

**A netnographic study of how professionals perceive
personal branding in LinkedIn**

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<p>Määräaikaiset, lyhyet työsuhteet ja työttömyys leimaavat tänä päivänä monia ammattialoja ja kilpailu avoimista työpaikoista voi olla erittäin kovaa. Lukemattomat eri alojen ammattilaiset kilpailevat usein samoista rajallisista työpaikoista. Tämä yhtälö on lisännyt kiinnostusta joukosta erottumisen keinoihin, kuten henkilöbrändäykseen ja LinkedInin tyylisiin sosiaalista mediaa hyödyntäviin palveluihin, jotka voivat toimia työkaluina muista erottumisessa.</p> <p>Tässä maisterintutkielmassa tarkastellaan LinkedIniä käyttävien ammattilaisten käsityksiä henkilöbrändäyksestä LinkedIn-palvelussa. Tutkimuksessa pyritään valottamaan niitä käsityksiä, joita eri alojen ammattilaisilla on LinkedInin käyttämisestä henkilöbrändäyksen tarkoituksiin ja sitä, miten he määrittelevät henkilöbrändäyksen LinkedInissä. Samalla tarkastellaan teemoja, jotka nousevat esiin näiden tutkimusvaiheiden aikana. Tutkimuksessa selvitetään erityisesti sitä, ovatko ammattilaisten käsitykset linjassa niiden näkemysten kanssa, joita esitetään henkilöbrändäyksestä kertovissa teorioissa ja malleissa.</p> <p>Käsitteenä henkilöbrändäys lähestyy markkinoinnin maailmaa. Tämän tutkimuksen pääkäsitteitä ovat henkilöbrändi, henkilöbrändäys ja LinkedIn sosiaalisen median ympäristönä. Henkilöbrändäykseen liittyvien teorioiden lisäksi tutkimus esittelee kaksi henkilöbrändäystä esittelevää mallia, Authentic personal branding modelin ja Brand Identity Planning Modelin, jotka selittävät henkilöbrändäystä ja henkilöbrändin muodostumista.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen aineisto kerättiin LinkedInistä alustan omaa hakutoimintoa hyödyntäen. Aineisto koostui postauksista, jotka käsittelivät henkilöbrändäystä ja jotka eri alojen ammattilaiset ovat kirjoittaneet eri näkökulmista sekä julkaisseet LinkedInissä. Tutkimusmetodina käytettiin netnografiaa ja aineisto analysoitiin hyödyntämällä teoriaohjaavaa sisällönanalyysyä, joka on laadullisen sisällönanalyysin muoto.</p> <p>Yhtenä tärkeimmistä tutkimustuloksista voidaan todeta, että ammattilaisten käsitykset henkilöbrändäyksestä ovat pitkälti samoja kuin aihetta käsittelevissä teorioissa ja malleissa, mutta käsittelevät aihetta hieman eri näkökulmista ja usein jopa syvemmin kuin kirjallisuudessa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tuloksia voidaan hyödyntää laajemman ymmärryksen luomiseksi henkilöbrändäyksestä ilmiönä. Tutkimuksessa esitetyn tiedon, tulosten ja päätelmien toivotaan innostavan ja hyödyttävän henkilöbrändäyksestä kiinnostuneita ammattilaisia, joiden pyrkimyksenä on toteuttaa henkilöbrändäystä tai jotka haluavat tietää aiheesta lisää.</p>	
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<p>Many fields of profession are nowadays characterized by temporary employment and rivalry for the available jobs can be intense. Countless professionals are often competing for the same limited positions. This has increased the interest in the means of standing out in the crowd, such as personal branding and services like LinkedIn that can serve as tools for this purpose.</p> <p>This master's thesis is a study of how professionals, who use LinkedIn, perceive personal branding in the platform. The study sought to clarify the perceptions that professionals of various fields have of using LinkedIn for personal branding, how they define what personal branding in LinkedIn is and which are the themes become highlighted in the process. Most importantly, the study investigated whether these perceptions were in line with the theories and models that are available of personal branding.</p> <p>As a concept, personal branding touches the field of marketing closely. The main concepts of this study were personal brand, personal branding and LinkedIn as a concept of social media. In addition to theory of personal branding, this study presented two descriptive models, the Authentic personal branding model and Brand Identity Planning Model, which explain personal branding and how a personal brand is formed.</p> <p>The data for this research was collected from LinkedIn by using the platform's own search tool. The data consisted of postings which were written and published in LinkedIn by professionals of different fields and which discussed personal branding in LinkedIn from different angles. Netnography was used as the research method and the analysis of the research data was conducted by using theory-bound analysis, which is a method of qualitative content analysis.</p> <p>The most important research results included that the perceptions that professionals have of personal branding were much in line with the views that were presented in theories and models which discuss the subject, although they sometimes discussed the subject more profoundly, compared to literature.</p> <p>The findings of this study may be of use in creating a wider understanding of personal branding as a phenomenon. Hopefully the information, results and conclusions that are presented in this study can be of interest and aid to professionals who intend to engage in personal branding activities or want to learn more about the subject.</p>	
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ABSTRACT

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1 INTRODUCTION

The economic turndown that has taken place in the 21st century has had many effects not only on the economy, but also on the many aspects and functionalities of working life (Contiades 2013, 1). As an effect of this economic situation, the unemployment among the highly educated increased by approximately 30 per cent from 2012 (Statistics Finland 2014, 1). Many fields of profession are characterized by temporary employment and rivalry for the available jobs can be intense. Hundreds, if not thousands, of professionals are often competing for the same limited positions. This has increased the interest in means of standing out in the crowd, such as personal branding, different ways of communication and services like LinkedIn that can serve as tools for these purposes (Laine 2014, 1). Although LinkedIn was not initially designed for recruiting, the online business network has benefited of the stringent requirements in the labor market (Harris & Rae 2011, 19; Vick & Walsh 2008, 3). So, as the situation in the job markets intensifies, various ways of differentiating oneself from others become more intriguing. These observations and realizations led to the discovery of the subject for this thesis and thus began a netnographic study of how LinkedIn users perceive personal branding in LinkedIn.

In the spring of 2013, I myself faced the challenge of finding an internship position to replenish my communication studies and this obstacle got me to realize that it would be even more challenging to find an actual long-term job. It would definitely require more than dozens of job applications and “looking good on paper”. It would require a strategy and an innovative way of thinking. Looking into this challenge and how it should be approached, one almost instantaneously gets familiarized with the concept of personal branding. This further led to the discovery of the subject of this thesis, which is about how professionals who use LinkedIn perceive personal branding in the platform. This study seeks to clarify and investigate the perceptions that professionals of various fields have of using LinkedIn for personal branding, how they define what personal branding in LinkedIn is and which are the themes are highlighted in the process. Furthermore and

most importantly, the study investigates whether these perceptions are in line with the theories and models that are available of personal branding and which are also presented in this study.

More specifically, the *research questions* that were answered in this research are:

- How do professionals who use LinkedIn perceive personal branding in the platform?
- How do these professionals of different fields define personal branding and which themes and issues do they relate to it?
- Are theories and models of personal branding in line with the perceptions that professionals of different fields have of personal branding?

Examining the relationship between the users of LinkedIn and personal branding is interesting because of the relatively short history of both social media and personal branding as the modern phenomenon that it is today. Professionals who use LinkedIn are likely to be already greatly acquainted with subjects like social media and personal branding and are often among the early adopters and researchers of such phenomena. These characteristics are valuable also to potential employers, because having an employee who is well-networked and informed about the developments of their field is advantageous also to them (Aalto & Uusisaari 2010, 20; Vitberg 2009, 13 - 14).

1.1 Research objectives

Professionals of different fields need to differ from each other when applying for jobs. They are competitors to each other in the job market, which makes standing out from the crowd and bringing forth one's skills important abilities (Aalto & Uusisaari 2010, 14). Many have chosen to utilize social media and especially LinkedIn. This thesis investigated how professionals view the social media platform LinkedIn as an instrument of personal branding. In practice, this was done by first presenting relevant and descriptive theories of personal branding, such as the Authentic Personal Branding Model and Brand Identity Planning Model, which were presented in chapters 2.3.1 and 2.3.2. Then these theories were reflected to LinkedIn users' views about personal branding which they have presented and published in their posts in LinkedIn.

As the subject of this research has to do with professionals and personal branding in LinkedIn, it was necessary to elaborate what is meant by *professionals* in the context of this study. The professionals whose views of personal branding in LinkedIn are investigated in this study work in the fields of media and communication, marketing, management, IT and social media research and many of them work also as career and personal branding

experts. This summary was based on the titles of the professionals who have written the LinkedIn postings that were used as research data in this research. The full list of the titles can be found in appendix 1.

LinkedIn was chosen particularly as the target of investigation for this thesis, because it is strongly a working life oriented social media platform and a part of a revolutionary change, where personal branding has been shifted from the face-to-face or offline world to the online world. Furthermore, LinkedIn is also particularly a professional online network which has partly developed from the deterioration of the economic circumstances, which have forced job seekers to find new ways to find employment (Harris & Rae 2011, 32). It goes without saying that very often a CV and a cover letter are no longer enough in the job search, one also has to impress potential employers online (Aalto & Uusisaari 2010, 117). According to Elman et al. (2014, 584), LinkedIn profiles have already completely replaced traditional resumés in the recruitment processes of many companies. In most cases, finding employment is the main goal of personal branding efforts (Labrecque et al. 2010, 39; Shepherd 2005, 590). It is a modern-day fact that companies seek to be known and seen as the employers of the best and most skillful individuals who likely have strong personal brands (Friedman 2015, 43).

Personality and individuality are values that are given more and more weight in the modern societies across the world (Nessmann 2010, 378). According to Harris and Rae (2011, 14) personal branding may become a determinant of success in the job market, if not in the society as whole, in the future. This study aims to examine how LinkedIn users, professionals of different fields, view LinkedIn from the manifold perspectives of personal branding. A further aim is to find out how familiar personal branding already is to LinkedIn users in general and whether or not a more in-depth understanding of personal branding activities already exists. This is useful and important, because the research on the functionalities of personal branding is yet unsatisfactory on many levels (Nessmann 2010, 379). According to Elman et al. (2014, 584) prior research on personal branding has gaps, particularly with regard to LinkedIn. This research is hoped to be of assistance to professionals or anyone who is interested in personal branding, both in theory and practice, and wishes to have somewhat deeper insight into the matter. What this thesis aims to offer to its readers is better understanding of how and why personal branding is used in online environments such as LinkedIn.

1.2 The structure and progress of the study

In the spirit of qualitative research, this netnographic study was started with a definition of the research problem and research questions. Next the relevant theories, the research

method and research data were presented. Then, the most important and relevant terms regarding personal branding and its neighboring concepts were explained and personal branding was discussed through select theories. After this, the research process paid a visit to the online environment and the target community LinkedIn and the field work phase of the study was begun, starting from the gathering of the research data and commencing its analysis. These were then followed by further analysis of the research data, results, discussion of the findings and finally, conclusions.

2 THE PIECES OF THE PERSONAL BRANDING PUZZLE

Personal branding is a rather complex entirety. The phenomenon could be characterized as a puzzle with many pieces which consist not only of the theories that derive from the contexts of more traditional branding but also of every-day personal branding activities that are practiced by regular people in many various ways, not forgetting the many characteristics of social media as platforms. The term personal branding is to some extent predictable or at least it may create different preconceptions or associations. Thus, an overview of its background and relationships to other concepts and terms is in order.

2.1 Definition of concepts

The main concepts of this study are *personal brand* and *personal branding*. These and neighboring concepts were included in the definitions below. LinkedIn was also described as a concept of social media. In order to deepen the understanding of these concepts in the context of this study, relevant background, origins and characteristics of personal branding were also elaborated.

2.1.1 Brand and personal brand

To begin with, a brand is a very wide concept; it can be a person, product, party, land, village or a city – rather anything. The claim that also a person can be a brand has been verified not until by the latest academic work (Khedher 2015, 19). A brand consists of two parts. First, there are the externally visible matters, such as the outward appearance or look. Second, a brand has a soul, persona, background and history. (Sounio 2010, 24.) This applies also to personal brands. According to McNally and Speak (2002, 28), a brand, at its simplest, is a relationship that is based on trust. This trust is further based on the experi-

ence that both parties of the relationship know that they share the same values. A brand as a term and concept could be described vastly from various viewpoints and through manifold studies, but this research concentrates specifically on the concept of personal brand, which will be clarified more closely in the following.

In order to describe the difference between a brand and personal brand on a very basic level, it can be said that where a brand promotes a company or a product, a personal brand seeks to promote a person and most often by the person himself (Shepherd 2005, 590; Labrecque et al. 2010, 39). Moreover, where a brand is a union of all the information related to a certain service, company or product (Olins 2003, 64), a personal brand is a union of images, impressions and expectations that others have of a certain individual. McNally and Speak (2002, 28) say that a personal brand is a view that someone else has of you and it reflects your beliefs, what you do and the way in which you do it. Rampersad (2010, 401) says that a personal brand can play a significant role in individual success.

The word combination “personal brand” is relatively new in the modern vocabulary and has first occurred only quite recently, in the same era with words like “attention economy” and “creative class” (Aalto & Uusisaari 2010, 15). Korteso (2011, 8) begins to clarify the subject of personal branding as a phenomenon by first explaining the concept personal brand; it is a person experienced by a certain group. According to another description, a personal brand is a combination of all digitally documented online material, which can be connected to a certain person (Aalto & Uusisaari 2010, 80). Aalto and Uusisaari (2010, 35) define personal brand as the reputation of a certain person in the context of goal-directed online communication. A personal brand is formed by the views of others and is based on appearance, choice of communication channels, presence and actions. Based on the information that the personal brand offers, it is possible to conclude the things that the person is interested in, who this person communicates and interacts with and when and how she or he can be contacted.

According to McNally and Speak (2002, 28) and Rampersad (2010, 401), a personal brand is theoretically something that everyone has. It is just not always managed in strategic or consistent ways or its existence may not even be realized (Rampersad 2008a, 34). According to one view, a personal brand consists of an individual’s strengths and weaknesses. In addition to strengths, a strong personal brand also includes some shortcomings which make it more human and believable. Perfection is not aspired, because ultimately, having no flaws is not seen as credible. (Sounio 2010, 27 - 28.)

But what is a good personal brand like? A good personal brand is visible in many ways. It is also highly recognizable, unique and authentic. A good personal brand brings about emotions and tells of the person “behind” the brand. It communicates values and what the

person wants to stand for, which are the person's strengths and weaknesses, what makes the person different from others, who the person actually is and the person does. (Nessmann 2010, 381.) According to Harris and Rae (2011, 16), a good personal brand is a mixture of trust, implementation, visibility and good reputation, authenticity is most crucial. However, a good brand is not *too* good, as an overly promoted and ostensibly perfect personal brand may cause suspicion and skepticism in its audiences (Harris & Rae 2011, 21).

The definition of a good personal brand is connected to the perceived value of a brand. According to Olins (2011, 10), there is no watertight procedure or formula for calculation a brand's value and the quality and effectiveness of any brand is eventually decided and given by whoever is evaluating it. A characteristic of a good and effective brand is the ability to stimulate action in its beholder (Olins 2011, 10). Thus, the value of a professional's personal brand could be estimated, for example, by monitoring the amount of profile views in LinkedIn or reactions that a branded LinkedIn profile creates in potential employers. Furthermore, one might say that a personal brand that includes the needed skills, the right education and authenticity is of great value for an employer of a certain field, but the same characteristics might not hold any value at all in another, completely different field of profession. Again, this is to say that the value of any brand is in the eye of the beholder. However, this does not imply that it makes no difference what a brand is like, how it is constructed and planned or what kind of an impression or associations it conveys, it simply means that the decision of giving value to a brand is always personal and case-specific. Furthermore, the perceived value of a brand is also subjected to the effects of time and various unforeseen events and Olins (2011, 10) adds that thus the future of a brand's exact value is quite impossible to predict reliably.

Personal brand, *reputation* and *image* are neighboring concepts, especially in the spoken language, but they are not synonyms (Kortesuo 2011, 8). Kortesuo (2011, 8-9) describes that both reputation and image are reflections or views of a brand, but they are developed in different ways. Kortesuo (2011, 8-9) uses the words indirectly and directly to describe the formation of reputation and image. A direct experience, on which a view of a brand is based, can be a telephone call, a face-to-face meeting, an e-mail or an interview in the radio or television, but it is always a first-hand experience. An indirect experience is something that has already been filtered by someone else, such as an interview in the newspaper, an edited TV interview or a story told by a friend. Thus, reputation is a view that is formed indirectly of a brand by a target group. Image, on the other hand, is a view that is affected not only by the brand's characteristics that can be experienced indirectly, but also by the actions, reactions and feelings of the target group itself. According to Kortesuo (2011, 10) a personal brand is sometimes defined as the combination of reputation and image, but it is yet a more multidimensional entirety than that.

A personal brand is created in order to become a public representative of a certain field and be able to influence the development and discussion on that field. Finding a job and getting the attention of potential employers in social media is also a focal motive for establishing a personal brand. (Aalto 2010, 28.) Labrecque et al. (2010, 49) say that the ways and objectives of personal branding depend on the phase of life of a person. Morgan (2011, 13) reminds that personal branding is also a tool not only for those who are promoting their know-how to find employment, but also for career management an existing position. This is to say personal branding is not only for those who are looking for recognition in the job market, but also for those who seek to improve their position as professionals at the workplace.

2.1.2 Personal branding

Personal branding, sometimes also referred to as *self-branding* or *self-marketing*, means the effective management of perceptions that others have of you (Rampersad 2008a, 34). Personal branding can also be explained as a process in which an individual separates himself uniquely from all others by pointing out their personal or professional claim of value (Schawbel 2009, 218). According to Shepherd (2005, 589) personal branding, the branding of people, is based on the same marketing and branding tactics that are used for products and companies. Lair et al. (2005, 309) add that the use of these tactics is to facilitate an entrance for professionals to the job market, much like a product is introduced to its particular markets. The term personal branding will be used throughout this thesis and is the most applied of the above-mentioned terms in literature.

To give some more perspective to the subject, it is useful to mention that different types of branding range from consumer branding to retail branding, product branding, corporate branding and through the most recent development, also to personal branding (Lair et al. 2005, 313). It is illustrative to point out, that the term has its roots in the original concept of product and corporate branding. More recently, the concept has extended to the use of ordinary people and their personal, individual brands (Harris & Rae 2011, 16).

As a concept, personal branding touches the field of marketing closely. In the majority of the scientific and non-scientific literature that is available of the phenomenon, business management expert and writer Tom Peters is mentioned as the creator of modern personal branding. The term personal branding was most likely used for the first time by no other than Tom Peters in 1997 in his article *The Brand Called You* (Labrecque et al. 2010, 38; Lair et al. 2005, 308; Morgan 2011, 60; 10; Schawbel 2009, 13; Vitberg 2009). One of Peters' most famous and cited words are "*To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You*" (Peters 1997, 83).

Personal marketing and *image building* are terms that are also in close relation with personal branding. Rampersad (2008a, 34) says that personal branding is, without exception, more than just marketing and promoting oneself. As summarized also by Lair et al. (2005, 308), personal branding is more than a combination of the know-how, experience and interests of a person, it is the way in which they are gathered together as a clear and compact entirety, which is personal brand. Personal branding is largely about communication. Nessmann (2010, 379) describes it as the communication management of individuals. According to Lair et al. (2005, 310), personal branding is, in fact, a communication strategy and Bliss and Wildrick (2005, 9) add that just as in corporate branding, the most important aspect of successful personal branding is the consistency of communication and messages that are conveyed through the brand. Many personal branding activities involve planning, monitoring and maintaining the personal brand, which, in turn, relates closely to public relations (Nessmann 2010, 377). The main concepts of this study and their definitions are summarized in table 1.

Concept	Definition	Source
Brand	A relationship that is based on trust and sharing the same values	McNally & Speak, 2002
	A union of all the information related to a certain service, company or product	Olins, 2003
	Consists of two parts: 1) the externally visible matters, outward appearance or look, 2) a soul, persona, background and history Consists of an individual's strengths and weaknesses.	Sounio, 2010
Personal brand	A combination of all digitally documented online material, which can be connected to a certain person The reputation of a certain person in the context of goal-directed online communication	Aalto & Uusisaari, 2010
	A person experienced by a certain group	Kortesuo, 2011
	Promotes a person, most often by the person himself	Labrecque et al., 2010 Shepherd, 2005
	A view that someone else has of you, reflects your beliefs, what you do and the way in which you do it	McNally & Speak, 2002

Personal branding	A communication strategy	Lair et al., 2005
	Communication management of individuals	Nessmann, 2010
	The effective management of perceptions that others have of you	Rampersad, 2008a
	A process in which an individual separates himself uniquely from all others by pointing out their personal or professional claim of value	Schawbel, 2009
	The branding of people, based on the same marketing and branding tactics that are used for products and companies	Shepherd, 2005

Table 1 Summary of the main concepts and definitions

Kortesuo (2011, 5) claims that in theory, there are only two expert groups who do not need personal branding. First, there are those who are satisfied with their unnoticeable position and do not wish for any more attention regarding their persona or careers. Second, there are those few who are the only experts of their field – although it is possible that another expert enters their field of expertise and then personal branding is again in a pivotal role.

2.1.3 Background, origins and characteristics of personal branding

One of the fundamental factors behind personal branding is the human ability of self-awareness, which enables us to evaluate our experiences but also learn from those of others. Self-awareness enables a person to “see” himself from an outside point of view and examine his characteristics as a sort of a bystander. Without this view, people would be unable to comprehend how they are seen by others. (Covey 2004, 74-75.) Covey (2004, 74) also speaks of “the social mirror”, through which individuals can see themselves as depicted by the opinions and views of others, which also shapes their view of themselves. This type of self-knowledge is the base for successful personal branding practices.

Personal branding has theoretical origins in many disciplines, such as public relations, advertising, marketing, marketing communication, corporate communication and communication management, among others (Nessmann 2010, 377; Lair et al. 2005, 311). There are a few views of when modern personal branding as a concept was formed. Both Shepherd (2005, 590) and Lair et al. (2005, 311) refer to the late 1990’s, when a vast array of self-help literature was published and there was a shift towards more economically uncertain times. Nessmann (2010, 378) points out an earlier phase in the 1980’s, when personality related public relations became a more recognized branch of science. Lair et al. (2010, 311) specify

their view by describing that the formation of personal branding took place during and after the previous economic turndown in the 1990's, because it was a time when both corporate communication and the labor market were facing new challenges and more uncertain and complicated futures as fields. Figuratively, by filling a void between these fields, personal branding enabled its practitioners to stand out from the crowd not only as the experts of their fields but also as potential employees.

Personal branding has in fact existed in different forms for centuries, but only lately has it become a more identifiable and distinguishable concept (Lair et al. 2005, 308). Nessmann (2010, 378) notes that rulers, historically prominent figures and influencers of the business life have always recognized the benefits of attending certain public events, wearing certain clothes, being seen with certain people and saying or writing certain things and how these things would make them appear. Were it not for the rapid emergence of social media, personal branding might not exist as the phenomenon that it is now (Friedman 2015, 42). Before the rise of social media, personal branding has been used for many purposes, in politics, especially during elections, and by celebrities, for example. Representatives, such as politicians, corporate managers and various celebrities, have chosen their words and delivery carefully or provoked their audiences intentionally with their behavior and actions, in order to create a certain image of themselves (Design Week 2010). Now that these activities have been largely transferred to the online world, the settings have changed and skillful individuals with any background have the opportunity and means, at least theoretically, to stand out from the crowd.

Although many scientific articles, such as those by Labrecque et al. (2010, 37), Harris and Rae (2011, 16) and Shepherd (2005, 589), state that marketing in social media is essential to the branding of companies and businesses, its value to personal branding in particular has been covered only scarcely. In fact, branding online for personal purposes has largely gone unheeded in research so far. In this light, the subject of this thesis is interesting and current, because demand for research clearly exists. In the business world the phenomenon has already gained some attention as consultants have started offering advice on personal branding. (Labrecque et al. 2010, 37.) From a researcher's point of view, LinkedIn has been in the forefront of this development.

Harris and Rae (2011, 14) state that nowadays, finding employment and building a successful career requires understanding of online networks and tools and their use. Professionals of certain fields that are seen as social media oriented to begin with, such as communication, information technology, journalism, media, marketing and business professionals, have an edge over many others on the online job market, since they more likely already possess the skills, knowledge and expertise to create a personal brand online. Thus, they have the opportunity to widen their career prospects in a way that marks them

out from others (Harris & Rae 2011, 14). One could generalize, that those who are fluent communicators offline tend to be that also online (Harris & Rae 2011, 20). Elman et al. (2014, 591 - 592) conducted a research on recruitment in LinkedIn and how occupation affects the use of LinkedIn. They found that human resources, sales and marketing were the largest occupational groups in the labor market and consequently also among the users of LinkedIn. They reached the result that these occupational groups also included the professionals that are most searched by employers in LinkedIn. This further implies that some professionals may be more inclined to engage in practicing personal branding than others, already because of the characteristics of their occupation. In other words, engaging in personal branding activities in LinkedIn will likely seem easier and more natural if the practitioner is already accustomed to operating in digital working environments and social media.

Occupational identity, how we see ourselves as representatives of a certain field and profession, has a strong influence especially on the field of communication, where practitioners are often presumed to be active in social media. On certain fields, an expert who does not use social media can be considered unconvincing. That is why one's occupational identity has to be sufficiently developed before establishing a personal brand (Aalto 2010, 50). According to Bliss and Wildrick (2005, 6), consultants and professionals of today do not spend enough time to develop their personal brands and reputations as the experts of their fields. Laine (2014, 3) agrees that personal branding is not used as much as it could or should be, because it is perhaps yet seen as unrewarding extra work or something that is out of the ordinary and thus arouses suspicions.

Personal branding requires special insight, self-knowledge and planning. A personal brand holds no value, if it is not communicated to a chosen target group actively. Both Kortesoja (2011, 7) and Olins (2011, 10) state that a brand in itself is worthless until the target group defines its value. Building a personal brand can be a full-time task, if it is target-oriented and taken seriously. However, seeking employees or employment via networks is nothing new in itself, only the means have changed. Before, suitable personalities and good workers were found, for example, by contacting acquaintances, but now social media offers a whole new range of possibilities both to job seekers and recruiters. (Balk 2013, 16-17.) Although there lie several opportunities in the use of social media, such as LinkedIn, this also sets requirements and expectations for job seekers. Not all of them are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed. Some percentage of job seekers will not use LinkedIn in their job search, but that creates a niche for those who do.

Finnish social media expert Tom Laine considers LinkedIn as the most important service and channel especially for the highly educated in their search for jobs and building their own personal and professional brands. Other popular social media, such as Twitter,

YouTube, Pinterest and Facebook are more about sharing one's interests and their use is more entertainment oriented. Laine also says that particularly in LinkedIn, one's persona and the coverage it gets can be extended and skills can be more efficiently presented than in other social media. This kind of activity is a requirement for professionals of today, but many fields have yet a lot of catching up to do. In the future, recruiting will focus more and more on finding employees whose communication skills and personal brands are strong. (Balk 2013, 17 - 18.)

2.1.4 The darker side of personal branding

Criticism and some of the more negative issues concerning personal branding in social media are not discussed very frequently in scientific articles. Understanding the more challenging areas of personal branding is however important for its practitioners. These areas are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Aalto and Uusisaari (2010, 28) have listed some of the downsides related to personal branding in social media, LinkedIn included. Mostly the pros and cons have something to do with privacy issues and publicity or the lack of it. Publicity can be seen as uncomfortable, especially by those who are not used to it in their professions. Fear of negative feedback or publicity is a concern to many. Some might worry about the negative reactions of their employers', regarding the publicity that personal branding activities might attract. Others can find it difficult to define their target audience for branding activities. One of the most common reasons of not practicing personal branding online or elsewhere is simply the lack of time. (Aalto & Uusisaari 2010, 28.) Personal branding is also often seen as additional workload in the already busy working life and many professionals do not have the resources, time and energy to concentrate on it (Bliss & Wildrick 2005, 6).

According to Vitberg (2009, 10 - 11), creating and maintaining a personal brand has never been easier than now, as social media has equalized personal branding and practically anyone can create a personal brand for themselves. But, although personal branding is seemingly easy to practice, it is not just as simple to harness it to reach a specific goal. Friedman (2015, 45) highlights an noteworthy controversy that concerns the nature of digital environments; as more and more professionals engage in personal branding activities online, it will soon become harder to stand out from the crowd. So, although engaging in personal branding activities is easier than ever, getting noticed is nevertheless getting harder and harder.

Generally, personal branding is spoken of as something that possible for anyone. Friedman (2015, 45) reminds that it is not realistic to presume that everyone has the time or prerequisites to practice personal branding, let alone the access to social media, even if their

attitude towards these was otherwise positive. In addition, personal branding can also produce results that were not anticipated or wanted by the practitioner. Aalto (201, 2009) shares Vitberg's view and says that because social media and platforms like LinkedIn have democratized personal branding, anyone can rise from obscurity to celebrity, but personal branding can fail dramatically, if actions are not carefully planned, skillful and intentional (Aalto & Uusisaari 2010, 109). Nessmann (2010), 382) clarifies, that the failure often results from an unexpected increase in publicity and the lack of competence to handle it, although this mainly concerns those who have practiced personal branding already for longer periods of time.

Rampersad (2010, 24) acknowledges that personal branding activities are at times related to selfishness or egocentricity. Lair et al. (2004, 308) also criticize personal branding and especially the effects it may have on its practitioners. They claim that personal branding seems to be a competition of who can convey the best but not always the most truthful impression of oneself and that this creates distorted competition. Aalto and Uusisaari (2010, 14 - 15) likewise argue that personal branding and being found online as a professional is not about creating a shiny virtual superhuman, but about finding ways for a developing and learning individual to operate online in a target-oriented way. Nessmann (2010, 380) is concerned that personal branding might turn professionals into mere commercial products and the starting points for personal branding may thus become excessively business-oriented. Nessmann continues that the discussion of this downside is alarmingly slight.

Furthermore, Lair et al. (2005, 317 - 318) were concerned that personal branding might also demand too much from individuals. It demands independence, resourcefulness, creativity and aggressive professionalism, self-motivation and self-promoting from individuals who may not all be able to live up to these expectations without exception. The assumed necessity of personal branding is also sometimes validated with a rather intimidating justification. This justification suggests that if individuals choose not to manage their personal brands, someone else will do it for them and the outcome may not always be what was desired. (Shepherd 2005, 590.) According to this view, choosing not to practice personal branding is avoiding responsibility and not taking initiative. From an every-day point of view, this savors strongly of an overstatement.

2.2 LinkedIn - a tool for personal branding

LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) is a social media platform. According to the platform's own description, it is "*the world's largest professional network with more than 400 million members in*

200 countries and territories around the globe” (LinkedIn Corporation 2015). Korteso (2011, 73) describes LinkedIn as a Facebook of professionals, through which experts of different fields can receive recommendations, market themselves, share opinions and materials and get in contact with other professionals. It is possibly one of the best tools for personal branding, considering the recommendation and endorsement functions it offers and how they are visualized for recruiters (Ward & Yates 2013, 101 - 102). Recommendations and endorsements are visible feedback that can both be given and received from others. These testimonials can be determining when they are seen by a recruiter who is looking for suitable job candidates (Harris & Rae 2011, 16).

LinkedIn has its origins in the American culture, but its importance and use have been growing globally during the last few years (Korteso 2011, 73 - 74). There are several types of profiles to choose from in LinkedIn; basic, business, business plus and executive. The basic profile is free of charge and includes the elementary functions needed in the use of the platform. Business, business plus and executive account types are subject to an annual charge and include various additional features. According to my personal experience as a communication professional, a LinkedIn profile is a vivid digital curriculum vitae, which combines bits from the occupational identity and private identity in a new way. According to Aalto (2010, 90), LinkedIn is an archive of professionals to which one should join sooner rather than later in order to increase professional connections.

A LinkedIn profile consists of 22 editable sections. These sections include the user's *name* and a *headline* which indicates the user's current job title. These are followed by the information of the user's *location* and *industry*. The profile also includes a *profile picture* and the user's *contact information*. Kananen (2014, 56) says a LinkedIn profile picture should convey trustworthiness and present the person as realistically as possible. Next in the profile is a *summary*, where the users may describe their accomplishments, goals and missions. The summary section should be a concise abstract which includes everything that is crucial about the LinkedIn user and personal branding practitioner, which will improve the profile's chances of being found among millions of other users (Kananen 2014, 55). The summary is followed by a section which covers the user's *experience* from jobs to voluntary activities. There is also a section for education which should entail information of schools that the user's has attended and other educational information. There are also sections for *recommendations*, *certifications* and *courses*. Recommendations are testimonials that can be requested from other users and displayed in the profile. Certifications can include licenses or clearances the user has attained. The courses section is where information of can be added regarding any coursework that the user has done, in order to highlight important aspect about the user's education. The *honors and awards* section is for presenting acknowledgements that the user has received. *Language skills* and *organizations* that have been a part of the user's career are presented in their own sections. *Patents* and *publications* can be

listed in their own sections. There is also a section that presents *projects* and team members that the user has worked with. The *skills and endorsements* section is important regarding personal branding activities, as it includes all of the user's relevant strengths and skills and visualizes them to others. Other users can choose to verify these skills by endorsing them. The endorsements are displayed in the profile next to each skill. There is a section also for *test scores, volunteer experiences and causes* and finally, for any *additional information* that the users want to share of themselves, such as a date of birth, marital status or what kind of contacts the user is interested in. (LinkedIn Help Center 2015.)

Kananen (2014, 55) says that effective personal branding in LinkedIn starts with creating a complete profile which includes all the relevant search words which enable the LinkedIn user and the profile to be found by others via LinkedIn's own search tool, which is located at the top of LinkedIn's browser view. The whole internet is based on using search words and LinkedIn is no exception. The profile must be genuine and truthful, but the most important factors are how a personal branding practitioner presents his or her information in the profile and whether or not the profile is found in LinkedIn's search results.

Figure 2 shows how and where LinkedIn is situated on the social media and personal branding map (Harris & Rae 2011, 32). The figure illustrates LinkedIn's sector in the personal brand development mix (Vitberg 2009, 10).

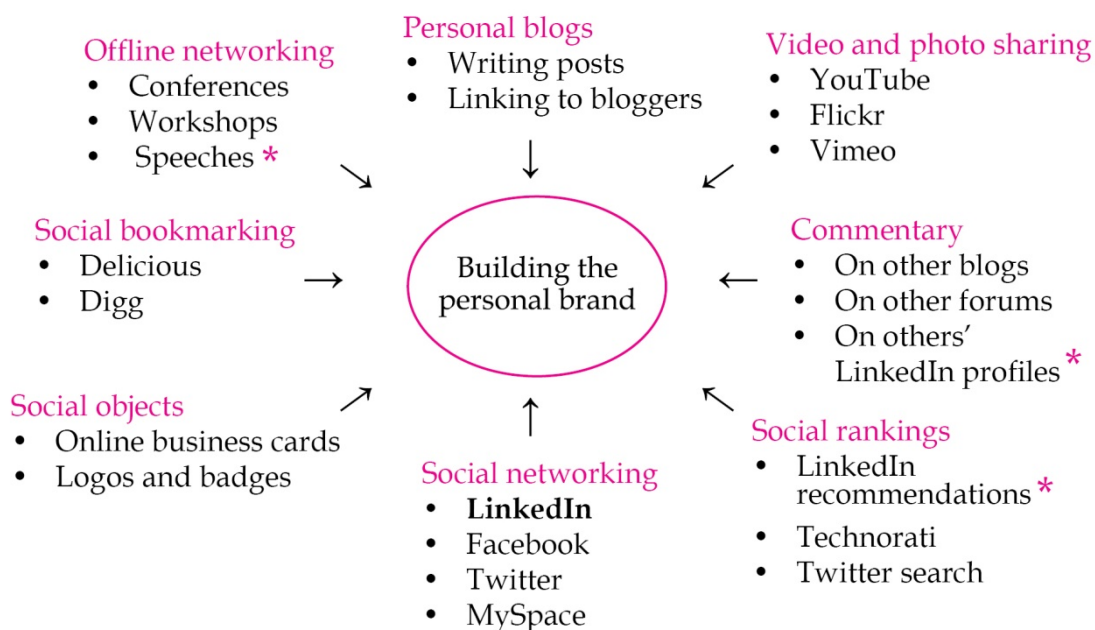


Figure 2 Personal branding map by Harris and Rae (2011, 32), * added to the figure by writer

Personal branding is nowadays easily perceived as something that takes place online, but the importance of offline personal branding is still indisputable. According to Vitberg (2009, 10), personal branding is most effective when both online and offline methods are combined, not replaced by one another. Online personal branding entails profiles and activities on various social media platforms, whereas offline networking is about face to face communication, such as meetings, speeches and conferences as illustrated in figure 1. Friedman (2015, 43) states that most personal branding activities are nowadays concentrated around digital presence and services, especially LinkedIn, but says that successful personal branding is managed in many different environments both online, in social media and offline, at work and in the professional scenery as a whole. Vitberg (2009, 12) likewise emphasizes the importance of finding the right balance between the analog and digital personal branding activities.

Another illustration of LinkedIn's position in the social media mix is Brian Solis' Conversation Prism, which is presented in figure 3 (www.conversationprism.com, 2015). Originally developed in 2008, the prism is a visual compilation of most, if not all, of the existing social media and how they have evolved in the course of time, categorized by their use. The prism consists of four circles which represent constant renewal as each of the circles adds to the next. The prism shows the vast landscape of social media and how LinkedIn is just a part of the social media mix. (www.briansolis.com, 2013.)

The core of the prism represents "You", the user of social media. This means to remind that each social media user should choose user-specific networks that are meaningful and useful particularly to them and that there are also many other social media networks than Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The next layer consists of topics such as vision, purpose, value, commitment and transparency. This layer challenges the viewer to determine a vision for social media, justification for using it, values that are represented and communicated to others, the level of commitment to providing value continuously and lastly, transparency, which refers to open and truthful communication in social media.

The third layer concerns branding, lines of business and corporate functions in social media and divides the prism further into interconnected sectors. (www.briansolis.com, 2013). Here, LinkedIn is situated in to the marketing and business sector and not in to the brand and social networks sector, which raises interesting questions in the context of this research. Social media networks can be understood and categorized in many different ways and thus placing them in a prism is not very straight-forward.

The last circle represents listening, learning and adapting and it highlights the importance of taking target groups into account but not forgetting your own goals in social media ei-

ther. All of these circles are in connection to each other and aim to provide a better understanding of how to use social media effectively. (www.briansolis.com, 2013.)



Figure 3 The Conversation Prism by Brian Solis

A LinkedIn profile consist of different sections and the efficient use of the profile in terms of personal branding is a sum of many things. Tom Laine, a Finnish social media expert, has put together a guide of how to practice personal branding in LinkedIn (Balk 2013, 18). As the most important things Laine lists choosing the profile photo carefully and forming a good headline for the profile, which should tell about the person’s current situation and core know-how. Korteso (2011, 78) also advises that in order to create a personal brand in the online environment, e.g. in LinkedIn, a professional should always use their own name

and have a profile picture that is true to life and identifiable. Using a logo or an illustration instead of a portrait can reduce approachability and credibility. Harris and Rae (2011, 20) also emphasize that authenticity is key in personal branding, as superficial personal brands will not endure time or create trust in an online environment.

One should also select three to five key words that describe one's skills and objectives as well as possible and repeat them in the profile in suitable places. The name and web address of the public profile should be clear and memorable. Joining networks actively and updating the profile are crucial. Repetition of the key words related to one's know-how and skills is highly advisable in the profile. Work experience and former tasks should be explained to the reader of the profile, titles seldom give an impression that is specific enough. All functions of the profile should be taken advantage of as much as possible and statistics, certificates and references or information of clients are excellent material for the profile. If finding employment is the main goal of the LinkedIn profile, it should be stated clearly. Also taking part in LinkedIn discussions and following interesting people is advisable. Laine adds that simple actions are often most valuable, like adding a link to one's LinkedIn profile to a job application. (Balk 2013, 17.)

According to Vick and Walsh (2006, 10) the first step in personal branding through LinkedIn is to make sure that the profile is as complete as possible and includes up-to-date information. An effective LinkedIn profile must be updated often in order to maintain the interest of target groups, such as recruiters, and to convey an impression of active presence. Vitberg (2009, 12) says that anyone who wants to practice personal branding in social media, e.g. in LinkedIn, has to be dedicated to the task by posting, updating and commenting regularly. Updating a LinkedIn profile actively is recommended because it most likely increases profile views and the profile's chances of being included in search results when employers are looking for suitable job candidates (Harris & Rae 2011, 19).

Continuity is very important in personal branding activities (Harris & Rae 2011, 19; Nessmann 2010, 384). A regularly updated profile is a prerequisite for personal branding in LinkedIn. A complete profile is also likely to include key words that recruiters and other target groups will be looking for as they search the network. (Vick & Walsh 2010, 32.) It is equally important that the contents of the profile are grammatically correct. This applies to all fields of profession, since meticulousness is often a sought-after attribute in any professional. As all communication and branding activities, a LinkedIn profile should have the right style and content for its target groups (Harris & Rae 2011, 20). Creating a LinkedIn profile and leaving it to live a life of its own can result in negative personal branding and an out-of-date or unmanaged LinkedIn profile can convey a poor first impression to recruiters or anyone who views it. The pros of personal branding in LinkedIn are reached only by active managing of the profile (Harris & Rae 2011, 17).

Morgan (2011, 14) advises to give value to the very basics when the objective is to convey an image of professionalism. A personal branding practitioner should demonstrate respect for the chosen target audience by engaging in discussions and responding to comments in a considered and comprehensible manner. Even something as basic as the importance of accurate grammar is not to be underrated in personal branding activities. This referred to also by Aaker (1996, 180) who says that any brand requires these continuous activities and active communication that focus on strengthening and reworking it and maintaining a customer relationship. In this context, the customer relationship is formed between the personal branding practitioner and chosen target groups, such as fellow LinkedIn users, that he or she wants to reach via the brand.

Certain qualities are required from a good and effective LinkedIn profile. Harris and Rae (2011, 14) state, that if a personal brand is developed only on a very superficial level, it will not be effective. Authenticity and validity, as well as falsity, are recognized miles away also in social media. Also, the information offered in the LinkedIn profile should be of such nature that it encourages, rather than discourages, potential employers to contact the owner of the profile (Harris & Rae 2011, 20). Harris and Rae (2011, 20) continue, that persevering work and time has to be invested in the building of the profile and it has to be updated often before it starts delivering some results, such as job offers or reference requests.

2.3 Models and other approaches to personal branding

An essential part of personal branding is to understand it widely from many perspectives. A few descriptive models are available, which explain personal branding and how a personal brand is formed. These models, *Authentic personal branding model* and *Brand Identity Planning Model*, will be explained in the following chapters 2.2.1, 2.2.2. and 2.2.3 for a more in-depth understanding of personal branding.

2.3.1 Authentic personal branding model

According to Rampersad (2010, 406), "*People should take control of their brand and the message it sends. This will help them to grow and distinguish themselves as exceptional professionals*". The authentic personal branding model by Rampersad (2008a, 35 - 37) consists of four phases which lead to the creation and forming of a strong, authentic personal brand (see figure 4). The model emphasizes the values and perceptions of a person and helps to project the desired image to a chosen audience in an authentic and truthful manner.

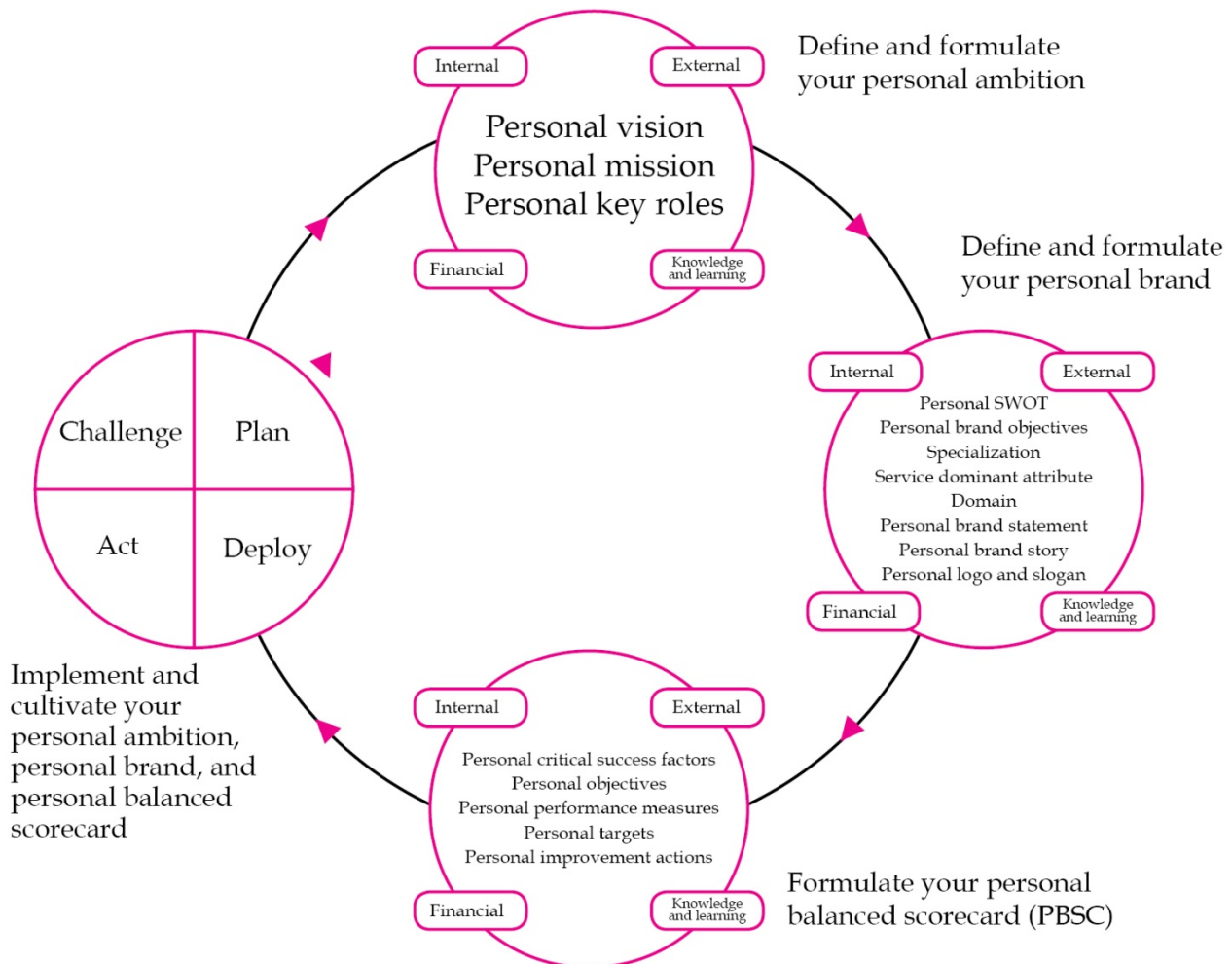


Figure 4 Four phases of the Authentic personal branding model

In the first phase, starting from the top of the figure (see figure 4), personal ambition is defined simply by writing down what makes *you* special and one of a kind, what kind of values you have, who you actually are and what you dream of, in other words, your personal vision, mission and key roles. This is the most critical and founding phase in the development of a personal brand, which defines the success of the whole upcoming personal branding process and is done not only to make these issues visible, but also to enhance self-awareness and self-knowledge. (Rampersad 2010, 403.) Kortessuo (2011, 23) identically states that as the planning of a personal brand commences, one should start simply by listing own strengths, interests, skills and personality traits to find out what their personal brand could include.

The *second phase* of the authentic personal branding model consists of several stages, which altogether form a so called brand promise. A brand promise should be authentic, easy to grasp, well summarized and compelling, much like a headline to a good news story. This convincing, but realistic brand promise will define the person's future actions and behav-

ior and act as a guiding principle. The creation of the brand promise is started by conducting a personal SWOT analysis, during which the person's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are recognized and listed. The SWOT analysis serves as a foundation to the next stages, as it gives further direction to the person's personal brand objectives, in other words, helps to define what the personal brand is meant to accomplish. Based on the same SWOT analysis, the single most central skill, service or area of expertise and central personal characteristic are determined and the main audience for the personal brand is chosen. All of these, including personal ambition that was defined in the first phase, form a personal brand statement. This is taken even further through the next stage, where a brand story is formulated. The brand story should summarize and crystallize main message that the personal brand is expected to convey about the person, in order to create a positive reaction in the chosen audience. Finally, as the last stage of the second phase, a distinguishable personal logo should be created to represent all of these actions and statements. (Rampersad 2010, 404.)

Moving on, the *third phase* of the authentic personal branding model highlights that a personal brand is next to no value if one does not take action to realize and implement it. The tool for this is the Personal balanced scorecard (PBSC), which transforms the personal brand into concrete personal goals by converting personal ambition and personal brand into actions and an action plan as well as into an analyzable and logical form. The PBSC consists of personal critical success factors that are derived not only from the personal ambition and brand but also from personal objectives and personal performance measures, targets and improvement actions. These can be all kinds of activities that the personal branding practitioner uses in order to reach goals and manage the personal brand. (Rampersad 2010, 404; 2008a 36.) The PBSC is simultaneously a tool for organizations that suffer from the lack of employee engagement, which creates unnecessary costs, underperforming and ultimately customer dissatisfaction in companies of all sizes around the world. The PBSC helps organizations to increase employee engagement by adding to the well-being and happiness of employees by offering them a way of thinking which prepares for action and increases inner involvement in work. By using the PBSC an individual employee's personal goals can be aligned with the goals of the organization, which will eventually be turned into improvement in the performance of both. (Rampersad 2008b, 11-12.)

The first three phases were presented in a more straight-forward manner in figure 5. There are four key perspectives that are present in each stage and should be taken into account in each of the phases of the model; internal, external, financial, and knowledge and learning. (Rampersad 2008a, 35.) These perspectives are depicted on the outer edges of each wheel of the model and encourage the personal branding practitioner to view the branding activities from various viewpoints (see figures 4 and 5).

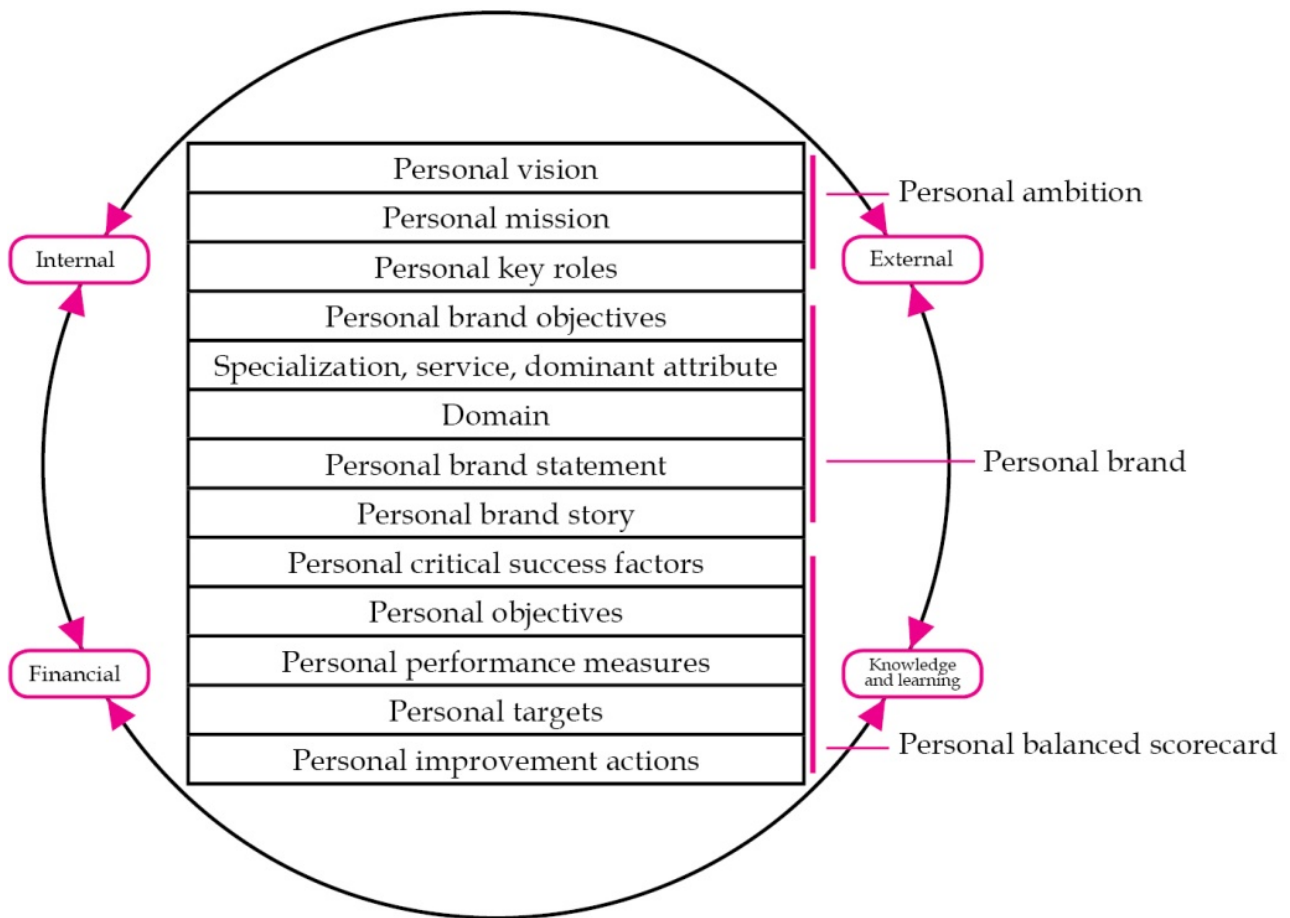


Figure 5 Key perspectives and the stages of creating a personal brand

The *fourth and last phase* of the model offers another tool for the continuous development and implementation of the personal brand in practice. The personal brand that has been created has to be maintained, used regularly and developed through various social media, such as LinkedIn, and other channels. This tool is called the plan-deploy-act-challenge cycle (see figure 3), which should be followed and repeated in order to maintain and develop the brand. This requires many actions, such as choosing the right vocabulary to represent the brand, promoting expertise through the brand, building networks and acting according to the values and promises of the brand.

These four phases can be repeated several times to replenish and fine-tune the personal brand as described in each phase. According to Rampersad (2008a, 37), this holistic model has been put to test and used successfully both by individuals and also companies.

2.3.2 Brand Identity Planning Model

Building a brand is difficult to begin with, regardless of whether it is created for a person or a product. Success is possible if there is enough knowledge of the identity of the brand,

in other words, what the brand stands for and how this can be communicated to others. (Aaker 1996, 35.) Many of the principles of brand management can be applied also to the use of personal branding (McNally & Speak 2002, 28). For example, the brand identity planning model by David A. Aaker (1996, 177) is an extensive tool for forming a brand, which can be modified for the purposes of personal branding.

Somewhat like a communication strategy, the *Brand Identity Planning Model* describes how the brand can and should be communicated to target audiences (Aaker 1996, 176). In the core of the model is the idea, that a brand should be analyzed from four different perspectives. By considering the brand distinctly as a 1) product, 2) organization, 3) person and/or 4) symbol, it gains more scope, accuracy and variety. The four mentioned categories are parts of a brand identity system (see Figure 4), which is a part of Aaker's Brand Identity Planning Model. The complete model is presented in appendix 2. For example, when a brand is regarded as a person, it can be seen to have human-like characteristics, such as a personality. By turning this concept around, in other words, regarding a person as a brand, the brand will then consist of the characteristics and personality of a certain person. This thought pattern sums up the central idea of personal branding and harnesses the methods of more conventional branding also to the use of personal branding (Nessmann 2010, 380).

Aaker (1996, 83) further explains that each person has a unique personality, which characteristics can be listed and turned into a brand and thus the brand identity of a personal brand is much more diverse than one that is based on the qualities of a product, for example. Through these observations, the Brand Identity Planning Model opens wider views for personal branding. For example, Nessmann (2010, 380) produces the use of the 4P's in the context of personal branding. *Product* then includes individual characteristics, *price* stands for the terms of offering professional services, *place* represents an environment, like LinkedIn, in which the personal branding practitioner offers services, and *promotion* is the public relations required by personal branding, such as the use of LinkedIn.

Aaker (1996, 178) stresses, that it is not invariably necessary to use all of the four categories in all cases; instead, the most suitable category should be chosen for each purpose at hand. In terms of pin a personal branding, considering the brand as a person is quite an obvious and natural choice of the four categories. With some modifications, the other three categories of the model (brand as product, brand as organization and brand as symbol) can possibly be used for understanding and finding perspectives for personal branding as well. In the Brand Identity Planning Model, the identity of a brand is constructed of a core identity and an extended identity as seen in figure 6. The core identity represents the things that will most likely stay the same about the brand, regardless of the passage of time or changes in its environment. The success of the brand is dependent mainly on these charac-

teristics. As for the extended identity, it entails elements which complete or support the core identity. The larger the extended identity, the stronger and more appealing to target audiences the brand becomes. (Aaker 1996, 178.) The complete Brand Identity Planning Model is presented in Appendix 2.

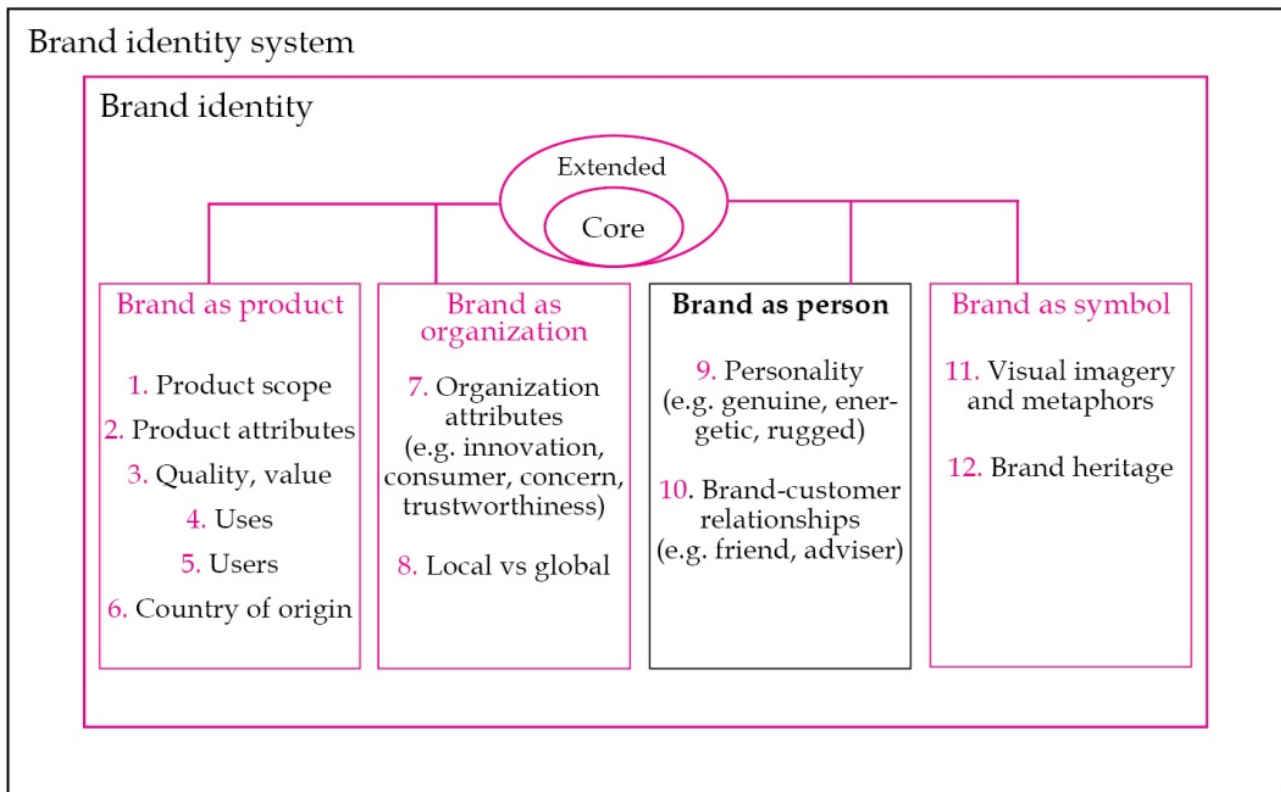


Figure 6 Brand identity system in Aaker's Brand Identity Planning Model

2.3.3 Other approaches

According to Korteso (2011, 23) a personal brand goes through five phases during its life cycle. The first phase is *planning*, the second is *creating and customization*, the third is *maintaining through renewal*, the fourth is *changing* and the fifth is *ending*. This is to say, that anyone who is planning to create a personal brand should start by recognizing their strengths and interests, good qualities and characteristics, areas of expertise, target groups, which channels to use and how to stand out from other personal brands. Once this basis exists, communication and networking in the selected channel, such as LinkedIn, is begun by creating a user profile, making connections and taking part in select, relevant conversations. And, a personal brand will not remain unchanging. Instead, its style and appearance and the opinions and expertise it represents change and evolve, just like the person behind them. The last phase, the ending of a personal brand, is somewhat open to interpretations, because a personal brand cannot just be "shut down". However, it can be terminated by

active communication to its audience, regarding the reasons of the termination, such as a change of professional field or retiring from working life, as examples. (Kortesuo 2011, 23.)

There are also more universal standpoints regarding the definition of personal branding. According to Khedher (2015, 20) personal branding is a process like any other, with chosen methods and expected results. Sounio (2010, 63), claims that theories are overrated in the general discussion regarding personal branding and gives more importance to the use of common sense and reasoning. Rather than being based on a theory, it is more important for a personal brand to be based on the true characteristics of a person. Sounio does not clearly differentiate personal branding from any other types of branding or even from marketing. From a research point of view, this approach presents itself as rather problematic and disconcerting. Either way, Sounio (2010, 61) settles for stating that like publicity, a brand cannot be controlled, but it can be brought to light in an interesting, useful and appealing way.

Before initiating any personal branding efforts, a personal branding practitioner must create a digital embodiment, or in other words, an online identity. In order to have a presence and the ability to act online, one has to have a recognizable point of reference, a platform, which enables communicating with others in the network. A LinkedIn profile is a good example of such a platform. One person can have several online identities depending on the goals of operating online and how much of their privacy they want to maintain. Online activities can be performed by a person as himself or anonymously by using an alias or a pseudonym. Usually, the online identity that is used for personal branding and professional purposes is very close to one's so called "real life" or offline identity and the person appears in his or her own name. A username or an e-mail address is a tangible manifestation of an online identity. (Aalto & Uusisaari 2010, 17.) This applies to LinkedIn as well any other social media platform.

In the modern society, the merging of working life and free time is becoming more and more common, not only in the offline world but also in online environments. Operating online on behalf of an employer is not unusual. Consequently, it is important to consider which things are said as a representative of an organization and which as a private person. In addition to a working life online identity and a personal, free time online identity, there is also a third, intermediary option, a professional online identity (see figure 7). The working life online identity is for representing an organization on behalf of an employer. The private online identity is strictly personal and unattached to working life. It is also possible to create a separate, professional online identity which includes a personal brand, around the two above-mentioned identities. (Aalto & Uusisaari 2010, 19.)

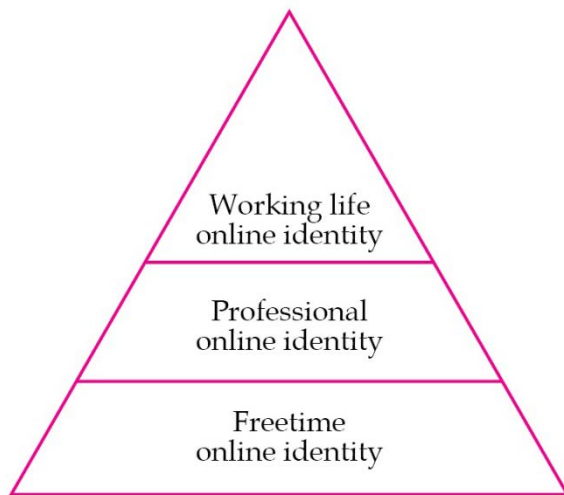


Figure 7 Three levels of online identity by Aalto and Uusisaari

LinkedIn is clearly intended for professional uses. Compared to other social media platforms, such as Facebook, it thus enables its users to draw a somewhat clearer line between working life and free time. This makes it a favorable base for developing a personal brand for professional purposes. (Aalto & Uusisaari 2010, 18.)

The background and demographics of a person often define which identity she or he adopts. Those who have been in working life for a long time may have a working life online identity but not a personal, free time online identity. Correspondingly, those who are newer to working life may have a personal, free time online identity, but not much of a working life online identity. Professional online identities are still seen less frequently in online environments, but they are becoming more common on almost all fields of profession. (Aalto & Uusisaari 2010, 21.)

Vitberg (2009, 13) suggests that there should be at least five fundamental parts in the planning and marketing of personal brand. These parts should entail both online and offline activities. The *first* of these is a personal branding statement, which should summarize to others, in a very concise and simplistic manner, the person's main know-how and what she or he stands for. *Second*, there should be a personal branding strategy, which, in practice, means conducting a SWOT analysis of the person, but also acquiring resources that are needed in the digital environment, such as a domain name and choosing the online platforms that are going to be used and that are used also by target groups. Ward and Yates (2013, 102) suggest that the use of the 4P's (Product, Price, Place and Promotion) can also be beneficial for beginning professionals and personal branding practitioners, because it is a useful tool both in terms of recognizing skills and strengths in general but also as a means of personal branding. The *third* part is about setting goals for personal branding. The goal can be getting a job or becoming known amongst fellow professionals.

The *fourth* stage is choosing the tactics of personal branding which should include both analog and digital activities in a good balance regarding the goals. This is the stage where the personal branding practitioner should join social media platforms like LinkedIn, create a profile and engage in interaction with the wanted target groups in online conversation. According to Ward and Yates (2013, 102), participating in discussions and commenting on others in a professional network can be determining regarding the next career opportunity. Professionals who are less accustomed to frequent face-to-face communication may find the digital environment more hospitable for social activities. As for beginning professionals, it is important to give value also to analog conversations in personal branding, whereas experienced professionals should add digital means into their personal branding activities (Vitberg 2009, 129). Morgan (2011, 14) reminds that establishing a LinkedIn profile is not an achievement as such, but making it visible to others by ongoing communication in the platform is. The *fifth* part is monitoring and reflecting on the results that these personal branding activities have achieved. Vitberg thus implies that the process of personal branding requires constant awareness and ongoing activities.

3 RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA

The research method that was used in this research is *netnography*. Netnography is an observational, descriptive and analytical method for qualitative research. (Earley et al. 2014, 3-4.) The name of the method combines the words internet and ethnography and it is especially oriented to the research of social media and its dynamic, ever-changing environments (Kananen 2014, 17). It is a technique that is meant for the cultural analysis of data that can be found in online communities (Belk et al. 2013, 108; Earley et al. 2014, 3). Belk et al. (2013, 106) continue, that netnography gives a common language, norms and comprehension for research practices. The method was described in more detail in the next chapter.

3.1 Netnography - ethnography goes online

Netnography is a relatively new research method. It has developed directly from ethnography, which further has its roots in anthropology. The themes of anthropologic research stem from understanding the deeper essence of cultures, communities and people. Both anthropology and ethnography have the same objectives, but their targets for research vary. First, anthropology studied the far, unknown cultures, but soon the areas and subjects of research could be found nearer to the researcher. Anthropology was then replaced with more modern ethnography. In ethnography, fieldwork and being where the research target is became increasingly important for the researcher, because it offered a possibility for deeper understanding of the research subject. More recently the new variation, online ethnography, better known as netnography, has emerged. Netnography as research method has developed during the last two decades at the same time with the progress of digitalization and rise of social media, as cultures and activities are moving into online environments. (Kananen 2014, 15 - 17.)

Netnography is in many ways similar to ethnography, as both methods study manifold cultural environments and research subjects are approached in their own surroundings (Earley et al. 2014, 3-4). However, compared to traditional ethnography, netnography can be a more economical and time saving research method, as research activities such as interviews and travelling are less required (Belk et al. 2013, 83). Unlike conventional ethnography, netnography also calls for knowledge and experience of computer-mediated communications and operating in online spaces (Earley et al. 2014, 4).

Netnography may also be referred to as *cyber-ethnography*, *virtual ethnography* or *online ethnography*. Scaramuzzino (2012, 42) outlines that in most cases, all of these refer to a more undefined and ambiguous approach to ethnography that is practiced in the internet and that does not involve a specific method. In comparison with these, the netnography that is referred to in this research is somewhat different. Netnography has been developed through the contribution of such fields as consumer research and marketing, but today it is used more commonly also in many other fields of research. Netnography is based on a particular method and netnographic researches can be seen to include certain common phases. Nevertheless, both Scaramuzzino (2012, 42) and Earley et al. (2014, 4) find that netnography is still also a relatively free-form approach because of the several methods that can be chosen to accompany it.

Using netnography as a research method benefits from understanding the difference between offline and online interaction. For example, as this research was conducted in the online environment instead of organizing face-to-face interviews in an offline environment, it was not possible for the researcher to confirm observations that were made by questioning interviewees and following their reactions (Kananen 2014, 118). Instead, the phenomenon was studied by gathering the amount of data was needed in order to understand the phenomenon as fully as possible. In addition, interaction itself is changed in an online environment, because it is affected by different rules and customs than offline or face-to-face communication. There are certain regulations and rules of etiquette or “netiquette” that apply to conversations in social media communities, certain language and abbreviations are used. (Belk et al. 2013, 106 – 107.) In LinkedIn, the language that is used reflects working life. The discussions and posts are mainly factual and emoticons or smileys are used sparingly, compared to Facebook, for example. Another difference is that unlike in the offline world and face-to-face communication, interaction in social media can be anonymous. This can prevent the researcher from acquiring information of users, as they can choose not to share their demographics. However, platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook, for example, are favorable sources of data for researchers because they encourage and advice their users to appear and operate with real names and identities in the online environment.

Compared to ethnography, netnography has also increased the accessibility of online research fieldsites and the massive amounts of research-worthy data they contain. The limitations of geography and time can be overcome in online environments and participation in online communities is largely unrestricted or requires only simple registration. Finally, data is archived automatically in the online environments and lots of information is saved into a digital format right after it has been formed as postings, conversations and updates. This means that researchers no longer have to collect the data themselves to the extent that it was necessary before. (Belk et al. 2013, 107; Earley et al. 2014, 5.) The netnographic research process itself does not differ from that of an ethnographic research. They are both forms of qualitative research, netnography being the more modern version of the two. The only difference between these two is the location of the subject that is studied. In netnography, this location is the internet and social media, which is notably different from the so called "real-life" or offline surroundings of traditional ethnographic research. In netnography, the researcher is not required to travel anywhere from in front of the computer screen to reach the field site. (Kananen 2014, 96.)

Netnography is not just about collecting data as in a traditional cultural approach, it also requires a significant amount of interpretation (Belk et al. 2013, 83). Netnographic research requires that the analysis of data and observations related to the research subject are based on the data as it is found in an online environment and seen through the eyes of a member of this social online community. This enables the researcher to participate in the online community and experience it as one of its members. In fact, the researcher's participation in the online culture is important in a netnographic research. (Earley et al. 2014, 10 - 16.) Having been a relatively active member of LinkedIn since the 18th of June 2010, I have gained understanding of the platform's functions, customs and purposes of use that are required in the conducting of this research. According to the requirements of netnographic research, this personal experience and time spent in the virtual locations of the research subject also add to the reliability of this research (Kananen 2014, 182). Belk et al. (2013, 109) advise that while conducting a netnographic research, the researcher should participate in the online community at the same level as its other members and according to what seems to be appropriate in that particular online community. According to my own experience as a LinkedIn user, the same code of conduct applies there as in working life in general. LinkedIn is not as informal as Facebook and members do not expect to read about the everyday life of others, but seek to find and share content that is professionally relevant, useful and interesting.

Some uncertainties are related to netnography as a research method. Usually they concern the subject of the research itself, meaning that the studied phenomenon may yet be rather uncharted (Kananen 2014, 97). For example, in the beginning of this study, it was not possible to define exactly which community and members were going to be under scrutiny

and to which extent and also, which data was going to be gathered, but these issues were resolved in rather interesting ways as the research progressed and the subject and became more familiar to me. For instance, the data for this research was found by first conducting various test searches with LinkedIn's search tool. After experimenting with such search word combinations as "communication personal branding" and "LinkedIn personal brand", the search words "personal branding LinkedIn" finally generated the best and most relevant data regarding the subject of this research. Only after that it became possible to take a closer look at who had written these posts and which views and professions they represented. The search words were entered into the search tool exactly as mentioned above, without any punctuation marks or additional words. Quotation marks were included. The search words were selected by choosing words that describe what is sought (writings of personal branding in LinkedIn) as accurately as possible, but without ruling out any potentially interesting or relevant research data.

Netnography was chosen as the research method for this study because it is especially designed for the analysis of online and social media content, such as the postings and text contents of LinkedIn. Netnography was a natural choice, because it helps to clarify how LinkedIn users perceive personal branding based on the postings that discuss the subject in LinkedIn. Paired with content analysis, ethnography can reveal what members of an online community think about certain issues and what their attitudes is towards certain topics are. The method can indicate many different characteristics of online communities through the data that is viewed and, in a way, also experienced by the researcher (Belk et al. 2013, 106).

3.2 The research data

According to Earley et al. (2014, 3) the environments of social media are recognized as important sources of qualitative research data and they provide what seems to be an almost endless archive of information for the use of various research purposes. This is both an advantage and a disadvantage, because on one hand, the researcher has access to rich and multifaceted information, but on the other hand, can also be overwhelmed by an oversupply of information (Earley et al. 2014, 79).

In netnography, the collection of data is commonly called data mining, which encompasses the gathering, analyzing and sorting of research data (Belk et al. 2013, 93). According to Liu (2008, 6), data mining aims to find usable knowledge from websites, text files or databases. Data mining is often used to gather large amounts of naturalistic, uncategorized data, which represents what is real and lifelike and has been formed without any

particular management. It is a process of creating and making sense of information, where possibly large amounts of data are reorganized into comprehensible and useful information. (Belk et al. 2013, 95.)

The data for a netnographic research usually rises from the observations of the researcher (Earley et al. 2014, 4). The data for this research was collected from LinkedIn by using the platform's own search tool. The aim was to gather postings which were written and published in LinkedIn by professionals of different fields and which discuss personal branding in LinkedIn. In this research a *posting* refers to an article which has been written and published in LinkedIn by a professional who uses LinkedIn. The search for the data was conducted in LinkedIn on the 6th of November 2015 and the search included all postings within the time frame from "one year ago" to "now". The search was further refined by choosing only posts as search results. The search words that were used were "Personal branding LinkedIn" and this search resulted in altogether 37 posts. According to Earley et al. (2014, 6), a netnographic research data must include a sufficient amount of messages or postings in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena that is studied.

In order to gather the data together, all 37 postings were copied and pasted into a Microsoft Word document by hand. This is a very common technique for recording online data in a netnographic research (Earley et al. 2014, 11). The same elements of each of the postings were copied; the name and title of the writer, the title of the posting and the body text. Any pictures or illustrations that might have been included were also removed from the data so that what remained consisted only of text. Including pictures in the data would have complicated and lengthened the analysis of the research data excessively. Furthermore, if there were comments in the postings, they were not included in the data. These exclusions were made in order to prevent the research data from becoming too large as compared to the resources of the research. Earley et al. (2014, 22) recommend limiting the amount of data to only what is necessary in a netnographic research, especially when the data set is analyzed by hand, so that the completion and objectives of the research are not jeopardized by data overload. In the research data of this research, the length of the postings varied from one to even seven sides.

To be clear, all of the postings were written and published in LinkedIn by LinkedIn users, in other words, professionals of different fields. The professionals that this research refers to are experts of media and communication, marketing, management, IT and social media research. Some have the title of career and personal branding expert. Of the total of 18 professionals whose postings were used as research data, nine (9) were men, seven (7) were women and one posting did not include information of the writer's gender. However, gender was not a relevant factor in this research. The professionals were of nine (9) differ-

ent nationalities from all over the world. US citizens formed the largest group, the division between other nationalities was more even. The division of professionals into different nationalities is presented in more detail in chart 8. The division shows that personal branding is a recognized and known phenomenon across the world, not only in the United States and Europe.

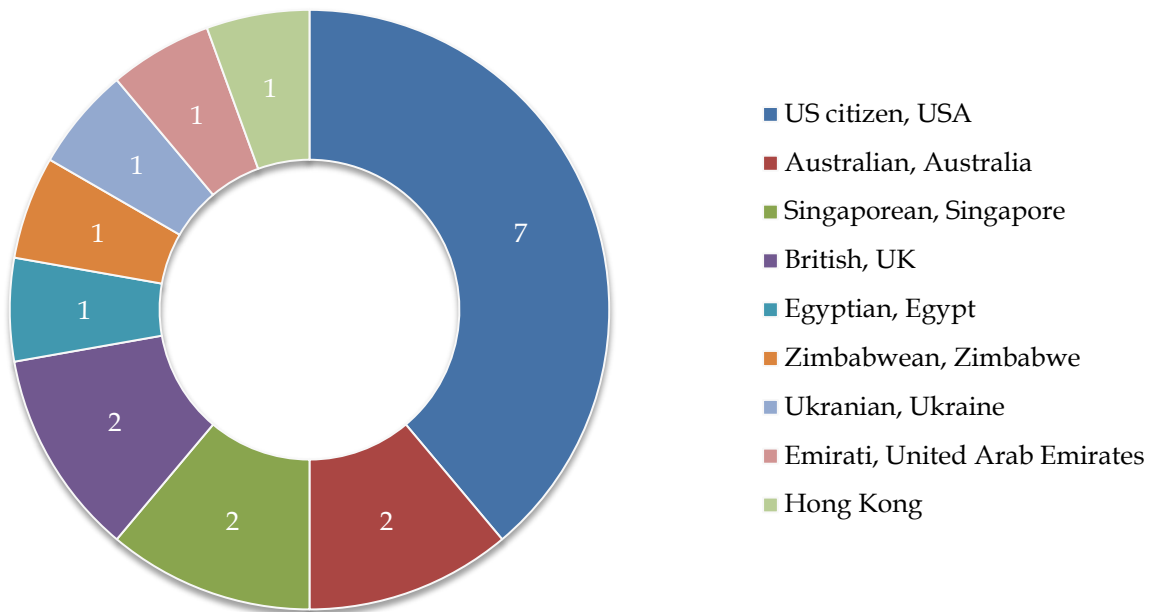


Chart 8 Division of professionals into nationalities

After gathering all of the data together, irrelevant and unusable parts that did not concern personal branding were further excluded from it. In total, fourteen (14) posts were discarded from the research data. The contents of eight posts were not relevant in regards to the research subject, as one of them discussed women's standings in working, two presented ways of landing new businesses in networking events, two were teasers for a social media conference, one concerned the planning of meetings, one was an agenda for an online symposium and one gave technical advice on connecting with others. Four posts were discarded due to language reasons, as two of them were written in Italian, one in French and one in Polish. One post occurred in the search results three times, but was naturally included in the data only once. After these exclusions, the research data finally comprised of a total of 23 postings which equaled a total of 42 sides of text. These 23 postings were published in LinkedIn by altogether 18 different professionals. This is due to three professionals having two postings in the research data.

Next, the research data was read through multiple times to get a good perception of the subjects and perceptions that were entailed in it. A profound familiarization to the data revealed that certain themes kept occurring repeatedly and continuously in the data.

These themes were then named and the occurrences of each theme were marked into the text with different, distinctive colors. These themes were further specified as this thematizing proceeded. Finally, six different themes were recognized and titled as follows:

1. Perceptions of personal branding
2. Perceptions of what a personal brand is
3. Perceptions of the LinkedIn platform as tool of personal branding
4. LinkedIn profile and its role in creating and maintaining a personal brand
5. The “dos” and “don’ts” of personal branding in LinkedIn
6. Profile pictures and their effects on personal branding

These themes were formulated based on the observation that they appear clearly and repeatedly in the research data and were also mentioned in the theories of this research. As said, the themes were used to arrange the research data into categories, or in other words, thematized. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, 93) thematizing means the classification of what is said about given themes in a research data. In thematizing, the data is divided and grouped into selected topics and the idea is to search and mark perceptions that describe the themes that are used. This way it is possible to study, for example, the differences and similarities that are found in the research data. In this study, thematization aided the processing and investigating the contents of the research data. It also helped to recognize the relevant parts from the research data, which would best describe the perceptions that professionals have of personal branding in LinkedIn. In the course of the thematizing, the parts that could not be categorized under any of the themes were ruled out of the data. For example, parts of the data were excluded, if they were considered unnecessary or irrelevant in regard to the whole and the objectives of the research.

3.3 Analysis of the research data

Generally in qualitative research, the analysis of research data can be either data- or theory-driven (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 95). In this research, however, the analysis of research data falls in to the middle ground of data-driven and theory-driven analysis and is thus what is called a *theory-bound analysis*. The theory-bound analysis model is a form of qualitative content analysis. Theory-bound analysis of research data is guided by (but not directly based on) a certain theory or theories, but the connection to theory is observable and noticeable. Also according to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009, 96), theory-bound analysis is not in direct connection with the theories that are presented in a research, but the theories are used to support the progress of the analysis and the observations and interpretations that are made within it. In theory-bound analysis, themes for the analysis are selected based on what is found in the research data, but the prior information that is gained from theories

guides and helps the analysis and the definition of these themes. The effects of this prior information can be recognized in the analysis, but the purpose is not to test a theory but to use it to clear the path for new thoughts. The analysis that is conducted in this research and the observations that are made within it are based on these leading thoughts.

The theory-bound analysis model allows the research data to be gathered quite freely. The logic of theory-bound analysis is based on what is called abductive reasoning, where the researcher's thought process circulates back and forth between the research data and the theories of the research. The researcher aims to combine these two together creatively and, at times, even by forcing. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 96 - 97.) In the core of this analysis method is finding explanations and confirmations for the interpretations that are made from the research data. The method can, at its best lead, to interesting, new and unexpected results. As mentioned above, the theory-bound approach to research data is also called abductive reasoning and it is often used in studies that seek to describe people's experiences of given phenomena (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 97). In the context of this research, the theory-bound approach is used to combine and compare theory and previous information of personal branding with what is found in the research data.

Theory-bound analysis is not discussed in the American research tradition, but the starting point of it is largely the same as in grounded theory, or in other words, data-driven analysis. The difference between a data-driven and theory-bound analysis is that in the first mentioned, the theoretical concepts are created from the research data, whereas in the latter, they exist based on what is already known of the phenomenon at hand. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 117.)

The analysis of the research data that follows, starting from chapter 4.1, reflects the theories and models of personal branding to the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of professionals that emerge from the research data. This reflection is done in order to point out the similarities, differences and contradictions between the theories and perceptions of personal branding. In practice, the analysis was done by interpreting the contents and meaning that are found in the research data and by organizing the contents further into entities that discuss the subject from the same perspective. The analysis is divided into six themes which present the combination of personal branding and LinkedIn through different angles. These themes were presented in chapter 3.2. The themes and what they include partly overlap each other, but that is only to be expected as personal branding in LinkedIn is an entirety that consists of many intertwined parts. Each posting will be referred to with a number. The details regarding each posting, its headline, the title of the writer and a link to each posting, can be found in appendix 1 in a numerical order.

The netnographic research method requires the researcher to make observations and document them during the different stages of the research as it proceeds (Earley et al. 2014, 15). In this research, notes were taken of the observations that were made during the course of the research, starting from the gathering of data in LinkedIn and also during the analysis, which was begun simultaneously.

In netnographic research, the analysis of research data begins already when the data is gathered by writing down or otherwise documenting observations. Earley et al. (2014, 10) advise that a researcher should also participate in the netnographic research in its field site, for the sake of experiencing what it is like to be a member of the online community that is studied. The participation should add or give something to the community, in the form of comments or postings, for example. Also according to Kananen (2014, 195), a netnographic research needs to form a connection to the natural environment of the phenomenon that is studied.

In this study, participation in the field site was carried out by commenting each of the 23 LinkedIn postings that were used as research data. Commenting the postings in LinkedIn made it easier to tune into the atmosphere and context of the field site and deepened the understanding of the research data. According to Kananen (2014, 97) this kind of *participatory observation* is the minimum requirement of netnography. According to Silverman (2006, 403), participatory observation (or participant observation) is a technique which is based on the thought that understanding a phenomenon requires not only observing but also participating in the environment where the phenomenon occurs. The comments added value also to the environment that was studied by activating discussion and thus drawing attention not only to the postings but also to the professionals who most likely had written and published them with the intention of promoting their own personal brands. The comments included a view or opinion of the main subject of each posting and often a reference to the reason why the comment was made, such as the ongoing study of the subject and general interest in the personal branding phenomenon.

All of the comments can be viewed through the links to the postings that are presented in appendix 1. In LinkedIn, the comments are located in the end of each posting, in the comments section. These comments to the postings were not included in the research data, but the observations that were made during the commenting have been included in chapter 4.1 which discusses the observations that were made during the participation in the field site.

3.4 Elaboration on research choices

Netnographic research should be concentrated on one selected site and focused on smaller rather than larger amounts of data, because that assists in reaching a more profound view of the activities in the given environment (Earley et al. 2014, 15). The scope of this study was limited by choosing LinkedIn as the target environment. This research aims to examine personal branding exclusively from a professional point of view, which made LinkedIn the most logical choice for a research target. Choosing LinkedIn as the target environment also helped to narrow down and define the objectives and goals of in a logical manner.

The data that was used in this research was *naturally occurring data*. It means that the data has been formed in situations which have taken place without the contribution or influence of a researcher (Silverman 2006, 403). The data of this research already existed in LinkedIn before the research was begun and unlike in the case of data that is collected through interviews or surveys, this data and its formation were not influenced by the researcher. Silverman (2006, 144) says that naturally occurring data is considered particularly neutral, highly representative and unbiased because it has not been interfered by a researcher. In this research the choice to use naturally occurring data was proven good, because the data not only offered sufficient answers to the research questions but also enabled the discovery of some unexpected and interesting results.

LinkedIn is an excellent source of information when it comes to personal branding and was chosen as the target community for this source for a number of reasons. First, Morgan (2011, 14) says recruiters increasingly choose LinkedIn as the first source of information while looking for suitable job candidates and vice versa. Second, according to Ward and Yates (2013, 101) employers and recruiters use platforms like LinkedIn to research the background of the person they are considering for a position. These aspects make LinkedIn an important platform for the practitioners of personal branding and job seekers, not forgetting researchers of the subject.

3.5 Ethical issues

Ethics is one of the more complicated issues related to the practice of netnography. The method requires the researcher to be aware of the possible positive or negative consequences that can follow from the research to an online community. The names and other personal data that emerge in the research data must be protected when it is necessary. In principle, when posts or texts have been published online, they become public content and

can be used as research data. However, the researcher still has to consider the ethical matters regarding quoting from online sources. Using the real-life, offline names of persons in a research or the analysis of research data can cause them to appear in unanticipated contexts in online search results after the research is published. (Earley et al. 2014, 13 - 14.) For example, the names of the LinkedIn users who have published the posts that are used as data in this research do not need to be revealed, because they are not essential information regarding this study or its goals. This creates an interesting collision between personal branding and the ethics of netnography, as personal branding actually aims to make its users appear more often in various online search results rather than hide their identities from additional publicity. On the other hand, it is not the intention of this study to promote the writers' personal brands by revealing their names. But, as the theories and research of personal branding confirm, personal branding can have unexpected effects, also on matters of privacy. Many of the posts that were included in the research data appear to be published as personal branding measures for their writers themselves, which further complicates this equation. This implies that the practitioners of personal branding cannot always anticipate the effects their measures can cause.

Ethical issues in this study are not only related to the conducting of the research but also to personal branding itself. On the negative side, personal branding is at times considered as self-admiration. Friedman (2015, 45) directs weighty criticism towards personal branding and argues that creating a built identity seems false and may take an individual farther away from an authentic, "real-life" identity. This is a view that should be taken seriously, although it somewhat fails to appreciate the judgment of sophisticated professionals who, in principle, are able to acknowledge and respect the difference between true and false. Ward and Yates (2013, 101) argue that regardless of this critical view, those who are able to bring forth their best qualities truthfully will often receive interesting responsibilities and opportunities in working life.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Notes and observations from along the way

In order to characterize the data that was found in this research in general, it can be said that the quality of the posts and their contents varied quite a lot. The nature of the postings ranged from expert opinions to personal views and interviews. It was notable already in the data gathering phase that many of the posts were likely written to serve as personal branding measures for the writers themselves. To be clear, the terms *professional(s)*, *LinkedIn user(s)* and *writer(s) of the postings* were used as synonyms in this research and throughout this thesis, they all referred to the professionals whose writings, in other words, LinkedIn postings, were used as research data in this research.

Beginning the gathering of the research data brought up questions, as there was no way of telling in advance how personal branding would actually present itself in LinkedIn and whether the same topics and perceptions would arise in the postings as in the theoretical models and background. The perceptions of personal branding could have differed from what is suggested in the theories or none might have been available at all. One of the first observations was that the amount of postings concerning personal branding in LinkedIn was lower than expected, given the relatively vast attention that the phenomenon has received. Nevertheless, the headlines of the postings, such as *Electrify Your Personal Brand in Your LinkedIn Summary*, *Personal branding: how to attract recruiters?*, *7 tips to developing your personal brand* and *Boost Your Personal Brand by LinkedIn* implied that useful and relevant research data was available within.

It was also among the very first observations, that some of the postings seemed to be strikingly professional and knowledgeable regarding personal branding in LinkedIn. This is not to say that the expectations of the amount of knowledge that professionals had of personal branding would have been low. On the contrary, it was obvious that LinkedIn users

were aware of personal branding, but the high level of insight that they had of the phenomenon was an important and informative discovery. However, some professionals seemed to discuss the more detailed matters surrounding the subject, such as the use of photographs in LinkedIn as tools of personal branding and how they would affect the personal brand that was created.

It was also noted that all of the postings were not as presentable as others, due to copious grammatical and spelling errors, deficiencies in text flow and consistency as well as the occasional lack of foreign language skills, as some of the writers seemingly used English as a second language. These are factors that can hinder personal branding activities by giving an unprofessional impression of the professional and LinkedIn user. Although the overall appearance of the postings and their contents was quite professional and informed, there were parts in the research data that brought up a sense of amateurism in the manner of how personal branding was discussed in the postings. This became evident for a number of reasons already while the data gathered. *First*, the advice that was given by various professionals was largely not based on proven facts. All along the line, referrals to scientific articles or sources were not used in the postings. Although the postings were meant to be tips from one LinkedIn user to another, advice on such an individual matter as personal branding should still have been well-founded and checked. *Second*, the postings included what could be described as rather informal lists of tips and self-help-style instructions regarding personal branding in LinkedIn. *Third*, in some postings grammatical errors stole attention from the message itself. The language that was used was not most convincing and savored of commercial text that is sometimes utilized in the contexts of marketing or advertising. Furthermore, it was noticeable in the early stages of the data gathering, that some of the postings were written in a sort of a “how-to” style, meaning that they shared “Tips and tricks” or “Do’s and don’ts” of personal branding in LinkedIn. This, at least in the mind of a researcher, referred to a somewhat American way of presenting information in a particular, marketing-oriented manner.

As the data gathering proceeded, it became clear that the data would offer interesting information of the perceptions, opinions and experiences that professionals have of personal branding as LinkedIn users. The data represented a whole array of views and opinions. It described how the writers of the postings perceived personal branding, how they felt about it and also what their observations and learnings of personal branding in LinkedIn have been. This was something that was not offered by theories or models of the subject. Another observation was that on one hand, LinkedIn users are eager to promote and applaud the platform in their postings, but on the other hand, they also warn beginners of “rookie mistakes” and give advice to fellow LinkedIn users on how to avoid certain minefields while using the platform for personal branding activities.

LinkedIn is a social medium, which made it seem peculiar that there were so few comments in the postings. Occasionally there were clear invitations to discuss the posting in the comments section below, but regardless of this, the conversation mainly remained quite scarce. The comments were not included in the research data, but again, there was not very much to leave out. This brought the research back to what Aaker (1996, 180) stated about the importance on engaging in discussions in order to practice successful personal branding and revealed an inconsistency between theories and the actual personal branding that is practiced in LinkedIn. The postings that were able to bring about comments were well-written, offered interesting or new views of personal branding and often included personal views and experiences. This further confirmed the claim that personal branding in LinkedIn requires a strong presence and consistent activities to achieve success.

Regardless of the mostly positive nature of these observations, it is not justified to go as far as saying that personal branding was a fully comprehended entirety. On the whole, the data reflects that personal branding is still a rather new phenomenon, but a general and superficial understanding does exist. In other words, there is not yet a lot of deeper understanding or very vast experience of how it should be practiced in LinkedIn. These observations lead the research to further analysis, which will take place in the next six chapters. The analysis was started in the next chapter 4.2 by presenting and analyzing the perceptions that the professionals had of personal branding.

4.2 Perceptions of personal branding

Both the theory that has been presented and the postings that were used as research data in this research found that personal branding was a fairly topical issue in many scientific articles as well as in LinkedIn. Posting 15 mentioned that *“Everybody is talking about personal branding. Why? Because talking about something is the first step towards improving it.”* So, in addition to recognizing the need for personal branding, the importance of taking action was also comprehended. Although the amount of postings concerning personal branding in LinkedIn was lower than expected, the discussion of the subject in these postings was found to be quite rich and advanced. The most essential and relevant parts of the contents of this discussion were analyzed in the following and a summary of the main results of this chapter can be found in the end of the chapter in figure 10.

The connection between personal branding and LinkedIn was highly recognized among the professionals. LinkedIn was often considered the primary channel of personal branding practices in social media. This was noted in posting 20, which found that *“If you are in*

the process of personal branding, you must have stunning LinkedIn profile." Aided by statistics, posting 16 also vouched for the importance of LinkedIn for personal branding: *"Recent research by Reppler.com shows that 48% of employers use LinkedIn for recruitment, with 68% of them hiring a candidate because of what they saw on a social networking site. With this in mind, you need to be taking LinkedIn seriously when it comes to personal branding."* Posting 17 also gave LinkedIn a very high score as a personal branding tool and stated that *"LinkedIn is the personal branding epicentre of the Internet. What I've shared here are some of the basic steps you need to take your personal branding on LinkedIn to another level."* According to posting 17, these basic steps included "spring cleaning" or updating the LinkedIn profile, engaging in discussions, publishing and sharing postings, and finding useful and interesting content in LinkedIn.

Posting 11 stated that *"In summary you are in charge of your own personal branding in 2015"*. One cannot overlook the similarity of what Tom Personal branding expert Tom Peters is clear: *"To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You"*. The resemblance between these two notations is very clear; both statements depicted personal branding as a responsibility of the individual.

But what exactly was personal branding in the eyes of the professionals? According to posting 12, *"[Personal] Branding is all about differentiating yourself. It's not about how you're the same as the others competing for the jobs you want. In today's highly competitive job market, you need to stand out . . . not get lost in a sea of sameness."* Posting 1 added that *"Personal branding will make you stand out of the crowd, will get you better opportunities and will transform your network into your marketing team who promote you every were."* These characterizations were, to a great extent, in line with the theories that were referred to in this research, as they emphasized differentiation from others and standing out from the crowd. In the words of one LinkedIn user, *"Personal Branding is about what you are known for and what kinds of values, believes & ideas jumps to people's head when they hear your name?"* (1).

Another professional described personal branding through three key points *"Self awareness and self esteem, Developing appropriate and efficient communication and Skillful use of networks"* (15). Effective communication in support of personal branding practices was also emphasized in Aaker's Brand Identity Planning Model (1996, 177), which suggested that success in personal branding is possible if there is enough knowledge of the identity of the brand, in other words, what the brand stands for and how this can be communicated to others. Yet, there was also knowledge of the fact that practicing successful personal branding requires manifold measures and communication is only one of them, as the posting continued: *"However, knowing this does not make you an expert yet, it is just the beginning. You are now simply initiated into the first mantra of personal branding"* (15). Yet another professional

offered a very simple description of personal branding. According to it, *“The art of Personal Branding is to make people know, like & trust you...”* (1).

The perceptions that professionals had of personal branding were sometimes very similar to those that were presented in theories and models. *First*, the writer of posting 15 agrees with Nessmann (2010, 384) as well as Harris and Rae (2011, 19), who said that continuity is very important in personal branding activities, by stating that *“Personal branding is a long term job, which needs to be prepared and planned. Knowing how to show the best of yourself is an indispensable part of actively seeking a new position.”*

Second, in the spirit of Rampersad’s Authentic personal branding model, the significance of authenticity was recognized among the professionals. This was put to words in posting 15: *“A sincere and honest look at your professional accomplishments, a communication strategy and skill with certain digital tools will be necessary.”* Also according to another LinkedIn user, the bottom line of personal branding was authenticity: *“You’re an original. Reflect that in the brand-supporting content you create for your LinkedIn profile. Authentic branding doesn’t come from using someone else’s brand messaging. It comes from digging deep and differentiating yourself”* (12).

Third, Covey (2004, 74 - 75) emphasized the importance of self-knowledge as the basis of personal branding. Posting 15 reached the same thought, but referred to Socrates, who underlined the importance of knowing oneself and can thus be seen as an *“early exponent of personal branding”*. Although the information was clearly based on different sources, the conclusions that followed were the same. Furthermore, the writer of posting 15 was also well-informed of how to establish a personal brand. The posting retold some of the instructions that were also given in Rampersad’s Authentic personal branding model regarding the phases that lead to the formation of a strong and authentic personal brand: *“Your career choices have been motivated by a particular appeal, a character trait or a desire for personal improvement - you need to identify what exactly and then articulate it. Define your qualities and determine the values that have been important to you in order to draw up an assessment of what you have done well during your professional life so far. Your objectives will fall naturally within a process of personal growth and progress and will distinguish you from other candidates.”* It is possible that the writer was familiar with Rampersad’s model, but there was no reference to this in the posting. On the other hand, it was not impossible that the writer reached this conclusion on his own.

Professionals were conscious of the growing significance of online environments to personal branding, but the importance of offline or face-to-face personal branding was also recognized. Posting 3 summarized that *“there are many ways in which you can build your personal brand however in today's society how you represent yourself online, is essential when creating an impression and developing a reputation.”* Posting 3 continued that *“there are many ways*

in which you can build your personal brand however in today's society how you represent yourself online, is essential when creating an impression and developing a reputation." Likewise, Vitberg (2009, 10) and Friedman (2015, 43) encouraged using both online and offline measures in practicing personal branding.

The internet is an endless source of advice on how to practice personal branding online. Posting 14 argued that the personal branding tips that are shared in social media today are watered down by their own oversupply: *"Is it every day that someone sends me, or my Google alert pops up with, another "secret" to personal branding? A LinkedIn trick. A social media short cut to gain customer loyalty. A never before tip to give a brand edge? How often do we see these great ideas? Every minute of every day? The avalanche of information inundates me"* The writer suggested that in addition to using the new tactics of the online world, one should also remember the "old school" fundamentals of social interaction. According to posting 14, successful personal branding practitioners choose to comply with the following fundamentals in LinkedIn:

"- They take responsibility and say I am sorry

- They send thank you notes and call people just to say thank you with nothing expected in return

- They give of their time, treasure, money and more without often being loud

- They volunteer and don't look for a reward

- When they say they will do something they follow through, even on little things

- They answer their phone and return calls and emails

- They treat even so-called little people with respect and kindness".

The writer suggested that the manners and norms that are commonly regarded as decent and respectable, such as modesty, dependability and altruism, should also apply to personal branding in social media. These fundamentals were also referred to by Morgan (2011, 14), who advised to give value to the very basics when the objective is to convey an image of professionalism through personal branding. However, the writer of posting 14 assumed that these qualities are not popular in today's online societies: *"None of these ideas would be considered novel or hipster cool. But fundamentals work in sports, business and dealing with others."* Finally, the writer defended his views by stating that the fundamentals would be used in his own personal branding activities *"I aspire to implement these old school fundamentals"* (14).

In addition, the use of traditional printed resumés was believed to be taken over by personal branding in online environments. That is why managing a LinkedIn account is advantageous and supports personal branding: *"Recruiters know where to look. The first impression is no longer made in the first 30 seconds of an interview - it is made in the first tenth of a second on a search engine. Build, maintain and control your e-reputation"* (15). On the other hand, posting 8 reminded that online personal branding measures have to be of a good quality,

otherwise they will lower the effectiveness of the personal brand: *“Make sure the personal branding you intend is not sullied by your LinkedIn profile and practices”*.

Posting 16 included a description that stressed consistency and continuity in online activities: *“Personal branding is not about being something you’re not, it’s about being the best version of who you already are. It’s you: on your best day, showcasing your best attributes, and playing to your strengths. Get this clear in your mind, and then reproduce it consistently on your LinkedIn profile”*. This approach resembled Rampersad’s definition (2008a, 35 - 37) of how a personal brand should be planned and created.

The summary section in a LinkedIn profile was considered an important piece in the personal branding puzzle, as it is the only part of the LinkedIn profile that can be edited freely and thus advances standing out from others: *“Powering your LinkedIn Summary section with personal branding helps you differentiate the value you offer over your competitors [. . .] in job search, business, and career management.”* (13). Furthermore, a branded summary not only makes the profile stand out from others but also catches the attention of hiring companies. *“When you’re job-hunting, branding your Summary (and the rest of your profile) generates chemistry and helps recruiters and hiring decision makers at the companies you’re targeting determine what makes you a good-fit hiring choice for them”* (13).

One of the writers of the postings saw personal branding as a separate activity or something that works as a basis for other activities in LinkedIn. *“Once you’ve worked on personal branding, and created your targeted, branded resume that includes a strong initial summary with specific relevant contributions, you’ll have a good foundation from which to create your LinkedIn summary section”* (13). Alternatively, one might say that all of the foregoing are personal branding activities.

Some of the professionals whose postings were analyzed in this study have written several postings about personal branding in LinkedIn and were very passionate about it. They had gathered information from personal branding experts and shared that information with others via their postings. This was likely done to promote their own personal brands, as the research data revealed that many professionals encouraged and advised also others to write postings in LinkedIn in order to attract attention to their profiles. Postings were also written to share experiences, advice and enthusiasm with others. The writer of posting 16 had interviewed a personal branding coach and elaborated the advice that was thus gained. *“Taking time out of her busy schedule, she gave me the low down on why personal branding is important: “Personal branding is essentially about who you have to offer – not just ‘what’”. She says that when these two things come together, prospective employers or clients can decide whether they are buying into your brand. “If people are going to make decisions about you, then the*

messages you put out there, online and in person, should shape how they think about you". Think of it as enhancing what you have already got to offer."

As said before, personal branding is a challenging research topic, as it entails many rather abstract and even unclear entireties. This was revealed, for instance, by the different and at times controversial interpretations of what personal branding actually is. In posting 21, personal branding is seen as one, separate component of LinkedIn: *"It's important to use lots of the multiple components available from LinkedIn, i.e. the right logo, banners, page analytics, optimization and personal branding."* According to a more common and widely justified perception, it is the other way around and LinkedIn is seen as a vehicle for personal branding. However, this was yet another matter of interpretation and spoke for the fact that personal branding is not only an interesting but also a rather ambiguous research subject.

Professionals were confident and enthusiastic about using LinkedIn for personal branding. For example, posting 20 spoke of personal branding as if it was a sheer necessity: *"Promote your personal branding by LinkedIn. Act now and start updating your profile."* Others expressed their interest in personal branding by stimulating discussion: *"Do you have any suggestions to share for personal branding on LinkedIn? Share your tips with us by commenting below"* (19).

In summary, many of these characterizations of personal branding bore a great resemblance to those that were described in the theories earlier in this study. Although there were no references to scientific sources in any of the postings, it was clear that the professionals who have published these statements in LinkedIn were well aware of what personal branding is about. These perceptions and views of professionals offered a more detailed look into the phenomenon.

Summary of main results: Perceptions of personal branding			
Topicality	The role of LinkedIn	What is personal branding?	Authenticity
<p>Not many postings of personal branding found in LinkedIn, but discussion was rich, advanced</p> <p>→ High awareness among professionals who have published postings / writings in LinkedIn</p> <p>Need for personal branding was recognized</p> <p>→ Attitudes towards the subject were generally enthusiastic, confident, even passionate</p> <p>Current and challenging area of research</p>	<p>Strongly connected to LinkedIn</p> <p>Primary channel and tool</p> <p>→ Enables practitioners to take the basic steps of personal branding</p> <p>Summary section in a LinkedIn profile was considered the most important tool of personal branding</p> <p>→ Summary is the only part of the LinkedIn profile that can be edited / branded freely</p> <p>→ Favorable for standing out from the crowd</p>	<p>A responsibility of the individual</p> <p>Differentiating oneself</p> <p>Standing out from the crowd</p> <p>Require using LinkedIn properly</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Self-awareness 2) Developing appropriate, efficient communication 3) Skillful use of networks <p>Requires manifold measures</p> <p>Making people know, trust and like you</p> <p>Long term job</p> <p>Requires planning, preparations</p> <p>Requires self-knowledge</p> <p>Divergent view 1: An activity that is separate from others, serves as a basis for other activities in LinkedIn</p> <p>Divergent view 2: Personal branding is a component of LinkedIn, not the other way around</p>	<p>Recognized as a significant / main characteristic</p> <p>→ Truthfulness, sincerity, honesty, originality</p>
			<p>Online / Offline</p> <p>Growing significance of online environments</p> <p>→ Online personal branding activities take over printed resumés</p> <p>→ Online presentation becomes essential</p> <p>→ Creating an impression, developing a reputation</p> <p>→ Quality of personal branding measures was emphasized, mistakes get highlighted</p> <p>→ Online activities require consistency continuity</p>
			<p>Offline / face-to-face communication was still recognized as important</p> <p>→ "Offline fundamentals" as factors of successful personal branding</p> <p>→ Responsibility</p> <p>→ Decency, respectability</p> <p>→ Ability to apologize</p> <p>→ Humility</p> <p>→ Altruism</p> <p>→ Dependability</p> <p>→ Answering calls and e-mails</p> <p>→ Respectfulness, kindness</p>
			<p>An oversupply of online instructions of personal branding was seen as a downside</p>

Figure 10 Summary of the main results regarding perceptions of personal branding

4.3 Perceptions of what a personal brand is

In the theory part of this study, it was noted that McNally and Speak (2012, 4), Harris and Rae (2011, 14) and Rampersad (2010, 401) stated that a personal brand is theoretically something that everyone has. The same notion was presented in posting 11, which found that *“You already have a personal brand – if you don’t control it, it’s being shaped for you by other people. Your personal brand perception is out there, you can manage it or you can let others take it away from you. Up to you.”* Personal branding was depicted as a responsibility of the individual and between the lines, it was insinuated that not having or managing a personal brand was considered almost as indifference. There were also many other perceptions and statements regarding the concept of personal brand in the research data. These were presented and analyzed in the next and a summary of the main results of this chapter can be found in the end of the chapter in figure 11.

The strong connection between LinkedIn and a personal brand became evident in many parts of the research data. This connection was summarized well in posting 11: *“If you wish to achieve great things in the business world your personal brand is where it starts and LinkedIn is the catalyst for this. If you don’t look after your own personal brand on LinkedIn then you are more likely to fail in your ambitions and your competitors are more likely to win. If you do look after your personal brand on LinkedIn then you are more likely to win and achieve all of your personal goals in 2015. It’s your choice”*. According to post 20, the most favorable section to showcase a personal brand was the headline of LinkedIn profile, which usually includes a job title or other professional headline: *“Proper tag line / headline – this is the place you can position your brand. Here specific tag line which describe yourself as a brand”*. This could be interpreted as call for creativity and a challenge to add some other than a just job title to the profile headline.

Posting 12 presented a very fundamental description of what a personal brand is, which resembled what was presented by Rampersad in the Authentic personal branding model: *“A “personal” brand is just that. It’s associated with a specific “person,” designed to resonate with their specific target employers, and crafted to showcase that person’s unique set of personal attributes, motivated strengths, passions, and value proposition.”* In other words, both Rampersad and the writer of posting 12 saw a personal brand as a versatile presentation of the different qualities of a given person.

There were also some other very analytical and informed observations in the postings about the main purpose of a personal brand: *“People buy people. Always have, always will. That’s why the phrase “it’s not what you know it’s who you know” is as true now as it was 100 years ago. Today they are buying your personal brand. Think you don’t need a personal brand? Think again”* (11). Although personal brands have not always been referred to as personal

brands, the idea of a personal brand has been used already for centuries. This was noted also by Lair et al. (2005, 308) who said that personal branding has in fact existed in different forms for centuries, but only lately has it become a more identifiable and distinguishable concept and Nessmann (2010, 378) who reminded that influencers of the business life have recognized the benefits of saying or writing certain things and how these things would make them appear. One of the postings stated that having a personal brand is determining and critical in regards to finding employment: *“If you want a new job then your personal brand will dictate whether you succeed or not”* (11). As matter of fact, Olins (2003, 64) defined a personal brand as a union of images, impressions and expectations that others have of a certain individual. Truly, such a combination could likely have an effect on getting a job. As mentioned before, according to Vitberg (2009, 10) and Friedman (2015, 43), a personal brand is most effective when both online and offline methods are combined. This was mentioned also in posting 16: *“Nowadays, your online brand is as important – if not more important – than your ‘in person’ brand. Your online presence means that people viewing you are getting an understanding about you and buying into it (or not) before they have even met you”*.

The benefits of cultivating a personal brand in LinkedIn were noted in many postings: *“Regularly leverage the power of LinkedIn to market and build your business and your brand”* (5), *“And for job seekers, it’s [LinkedIn is] a brilliant place to showcase yourself and your personal brand”* (2). According to one professional, a personal brand can give access to new contacts and success in working life *“If you have a fully rounded personal brand on LinkedIn that looks impressive and is backed up with substance as well as style then you are more likely to 1) get investors approaching you and 2) be welcomed with an open door when you approach investors. Why should someone invest in you if you can’t invest in yourself personally?”* (11). This quote ended in an interesting question, which implied that a personal brand is an investment to self. It makes each professional face the fact that if they are not ready to invest in themselves by creating a personal brand, it is possible that others might not invest in them either. Also, according to one professional, cultivating a personal brand in LinkedIn is dependent on using the platform properly: *“...it is important to use this platform [LinkedIn] correctly if you want to maintain a professional personal brand”* (19). Posting 11 continued to list the benefits that a personal brand can generate. According to the writer, having a confident personal brand can help with reassuring customers and stakeholders and capturing the attention of audiences and headhunters before others.

Posting 13 suggested the use of a personal brand statement as a means of creating and developing a personal brand: *“Include a stand-alone personal brand statement to make the content come alive, generate chemistry, and give a feel for your personality”*. A brand statement was also mentioned and explained in the first phase of Rampersad’s Authentic personal branding model (2008a, 35 - 37). This view suggested that at least some professionals were familiar with the theoretical background and models of personal branding.

According to one professional, another way to cultivate a personal brand in LinkedIn are endorsements: *"It's [an endorsement is] a great vehicle to help build your personal brand too. In LinkedIn's words: "It helps contribute to the strength of your profile, and increases the likelihood you'll be discovered for opportunities related to the skills your connections know you possess." ie. It increases the relevance of your profile when people are searching LinkedIn. Same goes for anyone you endorse"* (10). One might say that an endorsement is perceived as proof of a good personal brand. Still, endorsing others on LinkedIn has to be done in accordance to the unwritten rule that professionals should not endorse anyone who they do not know, because it could have negative effects on a personal brand: *"Now if you're endorsing a complete stranger, you not only look like a 'prat' to the recipient, who believe me, is shaking their head saying "who the hell is this person and why on earth are they endorsing me?" In addition, other people can also see that you've endorsed that person for some random skill. Not so good for your personal brand"* (10). This was a good example of a pitfall that may not have crossed the minds of all professionals who use LinkedIn. It is an unwritten rule of the LinkedIn community, which just has to be known. However, in order to become endorsed and recommended, one has to have a personal brand: *"If you want to be recommended and referred to by others then you need a personal brand on LinkedIn worth showing to other people"* (11). This was a noteworthy notion, because it showed that different personal branding measures support each other. None of these measures are separate, but simultaneous and overlapped. Furthermore, this suggested that a personal brand cannot exist without personal branding measures and activities, but the activities are also left without meaning, if one does not have a personal brand to give them a direction and context.

It was also understood that a personal brand takes time to develop: *"If you want to achieve your business objectives in 2015 you should make a new years resolution to focus on developing your personal brand on LinkedIn and keep it going throughout 2015. It's now more important now than ever"* (11). This was confirmed also by posting 19: *"You need to connect, engage and get your personal brand noticed online. Always remember that social media takes time and effort."*

Professionals saw that a personal brand as a tool is not only for those who are looking for employment, but also for employers and their representatives. Posting 11 suggested that great personal brands will make employees commit to their positions for longer, by making them feel that they are a part of something special and interesting: *"If you want employees or you want to keep existing employees then you have to have a personal brand worth following. All great leaders have great personal brands. Now that has changed from the battlefield and off line to social media, especially in a business context; LinkedIn. In a competitive world you need to impress and inspire your employees that it's worth staying with you and you need to impress future employees that you're worth following. A great personal brand can tick so many boxes when it comes this"*. This led to the conclusion that personal brands can have more wide-ranging

effects than thought, extending all the way from personal purposes to affecting the working lives, attitudes and views of others.

According to posting 11, clients and other contacts in working life can also be influenced and convinced through a personal brand: *“If you want to keep that client then you should focus on your personal brand – if you’re not and your client is being wooed by another service provider and their personal branding on LinkedIn is better than yours then you may just lose that client”*. Posting 11 continued to expand the scope of a personal brand and reminded that it could also be used for progressing and career development: *“If you want a promotion in your existing company you will stand more chance of getting it with an enhanced personal brand on LinkedIn”*. This was seen to apply also to gaining new clients by making a good impression with the help of a personal brand: *“If you want to win that new client then you must enhance your personal brand – if you don’t and they look at your LinkedIn profile and see nothing impressive, no thought leadership, no connections, no company page then social selling rules dictate that you will miss out and not even know about it”* (11). Yet, it was somewhat disconcerting that the benefits of having a personal brand are based on a possible threat of otherwise missing out on something.

An incomplete LinkedIn profile was seen as something that could possibly harm a personal brand: *“If you have an incomplete, sparse personal profile on LinkedIn and people find that on Google what does that say about your personal brand?”* (11). An incomplete LinkedIn profile could convey an impression of indifference or ignorance, even if it that was not the case.

Plagiarism, unauthorized copying of the contents that are found in the profiles of others, was seen as another threat to a personal brand in LinkedIn: *“Known across social media as duplicating or “scraping” content, violating copyrights can lead you into all kinds of moral and legal issues. This behavior can impact your personal brand, put your integrity in question, and cost you your current job, and future jobs”* (12). Posting 12 listed many reasons why plagiarism, the scraping of content from the profiles of others, could lead to serious trouble. For example, it could stain a personal brand and thus hinder finding employment. The writer continued, that LinkedIn might even delete the profile of a user who has verifiably copied content from the profiles of others: *“Members who violate the LinkedIn Copyright Policy are subject to account termination. At the very least, LinkedIn may disable access to or remove content, at their discretion”* (12). With regard to a personal brand, plagiarism was seen as out of character, because copied content is no longer personal. *“A copycat personal brand takes the “personal” out of the equation”* (12). And, *“The content you’re stealing may sound like you, but it’s really not your brand story”* (12). One of the characteristics of a personal brand is that it is always unique in each case, just like the personality which it is supposed to represent. Copied content was seen to fight against this idea: *“It’s not your unique personal brand. The achievements you steal from someone else couldn’t possibly be the same as yours. The situations,*

people involved, metrics, and facts are all different . . . even if only slightly” (12). Professionals also saw that inauthentic and dishonest content might turn into negative personal branding, which is the complete opposite of what authentic personal branding is meant to achieve. Posting 12 warned that plagiarism may do permanent and serious damage to a professional’s reputation: “It tarnishes your personal brand, and puts your reputation and integrity in question. If hiring professionals find out, you could be jeopardizing your chances to land the jobs you want. What does stealing say about your integrity? What kind of employee are you likely to be if you have no qualms about scraping copyrighted content?”

Instead of copying content, it was seen that professionals who want to find employment should concentrate on building their brands strictly on their own strengths, skills and values, as suggested by Rampersad in the Authentic personal branding model (2008a, 35 – 37) and by posting 12: *“You should focus on writing robust content that will generate chemistry for the kind of person you are, how you make things happen for employers, and what makes you a good fit for your target employers’ corporate culture.”* This was to say that a truthful personal brand and LinkedIn profile are eventually beneficial for both the job seeking professional and the future employer. The professional would thus be able to live up to the promises that were made through the personal brand and an employer would receive the kind of know-how that they were looking for: *“Your own approach to solving the problems that led to your achievements provide evidence to support your brand promise. Don’t settle for generic achievement statements that sound good, but aren’t really authentic for you” (12).* To conclude, posting 13 returned to a central characteristic of a good personal brand; authenticity: *“Besides, your own brand is unique . . . not like anyone else’s. Take the time to develop content that truly showcases your own unique value promise.”* The majority of professionals agreed that an effective personal brand is, first and foremost, individual and truthful.

Summary of main results: Perceptions of what a personal brand is			
Definitions	Characteristics	Creation, development and maintaining	Threats to a personal brand
Versatile presentation of the different qualities of a given person An investment to self	Everyone has one	Require forming a personal brand statement	Not having or managing a personal brand → Perceived as indifference, ignorance
	Associated with a specific person	Require using LinkedIn properly	
	Determining and critical in regard to finding employment	LinkedIn was seen as a primary catalyst → LinkedIn profile headline was seen as the most favorable section for showcasing a personal brand	An incomplete LinkedIn profile → Conveys an impression of indifference, ignorance
	Effectiveness requires both offline and online measures		
	Benefits from being cultivated in LinkedIn	Benefit from using endorsements in LinkedIn → Received endorsements were seen as proof of a good personal brand	Plagiarism (unauthorized copying of content from other LinkedIn profiles → Puts integrity in question → Stains a personal brand → Hinders finding employment → Might lead to the deletion of a LinkedIn profile → Makes profile content inauthentic and dishonest → May lead to serious and permanent damage to reputation → Out of character regarding personal branding as copied content is no longer personal, unique
	Gives access to new contacts and success in working life	Should be based on strengths, skills values	
	Helps to reassure customers and stakeholders		
	Helps to capture the attention of audiences, headhunters		
	Not only for those who are looking for employment but also for employers and their representatives		
	Beneficial for both job seeker and future employer		
	Can have wide-ranging effects		
	Most effective when authentic, individual, truthful		

Figure 11 Summary of the main results regarding perceptions of what a personal brand is

4.4 Perceptions of the LinkedIn platform as a tool of personal branding

LinkedIn users, professionals of different fields, described LinkedIn from varied viewpoints. The research data revealed that professionals had a fairly good understanding of what LinkedIn is and has to offer as a social media platform to personal branding. The perceptions that were found in the data were presented and analyzed in the following and a summary of the main results of this chapter can be found in the end of the chapter in figure 12.

To begin with, LinkedIn users recognized the platform as a relevant means of practicing personal branding. According to posting 6, *“LinkedIn is a powerful tool for building your personal brand”*. And furthermore, *“LinkedIn is the #1 professional network site, which plays an integral role in personal branding process. It is the showcase of your professional journey”* (20). In other words, LinkedIn was seen here as a channel of visualizing experience, skills and expertise in order for these to be seen by given audiences, such as potential employers or colleagues. Posting 23 further specified and expanded this view: *“While some view LinkedIn as an “online resume,” the platform is really very much more. LinkedIn is an awesome database that can be mined effectively for business purposes, a vehicle for brand building and way to build community and nourish your relationships online”* (23).

But what was seen to differentiate LinkedIn from other social media platforms? The writer of posting 8 said using LinkedIn is the best choice for professionals who want to be seen as the experts of their field and potential employees: *“There are a lot of social networks like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and others. But if you want to make a career and to be in the center of all business events and news you must have LinkedIn account.”* Compared to other social media, LinkedIn can be used particularly to *“to find allies, customers and valuable information on business in general and on your industry specifically”* (5). According to one professional, another special characteristic of a LinkedIn is the possibility to monitor the effectiveness of personal branding measures: *“One of the finest attributes of LinkedIn is that you can see, monitor and follow who has dropped by and viewed your LinkedIn profile”* (21). Posting 9 substantiated LinkedIn’s reliability and standing as a tool of personal branding by noting that *“LinkedIn is recognized as your official public space. What you say and display here is considered “on the record.” This provides an opportunity to craft your personal image and tell your story. Even a personal website is often seen as secondary to LinkedIn.”* One might conclude that this makes the platform the most favorable online environment for personal branding.

Professionals described LinkedIn from at least four different perspectives. *First*, they define LinkedIn as a networking site which is primarily centered on business by stating that *“LinkedIn is the perfect social media tool for business networking”* (19) and simply that *“LinkedIn is a business platform”* (8). Posting 2 adds that *“LinkedIn is a fantastic online business*

networking platform for professionals” and posting 5 that “LinkedIn is, and will only increase to be, a key part of how smart operators do business day to day”. Controversially, it is also claimed in posting 5 that the business aspect is only of secondary value in the platform: “LinkedIn is about developing relationships first and sales and opportunities automatically follow as a result.” Although these perceptions largely emphasized business, personal branding is not forgotten: “LinkedIn is a business-oriented social networking website that many people use for keeping in touch with business associates, clients, and former colleagues. It allows you to network with people and professional organizations in your industry and show your personal branding” (18). More specifically, the use of the platform was seen as an activity that supports business through creating relationships, connecting employers with potential employees and networking with colleagues. “I recently listened to a LinkedIn speaker who described how LinkedIn for business was designed for professional business oriented individuals. A place for employers and job seekers to connect and grow their business profitably” (21). There were some who saw the use of LinkedIn only and exclusively as doing business: “...it’s [LinkedIn is] about doing business and talking and listening to your peers, customers and potential customers. It’s about sharing your knowledge, your thoughts and ultimately about enjoying and benefiting from the relationships you create. We don’t need to call it anything if we do it properly, it’s just about doing business.” (5).

Second, others emphasized that LinkedIn is particularly for professional use: *“LinkedIn is a professional platform and your network does not need to be protected like you would for example with your personal Facebook profile” (5). A similar view was presented in posting 19: “LinkedIn is for professional networking. Use LinkedIn to update your network about your achievements and progress” and posting 16: “LinkedIn is ideal for building professional relationships and job hunting, in addition to raising your personal profile, getting referrals and recommendations for your work.” These views aimed at making a clear distinction between LinkedIn and the more entertainment-oriented social media.*

Third, some stress the social aspects of using LinkedIn. *“LinkedIn, in its nature, was built to support the build of and networking in social relationships” (7). The writer of posting 5 acknowledges the foregoing views, but sees LinkedIn first and foremost as a social medium. “The clue is in the title ... Social media is meant to be exactly that – social. Ok so LinkedIn is very much a professional and business based forum but the underlying principle remains.”*

Fourth, others claimed that LinkedIn is primarily a search tool, like Google. *“Many people underestimate the power of the LinkedIn search platform. It works in the in the same way that Google and YouTube does” (11). According to professionals, the biggest difference was that the LinkedIn search platform is used particularly for finding people and is thus a more potential tool for the use of personal branding: “Simply put, LinkedIn is a search engine. It searches to find people whose skills and expertise match the words typed into the search box at the*

top of a Profile Page” (5). However, it was recognized that appearing in the search results requires having a complete profile, which includes many descriptive words: “Essentially LinkedIn searches under key words so it is essential to pull out the key/important aspects of your role and list these, also an achievement focus is favorable as highlights to your employers the results of your work” (3). The importance of having a complete LinkedIn profile was also emphasized in the theories that were presented earlier in this research. In addition to finding people or being found by others, it was suggested that the LinkedIn search could also be used for benchmarking: “Use LinkedIn Advanced search or LinkedIn Influencers to find the most successful people in your career, know more about their career history and achievements, what kind of knowledge & skills they have and what makes them successful or special in that career?” (1).

Posting 23 described how LinkedIn can be advantageous on any of the levels of working life and how also executives could utilize platform effectively: *“LinkedIn is a platform that can help you be found – for partnering with others, for Board nomination, for internal task forces and succession planning, and for new opportunities beyond the executive’s current company” (23). This was to say that if executed correctly, personal branding in LinkedIn can generate significant results for anyone and should not be underestimated on any level of working life.*

Posting 15 contemplated the factors behind LinkedIn’s recent popularity: *“LinkedIn is the world’s number one professional network. In Singapore, where the battle for talent is raging, half the population is connected to this network. If you really do not know where to start, LinkedIn is without doubt the first step.” This was another way of saying that the intensified situation in the job market has increased the interest in means of standing out from the crowd, such as the use of services like LinkedIn that can also serve as tools for personal branding purposes.*

LinkedIn’s importance to personal branding was also proportioned to the amount of users: *“In 2014 LinkedIn Sign reported that over 332 million users are building their portfolios and branding their names to reinforce their business growth strategy through LinkedIn” (21). On the other hand, it was also seen that as the amount of users continues to grow, it will become harder and harder to stand out from the crowd. Theoretically, each LinkedIn user still has an equal chance to make a good first impression: “With nearly 350 million users, LinkedIn is the anchor of the modern digital professional world. It is much more than a digital business card or an online resume. It is your opportunity to control people’s first impression” (9). The discrepancies between the mentioned user amounts resulted from the fact that the postings were written and published at different times. Either way, these discrepancies showed how the amount of LinkedIn users has constantly continued to grow, which further indicated that professionals have considered it a useful platform. LinkedIn’s importance to personal branding was also seen to stem from its status as a concentration of professionals and in-*

formation, a combination which might generate a multifold of opportunities: *“LinkedIn is a place for professionals and companies to connect with each other and expand their network. It is used to exchange knowledge, ideas and career opportunities in helping individuals find group of interests in their related field. There are over 300 million LinkedIn users”* (19).

The prominence and popularity of LinkedIn were also substantiated in many of the postings by referring to the amount of users that the platform has attracted. *“As of July 2015 LinkedIn Sign reports there are over 360 million LinkedIn members on the LinkedIn platform. This positions LinkedIn as the largest business hunting ground on planet Earth”* (21). Such a large number of professionals have chosen to use the platform, that shutting oneself off from it was seen as a mistake: *“LinkedIn operates the world’s largest professional network on the Internet with more than 380 million members in over 200 countries and territories.”*(18). Consequently, not having a LinkedIn profile was considered missing out on something important. The logic behind this consideration was the same that was used to validate personal branding; if you do not manage your personal brand, someone else will do it for you and the outcome may not be what was desired. In other words, professionals saw that not joining LinkedIn was as if power and control over personal decisions were signed away to someone else. Based on this discovery, the research reached the conclusion that guilt or fear should not be motives for neither practicing personal branding nor using LinkedIn.

On the other hand, professionals viewed that regardless of these negative motives of joining LinkedIn, the platform also empowers personal branding practitioners to control their image and reputation in a new way: *“The greatest power LinkedIn can give you is by controlling what people find when they Google your name. LinkedIn gives you the opportunity to put something in the search results that is on purpose. It gives you a chance to create clarity and make a positive first impression”* (9). This was to say that if a professional has a profile in LinkedIn, it will be found on Google and show up in Google search results. By managing the contents of a profile, a LinkedIn user can control what is seen in the search result. Controlling a reputation or first impression is generally not considered easy. Thus, any means of doing so will likely interest professionals as personal branding practitioners, even if it also included having to deal with certain more negative emotions.

As mentioned before, a large majority of the personal branding activities that are done in LinkedIn aim at finding employment (Labrecque et al. 2010, 39; Shepherd 2005, 590). This could be noticed also in the research data, especially in posting 18, which pointed out that *“LinkedIn is the best channel for engaging with people and organizations that could potentially hire you. I think it is useful for every working professional to make a huge impact on recruiters while facing interview. When it comes to hiring, 78% of recruiters have hired through a social network, and the leading network for hiring is LinkedIn. It is the most popular site for recruiters by far, as the data below reveals: 95% of recruiters use LinkedIn to search for candidates; 95% use LinkedIn*

to contact candidates; 93% use LinkedIn to "keep tabs on" potential candidates; 92% posted jobs on LinkedIn." Unfortunately the writer of the posting did not mention the source of this information. Nevertheless, the percentages reflected positive attitudes and perceptions towards LinkedIn as a digital job market. In general, both personal branding and recruiting were seen to be moving towards a more digital emphasis.

The postings also referred to the different parts of the LinkedIn profile and discussed their usefulness and purposes. The summary section in the profile was seen to play a substantive role in regard to the practicing of successful and effective personal branding. Posting 5 stated that *"The LinkedIn Profile Summary features the best of your brand story. It is designed to compel and heighten interest in **you** and your offerings. If you can capture the attention of visitors here, they will scroll down and read more."* In other words, a LinkedIn summary was perceived as a means of attracting others to view the whole profile, instead of just glancing at the profile picture and the headline.

Finally, there were also some controversies in the LinkedIn users' descriptions and views of LinkedIn. According to posting 20, LinkedIn is an *"Online DB [database] of your contacts through your life and a place where you can share, interact in professional manner"*, but posting 5 argued the opposite: *"LinkedIn isn't a contact gathering exercise, it's not an address book, it's not a numbers game."* This implied that there was yet some uncertainty among professionals of what LinkedIn is not meant for. It was concluded in this research that there might not be an unambiguous explanation to these controversies and that different views and opinions should be accepted, as there are personal and case-specific reasons for using both personal branding and LinkedIn. Certainly the platform can be seen to serve many purposes, although specific steps are recommended if that purpose is personal branding.

Summary of main results: Perceptions of the LinkedIn platform as a tool of personal branding				
Definitions	Differentiation from other social media platforms	Benefits of use	Four different perspectives	Popularity and importance
Relevant means of practicing personal branding	Best choice for professionals who want to be seen as the experts of their fields and potential employees	Provides an opportunity to craft personal image	1) Business orientation → LinkedIn is a networking site that is primarily centered on business, strong business-orientation	Based on the intensified situation in the job market
Powerful tool for building a personal brand	A platform for those who want to make a career and be in the center of business events	Advantageous on every level of working life from employees to executives	2) Professional use → LinkedIn is particularly for professional use, clear distinction to entertainment-oriented social media	Based on the need to stand out from the crowd by means of personal branding
Plays an integral role in the personal branding process	Particularly for finding allies, customers, valuable information on specific industry	Offers equal chance to make a good impression	3) Social relationships → LinkedIn stresses social aspects and was built to support the formation of and networking in social relationships	Often justified by the high amount of users
Channel of visualizing experience, skills and expertise to given audiences	Allows to monitor the effectiveness of personal branding measures	Prevents missing out on something	4) Search tool → LinkedIn is primarily a search tool like Google, but for finding people and thus advantageous to personal branding	Amount of users continues to grow → Professionals considered LinkedIn a useful platform
More than an online resumé	Most favorable online environment for personal branding → Even a personal website was often seen as secondary to LinkedIn	Perceived as power and control over personal decisions	There was also uncertainty among professionals of what LinkedIn is ultimately meant for → An online database of contacts vs. Not a contact gathering exercise, not an address book	Status as a concentration of professionals and information → A combination which might generate a multifold of opportunities
A vehicle for brand building		Empowers personal branding practitioners to control their image, reputation		
Recognized as your official public space, what is said and displayed is "on the record"		Being found → LinkedIn profiles will show up in Google search results		
		Increases the chances of finding employment		
		Using the summary section in a LinkedIn profile plays an important role in practicing successful, effective personal branding		

Figure 12 Summary of the main results regarding perceptions of the LinkedIn platform as a tool of personal branding

4.5 LinkedIn profile and its role in creating and maintaining a personal brand

According to professionals, a well-constructed LinkedIn profile has a crucial role in successful personal branding: *“Your profile is a landing page that could get you a career opportunity, it's not just about Titles, Certificates or years of Experience it's about how you will make people think about you”* (1). Certainly, a LinkedIn profile can serve as a channel for many personal branding activities and purposes, which were clarified in the following and a summary of the main results of this chapter can be found in the end of the chapter in figure 13.

A good LinkedIn profile that supports personal branding was seen to be based on the active use of LinkedIn, but also of social media in general: *“The richer your digital presence is, the better your profile will be”* (15). According to posting 5, a good LinkedIn profile is created for a chosen target group and thus *“resonates with this audience”*. Versatility and ability to serve different purposes were also listed as characteristic of a good LinkedIn profile: *“Fill out your profile in several languages. Even if your ambitions are domestic, you will show yourself to be multilingual and open to opportunities”* (15). It was also described that a good profile can be found and stands out from the crowd: *“So if you want to be found, make the effort to optimise your profile”* (2).

Professionals also viewed that a good LinkedIn profile is not is a second CV. Copying the contents of a resumé to a LinkedIn profile was not seen as enough – it was actually seen as a mistake: *“Another beginner mistake is when people mimic their resume on their profile. It is so vital to make your profile audience engaging. Sharing insights, case studies and education that gets people to actually want to read your profile and maybe even have a conversation”* (5). This was further explained in posting 9, which noted that *“A good LinkedIn profile enables you to pick up where your resume left off and demonstrate further value, expertise, and capabilities”*. The postings implied that the benefits of an online profile should not be overlooked by following outdated procedures but utilized for practicing versatile and effective personal branding. Compared to a printed offline resume, an online profile enables the use of links, videos and pictures, which leaves more room for creativity and individuality.

Posting 23 included a summary of the characteristics of a good and effective LinkedIn profile. The writer's view was that there are a lot of mediocre and unpolished profiles in LinkedIn which could be turned into excellent ones, provided that proper action was taken. Transparency and authenticity were mentioned, paired with warmth, enthusiasm and meticulousness: *“So what does it take to turn a skeletal profile to a stellar one? A lot of introspection, thoughtfulness and hard work. For a profile to be truly stellar, it needs to paint a picture that is transparent and authentic. A stellar profile reveals your business passions and leadership philosophy, and is conveyed warmly. It uses keywords effectively and often, and it is complete”*.

Posting 5 advised personal branding practitioners to clarify their goals in order to be able to create an effective LinkedIn profile: *“Before designing your profile or building your network, get crystal clear on what your looking to achieve on LinkedIn and how that fits in with helping you achieve your marketing objectives over the next 3, 6 to 12 months”*. This statement formed a notable connection to theory, as it was also suggested in Rampersad’s Authentic personal branding model (2008a, 35 - 37) that successful personal branding requires careful planning. Posting 1 also urged LinkedIn users to plan ahead: *“Develop a brand statement on your profile Headline not just a Title to tell people what do you have to offer, or why they should connect with you”*.

Creating a LinkedIn profile will take time, but maintaining the profile is also a time consuming and ongoing task. Posting 5 urged to *“Keep your Profile Page updated”*. Leaving the profile to “live a life of its own” will unlikely lead to successful personal branding, but updating the profile regularly and being otherwise active in LinkedIn will pay for itself: *“In time, if you regularly offer good information, answer questions, provide resources, you begin to become well known, not only in that group's community, but on LinkedIn and on the Internet. This brings your Profile Page more views”* (5).

Just as a personal brand cannot be created overnight, it also takes time for personal branding measures, such as a LinkedIn profile, to take effect: *“A profile takes time to create and constantly evolves so make sure it is up to date and accurate, it is worth every moment - think of it this way - imagine if you were going to work, you wouldn't go only half dressed!”* (3). Reserving time for personal branding activities, such as creating a LinkedIn profile, was underlined also in posting 21 which stated that *“Every LinkedIn speaker I know advises their clients to Invest a little bit more time to carefully construct your LinkedIn scripts which provide a clear emphasis about your expertise, knowledge and business background”*. It was concluded from these observations that professionals saw it as advisable to create a LinkedIn profile on time and engage also in other personal branding activities already before they are acutely needed, (e.g. for finding employment), as these activities are not meant to be quick fixes.

Posting 13 listed some hands-on instructions for personal branding practitioners who are in the process of creating a LinkedIn profile. **First**, it was found defining and adding key words to a LinkedIn profile will later highlight it in the platform’s search results: *“Make sure you include the relevant keywords [...] to develop content for your branded resume. The more relevant keywords you include, the more potential traffic you’ll draw to your profile.”* **Second**, the posting offered advice on how to avoid any spelling mistakes which might reduce the effectiveness and credibility of personal branding: *“Create the content in a Word document, or run it through a Word document before posting it to your profile, so you can use Word’s Spell Check and character-count features”*. **Third**, it was expressed that a good summary should be brief and concise and live up to the requirements of modern technology: *“Keep the content*

in short paragraphs (no more than 3-5 lines) to make it easier to read. Tightly packed content can be dizzying to readers and can keep them from absorbing all of it. Keep in mind that people may be viewing your LinkedIn profile on very small screens, with their hand-held devices” (13). Instructions as detailed as these were scarcely found in theories or models of personal branding, nor were they presented in the literature that was used in this study. In summary, it was seen that there are certain practicalities that need to be taken into account while creating a LinkedIn profile and forming a good profile summary. This led to the conclusion that creating a profile in LinkedIn was not seen as a very complicated task in itself, although planning and orderliness are required. But, how many profiles result from such systematic planning and editing is yet another question.

On top of creating and maintaining a profile, a personal branding practitioner must make sure that the profile is public. Hiding a profile away for a reason or another is not than uncommon, but in terms of personal branding, an unseen profile is of no use: *“If you are on LinkedIn and using it to look for a job or acquire new business, then you DO want to be found don’t you?!”* (16). Furthermore, it was considered very important to have a complete profile in LinkedIn and this is stressed in many on the postings. *“Many people don’t invest time to look at their profile level and therefore end up having incomplete profiles. This reflects poorly as it make you appear like you do not take your profile seriously and therefore can infer you do not take other things seriously”* (3). Having a complete profile was seen to have many advantages: *“This will increase your search ranking and give potential employers and clients a good impression”* (16). A complete profile was also viewed to increase the chances of being found in LinkedIn and thus supports personal branding objectives. *“Keywords in your LinkedIn profile, achievements, recommendations, visits, credible links, content, posts etc are all relevant in determining your position on LinkedIn searches”* (11).

Contrarily, having an incomplete profile was seen to have many unwanted and negative effects on personal branding. *“A profile that is incomplete not only appears unprofessional (and potentially mistaken as a spam account) but also hinders your ability to be found by your ideal clients”* (5). Quite understandably, *“A blank or absent profile sends the message that you are not particularly interested in your professional image or career”* (9). Posting 23 offered an explanation to why there are incomplete profiles in LinkedIn. It was based on an observation that has been made of executives and their LinkedIn profiles: *“Based on my experience as an Executive Branding Coach, most executives have very poor LinkedIn profiles. The most frequent answer I hear from executives regarding why their profile is so bare is that they don’t want to look dumb by using the medium poorly – and since they have not invested the time to learn how to use it well, they essentially don’t use it at all”*. In other words, some LinkedIn users thought that they are avoiding poor personal branding by having bland and undistinguished LinkedIn profiles, but in fact, that is also poor personal branding. An incomplete profile that is left to *“live a life of its own”* gives an impression of unprofessionalism or disinterest, which is

destructive to a personal brand. In posting 11, there was a thought about how a LinkedIn profile represents a person at all times without cease. *“Remember your LinkedIn personal profile never sleeps, it’s being viewed 24/7 from people all around the world.”* This was another reason why having a meticulously crafted and fully completed profile was considered a good idea, whereas a poor profile would continue to convey a more unfavorable image.

The importance of the summary section in a LinkedIn profile was mentioned several times in the research data and also in the theory part of this study. It was stated repeatedly that in terms of personal branding, the summary section is the most important part of a LinkedIn profile: *“The Summary is the topmost dedicated and first-read section of the LinkedIn profile page”* (5). The writer of posting 16 explained how the summary section should be used: *“The summary box in your profile needs to be your personal elevator pitch, but targeted at the people you want to see it – such as prospective clients, recruiters or employers”*. The content of the summary section defines whether or not the person who is visiting the profile continues to read and go through the whole profile: *“The content in your LinkedIn Summary needs to capture attention and compel them to consider you as a viable candidate, and want to reach out to you and learn more about you. It should make them want to read your entire profile”* (13).

Personal branding should be practiced both offline and online. This was stressed repeatedly in the literature that has been presented in this research, but it could be observed also in the research data. Posting 13 noted that a LinkedIn profile should not take the place of a tangible resume, rather than complement it: *“Remember that a branded LinkedIn profile doesn’t replace your resume. It serves several purposes in conjunction with your resume, including: → Becomes a means of passive job search, to help you get found by recruiters and hiring decision makers through the relevant keywords you’ve strategically placed in the various sections of your profile.”* In other words, it was suggested that a branded LinkedIn profile works for its owner by offering information to employers and other target groups even when he or she is out of reach. A LinkedIn profile can also reduce the personal branding practitioner’s workload by doing duty as a universal resume which does not require constant updating, as it *“presents a somewhat more general career marketing communication than your resume, so it can position you for more options. Resumes need to be customized to position you as the problem-solver for each employer’s specific needs”* (13).

At its best, a LinkedIn profile was seen to advance the objective of authenticity in personal branding. It was recognized as a public document, which reduces the temptation to bend the truth: *“Those assessing you through your LinkedIn profile feel that you’re less likely to exaggerate in a public forum such as LinkedIn than you might in your resume document, which is only viewed by the select people you decide to send it to”* (13). The authenticity of a LinkedIn profile, and of personal branding in general, was considered very important among the professionals. For example, lying about previous work experiences was strongly criticized: *“How*

can people possibly imagine they'll get away with this on this public platform? There is no doubt you'll get caught. The consequences of lying are lethal to your reputation and credibility" (8). Posting 13 added that "It would be wrong to copy any of this content (or anyone else's content) and use it on your own profile. In fact, you'd be in violation of LinkedIn's Copyright Policy and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act". This implied that professionals had high moral standards regarding personal branding in LinkedIn and that the problems related to plagiarism have been noticed and commented also by LinkedIn as a company.

Inauthenticity was not entirely unknown amongst the professionals. Copying content from well-branded profiles for own use was one example of it. The writer of posting 12 described this aptly: "You see a compelling, branded LinkedIn profile of a job seeker with qualifications similar to yours. It speaks to you. It sounds so much like you. You want your profile to be as good as that. But you're not such a good writer." It was recognized that plagiarism in social media is easily underestimated: "You see no reason not to use some of that good writing in your own profile. Not the whole thing, just some of it. Somehow, because it's right in front of you, online for all the world to see, you don't think of it as stealing. But it most certainly IS stealing" (12). However, professionals who wrote about personal branding were aware of this and seemed to take it seriously: "But, beyond the moral issue of plagiarism, swiping content and using it on your own LinkedIn profile, or anywhere online or off-line, is very serious" (12). They were also conscious of the possible consequences that plagiarism might have.

Posting 12 painted a cautionary picture of a situation where things take a turn for the worse because of taking advantage of someone else's personal branding efforts: "It may cause you to be shut out by identity confusion and conflicts. That LinkedIn profile you borrowed from may belong to a job seeker who is targeting the same companies you are. What do you suppose happens when the companies' recruiters and hiring managers notice the same content for two candidates (or more, if others have stolen the content, too) they're considering for the same job? You'll all look like thieves, and you'll all get shut out. Nobody wins". However, looking for good ideas and practices in the profiles of others was allowed and accepted, as long as it is done respectfully: "It's okay (in fact, it's good practice) to look at the profiles of your competitors for ideas and help with the right keywords, but don't be tempted to copy and paste chunks of content into your own profile" (12). All in all, the professionals discussed the matters of inauthenticity and plagiarism rather profoundly and from various viewpoints, which offered a deeper look into the realm of personal branding in LinkedIn.

To conclude, finding a job was not seen as the only motive for having a LinkedIn profile. It was recognized that personal branding in LinkedIn can have positive effects not only on its practitioner but also on his or her current employer. Posting 9 stated that "Contrary to popular belief, the current employer greatly benefits from employees having good LinkedIn profiles. Do not allow a culture to form where good profiles are seen as a sign of people looking for an-

other job". This suggested that professionals who feel that it is not appropriate for them to have a profile on LinkedIn because they already have a job risk missing out on networking with colleagues and sharing valuable expertise among other things. Furthermore, it was found that a LinkedIn profile should also be seen as a tool for employees who want to practice personal branding in order to expand their current job descriptions: *"Someday, perhaps soon, you will want to find opportunities beyond your company, such as not-for-profit and paid board positions, or other corporate executive opportunities. In the meantime, having an up-to-date LinkedIn profile makes it possible for you to be found internally, too"* (23).

Summary of main results: LinkedIn profile and its role in creating and maintaining a personal brand					
LinkedIn profile	Characteristics of a good and effective LinkedIn profile	Disadvantageous qualities of a LinkedIn profile	Creation	Maintaining and development	
Has a crucial role in successful personal branding, if the profile is constructed well	Based on the active use of LinkedIn and social media in general	<p>Incomplete profile</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Gives the impression of not taking LinkedIn seriously and infers that this may apply also to other things → Appears unprofessional → Hinders the ability to be found → Sends the message that one is not particularly interested in professional image, career → Can be destructive to a personal brand → Often an attempt to avoid using LinkedIn poorly, but results in bad personal branding instead → Represents a person unfavourably in the online environment all the time 	Requires clarified goals before a profile is designed and networks are built	<p>A mediocre profile can be turned into an excellent one by taking proper action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Requires a lot of work, introspection, thoughtfulness 	
A landing page that could lead to career opportunities	Created for a certain target group and resonates with its audience		Not a very complicated task, but requires careful prior planning if success is aspired		
Serves as a channel for many personal branding activities	Serves different purposes in a versatile way		Takes time, cannot be created overnight	Time-consuming, ongoing task	
Supports personal branding	Can be found and stands out from the crowd		Requires developing a brand statement	<p>Include and require keeping the profile page updated</p> <p>Will lead to successful personal branding</p>	
Represents a person in the online environment at all times without cease	Not a second CV, demonstrates further value, expertise and capabilities instead		→ Includes what the professional has to offer, why others should contact the professional		
<p>Can reduce a professional's workload by serving as a universal resume which does not require constant updating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Presents more general career marketing communication than your resumé 	<p>Does not replace a resumé completely, but complements it</p> <p>Engages audiences</p> <p>Includes links, videos and pictures creatively to increase individuality</p> <p>Paints a picture that is transparent, authentic</p> <p>Conveys warmth, enthusiasm, meticulousness</p>		Requires careful construction in order to provide a clear emphasis about expertise, knowledge, business background	<p>Must be done regularly</p> <p>Require and benefit from being active in LinkedIn, for example by offering good information, answering questions, providing resources</p>	
		<p>Advances the objective of authenticity in personal branding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → is a public document, which reduces the temptation to bend the truth or exaggerate 	<p>Inauthenticity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Copying content from well-branded profiles for own use was one example of it → Taking advantage of someone else's personal branding efforts → Not entirely unknown amongst professionals → May cause professionals to be shut out by identity confusion and conflicts → Lying about previous work experiences etc. was strongly criticized → Consequences of lying are lethal to reputation, credibility → Professionals had high moral standards regarding personal branding in LinkedIn 		Has to be done on time, no when personal branding activities are already acutely needed
				<p>Does not replace your resumé</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Serves several purposes in conjunction with your resume → Becomes a means of passive job search 	<p>Plagiarism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → was discussed profoundly → Offered a deeper look into the realm of personal branding in LinkedIn → It was recognized that plagiarism in social media is easily underestimated → Was not often thought as stealing, but most certainly is stealing → Professionals seemed to take it seriously, were conscious of consequences it might have
		<p>Offers information to employers, other target groups when the profile owner is out of reach</p>	<p>Reveals professional passion</p> <p>Keywords are used</p> <p>Completeness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases the profile's search ranking → Gives a good impression potential employers <p>Is made public</p> <p>Increases the chances of being found and thus supports personal branding</p>		

Chart 13 Summary of the main results regarding the LinkedIn profile and its role in creating and maintaining a personal brand

4.6 The “dos” and the “don’ts” of personal branding in LinkedIn

Professionals shared advice on personal branding in LinkedIn actively. The advice that were found in the research data can be divided roughly into two categories; what to do and what not to do in order to practice successful and efficient personal branding. These were also referred to as the “dos” and “don’ts” of personal branding, as framed in posting 19: *“Follow these do's and don'ts and you will surely build and manage a powerful LinkedIn network”*. The next paragraphs analyzed these advice, starting with the “dos” of personal branding. A summary of the main results of chapter 4.6.1 and 4.6.2 can be found in the end of each chapter in figures 14 and 15.

4.6.1 The “dos”

To begin with, it was expressed that LinkedIn should be considered as more than just another social media platform: *“Make LinkedIn a part of your business strategy, not in addition to or lump it in with ‘social media’”* (5). If used correctly, it can be used to achieve career goals, but this will require learning to use the platform first. Posting 21 counseled those who are new to LinkedIn to first find out about the very basic functions of the platform: *“First step if you are relatively new to the LinkedIn platform you need to familiarise yourself with the basic user applications on LinkedIn.”* Because LinkedIn is a popular site also among recruiters, the time that is used for exploring the platform and refining a LinkedIn profile was seen to advance personal branding objectives: *“So, investing time in learning how to leverage social media for your job search, and to leverage LinkedIn, in particular, will be time well spent for you”* (18).

Indeed, reserving enough time for personal branding activities was recommended by many LinkedIn users. Posting 13 suggested taking time to edit the summary section, which was often regarded as the most important part of a LinkedIn profile: *“Although having a branded resume to work from gives you a good head start, you’ll need to spend some time re-tooling it for your LinkedIn Summary. They both service different purposes in your job search”*. Reserving time for personal branding in LinkedIn was believed to pay itself back with interest: *“Take an extra couple of minutes to customize and you’ll reap the benefits”* (2).

Rampersad’s authentic personal branding model suggested that in order to create a personal brand, a personal branding practitioner needs to determine his single most central skill, service or area of expertise (Rampersad 2010, 404). The writer of posting 1 shared guidelines that were based on a similar idea: *“Discover Your Brand Value, What Do You Have To Offer? Try to find how you are going to add value in your career and what do you can offer for Employers, clients or customers and what makes you special, Try to specify what are your*

*top 5 qualities, and which one will make you stand out of the crowd and start to develop it to be the best in your career” (1). Posting 16 also advised to “Make it clear what makes you different, and what value you can bring.” (16). These were seen as aspects that should be elaborated in a good LinkedIn profile. Words like *brand value* and *top 5 qualities* would likely not be used by persons who were entirely unfamiliar with personal branding or branding in general.*

Recommendations and endorsements (LinkedIn Help Center 2015) are mentioned repeatedly in the research data, as they are considered effective personal branding measures: *“Get recommendations: References are key to demonstrating the success of your previous work and in effect help sell you to other people. If you don’t have any, get some!” (3). According to posting 20, they are proof of the experience and the skills that a professional claims to have, because they are added to the profile by others: “Recommendations – world is run by recommendations and endorsement will give you more credibility”. The use of recommendations was definitely in the “dos” of personal branding, because they are visible to others at all times in a LinkedIn profile and “keep the profile going” when LinkedIn users themselves are not online: “Always be asking for recommendations, submit articles and resources to your ‘Home’ page, always be making connections. Do this and LinkedIn will work for you 24/7” (5). The writer of posting 5 said recommendations are useful also because they reveal who is responding and reacting to the personal branding measures of a professional: “So if you combine the people who endorsed you the most, with their contact information in the connections file, you now have the email addresses of your super fans!” This led to the conclusion that recommendations were not only seen as tools of personal branding but also as indicators of its effectiveness.*

LinkedIn enables its users to customize the internet addresses that lead to their profiles. Many professionals saw this customization as an advisable action. The writer of posting 16 said it will increase a personal branding practitioner’s chances of standing out from the crowd: *“Personalise your LinkedIn URL Use the option of including your name in your public profile URL, so instead of “linkedin.com/67w84rj32wef09” you can change it to linkedin.com/in/johnsmith. This will make it easier for you to be found both within LinkedIn and Google searches”. Posting 6 further explained that the customization is worthwhile: “Since no one wants to type in nonsense, you need to customize the address so that it is easier to use on your business cards”. Professionals found that a name is easier to remember and write down than a cryptic series of numbers and letters. Naturally, any activities that make a professional stand out are useful in terms of personal branding. However, it was said in posting 3 that not many yet know about this possibility: “Personalize your URL: “A lot of people do not do this or don’t know how to do it and is such a shame as they are greatly missing out!” This is advantageous for those who are aware of it, as they have an edge over their competitors who have not yet noticed this opportunity.*

Posting 6 stated that in order to use LinkedIn for personal branding purposes, one should *"Take control of your LinkedIn account"*. This meant that not having a plan was not seen as an option and *"Building a solid foundation is the backbone to being successful and all of that starts by having a plan"* (5). According to one professional, a plan should crystallize the goals for personal branding: *"Create a clear plan on what you're looking to achieve from the platform"* (5). Posting 9 added that this should be done systematically: *"Be strategic, setup a good profile, and update it regularly."* Having a plan was recommended for the sake of staying on track and not becoming overwhelmed by everything that is going on online: *"It is so easy to get lost in LinkedIn, quickly loose focus and gobs of time. Make sure you know what you want to achieve from your LinkedIn efforts, have your messaging templates pre-written and your activities that you would like to do on a daily basis"* (5). This was a reminder of the fact that personal branding measures, such as constructing a well-planned LinkedIn profile, take time and effort, not only in the beginning but also as the profile constantly evolves and develops in process of time. Orderliness and unhurried planning were seen to make it easier to achieve the goals that were set for given activities: *"Spending some time to think about how you 'group' your content, where information is listed based on priority, what keywords to use and what to actually include, is so important in making that crucial first impression"* (5). In terms of personal branding, taking time and making a serious effort were seen as beneficial also by Balk (2013, 16-17).

Having a LinkedIn profile was seen as a good start, but both theory and the perceptions of professionals suggested that being present and engaging in the activities of the platform is most important. Morgan (2011, 14) suggested that a personal branding practitioner should demonstrate respect for the chosen target audience by engaging in discussions and responding to comments in order to convey a professional impression. This was seconded by posting 17, which encouraged other professionals to *"Engage. Engage. Engage. It's not enough to just showcase self, you have to engage. It's now cliché that for most people social media is just about flaunting. But that's indeed missing the point of social network especially on LinkedIn."* In other words, it was stated that mere peacocking will not go far in respect of practicing personal branding in LinkedIn, because in the core of personal branding is conveying an authentic and truthful image of oneself.

Engaging in activities in LinkedIn was considered important, as it was seen to build trust between a personal branding practitioner and the target audience. Posting 1 encouraged to *"Keep in touch with your network, offer help and ideas, that's how people will trust you"* (1). Interaction with others was in a key role in this perception. This was confirmed by other postings as well: *"A network has to be cultivated and maintained. You also need to get involved in the networks of your sector. By participating in discussion groups around issues specific to your activity, you will be better informed of organised events and associations which exist"* (15). However, the importance of combining both online and offline personal branding activities was

yet highlighted: *“Although the world seems predominantly digital today, you must not lose sight of the human aspect. What better way to collect business cards than over a drink?”* (15). Again, a face-to-face meeting was seen as a fine addition to personal branding in LinkedIn. Building a good reputation was another motive for engaging in LinkedIn discussions and activities *“So spend your time building those relationships which in turn builds your reputation”* (5). Posting 5 put together an apt summary of the benefits of participating in the interactions of a LinkedIn network: *“It’s been said by many - a strong network is like money in the bank. And it is in a variety of ways. For example - your network can help you build visibility, connect you with influencers, open doors to new opportunities, help you secure a job or clients. In short, building and nurturing a network is a powerful strategy which can help support your career, business goals and advancement”* (5). This description included many aspects that are favorable to the development of a personal brand, such as publicity and receptive audiences.

The writer of posting 5 added strongly that another way of engaging is publishing articles: *“Publish articles, publish articles, publish articles, publish articles. Then support other publishers!”* According to another view, it does not matter if articles are published or not, just as long as one continues to participate and show interest in a way or another in order to promote a personal brand: *“you should be aiming to be active in at least 1-2 relevant groups as a ‘top contributor’ – a status awarded to people who are regular starting and involved in group discussions. But if creating content is not quite your thing, you can still get involved in groups by commenting on group discussions, sharing your expertise and knowledge”* (16). Indeed, participating in groups and discussions was considered to be of primary importance to promoting a personal brand in LinkedIn: *“Also, very important - when you regularly participate in the groups you join - you can become known as the ‘go-to’ person, or an ‘influencer’. And become a ‘top contributor’. All of this helps others see you as an individual they want to hire and need on their team. One who really is a pro”* (5). The same was suggested in posting 20: *“join on relevant groups that you master or gain knowledge, put valuable comments on group interaction and online discussions, set up group which can share your expertise.”* The conclusion can be made that professionals recommended adding value to the online community as an important means of personal branding.

The use of key words was also clearly among the “dos” of personal branding in LinkedIn. Posting 1 advises to *“Include Key Words that relevant to your field & industry.”* Key words were advised to be utilized by adding them in many different parts of the profile: *“Make sure that they (your LinkedIn Summary, Experience, Skills & Endorsements, and Headline) are “keyword rich””* (2).

Summary of main results: The “dos” of personal branding in LinkedIn	
Dos	General
Make LinkedIn an equal part of business strategy	Professionals used terms in describing the dos that would likely not be used by persons who were entirely unfamiliar with personal branding or branding in general → Indicates awareness of personal branding
Find out about LinkedIn’s basic functions → Learn to use the platform correctly to achieve career goals → Learn to use LinkedIn’s basic user applications	
Invest time into exploring the platform and refining the profile	
Take time to edit and customize the summary section which is often seen as the most important part of a profile	
Define brand value → Find ways to add value to the profile → What kind of value can be offered to employers, clients or customers → What makes the professional special → Specify top 5 qualities which will enable standing out from the crowd	
Get recommendations and endorsements → References which demonstrate success of previous work → Help “sell” the professional to others → Proof of experience and skills that the professional claims to have, → Added to the profile by others, which gives more credibility to a professional → Visible to others at all times in the LinkedIn profile, also when the professional is not online in person → Reveal who is responding and reacting to the personal branding measures of a professional → Not only tools of personal branding but also indicators of its effectiveness	
Submit articles and resources to the profile and make connections	
Customize the internet address (URL) that lead to the LinkedIn profile → Means including a name into the URL, as it easier to remember than a series of letters and numbers → Increases chances of standing out from the crowd → Offers a competitive advantage over those who have not customized the URL	
Plan → A solid foundation for personal branding in LinkedIn → Being successful starts by having a clear plan → Includes crystallized goals and what the professional wants to achieve in the platform → Be strategic, set up a good profile, update it regularly → Plan how to group content, list content based on priority, choose key words	
Be present and engage in LinkedIn’s activities → Seen as most important → Demonstrates respect for the chosen target audience → Includes engaging in discussions, responding to comments to convey a professional image → Builds trust between professional and target audience	
Remember offline activities → Combine both online and offline personal branding activities → Face-to-face meetings support personal branding in LinkedIn	
Publish postings in LinkedIn → Adds value to the online community → Is an important means of personal branding	
Add keywords to the LinkedIn profile → Key words should be relevant to the professional’s field and industry → Should be added to all parts of the profile	

Figure 14 Summary of the main results regarding the dos of personal branding in LinkedIn

These were the most important “dos” of personal branding in LinkedIn, as perceived by professionals who use the platform. The research data revealed that professionals also have a lot of perceptions of what should **not** be done in the name of personal branding in LinkedIn. These “don’ts” will be analyzed and discussed next.

4.6.2 The "don'ts"

For starters, professionals warned not to create a profile in LinkedIn only for the sake of "being" in LinkedIn. An apparent presence in LinkedIn was not seen as enough in order to practice personal branding: *"If you use LinkedIn as a CV repository and to general just hang around in and not engage with others, then it's akin to entering a networking event with business cards in your hand but standing behind the curtains, occasionally peeping out"* (5). In other words, *having* a profile was not considered the same as *using* LinkedIn.

According to posting 5, the "don'ts" of personal branding included having *"No Goals"* and *"No plan"*. Having clear goals and a plan were seen as the best foundation for achieving success in personal branding. According to one posting, a good plan includes many activities and in turn, failing to be active is not advisable if the goal is to build a functional personal brand: *"If you aren't active, you won't be recommending, endorsing or joint venturing with anyone else, or few. That said, active networkers will avoid connecting with you"* (5).

The aim to be authentic was a leading thought in many of the "don'ts" of personal branding. According to posting 2, a professional is not doing *"Brand You"* any favors by being dishonest or untruthful: *"Don't lie. It will be very embarrassing too. All your connections can view your profile and if you lie, you will be found out"*. Lying might generally be used to give a more appealing and competent impression of oneself, but untruthfulness exposes the personal branding practitioner to the threat of being found out. At worst, this could result in a public humiliation, which would be devastating to a professional image.

Professionals advised other LinkedIn users not to underestimate the platform as a tool of personal branding: *"Don't underestimate how LinkedIn works and how others use it to find you....or not as the case maybe!"* (11). For example, it was considered too late to initiate personal branding activities in LinkedIn today if results are needed tomorrow: *"you need to dive in and you don't wait until you are no longer employed. Push the pedal to the metal now. Dedicate a weekend or a couple evenings to getting yourself prettied up and educated. Dedicate 30 minutes a day to LinkedIn once you get settled."* In other words, a LinkedIn profile and personal brand cannot be built in a day, but once activities are commenced, they will quickly pay for themselves by offering a head start in challenging situations in the job market, for instance. According to posting 2, incomplete profiles and empty profile sections in professionals' profiles are a sign of unawareness, because they have a negative effect on the findability of a profile: *"Don't leave your LinkedIn profile incomplete if you want to be found."* The summary section was often considered the most important part of a LinkedIn profile, mostly because it is a section that can be edited freely. According to posting 5, LinkedIn users do a disservice to themselves by not completing the summary section *"Many LinkedIn users ignore it [summary section] or don't know it exists. Instead, they go right to the*

Experience section and load that up with company content, which is often a direct take from their website or hard-copy brochure."

One of the "don'ts" of personal branding in LinkedIn was sending an invitation to connect without editing the default invitation text: *"Don't send people an invitation to connect with LinkedIn's default text. It makes them think you couldn't be bothered to write a personalised message. Why would they bother connecting with you? Give them a good reason, especially if they don't know you"* (2). One of the interviewees of posting 5 also saw it as a beginner's mistake: *"Connecting with people without a personal note is a rookie mistake. There are a few places on LinkedIn that don't allow you to add a message, and that often connecting from these spots creates bad habits. Be sure that you are connecting directly from their profile or your connections tab - so you can add a note with your connection request."* This was seen as an issue that has to do with the rules that are expected to be followed in online environments, but also with personal branding, in which it is important to give a respectful and considerate impression of oneself to others. Another interviewee in posting 5 said that it is an utter failure not to personalize an invitation: *"This could be the greatest transgression of all. With all that we are hearing about the importance of developing trust-based business relationships, it is amazing to me that people still send the default, generic invitation to connect on LinkedIn. Show your professionalism."* Taking the time to personalize an invitation to connect was seen here as a way of standing out from the others as a true professional.

The research data included a dilemma regarding accepting or turning down new connections in LinkedIn. The writer of posting 19 claimed that professionals should not connect with people they do not know: *"There are people on LinkedIn that don't appreciate random requests and might report you as spam"*. On the other hand, the writer of posting 5 insisted that turning down an invitation to connect would be unwise, because the whole point of LinkedIn is connecting with other professionals and promoting a personal brand: *"Just as you wouldn't go to a network meeting and ignore people you don't know, neither should you decline an invitation from someone you don't know unless you think it might be a spam account or have another reason for not wanting to connect."* One answer that was found to this dilemma was that each invitation is case-specific and should thus be handled, case by case, at the discretion of the receiver.

When LinkedIn users send invitations to connect to others, they can choose from a list of options what their current relationship with the receiver of the invitation is. Posting 2 advised that this should be done with caution, because it can also affect whether the invitation is accepted or not: *"Don't use the "Friend" option when connecting unless you are a friend of theirs. It's a major pet peeve for many professionals on LinkedIn and they won't want to connect with you."* The writer suspected that using the "Friend" option in an invitation might be considered too intrusive or indiscreet by the receiver, if there is no real or memorable con-

nection between the two persons. There may be cultural differences in how this is experienced. For example, the American culture is often seen as one that is very particular about the rules of behavior, such as being polite or not being too intrusive. As an addition to this, any negative inputs were advised against in posting 8: *"Discussions on LinkedIn groups can sometimes get quite heated. No matter how angry you are privately, never fire off an angry retort or berate someone in public. It's on the internet and it lasts forever. If you can't control yourself under these circumstances, how can any employer afford to have you on their team?"* Professional, respectful behavior was seen just as important online as it is in an offline environment. One might argue that good behavior has an even bigger role online, where conversations are often saved and archived, which means that an insensitive or angry comment can leave a more permanent mark to a personal brand. Also according to posting 19, negative commenting was not appreciated in LinkedIn and it was seen as disadvantageous to personal branding: *"Don't Comment Negatively or Criticize in Groups. No one would want to connect with you when all you do is spread negativity and criticize other LinkedIn users. It's a big turn off."* On the other hand, avoiding negative comments, even when they would be justifiable, is also not authentic or truthful and thus not in accordance with what personal branding should be. Critical comments should be allowed when they are justified and appropriate.

The writer of posting 2 warned not to go too far with seeking personal advantages through personal branding: *"Don't use your LinkedIn as your email marketing platform and spam people with news and events about your company. Most won't be interested and will remove you as a connection."* One should not share or send information that is not professionally useful or interesting. Furthermore, useful content will draw more attention to a personal brand. Posting 5 agreed that adding value is important: *"Nobody, and I really mean nobody likes to feel like they are being 'sold to'. Hammering your new connections inbox with messages about your product and services straight away is not going to win you any friends ... Or customers for that matter."*

Versatility has already been mentioned as a positive quality in a LinkedIn profile and filling out a profile in several languages was considered advantageous. However, posting 5 advised not to create more than one profile and reminded that it is actually against LinkedIn's user agreement, which advises to delete any duplicate accounts: *"Do not create two profiles! If you have more than one focus, use Company pages. Having more than one profile on LinkedIn also goes against LinkedIn's end-user agreement."* This indicated that not everyone is familiar with the rules and regulations of using LinkedIn, or alternatively, there are inconsistencies in the instructions. Unawareness might lead to unwanted and potentially harmful results in regards to personal branding.

Using incorrect grammar was seen as harmful in terms of personal branding, as mentioned before. Spelling errors might seem harmless, but in the wrong place, they might cause actual harm to a personal brand: *“Typos are bad in general, but none are as harmful as the misspelling of your company’s name. It’s not as rare as you might think. I did an advanced search of top executives -- Vice Presidents and C-Suite professionals -- and looked for a couple of company names that are often misspelled. I found that: 142 top execs who had worked for or with Procter & Gamble during their career identified the company as “Procter & Gamble” (8).* Posting 13 advised not to underestimate the importance of reviewing the contents of a LinkedIn profile or a posting at first hand: *“Don’t rely entirely on Word Spell Check. Proofread the content very carefully before posting it. Poor grammar and misspellings can sabotage your chances.”* Posting 8 discovered several examples of unfortunate spelling mistakes, which could potentially harm a personal brand: *“21 top executives included “Pubic” rather than Public in their current or former employer’s name. If you can’t get your company’s name right, what else do you overlook? Do I want to do business with you?”* Giving an impression of professionalism requires accurate communication and although spelling mistakes are not usually considered very serious, they can draw unexpected attention in the context of personal branding. However, some might argue that refusing a business opportunity because of a misspelling might be rather judgmental.

Professionals stressed that LinkedIn is not like other social media platforms and this should be taken into account in its use: *“Don’t Use LinkedIn Like Facebook or Twitter. Nobody likes to see your daily activities or what you had for lunch. Keep in mind the appropriate etiquette for each social networking site” (19).* This was to say that the platform should not be used for other than professional purposes and for sharing information that can be useful and interesting to others. Another issue regarding the nature of the platform was also related to netiquette. The writer of posting 8 urged professionals to think over before posting a comment and making sure whether it is going to be public and seen by everyone or intended as a private message to another user: *“Not realizing that it’s not a private conversation: When you make a comment on your home page, everyone in your network has the potential to see it, not just the person to whom you’re responding. So, it’s not okay to ask about tee time or what day they’re leaving for Europe.”* These norms were considered important online and could affect a personal brand. Not abiding by these often unwritten rules can give an impression of unprofessionalism, which is not beneficial to a personal brand.

Professionals advised not to copy a resumé into a LinkedIn profile or to write a profile like one would a resume. As posting 19 implied, in most cases it is not enough: *“Don’t just post your resume online.”* One of the reasons for this was that a LinkedIn profile is meant to be a channel for social interaction and building relationships as well as personal brand. It is not to be used primarily as a depository of work experience: *“If you are an entrepreneur, business owner, professional service provider or part of a sales team, you are wasting a valuable platform*

that can be used for lead generation and relationship building” (5). If the contents of a LinkedIn profile are just another version of a person’s resume, it might have unwanted effects on a personal brand: “Copying/pasting from a resume, statistics and all, this makes you look like someone that takes shortcuts and is publicly or privately looking for a (new) job” (5). In other words, it is no longer quite clear why the person has a LinkedIn profile and this causes guesswork and confusion in others, regardless of whether there was any real justification for this or not. The writer of posting 21 also advised against copying a resume to a LinkedIn profile: “Don’t cut and paste your Resume or CV into your LinkedIn profile page.” According to the writer of posting 21 that does not provide a clear emphasis on expertise or knowledge.

Summary of main results: The “don’ts” of personal branding in LinkedIn
Don’ts
<p>Creating a profile only for the sake of “being” In LinkedIn → “Having” a profile was not considered the same as “using” a profile → LinkedIn was not seen as a mere depository of CVs</p>
<p>Having no goals or plan</p>
<p>Being dishonest or untruthful → Do not lie, connections will notice it and it will be found out → Untruthfulness exposes the professional to public disapproval, which was seen as devastating to a professional image</p>
<p>Underestimating LinkedIn as a tool of personal branding → Do not underestimate the benefits of using LinkedIn → Do not wait until being unemployed → It was considered too late to initiate personal branding activities in LinkedIn today if results are needed tomorrow → Once begun, the activities quickly pay for themselves and offer a head start in the job market</p>
<p>Having an incomplete profile and empty profile sections → Are a sign of unawareness → Have a negative effect on the findability of the profile → Not completing the summary section was seen as a disservice to personal branding</p>
<p>Sending an invitation to connect without editing the default invitation text → Was seen as a beginner’s mistake → Was seen as unprofessional → Makes the receiver think that the professional is not bothered to write a personalized invitation → Was seen as an issue that has to do with the rules that are to be followed in online environments, but also with personal branding which emphasizes giving a considerate impression to others</p>
<p>Connecting with a stranger in LinkedIn → Should not be done → Was not appreciated and might even be reported as spam by the receiver of an invitation to connect → On the other hand, turning down an invitation from an unfamiliar person was also seen as unwise → Connecting with others, making new connections was seen as the whole point of LinkedIn → It was concluded that each invitation is case-specific and should thus be handled at the discretion of the receiver</p>
<p>Using the “Friend” option too lightly (When sending invitations to connect, one can choose from a list of options what their current relationship with the receiver is) → Do not use the “Friend” option when connecting unless you actually are a friend → Should be done with caution → Can affect whether an invitation is accepted or not → May be considered intrusive by the receiver, if a real connection between the sender and receiver does not exist</p>
<p>Leaving negative comments → Negative input or losing temper in discussions etc. was advised against → Respectful behavior was seen just as important online as in an offline environment → Good behavior was seen to have an even bigger role online, where conversations are often saved and archived and angry comments can thus leave a more permanent mark to a personal brand → Critical comments should be allowed only when they are well justified and appropriate</p>
<p>Going too far with seeking personal advantages → Do not use LinkedIn as a marketing platform, it will easily be considered as spamming → Can result in being removed from connections → Do not share or send information that is not professionally useful or interesting</p>
<p>Creating more than one profile (duplicate profiles) → Is against LinkedIn’s user agreement, duplicate accounts will be deleted → Might lead to unwanted, harmful results in regards to personal branding</p>
<p>Using incorrect grammar → Was seen as harmful → Might seem harmless → In the wrong place, might cause actual harm to a personal brand (e.g. misspelling own or company name etc.) → Can draw unexpected negative attention</p>
<p>Misusing LinkedIn → Do not use LinkedIn like Facebook or Twitter, it is not the place for reporting daily activities → Should not be used for other than professional purposes → Do not disrespect netiquette → Can give an impression of unprofessionalism that is not beneficial for a personal brand</p>
<p>Copying a resumé into a LinkedIn profile → Was not seen as enough, do not just post your resumé → Do not use LinkedIn primarily as a depository of work experience → Contents of a LinkedIn profile should not be another version of a person’s resume → Might have unwanted effects on a personal brand → Makes a professional look like someone that takes shortcuts → Raises question of why the professional has LinkedIn profile; causes guesswork and confusion in others → Does not provide a clear emphasis on expertise or knowledge</p>

Figure 15 Summary of the main results regarding the don’ts of personal branding in LinkedIn

4.7 Profile pictures and their effects on personal branding

Perhaps surprisingly, the use of profile pictures and the effects that they can have on personal branding turned out to be much discussed, popular and thought-provoking topics among professionals. Profile pictures were mentioned also in the theories that were presented earlier but not as inclusively and analytically as in the research data. A summary of the main results of this chapter can be found in the end of the chapter in figure 16.

In the research data, having no profile picture in LinkedIn was not considered an option even remotely and selecting a suitable photograph was seen as very important. A profile picture was considered to be among the first things that a person sees while visiting a LinkedIn profile and as in face-to-face communication, a first impression can be determining also in an online environment. This was summarized in posting 5 *“You have less than a minute to make a first impression on LinkedIn. Research has shown that viewers will view your photo first, then across to your Headline, down the page through to your content, media and Summary and then back up to your photo”*. Moreover, it was seen that a profile picture gives the personal brand a face when the person himself is not physically present. This was described in posting 3: *“Include a profile picture: People connect better visually and therefore when you are “faceless” not only are you missing out on potential connections/considerations you are also featured at the bottom of the LinkedIn search functionality as the system relegates these profiles”*. In other words, if a profile is complete with a good profile picture, it will represent a personal brand much more effectively.

Posting 15 reminded that having a professional profile picture in LinkedIn is as much a personal branding activity as writing a press article: *“A press article? Personal branding. LinkedIn? Personal branding. A professional photo? Yet again personal branding.”* However, some professionals insisted that adding a profile picture is not enough as such, but the photograph must also be of good quality in order to convey an image of professionalism: *“Don’t use anything other than a professional looking photo – preferably head and shoulders (2) and “Use only professional image” (20)*. Posting 8 supports these claims: *“But not just any photo will reflect well on your brand. Before you think about posting a cropped photo that shows your buddy’s hand on your shoulder, do yourself the favor of looking at dozens of pages of LinkedIn photos. How do you react to what you see? Then, get yourself to a great photographer!”* This implied that profile pictures have a much greater effect on personal branding than what was anticipated in this research.

LinkedIn should not be confused with Facebook. Although both are social media platforms, they were designed for different settings and purposes. This applies also to the use of profile pictures, as was repeated in posting 2: *“Remember, LinkedIn is a professional platform, so a photo of you downing a beer at a pub, or in your bikini, should be reserved for other social*

platforms like Facebook." This was criticized also in posting 5, which reminded that using certain images as profile photos is not only inappropriate and poor personal branding but can also even go against LinkedIn's terms of use: *"Oh, the photos that people upload to their LinkedIn profiles: Shots of poor quality, that are terribly composed, have a bad expression, reflect bad clothing choices, were taken in an improper setting, or that are now outdated. Or, they violate LinkedIn User Agreement and upload avatars, logos, or irrelevant subjects."* Profile pictures seemed to be a subject that awakened emotions, especially when it came to poor or inappropriate photographs. LinkedIn was seen as a professional network which should be treated accordingly. Deviations from this norm may cause disapproval.

Unlike Facebook, LinkedIn is a working life oriented platform, where professional behavior is valued as much as in offline environments. According to posting 5, some LinkedIn users have mistaken LinkedIn for a sort of professional Facebook: *"A great number of newcomers display poor quality pictures as well as not very professional etiquette: Posting pictures of vacations, Posting updates with riddles cats or silly memes"*. Again, using unprofessional profile pictures truly appeared to vex other LinkedIn users, who saw it as ignorance and unawareness: *"You see this every day of the week, people using company logos, cartoon characters and pictures that are completely out of character with LinkedIn. People connect with people and as such you need to present your face, eyes (no sun glasses) in a professional manner and in appropriate surroundings"*(5). To counterbalance all of this criticism towards poor graphs, posting 23 mentioned one group of LinkedIn users who were generally thought to have appropriate, high quality profile pictures in LinkedIn, although their own contribution to this was doubted: *"They [executives] generally have a great photo (thanks to their corporate public relations department)."* Presumably there is little actual research or evidence of this, other than the writer's own observations and experiences.

Although professionals took the selecting of an appropriate profile picture seriously, room was still left also for creativity. The writer of posting 4 had recently updated her personal brand and analyzed the benefits of using a so called glamour shot or alternatively a selfie as a profile picture, but finally chose something that was in between these two: *"What I felt was best for me was to: 1) Use 1 high resolution photo on both my personal and business social media pages to maximize personal branding consistency, 2) Hire a professional photographer to take several professional headshots of me smiling in a well-lit studio so that I could choose the best shot. Essentially, I decided to go with a **professional glamour shot**. Before that I was using a lower resolution close-up photo of me wearing a business suit. It wasn't a selfie. But, it wasn't a really high quality professional photo either"*. This choice, well justified and personal, also gained the acceptance of other LinkedIn users: *"So far, almost everyone loves the new professional glamour shot better - even my colleagues on LinkedIn."*

As stated in the beginning of this research, the main objective of personal branding is often finding employment. Personal branding is, however, a puzzle with many pieces and each of the pieces needs to be in the right place in order to achieve success. Having a complete LinkedIn profile with an appropriate profile picture can be of significant value and the lack thereof can lead to setbacks in achieving the objective of being employed. Posting 11 claimed that *“The first thing an HR director does is look at your LinkedIn profile. No photo, no summary page and no updated job title/experience and you won’t even get an interview.”* This claim was strengthened by posting 5, according to which *“LinkedIn is a vibrant visual medium. The time is right to invest in quality business portraiture. No selfies or webcam shots, either. No photo? Think again. People don’t buy from or hire ghosts.”* In this light, the requirements for profile pictures did seem quite strict. In order to be taken seriously as a personal branding practitioner, a LinkedIn user must invest in a good quality profile picture, as having a poor profile picture was not seen as a real alternative. Posting 8 proposed that having a profile picture of some kind might still be better than having no picture at all: *“LinkedIn research tells us that you are 14 times more likely to have your profile opened if you have a portrait than if you don’t, so posting a photo is a must.”*

According to one perception, the importance of having a good profile picture in LinkedIn can be compared to appearing well-dressed in a public event. This was explained in posting 5: *“You would never go to an in-person networking party naked, dressed in your dirty old sweat pants, or without any shoes. Why? You want to make a good first impression. Yet, failing to fully optimize your LinkedIn profile has the same effect online as coming to the party dressed wrong. Studies show that people are seven times more likely to click on your LinkedIn profile if there’s a picture than if you don’t have one.”*

Some professionals would have allowed the use of any ordinary, realistic photo as long as it presents the personal branding practitioner in a dignified manner: *“LinkedIn is not a place to show off a picture of your dog or cat. Your picture doesn’t need to be a professional head shot but an image of you that communicates your maturity, energy and enthusiasm”* (19). Posting 16 was in step with the foregoing and favored authenticity and individuality over a professionally taken photograph. Here, giving a truthful impression was seen as more important than the technical or artistic qualities of the photograph *“Ideally you’ll want to employ a professional photographer to take the picture, but if budgets are tight, a picture that is sharp, high resolution, flattering and clear – not a cropped image of your head and shoulders taken from the office party. That doesn’t mean you have to be dull – you can ensure that your photo reflects your personality and professionalism – and don’t forget to smile!”* Moreover, giving a warm-hearted impression of oneself by smiling was seen as beneficial. Some LinkedIn users advised to *“Use a professional photo of your face with smile and appropriate background & colors”* (1) and *“Put a recent professional photograph - you should be alone, elegant, smiling and against a plain background”* (15).

Theories and models of personal branding, such as the Authentic personal branding model by Rampersad (2008a, 35 - 37), emphasize the importance of authenticity. The research data indicated that although LinkedIn users called for professional profile pictures, they also acknowledged that this should not be done at the expense of authenticity: *"Your photo should be up-to-date, clear, professional, and an expression of you, preferably the smiling you. If you are a casual guy, no one expects or wants to see you in a suit. In a virtual world we may do business with someone we have never met. The connection provided by a photo, especially when you can see the eyes and a warm reception can go a long way"* (5). In other words, no matter how professional the photograph is, it should portray the personal branding practitioner's true self instead of a polished but untrue image.

As in all communication in general, transparency was a respected aspect also in the contexts of personal branding, because was seen to increase reliability and trustworthiness. LinkedIn allows its users to choose how visible or invisible their profiles are to others and professionals seemed to want to cherish this freedom of choice. This was verbalized in posting 6, which stated that *"It's good to be transparent most of the time, so select the first option and allow people to see your name, photo and headline."* The importance of having a profile picture in LinkedIn has already been mentioned many a time, but not having one can have unexpected consequences and generate unwanted associations in others, no matter how unfair or excessive they might seem: *"Some people don't have photos at all. It makes me think they have something to hide and it's just a little bit creepy (along with those to choose to be anonymous)... We live in a visual world and people want to see who you are and what you look like."* (2). In other words, having no picture in the profile can eat away reliability and decrease transparency. As posting 9 put it: *"And of course provide a picture. Say what you want about fairness, but pictures matter, people want them, and a good one can help you."*

Summary of main results: Profile pictures and their effects on personal branding				
General	Requirements for a profile picture in LinkedIn	Advantages of having a profile picture	Not having a profile picture	Authenticity and transparency
Profile pictures and the effects they can have on personal branding were much discussed, popular and thought-provoking topics among professionals	Seemed strict → To be taken seriously as a personal branding practitioner, professionals must invest in good quality profile pictures → Having a poor profile picture was not seen as a real alternative	Having a good profile picture in LinkedIn was compared to being well-dressed in a public event	Was not considered a real option	Authenticity and individuality were still favored over a professionally taken photograph → Use of ordinary, realistic photos was approved as long as they presented the personal branding practitioner in a dignified manner → giving a truthful, warm-hearted impression of oneself was seen as more important than the technical or artistic qualities of the photograph
Profile pictures were discussed more inclusively and analytically in the research data than in theories and models of personal branding	Adding a profile picture was not seen as enough only as such → Not just any photograph can reflect well on a personal brand → No family photos, poorly cropped photos → Photograph must also be of good quality in order to convey an image of professionalism → Anything other than a professional looking photograph should not be used	Having a profile picture of some kind was seen as better than having no picture at all → Profile will more likely be opened if it includes some kind of profile picture	Can have unexpected consequences and generate unwanted associations → Was seen to eat away reliability and decrease transparency → May convey an impression of hiding something	
Selecting a suitable profile picture was considered very important			Was seen to hinder becoming employed → Employers start a recruiting process by looking at candidates' LinkedIn profiles → Lack of profile picture may result in not being invited to an interview	Importance of authenticity was emphasized → Although professional profile pictures were called for, it was acknowledged that this should not be done at the expense of authenticity → Profile pictures should portray the truth instead of polished but untrue images
Was considered to be among the first things that a person sees while visiting a LinkedIn profile → Seeing a profile picture in LinkedIn was compared to meeting someone for the first time → Very important in regard to making a first impression → Profile picture is viewed first and last → A first impression that is made online was seen as important as in a face-to-face meeting → Less than a minute of time to make a first impression in LinkedIn	The most criticized profile pictures were said to be → shots of poor quality → terribly composed → flawed by a bad expressions or clothing choices → taken in an improper setting → outdated → avatars, logos, or irrelevant subjects which violate LinkedIn's user agreement → company logos, cartoon characters → completely out of character with LinkedIn → included a person wearing sunglasses	Was seen just as much a personal branding activity as writing a press article		
		Was seen as contributory to transparency in personal branding		
		Gives a face to a personal brand, when the professional cannot be physically present → It was seen that people connect better visually → Not having a profile picture was seen as being "faceless" and will lead to missing out potential connections		
Profile pictures were found to have a much greater effect on personal branding in LinkedIn than what was first anticipated	Despite the requirements and critique, creativity was allowed regarding pictures → Choices that were well justified and personal gained the acceptance of other LinkedIn users, professionals			

Chart 16 Summary of the main results regarding profile pictures and their effects on personal branding

5 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter discusses the results that were reached in this research, and the interpretations thereof. In general, the results of this research showed that professionals who use LinkedIn perceived personal branding clearly as a positive phenomenon which can benefit their careers considerably and speed their success in finding employment. The more negative issues that concerned personal branding were more easily found in the theories and literature that covered the subject, although they were scarcer all along the line.

5.1 Discussion of results

To begin with, it was noticeable that LinkedIn users discussed personal branding in LinkedIn from somewhat different, more individual and personal angles than what was seen in theories and scientific articles of the subject. For example, the analysis of LinkedIn profile pictures and their effects on personal branding manifested that LinkedIn users contemplated the use of profile pictures more profoundly and practically than what was presented in theories and models. Nevertheless, as a result of the analysis of the research data, it is obvious that many of the professionals rested their postings and views on valid literature, even though references were not produced. This connection is clear to anyone who has read both academic literature of personal branding and the postings that were used as the data of this research.

The analysis of the research data showed that the borderline between personal branding and other similar phenomena or activities is often unclear and undefined. It was sometimes challenging to try to define if a person is specifically referring to personal branding or not. Professionals wrote postings about the importance of promoting a LinkedIn profile, being authentic and engaging in online discussions in LinkedIn, but the reference to per-

sonal branding could be rather indirect. The postings included references to all of the characteristics of personal branding, but the words *personal branding* might only be mentioned briefly in a subordinate clause or between the lines, so to speak. This resulted in the conclusion that personal branding is possibly a phenomenon which cannot be defined or outlined precisely, in an unambiguous manner and that understanding the perceptions that professionals have requires interpretation. This is one of the reasons why investigating the phenomenon is challenging.

According to the perceptions that professionals had of personal branding in LinkedIn as its practitioners, authenticity was in a central role in personal branding and it was referred to time and again in the research data. It is the foundation of good, effective and successful personal branding. It seemed to be present in all personal branding measures and activities, from choosing a suitable profile picture in LinkedIn to everything else that is included in the LinkedIn profile and stated in the discussions and comments in the platform. Professionals noticeably had a lot of respect for this characteristic of personal branding and demanded it from themselves as well as other personal branding practitioners.

The analysis of the research data showed that professionals perceived LinkedIn as a good and prominent tool of personal branding. Some went as far as saying it is the best tool for the purpose. This was justified by describing LinkedIn as a versatile platform that is much more than just an online resumé, it can be used for brand building, networking and business activities in a modern way. In terms of personal branding and according to professionals, one of the best aspects of LinkedIn was the strong focus on professionalism, which differentiates it from other social media platforms. At least four different perspectives can be seen regarding how professionals perceive LinkedIn. One view emphasized business purposes, one stressed LinkedIn's significance in professional and occupational use, one centered on the social aspects of LinkedIn and finally, one view emphasized LinkedIn as a tool of finding others and becoming found as a professional. LinkedIn's importance as a personal branding tool was justified by referring to its ever growing amount of users, the possibility to control an image or reputation and actually find employment.

Professionals viewed that a LinkedIn profile is in an important role in creating and maintaining a personal brand, but success can only be reached through the active use of the profile. Maintaining a profile was considered a time-consuming but important task. A LinkedIn profile was not perceived as a static CV, but as an interactive digital embodiment of the personal branding practitioner, which leaves more room for creativity than a printed resumé. In line with theories, professionals stressed the importance of planning and orderliness while using a LinkedIn profile as a tool of personal branding. Just as in theories, authenticity was mentioned as an important building block of a good profile. Professionals often saw the summary section as the most important part of a LinkedIn

profile, because it can be edited freely. However, professionals seemed to agree that most importantly, a LinkedIn profile needs to be complete in order to be effective. When it comes to personal branding, an incomplete profile was seen as harmful in many ways. A LinkedIn profile represents a professional around the clock every day. According to professionals, that is why a profile should be made especially presentable. Although LinkedIn was primarily seen as a personal branding tool for those who are looking for employment, professionals recognized it also as a means of representing an employer in an existing job and networking with other professionals.

Profile pictures and their effects on personal branding appeared time and again in professionals' perceptions of LinkedIn as a tool of personal branding. It was a subject that stirred up emotions and opinions. Professionals saw having a profile picture as a necessity. Choosing the right profile picture was also viewed as very important. Professionals justified these perceptions by stating that a profile picture determines the first impression of a personal branding practitioner in an online environment and should thus be of high quality. In terms of profile pictures, professionals wanted to make a clear distinction between LinkedIn and Facebook. Professionals widely agreed that LinkedIn is not a place for vacation pictures, but a professional network that should be respected accordingly. Poor or inappropriate profile pictures faced strong criticism. Professionals saw that inappropriate profile pictures affect not only the personal brand but resultantly also the chances of finding employment. Although the requirements that professionals set for profile pictures were quite strict, they were not meant to suggest the use of untrue or unrealistic images. Authenticity was valued also in regard to profile pictures. According to the perceptions of professionals, a profile picture should portray the true self of a personal branding practitioner. In a nutshell, profile pictures had a much greater impact on personal branding than what was first expected in the context of this study.

The perceptions that professionals had of personal branding revealed that it was seen as a very current topic. Professionals not only recognized the need for personal branding but also the importance of taking action to implement it in the concrete. Most importantly, the connection between personal branding and LinkedIn was perceived as obvious and strong. LinkedIn was clearly seen as an efficient and notable tool for personal branding purposes, and even more so in the future. LinkedIn and personal branding were seen as vehicles for differentiating oneself from others. All in all, it could be said that the perceptions of professionals were largely in line with those that were presented in theories and models. The more traditional ways of practicing personal branding were still considered necessary and combining both online and offline methods was recommended by professionals. However, some professionals also stated that the time of the printed resumé has come to an end and traditional CVs are largely being replaced by online materials. Professionals viewed that personal branding has to be continuous and authentic in order to be efficient

and it should be based on strong self-knowledge. An important result was that some professionals saw that the fundamentals of what is generally considered good and respectful behavior should form the foundations also for personal branding activities. Again, the summary section was seen as the most important part of a LinkedIn profile, but professionals also saw it as the most favorable section regarding personal branding, as it is the only part of the profile in which text can be edited freely. Another finding uncovered that some professionals saw personal branding as a one activity in LinkedIn, whereas some made no clear distinction between LinkedIn and personal branding. All in all, it can be said that there are clear resemblances between the perceptions that professionals have of personal branding and the models and theories that cover the subject.

The perceptions of a personal brand also revolved around LinkedIn. Professionals saw LinkedIn as a catalyst for a personal brand and the summary section in a LinkedIn profile was, again, seen as the most important channel of showcasing a personal brand. The definitions of a personal brand that were presented by professionals were very similar to what is offered in theories and models, which indicated that professionals are well informed of the subject. Very analytical conclusions and opinions were included in the research data regarding personal brands and their history and formation. Some professionals stated that a personal brand is needed especially for finding employment and it may even determine whether a professional finds a job or not. According to professionals, personal brands can have more wide-ranging effects than thought, extending all the way from personal purposes to affecting the working lives, attitudes and views of others. According to the perceptions of professionals, a personal brand may help to influence potential customers and clients, provided that it is based on a complete and well planned LinkedIn profile. The perceptions that professionals had of what a personal brand is revealed that not all motives for having a personal brand were entirely positive. Some professionals seemed to worry that not having a personal brand equaled missing out on something or gave an impression of unprofessionalism or ignorance to others. Plagiarism, copying the contents of someone else's LinkedIn profile, was seen as a threat to a personal brand and as a serious malpractice. Professionals saw plagiarism as counter-productive, because copied content is no longer personal and does not support a truly personal brand. In fact, using inauthentic content was perceived as negative personal branding. Professionals saw that a personal brand should be built strictly on personal strengths, skills and values, as suggested by Rampersad in the Authentic personal branding model. A truthful personal brand eventually benefits both the job seeking professional and the future employer. Professionals agreed that an effective personal brand is, first and foremost, individual and truthful.

Professionals share advice on personal branding in LinkedIn and the advice can be divided roughly into two categories, the "dos" and "don'ts" of personal branding. When it comes to personal branding in social media, professionals advised others to concentrate on

LinkedIn and learning to use it as effectively as possible. Reserving enough time for using the platform and completing the different sections in the profile were seen as decisive factors regarding successful personal branding in LinkedIn. Professionals agreed with Rampersad's Authentic personal branding model of the importance of self-knowledge and advise that each professional should make sure that their most central skills are listed in their LinkedIn profiles. Unlike any models or theories that were referred to in this study, professionals highlighted the importance of taking advantage of recommendations and endorsements that are featured in LinkedIn and saw them as very efficient tools of personal branding. According to professionals, recommendations and endorsements support personal branding activities by giving visual, public proof of a professional's skills. Recommendations and endorsements, which are given by other LinkedIn users, also reveal who has reacted to a professional's personal branding measures. Professionals also highly recommended customizing the URL that leads to one's LinkedIn profile (e.g. www.linkedin.com/in/maaritgratschew). Customization makes the URL more memorable and increases the findability of the profile, which is advantageous for a personal branding practitioner. Planning was viewed as the backbone of personal branding. A personal branding plan is meant to keep a professional on track in the hectic online environment and it should entail the most important goals regarding personal branding. Not having a plan was seen as impractical and unrealistic. Professionals perceived being present and engaging in different activities in LinkedIn as the most important building block of personal brands and branding. Engaging in discussions, commenting and publishing postings in LinkedIn were seen as ways of showing that a professional is interested in others, respects the online community and is seriously building a personal brand. Being active in LinkedIn was seen as creating trust between the personal branding practitioner and the chosen target audience. It also gives a personal brand more visibility.

When it comes to the "don'ts" of personal branding, professionals advised not to have a LinkedIn profile only for the sake of being in LinkedIn. This is to say that they saw a significant difference between being in LinkedIn and actually using the platform for personal branding purposes. Not having a plan or not defining goals was seen as inadvisable. Professionals advised against having untruthful content in a LinkedIn profile, because it may have destructive effects on a professional's personal brand. LinkedIn should not be underestimated as a tool of personal branding. However, in order to practice effective personal branding, for example, to find employment, it is crucial that personal branding activities are begun already at an early stage and not when the need for action is immediate. Professionals warned that developing a well-branded LinkedIn profile will take some time and effort. Professionals also advised not to ignore some of the unwritten rules of conduct in LinkedIn, such as personalizing the invitations to connect. Sending an invitation without editing the default invitation text may be seen as

inconsideration and it may thus work against the goals of personal branding. An important finding was that professionals had varying and contradictory opinions of accepting and turning down invitations to connect in LinkedIn. One professional saw that it is unwise to connect with someone they do not know while another said turning down invitations is unwise, because accepting invitations equals promoting one's personal brand. One conclusion that was reached by this research was that each invitation should be treated separately and case-specifically by the receiver. Professionals warned not to seek personal advantages too frankly through personal branding in LinkedIn. Professionals should not share information that is useful and advantageous only to themselves, it should be that also to others. According to the professionals' perceptions, spamming connections with marketing materials in LinkedIn will likely be harmful to a personal brand. Professionals also said that negative commenting in discussions or leaving aggressive comments to postings is unadvisable. Inconsistencies should not be found in an effective LinkedIn profile and grammatical errors should be avoided and corrected in order to practice credible personal branding. Professionals stressed that LinkedIn should not be used like other social media; LinkedIn is not for posting about daily activities or sharing vacation pictures, it was seen first and foremost as a professional network. Finally, professionals did not perceive LinkedIn as an online resumé and saw that it should not be used as one. Instead, it should be used as an interactive and social channel for personal branding purposes.

The more negative issues regarding personal branding itself as a phenomenon did not come up in the research data very forcefully, but the mistakes that can be made by personal branding practitioners in LinkedIn were under extensive scrutiny. Professionals seem to have strong and direct views of how personal branding should be practiced. Interestingly, particular attention is given to certain areas and measures, such as the use of profile pictures in LinkedIn and their effects on personal branding.

One of the most interesting and important results of this study was that personal branding as a phenomenon and LinkedIn as a platform have many characteristics in common. *First*, both require constant attention and activities. *Second*, authenticity, honesty and truthfulness are prerequisites for success in both. *Third*, a personal brand and a good LinkedIn profile are both perceived as entires that require long-term commitment and activity in order to become truly effective and functional. These considerations partly explain why LinkedIn is often considered the best tool for personal branding in social media today.

Labrecque et al. (2010, 37-50) conducted a research which results indicated that many find personal branding interesting, but challenging at the same time, because there is not enough unambiguous information available of how it should be practiced. In the light of this research the circumstances seem to have since changed, as it seemed that professional

know how personal branding should be practiced, but still viewed it as a task that requires a lot of work and effort. Professionals recognized the need for personal branding, e.g. in LinkedIn. They were aware of the supposed advantages of personal branding, but also of the more challenging areas. For example, professionals knew how personal branding should be practiced in a planned and systematic manner, but they also felt pressure to commence personal branding activities.

The perception that these professionals had of personal branding in LinkedIn was quite unified and unanimous. There were not many negative views of personal branding, although the question of poor personal branding is reflected upon repeatedly. In general, professionals had many opinions of how personal branding is practiced correctly and incorrectly and they shared these opinions actively with others. Professionals who use LinkedIn for personal branding were well aware of the fact that personal branding should be practiced according to its rules. The sense of justice was high among the personal branding practitioners in LinkedIn. For example, copying contents from another user's profile and using it in one's own profile was condemned all along the line. Professionals expected authenticity from other personal branding practitioners. Telling the truth about prior work experiences and using a profile picture that is true to life were seen as very important. All in all, LinkedIn users perceived personal branding as an activity that should be respected by all of its practitioners.

The goal of this thesis was to find out how the professionals of different fields perceive personal branding in LinkedIn. Regardless of their field of expertise, professionals seemed to think that personal branding is almost a necessity for anyone who wants to find employment, proceed in their career or become seen as a worthy expert of their field. Authenticity was mentioned often in the research data, which suggested that professionals who use LinkedIn mostly agree with the message of Rampersad's Authentic personal branding model. The goal was also to find out, whether the perceptions of personal branding were in line with the theories and models that describe the phenomenon. The resemblance between the theories and the perceptions of professionals was very clear. There are only a few discrepancies. For example, some professionals saw personal branding as one part of using LinkedIn, while theories generally suggest that it is a larger phenomenon, not a separate activity. The biggest difference between the perceptions of professionals and theories is that professionals communicate their views and knowledge in a more down-to-earth and clear manner. On the whole, they also had good justifications for their opinions, for example in the discussion about profile pictures and their effects on personal branding.

Because modern personal branding is a rather new phenomenon, not many comprehensive and interpretative models of it are available. Personal branding practitioners, professionals and users of LinkedIn seemed to have a deeper and much more analytical view of

the phenomenon than what was offered in theories and models. These views have been shaped by their own experiences, which opens a refreshing and new kind of possibility to understand and describe personal branding that cannot be offered by theories or models.

There are certain conclusions that can be made of the results of this research. It was observed that the views of professionals who practice personal branding in LinkedIn were partly more advanced and analytical than those that were presented in theories. This implied that professionals want to know more about the phenomenon and truly take advantage of the benefits it can offer in LinkedIn.

As a researcher, I would not wish to conclude that personal branding is an unavoidable necessity to professionals of all fields. To many it surely is not, regardless of the almost uniformly positive views of professionals that were presented in this study. Based on the insight given by this research process and theories, it is still a relevant thought that the benefits of personal branding still are, to a large extent, profession- and person-specific. Personal branding should thus be used by those who truly see it as advantageous and positive. Personal branding should not be taken too seriously, because it is likely that then it will not be effective, authentic or even rational. It should be experienced as comfortable and at its best, a pleasant activity.

These findings can be used in creating a wider understanding of personal branding as a phenomenon. Hopefully the information, results and conclusions that are presented in this study can be of interest and aid to professionals who intend to engage in personal branding activities or want to learn more about it. According to Nessmann (2005, 381) the definitions and meanings of what a personal brand is and what personal branding is about are not clarified in the existing research sufficiently. Thus, this research offers new input to these topics through investigating them in the context of the social media platform LinkedIn and the perceptions of professionals who use it for personal branding purposes.

5.2 Evaluation of the research

The purpose and aim of this research was to study how professionals of different fields perceive personal branding in LinkedIn and whether that perception was in line with the theories and models that are available of the subject and presented in this study. The research data consisted of 23 LinkedIn postings that were written by professionals of different fields in LinkedIn. It turned out that this data served the purpose of this study well and its contents were useful and relevant. Although it was observed in the data gathering phase that the amount of posts concerning personal branding in LinkedIn was lower than

expected, the 23 postings that were found offered the amount of saturated data and information that was needed to generate a valid research and results. The postings of professionals and personal branding practitioners often included profound and multifaceted perceptions and opinions of personal branding and its “by-products”. The postings also complemented each other and the gaps in one posting were often filled in by the information that was found in another.

The reliability of an ethnographic research can be somewhat problematic, at least compared to more traditional methods of qualitative research. The extent and duration of field work is often considered one indicator of reliability. Still, it cannot be the only criterion, because each research has different, individual requirements for the duration and scope of fieldwork. (Kananen 2014, 182.) Personal branding is certainly an existing phenomenon with many identifiable themes. Furthermore, these themes and topics are found not only in the theories and models that were presented but also in the research data.

Generally, a research that can be repeated is considered as a valid research. Kananen (2014, 194) however says that in a humanistic, netnographic study, achieving repeatable and permanent research results is often challenging, because the studied phenomenon changes along with its environment. In anthropology, ethnography and also in netnography, the studied phenomena are mostly very dynamic and fluctuating. The research data that is gathered from environments of social media seldom stays unchanged. In this research, the methods and ways of observing the phenomenon have been described in as much detail as possible to achieve sufficient validity.

The research and the research data could have been broadened, for example, by conducting interviews with professionals who use LinkedIn. Processing the vast research data manually was laborious as it was and thus broadening the data was not seen as a realistic possibility considering the resources and time that were available for the research. Instead of gathering as much data as possible, this research concentrated on ensuring that the data was relevant and offers a *ticked* description of the phenomenon that was studied (Kananen 2014, 93). Earley et al. (2014, 262 - 263) explain that a *ticked* description means that the data offers a rich and thick description of the studied phenomenon and a detailed representation of the perceptions that the cultural members of a certain online community have of the phenomenon at hand. The research data that was used has been stored both in an electronic format and as a printed document, so that it will be available if there is any need for reviewing.

According to Nessmann (2005, 384) the field of communication and public relations is likely in a key role in the future as an expert body regarding personal branding and the counselling that is required to practice it. Thus the results and information that are presented in

this study may offer views and guidelines also particularly for communication and public relations professionals. Nessmann (2005, 391) adds that communication and public relations professionals must gather information of personal branding and the surrounding subjects in order to be able to serve as communications advisors for personal branding practitioners now and in the future. Personal branding includes challenging areas that require the sound judgment and expert opinions of communication and public relations professionals.

5.3 Directions for future research

Examining personal branding is challenging, because it is yet a very abstract and uncharted subject, especially theoretically. So far, most literature and articles have quite a unilateral perspective of the subject, which speaks mostly for the revolutionary change, advantages and success personal branding is expected to deliver. Again, this is to say that there are still a lot of areas in personal branding which have not been yet studied.

An interesting view to personal branding is offered by Vitberg (2009, 10) from the field of professional service marketing, where employees' expertise and know-how are sold to various customers with a promise to solve their problems. On the field of professional service marketing, it is important for both the employee and the employer that the employees have personal brands, which attract potential customers to acquire their services. Thus, employees with well-planned personal brands convey status also to their employers (Olins 2011, 10). Studying the benefits that employers may receive through the personal brands of their employees could be an interesting research subject for the further and deeper investigation of personal branding.

Another subject for further research on personal branding should be the downsides and negative effects it may cause to practitioners in the future, as they are still seldom discussed, at least by professionals who use LinkedIn. Social media was initially welcomed with enthusiasm and carelessness and many of its flaws were not discovered until later. By then, all kinds of damage had already happened, regarding privacy and publicity issues, for example. Personal branding, particularly the type that is practiced in online environments, will likely encounter similar stumbling blocks.

Volatility and change are known characteristics of social media and that is why research results of online personal branding can become outdated very quickly. Some type of alternative futures research could thus offer interesting insights into the subject. Also, there is a lot of advice on how personal branding should be practiced, but that much discussion

about how its effectiveness and successfulness could be measured. It would be interesting to study the ways in which individuals can track and analyze how effective their personal branding is and whether there are tools that could be developed for this purpose.

This research might be complemented by a further study of the views that recruiters and employers have of personal branding. Investigating their opinions and perceptions through surveys or interviews would likely offer another point of view to the subject. In conclusion, personal branding is still a rather uncharted phenomenon which offers many interesting challenges and scenarios also for future studies.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Information of the LinkedIn postings that were used research data

Posting number	Posting headline	Title of the writer in LinkedIn	Link to posting
1	The Art of personal branding on LinkedIn	Career Coach Personal Branding Trainer/ Speaker	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140313142021-89397185-the-art-of-personal-branding-on-linkedin
2	Personal branding on LinkedIn: 11 mistakes to avoid	Digital Marketing Director / Passionate about digital marketing	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140617042831-25477418-personal-branding-on-linkedin-11-mistakes-to-avoid
3	Personal Branding - LinkedIn	Owner & Founder - Pro Resume Write - Professional Resume Writing Services	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140620193447-52126328-personal-branding-linkedin
4	Is it better to use glamour shots for personal branding on LinkedIn?	High Tech & Inspirational Career Coach Helping Professionals Transform Their Career & Brand Founder+CEO	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/better-use-glamour-shots-personal-branding-linkedin-vicki-morris
5	10 LinkedIn Experts Share Their Tips and Tricks	I help you identify online goals & I help you achieve them using / web design / content marketing / conversion optimization	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/ten-linkedin-experts-shares-tips-tricks-steve-cartwright
6	Is Your LinkedIn Profile Sending Distress Signals?	Executive Branding Coach Speaker: My marketing communications savvy makes your LinkedIn profile & business story shine	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/your-linkedin-profile-sending-distress-signals-carol-kaemmerer
7	It's about Social Relationships Not Social Selling	Awarded Digital Marketing Strategist Social Branding Expert SEO Trainer LinkedIn Trainer Social Media Trainer	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/its-social-relationships-selling-jasmine-sandler
8	Six reputation killers on LinkedIn	Executive Branding Coach Speaker: My marketing communications savvy makes your LinkedIn profile & business story shine	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20141020222834-40209324-five-reputation-killers-on-linkedin
9	5 reasons LinkedIn is critical for virtually all professionals	Director of Digital Media, Professor, Pastor	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/5-reasons-linkedin-critical-virtually-all-george-konetes

10	Stop endorsing people you don't know on LinkedIn!	Digital Marketing Director / Passionate about digital marketing	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140516035034-25477418-stop-endorsing-people-you-don-t-know-on-linkedin
11	New year - new personal brand	Global CEO / Speaker/ Entrepreneur /enabling LinkedIn for you	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/new-year-personal-brand-marketing-award-winning-b2b-social-media
12	Tempted to Copy Another LinkedIn Profile? 7 Reasons Not To	Executive Resume Writer, Personal Branding Expert Dazzling LinkedIn Profiles Executive Job Search Author	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140827150254-14212868-tempted-to-copy-another-linkedin-profile-7-reasons-not-to
13	Electrify Your Personal Brand in Your LinkedIn Summary	Executive Resume Writer, Personal Branding Expert Dazzling LinkedIn Profiles Executive Job Search Author	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140630131503-14212868-electrify-your-personal-brand-in-your-linkedin-summary
14	"Old school" ways to increase your brand presence	Career Strategist 6 Figure Executive Career Coach Outplacement Brand Amplifier, Author and Speaker	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/some-old-school-ways-increase-your-brand-presence-john-m-o-connor?trk=mp-reader-card
15	Personal branding: how to attract recruiters?	Managing Director	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/personal-branding-how-attract-recruiters-j%C3%A9r%C3%B4me-joseph-remeur
16	7 tips to developing your personal brand	Helping all kinds of organisations attract, engage & retain customers for profitable business growth	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/7-tips-developing-your-personal-brand-rachael?trkSplashRedir=true&forceNoSplash=true
17	3 Quick Tips to Resurrect Your LinkedIn Profile	Communications Officer	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/3-quick-tips-resurrect-your-linkedin-profile-biriwasha
18	LinkedIn does work!	Researcher at a social media company	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/linkedin-does-work-alice-lyubik?forceNoSplash=true
19	Do's and Don'ts When Using LinkedIn	Social Media Manager	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140914100302-337594420-do-s-and-don-ts-when-using-linkedin
20	Boost Your Personal Brand by LinkedIn	IT Strategist Technology Leader Digital Enthusiast	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140926094652-51199626-stunning-linkedin-profile-boost-your-personal-brand
21	LINKEDIN TRAINING TIPS FROM A PROFESSIONAL LINKEDIN SPEAKER	Registered and Approved Growth Coach Winning Pitch Coach Leadership Management Training	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/linkedin-training-from-professional-speaker-dr-mark-david-yates

22	Getting Your Ducks in a Row: A Primer on LinkedIn Skills	Executive Branding Coach Speaker: My marketing communications savvy makes your LinkedIn profile & business story shine	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/getting-your-ducks-row-primer-linkedin-skills-carol-kaemmerer
23	Still Hoping to Charm with Your Skeletal Profile?	Executive Branding Coach Speaker: My marketing communications savvy makes your LinkedIn profile & business story shine	https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/still-hoping-charm-your-skeletal-profile-carol-kaemmerer?trkSplashRedir=true&forceNoSplash=true

Appendix 2. The complete Brand Identity Planning Model by David A. Aaker (1996)

