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1. Introduction

This section will provide the reader with a background of self-branding and justifying its relevance. The problem, purpose, perspective and research questions will be specified and explained. Lastly, this section will conclude with a definition list of words used throughout this paper.

1.1 Background

The conceptualisation of self-branding can majorly be attributed to three components; the evolution of branding (Aaker, 1997; Berthon, Pitt, Chakrabarti, Berthon & Simon, 2011; Fill & Turnbull, 2016; Kapferer, 2008), the age of digitalisation (Gandini, 2016; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; Quinton, 2013; Rangarajan, Gelb & Vandaveer, 2017; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015) and the precarity of modern employment (Gandini, 2016; Pera, Viglia & Furlan, 2016; Vallas & Cummins, 2015).

Self-branding is defined as the activity of “capturing and promoting an individual's strengths and uniqueness to a target audience” (Labrecque et al., 2011, p. 39).

The value and impact a brand has in today's society is multifaceted, a brand is defined as “an organisation's promise to a customer to deliver what a brand stands for... in terms of functional benefits but also emotional, self-expressive and social benefits” (Fill & Turnbull, 2016, p. 291). Since the introduction of personification (Aaker, 1997) and the notion of brands acquiring an identity (Kapferer, 2008), brands' focus and strive have shifted from distinction towards consumer associations. Opposed to simply seeking recognition through branding, businesses are now seeking relationships and affiliations with their customers (Berthon et al., 2011).

Digitalisation and technological advancements have changed the way consumers and businesses interact (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Social platforms like Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram cover a diverse range of purposes and are transforming how the internet and self-branding is approached (Gandini, 2016;

Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). However, consequences of engaging on social platforms are existent and require responsibility and consistency. The choice of being present or absent and furthermore, what content to post has a great bearing on how co-creators and ‘consumers’ view individuals (Gandini, 2016; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015). The new attention given to the online environment has obliged brand strategists and managers to rethink (Quinton, 2013).

The precarity of modern employment has been largely attributed to the changing and new economy, known as the sharing economy (Pera et al., 2016), neo-liberal economy (Vallas & Cummins, 2015), reputation economy and knowledge economy (Gandini, 2016). Self-branding has become a tool conducive to securing employment (Gandini, 2016) in the precariousness of the changing economy. The need of self-branding for the self-employed, inclusive of freelancers and entrepreneurs, is enabled by the innovation and construction of technology and its infrastructure (Muhammed, 2018).

The concept of self-branding was first conceptualized by Tom Peters in 1997 (Labrecque et al., 2011; Rangarajan et al., 2017) who expressed that an individual is “not defined by your job title and you're not confined by your job description” (Peters, 1997, para. 16). Rangarajan et al. (2017) question the difference between the branding of enterprises and individuals, explaining the first is made on demand and the later through development. Labrecque et al. (2011) suggest that self-branding efforts may vary with regard to an individual’s life span and cultural influences and recommend further research on the topic. Considering the aforementioned insights, this research has been constructed.

1.2 Problem

Living in an environment and market where employment is precarious it is hard to know what to do and which measures to take. When a changing economy (Gandini, 2016; Pera et al., 2016; Vallas & Cummins, 2015) is on the rise it is important to understand how to procure and preserve one’s career, self-branding is the method proposed (Gandini, 2016; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011; Pera et al., 2016; Peters, 1997; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Vallas & Cummins, 2017).

Existing literature on self-branding mainly focuses on the self-employed, described as “those workers who, working on their own account or with one or a few partners or in cooperative...” (Annink, Gorgievski & Den Dulk, 2016, p. 650) and continues to classify said individuals into two main categories: freelancers (Gandini, 2016; Kitching & Smallbone, 2012; Vallas & Cummins, 2017) and entrepreneurs (Gandini, 2016; Vallas & Cummins, 2017). However, the literature fails to acknowledge the ramifications of self-branding for the ‘traditionally employed’. The traditionally employed are those who “are dependent on an employer to provide them with work to do, and work under their direction” (Kitching & Smallbone, 2012, p. 77). Despite the precedence of self-branding being contingent on precariousness, the changing economy bares implications for its entirety.

Furthermore, when considering the economy and an example of its entirety, literature detailing the Swedish employment market and its mentality in correlation to self-branding was quickly realised as lacking. Thoroughly understanding the phenomenon of self-branding requires the totality of a specific employment market and a range of potential influences. In Sweden, a possible influencing implication is the Law of Jante, which introduces a cultural context. The Law of Jante is a cultural phenomenon portraying the mentality of Scandinavians, their interaction, and the negative and unpleasant viewpoint held against individuality and success (Cappelen & Dahlberg, 2017). Given the nature of self-branding, “capturing and promoting an individual's strengths and uniqueness to a target audience” (Labrecque et al., 2011, p. 39), the relationship Swedes have to self-branding is seemingly paradoxical.

The lack of research on the ‘traditionally employed’ and the potentiality of a cultural context, the Law of Jante, having a considerable impact on the strategies of Swedes’ self-branding activities creates the contribution for this research.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this research is two-fold, including both an explanatory and exploratory scope. The explanatory elements seek to understand and investigate the Swedish employment market with regard to self-branding and to identify the variables of influence. The aim is to recognise patterns and reasons through in-depth interviews in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena.

The second purpose of this research is of a more exploratory nature, as it strives to uncover new insights for Sweden's 'traditionally employed' with regard to employing self-branding activities.

1.4 Perspective

The perspective taken throughout this research is that of the employees, those that are employed or self-employed, not the employers. As this is a study based on self-branding it seemed most appropriate to study those that are creating a brand and selling it on the labour market. The secondary data follows in this nature, and the primary data is naturally created, with regard to the interviews, from the employee's perspective.

1.5 Research Questions

***RQ 1:** How do Swedish entrepreneurs, freelancers and the 'traditionally employed' self-brand themselves today given the current environment?*

***RQ 2:** What importance does self-branding have for the 'traditionally employed' in Sweden?*

1.6 Definitions

- **Authenticity:** “worthy of acceptance, authoritative, trustworthy, not imaginary, false or imitation, conforming to an original” (Beverland, 2009, p. 15).
- **Brand:** “an organisation’s promise to a customer to deliver what a brand stands for... in terms of functional benefits but also emotional, self-expressive and social benefits” (Fill & Turnbull, 2016, p. 291). This definition refers to both brand and branding.
- **‘Traditional’ Employees:** Individuals who “are dependent on an employer to provide them with work to do, and work under their direction” (Kitching & Smallbone, 2012, p. 77). In this study, the definition of an employee will further be acknowledged as the ‘traditionally employed’ or a ‘traditional employee.’
- **Entrepreneur:** “the principal agent of venture activities, and entrepreneurship is therefore defined by the actions of entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship involves the recognition, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities, which implies that entrepreneurs must take a series of actions” (Lee, 2019, p. 31).
- **Freelancer:** “those genuinely in business on their own account, working alone or with co-owning partners or co-directors, responsible for generating their own work and income, but who do not employ others” (Kitching & Smallbone, 2012, p. 76).
- **Identity:** “the symbols and nomenclature an organisation uses to identify itself to people” (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan, 2018, p. 115).
- **Image:** “the global evaluation (comprised of a set of beliefs and feelings) a person has about an organisation” (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018, p. 115).
- **Job Precarity:** “refers to all forms of insecure, contingent, flexible work – from illegalized, casualized and temporary employment, to homeworking, piecework and freelancing” (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 3).

- **Personification:** “refers to the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347).
- **Reputation:** “the attributed values (such as authenticity, honesty, responsibility, and integrity) evoked from the person’s corporate image” (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018, p. 115).
- **Self-branding:** “entails capturing and promoting an individual’s strengths and uniqueness to a target audience” (Labrecque et al., 2011, p. 39). The definition of self-branding is interchanged with that of personal branding throughout the study.
- **Self-Employed:** “those workers who, working on their own account or with one or a few partners or in cooperative, hold the type of jobs where remuneration is directly dependent upon the profits derived from the goods and services produced” (Annink et al., 2016, p. 650).
- **Social Capital:** “is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition... which provides each of its members with... a “credential” that entitles them to credit in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu, 2018, p. 83).

2. Frame of Reference

This section will review the existing literature and provide the reader with theories and concepts that are central to this paper. This will allow the reader to gain a deeper understanding of the current literature. Lastly, this section will introduce a conceptual model developed by the researchers.

2.1 The Evolution of Branding

2.1.1 The History of Branding

In recent decades, branding has developed quickly and become an instrumental and vital element in the marketing activities of corporations. Historically, the origin of the word brand, was simply a method of distinction, a way to differentiate one material thing from the other, to simply burn a mark (Berthon et al., 2011). In keeping with the original concept, branding was represented most often by a symbol or symbols that indicated ownership until a shift in thinking caused a deviation from a focus on representation to a focus on meaning (Berthon et al., 2011). According to Berthon et al. (2011), this shift introduced two new aspects of meaningful branding: expression and interpretation which are also accepted as the trade-off in communication between the creator and the consumer. The following table demonstrates “an evolution from instrument to identity” (Berthon et al., 2011, p. 187), indicating that branding has drastically advanced over the last fifty plus years. Fill and Turnbull (2016) exemplify two definitions from 1960 and 2014 (see table 1).

Author	Brand Definition
Alexander (American Marketing Association, 1960)	‘A name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors.’
Aaker (2014)	This last definition refers to ‘brand and branding’: ‘an organisation’s promise to a customer to deliver what a brand stands for... in terms of functional benefits but also emotional, self-expressive and social benefits.’

Table 1. Brand Definitions (Fill & Turnbull, 2016, p. 291)

A comparison of the two definitions shows one can be considered basic, incorporating words like name, design, symbol and differentiate, while the second refers to the functionality and purpose derived from branding focusing on: promise, delivery, benefit, emotional and self-expression. The numerous changes to the definition of branding underscore the importance and changing value a brand has today. Branding and the development of brands is a marketing strategy used by many businesses and corporations (Berthon et al., 2011). A brand captures both the internal and external values of a product, business or service and does so to establish clear communication between the sender and recipient (Berthon, et al., 2011; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Labrecque et al., 2011; Kapferer, 2008; Fill & Turnbull, 2016). Two key aspects and interests for businesses in establishing a strong brand is the ability to communicate and identify with their customers (Kapferer, 2008). When branding and brands shift their focus from representation to meaning, the intent naturally shifts as well. While seeking recognition through branding was once enough, businesses are now pursuing relationships and affiliations with their customers (Berthon et al., 2011) and in doing so creating a competitive advantage for themselves. What is fascinating about a brand is that unlike any other product or service, it cannot be copied.

2.1.2 Brand Construction and Elements

Research on conceptual models and the expressions of core components shows that three key frameworks exist: The Elements of Brand Magic (Biel, 1997), The PCDL model (Ghodeswar, 2008) and The Three Brand P's (Fill & Turnbull, 2016). The Elements of Brand Magic model is comprised of three main elements: brand skills, personality and the building of relationships. Brand skills refer to the attributes that distinguish and differentiate brands. Brand personality refers to the fundamental traits a brand portrays concerning lifestyle and perceived values. The element called relationship refers to the building of communication, contact and exchanges with individual buyers that is two-way (Biel, 1997).

The second framework, the PCDL model, consists of four stages: positioning of the brand, communicating the brand message, delivering the brand performance and leveraging the brand equity. With regard to this specific model, Ghodeswar (2008) clarifies the

following: positioning of the brand refers to the creation of perception in the consumer's mind and differentiation; communicating the brand message, explains which and how channels will be used, including: direct marketing, sponsorship, advertising, public relations, etc.; delivering brand performance demonstrates the need to continuously track and monitor the brand's reception and performance in the eyes of the consumers compared to other competitors in the marketplace; and finally how leveraging brand equity, describes the process of linking the brand to both current and potential brand associations.

The final conceptual model found in the literature regarding the core brand elements was The Three Brand P's (3BPs): promises, positioning and performance. When describing these three elements Fill and Turnbull (2016) illustrate them centred around communication. Communication, in this setting, establishes the brand promises known, which they characterise as brand awareness, the position as the brand attitude and the performance element as the brand response. The three elements in this model, if used correctly, establish credibility and transparency for consumers and offer an integrated view in the consumers' minds (Fill & Turnbull, 2016).

When investigating the makeup of these models a pattern becomes prevalent, there are three elements that they all have in common. The first is the product or service they vow to present in order to satisfy a need, in short, their purpose (named brand skills, promise and positioning the brand). The second is their target, the manner in which they identify, associate with and position themselves in the perception of the consumer (named personality, positioning and communicating the brand message). The third element that all four models have in common, is final consumer perception or performance (named delivery, performance and relationship). This third element is the broadest including: the management of consumer relationships after or when the product or service has been delivered, the continuation about how to nurture the consumer relationship and the perception of the delivered brand and its promises (Biel, 1997).

2.1.3 Personification

Relationships brands have with consumers, as mentioned before, have become one of the most important and success-driven aspects of its formation. The new formation of brands has allowed them to not only be generalizable across product categories and cultures (Aaker, 1997), but potentially help consumers discover their own identity (Kapferer, 2008). Two frameworks which reinforce this idea are the brand personality scale (Aaker, 1997) and the brand identity prism (Kapferer, 2008).

The brand personality scale is a composite of five personality dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness (see figure 1). These dimensions are used by businesses to differentiate their brand, in a particular product category, with the objective to enhance consumer preferences and usage (Aaker, 1997). The dimensions are used to describe brand characteristics and to make it easier for consumers to associate and identify with them. Aaker (1997) talks about the concept of brand personality by assigning a set of human characteristics to a brand, she continues to explain that “perception of brand personality traits can be formed and influenced by any direct or indirect contact that the consumer has with the brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 348). The direct and indirect influences, create the entire environment surrounding the brand itself, including both influences outside of the brands’ control and those that are essentially the makeup of the brand. The direct contacts are different types of associations to the brand, it can be employees of the brand, the CEO, the endorsers or even the typical user (Aaker, 1997). The indirect influences in the personality scale are the product-related attributes, the product-category attributes or simply the name or logo of the brand. All of these aspects are not only incorporated but important and therefore consistency becomes imperative.

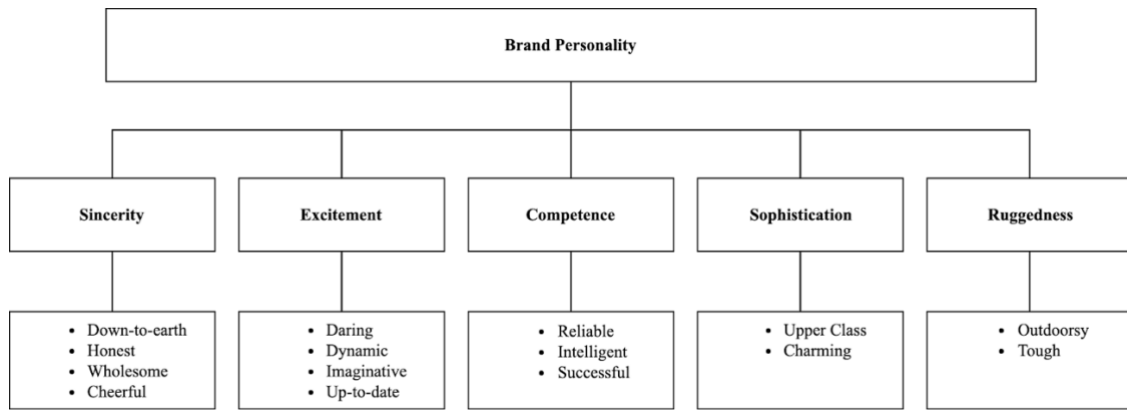


Figure 1. A Brand Personality Framework (Aaker, 1997, p. 352)

The second framework developed during the evolution of branding was the brand identity prism. This prism created by Kapferer (2008) is comprised of six facets: personality, culture, self-image, reflection, relationship and physique (see figure 2). Surrounding these six facets are internalization and externalization horizontally and the picture of the sender and the picture of the recipient vertically. Kapferer's (2008) prism seeks to explain and assist three major actualities that belong to brands. Firstly, the prism can be used to define the identity of a brand, secondly to outline the boundaries which it is free to change and develop within and lastly that a brand is simply a form of speech. A brand can be considered speech based on the simple fact that it communicates the product it creates and endorses products it epitomizes (Kapferer, 2008).

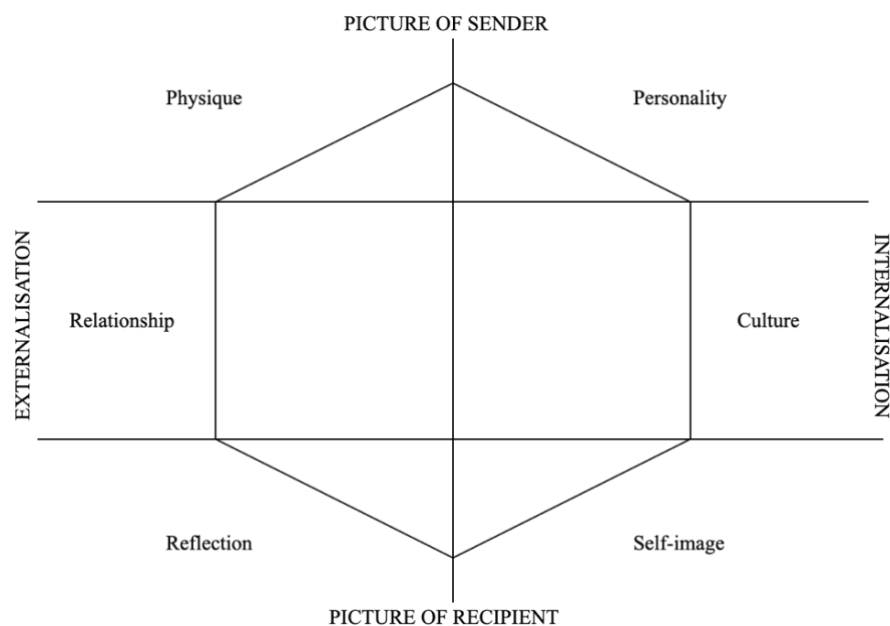


Figure 2. Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2008, p. 183)

2.2 Self-Branding

2.2.1 The Concept

In a market where brands are personified, assigned larger roles and carry significant value, it appears that everything not only can be branded but should be. Self-branding is defined as the “capturing and promoting an individual's strengths and uniqueness to a target audience” (Labrecque et al., 2011, p. 39). This definition is further complemented through the specific context of the employment market; “the crafting of a unique and authentic image to be sold on the labour market” (Gandini, 2016, p. 125), and through the simplistic expression given by Rangarajan et al. (2017), the “totality of impressions communicated by an individual” (p. 658). The composition of a self-brand and its processes resemble that of a business, product or organization’s brand and can be categorized in the same sense (Rangarajan et al., 2017).

Reflecting on the similarities between ‘business brands’ and the activities of self-branding, the composition is congruent. A self-brand must be comprised of the three aforementioned aspects: a product or service satisfying a need, a target and position, as well as the consideration of consumer perceptions and performance, in order to succeed. Furthermore, the relevance of personification, the brand identity prism (Kapferer, 2008) and brand personality scale (Aaker, 1997), are indispensable with regards to the phenomenon self-branding. The six facets: personality, culture, self-image, reflection, relationship and physique (Kapferer, 2008), shaping the brand identity prism, essentially describe the dimensions influencing an individual’s life. The personality dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness, described in Aaker’s (1997) brand personality scale are derived from the “Big Five.” The “Big Five” constitutes a five-factor model which is the “widespread recognition that almost all personality traits can be understood in terms of five basic dimensions” (Costa, McCrae & Kay, 1995). Understanding the foundation of a self-brand and its attributes help clarify its relevance in modern society.

The concept of self-branding was first conceptualized by Tom Peters in 1997 (Labrecque et al., 2011; Rangarajan et al., 2017) who wrote that “we are the CEO’s of our own companies: Me Inc” (Peters, 1997, para. 5). Self-branding revolves around the activity of

creating a distinctive role for oneself; creating a message, strategy and promotion for an individual. To use networks, assets, opportunities and an individual's reputation and image to establish a competitive advantage and become more appealing on the job market (Peters, 1997). Peters (1997) also reinforces the similarities between traditional brands and personal brands by explaining how people should take a lesson from major brands.

2.2.2 Age of Digitalisation

Over the past decade, the number of social media platforms and users has increased drastically with consumers spending more time online and on social platforms (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). Reports show the following percentages as a representation for Sweden's population's usage on social media platforms: 76% Facebook, 49% Instagram, 25% LinkedIn, 18% Twitter (Statista, 2017). The sheer diversity and number of opportunities to publicize oneself have changed the way individuals, consumers and businesses interact with each other (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). Micro-blogging platforms such as Twitter, picture sharing applications like Instagram, employment platforms such as LinkedIn and social platforms like Facebook are transforming the way the internet and self-branding is approached (Gandini, 2016; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015).

Digitalization and social media not only present opportunities and advantages for individuals, they carry the risk of blurring the boundary between an individual's professional and private life (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015). What people decide to provide in terms of content and style on social media can greatly impact how co-creators and 'consumers' view them. Individuals have the ability to proactively control a public image (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015), but with this comes considerable responsibility and consistency. The purpose and rationale for why people choose to be active on social media and social platforms might simply be the desire to stay connected, unfortunately, not all activity and posts positively contribute to one's brand. Digitalization can be seen as an enabler to the concept of self-branding and promotion. Quinton (2013) explains how the shift of interaction and communication between brands and consumers in both the online and offline environments has "required the rethinking of how brands should be managed"

(Quinton, 2013, p. 912). The age of digitalisation is typifying consumer behaviour to believe, if a company or brand cannot be found on Google it simply does not exist (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015).

2.2.3 The Strategy of Self-Branding

Considering the architecture of a brand, it can be argued that most individuals already have a personal brand regardless of their consciousness. “Individuals possess intrinsic personal branding as a result of personality qualities, past experience and development, and communication with others- whether they know it or not” (Rangarajan et al., 2017, p. 657). The question of self-branding therefore revolves around the strategy, the ‘how to do it’?

Following the precedence of traditional branding there are two imperative components, the composition of the brand itself and the creation of awareness.

Pursuing the idea that most individuals already have a brand (Rangarajan et al., 2017), the first step becomes objectifying and specifying it. Identifying one’s purpose, strengths and core characteristics becomes the foundation of their brand. Aspects such as mission statements, offerings and deliverables are the principal elements. Unfortunately, a number of concepts are confused with self-branding: reputation, image, personality and identity. Reputation is “the attributed values (such as authenticity, honesty, responsibility, and integrity) evoked from the person’s corporate image” (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018, p. 115), whilst image is the “the global evaluation (comprised of a set of beliefs and feelings) a person has about an organisation” (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018, p. 115). Perhaps the distinction arises in the activity itself, merely that the construction of a self-brand incorporates a strategy whilst reputation, image, identity and personality are predetermined by the creation of a personal brand. The totality of impressions (Rangarajan et al., 2017), one’s digital footprint (Labrecque et al., 2011) and personal reputation (Pera et al., 2016) can help implicate or convey one’s personal brand but does not determine its entirety.

Once the values that construct the brand are determined, the creation of awareness, initiation of communication and intensification of visibility become the primary focus. “Visibility has a funny way of multiplying” (Peters, 1997, para. 31) itself, hence, the more visible an individual or brand is, the greater the likelihood of being seen. Visibility in terms of self-branding is predominantly curated through the usage of digital, online and social platforms (Gandini, 2016; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011; Pera et al., 2016; Quinton, 2013; Rangarajan et al., 2017). Digital media has become the mechanism for self-branding, and participation is imperative for relevance. Gandini (2016) explains how acquiring a reputation, social capital and a self-brand diminishes the need for face-to-face interaction, placing more weight on the online activities of individuals. Presence alone can be insufficient while the additional activity of posting, sharing and endorsing others, can help create a more authoritative consumer perception (Rangarajan et al., 2017). When interacting with others online, emphasis is placed on engagement and the building of unique relationships (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015) opposed to the simple consumption of statements made on one’s profile. Interaction also sparks comments, criticism and feedback which ultimately enables individuals to assess the effectiveness of their brand (Labrecque et al., 2011; Pera et al., 2016). However, “living the characteristics of one’s personal brand, not just conveying them online, is a necessity” (Rangarajan et al., 2017, p. 659). Rangarajan et al. (2017), in their findings, caution individuals about the concept of inauthenticity by portraying an online brand that is removed so far from reality that it could be perceived as manipulative. Operating in a highly fragmented and individualised labour market, digital media has become a determining aspect for professional success and development (Gandini, 2016), maintaining consistency is therefore paramount.

2.2.4 Consistency and Authenticity

A key to creating a thorough and strong brand is consistency (Kapferer, 2008). An example of consistency within the realm of self-branding is that of a man who traditionally wore a hat when doing business to communicate his distinctiveness (Rangarajan et al., 2017). Finding a way or strategy to both specify one’s values and efficiently communicate them can be difficult; storytelling is an integrative way to

“promoting one's uniqueness to an assumed audience” (Pera et al., 2016, p. 45). Storytelling is a relatively new phenomena for reputation building which is contingent on the principles of the sharing economy. Pera et al. (2016) express the need for self-branding in the modern marketplace and that storytelling can facilitate the “entrepreneurial posture” (p. 53) that is needed.

Another concept which coincides with that of consistency is authenticity. “Informed consumers demand consistency and authenticity of their brands and are no longer willing to accept insincere brand behaviour” (Fritz, Schoenmueller & Bruhn, 2017, p. 325). Authenticity and consistency aid in understanding how one’s self-brand is perceived and accepted by the recipient. Self-expression which is used in the named definition of branding and the heart of self-branding is specifically listed by Beverland (2009) as a form of subjectivity. Determination of which self-brands are truly authentic is still unclear, however authenticity is described as the “perceived genuineness of a brand that is manifested of its stability and consistency (i.e., continuity), uniqueness (i.e., originality), ability to keep its promises (i.e., reliability) and unaffectedness (i.e., naturalness)” (Fritz et al., 2017, p. 327). Despite the subjectivity and ambiguous measurement of authenticity, “you cannot tell consumers that your brand is authentic - you have to show them.” (Beverland, 2009, p. 178). Authenticity and consistency can thus be deemed necessary in the construction of a successful personal brand.

2.3 Precarious Employment Market

2.3.1 Connection to Freelance and Job Precarity

When introducing the concept of self-branding and its importance, many authors make the connection between the concept, and the changing economy in concurrence with precarity (Gandini, 2016; Pera et al., 2016; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). The sharing economy, reputation economy and knowledge economy are recurring notions about the changes in the economy in conjunction with the employment market. Self-branding and its acquisitions have become “instrumental to secure employment in the freelance-based labour market of the digital knowledge economy” (Gandini, 2016, p. 123).

The recession in 2008 had major implications on the construction of the current employment market, specifically, a rise in freelance internationally (Consultancy UK, 2018). In Sweden it has been reported that the percentage of freelancers increased 55% annually, over the past six years (Dagens Industri, 2018). Freelancing and a gig approach to the employment market is a way for corporations to downsize, lower labour costs, meet project needs and increase the level of employee satisfaction (Muhammed, 2018; Schrader, 2015). A shift in the desires of employers has simultaneously changed the attitudes of millennials and Gen Z employees. Millennials have become more selective with associations to businesses and began prioritizing things that are important for them, with remote and contract-based work becoming the solution. Another important aspect regarding the changing economy is the enablers: technology and infrastructure (Muhammed, 2018). Platforms for pairing talent and businesses are accommodating freelancers and lowering the barriers to entry (Schrader, 2015). Co-working platforms and services like Skype (Schrader, 2015), as well as the concept of open or shared working spaces has made independent work more attractive than the alternative (Muhammed, 2018), being traditionally employed.

2.3.2 The Concept of Social Capital

Social capital is defined by the original theorist Bourdieu (2018) as the “resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition... which provides each of its members with... a “credential” that entitles them to credit” (p. 83). The definition of social capital is complemented by Gandini (2016) through the perspective of the employment market, “an investment in social relationships with an expected return, in a context where job search heavily relies on networks of contacts” (p. 126).

Social capital is a concept of pivotal importance when attempting to understand the acquisitions of self-branding, in the context of the literature and this paper, it can simply be understood as the worth and reward of being online and networking in a changing economy. Gandini (2016) and Pera et al. (2016) refer to self-branding strategies as proactively maintaining a reputation, empowerment, professional success and the

management of social relationships, with social capital being the reciprocal. The term capital is incorporated in the concept as it is what is sold on the labour market, a distinctive and authentic image (Gandini, 2016). The question of how to attain social capital can be found in the answer of how to ‘self-brand’. Interaction, visibility, communication, consistency and compelling storytelling (Gandini, 2016; Pera et al., 2016) are all strategies aforementioned, with the reward of social capital that can be sold and used in the employment market.

2.3.3 Skilled vs. Non-Skilled Workers

An important distinction to make is the difference in types of freelancers; the remote, platform and contract-based workers. With regard to self-branding being contingent on job precarity, the providing and seeking of specific skills and experience is often studied. However, digitalization and current trends have not only supplied what is referred to as skilled workers with opportunities but non-skilled workers as well. Skilled workers are those who facilitate the restructuring of the economy, what initially was referred to as the typical management consultant (Torres, 2018). The term implies that there must be a specific skill to perform the job or project assigned. Non-skilled workers, whose employment is facilitated through sharing or on-demand applications such as Uber and TaskRabbit (Torres, 2018), and are otherwise referred to as platform workers, whose duration and required skill level vary greatly depending on the client (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). Another specific attribute of non-skilled or platform workers is that of algorithmic management techniques, “algorithmic control is central to the operation of online labour platforms” (Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta & Hjorth, 2018). The distinction between types of workers is clear.

2.3.4 Social Platforms as the New Portfolio

Combining concepts like social capital and the necessity for individuals to maintain a brand in modern society, one’s social platforms can be viewed as their new portfolio. A portfolio is the wealth of experience and commitment, professional specialisms (Platman, 2004), list of last jobs and the management of personal networks and contacts (Gandini,

2016). The traditional Curriculum Vitae (CV) is no longer considered ample as it does not “provide significantly rich information to potential clients” (Gandini, 2016, p. 131). Gandini (2016) found that education titles and skills; accomplishments typically listed on CV’s, are merely entry tickets to an interview. The need for networking, differentiation and uniqueness becomes apparent and can be constructed in the form of the aforementioned social capital. The management of such assets and the awareness of prospective employees consuming one’s profile must be taken into consideration when contemplating the boundaries between the content posted.

2.3.5 Absence

The literature has reflected not only the imperatives and advantages of self-branding but the strategy as well. However, Kleppinger and Cain (2015) discuss the potential implications of lacking a digital identity and the unintended negative message that it could send in today’s social environment. When individuals engage in self-branding, they establish control, proactively market themselves and participate in a feedback loop. The mere lack of presence leads to invisibility and loss of control, one is simply relinquishing management of their reputation, image and most importantly brand. Gandini (2016) expresses how “social media presence is instrumental for searchability and is detrimental for credibility when absent” (p. 129); social media serving the means of ‘window shopping’ governs the requirement of presence for individuals (Gandini, 2016).

2.4 The Swedish Mentality: The Law of Jante

Having a better understanding of the evolution of branding, its implications, strategies and consequences the researchers wanted to understand self-branding through a cultural context, as it potentially can heavily influence self-branding for Swedes.

The Law of Jante is a cultural phenomenon formulated by the Dano-Norwegian writer, Axel Sandemose. This phenomenon portrays the mentality of Scandinavians and how they interact with each other (Cappelen & Dahlberg, 2017). The Law of Jante holds a set of 10 so-called ‘rules’:

1. Don't think you're anything special.
2. Don't think you're as good as others.
3. Don't think you're smarter than others.
4. Don't convince yourself that you're better than others.
5. Don't think you know more than others.
6. Don't think you are more important than others.
7. Don't think you are good at anything.
8. Don't laugh at others.
9. Don't think anyone cares about you.
10. Don't think you can teach others anything.

(Cappelen & Dahlberg, 2017, p. 420-421)

The phenomena was created to explain the negative and unpleasant viewpoint held against individuality and success. However, Cappelen and Dahlberg (2017) also argue that the law has many positive facets, the main being valuing the collective rather than the individual which leads to harmony, social stability and uniformity. Furthermore, individuals affected by the 'Jante' mentality usually feel limited and held back, due to the fact that the law restricts them from individualistic behaviour in fear of being disliked (Cappelen & Dahlberg, 2017). The consequences of the Law of Jante were therefore considered integral to the research.

2.5 Conceptual Model

The following conceptual model (see figure 3) is proposed by the researchers as a reflection of the frame of reference. Table 2 is a condensed list of the concepts and their authors, corresponding to the conceptual model.

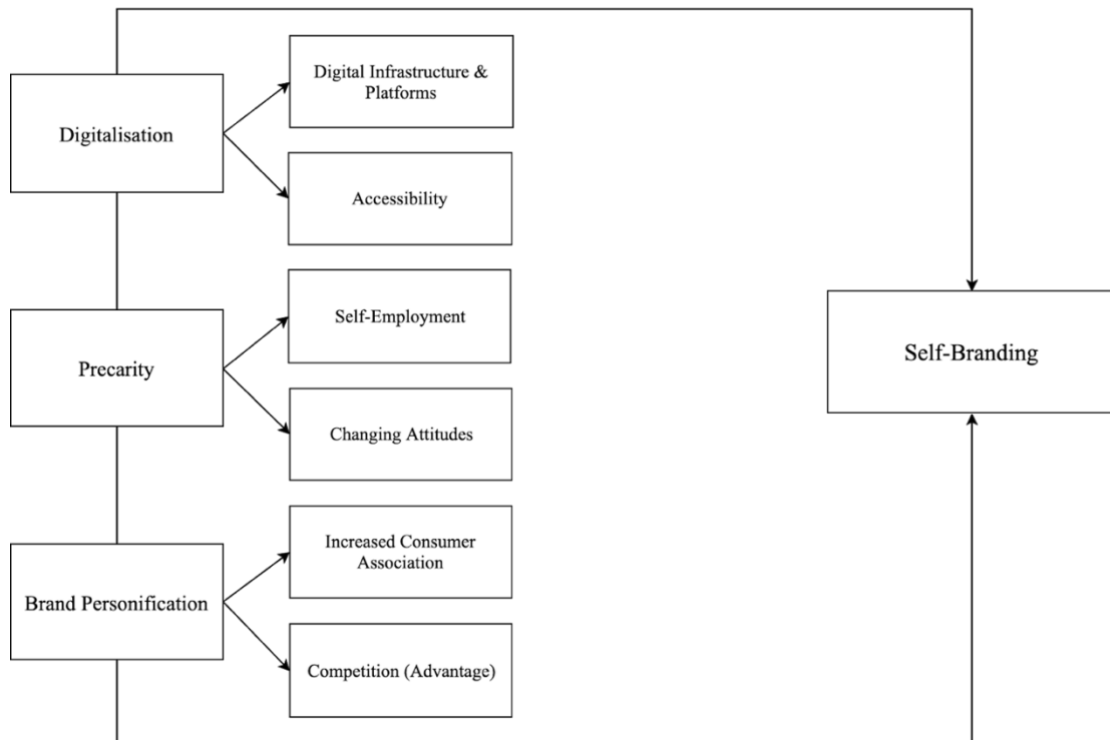


Figure 3: The Researchers' Conceptual Model – A Reflection of the Literature

Concept	Author & Literature
Digitalisation	
Digital Infrastructure & Platforms	Gandini, 2016; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011; Quinton, 2013; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015.
Accessibility	Muhammed, 2018; Gandini, 2016; Pera et al., 2016; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Labrecque et al., 2011.
Precarity	
Self-Employment	Gandini, 2016; Kitching & Smallbone, 2012; Pera et al., 2016; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Vallas & Cummins, 2015.
Changing Attitudes	Gandini, 2016; Pera et al., 2016; Vallas & Cummins, 2015.
Personification	
Increased Consumer Association	Aaker, 1997; Berthon et al., 2011; Fill & Turnbull, 2016; Kapferer, 2008.
Competition (Advantage)	Berthon et al., 2011; Labrecque et al., 2011; Peters 1997; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Pera et al., 2016.
Self-Branding	Gandini, 2016; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011; Pera et al., 2016; Peters 1997; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Vallas & Cummins, 2015.

Table 2: List of concepts and corresponding authors

3. Methodology & Method

This section will first present the methodology of this research, which includes the research strategy, research philosophy and research approach. Then, the method of this research will be explained, including the sampling method, data collection as well as the types of interviews conducted. Lastly, the ethics and trustworthiness considered in this research will be discussed.

3.1 Methodology

3.1.1 Research Strategy

One of the first resolutions with regards to constructing a research is the decision between a quantitative and qualitative research study. A qualitative study is used to “emphasize the themes and patterns of meanings and experiences related to the phenomena” (Collis & Hussey, 2014, p. 10). The fundamental difference between qualitative and quantitative is the subject of measurement. Given that an abundance of literature and knowledge is available considering the objectives of the employment market and the phenomena of self-branding, this research seeks to understand and identify the meaning and use of self-branding through different dimensions of the Swedish employment market. Hence, a qualitative research was deemed most appropriate. The qualitative strategy has been earlier adopted in self-branding research by Gandini (2016), Vallas and Cummins (2015) and Rangarajan et al. (2017).

3.1.2 Research Philosophy

When conducting research, the researchers’ values and beliefs impact the way in which decisions are made and how the research is pursued (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). Throughout the research process many assumptions are made, both consciously and unconsciously, these assumptions are innate and vary in types. The three primary assumptions with regards to the development of a research philosophy are; ontology, epistemology and axiology (Saunders et al., 2016), all which must be considered when conducting research.

Since the purpose of this research is to gain richer and deeper insight into the functionality of self-branding in the Swedish employment market and the differentiations of its use, the philosophy that will be adopted is interpretivism, hence an interpretive paradigm. Interpretivism tends to use small samples, conduct in-depth investigations and produces rich, subjective and qualitative data (Collis & Hussey, 2014; Saunders et al., 2016). An interpretivist philosophy and interpretive paradigm were deemed most appropriate as the research is largely based on individual interpretations and reflections as part of a subjective reality. Self-branding is a tool that bears different means and importance to individuals with complex implications that follow.

3.1.3 Research Approach

When it comes to research and the development of theory, there are three approaches; deduction, induction and abduction (Saunders, et al., 2016). The difference between the three approaches is derived from the research purpose or goal; adopting a deductive approach is used in the falsification or verification of a theory, an inductive approach is adopted for theory generation and construction whilst an abductive approach strives to generate or modify an existing theory with the combination of new ones (Saunders, et al., 2016).

The inductive approach was deemed most suitable for this research purpose. An inductive approach is designed to generate untested conclusions, generalise the specifics and collect data with the function of exploring said phenomena and identifying themes and patterns within (Saunders, et al., 2016). The induction process begins with observations and findings and seeks a theory to build upon it (Bryman & Bell, 2015). An abundance of facts are available concerning the employment market and fewer on the phenomena of self-branding, their correlation is clear and so are the implications of the phenomena, however how, where, when and why should/ is self-branding encouraged? As an interpretivist philosophy and inductive approach are adopted throughout this research, the collection of data and hence generation of theory through analysis is what is hoped to be established with regards to insight.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Sampling Method

In order to express and conduct the purpose of this study, it is of utmost importance to identify a relevant and representative sample for the interviews. Taking this into consideration, Saunders et al. (2016) provide two different types of sampling techniques; probability sampling and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling often entails that every individual from the target population has an equal chance of being selected, whilst a non-probability sampling method, means the probability of each participant being selected is unknown. The decision of applying probability sampling versus non-probability sampling is dependent on the research question (Saunders et al., 2016). Since the aim of the research is to question and confer with individuals in different types of employment, more specifically; freelancers, entrepreneurs and the traditionally employed, it was decided to apply the technique of non-probability sampling. In order to provide a representative consensus of the entire employment market, participants of different ages, genders and assignments must be included. Hence, the sampling must be purposeful and non-probable.

Saunders et al. (2016) further explain that there are four different sampling techniques within the realm of non-probable sampling; quota, purposive, volunteer and haphazard sampling. Since the aim was to examine individuals in different types of employment, to generate a well-reflected overview of people in the workforce, purposive sampling was deemed most appropriate. Purposive sampling, also known as judgemental sampling, is the selection of participants based on their knowledge and experience without amending or adding to the participant list after the commencement of the interviews (Collis & Hussey, 2014).

The criteria set for the participants/ interviewees was relatively basic, they needed to be employed, reside in Sweden, and separately, range in employment type. The composition/ demographics of the participants ultimately ended up being three freelancers, five entrepreneurs and two individuals who are 'traditionally employed'. However, one of the participants did not completely match the specified criteria. The decision was made to

include one freelancer whom is Swedish and works both in the Swedish and international market. This participant was ultimately included for comparison sake, but also to gain insight into differences between the Swedish market and the European or international market. The goal was for this participant to strengthen the propositions made about self-branding within the Swedish employment market.

For the purpose of anonymity, each participant has been allocated a number (see table 3), which is in chronological order to the interview process, which will be used throughout the remainder of the paper both in quotes and written statements.

Acronym	Type of Employment	Age	Gender	Interview type	Interview length	Date of Interview
Respondent 1	Entrepreneur	50	Male	Face-to-face	1:07:54	22/3-19
Respondent 2	Freelancer & Traditional	21	Female	Face-to-face	0:57:09	22/3-19
Respondent 3	Traditional	23	Female	Face-to-face	0:49:35	25/3-19
Respondent 4	Freelancer & Traditional	21	Female	Video Chat	0:40:37	27/3-19
Respondent 5	Entrepreneur	66	Female	Video Chat	0:43:01	28/3-19
Respondent 6	Traditional & Entrepreneur	52	Female	Face-to-face	0:36:56	30/3-19
Respondent 7	Freelancer	44	Male	Face-to-face	1:06:35	31/3-19
Respondent 8	Entrepreneur	50	Female	Face-to-face	0:42:39	31/3-19
Respondent 9	Entrepreneur	40	Male	Face-to-face	0:53:18	2/4-19
Respondent 10	Entrepreneur	32	Female	Face-to-face	0:43:01	11/4-19

Table 3: Interview Participants

3.2.2 Data Collection

In this paper, both primary and secondary data will be used. The secondary data referred to throughout this paper is represented by the literature, including predominantly academic articles, books and published news articles from reputable sources. Non-academic studies provided relevant information on the basis and disposition of certain concepts as well as their implication and were therefore incorporated, to simply complement the existing literature. The primary data will be represented and generated from the empirical findings retrieved from the interviews conducted (Collis & Hussey, 2014).

The existing research and literature on self-branding with regards to freelancers and entrepreneurs has been well articulated, however, it has not been properly researched within Sweden and especially not when it comes to the employment category of; ‘traditionally employed’. In order to find secondary data suitable for this paper, databases such as Google Scholar and Primo (Jönköping University Library), were used to search for the most relevant literature. Once the articles were retrieved, the academic articles were carefully evaluated based on a variation of criteria. The aim was to solely include reliable, relevant and trustworthy literature and academic articles, making the date of publication and location of publication central factors. Older literature was integrated as the history and evolution of branding is strongly connected to the concept of self-branding. The academic articles ultimately selected were peer-reviewed, and the large majority on the Association of Business Schools (ABS) list. The ABS list is used by certain schools and departments to aid in the research auditor’s judgements, allowing them to be more informed about the nature and quality of specific works (Morris, Harvey & Kelly, 2009). The majority of focal articles were graded three or higher (out of the maximum of four) and published between the years 2015 and 2018.

Additionally, in order to gather appropriate data, the following keywords were used; branding, personal branding, self-brand, reputation, social media, digitalisation, freelance. These keywords were chosen in order to retrieve a large and broad amount of literature and material which subsequently could be narrowed down and categorised.

3.2.3 Interviews

There are generally three forms regarding interviews; structured interviews, unstructured interviews and semi-structured interviews. When deciding upon which type of interview to conduct, the purpose and objective of the study must be taken into consideration (Saunders et al., 2016). Implementing a semi-structure to the interviews allows for the discussion of new ideas, the uncovering of patterns and themes, and the examination of subjective motivations and the highlighting of individuals differences (Collis & Hussey, 2014).

Furthermore, the majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, as a priority of this research was to increase familiarity, comfortability, a strengthened environment and the comprehension of complicated natured questions (Collis & Hussey, 2014). The remaining two interviews were conducted through video-chat.

A possible limitation of three prospective interviews is the language barrier. As this research intends to fill the gap of lack of self-branding research directed in Sweden, the interviewing of Swedes is essential. Respondent five, six and ten felt substantially more comfortable carrying out the interview in their mother tongue, Swedish, and translation was therefore needed. Conducting interviews in one's mother tongue or a language in which they are more comfortable allows for more accurate and expressive results. When translating the interviews, the researchers did so together, which allowed for more correct translation, as well as translating verbatim. Translating verbatim is not translating exactly word for word but capturing the meaning and essence of what has been spoken (Temple & Young, 2004).

3.2.4 Interview Questions

The aim and objective of the interviews was to reach a better and deeper understanding of the Swedish employment market with regards to self-branding and to interpret individuals' usage, perspective and strategy.

The general structure of the interview is two-fold (see appendix 1 & 2). Initially, the interview begins with a combination of basic and specific questions regarding the individual; personality, daily routine, social media usage, goals and perceptions. The interview continues onto the second component, where questions regarding self-branding respectively are posed. The creation of the interview questions was inspired from a previous study conducted by Rangarajan et al. (2017) exploring the strategic aspects with regards to self-branding as well as integral concepts discussed throughout the frame of reference: consistency, personification, consciousness, brand values and attributes and social media usage.

A distinctive element with this specific interview process is the decision to not introduce the concept of self-branding until halfway through. The decision to simply not introduce the term self-branding was made after conducting two pilot interviews, where the concept of unconsciousness became apparent, also previously discussed and supported by Rangarajan et al. (2017). Self-branding is introduced as a concept later on during the interview process to not warrant any answer that otherwise would have not been given. This method was used to prevent bias, specifically question order bias, the avoidance of leading the interview in a particular direction (Alsaawi, 2014).

3.2.5 Data Analysis

Seeing as the primary data presented in this paper was gathered through semi-structured interviews, the most suitable analysis approach is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a systematic method used when it comes to the analysing of data collected in a qualitative study with the purpose of identifying and interpreting themes and patterns related to the stated research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Saunders et al., 2016).

When adopting a thematic analysis throughout the process of analysing data, the first step is to transcribe the interviews for the sake of gaining underlying insight. Transcribing the interviews additionally allows the researchers to develop a range of approaches on how to implement themes and patterns cohesively in an analysis. The second step is to thoroughly search for reflections, differences of opinions and establish themes and

patterns from the observations (Saunders et al., 2016). These observations can be defined as the coding process, with reliability and rigour in mind it is important that all researchers first do so individually and compare their results to eventually acquire the final framework (Rambe & Mkono, 2018). As it is an interpretivist study, following these steps will allow the researchers to investigate the varying interpretations on the phenomena of self-branding. The researchers will additionally have to redefine the themes, patterns and categorical reflections as a cohesive and well-structured framework.

An example of the third step of thematic analysis was exemplified during the coding process of the main themes. When analysing the patterns, themes and observations, the concept of authenticity became apparent and highly relevant and was therefore included in the empirical findings and analysis, literature was hence investigated and added to the frame of reference.

3.3 Ethics

When conducting a research project, it is of utmost importance for the researchers to consider ethical issues that may occur throughout the process in order to avoid engaging in unethical behaviour (Bryman & Bell, 2015). With regard to ethics within research, the criteria refers to the practices and behaviours of the researchers when explaining, structuring and interacting with others (Saunders et al., 2016). The criteria refers to the manner in which the rights of participants and all actors affected by the research should be taken into account (Saunders et al., 2016). Despite the fact that ethical issues can occur during all stages of the research process (Bryman & Bell, 2015), ethics are often ignored until faced with the consequences of unethicity (Collis & Hussey, 2014). According to Collis and Hussey (2014), the most important principle regarding ethics is voluntary participation, which means that every participant should by their own will be a part of the study.

Therefore, before the interviews, all participants were given a consent form (see appendix 3), informing them of the circumstances and nature of the conversation as well as asking them for consent to record the interview. Before the commencement of each interview, each participant was asked to sign a written form where they were provided with

information regarding the length, conditions and usage of interview material. A guarantee of anonymity, confidentiality and protection of the recordings, where personal information would only be available to the researchers themselves and no outside party. The participants were also informed that the interview would be open, where they would be allowed to speak freely and completely as well as end the interview during any point in time.

3.4 Trustworthiness

In qualitative research there are four main criteria regarding the quality of the study, titled trustworthiness; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Credibility concerns the issue with whether the research was conducted in a way where the topic of investigation was properly acknowledged (Collis & Hussey, 2014). The credibility of a study can be enforced by using triangulation, meaning using different sources and by consistently debriefing between the researchers (Collis & Hussey, 2014). According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), credibility refers to the credence that can be established in the truth of the findings from the research. For the purpose of increasing credibility in this research, data triangulation and investigator triangulation were applied. The researchers used different sources during various processes of the research (Collis & Hussey, 2014), and analysed the data separately and later compared the differences of interpretations (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Another important factor when evaluating the analysis of the research is transferability. Transferability has to do with the generalisability of the findings, more specifically, if an identical study was performed would the same results be produced (Collis & Hussey, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). However, since observations are interpreted through the environment, they are never wholly generalisable (Shenton, 2004), specifically in a small sampled study as the one conducted.

The evaluation of dependability emphasises whether the process of the research is methodical, rigorous and well established (Collis & Hussey, 2014). It concerns the

conferring with participants regarding the researchers' interpretation of expressed opinions as well as possible recommendations (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Confirmability concerns the research process and whether the results are taken from the context of retrieved data (Collis & Hussey, 2014). Furthermore, it is crucial to make sure that the findings are the outcome of thoughts and reflections of the respondents and not based on the researchers' own thoughts and preferences (Shenton, 2004).

4. Empirical Findings

In this section, the findings from the conducted semi-structured interviews will be presented. This will provide the reader with a clear understanding of what was uncovered during the data collection process. Quotes and opinions from the conducted interviews are included and will lay a foundation for the analysis.

4.1 Thematic Analysis

The following table represents the themes produced through the construction of the thematic analysis of the primary data, the interviews. The subsequent six themes (see table 4), formed the structure for the empirical findings as well as the analysis.

1. Theme	2. Indicators	3. Description of Theme
Social Media Usage Digitalisation	Presence, level of activity, perception of absence, purpose and opportunities received	This theme describes the social media usage of individuals in the Swedish employment market, with specific consideration to their level of engagement, the advantages and disadvantages and their thoughts on individuals whom have not partaken in digitalisation.
The Online vs. Offline	Searchability, importance of offline branding activities, accessibility and consistency between mediums	This theme describes the relationship between online branding activities and offline branding efforts, towards the creation of a self-brand and the perceived importance of the two mediums.
Authenticity	Agreeableness, brand in comparison to personal description, genuineness	This theme describes the value of authenticity in self-branding and how the portrayal of certain attributes must be genuine and consistent with that promoted.
Self-Employment	Attitude towards self-branding, social capital, value of authenticity, knowledge and understanding	This theme describes the significance of social capital for the self-employed in the Swedish employment market and how such capital is ascertained.
The ‘Traditionally Employed’	Personal activity, mentality and importance of self-branding for the ‘traditionally employed’	This theme describes the implications and use, or lack thereof of self-branding activities for the ‘traditionally employed’ in Sweden.
Cultural Context: The Law of Jante	Opinion, perspective, social behaviour and comparison to other countries	This theme describes the implications of the Swedish cultural phenomenon, The Law of Jante, on self-branding and questions the appropriation of the law given the current environment.

Table 4. Description of Themes

The participants and their statements will be referenced in-text in the form of a number, either as ‘participant #’ or (#), corresponding to that presented in table 3. Formulating expressions in such a manner allows for statements to be grouped together, highlighting differences and similarities.

4.2 The Effects of Digitalisation

4.2.1 Social Media Usage

A common and continuous theme throughout the interviews was that of social media, which consisted of their presence, engagement, purpose, opportunities and their perception of those absent from all platforms. As seen in table 5, all participants besides one were present on social media however, their degree of engagement and activity on the platforms was varying. Two participants (1 & 5) described themselves as not very active on their channels, two participants considered themselves active (7 & 9) and five participants regarded themselves as very active (2, 3, 4, 8 & 10).

“I usually like, try to post once a day, maybe every other...” (10)

“5 pictures from 5 years.” (1)

Respondent	Facebook	Instagram	LinkedIn	Twitter
1	X	X	X	
2	X	X	X	X
3	X	X	X	X
4	X	X	X	
5	X	X		
6				
7	X	X	X	X
8	X	X	X	
9	X	X	X	
10	X	X	X	

Table 5: Participants presence on different social media platforms

During the discussion of different platforms and social media channels, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter were recognised as the most popular. Despite few participants mentioning other platforms such as Snapchat, WhatsApp, Tumblr etc., the aforementioned platforms (see table 5) were considered as the main focus and central to the conversation.

4.2.2 Purpose for Engagement on Social Platforms

In light of the demographic of the interviewees and their employment, their purpose and attitudes towards social media usage was deemed essential to establish, in order to subsequently enhance and further the discussion of their self-branding activities. Within the realm of social media and its uses, the interviewees were questioned about their perceived purpose. Every participant present on social media claimed that their purpose was personal and all but one (5), professional as well. The participants using social media for professional purposes had separate accounts, some of which they personally managed and others not, and claimed that the content posted on such channels was different to that posted on their personal accounts. An interesting note with regards to the difference in content between purposes was that all participants, claiming both a personal and

professional purpose, asserted that they would post professional content on their personal channels but not vice-versa. Hence, the professional was strictly professional but the personal could be professional as well.

4.2.3 Opportunities Received

With the objective of further understanding the participants attitude and usage of social media and digital platforms, the interviewees were questioned about opportunities they would not have otherwise received if it was not for their presence on social media. The following opportunities and occasions were given: *employments, internships, apartments, roommates, events, travels* and other business related opportunities in the form of *customers and growth*.

4.2.4 The Consequences of Absence

Based on the occasional negative comment made towards social media, the participants were asked about their perception of individuals who were absent from social platforms and if consequences would follow as a result of invisibility. The results were intriguing. Five participants (1, 2, 3, 6 & 9) had a positive reaction towards individuals abstaining from the social environment using words such as: *nice, cool* and *impressed*. Whilst two participants had a negative reaction (7 & 8), using words like: *lost, brave and uneducated*, and the remaining three participants had neutral or conflicting opinions.

"It makes them look a little bit lost in the new, I would say and not a company that is current today I would say, in a way the company doesn't exist if you are not existing on the web." (7)

"I'm impressed actually because I think that to be able to find your own way or choose your own way of living your life is a strength." (1)

"Cool. I mean, good for them... that's for them a branding tool, to be like off the radar." (2)

Throughout the conversations based on absence, many participants mentioned the negative effects of online participation and how it could either be misused or the purpose not understood correctly. In the context of business activities and strategies participant 1 stated:

"...also it's a little bit of people throw it up there and they trust that something will happen but it doesn't, you have to use the right tool for the right problem"

In the context of negative social side effects and misuse, participant 2 stated:

"I ultimately think that people that are on social media, are on it for the likes and to get the compliments or like gratification, because social media is a drug."

Despite the majority not only being present on social media, but active or more than that, the participants viewed social media and the online environment as a “*double edged sword*” (2), which is seen through the conflicting perception of absence in comparison to their own activity.

4.3 The Online vs. Offline

4.3.1 Importance of Offline Branding Activities

As a self-brand is supposed to reflect the efforts, achievements, values and missions of an individual, it is only natural that both the offline and the online efforts reflect the same directive. As the online is a perpetual measure of one’s efforts and possible success, the participants were questioned about which environment, the online or the offline, they found more important. The majority of the participants (1, 2, 3, 4, 6 & 8) insisted that the offline was more important than the online. The remaining four participants (5, 7, 9 & 10) described how they think it is equally as important to brand and maintain one’s brand in both the offline and online environments.

"You reach a lot of people on social media, and if I post a picture, they are not going to be sitting there for half an hour staring at it. Whereas, if you talk to someone for half an

hour, that's going to make a bigger impression. So, I think it is important to remember that, and be like offline more." (2)

"...you in yourself are a commercial, a walking advertisement..." (6)

4.3.2 Searchability

In measuring or discussing the effectiveness and upkeep of one's self-brand, the question of 'where will people see me or virtually meet me first' came to mind. The participants were asked about where they turn to find more information on an individual or brand, and where they conduct their search. As seen in table 6, the majority of the participants conducted research on the internet, meaning that that is where their first impression is derived.

Respondent	Networking	Friends	Internet	Social Media
1	X	X		
2			X	X
3	X		X	X
4			X	
5			X	
6		X	X	
7			X	X
8		X	X	X
9	X			
10			X	

Table 6: Tools for information search on individuals and brands

4.3.3 Consistency Between Mediums

During the course of the conversations surrounding the debate of the online versus the offline, participants were asked if they have ever felt deceived, let down or disappointed by a brand and in that case, why? One of the themes that appeared frequently was that of fakeness and failure to deliver (2, 5, 6 & 8).

"...I would love for her to just enlighten that, that would make her more trustworthy to be honest." (8)

"I didn't think he delivered on his promises and that he had sold himself more than what he could." (5)

"Branding is much more about being and doing than actually saying that you're doing it" (1)

The feelings of fakeness and failure to deliver held by the four participants were described as being derived from an inconsistency between the online and offline mediums.

Consequently, the entirety of the participants was asked if they believed consistency between online and offline activities to be fundamental and crucial aspects to the success of a self-brand. Almost all of the participants (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, & 8) displayed frustration when accounting a story or event when they felt an individual was not authentically themselves when self-branding. Participant 4 and 6 explicitly talk about the differences they typically observe between the online and offline environment:

"... but it shouldn't be this drastic." (4)

"... but many just take loan on loan." (6)

From understanding the quotes and the context of the questions posed, consistency and authenticity with regards to self-branding became two major and decisive concepts.

4.4 Authenticity

4.4.1 Agreeableness

Authenticity with regards to the participants and their brands was measured through their own descriptions, and the descriptions' agreeableness. The participants were first asked to describe themselves in three words and later describe their brand in three words. Four participants (1, 4, 7 & 9) used the exact same words to describe their brand and themselves, two participants (5 & 6) gave similar descriptions (with one word varying) and three of the participants' brand and self-description did not match (2, 3 & 8). The final participant (10) never gave a concrete description and got side-tracked when describing their brand.

Another method used to attempt to measure and evaluate the authenticity of the interviewees' brand was to ask if they believed that, firstly people in their personal lives and secondly people in their professional lives would agree with the description given. All ten participants stated that individuals in their personal lives would agree with the description given, but only eight interviewees (1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 & 10) claimed that people in their professional lives would also agree.

4.4.2 Genuineness

Several participants (1, 2, 3, 7, 8 & 10) also described their own efforts towards self-branding being authentic and how they manage their accounts in order to remain genuine.

"I have always been public, because I feel like I don't have anything to hide and I think that it is really important that what you post on Instagram or social media gives an understanding of who you are to everyone else, and if you cannot stand for it, I don't think you should post a picture or text like that." (10)

"I mean I'm a little bit conscious but I try to do it as close to my own personality or my own beliefs." (1)

The interviewees additionally expressed their need for other and all individuals whom self-brand to be authentic, genuine and honest.

4.5 Self-Employment

4.5.1 Knowledge and Understanding

As the discussion developed further, the depth, consequences and notion of self-branding as a concept was the primary focus. The participants were asked to provide a definition of self-branding, what their understanding of the concept was and their personal perception. The definitions were as follows: *different types of profiles* (2), *public image and perception* (3), *personality and character* (4), *accomplishments, values, what you stand for* (5), *how you act and actions you take* (7), *how one looks from the outside and how you look at yourself* (8), *behaviour and promoting of oneself* (10).

As understood by the interviewees and by the descriptions of self-branding given by the participants, the difference between brand, identity, reputation and image becomes ambiguous. Throughout the interviews all of the participants agreed that there was a difference but had a hard time explaining what that difference definitively was. Three of the participants (4, 8 & 9) acknowledged the difference but commented on their close similarity; describing them as “*kind of like synonymous*” (4) and “*...a red thread through all of them*” (8) and “*I think it is both kind of the same thing*” (9). The participants' perception and understanding of the different terms is important to consider with regards to the level and degree of their knowledge of the concept of self-branding.

4.5.2 Attitude Towards Self-Branding

The question of, if the participants consider themselves active in the field of self-branding was then posed. Seven participants (1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9 & 10), out of the possible ten, replied yes, they actively self-brand. Two of the participants (4 & 6) claimed that they moderately self-brand or self-brand to a certain extent and participant 5 said that she did not believe her efforts to be that of self-branding.

"I mean when you say it like that, I mean spontaneously I have never thought that people do it, I think more about that we are for example with Best Western, we are pursuing branding... " (5)

As a method of perspective, the interviewees were asked to give examples of people they perceived to be self-branding. Although understanding of the concept, many interviewees did not recognise the branding efforts of individuals in their private lives or even professional lives. Rather, they acknowledged the efforts as successful to people who were distant to them or had the status of famous or known, see table 7. In the table below, the column of other consists of: *group branding* (1), *sales people* (6), *banks and competitors* (8) and *regular people* (10).

Respondent	Celebrities	Influencers	Friends	Employees	Politicians	Other
1						X
2	X					
3	X	X				
4		X	X			
5				X		
6				X		X
7					X	
8						X
9		X				
10						X

Table 7: Examples given of types of people self-branding

Through carrying out the interviews the general opinion, attitude and position the interviewees had regarding self-branding and such activities became apparent. The participants for the most part had positive attitudes towards self-branding and the promotion of one's values.

"You don't have to, but your competitors will have it. So like if you want to increase the opportunity to get jobs and projects you should. Because it will facilitate everything."

(3)

"So I think people should become more conscious of what they put out there and how they brand themselves." (2)

However, one participant (1) had a negative connotation towards the sentiment of self-branding, perceiving efforts and actions attached to the word branding as deceptive and unreliable. The remaining two participants had very conflicting and unsure opinions (5 & 9). In the example of participant 9; this specific participant continued to refer to self-branding as something solely for the rich and famous, when asked if the participant would view individuals who are not very successful, very famous and very rich as a brand, the participant answered:

"Probably not ... you see accountants everywhere but you don't know who that guy is, maybe he is extremely successful but you don't know who he is because he is not famous." (9)

4.6 The Traditionally Employed

The demographic of the participants was as follows: three freelancers, five entrepreneurs and two 'traditionally employed'. The topic of self-branding and whether to engage in branding activities or not, through literature, has been mainly based on the classification of employment. Three of the participants (2, 4 & 6) are dually employed, meaning that they are both self-employed and traditionally employed, as in, either a freelancer or entrepreneur and 'traditionally employed'. With regards to 'traditional employment' and whether individuals should pursue self-branding, the three aforementioned participants were able to give a unique perspective. To the question of whether participant 6 brands herself at her traditional job or not, she answered:

“Yes I do. You always should, whatever job you have it is important to be the best version of yourself.” (6)

However, this perspective was not shared by the entirety of the demographic. Four of the participants (2, 3, 4 & 9) did not believe that it was equally as important for the ‘traditionally employed’ as it was for the self-employed to self-brand.

“I mean, I think, I don't think it is as relevant for nine to five normal people. In some cases, I mean these are just thoughts that maybe even it could hurt your career, if you have one of those jobs.” (4)

Five of the participants (5, 6, 7, 8, 10) believed that it was indeed equally as important and one of the participants (1) had a unique and interesting perspective.

“Not equally important... but for example for middle management or management I would say it is equally important because they are, their... they are what they achieve.” (1)

4.7 The Law of Jante & Its Effects

4.7.1 Opinion and Perspective

As the research was conducted in Sweden, the Swedish mentality and any other underlying biases towards the promotion of one’s self, in other words self-branding, was found integral and interesting to the findings of the study. When asked directly about their opinions on the Law of Jante the majority of the participants (2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 & 10), seven out of the possible ten, had a negative reaction. Words such as *dumb* (2), *annoying* (4), *degrading* (4), *outdated* (5), *limiting* (7) and *bad* (8) were used to describe their feelings on the so-called law.

“...I get the point of it, but, and you shouldn't, there is a difference between being proud of what you are doing and what you have achieved and bragging about it.” (2)

"But I don't like Jantelagen, because it limits people. And I think we should not limit ourselves, but I know that I do it myself so it is a, I have a complex relationship to that law. I don't like it, I don't think we should limit ourselves. We shouldn't be afraid to brag if it is true to who you are." (7)

The remainder of the participants had either a completely neutral opinion (9) or a neutral yet slightly positive opinion (1 & 3). The neutrality of their opinion stems from their ability to both find the negative and positive aspects of the law, without allying to one side of the spectrum. Participant 1 explained that not being able to be better than anyone else means that you cannot be worse than anyone else either.

4.7.2 Social Behaviour and Implications

Furthermore, there were two additional elements to the Law of Jante and its implications that were discussed. The first being if Swedes were perceived to behave differently in comparison to individuals from other countries, and the second being if the participants truly thought it had an effect on the branding activities of Swedes. The majority of the participants (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10) when defending their opinion on the Law of Jante naturally compared Swedes to other nationalities, commenting on how others are not scared to; *impress* (1), *show satisfaction* (5), *be successful* (7), *talk openly* (10) and *promote themselves* (5).

As the topic of the Law of Jante might be seen as a sensitive subject, many of the participants found the need to defend their position and commented on society as a whole. Participant 10 and 1 had interesting input:

"Yeah but exactly. It is a fine line, you have to find something in the middle, you shouldn't be too wimpy and shouldn't be too forward." (10)

"So I think it makes it a better society but still, we need a lot of different people, so we need the braggers and we need the crazy people." (1).

5. Analysis

In this section, the insights gained from the empirical findings will be analysed. The aim is to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of how the empirical findings are related to theories and concepts presented in the frame of reference as well as potentially answer the research questions.

Interpreting key elements of the interviews is a major part of the analysis; to either confirm or deny the conceptual model of self-branding (see figure 3), with regards to the major concepts that influence self-branding. The following figure complements the researchers' conceptual model presented in the frame of reference, through adding relevant, concise and succinct empirical findings.

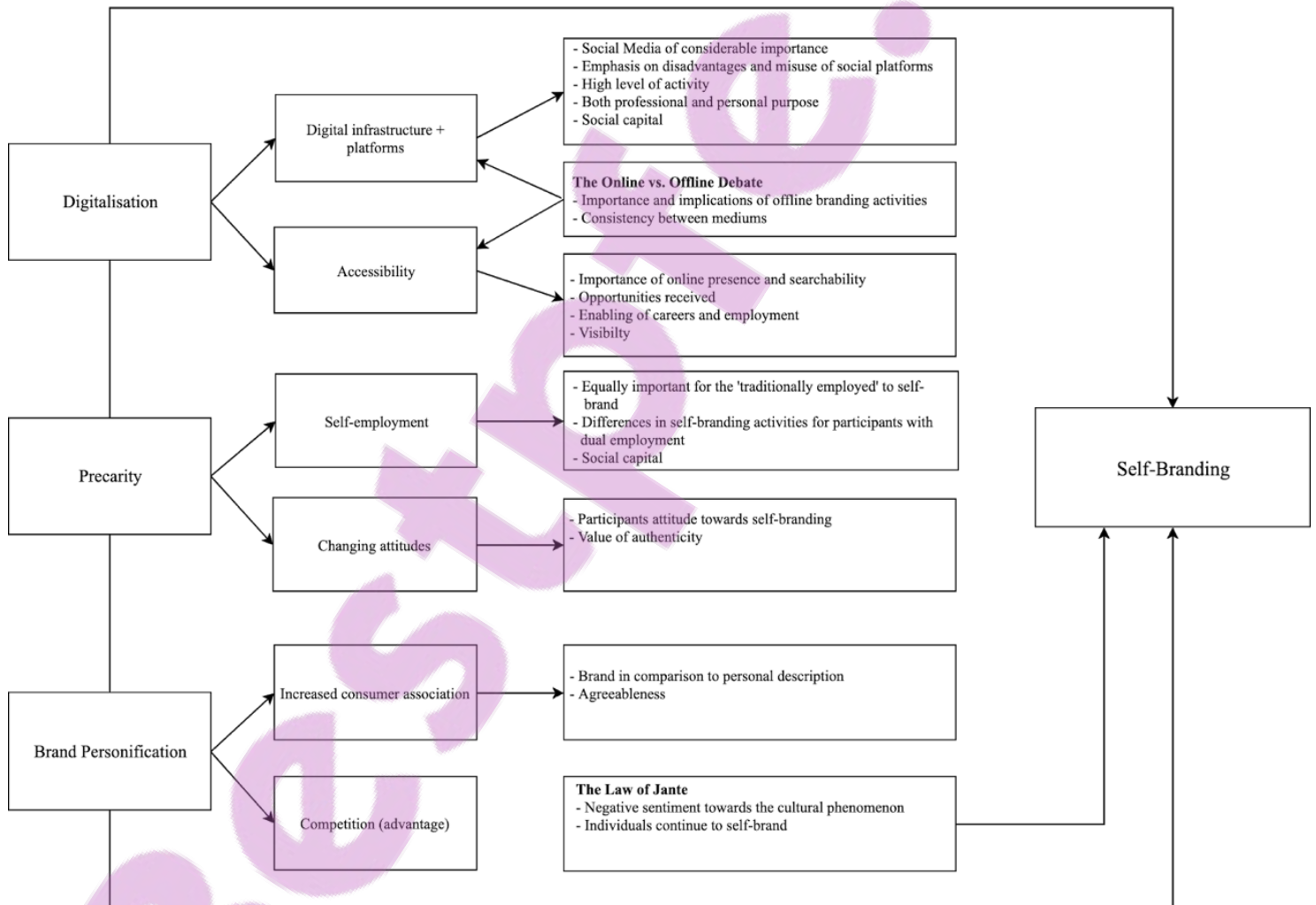


Figure 4. The Researchers' Revised and Amended Conceptual Model

5.1 Social and Digital Platforms

The interviews were based on the contributing elements to the construction of a self-brand. Social media and its usage was described by the literature as a tool to proactively control a public image (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015) and aid in the maintenance of one's digital footprint (Labrecque et al., 2011), all things relevant to the notion and definition of self-branding. All the participants besides one, participant 6, were present on social media and the majority referred to their engagement as active or very active. Knowing the importance of presence on social platforms given the current environment, follow up questions were posed with regards to their interactivity and strategy specifically. However, throughout the interviews when questioned about their activity, the conversations were steered to the contemplation of the potential advantages and disadvantages of social media usage oppose to a how-to guide. Participant 2 described the general consensus well, as a "*double-edged sword*".

5.1.1 Dual Fulfilment: The Personal and Professional

One of the main advantages recognised for the individuals present and active on social media was that of the fulfilment of two fundamental purposes; the personal and the professional. The literature describes how particular platforms acquire different purposes as well as their users (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015), meaning that individuals have the ability to differentiate between platforms as well as type of content posted (Gandini, 2016; Labrecque et al., 2011; Rangarajan et al., 2017).

All of the participants expressed their presence and engagement on social media as fulfilling a personal purpose, and all but one (5) a professional purpose as well. On the discussion of personal versus professional purposes, the greater part of the participants disclosed that they had separate accounts for the distinctive purposes, meaning an account (in some cases plural) to cover and express their personal purpose, and another (or multiple) to cover their professional and business interests. Note that, although the majority of the participants incorporate a media strategy in their business and marketing efforts, not all participants had control or the responsibility for these accounts. Participants (1, 3, 5, 7 & 9) discussed how their enterprises use social media and platforms

to market themselves, but that activity was designated to another employee. Another interesting finding on the topic of dual purposes is that the participants claiming both a personal and professional purpose of social platforms explained how they differentiated their content between accounts. They explained how they allowed themselves to share and post professional content on their personal channels, but not vice versa.

The distinction and differentiation between content and reasoning for acquiring accounts on various platforms can be connected to two major concepts investigated throughout the literature: social capital (Bourdieu, 2018; Gandini, 2016) and the composition of a modern portfolio (Gandini, 2016; Platman, 2004). In the context of self-branding, social capital and new portfolio requirements are strongly related, both are centred around the providing of, and investment in relationships, assets and information with an expected return within the employment market. The notion that personal should be obscured from that of the professional can be dependent on the fact that the personal is not of interest to be ‘purchased’ on the employment market, personal credentials are not recognised, acknowledged or entertained in such marketplace.

The ability of the participants to distinctively manage their purposes eliminates the blurred and ambiguous boundary between one’s professional and private life, Kleppinger and Cain (2015) discuss.

5.1.2 Disadvantages & Misuse

Considering the participants high level of engagement and activity on social media, the frequent and constantly recurring mentioning of negative perceptions of the online environment was perplexing. Furthermore, the literature does not explicitly refer to possible disadvantages that may occur during the course of employing self-branding activities; the authors merely discuss the disadvantages of not being present, describing it as the relinquishing of control (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015).

Assuming that not all individuals with varying types of employment would be equally as active on social platforms, their perspective on absence was questioned. The results were disconcerting and contradicting to the participants own activities and presence. Five

participants (1, 2, 3, 6 & 9) had a positive reaction towards individuals abstaining from the social environment, two participants had a negative reaction (7 & 8), and the remaining three participants had neutral or conflicting opinions. The participants whom had positive reactions to the question could be described as admiring said individuals:

"I think it sounds really nice. And I would like to have my life like that. I think it sounds so nice." (3)

Participant 2 expressed a unique opinion, commenting on certain individuals' absence as a branding tool in itself. However, when making this assessment, examples of known and famous actors were given. This assessment alludes to the fact that certain individuals already have an established brand, and that perhaps absence is a specific value and message.

As an attempt to understand the contradicting opinion the majority of the participants held, the interviewers turned to the negative consequences described from interacting on social platforms. Misuse, abuse and deceit were the common themes that surfaced when discussing the negative effects. Misuse refers to the improper use perceived by participant 1:

"...also it's a little bit of people throw it up there and they trust that something will happen but it doesn't, you have to use the right tool for the right problem"

Abuse is characterised by participant 2 as:

"I ultimately think that people that are on social media, are on it for the likes and to get the compliments or like gratification, because social media is a drug."

Deceit was the most commonly expressed negative side effect of online social concurrence. Throughout the interviews, deceit became synonymous with fakeness (not being genuine), and that the difference between individuals online and offline was too drastic or not as promoted. With presence being instrumental to searchability and detrimental to credibility (Gandini, 2016), the results are hard to understand. With a lack of literature on negative perceptions, misuse, the reasoning and potential preventative

measures for such perceptions, given the responses, it appears relatively likely that such feelings are stemmed in majority from personal experience oppose to professional.

5.2 Accessibility

5.2.1 Securing Opportunities

As the major reward and result of self-branding in modern society is that of opportunity, mainly securing employment (Gandini, 2016; Rangarajan et al., 2017), the participants were question with regards to opportunities they would not have otherwise received if it was not for their presence and engagement on social media. As the employment and characteristics of the demographic varied, the results were assumed to naturally do so as well. The results were favourable and expanded upon contributions to the literature. Participants listed opportunities such as; *employment, internships, apartments, roommates, events, travel* and other opportunities related to their enterprises in the form of *customers* and *growth*. Dependent on the responses, and the fact that all of the participants managed to provide at least one opportunity they would not have otherwise received, a clear advantage to self-branding, that of opportunity has been confirmed.

With digital, online and social platforms transforming and modifying communication and interaction (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015), as well as being considered the predominant curation of visibility (Gandini, 2016; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011; Pera et al., 2016; Quinton, 2013; Rangarajan et al., 2017), individuals, consumers and businesses are now gathered in the same and singular atmosphere. Given the intent of ‘purchases’, of both the social and monetary nature, individual’s self-branding activities has provided them with opportunities beyond the scope of the employment market.

5.2.2 Enablement

The urgency of self-branding and the rise of a changing economy (Gandini, 2016; Pera et al., 2016; Vallas & Cummins, 2015), has been enabled and facilitated by digitalisation (Muhammed, 2018; Schrader, 2015). As previously stated, all of the participants in the study besides one, use social media and digital platforms to fulfil their professional

purpose; moreover, three participants (2, 4 & 10) ascribe their success to a singular platform. Participants 2, 4 and 10 described Instagram as their sole and most influential outlet for online promotion.

"No I actually think that Instagram is pretty much everything, I mean that is where I place my marketing efforts... because otherwise I cannot reach out in the same way."

(10)

Employing self-branding activities has enabled entrepreneurs (10) and freelancers (2 & 4) in this study to not only initiate a career but prevail with regards to growth, reach and the establishment of a network. As suggested by Muhammed (2018) and Schrader (2015), these specific millennial participants are following the trend and natural inclination of the modern economy; through seeking opportunity, employing technology and engaging in self-branding.

5.2.3 Visibility and Searchability

With regard to visibility one major and focal finding can be established, the high level of its importance. In like manner with the literature, the primary data found the strategy of self-branding to be attributed to two main concepts, that of consciousness (Rangarajan et al., 2017) and visibility (Gandini, 2016; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011; Pera et al., 2016; Quinton, 2013; Rangarajan et al., 2017) meaning that, self-branding must be pursued with intent and action with the desirable outcome of visibility.

The participants were asked if they would see a brand when they meet someone, the answers were as follows: six participants responded no, one responded yes, one responded sometimes, and two participants did not directly respond to the question. When answering the question, the participants additionally exemplified individuals whom they would see as brands, recognising the notion that not all branding activities are considered to be relevant or of added value to a self-brand. The majority of individuals listed by the participants were those who were distant to them or had the status of famous or known (see table 7). The importance of visibility is therefore essential in self-branding activities. However, these results might bear negative implications for self-branding. Businesses

and corporations have successfully managed to evolve branding efforts in to that of personification and attribution of human-like characteristics (Aaker, 1997; Kapferer, 2008), however, individuals and persons have arguably not managed to establish the perception of brand. Peters (1997) describes how individuals must be the CEO's of their own companies, however, if individuals will not be regarded as such, the pursuit is questionable.

Furthermore, to validify and ascertain the importance of visibility, the participants were questioned about how they search for people and businesses. The large majority reported various sources on the internet (see table 6). In this specific context, visibility was largely correlated to searchability, confirming Gandini (2016) and Kleppinger and Cain (2015) explained implications of absence.

"... in a way the company doesn't exist if you are not existing on the web." (7)

Visibility can hence be deemed paramount to self-branding activities.

5.3 The Online vs. Offline Debate

5.3.1 The Importance of Online and Offline Branding

The importance of online branding has thoroughly and comprehensively been discussed throughout the literature. Few authors mentioned offline branding activities (Gandini, 2016; Pera et al., 2016; Quinton, 2013), however, merely addressed their presence or need without further explanation. Gandini (2016) furthermore implies that a result of successful self-branding is the diminishing and reducing need for face-to-face interaction, placing a greater weight on online activities. Despite the lack of literature on how to self-brand in the offline environment, it was a recurring theme brought up by the initial participants, which developed into structured questions throughout the remainder of the interviews. The majority of the participants (1, 2, 3, 4, 6 & 8) insisted that offline branding efforts were more important than the online. The remaining four participants (5, 7, 9 & 10) expressed their belief that both mediums were equally as important.

"You reach a lot of people on social media, and if I post a picture, they are not going to be sitting there for half an hour staring at it. Whereas, if you talk to someone for half an hour, that's going to make a bigger impression. So I think it is important to remember that, and be like offline more." (2)

The participants perceiving offline branding activities as equally important as the online, and most commonly more important, was a surprising and unpredictable finding. As previously mentioned, the literature scrupulously explains the importance and implications of online branding, however, fails to acknowledge the relevance of offline branding. Quinton (2013) explains how the digital era, acknowledged by many (Gandini, 2016; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011; Quinton, 2013; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015), changes and shifts how consumers interact in both the online and offline environments but supply no strategy, advice or implications. The participants highly regard offline self-branding activities which implies that at least equal effort should be placed on such efforts, contradicting the literature, specifically the implications given by Gandini (2016).

5.3.2 Consistent Branding Efforts

As reported in the literature, consistency is a mechanism that needs to be considered, primarily when branding (Kapferer, 2008) and subsequently in the employment of self-branding (Gandini, 2016; Pera et al., 2016). The relationship or rather approach to consistency that became apparent throughout the interviews was that of the online and offline. It is important to note that the concept of consistency and the findings that follow have now come to contribute the question of authenticity. On the conversation of consistency, or rather lack thereof, the notions of deceit, fakeness and branding not being perceived as authentic or genuine were integral.

"And then it's more about when you actually meet people and realise that your expectations are met." (1)

"...they have to be genuine and online isn't that genuine it's just, it's good to establish contacts. But I think you still have to have a lot of skill offline to be able to succeed as a brand." (4)

When the participants expressed frustration with regards to consistency, it was in reference to a contradiction of experience of an individual's offline and online 'brands'. A conclusion that be taken from this notion is that offline branding activities can be seen as a verification of the online; if the online and the offline are consistent, a brand is authentic. Meaning that, online branding activities can and most often are met, considering the negative attitudes found towards social media, with scepticism; until this scepticism is disproven, or in other words online branding activities verified, a brand will not be considered real, authentic or trustworthy.

"...I would love for her to just enlighten that, that would make her more trustworthy to be honest." (8)

However, this raises a major concern with regards to self-branding as an activity that is encouraged. Rangarajan et al. (2017) expressed that living the characteristics of one's brand is a necessity and found as a result of their study that inauthentic branding, branding that is far removed from reality, may be perceived as manipulative. However, self-branding should be the true and honest reflection of an individual's strengths and uniqueness (Labrecque et al., 2011), perhaps inauthentic branding can be written off as improper branding.

Moreover, considering the finding of the offline being equally as, if not more important than online self-branding efforts and the common perception of deceit, fakeness and inauthenticity; is self-branding truly promising with regards to the ridding of precarity? If individuals, consumers and businesses must interact face-to-face to be validated and considered authentic the implications and benefits of self-branding are not being realised.

5.4 Self-Branding for the Traditionally Employed

5.4.1 The Importance

As the literature refers to self-branding efforts within scope of the precarious employment (Gandini, 2016; Pera et al., 2016; Vallas & Cummins, 2015), the interviewers wanted to explore the concept in terms of 'traditional employment'. When the participants were asked if they believed self-branding activities to be equally as important for the 'traditionally employed' as it was for the self-employed, the demographic was split; 5 participants (5, 6, 7, 8 & 10) answered yes and 5 participants (1, 2, 3, 4, & 9) answered no. Two compelling findings were proposed.

The first intriguing finding was the participants reasoning for their opinion. Once again, negative and positive consequences of the online versus the offline environment were discussed. When the participants believed that it was not equally as important for the traditionally employed to part take in self-branding activities the harm of social media usage was reiterated.

"...that maybe even it could hurt your career, if you have one of those jobs." (4)

"Consider the fact that people check Instagram. So I think that if you have like a bit of a sensitive work in that way that you have a lot of personal contact, I think you are a bit more aware. Like maybe a bit more careful with that because people understand that it hurts you." (3)

On the other hand, when the participant believed self-branding to be equally as important for the traditionally employed, the focus laid on the offline environment.

"Yes I think so. If you want to succeed, you anyways have to be memorable, right? You should remember me when you meet me 'wow, I want her, I want to have my conference there or that's the consultant I want' so yeah I think so absolutely." (5)

The second intriguing finding may be an explanation for the certain participants reasoning. When seeking to understand why certain participants responded what they did, the 'big picture' approach was taken. Three out of the five participants whom did not

think it was equally as important for the traditionally employed to engage in self-branding had described their main purpose (despite maybe having plural) on social media to be that of the professional.

“So now actually, Instagram is the only tool I'm using. And it's going quite well, because a lot of people are very active on Instagram, and they have a lot of new business features.” (4)

Participant 1 described how his enterprise is adopting the value and attributes of his personal brand, as the company brand. He further describes how his brand is much stronger than that of the company. Due to the fact that the aforementioned participants view their main, but not sole, purpose on social media professional, they may perceive self-branding to not be relevant to those whose employment is secure.

Furthermore, this notion can be correlated to both the findings of why individuals create a distinction between personal and professional content as well as that of social capital. Social capital, in the context of this study, is a credential acquired with the intent to be sold on the labour market (Bourdieu, 2018; Gandini, 2016); as the ‘traditionally employed’ have nothing to ‘sell’ or exchange, they perhaps have no reason to part take in such a marketplace.

5.4.2 Dual Employment Differences

Three of the participants entertained dual employment (2, 4 & 6), meaning that they were both self-employed and ‘traditionally employed’. With respect to the question of importance of self-branding for the traditionally employed, the aforementioned participants, were able to provide an insightful and intriguing perspective. Participants 2 and 4 did not perceive self-branding to be equally as important for the traditionally employed, the following comments were given:

“They do not brand, they just post about their life” (2)

“If you have a normal job, you know, your job isn't you” (4)

The third participant with dual employment (6), recognised self-branding as equally important for that of the ‘traditionally employed’, however, when providing a reason, she simply expressed that it is important to always be the best version of yourself regardless of employment. As being the best version of yourself is not a direct component of self-branding, the results can be interpreted in the distinction of purposes and once again social capital.

5.5 The Perception of Self-Branding

5.5.1 Self-Branding as a Concept

Self-branding is defined as “capturing and promoting an individual's strengths and uniqueness to a target audience” (Labrecque et al., 2011, p. 39), and can arguably be constructed without intention (Rangarajan et al., 2017). Early on in the study when conducting the pilot interviews the question of consciousness arose and was therefore investigated through the literature and primary data. The notion that individuals can both deliberately and unconsciously brand themselves through social platforms (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Rangarajan et al., 2017) was an interesting suggestion. When the question of if the participants considered themselves to self-brand the majority replied yes (1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9 & 10), two participants claimed partially (4 & 6) and the final participant (5) did not recognise her own efforts as that of self-branding. However, besides their own efforts, the participants were also questioned about their perception of self-branding as a concept, the results were complex. Although the majority of the participants maintained a positive attitude towards the concept of self-branding, and engaged in such activities, all participants managed to acknowledge less desirable ramifications.

"We all self-brand ourselves, but some are more obvious than others. The most important thing is that the self-branding activities are reflecting the true you, so you don't get internal conflicts and feel like shit because your public 'you' is not the same as the private 'you'". (7)

"I see and I react to people that are trying consciously to create their brand and it is not favourable." (1)

Several participants reacted negatively towards individuals deliberately and proactively maintaining their self-brand. This notion of consciousness, deliberation and purposefulness was once again perceived as an effort to deceive. The results of these findings can broadly be connected to three concepts found in the literature: authenticity (Beverland, 2009), unnaturalness (Fritz et al., 2017) and storytelling (Pera et al., 2016). Authenticity and unnaturalness are strongly associated. Fritz et al. (2017) describe one of the attributes of authenticity being naturalness, given the negative attitudes towards self-branding being deliberate, purposeful and deceitful, they are comprised of being unnatural and hence inauthentic. The interpretation of storytelling is that the participants perception of a certain ‘story’ is once again inauthentic. The individuals whose story or brand has been negatively interpreted have not incorporated the correct method of storytelling.

5.5.2 Measure of Authenticity

As an attempt to understand if the participants self-branding efforts were authentic and consistent, they were asked to both describe themselves and their brands in three words. A self-brand according to the literature is a reflection of values, achievements, missions and attributes that one seeks to promote (Gandini, 2016; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011; Pera et al., 2016; Peters, 1997; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). Searching for authenticity is “the manifestation of the search for what is real” (Beverland, 2009, p.17), which was the intent with the aforementioned question. Four participants (1, 4, 7 & 9) used the exact same words to describe their brand and themselves, two participants (5 & 6) gave similar descriptions (with one word varying) and three of the participants’ brand and self-description did not match (2, 3 & 8). The final participant (10) never gave a concrete description and got side-tracked. Authenticity is described by the literature as something that is authoritative, trustworthy, reliable, natural and original, however also highly subjective and socially constructed (Beverland, 2009; Fritz et al., 2018). As there is no objective determinant for what can be considered authentic, individuals are cautioned to not portray brands that are far removed from their reality (Rangarajan et al., 2017).

"I mean I'm a little bit conscious but I try to do it as close to my own personality or my own beliefs." (1)

In the above quote, one of the participants mentions his own efforts to remain as authentic as possible, however, measuring a self-brand's effectiveness, with specific regards to authenticity remains a struggle.

5.5.3 Agreeableness for the Personal and Professional

The participants relationships in their personal lives and professional lives were two additional environments investigated with the aim of further understanding authenticity in correlation to self-branding. The participants were asked if they believed, firstly people in their personal lives and secondly people in their professional lives, would agree with the description given of themselves. All ten participants stated that individuals in their personal lives would agree with the description given, but only eight interviewees (1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 & 10) claimed that people in their professional lives would also agree.

As previously mentioned, authenticity is highly subjective and socially constructed (Beverland, 2009), however, if agreeableness is ascertained, authenticity can in essence be so as well, as society is objectifying and verifying the listed attributes. The following assumption can be made; if the participants' description of their self-brand matched with the description of themselves, and people in two focal environments agreed with that description, due to the concept of consistency and characteristics of authenticity, their brands can be perceived as authentic.

5.6 The Law of Jante

5.6.1 The Negative Sentiment

As the research was conducted in Sweden, the Swedish mentality and any other underlying biases towards the promotion of one's self, self-branding, was found integral and interesting to the findings of the study. The majority of the participants had a negative opinion and sentiment towards the Law of Jante, using words such as *dumb* (2), *annoying* (4), *degrading* (4), *outdated* (5), *limiting* (7) and *bad* (8) to describe their feelings. Of the

remaining three participants, one had a completely neutral belief and two had a neutral yet slightly positive opinion of the law. It was found that the neutrality of their opinions stemmed from their ability to both find the negative and positive aspects of the law, without allying to one side of the spectrum. As expressing opinions about a law of social nature can be considered sensitive, not many questions were posed, the participants simply had the opportunity to address their beliefs. There were several interesting findings.

One of the major findings was that several participants associated the proverbial antonym of the Law of Jante with bragging, insinuating that showing success and achievement is braggery. The participants furthermore implied how they perceive Swedes to be scared to: *impress, show satisfaction, success, talk openly, promote* and *brag*. Participant 10 talks about the fine line where showing success quickly turns into what the others called bragging:

"Yeah but exactly. It is a fine line, you have to find something in the middle, you shouldn't be too wimpy and shouldn't be too forward."

Seeing as the majority of the participants were not only able to list negative personal feelings towards the law but also negative social implications, the influence of a cultural context is evident. Cappelen and Dahlberg (2017) express how Swedes affected by the law usually feel limited and held back and the results further these feelings as much more than that expressed by the literature.

5.6.2 Individuals Continuing to Self-Brand

Given the nature of the law, the negative and unpleasant viewpoint held against individuality and success (Cappelen & Dahlberg, 2017) and the ten rules provided; the finding that individuals whom had a neutral or slightly positive attitude towards the law continued to engage in self-branding was confounding. As the literature fails to acknowledge cultural influences and possible implications, the managing of such context is complex and unknown. However, with regards to the Law of Jante, the theory is that

the law is no longer considered appropriate and is outdated, considering the vast majority of the participants holding a negative sentiment.

6. Conclusion

At last, this section will execute the purpose by answering the research questions and provide the reader with a conclusion from the empirical findings, analysis and discussion.

The aim of the qualitative research study was to investigate and gain a deeper understanding of the Swedish employment market with regards to self-branding. Furthermore, the research strived to understand the variables of influence with regards to self-branding in Sweden and uncover new insights for Sweden's 'traditionally employed'. Along with the research questions, the researchers developed a conceptual model (see figure 3) with the purpose of guiding the study, which was conclusively revised and complemented with findings (see figure 4).

RQ 1: How do Swedish entrepreneurs, freelancers and the 'traditionally employed' self-brand themselves today given the current environment?

RQ 2: What importance does self-branding have for the 'traditionally employed' in Sweden?

The question of how the Swedish employment market self-brands was majorly answered through two reflections: the realisation of an individual's purpose and need for authenticity. However, as attributes promoted by individuals when self-branding are so individualistic, the strategies naturally were so as well; making an insightful 'how to guide' very complex and difficult to create.

With regards to the second research question, reasonable interpretations were constructed. Despite the findings being contradictory and uncertain, the varying responses themselves arguably prove that self-branding is of some importance for the 'traditionally employed' and therefore should employ such activities given modern society.

Two additional highly relevant and compelling findings were discovered. The primary data reflected the need for individuals to both engage in offline and online branding efforts, commonly considering the offline more important. The second is that of the cultural context, the Law of Jante. With regards to this phenomenon a quantitative

measure cannot be established with regards to the weight of its impact, but the primary data is very clear concerning the existence of an influence.

7. Discussion

In this section, practical implications, strengths, limitations and suggestions for further research within the field are presented.

7.1 Practical Implications

Self-branding is considered a critical tool in the activities of individuals who are self-employed. However, how consumers perceive such branding efforts is of equivalent, if not more, importance. It would be beneficial for individuals self-branding to truly understand and interpret their target audience. As authenticity is an object of subjectivity, being conscious of and identifying with the consumers of one's brand is of pivotal importance; to create a strategy and to deliver an authentic brand to a desired target audience.

Furthermore, individuals engaging in self-branding activities would benefit from emphasising offline efforts in their strategy. Visibility is established through presence in the online environment however the consistency between the offline and online is considered a determinant and verification. Understanding that both the online and offline aspect of self-branding contributes to social capital is an asset.

7.2 Strengths and Limitations

Throughout the study, two main strengths were recognised. The first strength was the information and insights gained from conducting two pilot interviews. During this process, the ability to test the interview questions and uncover other relevant concepts was provided. As an example, the notion of unconsciousness became apparent and was therefore not only incorporated in the interviews but also further investigated through literature.

The second strength was that of the diversity of the sample with regards to age. The participants ranged from 21 to 66 years of age, allowing a true representation of the Swedish employment market to be reflected. Including such a diverse age demographic was additionally interesting with regards to self-branding. Seeing as self-branding is

regarded a concept of pivotal importance given the modern environment, investigating whether this new tool has been employed by older generations is compelling.

As the literature on self-branding is lacking with regards to the exact strategic approach, more specifically the descriptives on how and what content to post, the phenomena at times became hard to exemplify for the participants of the study. As the demographic of the participants was truly diverse the existing knowledge the participants had on the topic of self-branding naturally was so as well. Besides explaining and understanding the concept of self-branding, per definition, and why it has become important in a changing economy; several participants struggled to describe their strategy descriptively and in-depth, seeing their activities as natural and/ or unconscious.

The second limitation was that of the size of the sample with regards to the ‘traditionally employed.’ Five entrepreneurs, three freelancers and two ‘traditionally employed’ were interviewed, leaving the category of ‘traditionally employed’ individuals scarce which might create a natural bias with regards to the findings.

7.3 Future Research

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be given to enrich the body of knowledge of self-branding. As previously mentioned by both the literature and the majority of the participants in the study, self-branding is considered a necessity for those in precarious employment. Being a necessity, it would be interesting to learn if this is a tool taught to students in either high school and/or university.

The second approach which would be undeniably interesting is the question of what constitutes effective self-branding? As notable efforts are placed in the creation and maintenance of a self-brand, a measurement of effectiveness and efficient self-branding would be invaluable.

The third and final recommendation for future research is that of the ‘traditionally employed’. Establishing self-branding as a suitable tool for the ‘traditionally employed,’ further research would be able to expand upon the implications and possible varying strategy to that of the self-employed.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Questions (English version)

Introduction Questions

1. How are you? Please tell us a little about yourself: age, employment, hobbies, education etc.
2. What does your daily routine look like? Do you have one?
3. If your days look different dependent on employment, are there certain things you always do?
4. Is there something missing? Something that you would like to do but do not have time for?
5. Describe yourself in 3 words.
6. Do you think that 1) people in your professional life, 2) people in your private life perceive you in the same way?
7. What are your priorities?
8. How did you apply to the job you currently have? How do you connect with clientele?
9. What do you wear to work?
10. Are you always on time?
11. Do you/ how do you greet people in the office/ co-workers?
12. When you want to know more about someone, how do you get hands on this information?
15. What is your impression of people who do not have social media? Do you know anyone who does not?
16. Are you on social media? If so, which platforms? Why not?
17. What do you think your purpose is on social media? What type of things do you post? Do you think before you post? Which channels do you use most? What type of people do you follow?
18. Are you public or private on your channels? Have you ever been public?
19. How interactive would say that you are on social media?
10. Would you consider social media as a key element in your job/ for the company?
21. Has your presence on social media ever given you opportunities you would otherwise not have received?
22. Is there anything else that would be interesting to know about you, for example; are you a vegetarian/ vegan, follow a specific movement, work with a charity?

Self-Branding Based Questions

23. How would you define self-branding?
24. Would you say that a self-brand is something that you try to maintain?

25. Do you believe there to be a difference between self-branding and the branding that businesses and corporations do? If so, what?
26. Is a brand something you see when you meet someone?
27. What do you think is the difference between brand, image, personality and reputation is?
28. Describe three core values of your own brand.
29. Have you ever seen a brand make a mistake?
30. Have you ever made a mistake which you perceived to damage your brand?
31. Have you ever witnessed someone else do that?
32. Has someone ever done something to make you change your professional perception of them?
33. How do you manage your brand?
34. In the current environment, do you think that being present on social media is a vital part of one's brand?
34. Do you think it is important for everyone to have a brand?
35. How do you manage your brand offline?

The Law of Jante

36. What are your opinions on *The Law of Jante*?
37. Do you see *The Law of Jante*'s implications at work in other people or yourself? Do you try to not stand out so much?
38. Do you think it plays an underlying role?
39. Do you think that Swedish people are scared/ hesitant to promote themselves?

Appendix 2: Interview Questions (Swedish version)

Introduction Questions

1. Hur mår du? Berätta lite om dig själv: ålder, utbildning, vad jobbar du med, fritidsintressen.
2. Hur ser din dagliga rutin ut? Om du har en?
3. Om din dag ser annorlunda ut på grund av jobbet, är det vissa saker du alltid gör?
4. Känner du att det är något som saknas? Något som du skulle vilja göra men inte har tid för?
5. Beskriv dig själv med 3 ord.
6. Tror du att 1) människor du jobbar med, 2) människor i ditt privatliv skulle hålla med?
7. Vad i ditt liv prioriterar du?
8. Hur fick du/sökte du till ditt nuvarande jobb? Hur får du dina kunder/ folk att uppmärksamma dig/ din verksamhet?
9. Vad har du på dig till jobbet?
10. Är du alltid i tid?
11. Hur hälsar du på folk på jobbet?
12. När du vill veta mer om någon, var och hur söker du efter information? Hur skulle du ta reda på den informationen?
13. Vad är ditt intryck om folk som inte har sociala medier? Känner du någon som inte är på sociala medier?
14. Är du på sociala medier? Om ja, vilka? Om nej, varför inte?
15. Vad är ditt syfte med att vara på sociala media? Vad för slags inlägg gör du? Tänker du efter innan du lägger upp något? Vilka kanaler använder du mest? Vad följer du för folk/konton?
16. Har du en öppen profil eller är du privat? Har du någonsin haft en öppen profil?
17. Hur aktiv är du på sociala medier?
18. Skulle du säga att sociala medier spelar en huvudsaklig roll i ditt jobb/ för ditt företag?
19. Har dina sociala medier gett dig möjligheter du annars inte skulle ha fått?
20. Är det något mer som skulle vara intressant att veta om dig, till exempel; är du vegetarian/ vegan, stödjer du en specifik rörelse, jobbar du med en välgörenhet? Eller något annat som du brinner för i livet eller som du har en passion för?

Self-Branding Based Questions

21. Hur skulle du definiera self-branding?
22. Skulle du säga att ett self-brand är något som du försöker upprätthålla?
23. Tror du att det är en skillnad mellan self-branding och den typen av 'branding' företag gör? Om ja, vad?

24. Är ett varumärke något som du ser när du träffar en person?
25. Vad är skillnaden mellan ett varumärke, image, personlighet och rykte enligt dig?
26. Beskriv tre huvudsakliga värderingar av ditt varumärke/brand.
27. Har du någonsin sett ett varumärke/företag göra ett misstag?
28. Har du någonsin gjort ett misstag som du upplever ha påverkat ditt varumärke/brand negativt?
29. Har du någon gång sett någon annan göra det?
30. Har någon någonsin gjort någonting som har gjort att du ändrade ditt professionella intryck av dem?
31. Hur upprätthåller du ditt brand?
32. Tror du att närvarande på sociala medier är en viktig faktor av en persons personliga varumärke?
33. Tror du att det är viktigt för alla att ha ett brand?
34. Hur hanterar/förvaltar du ditt brand offline?

The Law of Jante

35. Vad är din personliga åsikt om *Jantelagen*?
36. Tycker du att man märker av Jantelagen någonting på jobbet hos andra människor eller hos dig själv? Försöker du att inte stå ut så mycket ur mängden?
37. Tror du att det har en underliggande roll?
38. Tror du att svenskar är rädda för/tveksamma till att marknadsföra sig själva?
39. Tror/ Tycker du att det är viktigt för alla att ha ett personligt varumärke?

Appendix 3: Interview Consent Form

Interview Consent Form

Research project title: Marketing in the employment market, similarities and differences between freelancers, entrepreneurs and 'traditionally employed'.

Research investigators: Annika Romell and Evelina Lidman

Information;

- The interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes; notes will be written during the interview as well as an audio tape recording;
- We don't anticipate that there are any risks associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time;
- The transcript of the interview will be analyzed in numbers and you will remain anonymous as a research participant;
- All parts of the content of your interview may be used.

By signing this form, I agree that;

1. I am voluntarily taking part in this project. I understand that I don't have to take part, and I can stop the interview at any time;
2. The transcribed interview or extracts from it may be used as described above;
3. I have read the Information sheet;
4. I don't expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation;
5. I can request a copy of the transcript of my interview and may make edits I feel necessary to ensure the effectiveness of any agreement made about confidentiality;
6. I have been able to ask questions I might have, and I understand that I am free to contact the researcher with any questions I may have in the future.

Printed Name _____

Participants Signature _____

Date _____

Researchers Signature _____

Date _____