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LUT School of Business and Management

Bachelor's Thesis

International Business

Personal branding practices of adolescents on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this bachelor's thesis was to explore adolescents' personal branding practices in the social media environment of the photo and video sharing mobile application Instagram. As the theoretical background for personal branding is quite limited, this thesis combined concepts of personal branding and self-presentation to answer the research problems. Empirical data was collected by conducting semi-structured individual interviews with 10-14-year-old adolescent girls. The photo-elicitation method was utilized in the interviews as the participants were requested to present and discuss their Instagram accounts.

The concepts of personal brand identity and personal brand positioning were found to be suitable descriptions to adolescents' personal branding practices on Instagram. It was found that adolescents consciously consider what kind of personal brand identity they aim to portray to their audience and that authenticity of the personal brand identity is valued. Personal brand positioning, on the other hand, was found to be achieved through impression management: adolescents make strategic disclosure decisions regarding the content they post on their Instagram accounts in a way that the content is reflective of the personal brand identity. Posting brand-related user-generated content on one's Instagram account was found to be one of the many disclosure decisions in personal brand positioning on Instagram and this type of content was very common on the participants' accounts. Adolescents were also found to be interested in monitoring the audience reactions to their personal branding efforts.

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Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tarkoituksena oli tutkia eksploratiivisesti henkilökohtaista brändäystä nuorten Instagram-käyttäytymisessä. Koska henkilökohtaista brändäystä koskevan teorian määrä on vielä varsin rajallinen, tässä kandidaatintutkimuksessa yhdistettiin henkilökohtaisen brändäyksen sekä itsensä muille esittämisen (self-presentation) käsitteitä tutkimuskysymyksiin vastaamiseksi. Empiiristä dataa kerättiin haastattelemalla 10–14-vuotiaita tyttöjä. Haastattelut toteutettiin puolistrukturoituina yksilohaastatteluina, joissa hyödynnettiin valokuvaelisaatio-menetelmää: nuoret esittelivät haastatteluissa Instagram-tilejään.

Tutkimustulosten perusteella havaittiin, että käsitteet henkilökohtainen brändi-identiteetti ja henkilökohtaisen brändin asemointi soveltuvat kuvaamaan nuorten toteuttamaa henkilökohtaista brändäystä Instagramissa. Nuoret harkitsevat tietoisesti, millaista henkilökohtaista brändi-identiteettiä pyrkivät viestimään yleisölleen, ja brändi-identiteetin autenttisuutta pidetään tärkeänä. Henkilökohtaisen brändin asemoinnin havaittiin tapahtuvan vaikutelmien johtamisen kautta: nuoret tekevät strategisia päätöksiä koskien Instagram-tiliensä sisältöä niin, että se vastaa henkilökohtaista brändi-identiteettiä. Tuotemerkkejä kuvaavan sisällön lataaminen Instagram-tilille on yksi esimerkki näistä strategisista päätöksistä, ja tällaisen sisällön havaittiin olevan varsin yleistä haastateltujen nuorten tileillä. Nuoret ovat myös kiinnostuneita yleisön reaktioiden monitoroimisesta.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Personal branding is an interesting and relatively new marketing concept which is nowadays especially relevant due to the increasing importance of social media in people's lives. This study combines ideas of personal branding with concepts of self-presentation as the academic research on personal branding is still quite limited due to the concept being so new. In this study personal branding is explored in the social media context of the photo and video sharing mobile application Instagram where personal branding has not been studied before. The interest is specifically on the personal branding practices of adolescents whose social media use has not been widely studied.

1.1. Background

Social media plays a major role in today's adolescents' lives. Especially the photo and video sharing mobile application Instagram is gaining popularity among adolescents. For example, in a survey conducted in the United States during fall 2015 one third of the approximately 9400 respondents aged 13-19 stated Instagram as their most important social media (The Wall Street Journal, 2015). The search for popularity is quite evident in the data concerning adolescents' social media behavior: in an American survey of 216 adolescents 61 percent of the 13-year-old respondents stated checking the likes and comments on their social media posts as the reason for lurking on social media (Underwood & Faris 2015, 4).

On Instagram the user creates an account where he or she can post pictures and short videos. A short description can be written for each photo and this description can include hashtags. The use of hashtags allows users to search for content that they are interested in. Instagram users can follow other accounts and the numbers of followers and the accounts followed are presented in the profiles. The users can also like and comment on other users' photos and the number of likes a photo gets is shown below the photo.

Despite the great importance of social media on adolescents' lives, very little academic research on social media activity is conducted from the perspective of this younger demographic. Studying the adolescent perspective might, however, be rather appropriate as adolescents are the 'next generation' of consumers (Jezkova Isaksen & Roper 2012). Furthermore, it has been argued that adolescents can express perceptive ideas which should be taken seriously in research (Greene & Hill 2005, 9).

Instagram as a relatively new social media has not been the subject of extensive research either. However, the very recent academic research on consumers' motives for using Instagram supports the motivation to study Instagram activity from the self-marketing perspective. Both Sheldon and Bryant (2016) and Lee et al. (2015) found self-promotion type of self-expression to be one of the motives that users are likely to have for using Instagram. However, it should be noted that neither of these quantitative studies included adolescents as participants. In this bachelor's thesis adolescents' Instagram activity is studied from the perspective of personal branding.

1.2. Research objectives, problems and limitations

The objective of this bachelor's thesis is to explore adolescents' personal branding practices in the social media environment of Instagram. The main research problem is: "How do adolescents engage in personal branding while using Instagram?" The aim is to explore the ways in which adolescents engage in personal branding activity on Instagram. The main research problem is supported by two supporting research problems.

The first supporting research problem is: "What is the role of brands in adolescents' personal branding efforts on Instagram?" In the academic research concerning adolescent consumers it has been argued that owning the right branded products can be highly important for the adolescent consumer (Jezkova Isaksen & Roper 2012). In addition, brand-related user-generated content is nowadays very common on social media platforms (Smith et al. 2012). In the context of Instagram the most visible way for users to communicate brand associations is by featuring branded products in the photos posted on the personal Instagram account.

The second supporting research problem is: "How do adolescents monitor the results of their personal branding efforts?" In the prior personal branding research monitoring the results of one's personal branding efforts has not been given much attention. It could be argued that this aspect of personal branding has become more relevant due to the rapid development of social media technology. Nowadays it is possible to monitor the reactions of one's online audience with relatively little effort. This is especially true for Instagram as one can download a mobile application which allows the user to monitor the follower statistics: the number of new Instagram followers gained, the number of followers lost and

the overall popularity value. In this study by referring to monitoring the results of one's personal branding efforts, it is meant monitoring the reactions of one's Instagram audience.

The focus of this study is on the personal branding practices that the individual engages in, not on how the target audience perceives these efforts. The interest is on the aims and perceptions of the individual: whether or not the individual's personal branding efforts are effective in terms of favorable audience reactions is not analyzed. Therefore the analysis of personal brand image is excluded from this study. The study of the personal brand image would require a much more elaborate research setting which would not be achievable within the scope of this bachelor's thesis. Moreover, this study is limited to exclusively viewing the adolescent girls' perspective to personal branding on Instagram as all of the interviewees are girls. The interviewees also come from considerably similar cultural backgrounds. The limited diversity of the sample reflects the aims of this study: the aim is not to find generalizable results but rather to explore the phenomenon of personal branding in a new context.

1.3. Research methodology

This research is qualitative in nature as the aim is to explore adolescents' personal branding practices in the social media environment of Instagram. Explorative approach is suitable for this research because the phenomenon studied is relatively new and therefore the amount of prior research is quite limited.

The empirical data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with 10-14-year-old figure skaters living in Lappeenranta, Finland. Despite the age differences, the group was quite homogenous as all of the participants were girls who share an interest in figure skating. The participants were chosen via convenience sampling as all of them were previously known to the researcher. The aim was to interview Instagram users with different levels of following in order to collect views from both more and less popular Instagrammers. As the interviewees were under-aged, parental consent was asked before telling them about the research. The interviews were conducted individually and each of them lasted around 20 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed afterwards.

The photo-elicitation method was utilized in the interviews: in the beginning of the interviews the interviewees were requested to present their Instagram profiles and describe them in their own words. The use of photos in an interview might lead to the participants expressing

ideas that otherwise might have been overlooked in a traditional verbal interview (Croghan et al. 2008). The photo-elicitation method is seen as especially useful when interviewing children as photos provide tangible stimuli for discussion and they can capture experiences which might be hard to understand from an adult perspective (Clark-Ibáñez 2004). Furthermore, the use of images has been deemed effective in studying self-presentation (Croghan et al. 2008). Incorporating images into the interviews seems rather intuitive in the context of this research as personal branding on Instagram is mostly carried out through the sharing of images. Hence, the interviewees did not have to be given a specific task to photograph their lives, but rather they just presented their on-going life project of creating content for their Instagram profiles.

It should be noted that all of the interviewees have a close relationship with the researcher as she is their figure skating coach. This familiarity between the interviewer and the interviewee possibly helped the interviewees to feel more relaxed during the interviews when compared to the participants being strangers to each other but it could also have created disadvantages. The interviewees might not have felt comfortable with sharing some views with a person who is an authority figure in their lives.

1.4. Theoretical framework

This research studies the phenomenon of personal branding in the social media environment of Instagram. The context of Instagram presents limitations to the strategies which can be utilized in personal branding efforts. Especially among the younger users there are several social rules regarding what is seen as socially acceptable behavior in this environment. Furthermore, the technology of the mobile application constructs the practical limits to what is possible to achieve on Instagram.

In this study personal branding is studied from the perspective of the traditional branding framework. The interest is on the brand identity and brand positioning in personal branding. The personal brand identity represents how the adolescents aim to be perceived by their audiences on Instagram and personal brand positioning is related to the ways in which the adolescents communicate about their brand identity. Impression management is seen as a key aspect of personal brand positioning on Instagram. Following the logic of the traditional branding framework, monitoring the results of one's personal branding efforts is also included in personal brand positioning in the Instagram environment. Even though the brand

image, which refers to how the brand is perceived by the audience, is an essential part of the traditional branding model, it is excluded from this study. Figure 1 depicts the theoretical framework of this research.

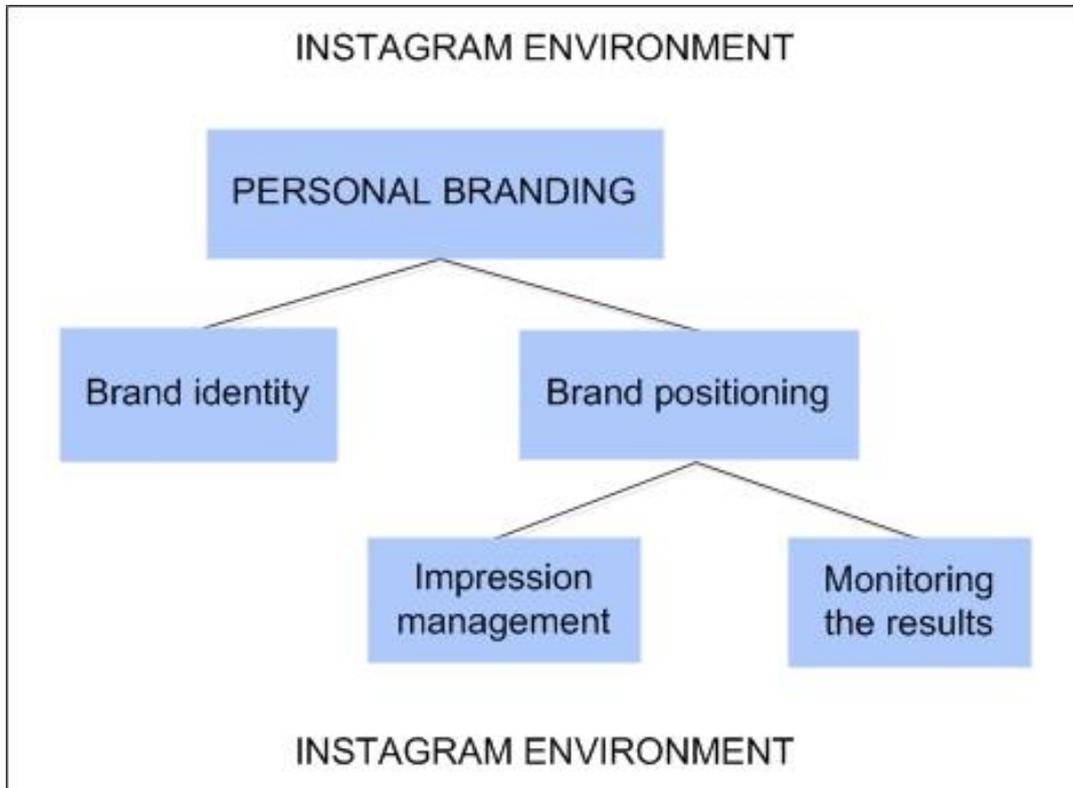


Figure 1. The theoretical framework

1.5. Literature review

The concept of personal branding is relatively new and therefore the academic research on this area is quite underdeveloped. For the purpose of this bachelor's thesis, both general personal branding literature and personal branding literature in the context of social media are studied. More traditional branding literature by Aaker (2010) is used in support of personal branding research. The personal branding literature review by Shepherd (2005) serves as the starting point for the process of defining the concepts used in this study. The literature review by Lair et al. (2005), which focuses on the ethical aspects of personal branding, is also used in creating the overall view of personal branding presented in this study.

There is no prior research on personal branding in the social media environment of Instagram. The prior research on personal branding in a social media environment has focused on the context of Facebook (Labrecque et al. 2011) and YouTube (Chen 2013). As Instagram is such a new application, the research conducted on user behavior in this context is not very extensive: the main research topic has been users' motivation to use the application.

As the academic literature on personal branding is still quite limited in quantity, also selected literature on self-presentation is studied in order to create a stronger theoretical background for this study. Goffman's self-presentation work 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life' (1959) is very frequently cited in personal branding literature and its imagery is well suited for the purposes of this bachelor's thesis as well.

1.6. Definitions for key concepts

Personal branding on Instagram

In this study personal branding on Instagram is defined as the clear communication of the personal brand identity through strategic self-presentation on pictures uploaded to Instagram.

Personal brand identity

Personal brand identity refers to how a person who engages in personal branding aims to be perceived by his or her target audience.

Personal brand positioning

Personal brand positioning refers to the activities which are aimed towards actively and clearly communicating an individual's personal brand identity to the target audience.

Brand-related user-generated content on Instagram

In this study referring to brand-related user-generated content means the type of photo content posted by Instagram users which distinctly features product or corporate brands.

1.7. Structure of the study

This bachelor's thesis starts by presenting the theoretical background of the study: Chapter 2 acts as an introduction to personal branding while Chapter 3 discusses the academic literature on self-presentation that is most closely linked to personal branding in an online environment. The empirical findings on personal branding practices of adolescents on Instagram are presented and analyzed in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 contains the conclusions of this study which are based on the theory and empirical findings introduced in the prior chapters.

2. PERSONAL BRANDING

This chapter starts by introducing the background of personal branding and then goes on to present some of the definitions for personal branding that are expressed in the literature of the area. The definition for personal branding used in this study is formulated. Brand identity and brand positioning are discussed from the perspective of personal branding. As the aim of this study is to research personal branding in the social media environment of Instagram, this chapter also presents some aspects of personal branding that are unique to the online environment.

2.1. Background

Personal branding is a relatively recent marketing phenomenon which has its roots in the employment context. The concept of personal branding is seen to have emerged from Tom Peters' highly influential article 'The Brand Called You' (1997). In his article Peters advocates the view that everyone has the ability to brand themselves and that everyone actually should do that in order to thrive in today's employment environment (1997). The article is very inspirational and provides the reader with advice on how to differentiate oneself from competitors by adopting personal branding ideologies (Peters 1997). Peters' article spurred the publication of a number of personal branding books which aim to assist the reader in managing a successful career (Shepherd 2005). As personal branding gained popularity, a whole personal branding industry was born (Lair et al. 2005). Hence, the beginning of the personal branding movement is strongly related to self-help type of literature and consultancy services. This background has naturally influenced also the academic research of the area.

The crowded communication environment is seen as one of the main reasons behind personal branding (Lair et al. 2005). Lair et al. (2005) argue that during the early days of the personal branding movement both the corporate communications environment and the employment environment were in a particularly favorable state for the personal branding ideology to prosper: as management trends such as corporate re-engineering and downsizing gained momentum, it became increasingly important to stand out entrepreneurially in order to succeed. Personal branding was, and still is to this day, marketed as a way of increasing visibility and gaining a competitive advantage in this crowded communication environment (Shepherd 2005). The advocates of personal

branding such as William Arruda (2003) argue that it allows the individual to stand out and to differentiate oneself from the competitors. Personal branding is seen in quite a positive light in today's academic literature as well: Manai and Holmlund (2015) for example view branding as a flexible way for individuals as job applicants to respond to the crowded communication environment.

Even though personal branding has been marketed in a very positive and inspirational manner by its advocates, it has also been subjected to criticism. The promises of personal branding have been questioned. Shepherd (2005) argues that due to the large number of competing brands, personal branding cannot ensure visibility and business success as effectively as its advocates promise. In addition to the doubts over personal branding's effectiveness in fulfilling its objectives, it has also been criticized from an ethical perspective. Concerns over the potentially damaging effects of personal branding on society have been expressed: personal branding has been seen to promote a very individualistic look on life where there is very little concern over others' well-being (Lair et al. 2005). Personal branding has also been argued to encourage a reductionistic way of expression (Lair et al. 2005).

Despite the criticism personal branding has been subjected to, the ever-increasing popularity of social media has now made it relevant in a new light. Nowadays more than ever personal branding is no longer only seen as a strategy for succeeding in business life. It has been argued that online personal branding could lead to the individual finding new career opportunities, reaching new audiences for his or her work or even enriching other people's lives (Harris & Rae 2011). Labrecque et al. (2011) found that personal branding is a conscious effort in the online environment and they even went so far as to argue that branding cannot be avoided when one participates in online environments. Hence, it has been suggested that due to the increasing importance of social media, there is a need to study personal branding with a wider scope than the original employment setting (Khedher 2015).

2.2. Definition

As personal branding is a new concept which has been fully embraced by the business self-help movement, its theoretical background from marketing point of view is still very limited. Embedding personal branding into marketing theory has been seen as problematic, and there has even been debate over whether or not personal branding should be viewed as worthwhile from the perspective of marketing research (Shepherd 2005). This debate, however, now seems to have ended in favor of personal branding (Khedher 2015). Even though personal branding consultants and other specialists often times seem to advocate relatively similar themes (Lair et al. 2005), a well-supported theoretical framework for the process of personal branding has not yet been established. Researchers have yet to come to an agreement over the content of the concept. Differing approaches towards the process of personal branding are presented in personal branding literature and researchers have formulated differing definitions for the concept. It should also be noted that some authors use slightly different terms when referring to personal branding: for example Labrecque et al (2011) alternate between using the terms personal branding and self-branding. In this study, however, the term personal branding is used exclusively.

In the original context of the employment environment personal branding is often described as the marketing effort that an individual engages in to navigate the labor market successfully (Lair et al. 2005). Nowadays the scope of personal branding has expanded to include other aims in addition to managing a successful career but the underlying assumptions of personal branding could still apply. In its essence personal branding is seen as a way of clearly communicating the individual's unique strengths (Arruda 2003). The process nature of personal branding is often emphasized in the literature of the area. Khedher (2015), for example, describes personal branding as a planned process with specific goals. One of the most comprehensive definitions for personal branding is provided by Shepherd (2005): "personal branding is essentially an inside-out process that serves to encapsulate the current strengths and uniqueness of the individual in relation to a targeted market." Based on these definitions, personal branding can be understood as a process which starts with the individual reflecting on his or her strengths in relation to the target market and then aiming to communicate these clearly and effectively.

The online environment brings its own twist into the ideas of personal branding: personal branding online involves managing social networking profiles (Labrecque et al. 2011). Even

though Chen formulated his definition for personal branding in the context of the video-sharing website YouTube, it can be modified to suit the Instagram context as well. According to Chen (2013), personal branding on YouTube is about creating a brand personality through self-presentation on the video content uploaded to the site. Similarly, personal branding on Instagram could be described as strategic self-presentation through the images uploaded. In this study personal branding on Instagram is seen as clearly communicating the personal brand identity through strategic self-presentation on pictures uploaded to Instagram.

The advocates of personal branding often argue that the process of personal branding is similar to the branding of products or companies (Shepherd 2005). These types of views are especially evident in the personal branding texts written by personal branding consultants. Lair et al. (2005) find this self-commodification to be one of the main negative effects of personal branding: the person engaging in personal branding is encouraged to turn him- or herself into a product. However, the product branding approach is also supported in academic literature. Chen (2013) found the personal branding process on Youtube to mirror the product branding process. In addition, Labrecque et al. (2011) used the traditional branding model of brand identity, brand positioning and brand image to structure their empirical findings on the personal branding processes on Facebook. Due to the product branding approach being so prominent in the personal branding literature, it seems rather justified to consider personal branding in the light of the traditional branding model in this study as well.

2.3. Brand identity

In traditional branding literature the brand identity describes how the marketer intends the brand to be perceived (Aaker 2010, 382). It essentially means the set of brand associations that symbolize what the brand represents (Aaker 2010, 68). Even though this concept of brand identity initially applied to the branding of products and companies, it could also be utilized in the context of personal branding. The personal brand identity can be thought to represent how the person aims to be perceived by his or her target audience.

Self-reflection appears to be the key to developing the personal brand identity as the importance of self-reflection is often emphasized in the personal branding literature. Some form of self-reflection is quite commonly argued to be the first step in the personal branding process. Self-reflection is seen as essential for the individual to discover his or her unique

strengths. For example in the three-stage personal branding process named 'extract, express, exude' that is promoted by the personal branding consultant William Arruda, the first stage consists of the individual considering who he or she is in order to uncover the core around which to create the personal brand (Reach Communications Consulting, 2009a). The importance of self-reflection has also been acknowledged in academic literature: Manai and Holmlund (2015), for example, supported the need for introspection in their research concerning business students' personal branding skills. Interestingly, even though the need for self-reflection comes across relatively often in personal branding literature, personal branding has also been criticized for lacking possibilities for self-reflection and for supporting a superficial self-image (Lair et al. 2005).

The strong emphasis on self-reflection is, however, slightly problematic. The idea of the personal branding process beginning with self-reflection with the aim of uncovering the uniqueness of the person can be seen as slightly contradictory to the marketing principle (Shepherd 2005). A consumer oriented approach can be regarded as the predominant approach in marketing; yet the emphasis on introspection in personal branding can be interpreted to reflect a product oriented approach (Shepherd 2005). Shepherd (2005) has, however, suggested a way to overcome this problem: the self-reflection should be done with the competitive brands and the target market in mind. Based on this suggestion, the individual who engages in personal branding is required to possess a good understanding of both his or her personal qualities and the competitive environment when constructing the personal brand identity.

Authenticity is argued to be a necessity for successful personal branding (Arruda 2003). The personal brand identity should correspond to the person's values, personality, expertise and unique characteristics that differentiate the individual from his or her competitors (Montoya & Vandehey 2009, 4-5). However, the authenticity of personal branding could still be questioned. After defining the personal brand identity, it should be clearly communicated to the target audience (Reach Communications Consulting, 2009b). The objective of clear communication might leave little opportunity for the individual to express varying values or contrasting goals (Shepherd 2005). Furthermore, Montoya and Vandehey even go so far as to argue that an entrepreneur who engages in personal branding should only specialize in one quite narrowly defined area of expertise and then build the personal brand around this specialization (2009, 51). Therefore it could be thought that to some extent the personal branding process itself limits authenticity.

The question of authenticity in personal branding becomes particularly interesting in the online environment. The key issues with authenticity in online personal branding are caused by the tension between the online and offline environment. Firstly, online personal branding can lack authenticity if the offline reality does not correspond to the expectations created by online personal branding efforts. Shepherd (2005) argues that personal branding can include an element of deception when the audience expectations are raised so high that they do not meet with the reality and he believes that this is especially common in online environments. However, on those social media applications where the users mostly connect with people who they already know offline, this might not be such a prevalent issue. For example, some of the participants in Labrecque et al.'s (2011) online personal branding research stated that a successful online personal branding strategy is authentic and they even expressed distaste towards those individuals who make an attempt to communicate an online personal brand identity which significantly differs from their real identity.

The second issue with authenticity in online personal branding is related to the challenges of managing multiple personal brand identities. It has been argued that especially in the online environment it is difficult to create and maintain different personal brands for different audiences (Labrecque et al. 2011). If the different brand identities clash and therefore create mixed messages, the person might appear as inauthentic (Labrecque et al. 2011). People might want to for example separate their professional and social worlds but that might not be easily achieved online because of the difficulty in controlling who receives certain personal branding messages (Labrecque et al. 2011). However, the social media technology has evolved quite significantly since the time that Labrecque et al. conducted their research on online personal branding processes. Hence, nowadays the individual who engages in online personal branding might be more able to flexibly control who belongs to certain audiences and therefore segment the audience.

2.4. Brand positioning

Brand positioning could be defined as the active communication of the brand identity to the target market (Labrecque et al. 2011). Brand positioning is about implementing the brand identity (Aaker 2010, 176). In personal branding brand positioning can be seen as the person aiming to actively and clearly communicate his or her personal brand identity to the target audience. The person strives to highlight those positive characteristics that the target audience values while simultaneously differentiating him- or herself from the competitors (Labrecque et al. 2011).

The similarities between the product branding approach and the advice given on personal brand positioning are quite striking. Mirroring the product branding process, it has been argued that a person should formulate a personal brand statement (Shepherd 2005). After the construction of the personal brand statement the individual is encouraged to devise a communication strategy to ensure the clear communication of the brand identity (Reach Communications Consulting, 2009b). This approach towards personal brand positioning is remarkably similar to the first two steps of Aaker's three-step brand identity implementation system: Aaker advises the brand marketer to first create a brand position statement which specifies the part of the brand identity to be actively communicated and after that to execute a communication program (2010, 176). The emphasis on creating a communication strategy is in line with the idea of personal branding being a planned process.

It has been advised that the person should be consistent and constant in his or her personal branding efforts (Arruda 2009). The importance of consistency in personal brand positioning can be seen to originate from the traditional branding ideology: Aaker for example argues that there are several benefits to being consistent in branding efforts over time (2010, 222-224). However, the requirement of consistent communication in personal branding supports the view that the individuals engaging in personal branding cannot afford to express their different personas or diverse ideas without risking brand dilution (Shepherd 2005). The emphasis on constant communication, on the other hand, reflects the level of activity required from the person who aims to benefit from personal branding. Arruda (2009) argues that strong brands are always there for their customers and this should also apply to the person who engages in personal branding.

The previous personal branding research has not focused on how the individuals engaging in personal branding monitor the results of their efforts. This is an interesting omission especially when one considers the nature of the advice given on personal brand positioning: personal brand positioning is seen to otherwise be very similar to traditional brand positioning except for the fact that the need to monitor the results of the branding efforts is included in the traditional brand positioning process. For example, the last step in Aaker's brand identity implementation system is the tracking stage where the communication program is monitored (2010, 176). In fact, Aaker emphasizes that investing in monitoring the brand position is highly beneficial (2010, 189). Yet this aspect of brand positioning has been quite underdeveloped in the personal branding literature. However, the researchers who have conducted studies on personal branding on social media have reported some form of monitoring the results to be a part of people's personal branding efforts online. For example, Chen (2013) found that people follow the click rating of their YouTube videos in order to monitor how their personal brand is established. Also a few participants in Labrecque et al.'s (2011) research reported that they monitor their social media profiles and assess their personal branding efforts.

Due to the nature of communication on social media other people's input can have an influence over the results of an individual's personal branding efforts. By writing undesirable comments and posting photos that are not in accordance with the planned personal brand positioning, the person's followers on social media can have a disruptive effect on the effectiveness of the individual's personal brand positioning efforts. Labrecque et al. (2011) found that the followers on social media can hinder an individual's personal branding efforts since they might not understand what kind of content is desirable and this ultimately might be one of the reasons for personal branding failures online. Furthermore, this was seen as particularly problematic due to the fact that others were able to post their comments without the person's consent (Labrecque et al. 2011). However, the extent of this problem might now need to be re-evaluated as nowadays the social media applications generally offer more opportunities for controlling the content posted by others on an individual's personal profile.

3. SELF-PRESENTATION AND PERSONAL BRANDING

A multidisciplinary approach has been recommended for personal branding research (Shepherd 2005). Self-presentation is especially relevant to personal branding due to the fact that personal brand positioning is argued to be carried out through self-presentation (Khedher 2015). This bachelor's thesis combines the theory of personal branding with Goffman's self-presentation imagery as suggested by Shepherd (2005) in his review of the personal branding literature. Goffman's work has been frequently cited in recent academic articles on personal branding (Khedher 2015; Chen 2013; Labrecque et al. 2011) as the dramaturgical imagery seems to depict personal branding quite fittingly. This chapter combines Goffman's views with recent research findings related to self-presentation strategies in an online environment. The end of the chapter discusses the role that brands have in self-presentation.

3.1. Nature of self-presentation in an online environment

People have been found to consciously plan what they post online. Belk (2013), for example, argues that the conscious management of online self-presentation is nowadays becoming more common. This view is supported in the academic research on online self-presentation: Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) reported that their participants used Facebook to conscientiously manage their self-identities while Schau and Gilly already in 2003 found that their informants put a lot of thought into deciding what personal content to disclose on their personal websites. Moreover, people have an awareness of their online audience which affects the type of content they decide to disclose online. People have been found to recognize that the audience of their personal websites can be unlimited and undefined (Schau & Gilly 2003). Marwick & Boyd (2010) use the term networked audience to describe the audience on social media: the networked audience can be both public and personal because it is unidentified while still containing familiar faces. The networked audience needs to be managed by monitoring the followers' feedback, following what others do on social media and by trying to understand the followers' interests (Marwick & Boyd 2010). This way of engaging with one's audience on social media leads to the networked audience having a certain influence over the content a person posts on social media (Marwick & Boyd 2010).

Researchers have been interested in whether people aim to present their actual or ideal selves when participating in online environments. The most recent research advocates the

view that people strive to present their actual selves as opposed to ideal selves on social media. For example, Back et al. (2010) found that people do not aim to present an idealized version of themselves on their Facebook profiles. Even though self-presentation has not been studied in the context of Instagram, the findings from Facebook could provide some indication. People might not be able to present an idealized version of themselves on Facebook because they mostly use it to connect with their real life friends (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012). Similar reasoning might also apply to Instagram: the users often times connect with their real life friends on Instagram even though depending on their privacy settings, they might also have strangers following their accounts. Naturally, the findings regarding self-presentation on Facebook might not, however, be fully applicable to the Instagram environment as Facebook and Instagram are, after all, different social media environments with their own unique characteristics. In addition to the findings related to the presentation of the actual self online, it has been found that people have a tendency to explore multiple selves in the online environment: people can use different self-presentation strategies to explore and display different aspects of the self (Schau & Gilly 2003).

3.2. Impression management in an online environment

The imagery that Goffman uses to describe different aspects of self-presentation is derived from the world of theater. Goffman uses the word 'performance' when referring to an individual interacting with a specific audience (1959, 22). The term 'front' on the other hand is used to refer to the part of the performance which commonly functions in a fixed manner in order to define the situation for the audience (Goffman 1959, 22). The idea of the front has been argued to very closely resemble the concept of personal branding (Shepherd 2005).

The front is divided into the setting and the personal front (Goffman 1959, 22-24). The setting includes the background of the performance and the props used while the personal front consists of the characteristics more closely related to the person such as clothing and gestures (Goffman 1959, 22-24). The use of the standard equipment of the front can be either intentional or unintended (Goffman 1959, 22). From the point of view of personal branding the content of the front should be intentionally planned in order to guide the audience to form a desired impression.

It has been argued that personal brand positioning in an online environment is based on impression management (Labrecque et al. 2011) which parallels Goffman's notion of the use of the front. Online impression management consists of maintaining a consistent image by strategically revealing certain pieces of personal information on social media (Labrecque et al. 2011). Chen (2013) makes the notion that the elements on social media profiles such as personal information and other content disclosed to the audience resemble the props in Goffman's self-presentation imagery. People have been shown to make conscious decisions on what kind of props to include in their performance to create meanings for their audience on the stage of social media (Labrecque et al. 2011). From the perspective of personal branding these disclosure decisions should be made so that they are most reflective of the person's intended message (Labrecque et al. 2011).

3.3. Brands in online self-presentation

If self-presentation online is considered from Goffman's perspective where people actively make decisions on which props to include in their performance, it is only natural to consider the meaning that these props contain. Even though these props can include any type of personal information or content uploaded to a social media profile, an especially interesting group of props is brand-related user-generated content. Brands can be used as subtle cues in self-presentation (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012). The online environment could be seen as a particularly convenient place for associating oneself with a brand: it is argued that it is more acceptable to describe what types of belongings one owns online as opposed to promoting them in a real life situation (Belk 2013). In addition, in the online environment brand associations can be achieved without actually owning any products offered by the brand: for example one can like or follow a brand's social media account. However, in the context of Instagram the most visible and therefore arguably the most interesting way to create brand associations is to feature branded products in the photos uploaded to one's Instagram account.

Creating user-generated content about brands has been argued to be a highly meaningful process: UGC activity has even been seen to be a part of an individual's identity creation (Halliday 2016). For example, on personal websites the website creators have been shown to add depth to their digital selves by utilizing brands to communicate more complex meanings in a compact way (Schau & Gilly 2003). Even though it has been argued that people generally present their actual selves on social media, brands can be used to

communicate idealized aspects of the self as well (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012). 70 percent of the interviewees in Hollenbeck and Kaikati's (2012) research reported that more of the brands they associated themselves with on Facebook symbolized their ideal selves. It was also found that whether brands are used to represent either more idealized or actual aspects of the self depends on the person's life situation (Hollenbeck & Kaikati 2012).

Due to their developmental stage adolescents are an especially interesting group of consumers when it comes to branding. Owning certain brands can seem highly important in the eyes of the adolescent consumer (Jezkova Isaksen & Roper 2012). In adolescence children become more aware of the social implications of owning specific brands because their understanding of the self increases and they start to feel a stronger pressure to 'fit in' (Chaplin & John 2005). Jezkova Isaksen & Roper (2012) found that adolescents believe that owning certain brands can assist an individual in fitting in with his or her peer group. Furthermore, the time frame during which a certain brand is seen as a 'must have' product can be very short (Jezkova Isaksen & Roper 2012). During this stage in a person's life also the number of self-brand connections increases (Chaplin & John 2005) which makes it particularly interesting to study the use of brand associations in adolescents' self-presentation on Instagram.

4. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The empirical part of this study presents and analyzes the findings from the interviews conducted. This chapter starts with a brief description of the participants and then goes on to depict the Instagram environment from the adolescent perspective. The findings on personal branding practices of adolescents on Instagram are discussed from the perspectives of personal brand identity and personal brand positioning. The personal brand positioning section is further divided into three sub-sections: 'Impression management' which combines ideas of self-presentation and personal brand positioning, 'Brand associations' which discusses the role of brand-related user-generated content in adolescents' personal brand positioning efforts and 'Monitoring the results' which presents the findings on how adolescents monitor the audience reactions on Instagram.

4.1. Participants

The adolescents interviewed for this research are Finnish girls who practice figure skating during their spare time. Therefore it should be noted that this shared interest in sports could have an influence on the personal branding efforts of these individuals. In addition, most of them are also friends with each other and follow each other on Instagram which might have an effect on the views they have on Instagram use.

The participants are quite experienced Instagram users as all of them have actively used the application for over one year. Moreover, for some of them Instagram is the only social media application they use. This could be seen as an indication of how important Instagram is to these adolescent social media users when compared to other social media applications. None of the participants have Facebook profiles. The other social media platform that the participants use in addition to Instagram is Snapchat which is used by Participants 1, 2 and 5. However, in this bachelor's thesis the study of the online personal branding practices of adolescents is limited to the Instagram context only.

Despite all of the participants having used Instagram for around the same amount of time, there are quite significant differences in the number of followers they have: the person with most Instagram followers (Participant 1) is followed by over 1400 people whereas the person with the lowest number of followers (Participant 3) is followed by almost 60 people (Table 1). Due to these quite significant differences in following, this study is able to view personal branding from the perspectives of both popular and slightly less popular Instagram users.

Interestingly, all of the participants, except for Participant 3 with the least number of followers, were actually relatively happy with the number of people following their account at least for the time being. Therefore most of the participants are not by their own accounts actively promoting their Instagram accounts to potential new followers. Participant 4, however, stated that she was content with her following for the moment but indicated that in the future she might strive to become more popular. This reflects the evolving nature of adolescents' Instagram activity: the goals and strategies used may evolve over time.

Table 1. Participants

Participant	Age	Time on Instagram (years)	Number of followers (*	Number of users followed (*
Participant 1	12	2	1444	1729
Participant 2	14	3,5	236	482
Participant 3	10	2	58	139
Participant 4	12	1,5	227	201
Participant 5	14	1,5	586	390

(* Numbers checked on the day of the interview

All of the participants, except for Participant 3, actually have more than one Instagram account: usually one main personal account and another account to pursue varying interests. For example, in addition to their personal accounts Participant 2 has a fan account dedicated to her favorite anime and Participant 4 has a second account which she created solely for the purpose of participating into Instagram contests run by marketers. In this study the emphasis is on the main personal accounts of these adolescents as these are the accounts that are usually meant for a wider audience and therefore arguably more suitable for analysis from personal branding perspective.

4.2. Instagram environment

In order to study adolescents' personal branding efforts specifically in the context of Instagram, it is critical to gain a general understanding of how the Instagram environment is perceived by them. After all, this social media environment could have an effect on the strategies used in personal branding. Moreover, if one considers Shepherd's (2005) concept of personal branding where a thorough understanding of the competitive brands and the target audience is needed when constructing the personal brand identity, the person engaging in personal branding on Instagram actually should be very aware of the Instagram environment.

Based on the views expressed in the interviews, Instagram comes across as a world of elaborate rules regarding the type of behavior that is seen as acceptable. These rules seem to cover most aspects of Instagram use from what kind of pictures are considered to be Instagram material to how often pictures should be uploaded. The participants in this study were highly aware of these rules as most of them were for example readily able to give advice on good Instagram practices when asked to offer advice to a hypothetical person who is new to the world of Instagram. The rules of Instagram also have a tendency to evolve over time. This became especially evident in the interview with Participant 1 who highlighted that the customs even tend to change quite quickly on Instagram. For example, according to Participant 1 the use of hashtags is already an old custom. Hence, if an Instagram user aims to keep up with the customs, he or she has to be rather active in monitoring the environment.

A lot of the opinions which reflect the rules of Instagram use were centered on the concept of what makes a good Instagram photo. The term that came up a lot was 'a photo of good quality': the preeminent opinion was that one should only upload photos of good quality. Most of the participants were able to explain the concept of the photo of good quality when asked to elaborate on the subject but Participant 2 gave the most detailed definition. According to Participant 2, a photo of good quality is well focused and straight so that the object of the image is shown well and clearly. Hence, it could be argued that in order to conform to the audience expectations on Instagram, one should maintain a certain standard for the content that one posts on Instagram. According to the participants, one should also be careful with how often one posts photos on Instagram as uploading photos too often can

be annoying from the followers' perspective. Participants 4 and 5 further elaborated that posting photos often might not be that annoying unless they are very similar.

Breaking the rules of Instagram was mostly seen as embarrassing. Although most of the participants felt quite indifferent about rule breakers, Participant 2 expressed the strongest opinion towards people who do not abide by the rules:

Interviewer: What do you think of a person who uses them? ('unacceptable' hashtags)

Participant 2: She is idiotic and stupid.

Not knowing how to act on Instagram could therefore spark quite negative opinions among the audience. Interestingly though, none of the participants were able to specify why certain practices were considered as embarrassing. All in all, most of the participants felt it was best to just abide by the rules: Participant 3 even reflected on the times when she herself had made mistakes and emphasized how embarrassing her practices had been.

4.3. Brand identity

The concept of personal brand identity can be seen to apply to adolescents' Instagram activity: the adolescents interviewed had considered how they aim to be perceived by their Instagram audience. Although the extent of how much they had thought about their brand identity differed from participant to participant, it was clear that this is something that everyone reflects on. The participants were able to describe the identities they wanted to portray:

Interviewer: What do you want to tell through your Instagram account?

Participant 1: That I'm funny.

Interviewer: Have you thought about how you want to be seen there?

Participant 5: Not much, but I usually try to look happy in my photos: I don't post any angsty photos there.

Participant 4's personal brand identity to be portrayed was especially interesting as it reflected the type of thinking that Shepherd advocates about constructing the personal brand identity with the target audience in mind. Participant 4 wanted to be seen as 'a good person' and by that she meant she wanted to be viewed as a person who knows how to act properly on Instagram. This view also reflects the importance of the Instagram environment in adolescents' personal branding efforts.

The authenticity of the personal brand identity is a topic that sparks opinions among adolescents. The participants' opinions on authenticity were slightly contrasting because on one hand there were participants who emphasized the authenticity of their personal brand identity; on the other hand some of the participants stated that they aim to portray a slightly improved version of themselves. However, in line with the findings presented in the prior online personal branding research (Labrecque et al. 2011) it seems that the idea of an authentic personal brand identity is more supported among adolescents. Participants 1 and 4 were most adamant about portraying their real identities on Instagram and Participant 5 too stated that she always posts photos which reflect her real preferences and therefore she aims to be authentic. However, Participant 5 did see authenticity to be slightly problematic: she reflected on how the audience might form an opinion of her that does not correspond to her true identity because the question of authenticity is a matter of personal opinion. This way of thinking already demonstrates a transition from the personal brand identity to the personal brand image as it shows an awareness of the difference between how the person aims to be perceived and how the audience might actually see these efforts. The minority opinion supporting the idealized personal brand identity came up especially in the interview with Participant 2: she explicitly explained that her real identity and Instagram identity differ. The motivation to portray an idealized identity seems to be the desire to make a good impression.

The prior research on personal branding has criticized personal branding for restricting the variety of values an individual can express but adolescents on Instagram seem to have found a solution for this issue. Due to the privacy settings on Instagram adolescents are able to create different accounts specifically for different audiences without risking brand dilution on their main personal Instagram account. Participants 1 and 5, for example, have second, more private accounts for uploading photos which do not meet the standards they have for their main accounts and they only accept their closest friends as followers to these accounts. The adolescents feel like they can express themselves more freely on these accounts as for example Participant 5 described the photos on her second account to be more ordinary and not of such high quality as on her main account.

Being able to explore multiple personal brands on Instagram was particularly important to Participant 2. Her second account is a fan account dedicated to her favorite anime and she emphasized that her classmates at school can never know about it because they do not accept her interest in anime and therefore bully her. Due to her situation with the bullies she

has to separate her two Instagram identities and make sure that the personal brand identity she aims to communicate through her personal account conforms to the audience expectations. Her personal branding efforts in general demonstrate a pronounced awareness of the target audience. The ability to segment the audience on social media and even have an account that real life acquaintances do not know about is very much in contrast with Labrecque et al.'s (2011) ideas of people having to portray a single persona everywhere on social media in order to avoid sending conflicting messages that would dilute the personal brand.

4.4. Brand positioning

Communicating the personal brand identity to the Instagram audience is a conscious effort and requires conscious planning from the adolescents. Even though only two of the participants (Participant 1 and 4) admitted to specifically having a plan for their Instagram activity, all of the participants had clearly thought about what kind of content they aim to post in general. All of the participants were easily able to describe the types of photos they usually post on Instagram. For example, Participant 1 stated that she only posts colorful photos of good quality and Participant 5 described how her aim is to post the kind of photos that make a new person viewing her profile see her in a positive light. All in all, these views reflect personal branding ideologies quite well.

4.4.1. Impression management

Adolescents are very aware of the potential of the Instagram audience to be undefined and unlimited. All of the participants in this study manage their audience by having a private profile on Instagram, meaning that before a potential new follower can see the user's photos, the user has to first accept his or her followership request. Due to these privacy settings the adolescents are able to quite effectively control who can become the members of their audience. All of the participants stated that they do not want random, suspicious characters to follow them and see the content they post on Instagram. By effectively controlling who are in the audience, adolescents seem to be able to avoid some of the personal branding problems caused by other users who might post undesirable content that is not in accordance with the planned personal branding message. Participants 1 and 5 for example explained that their friends would not embarrass them on Instagram. Random, unknown individuals, on the other hand, might cause problems for which Participant 2 provided an

example since before her account was private she used to get disturbing comments on her photos from people unknown to her.

The concept of online impression management presented by Labrecque et al. (2011) is a fitting representation of adolescents' personal brand positioning efforts on Instagram: adolescents aim to make disclosure decisions that best represent their personal brand identity. The participants in this study indicated that they plan very carefully what kind of content they post on Instagram. Participant 5 even explained that if she herself cannot decide whether or not to post a certain picture, she will consult her friends on the decision. When deciding on what kind of photos to post on their Instagram accounts, the adolescents are in effect choosing the props for their performance if put in Goffman's (1959) terms. These are conscious decisions for the adolescents as all of the participants were able to clearly explain what kind of photos they aim to post on Instagram and what kind of photos they would never post. For example, Participant 3 usually posts photos that are not too mature and would never post photos of her parents or her food at a restaurant; whereas Participant 5 stated that she would never post revealing pictures of herself or photos associated with alcohol and smoking. Some of the participants were even able to describe what kind of criteria they consider before posting a photo on their account. The disclosure decisions are made in accordance with the individual's personal brand identity. An excellent example of this is Participant 2 who has deleted a majority of her old photos because she sees them as bad, stupid and childlike and therefore they conflict with the identity she now wants to portray. Also the opinions on unacceptable photos expressed by Participant 5 represent the wholesome brand identity she aims to portray to her audience.

One of the central elements of the disclosure decisions concerning the kind of content to upload to one's Instagram account is the extent to which the photos are edited. The amount of editing that is typically done to the photos before they are posted on Instagram is a conscious decision which reflects consistency in brand positioning efforts: most of the participants in this study were able to describe their typical approach to photo editing. Furthermore, the amount of editing is also a representation of the individual's brand identity. For example, Participant 5 who aims to be authentic on Instagram usually edits her photos very little because she feels that photos which are not edited are more natural. Her approach to editing photos is quite practical as well as she does not edit her photos at all unless she needs to add some brightness due to sometimes having bad lighting in the photo initially. Participant 2, on the other hand, who aims to portray a slightly idealized version of herself

explained that she spends a lot of time and uses a couple of applications for editing her photos because she wants her photos to look good. For example, she told that she had once used four hours by editing one photo.

Much like consistency is emphasized in the personal branding literature, adolescents find consistency to be important in Instagram communication. Interestingly, consistency is not necessarily achieved by being consistent in the themes that are photographed but by maintaining the visual cohesion of the profile. The subjects of the Instagram photos may vary but consistency is maintained by editing all of the photos so that they visually follow a common theme. The theme reflects the individual's personal aesthetic:

Interviewer: Can you describe your theme to me?

Participant 1: Colorful.

Participant 4: It's a mix of natural and black and white.

Participant 2: I used to have a black and white theme, then I had like a dark theme and then a really light theme.

The use of themes was, however, also criticized because the themes can be quite restricting. Participant 5 had thought about starting a theme but decided against it because she wants to post photos as they are, not as they fit in with the theme and Participant 2 got fed up with themes because she felt that sometimes one might not be able to post a great picture if it did not match the theme. These are interesting remarks from the perspective of personal branding as personal branding has exactly been criticized for encouraging reductionistic expression because of the emphasis put on consistency. However, Participant 5 indicated that the use of themes in general is a current trend on Instagram. Therefore it remains to be seen whether this is a custom that is going to last and for how long.

In addition to the use of themes, consistency is also achieved through the descriptions written for the photos uploaded. The participants stated that they generally write similar descriptions for every photo. For example, Participant 1 searches song lyrics online which represent her current feelings, Participant 2 writes a short description of what is in the photo, Participant 4 often times only writes one word in English and Participant 5 chooses an emoji which describes her feelings. Just like with the choice of a theme, the types of descriptions that are written for the photos are a result of conscious planning and reflect the individual's personal preferences.

4.4.2. Brand associations

Photos that contain brand associations are an especially interesting group of props in personal brand positioning on Instagram as they can be seen as quite a common element in adolescents' Instagram profiles. All of the participants in this study, except for Participant 2, had photos that could be described as brand-related user-generated content on their Instagram accounts. Moreover, all of the participants who had brand-related content on their Instagram accounts had even posted at least one photo where clearly the focal point of the photo was a branded product, for example a photo of a hand holding a bottle of Victoria's Secret fragrance (Participant 3) or a photo of two Starbucks' coffee cups on a table (Participant 4). Also slightly more subtle brand associations were presented on the participants' Instagram accounts, for example in the form of the person in the photo wearing distinguishable branded clothes.

Interestingly, despite the high visibility of branded products on adolescents' Instagram profiles, most of the participants in this study did not personally feel that having photos of specific branded products was of high importance. For example, Participant 5 explained that having photos of branded products is not really important to her but they provide some variation to her Instagram feed which otherwise contains a lot of photos of herself. Participant 1's views differed quite significantly from the rest of the participants as she did find brand associations to be important. Moreover, when asked to point out which of the photos on her Instagram feed best described her account, she chose a photo of herself holding an empty Starbucks' coffee cup. The most striking feature of the photo was that it had been cropped so that her face was not included in the picture.

Most of the adolescents in this study did not believe there to be a distinction between brands that are seen as better or worse options to feature on Instagram photos; most of them did, however, acknowledge that certain brands are trendier at different times. The participants, except for Participant 2 who by her own account is not very interested in brands, discussed specific brands which they thought were currently on trend. Participant 1 who expressed most interest in brands and also exceptionally did think that there is a distinction between good and bad brand options was able to come up with the most comprehensive list of currently trendy brands:

Interviewer: Could you give me some examples of good brands at the moment?

Participant 1: Nike, Adidas, Kånken, Starbucks, NY.

Even though a distinction between good and bad brands was not made, it was acknowledged that brands have a tendency to go in and out of style. Participant 5 for example reminisced on the times when Victoria's Secret was the brand that everyone was excited about and she too posted a photo of a Victoria's Secret store. Participant 3, on the other hand, reflected on the development of brands' popularity with an example concerning cookie brands:

Participant 3: For example Domino is already dead. '...' Like Dominos are something that people would no longer really eat because people now eat more Oreos. '...' Oreo is getting old little by little.

These accounts highlight adolescents' awareness of the trends concerning brands. The explanation by Participant 3 is particularly remarkable considering that she was the youngest participant at age ten and yet she demonstrated such clarity in her perception of trends. Furthermore, she indicated that she was going to delete her photo of a packet of Oreo cookies from her Instagram account. Therefore at least to her, following the trends is important and the trends affect her disclosure decisions in personal brand positioning.

In the interviews with the participants it was also discussed what it means to post pictures of trendy branded products on Instagram. According to the participants, posting photos which feature trendy branded products means that the person is like the others and this was generally seen in a positive light. Being like the others was especially important to Participant 1 who clearly placed the highest importance out of all the participants on posting brand-related content on her Instagram account. Moreover, Participant 4 explained that it is a good thing to be seen as a person who owns everything that is in style at the moment because it shows that the person has been given everything she wants to have. All in all, these views reflect Jezkova Isaksen and Roper's (2012) findings on adolescents' attitudes towards brands even if they are not quite as radical as the opinions expressed in their research.

From personal branding point of view where the aim often times is to stand out from competitors by engaging in personal branding, the idea of trying to fit in via brand positioning efforts is slightly conflicting. However, in this context it should be noted that even though brand-related content on adolescents' Instagram accounts is very common, it is by no means the only type of content posted and hardly even the most typical content to be seen on their profiles. Therefore it could be argued that user-generated content about brands is

just one type of prop among many others used in personal brand positioning on Instagram and in adolescents' case it often has the special meaning of trying to fit in with the peer group. Just like with making decisions on including any other prop to the performance, choosing to post specific brand-related photos on one's Instagram account is a strategic disclosure decision. Posting a lot of photos featuring on-trend brands could in special cases even be seen as being very much in line with the personal brand identity to be portrayed: for example Participant 1 emphasized the importance of brands while claiming that her aim was to literally be like everyone else.

4.4.3. Monitoring the results

Monitoring the results of one's personal branding efforts on Instagram is interesting to adolescents. The fact that all of the participants, except for Participant 3, had at some point used the Followers + application which presents the user's follower statistics is one indication of adolescents' interest in monitoring the audience reactions. The application was seen as useful for identifying the users who unfollow the user's account and those users, termed as 'ghost users', who only follow the account but never like or comment on the photos. Then if the user does not approve of this type of activity, she can unfollow them in return. However, none of the participants use this application anymore as they feel that it is slightly unnecessary. Participant 2 also pointed out that one would have to pay for the application, if he or she wanted to see all the useful information, and even though it is a quite nice application, it is not nice enough for her to pay for its use. For the participants in this study checking the likes and comments on their photos is enough in terms of monitoring the audience reactions. This is comparable to Chen's (2013) findings on people's personal branding efforts on YouTube where the users were found to monitor the click rating of their videos.

Adolescents tend to reflect on the results of their personal branding efforts on Instagram. When reflecting on the number of likes on photos, the number of followers is taken into account: even though Participant 3 was not very satisfied with the number of likes her photos usually got, she pointed out that the number was to be expected as she did not have that many followers. Furthermore, in her interview Participant 2 analyzed the reasons leading to certain outcomes: she told about Instagram users who have about 500 followers but only get around 20 likes on their photos and explained that this is probably caused by them

posting badly focused, stupid, and situational photos. These views demonstrate that adolescents have a relatively holistic approach when reflecting on the audience reactions.

Even though the audience reactions receive quite a lot of attention from the adolescents, the results do not evoke strong feelings in them and very rarely result in them changing their Instagram activity in any significant way. The participants mostly stated that they are not too bothered if their photos do not for example get that many likes. Participant 5 explained that she is happy and feels that her photo was good if it gets a lot of likes and nice comments but if it goes the other way round she is not really affected. Generally, unfavorable audience reactions in terms of the number of likes and comments on photos do not seem to make adolescents reconsider their personal brand positioning. Only Participant 2 stated that she might try to post photos more often if it seemed that she was starting to get less likes than usual. All in all, the way adolescents do not change their communication style based on less favorable audience reactions can be seen to reflect the importance of authenticity in personal branding. However, it is to some extent in contrast with Shepherd's (2005) emphasis on including the marketing principle in personal branding.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this bachelor's thesis was to study adolescents' personal branding practices in the social media environment of Instagram. As personal branding as a concept and Instagram as a communication environment are both relatively recent phenomena, explorative approach was suitable for this study. The research methodology included the use of the photo-elicitation method which was found to be highly beneficial in this study. The introduction of photographic material into the interviews allowed the participants to give detailed explanations of their ideas as they were able to give examples from their own Instagram accounts to support their thinking. From theoretical perspective this study combined concepts of personal branding and self-presentation in answering the research problems.

The main research problem of this bachelor's thesis was: "How do adolescents engage in personal branding while using Instagram?" This question was approached from the perspective of the traditional branding model as product branding approach was emphasized also in the prior personal branding literature. Based on the empirical findings in this study, the concepts of personal brand identity and personal brand positioning were

found to be suitable descriptions to adolescents' personal branding practices on Instagram. It was found that adolescents do consciously consider what kind of personal brand identity they aim to portray to their audience and that authenticity of the personal brand identity is valued. Personal brand positioning, on the other hand, was found to be achieved through impression management which as a concept is in this context derived from Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical self-presentation imagery. Adolescents were found to make conscious disclosure decisions regarding the kind of content to post on their Instagram accounts in a way that what they communicate to their audience is in line with their personal brand identity. Much like the emphasis on consistency in the prior personal branding literature, adolescents aim to be consistent in their personal brand positioning efforts on Instagram.

The special interest in this study was on brand-related user-generated content on adolescents' Instagram accounts and therefore the first supporting research problem was: "What is the role of brands in adolescents' personal branding efforts on Instagram?" Photos featuring branded products were found to be very common on adolescents' Instagram accounts and they were generally seen in a positive light. Posting photos featuring currently on-trend brands was found to have the meaning of helping the individual to fit in with her peers. Although the aim of trying to fit in through personal brand positioning is seemingly in contrast with the personal branding ideologies, it should be noted that the decision to post user-generated content about brands is only one of the many strategic disclosure decisions adolescents make regarding their personal brand positioning efforts. Brand-related posts are a common element of adolescents' Instagram accounts but hardly the most prominent element.

The second supporting research problem was: "How do adolescents monitor the results of their personal branding efforts?" The prior personal branding literature has not given much attention on how individuals monitor the audience reactions to their personal branding efforts but in the context of social media this has become more relevant as social media applications offer more opportunities for achieving that. It was found that adolescents are interested in monitoring the audience reactions and they also tend to analyze different outcomes with a relatively holistic approach. The adolescents in this study were receptive to new ways of monitoring the audience reactions but felt that checking the likes and comments on their photos was a sufficient method for monitoring their audience at the moment. However, an unfavorable audience reaction in terms of the number of likes is quite unlikely to make the person to reconsider her brand positioning which could be seen as a

reflection of the importance of authenticity in adolescents' personal branding efforts on Instagram.

Because of the research setting the generalizability of the findings from this study is quite limited. The empirical data was collected by interviewing adolescent girls only and therefore the findings from this study might not be fully applicable to adolescent boys' personal branding practices. Including the adolescent boys' perspective might have brought up some differing views on personal branding in the Instagram environment. The ways in which adolescent boys engage in personal branding while using Instagram might differ from adolescent girls' personal branding efforts. Hence, in order to get a more comprehensive view on adolescents' personal branding practices on Instagram, this topic could be studied using a mixed or an all-boys sample.

As adolescents' online personal branding activity is such a new research topic, it might be worthwhile to study it also from other perspectives and with a wider scope. Most of the participants in this study were not highly popular in terms of the number of followers they have on their accounts so it might be interesting to study whether their personal branding practices differ in any significant ways from those users who are intensely followed on Instagram. Adolescents' personal branding practices on other social media platforms could be studied as well. For example, it could be studied how adolescents engage in personal branding on Snapchat, which was found to be the other social media platform the adolescents in this study use in addition to Instagram. It would be particularly interesting to study whether or not adolescents' personal branding practices on Snapchat differ from their efforts on Instagram due to the fact that the video and photo content posted on Snapchat is only visible for 24 hours. Furthermore, personal branding practices could be studied from the perspective of multiple platforms: if Instagram and Snapchat were both actively used, it could be studied if and how the personal branding efforts are coordinated across platforms. From theoretical perspective the research setting could be developed so that it also includes the brand image aspect of the traditional branding model as in this study the focus was exclusively on the individual's own perceptions.

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