyone has to be able to adapt into the professional norms of the field*”. As this principle implicitly keeps popping up when discussing relevant channels and communication styles, it could be said the students fundamentally – or perhaps even unconsciously – follow the strategy proposed by Parmentier, et al. (2013): **standing out while fitting in**. This is well illustrated in excerpt 11: the brand does not need to be distinguishable – or different – from others, but it has to stand out within the reference group. Even though one student suggests creating “*exceptional material*” compared to the great masses, complete differentiation without fitting in to the industry norms is opposed by Parmentier, et al. (2013), as well as by almost all students. As the students state, one has to “*look*” certain kind at a certain industry.

4.5.3.1 The right starting points

- (12) *I would begin with emphasizing my own interests, and would think about everything in longer term, where I want to see myself and doing what. In that sense from an ideological point of view, that you would go for things you want to see yourself doing and what you like to do instead of doing what seems smart.*

The analysis shows that in order to practice personal branding, one should first carry out self-examination to figure out what one is aiming at, as emphasized by all but one interviewee. For this, the students advice to define “*what you want from life*”, as is also suggested by Dutta (2010). The students thus greatly link the starting point for personal branding with the requirement of authenticity. Goals that represent the “*true interests*” of the person are widely seen as the “*right starting points*” in order to create the most durable, valuable – and authentic – brand. This is illustrated in excerpt 12: one should begin to brand oneself by thinking what one wants to achieve on a long-term basis. In addition, the students advise to identify the personal *strengths and skills*. Most interviewees brought this up, as taking advantage of one's strengths helps in developing a brand that can provide the greatest value for others. “*It's important to crystallize what you can and what you want*”. Thus, the student understands branding similarly as emphasized in the literature (e.g. Labrecque, et al., 2011).

- (13) *Firstly you should think what you want to do and achieve. So if you want to look for start-up jobs, you shouldn't perhaps go there suited up with the most formal tie, but somehow differently. The opposite.*

According to the analysis of data, what one wants to achieve – or *"the target and vision"* as one interviewee put it – should then guide and be reflected in all conscious branding actions. Excerpt 13 illustrates how even dressing for a job interview should be based on the targets of personal branding. Therefore, *setting goals is the first step* into the branded self.

However, many of the interviewees do not take such a planned and deep view when branding themselves. While almost everyone states that they do try to build their professional brands by doing such things that support the brand, only a few state to have actually pondered on their deeper aims and having set specific goals.

(14) *"Let's say that for whatever I decide to do in my life, no matter what, I go for it for the right reasons, genuinely and with my whole heart".*

Still, all interviewees say to *base their branding on their interests and strengths*. Three interviewees think of this especially strongly and emphasize how they base all their decisions in life according to what they want to do, as illustrated on excerpt 14 above. These students thus act according to the requirement of authenticity. The students point out how they rather act according to their interests, instead of *"thinking it as a portfolio one should have"* and thus what would look good on a CV. The students perceive this is especially important when branding oneself professionally, as *"it is important that I feel good there myself --- no matter which job position that will be"*.

4.5.3.2 Increasing social and cultural capital

After the targets are set and strengths identified, one can start to develop the brand. As the students state, this should be carried out according to the set targets, little by little and systematically, as illustrated in excerpt 15; one should build the brand, with the set goals always in mind, especially if the goals require a distinct change in direction.

(15) *Or if you realized that you are on the wrong path and would rather do something non-profit. Then you would go to some volunteer stuff and create that philanthropist image of yourself. You couldn't go from the marketing division of McDonald's to the Red Cross. It should be some kind of a plan how you shape yourself fit for the Red Cross...*

However, while most interviewees seem to feel that one should *"build an image for yourself of how you act and what areas you are interested in, instead of going wherever you feel like at a certain point"*, there are also contrary views; one interviewee suggests always acting according to the feeling

instead, as only such can be considered as authentic actions. Still, majority of the interviewees advise to plan branding, as discussed in the previous section. After all, planning and setting targets are seen as very much interlinked; *“you always plan personal branding a little, and even when you are not planning, you still are planning”*. Thus, having a plan is very much linked to developing the brand.

(16) *All that branding stuff is development. ---. Everyone has that brand from the beginning, and then you develop it. Everything you bring to it, is just developing it. When that awareness opens up, or maybe that primary school kid doesn't yet to the employer, but already then it's the thing that if you want to go to the university, you have to get good grades to get in to that university. At the university then, if you want to land a certain job where people care about your GPA, you try do well in exams.*

Most interviewees feel that *“all branding is developing”* as illustrated in excerpt 16. The students see personal branding as a never-ending action that aims at *“keeping up with the change”*. In other words, developing the brand is about updating it, as also illustrated in the excerpt by referring to studies; one develops the personal brand in some way throughout the life. Goals and targets – such as getting in to a university or landing a job – direct the updating of a personal brand. Therefore, the students feel that some sort of developing of the brand is not only possible but a crucial and natural path for the brand to remain competitive: *“you see a target and aim at that, and you don't ever think that you would be ready”*. Switching a job updates the personal brand in terms of work experience, and starting to use a new social media channel helps developing the communication of the brand.

In addition, the students feel that one should increase social and cultural capital in order to improve and develop the brand. Such advice is given by all but one interviewee, as well as many academicians (e.g. Dutta, 2010; Parmentier, et al., 2013). Interestingly however, this aspect of branding shows some differences between the two different major groups: increasing social capital is much more emphasized by marketing students, while the economics students would invest in gaining more of cultural capital. The difference can be explained by the nature of the field and what the students believe that employers are looking for in potential job candidates: in marketing, personal characteristics and social skills are seen to be more important, whereas the economics students assume their knowledge and business skills to form a more determining factor when applying for a job.

(17) *Knowing the right people is usually the best way. And then for example you should something, well not necessarily at that organization but least something in the organizational field, meet people and go to those seminars and events, where you could*

meet people from your dream employer, and that way have the opportunity to show your face and to tell about yourself and create that brand.

Social capital

Getting contacts, in other words networking and thus increasing the social capital, is seen as the most important aspect for building a powerful personal brand, as illustrated in excerpt 17. *"A great part of your personal brand is in any case the people you know"*. However, one should also maintain the networks and utilize them in order to practice personal branding efficiently. Half of the interviewees mention how attending various events and seminars is a great tool for both acquiring and maintaining networks and that way building the personal brand, as illustrated in excerpt 10, and thus to *"strengthen your group of contacts"*. Thus, attending events is a way to stick to the people's minds, as *"often the same people from companies attend these events"*. Social media platforms offer another channel for acquiring contacts and maintaining networks. However, only two interviewees see such platforms as equally good as face-to-face participation for building and maintaining of networks. When kept up to date, networks can then provide great benefits for the individuals who are looking for new career possibilities. *"Many firms want to avoid that [recruiting] by taking an employee through networks, as then you know that the person is good for sure."* Networks are seen as a major factor for career development. In addition, most interviewees point out how increasing social capital also refers to the less obvious networking, such as staying in good terms with previous employers and making sure the recommendations are in order. After all, *"people are more bound to believe what other people tell about you"*. As Parmentier, et al. (2013) point out, developing networks is one of the most critical tools of building a professional brand.

As students see increasing social capital as a crucial method for developing the personal brand, most of them also act according to the own advice. Networking seems to divide the students in two camps: those who actively attend events, and those who practically never attend networking events for a reason or another. However, majority of the students belong to the first group, representing equal number of students from both majors. Three different types of networking events are usually utilized for branding oneself: larger career fairs, field-specific networking events, as well as small career events organized either by the student union together with the companies or by the companies themselves (excursions).

- (18) *I go to excursions just to show my face. At those firms I could be interested in. Even though I don't yet know what I want to do when I grow up, I try to go to excursions as much as*

possible to learn about the firms, but also because they are interesting firms and by attending the events I get to know these people who do the hiring decisions.

The type of networking events that the students attend the most are *excursions and smaller events* organized by the student union or companies. Those are seen as great for personal branding, as one is able personally talk with professionals, those doing the hiring decisions. This is illustrated in excerpt 18; the student attends the events just in case, in order to acquire valuable social capital. As O’Leary, et al. (2002) point out, networking is especially important for job seekers. Interviewees also point out how attending such events is not enough, but one has to put effort into giving a good picture. “*When I attend these excursions, I try to be polite and ask clever questions*”. Thus, the students see it as important to show interest towards the firm or the individuals they meet, as well as to be active at the events attended, which also most interviewees state to do.

(19) *Sometimes I’ve gone to events so that I don’t really feel like this now, but there’s result that now I work in this field whose events I’ve attended. --- I’ve put effort on it even though I couldn’t have cared less for the event, but I’ve thought I may benefit from this in the future.*

Excerpt 19 illustrates how some of the students also attend *field-specific events* in hope of gaining professional advantage. However, these students are usually those who have worked on the same field or company for a longer time already, and thus established some professional knowledge. As the student states, field-specific networking events should be attended even when “*not feeling like going*”, as the importance for the personal brand is great. However, as attending events is time-consuming, the students describe how they “*carefully choose those events to attend*”. The third type of events that almost all interviewees attend to create contacts are *career fairs*. However, these are not seen as effective as more intimate events. Also, a few interviewees who do not attend networking events state that they are simply “*too lazy*”.

Cultural capital

(20) *So then, if you think about developing yourself, so with everyday actions, you do such things you like and what you can use as a part of your work, you do that all the time. If you want to get into the restaurant field, you go to restaurants and cook and so on. Develop your skills. Also out of the professional field. So you do such things all the time where you would also like to see you professionally.*

Improving one's skills and field-specific knowledge is likewise regarded as an important tool in developing a personal brand, especially for career-related purposes. The interviewees point out how cultural capital can be increased by multiple means, but the key issue is to invest time in it, as pointed out below – "*do such things all the time*". One must be active and engage; *you have to find your way to [learn and acquire] certain things, which then build your expertise*". Excerpt 18 illustrates increasing cultural capital in the areas of interest: simply visiting restaurants or learning to cook can be beneficial if aiming for the restaurant business, for example. Moreover, information about a specific field can also be gained indirectly via following experts on the field. All in all, the students advise acquiring field-specific knowledge and skills to improve one's chances of getting a job, and a good way to start is to enhance already existing skills: "*for example, if you are good at programming, try to learn it more*". Parmentier, et al. (2013) also emphasize increasing of field-specific knowledge and skills to develop the brand. Still, the interviewees remind that "developing" the brand should not be in contrast with one's own authentic brand, such as doing something doesn't like, and developing should make sense "*in comparison to the relative cost*" such as enjoyability. "*For example, I don't like to write, actually I hate it, so I would never start to blog*".

While all students believe increasing cultural capital is important, fewer are able to come up with concrete examples of how they would practice that themselves; the students do not put as much thought on increasing cultural capital as that of social. Rather, the students feel this happens all the time when studying, gaining more experience as well as international experience. A few exceptions could be seen, as a couple of students stated to have purposefully attended additional courses on field-specific important skills.

4.5.3.3 Communicating the brand

Building a personal brand is all about communication, either face-to-face or in the online world, and by direct or indirect messages. A few sub-topics about communication arise from the interview data: firstly, to whom one communicates, secondly, how this communication is done, and thirdly, what are the channels that should be used.

Whom to communicate

In general, most interviewees feel that the brand should be communicated to "*the relevant audience*", such as future employers. Also, the message should be targeted and focused. "I see that the more you cut the target audience, the better you can do it well, and exactly better communicate and direct the message to certain groups. This is also backed by literature; one should choose the audience (Dutta, 2010). Still, one student shows a differing opinion stating one should communicate the brand "*to everyone you meet*". This is illustrated in excerpt 21 below. Despite the little broader view on whom to communicate, the student brings up an important aspect that can be perceived with other interviewees as well: one can never know through whom the opportunities will arise. However, the student also states that "*if you have no clear customer group*". Therefore, the student also admits that messaging should be *targeted* if a specific audience can be identified. Hence, it can be concluded that all the students all believe the same: communication should be targeted, but on the other hand, one can never know where opportunities will arise. This is also how the interviewees state to practice themselves – and many point out how "*I am good at targeting the message*".

- (21) *It could be an important message to everyone you meet. You never know who offers you that job. If you want to do something interesting in your life, it can come from anyone. --- Maybe that offer comes to you through your mother or through someone you meet at a bar. From wherever possible. I wouldn't delimit anything. Of course you can present your case however you want and differently in some occasions, and it's natural. But I would go to everyone, the same when you are working on the firm's strategy. If there is no clear customer group, then you tell everyone.*

How to communicate

The students note that when communicating the brand, one should "*communicate the kind of picture you want to give of yourself*". All students point out how this includes communicating the skills as well as personality, as illustrated in excerpt 22. Thus, the students seem to agree with Marwick and Boyd (2011) that one should find a balance of *informational and personal message content*; both

revealing about the personality as well as communicating the field-specific skills and knowledge is important.

(22) *I feel that a good picture is such where you think of the substance, so you have the knowhow, and you communicate that, but also you have the persona – so you communicate something about your personality.*

What one communicates aims at, naturally, in standing out from the crowd. Therefore, the students advise to concentrate in presenting the strongest aspects of the person. Four students point out how the message should be "*short and sweet*", and everyone agrees that message should be compelling and even refer to telling a story. Excerpt 22 illustrates this: one should be able to form a logical whole of one's identity and experience, but also focus and present the message in a compelling, concise way. The same is argued by Hearn (2008), who reminds that such compelling and short message can help in gaining a "top of the mind" status.

(23) *Perhaps recruiters like if you have a good story, that you have some kind of a starting point and a clear logical order, so perhaps creating that one is good branding.*

Also, all but three interviewees put high emphasis on communicating the message differently according to situation and audience. This is illustrated in excerpt 24: "*You have to understand the respondent*" and situation, and plan the message according to "*what you want to tell them*". One student refers to this as being "*adaptive*", as especially in job search one should be able to recognize the important aspects that should be communicated; "*on your CV you should communicate such features that the employer values*".

(24) *Or then it's done in different media, and differently in different occasions. You look at the situation and the norms of the channel, and if you break those norms, it's really bad.*

Interestingly, this aspect is mentioned by more economics students than marketing, although the pre-assumption would suggest the contrary. However, it is possible this is only accidental; students may have taken that as given, as I intentionally did not ask any direct questions about the need to act according to audience and situation. In addition, half of the interviewees stress that instead of only telling about one's competences, one should also aim at demonstrating the skills in order to fully benefit from increasing cultural capital, as also Schau and Gilly (2003) point out. This is brought up in the excerpt 25: one has to be able to demonstrate the value for the audience.

(25) *Or should you in some way show that hey you are, like in marketing you should be, you are quick-witted and a good presenter and so on. If I were in a recruiting process, in which I knew I would have to make lots of presentations in that job, so actually it's like I'm making a presentation during the whole interview in some way, because I want to bring that up.*

Also, the students see that in order to benefit from personal branding, it should be practiced actively, but at the same time branding should look genuine to the world; "*branding should not be taken too far*", as that is seen to raise irritation. The audience is often able to tell if actions are taken purely branding in mind, and "*personal branding can be disastrous if done badly*". This is especially the case in the country-context, as "*it is never good to be showing off in Finland*".

All in all, the students' advise on how to communicate correspond to how they describe to practice branding themselves as well: the students place especially much emphasis on being attentive to audience: "*If I look for a job, I think about the company and really call there and think, how I could make a good impression exactly there.*" Those students who state to practice very little branding also put most emphasis on this, situation and audience specific message: "*That's how I brand myself – I modify my CV and application according to the audience needs*". However, the students are more differing on what they emphasize on their message – personality or substance knowledge. "*For some, it might be the brand. But for me, it's the personal what matters*".

Where to communicate

Most students point out how communicating the message is again linked to the goals and relevant audience. One should choose the channels according to where the relevant audience is present and what one wants to gain – be it branding professionally or among university friends. "*For example if you think of my brother's case, it doesn't make any sense to start shouting around his opinions on Twitter, as his customers are not there*". The students point out how one has to follow the field-specific norms and act according to that: "*consulting firms are online, they check [the presence]*", but that "*more traditional employers are perhaps not that much on social media*". The student explains to refer to banks and large, established organizations by traditional employers. Similar thought can be seen across the interview; on different fields, different channels are emphasized.

Existing literature (e.g. Dutta, 2010; Marwick & Boyd, 2011) concentrate highly on online channels for practicing personal branding. However, most interviewees from both major groups feel that communicating the brand offline is more convincing and better for representing personality, as brought up in chapter 4.4. "*I think the best is to talk with people, so have contacts and networks, and*

thus you may get a direct contact to that organization, so people actually know you". Only three students perceive digital footprint as utterly important for personal branding, and that the business students should put a lot more effort on their digital representation. Some major-specific differences can thus be seen, as these interviewees all study marketing as their major. However, as the rest of the marketers represent a more traditional view, no clear conclusions can be drawn.

(26) *That straight contact, if we take a Spartan example, would be that spear tip. And then that digital media and everything else in the background would be that shield in the background.*

Nevertheless, when explicitly talking about spreading the brand message and where to communicate, most interviewees talk more about the online channels even though they would state to prefer offline personal branding methods. This is perhaps due to them strongly linking branding to digitalization, and taking offline branding for granted. Instead, they state that "*you should have all mandatory parts in order, such as LinkedIn*" and "*well nurtured online presence shows you have eye for situation and just for everything*". The need to be present at professional channels is also emphasized by academicians such as Labrecque, et al. (2011) and Harris and Rae (2011). Thus, the excerpt 26 puts the students' ideas together: the best way to communicate one's brand is to mix relevant channels of both worlds. Offline branding is perhaps more powerful and thus utterly important, but online channels should neither be abandoned as they provide a good backup for the brand message, or "*some meat around the bones*" for the job application, for example. Then, the emphasis put on different channels should follow the field-specific rules (Parmentier, et al., 2013), as stated above.

The students' illustrations of branding in the social media sphere can clearly be divided into two – passive and active. In the passive form branding happens by *being present*: here the personal brand is affected by who are one's existing connections, what pages one "likes", and what kind information (including pictures) is visible. Active branding comprises what concrete branding actions one takes in social media, such as with what one posts or writes and with whom one actively networks. The general opinion by the students is that both ways matter, especially as social media may affect the image formed for those people who do not know the person as well. As brought up in chapter 4.4, LinkedIn, Twitter and blogs are seen as most important social media channels for personal branding.

Most students also seem to act according to how they suggest, regarding the channels where to spread the message. However, in relation to social media, there's an exception: even though the students highlight Twitter and blogs as the best social media channels for branding oneself, only two interviewees, both marketing students, use these platforms actively. Also, only eight of the

interviewees are present on LinkedIn. As a reason, many students state that *“I only use those, which feel natural to me. But I would suggest that one should use other channels as well”*. Another student states: *“For example, I’m not on LinkedIn at all. --- I know I should use it, but I just don’t like the platform.”* Thus, how the students advise and what they actually do, differ greatly regarding the social media platforms as branding channels.

Thus, all in all the students act quite similarly to how they advise regarding brand communication, but for the channels used the reality is far from what the students suggest.

4.5.3.4 Branding consistently and constantly

As personal branding is often unconscious, branding is actually done constantly. However, most of the students emphasize that conscious branding actions should also be taken consistently. The student in the excerpt 27 compares personal branding with starting a blog: personal branding, similar to blogging, is no "task" with a start and an end, but it has to be practiced systematically and regularly. One should be consistent, and if one decides to start branding oneself via certain channels, one should commit and be prepared to give the time. *“If you don't have any [posts] in a few months, it's worse than not having a blog at all”*.

(27) *Well, maintaining a personal brand is quite similar to anything, like having a blog, it’s nothing like you do it once and then it’s ready. In my last meeting a friend of mine wanted to start a blog on his website and at the same time update the site itself. I told him, that you have to realize that those two are two completely different things; you can set up a website once without any frequent updating, and it’s fine for the next 3 years. But writing a blog has to be done systematically, frequently, and that applies to your personal brand as well.*

Most interviewees link the need for consistent branding only to online channels, but one student reminds this requirement also applies to branding in the offline world. The student takes extracurricular activities at university as an example: being extremely active on one year and then suddenly disappearing may have a negative effect on the personal brand. In this case, such negative effect may be invisible for the potential employers looking for extracurricular activities on one's CV, but the other relevant audience – the fellow students – may form a negative brand image. Taking the time and committing to personal branding is hence seen as utterly important. Besides constantly, personal branding should also be practiced on a long-term basis, and branding should be integrated to the everyday life. Moreover, the analysis shows that branding is seen as most beneficial when

considered also in those everyday activities that are not necessarily considered as specific personal branding actions: *"every day when you are at work try to be so that you would leave a positive image, or at least don't burn any bridges"*. Regarding constant and consistent branding, students seem to act according to their advice.

4.5.3.5 Controlling the brand

Half of the students also try control their brand, in a way or another. The analysis shows there are two major ways how the students practice boundary control: controlling offline behavior and visual looks, and controlling online presence. Controlling one's brand is foremost understood as controlling the self-presentation and what one presents of oneself in public, by *"thinking what you will say"*, and also as *"staying focused"*. Indeed, the students contrast controlling with creating a positive image, as that is what branding ultimately aims at. This is also backed by Marwick and Boyd (2011), who describe controlling by *boundary management*. Control of behavior is understood to matter most in the professional sense. *"If you go to that company cocktail party, you don't drink that liquor too much and then embarrass yourself"*. Similarly, the students practice controlling to a large extent in recruiting situations. However, most students point out that while being important in certain contexts, controlling in the offline world is also more difficult, as everyday actions are often so unconscious that specific control may be difficult to hold. In addition, many students describe to practice brand control by *how they dress*: *"Now I for example have to start pondering whether I can continue to go to work wearing a jeans jacket."* Still, a few students point out how one can never fully control the brand in the offline world, as one can never know how the brand forms in the eyes of others.

Controlling the brand in the online space is then understood as easier, but only three interviewees, all economics students, state to practice online control of their brands. Mainly this takes place on the social networking site Facebook: the students have deliberately set strict boundaries for who sees what as well as hidden any pictures that could be regarded as unfavorable for the brand. This is illustrated in excerpt 28; the student states how this is *"common sense"* to control, and that the *"worst could be if your employer saw a picture of you lying on the ground"*. Thus, the students aim at hiding information that can be found of them on public channels. Thus, they practice boundary management (Ollier-Malaterre, et al., 2013). *"Not a lot of information can be found of me [online]. I'm happy about that"*.

(28) *But for example Facebook is such, that you have to completely secure and hide those, for example pub crawl pictures, that they wouldn't be the first thing appearing there. It's common sense. That you don't have them visible for everyone. I would say that the worst thing would be that your employer goes there to see your profile and you lie on the ground in your profile pic.*

Although only economics students state to practice such brand control, also a few marketing students point out it is advisable to do so. However, two marketing students believe completely the contrary; according to them, controlling is not necessary and rather time-consuming. *"Nobody cares if there's a picture of me with a bottle on Facebook"*. The same applies for Google – a few students point out it is naturally worth to check what can be found, but too much timely emphasis should not be put on that. Actually, two of the marketing students remind how personal branding needs the public aspect, and *"you cannot develop a successful brand unless you are ready to throw yourself in"*. Also, some of the students point out that actually all branding is controlling in some way, as all *choices* taken are about controlling the brand – about trying to affect the image perceived by the others. Thus, one can never fully control a personal brand, but still all actions are controlling in some way.

4.5.3.6 Evaluating the brand

In addition, all interviewees agree that assessing the one's personal brand and the impact of branding actions is very difficult due to the brand being formed in the minds of others, as also argued by Hearn (2008). Most students note that the brand could of course be evaluated by benchmarking the brands of others, but as a brand is always *personal* this does not provide very information. The students note that even though some may have higher levels of some certain cultural or social capital, *"you have something else there, which is much more valuable"*. Therefore, the students do not encourage putting too much emphasis on benchmarking other people's brands.

Instead, the students feel that a brand can be assessed through *succeeding*, such as being hired or even headhunted to a job. Such achieving of goals gives a good indication that the brand has been perceived as *suitable to the job*. Also, if one has clearly put effort on branding at certain channels and then is being hired, some correlation can be perceived. However, the students also point out one can never know which single action has contributed to the brand being noticed and chosen. *"You can never know the summary of actions that has led to you being called for an interview or landing a job."* In addition, a few students bring up that following the analytics of for example blog visitors or LinkedIn contacts can provide some indication of the brand's *visibility*, but analytics neither tell *"whether your*

brand has worked" in a desired way. However, half of the interviewees conclude that perhaps the best way to assess the brand is by the *perceived image* by others and whether it responds to the image one hopes to be reflecting. For example, one could ask others how the brand image is perceived. Better information about how others perceive one's brand can then help in assessing the impact of branding efforts (Dutta, 2010; Labrecque, et al., 2011). Based on that information, one can then take actions to develop the brand. However, one student points out that perhaps the most valuable information can be achieved from those who have not been impressed by the brand, such as recruiters who have not hired the person, since the people who know you better, such as colleagues, may "*just tell everything's alright*".

(29) *Oh yes now I know when your personal brand is bad; I already told it once! It's bad when people think you are different than you really are. Then it's bad. And you will notice it yourself as well, if you are hired for a job you don't like at all. Or one you don't fit. Or maybe you are bad at it or don't want it. Really, it's only you who can know it, when you sit down and ponder. No one else is able to tell it, and it cannot be measured.*

Thus, such assessing by asking for others' perceptions is also contrasted with *authenticity* by those interviewees who call for the brand to reflect the true, authentic self. This is illustrated in excerpt 29; the student perceives that personal branding is not working if it leads to such results that are not in line with the person's true identity, wants and strengths. Thus, the student concludes by remarking that no one else can fully assess the brand except for the person herself. All in all, the students hence see assessing the brand image as difficult, and rather such assessing should be based on self-reflection. Hence, the circle closes again.

4.5.4 Why do I not brand myself?

The analysis shows the students understand the personal branding phenomenon as quite comprehensively, and also how they think branding should be practiced corresponds to the literature. However, still half of the students explicitly state not to practice branding, or do so very little. On the other hand, also those who say to brand themselves practice it in smaller scope than they advise; they perceive that they "*should be a lot more active*" in personal branding. In addition, the social media platforms are utilized a lot less than the students advise. Therefore, it is interesting to look at the reasons *why* the interviewees are not acting according to their own advice. Most of the reasons are related to branding in the online sphere, as online branding requires frequent actions

differently than the offline world. Also, in the physical sphere, branding actions are mostly linked to everyday behavior, and hence the students also more actively brand themselves live.

- (30) *Perhaps it's the lack of time. I'm so busy. Or it would be so nice to write blog postings every week, and in that way build the brand, discuss more there. But it would be even better if somebody paid for it. --- But there is just no time.*

Firstly, the analysis shows that some of the reasons stated are independent from whether students say to practice branding or not; *branding takes time and effort*, especially in relation to social media platforms. Despite majority of the students seeing Twitter as a great place for practicing branding, for example, only two of the interviewees actively use the channel. Excerpt 30 illustrates this view brought up by almost every interviewee: engaging in branding requires time, and as students are already busy, they simply do not have the extra time for branding. In addition, many are not ready to "take the trouble", especially if the platform and communicating there does not feel natural to the person oneself. As one student states, "I'm too lazy to maintain", referring to a blog. Some of the students even admit to be troubled by their lack of time to brand themselves: "That LinkedIn, so that has really troubled me, I should really do something about it, but just haven't managed to do that."

- (31) *(So I advised so in the sense that if you feel like you need to do it. Then you could do so. But I don't really feel that I would need to practice that.*

- (32) *But I want to have a job, to which I have been selected based on their perception they get of me in the job interview, and not based on my CV and transcripts. I know it's really important for many companies how good my papers look, and that you have to have those certain universities there, or previous jobs or courses, or whatever. Okay well, I may even create such a brand of myself, that I am not such a person. Perhaps I am even an anti-CV person. I don't want to give an image that I am too career-oriented. I may want to give an image that I want to go to an industry which is a bit more laid-back, and where they don't judge you so much based on cold factors. But instead, I would like them to judge me as a person and trust on that feeling I give them, and that it's genuine.*

Secondly, some of the interviewees do not see the reason for branding, as they do *not believe that would benefit them in any way*. However, it should be noted that here the students refer solely on explicit branding actions other than in face-to-face situation, although not explicitly stating that; the view is illustrated in excerpts 31 and 32: the students do not see branding as necessary, as they believe

that will not be a decisive factor for the hiring decision. While the student in excerpt 31 explains that branding is not needed in general, the student in excerpt 32 takes a more passionate view; for this student, *not* putting much effort on branding represents an authentic being, and therefore the student sees branding as even a negative action. “*I believe branding the brand only gives a small hint*”, *but what you really are will only reveal in face-to-face stations.*” Later on, the student admits though that “*true, that [being invited for a job interview] might be my problem*”. In addition, the students feeling so also extend the reason to branding for private life purposes – there is simply no need to brand online.

(33) *The reason why I most likely haven't done much of professional brand is that I don't really know what I want to do when I grow up. It's pretty much linked to that goal orientation.*

Thirdly, a few students point out how branding is only beneficial when one knows where to aim and has difficulties in getting there. Thus, branding is seen as “*waste of time*” if already in a desired position. On the other hand, branding is seen as difficult when not knowing “*what I want to do when I grow up*”, and thus not being able to project *any targeted, field-specific image*. This is illustrated in excerpt 33: the student does not see the benefit of branding oneself, as the student doesn't know where to aim. Interestingly, one student also points out how it's difficult to brand oneself *due* to being a student – a contradictory view in comparison to most interviewees, who see branding as especially beneficial at this stage of career: “*Now it would feel irrelevant, as I'm a student.*”

Thus, overall the interviewees seem to practice personal branding to a smaller degree than suggested by personal branding advocates – or even by themselves. Rather, the students take a more practical view: “*I guess it's simply about lack of time – I'm busy*”.

5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this research has been to examine how Finnish business students understand and practice personal branding. The research was conducted by carrying out 12 semi-structured interviews, after which I analysed the data with the thematic analysis method. The research topic was approached by dividing the research question into three sub-questions.

- 1) How do final year business students understand personal branding as a phenomenon?
- 2) How do business students practice personal branding themselves?
- 3) How should personal branding be practiced in order for it to help in being hired?

However, while the findings relating to each sub-question proved highly interlinked and often reply to more than one question, I opt to reply to the questions as a whole and without separating of topics.

The four pre-set themes served as the structure for the whole research process: personal branding is examined from the angles of what personal branding is, why personal branding is practiced, where personal branding is practiced, and how personal branding is practiced. The latter was then still divided into two different sub-themes: how the students perceive that personal branding is and should be done, as well as how they practice branding themselves. In addition, the underlying reasons for the birth and evolution of the phenomenon were looked at throughout the research.

Personal branding is a relatively new phenomenon with little existing research, especially with an empirical setting. Close, et al. (2011) and Parmentier, et al. (2013) provided my only empirical reference studies, though also these included a very different setting. The newly published study by Holmberg and Strannegård (2015) offers the most similar research setting, examining the Swedish students' usage of their study institution as a part of their brand. However, I did not have this study at hand until the very end of the analysing process, and therefore little contrasting could be done during the research process.

I built my original research setting on comparing the understanding and practicing by two different student groups, namely marketing and economics students. However, the analysis soon showed that my pre-assumption did not hold, as very few major-specific differences were perceivable, especially regarding *how* branding is practiced. Instead, there were great differences in both understanding of the phenomenon as well as practicing of it between the individuals. Lifestyle and personal references seem to matter more than field of study within the business school. Therefore, this unexpected finding can be contrasted with one of the underlying principles of personal branding brought up by Shepherd (2005); that personal branding is a highly individualistic approach and that there is no one-size-fits-all framework for practicing personal branding. The students' understanding of the phenomenon as a whole – especially regarding what and how – varies greatly across individuals, as well as how the students describe to practice branding. In that sense, the critical self-auditing and generally examining one's wishes suggested by Shepherd (2005) are in line with my research: no one else can tell the person how to brand oneself, but the right strategy will be found from within.

In addition, the students' differing understandings of the phenomenon can be further illustrated by the interview finding: the phenomenon is considered either as an on-going action of all being as well as deliberate branding actions, or as only consisting of actions that are deliberately done but not all

the time – or anything in between. Nevertheless, which ever view the student holds, all interviewees link personal branding to “showing oneself in a positive light”, a polished version of self. Hearn (2008) emphasizes the role of persuasive communication in branding oneself, as well as of communication as an utterly important factor in personal branding. These aspects are thus greatly visible in the students’ understanding of the phenomenon; they see branding as an abstract feeling and even as a story, which needs to be communicated to others. Hence, the students’ overall understanding corresponds to that by Hearn (2008).

The findings show that the students understand the reasons behind personal branding as both career- and private life –oriented, and perceive technical development and increased competition as the greater background for the phenomenon. Lair, et al. (2005) refer to the same thought; the importance of personal branding in professional sense has increased along with increased competition. Close, et al. (2011) study personal branding in a recruiting situation and how a person’s intrinsic and extrinsic brand cues affect especially in the early stages of the hiring process, and when no other established connections exists. The students regard the same; branding can be very beneficial if having trouble in reaching one’s goals. Also, most students actually feel that even greater reason for practicing personal branding, than getting a job, is that it is a *must* nowadays, when everyone else practices branding as well.

Moreover, students understand personal branding as highly audience- and context-specific phenomenon. According to them, brand communication must always be adapted and targeted to fit the needs and norms of the audience as well as that of the field and situation. Parmentier, et al. (2013) emphasize the need for field-specificity, and Dutta (2010) reminds of the need to find a balance between private and public audience, which are also linked to the goals of branding. Thus, my research findings are in line with existing research.

The findings show that besides the above mentioned audience-specific branding, the students pay especially much attention on increasing cultural and social capital as a method for branding oneself. All interviewees feel that networks are perhaps the highest value for a personal brand, both to bring along to an organization as well as utilize when searching for new opportunities. On the other hand, the students also emphasize learning and gaining field-specific knowledge and skills. The same is argued by Parmentier, et al. (2013), but brought up surprisingly little in other previous studies. Most of the students also state that such building of capital is the method how they most often brand themselves, as well as how they think one should be doing when looking for to be hired.

This leads us to the next finding; while my research findings much more emphasize this gathering of capital as the most important method for branding oneself, much of the existing literature, such as Dutta (2010) and Labrecque, et al. (2011), concentrate only on social media for personal branding, giving the image that social media is the only place to brand oneself. This social media concentration of much of the literature also shows in the students' understanding of the topic, as some of the interviewees initially link personal branding solely on being active on social media. The students still rely much more on traditional channels and regard face-to-face communication as the most effective method to brand themselves. Surprisingly many of the students are absent from the leading professional social media channels LinkedIn, Twitter and blogosphere, because they do not regard them as highly valuable.

Shepherd (2005) highlights the need for authentic branding. This also shows up in the empirical research: the students feel that all branding actions should be based on the true strengths and wants, as only that can be perceived as a durable brand.

Lastly, Parmentier, et al. (2013) argue that when practicing personal branding in professional sense, individuals should not aim at differentiating themselves but rather to "stand out". According to them, complete differentiation is rather harmful for individuals, but one should also aim at projecting field-specific similarities. The same finding emerges from my empirical data; the students believe one should show "belonging" to a certain field, company or any group, along with standing out. Actually, the strategy of "standing out while fitting in" can be seen on the background for all personal branding. This is the case with Finnish business students as well; when describing the actions they take to brand themselves, it is prevalent the students do not want to look too different. One has to fit to the industrial or company norms, as Parmentier, et al. (2013) argue.

All in all, the research findings show that the students' understanding of the personal branding phenomenon as well as how it should be practiced in order to be hired correspond well with the existing literature. My research shows how personal branding is about constant balancing of expectations; it's about balancing between the goals and audience, between informational and personal communication, as well as between authentic and controlled communication.

However, what differs is how the students actually then practice branding, as well as how beneficial they see branding in general for being hired. The Finnish business students still seem to practice personal branding to a quite small extent in comparison with what the literature suggests. While students regard personal branding as generally more important for marketing than economics

students, still most feel they do not need to brand themselves; when needing to prioritize with limited timely resources, many students opt not to place attention on personal branding.

In this research study, I hope to have given a greater view on Finnish business students' understanding of personal branding, as well as how they practice it themselves. In this section, I have summarized the most interesting findings that were interpreted from the empirical research data. The underlying strategy for personal branding, as presented by Parmentier, et al. (2013) is to stand out while fitting in – and to find the individual way to do that.

Suggestions for further research

While researching the topic of personal branding, I have noticed some interesting aspects that I would suggest for further research on the topic. Firstly, while personal branding currently so much concentrates on branding in social media, the core audience more likely consists of younger individuals, the digital natives. However, I see the problem of standing out as important – or perhaps even more important – for those job seekers who have passed the magical line of 50 years' age. With the constant turbulences in economy, no one can rely on their position in an organization to survive the cost cuts; redundancies are unfortunately everyday now. However, being left unemployed at a mature age, being hired again is more difficult than for the younger workforce. Hence, the “50+” could make an important customer group for personal branding consultancies, as well as an interesting research setting for the future.

Secondly, and derived from my own research, it would be interesting to repeat my research setting of comparing two groups of students, but now making the difference more obvious; the other group of students should be chosen out of the business school, as such research could yield interesting results. Thirdly, I would like to study the possible effects of cultural factors on personal branding, as such explicit self-expression does not perfectly fit to the modest Finnish culture.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW OUTLINE

1. ELÄMÄNTARINA (TAUSTATIETOA)

- Kerro itsestäsi – kuka olet, mistä tulet?
 - o *ikä, opintosuuntaus*
 - o *Tämänhetkinen työtilanne: onko työnhakija / kokoaikaisia töitä jo tiedossa / jo kokoaikaisissa töissä + kuinka kauan kesti löytää mahdollinen työ?*

2. MITÄ ON PERSONAL BRANDING?

- Mitä personal branding sinun mielestäsi merkitsee? Miten käsität sen?
- *Mitä mieltä olet tästä ilmiöstä?*
- *Kuka voi harjoittaa personal brandingia?*
- Mitä huonoja puolia? Miksi et halua harjoittaa? *Miltä susta tuntuu, kun pitää olla se LinkedIn?*
- *Mitä asioita ja välineitä personal brandingiin kuuluu? (web 2.0, networking, f2f)*

3. MISSÄ PERSONAL BRANDINGIA TAPAHTUU?

- Missä personal brandingia mielestäsi tapahtuu?
 - o *Online*
 - o *Missä muualla*

4. MIKSI PERSONAL BRANDINGIA TAPAHTUU? MIKSI SITÄ TEHDÄÄN?

- Miksi ihmiset brändäävät itseään? /HYÖDYT?
- Missä elämäntilanteissa personal brandingia ehkä tehdään / eniten hyötyä?
- Painoarvo työnhaussa?
 - o *Painoarvo rekrytoijille?*

5. MITEN PERSONAL BRANDINGIA HARJOITETAAN?

- Miten personal brandingia voi harjoittaa? / *Miten voi rakentaa?*
 - o *Strategiat ja metodit*
 - o *Tavoitteet, lähtökohdat*
 - o *Miten kanavat kannattaa valita*
 - o *Kelle viestitään*
- *Miten voisi lähteä brändäämään itseänä työnhakutarkoituksessa?*
- Miten omaa brändiä voi kehittää ja/tai ylläpitää?
 - o *Kontrollointi?*
 - o *Mittaaminen, toimiiko brändi?*
- Miten lähtisit brändäämään itseäsi / rakentamaan brändiäsi työnhakutarkoituksessa?
- *Mitä muita asioita itsensä brändäämisessä tulisi huomioida?*
- *Pukeutuminen, liittyykö?*
- *Mitä muita asioita? MILLAINEN oman brändin tulisi olla?*

6. MITEN PERSONAL BRANDING NÄKYÄ SINUN ELÄMÄSSÄSI?

- Mikä on sinun brändisi? Kuvaile, kuka SINÄ olet.
 - o *Tagline: pystytkö kuvaamaan brändisi yhdellä lauseella*
- Miten sinä brändäät itseäsi, vai brändäätkö ollenkaan (tavoitteellisesti)?
 - o *Kanavat, ylläpito, kehittäminen, kontrollointi (googlaus, mittaus, ...)*
 - o *[jos vastaa eri tavalla]: Miksi et toimi niin kuin itse ohjeistit?*
- Mitä sä ajattelet sun omasta LinkedInistäsi? (suosituksia?)
- Arvioi omaa CV:täsi.
- Kuinka kuvailisit personal branding -osaamistasi? Tai opiskelijatovereidesi osaamista?
- Onko personal branding auttanut sinua työnhaussa? Miten?

7. REKRYTOINTI: MITÄ REKRYTOINTI SINULLE MERKITSEE?

- Miten yritykset rekrytoivat?
- Mitä kaikkea rekrytointiin kuuluu? Mitä rekrytoinnissa tapahtuu?