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*Kati Koivunen*

# CO-CREATING PROFESSIONAL BRAND IDENTITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN A CAREER TRANSITION

*UNIVERSITY OF OULU GRADUATE SCHOOL;*
*UNIVERSITY OF OULU,*
*OULU BUSINESS SCHOOL*

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# CO-CREATING PROFESSIONAL BRAND IDENTITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN A CAREER TRANSITION

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### *Abstract*

This dissertation explores human brand identity co-creation among “average professionals” dealing with career transitions—a career stage when issues of identity are particularly salient. Drawing from the multidisciplinary literature on human brand, brand co-creation, and identity work—and empirical research—a conceptual framework is presented to understand the phenomenon in the context of social media.

The results from semi-structured interviews of 18 professionals who had a successful career transition and were highly engaged in at least one form of social media activity at the time of their interview show that professionals co-create their human brand identities through a dynamic reciprocal process with human and non-human stakeholders as well as future audiences. The interview themes are arranged in a conceptual framework that describes three main processes: constructing the professional brand identity, managing brand identity tensions through identity work, and becoming a professional brand.

By proposing a conceptual framework, this dissertation represents the first study of the human brand identity co-creation of professionals in the social media context. The findings from this study make several contributions to the current branding literature. First, this study develops a framework that conceptualizes the process of professional brand identity co-creation on social media. Second, it analyzes professional brand identity as a dynamic and ongoing social process of co-creation. Third, it empirically examines the individual brand identity negotiation process and identity work involved in professional brand identity co-creation. Finally, it increases understanding of the outcome that professional brand identity construction may have for the individual.

The study also has practical implications as it highlights the importance of identity tensions and identity work in the process of professional brand identity co-creation. Professionals who consciously engage in identity work processes can benefit from enhanced career resilience and an increased sense of belonging.

*Keywords:* brand co-creation, brand identity, career transition, identity work, personal brand, professional brand, professional identity, social media

**Koivunen, Kati, Asiantuntijan brändi-identiteetin yhteisluominen sosiaalisessa mediassa urasiirtymissä.**
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## *Tiivistelmä*

Tämä väitöskirja tutkii asiantuntijan brändi-identiteetin yhteisluomista urasiirtymän aikana – vaiheessa, jossa identiteettikysymykset ovat keskeisiä. Henkilöbrändiä, brändin yhteisluomista ja identiteettityötä käsittelevän monitieteisen kirjallisuuden sekä empiirisen tutkimuksen pohjalta esitetään käsitteellinen viitekehys ilmiön tarkasteluun sosiaalisen median kontekstissa.

Tulokset 18 urasiirtymän sosiaalisen median avulla tehneen asiantuntijan puolistrukturoiduista haastatteluista osoittavat, että asiantuntijan brändi-identiteetti on dynaaminen prosessi, joka rakentuu vuorovaikutuksessa sidosryhmien kanssa. Haastatteluteemat on järjestetty käsitteelliseksi viitekehykseksi, joka kuvaavat kolmea pääprosessia: asiantuntijan brändi-identiteetin rakentumista, brändi-identiteettijännitteiden hallintaa identiteettityön avulla ja asiantuntijabrändiksi tulemista.

Tämä väitöskirja edustaa ensimmäistä tutkimusta asiantuntijabrändi-identiteetin yhteisluomisesta sosiaalisen median kontekstissa. Tutkimus edistää brändimarkkinoinnin kirjallisuutta lisäämällä ymmärrystä henkilöbrändeistä ja brändin yhteisluomisesta neljällä tavalla: (1) kehittämällä viitekehyksen, joka käsitteellistää asiantuntijabrändi-identiteetin yhteisluontiprosessin, (2) analysoimalla asiantuntijan brändi-identiteetin rakentumista dynaamisena ja jatkuvana sosiaalisena yhteisluonnin prosessina, (3) tarkastelemalla empiirisesti yksilön brändi-identiteetin neuvotteluprosessia ja identiteetin yhteisluomiseen liittyvää identiteettityötä ja (4) lisäämällä ymmärrystä asiantuntijabrändi-identiteetin rakentumisen tuloksista yksilön näkökulmasta. Tutkimuksella on myös käytännön merkitystä, sillä se korostaa identiteettijännitteiden ja tietoisen identiteettityön merkitystä asiantuntijabrändäyksessä. Asiantuntijat, jotka tietoisesti osallistuvat identiteettityöprosesseihin, voivat hyötyä parantuneesta uramuutosketteryydestä ja lisääntyneestä yhteenkuuluvuuden tunteesta.

*Asiasanat:* asiantuntijabrändi, asiantuntijaidentiteetti, brändi, brändi-identiteetti, brändin yhteisluominen, henkilöbrändi, identiteettityö, sosiaalinen media, urasiirtymä

***Tämä kirja on omistettu Jadelle ja Maxille***

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This work highlights how we interrelate with others, and how the people we are connected to have an impact on what we can achieve. When we see the pursuit of a Ph.D. from this perspective, it is clear that it is not just an individual effort but something that happens within a community of practice. I learned a lot from this community, including practical knowledge about brand research, central ideas for this document, and feedback to help me improve. During my journey, this amazing crew had my back, keeping the inspiration flowing and support on tap whenever I hit a rough patch. Hence, I wish to emphasize that this accomplishment is not merely a reflection of my individual effort but rather the fruitful outcome of our collective collaboration.

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As you continue to grow and explore your own paths, always remember that your potential knows no bounds. Embrace your passions, overcome challenges, and never cease to believe in yourselves. My love and support will forever be with you on your journey toward fulfilling your own dreams. This dissertation is dedicated to you.

Tornio, June, 2023

Kati Koivunen

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# 1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the research phenomenon by providing an example of the phenomenon in its empirical context and discussing the motivations for conducting this study. It also introduces the research gap, the purpose of the research, the research questions, and how they will be addressed. Additionally, the theoretical positioning of the study is discussed. Finally, this introduction presents the structure of the thesis.

## 1.1 Motivation for this study

> *"I have seen it [sharing work-related content on social media] as particularly important because I hope that my brand doesn't die while I'm not actively involved in work-life. I can still write and discuss work despite being on parental leave. Another point is that I see communicating on social media as a counterweight to life at home. It's nice to be part of professional communities and follow what's going on in the field." (N2).*

The capture above comes from Lisa, a 35-year-old human resources professional whose name has been changed here. For a few years, she had been planning a career transition that was realized during her parental leave. Hopping off a corporate position and starting a business of her own was a dream come true as she wanted to dedicate more time to her family and work on things that she found inspirational. During her previous career transition a few years ago, she started to use LinkedIn to connect with industry peers, potential employers, and colleagues. By actively sharing content, she had quickly become one of the trusted thought leaders in her field, and her posts reached hundreds of views and initiated reactions on LinkedIn. Her active social media presence had not only provided Lisa with the possibility of the career transition from a paid position to an entrepreneur, but it had also enhanced her professional self-confidence and secured her a smooth transition to an entrepreneur. However, in the middle of the career transition, she struggled to combine the fresh identities of a parent and entrepreneur with the professional brand identity she had built on social media over the years, which made her feel confused about how to connect with her peers, her previous, present, and possible future employers, and other stakeholders in social media.

The situation described above is an example of the growing phenomenon of human brand identity co-creation (e.g., Centeno & Wang, 2017), which is often connected to the growth of social media (see, e.g., Labrecque et al., 2011) and an increasing number of career transitions (i.e., movements across jobs, roles, and/or organizations) (Gandini, 2016; Lair et al., 2005). For a professional—defined here as an individual who participates in the processes of a professional community based on professional identity (Ibarra, 1999)—brand identity provides career-related benefits. It becomes particularly valuable in career transitions because developing a brand increases employability (i.e., one's ability to identify and realize career opportunities) (Khedher, 2019). Additionally, professionals are increasingly expected to be proactive (i.e., proactively involved) in crafting a human brand identity that helps them stand out in increasingly competitive career markets (Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005; Gandini, 2016).

In this study, a brand is referred to as a dynamic social process (Black & Veloutsou, 2017) arising from interactions between a professional and its stakeholders (Merz et al., 2009). Taking the concepts together, a professional brand is considered here as a dynamic social process initiated by a professional who interacts on social media in a professional capacity and as a part of his or her efforts to promote his or her professional and role identities to become well-known within his or her field of practice (e.g., Parmentier et al., 2013).

For any brand, constructing an identity is a critical practice (Aaker, 1996), particularly for a brand that is also human (Pluntz & Pras, 2020b). A brand identity is seen here as a dynamic process that emerges from continuous interaction in social contexts (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). Thus, interactions through which a professional connects with other professionals on social media can be seen as an important avenue for constructing a professional's human brand identity, referred to here as a professional brand identity. However, previous research (Molyneux et al., 2017; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017) on professional brands suggests that the construction of brand identity is closely related to personal identities and the notion is that brand identity construction is a more complex process for humans than it is for product brands.

This study focuses on professional brand identity in the social media context. Researchers have argued that the emergence of Web 2.0 is one of the catalysts of the human brand phenomenon as it offers tools that encourage individuals to share content (Labrecque et al., 2011; Karaduman, 2013). Social media, among other technological advances, allows multiple stakeholders (e.g., colleagues, peers, and employers) to contribute to the evolution of the professional brand identity through interactions (e.g., Sarasvuo et al., 2022), which are often referred to as brand co-creation (da Silveira et al., 2013; von Wallpach et al., 2017). In this study, brand co-creation is defined as *"[..] a process of intentional interaction between or among two or more parties that influences a brand*" (Sarasvuo et al., 2022, p. 544). Professional brand identity co-creation can thus be considered a process that includes two participants who take an active role in brand identity co-creation: the professional and the stakeholders (i.e., various actors who contribute to the professional brand identity construction process), who both have the possibility of mutually benefitting from the process (Sarasvuo et al., 2022).

In social media, the interaction can range from liking a post on Facebook to offering a job to a peer coping with a layoff on LinkedIn. For modern professionals, who more or less work and live in a digitally mediated world (Jacobson, 2020), professional brand identity co-creation is often seen as a professional-based responsibility (Labrecque et al., 2011) followed by positive outcomes, among which are social and cultural capital (Khedher, 2019; Gandini, 2016; Tarnovskaya, 2017), economic rewards (Rangarajan et al., 2017), and career opportunities (Parmentier et al., 2013; Schlosser et al., 2016). On the other hand, the stakeholders interacting with the professional can become such a powerful source of brand identity that recent research (Erz & Christensen, 2018; Preece & Kerrigan, 2015) has reported difficulties and identity tensions followed by the professional's attempts to keep the brand identity coherent. Table 1 summarizes the key concepts of the study.

**Table 1. The key concepts of the study.**

| The concept | The definition |
|---|---|
| Professional brand | A dynamic process initiated by a professional who interacts with others in a professional capacity and as a part of his or her efforts to promote his or her professional and role identities to become well-known within his or her field of practice (e.g., Parmentier et al., 2013). |
| Brand | A brand is a dynamic social process (Black & Veloutsou, 2017) arising from brand-based interactions between a brand manager and its stakeholders (Merz et al., 2009). |
| Brand identity | A social and developmental process (Suomi et al., 2020; da Silveira et al., 2013) emerging from interaction (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006). |
| Brand co-creation | "*[…] a process of intentional interaction between or among two or more parties that influences a brand*" (Saravuo et al., 2021, p. 543). |
| Identity work | A "*pursuit of coherent identities, where 'coherence' refers variously to individuals' sense of their own continuity over time, clarity in awareness of the connections between their multiple identities, a sense of completeness or wholeness, and embrace of the essentially integrated nature of their selves"* (Brown, 2015, p. 27). |

| The concept | The definition |
|---|---|
| Identity tensions | Intrapersonal struggles between the multiple personal identities including professional brand identity and/or between the brand identity definitions professionals attribute to themselves and the brand identity definitions provided by others (Kreiner et al., 2006; Chreim et al., 2007; Preece & Kerrigan, 2015.) |

## 1.2 Research gap and purpose of the study

This study's justification may be constructed on identifying three gaps that are addressed in this research. The gaps are revealed in the literature on human brand identity and brand co-creation.

### *Gap 1: Lack of human brand identity studies on non-celebrities*

The first gap is that the existing human brand research is mainly concentrated on celebrity brands that are commercialized as products (e.g., Dion & Arnould, 2016) or people in prestigious positions, such as CEOs (e.g., Bendisch et al., 2013). Despite the constantly growing interest in human brands (in 2019, 31 articles about human brands were published) (Levesque & Pons, 2020), there is very little research that looks at the identity construction process of a human brand that has no celebrity status, such as a professional. Although Centeno and Wang (2017) expose glimpses of how the human brand identity co-creation process works in the case of celebrity brands (this is discussed in Section 2.1.2), there is a need for studies that acknowledge the differences between celebrity and non-celebrity human brands (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019).

### *Gap 2: Undertheorized stakeholder and process perspectives*

The second gap is that the stakeholder and process perspectives have remained undertheorized in the branding literature (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016) and especially in discussions on human brands (Centeno & Wang, 2017). Despite the existence of a few contributions at the conceptual level (see, e.g., Osorio et al., 2020), there are relatively few empirical studies addressing the dynamic process of human brand identity co-creation. The co-creation process that includes stakeholders (i.e., all of whom may have an interest in the role, performance, and behavior of the brand; see Dumont & Ots 2020, p. 118) in relation to human brands has only been analyzed by a few authors (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Dumont & Ots, 2020; Erz & Christensen, 2018; Preece & Kerrigan, 2015; Parmentier et al., 2013), and there are calls to gain more knowledge about the stakeholder impact and involvement in human brand co-creation.

Further, it has been suggested that, as an emerging literature stream in the field of brand management, human brands can challenge the traditional approaches (Iglesias et al., 2020), which still often view brands as static and having one sole author. Additionally, although professional brand identity co-creation is carried on constantly (Jacobson, 2020, p. 722) on social media, there is a lack of studies that focuses on the process particularly relating to social media (see Erz & Christensen, 2018; Smith & Fischer, 2020). Social media is an interesting context for brand research because of its co-creational nature (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012) and specific social dynamics that might characterize online multi-stakeholder co-creation that cannot be observed in offline environments (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013).

### *Gap 3: Lack of studies focusing on the individual experiences and outcomes*

Third, the extant academic human brand discussion often overlooks individual experiences (Parmentier & Fischer, 2020) and outcomes of human brand co-creation (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). While brand researchers have emphasized that brand co-creation may result in diverse outcomes (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2016) since those are regarded as subjective from the standpoint of the beneficiary (i.e., the professional) and there are differing viewpoints on what is co-created and by whom (Sarasvuo et al., 2022), the individual process and its outcomes have remained under-researched topics in the context of human brands.

### *Purpose of the study*

Regarding human brand identity co-creation, the above-mentioned gaps show that more research is needed to extend the literature. Despite its exploratory nature, this dissertation is not a pre-study, as the purpose of this research is to understand professionals' human brand identity construction on social media in a career transition. To address the research purpose, the following main research question is posed: How do professionals construct their human brand identity on social media in a career transition?

The sub-questions aiming to partially solve the main research question are: (1) How do professionals describe the process of brand identity construction on social media in a career transition? (2) How do professionals experience the intrapersonal tensions that are involved in professional brand identity co-creation? (3) How do professionals solve the identity tensions involved in professional brand identity co-creation? (4) How do professionals experience the outcomes of professional brand identity construction? Table 2 presents the relationship between research gaps, research questions, and research contributions.

**Table 2. The relation between research gap, contribution, and question.**

| Research gap | RQ | Research contribution |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Lack of human brand studies on non-celebrities. | How do professionals describe the process of brand identity construction on social media in a career transition? | Develop a framework that conceptualizes the process of professional brand identity co-creation on social media. |
| Undertheorized stakeholder and process perspectives. | How do professionals experience the intrapersonal tensions that are involved in professional brand identity co-creation? How do professionals solve the identity tensions involved in professional brand identity co-creation? | Analyze professional brand identity construction as a dynamic and ongoing social process of co-creation. |
| Lack of studies focusing on individual experiences and outcomes of co-creation. | How do professionals experience the outcomes of professional brand identity construction? | Understand the individual brand identity negotiation process and identity work involved in professional brand identity co-creation. Understand the outcomes that professional brand identity construction may have for the individual. |

The first question, "How do professionals describe the process of brand identity construction on social media in a career transition?" aims to understand the sub-processes through which professionals dealing with career transition construct their brand identities in the context of social media. The answer is found by reviewing the literature on human brand identity and human brand co-creation. The relevant literature is synthesized and evaluated to develop a conceptual framework for the process of professional brand identity co-creation. This is then used as a lens to look at the empirical data which consisted of "average professionals" who have acquired a career transition with the help of their brand's visibility on social media and therefore can arguably be said to have co-created a professional brand identity (see Parmentier & Fisher, 2020; Gorbatov et al., 2018). Furthermore, it has been argued that constructing a human brand does not come naturally as "*it takes practice, training, and tools*" (Vallas & Christin, 2018, p. 13). Therefore, a particular focus is on those processes and strategies that (1) are available for "average professionals" who do not possess special resources (as celebrities do), such as PR staff, and (2) that are conventional to social media channels that are publicly (and often freely) available for "average professionals," such as LinkedIn.

The second research question, "How do professionals experience the intrapersonal tensions that are involved in professional brand identity co-creation?" seeks to provide new knowledge on how human brands experience the process of brand identity co-creation and the intrapersonal challenges and tensions followed by the process. An extensive literature study on human brand co-creation combined with the identity work literature provides a lens through which the empirical data is analyzed.

The third research question, "How do professionals solve identity tensions involved in professional brand identity co-creation?" extends the answer to the second research question. It focuses on revealing those identity work strategies that are used to solve identity tensions and establish a coherent human brand identity. The fourth and final research question, "How do professionals experience the outcomes of professional brand identity construction?" is empirical in nature. It concentrates on exploring the outcomes that the professionals felt they had acquired due to brand identity construction in a career transition on social media.

Altogether, the research questions provide the answer to the purpose of the research and include "*potential for an empirical response and a novel insight that adds significantly to – or against – previous understandings*" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1268). In so doing, the study contributes to the theory development of branding by:

1. Developing a framework that conceptualizes the process of professional brand identity co-creation on social media
2. Analyzing professional brand identity construction as a dynamic and ongoing social process of co-creation
3. Understanding the individual brand identity negotiation process and identity work involved in professional brand identity co-creation

4. Understanding the outcome(s) that professional brand identity co-creation may have for the individual.

The first contribution extends the view of human brand identity by addressing the unique features of non-celebrity human brands and offering a new concept of professional brand identity and building a theoretical framework of professional brand identity co-creation. The research contribution is approached through an iterative process of linking theory and empirical data. Since it is important to understand the reality in which non-celebrities co-create their human brand identities, the research setting of this study differentiates from previous studies. Instead of focusing on celebrities or professionals working in a particular organization and/or holding prestigious posts (see Parmentier & Fisher, 2020), this study uses data that is collected from professionals who have diverse professions, professional backgrounds, and career settings. To get an understanding of human brand identity co-creation of non-celebrities, this study focuses on professionals who are not commercialized entities sold as products in the marketplace but who proactively manage their careers through branding.

The second research contribution extends the view of human brand identity co-creation by analyzing it as a d*ynamic and ongoing social process* (da Silveira et al., 2013; von Wallpach et al., 2017; Iglesias et al., 2013). The theoretical framework is used as a tool to analyze the professional brand identity co-creation process and the stakeholders involved in the process. By doing that, this study shows how the brand co-creation perspective (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) applies to other realms beyond the product brands where it has originally been developed. In this study, professionals interacting on social media offer an empirical site for exploring the brand identity co-creation between a human brand and the stakeholders.

The third research contribution extends the view of human brand identity by building an understanding of the negotiation of professional brand identity. This is done via identifying individual identity tensions (e.g., Erz & Christensen, 2018; Preece & Kerrigan, 2015) involved in human brand identity co-creation and explaining how these tensions are solved by the professional. By highlighting identity tensions as an inevitable part of human brand identity construction, the dynamic nature of human brand identity co-creation is acknowledged. The fourth research contribution extends the view of human brand identity by addressing the outcomes of the professional brand identity construction process. As a result, the individual outcomes of brand identity co-creation in the context of human brands will be more broadly understood. In the following section, the theoretical discussions positioning the research are addressed.

## 1.3 Positioning of the study

This study belongs to the discipline of marketing, and more precisely, to its sub-discipline of branding. However, the thesis's focus is explored from two theoretical perspectives: marketing and organization research. Simultaneously, these standpoints provide two different lenses through which to explain the phenomenon. The first lens discusses the concept of human brand identity and adopts a stakeholder-oriented perspective. The second lens provides an understanding of the processual aspects of an individual’s identity construction.

The adoption of concepts or theories from organizational research into brand research is not uncommon. Previously, corporation brand co-creation studies have combined corporate branding discussion with organization and management research (see, e.g., Schmeltz & Kjeldsen, 2019). Here, the particular idea in adopting concepts from organization research is that they have the ability to explain professional brand identity construction which cannot be as effectively done by using only theories from marketing research. This is because the conceptualizations and frameworks of identity within the marketing literature have mostly developed around products (e.g., Aaker 1996) or organizations (Kapferer, 2012), which are, unlike humans, generally understood to be relatively fixable and stable (Michel, 2017). Consequently, human brand researchers (e.g., Bendisch et al., 2013) have questioned the applicability of those conceptualizations, and different characteristics (e.g., mortality, hubris, unpredictability, and authenticity) have been used to explain the uniqueness of a human brand (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). To create a comprehensive understanding of human brand identity, this study acknowledges the special characteristics of human brands.

The key premise of the main theoretical approach of this study, brand co-creation, is that brands are developed in interaction with their stakeholders (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) with whom the brand managers negotiate the identity attributes (Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013). Notably, in this dissertation, brand co-creation is presented, similar to identity work, as a *perspective.* The brand co-creation perspective is found to be relevant in examining the stakeholders’ role in constructing human brand identity by previous research (Centeno & Wang, 2017).

Human brand research focuses mainly on the individual as the core of the creation of the brand (Dumont & Ots, 2020), as the agency of the brand is considered being on the person who owns the brand. However, the current research that relates brands and new technologies, such as social media (e.g., Swaminathan et al., 2020), suggests that brands are co-created by stakeholders along with brand owners. The co-creation approach has increasingly been used in brand research (Sarasvuo et al., 2022) and mostly in studies that focus on the involvement of the stakeholders in the co-creation of the branding processes of a company (see e.g., Iglesias et al., 2020). Due to the specific characteristics of human brands, the suggestions from those studies cannot be applied as such. However, the results from the few studies (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Black & Veloutsou, 2017) that have applied the co-creation perspective on human brands support investigating it as a social construct. Within this perspective, the stakeholders are also co-creators of human brand identity. In the case of celebrities, the contribution of the stakeholders is essential as they possess resources and motivations within the activities that constitute a human brand (Centeno & Wang, 2017), and the reason for their involvement is to provide cultural (i.e., professional legitimacy), social (i.e., networks, connections) and economic (i.e., monetary benefits) value (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015). Stakeholders also play a key role in constructing a professional brand. In career transitions, professionals primarily seek to engage and interact with those stakeholders who can provide them with career-related advantages, such as collaboration possibilities, partnerships, industry insights, and jobs. These include past, current, and potential colleagues (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015), industry influencers, (e.g., agents; see Parmentier et al., 2013), customers (Cederberg, 2017), journalists, and potential collaborators (Dumont & Ots, 2020).

Choosing the co-creation perspective as the main theoretical approach of this study develops brand co-creation research by examining the previously under-researched context of human brands. In addition, it provides a better understanding of human brand identity construction in the context of social media. Although social media is characterized by continuous change (see e.g., Scolere et al., 2018), the basic characteristics – the possibility to share content with the masses and build sociability – persist. For this reason, in this study, it is important to take a view broader than single platforms and try to explore human brand identity co-creation that is not bound to the specific technological affordances of single sites but is enabled by social media (see Swaminathan et al., 2020) due to its ability to reach different audiences. (The platforms used by the participants of this study are summarized in Table 5.) Not only does social media offer a realm for professional brand identity co-creation, but it also helps to understand the stakeholders' role in the process.

Although brand co-creation emerges from the interaction between two parties (von Wallpach et al., 2017), this study views the phenomenon solely from the professional's perspective. In the case of professional brands, there are two valid reasons to examine co-creation as a single individual may experience it. First, the context of this study, social media, is described as co-creational (Swaminathan et al., 2020) because it is based on human interaction (such as likes and comments), which is regarded as inherent for brand co-creation (von Wallpach et al., 2017). In the case of professional brands, this means that once the professional decides to use social media for career transition purposes, his or her brand identity automatically becomes a subject of co-creation. In this sense, professionals expose their brand identities consciously and intentionally to co-creation. Thus, in analyzing the empirical data, it became important to understand the ways an individual professional engages in and enhances the interaction between himself or herself and the stakeholders on social media.

Second, a closer examination of the empirical data revealed the unpredictability of the stakeholders' reactions to the interaction and the individual outcomes followed by those reactions. Therefore, although brand co-creation is often seen as a *process of intentional interaction* (Sarasvuo et al., 2022) between two parties (Wallpach et al., 2017), this study acknowledges that social media can generate unintentional and highly individual elements in the human brand identity construction process that differs from analogous environments. After collecting and analyzing the empirical data, it was noted that human brand identity co-creation, in the case of professionals, included internal identity tensions (i.e., forces that simultaneously pull people in two (or more) directions). Thus, it became important to acknowledge the complexities and contextual idiosyncrasies that individuals in career transition subjectively encounter, as they modify their brand identity regarding fluid personal identities (see Ibarra, 1999), different audiences (see Dumont & Ots, 2020), changing circumstances (see Rangarajan et al., 2017), and shifting social media platforms (see Scolere et al., 2018). By concentrating on the professional's viewpoint and experiences in co-creation, it is possible to make visible the intrapersonal process generated by the co-creation of human brand identity.

This meant also exploring how individual identity tensions related to the brand identity construction process and how the tensions are solved. This notion led to a closer examination of the identity work perspective (Ibarra, 1999; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), which in previous studies (e.g., Beech et al., 2012) found an appropriate way to explain an individual's reactions to identity tensions. Identity work refers to an inherently dynamic process of human identity construction (Brown, 2021) in and through interaction with others (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006). In this dissertation, the identity work concept is used as a perspective, meaning *"a general view on a specific set of identity-related matters*" (Brown, 2021, p. 1213) and, thus, is broader than a single theory. Conducting the literature review revealed that identity work was not addressed by existing studies on human brands. Because identity work has been studied primarily in the organizational context, this study concentrates on studies that best fit the context of the study – identity work with a focus on professional identity construction. In bringing the perspective of identity work (Ibarra, 1999; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) from organizational research into discussions within the marketing literature, this study shows that human brand identity needs to be seen as a dynamic process where identity tensions and resolving the tensions vary. By adopting the identity work perspective, instead of increasing understanding of being a human brand, this study focuses on the human brand as "*becoming*" as originally suggested by Centeno and Wang (2017), who argued that human brand identity can be described as becoming because it results from social construction.

As summarized in Figure 1, this dissertation approaches professional brand identity co-creation by using studies on brand identity within human brand and brand co-creation research. They are complemented by the relevant literature on identity work and social media research.

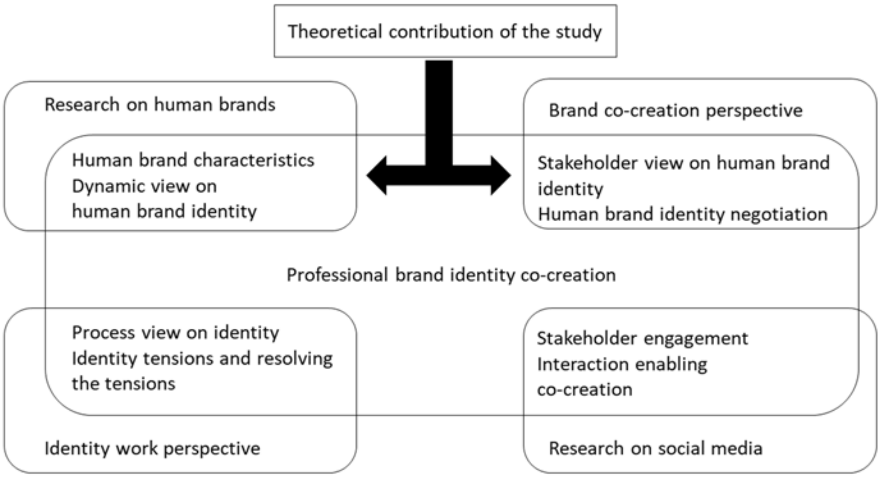


**Fig. 1. Theoretical positioning of the study.**

The major contribution of this study is a more profound understanding of the professional brand identity co-creation concept, specifically concerning (1) dynamic human brand identity, (2) stakeholder contribution, (3) brand identity tensions, and (4) individual outcomes of the human brand identity co-creation process. This study contributes to the theory development of human brand identity by exploring it in the context of professionals, which has not been sufficiently addressed in the existing studies. The context of professionals enabled the exploration of human brands that are not commercially similar to celebrities (see Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) or artists (see Preece & Kerrigan, 2015). Additionally, the study contributes to the theory development of co-creation studied within branding by increasing understanding of the interaction between the brand and the stakeholders, particularly in the context of social media. Moreover, for professionals, this study provides useful implications when building a human brand on social media in a career transition.

## 1.4 Structure of the study

This dissertation which explores professional brand identity co-creation consists of six main parts complemented by the introduction and conclusion chapters. The overview of the structure is presented in Figure 2. In the following, each chapter is described in more detail.

Chapter 1 presents the motivation and the key concepts of the study. It also provides details of the context of the study, social media. Justification of the study is demonstrated by identifying three “gaps” that are addressed in this research and discussing the purpose of the study. Research questions and their relations to the research gap and research purpose are presented. Finally, the study’s theoretical position is described and discussed.

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on human brand identity to highlight the human brand characteristics and dynamic view of the human brand. The first section gives the pre-understanding for looking at human brand identity. In addition, the chapter discusses the human brand in relation to social media and career transition. The second section examines the literature on brand co-creation. The focus is on the stakeholders and the brand co-creation processes which concentrate on interacting with the stakeholders. The third section addresses compatible identity work perspectives for studying professional brand identity co-creation. Finally, it provides a tentative conceptual framework for professional brand identity co-creation.

Chapter 3 presents the qualitative research perspective based on the social constructivist viewpoint and the main tenets of the social constructivist methodology. The chapter explains the qualitative investigation as a research approach that uses experiences as the basic data more in detail.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the results of the empirical data analysis. The results are organized theme by theme starting from the theme of “Constructing professional brand identity,” continuing to the representation of the theme of “Managing brand identity tensions through identity work,” and finally to the theme of “Becoming a professional brand.”

Chapter 7 elaborates on the main constituents of professional brand identity co-creation. The chapter starts by pointing out the most relevant findings of this study. It also discusses the applicability of the brand co-creation approach on human brands and demonstrates the identity work approach. The chapter introduces a new concept, “Becoming a professional brand” which outlines the dynamic and future-oriented nature of professional brand identity co-creation. Finally, the conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2 is revisited and developed.

Chapter 8 presents the theoretical and practical contributions. It also offers recommendations for future research as well as a discussion of the study's limitations and critical assessment.

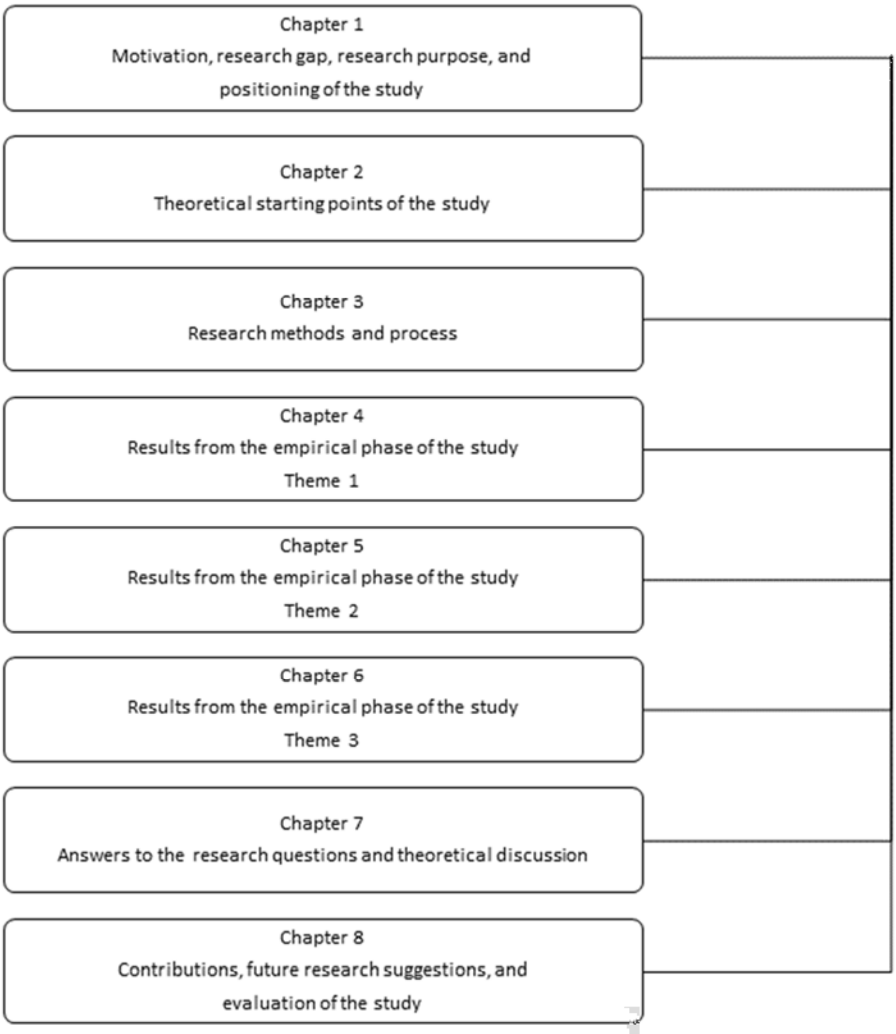


**Fig. 2. Structure of the study.**

# 2 Theoretical background

This chapter discusses the human brand identity co-creation which denotes an interaction between the human brand and the stakeholders initiated by the human brand in the context of social media. The chapter starts by creating an understanding of the existing knowledge in human brand research. First, the special features arising from the previous literature on human brand identity are explored, and the suggestions for the characteristics that are unique to brands that are also humans are discussed. Additionally, the human brand is discussed in relation to the context of this study – social media.

The second section connects human brand identity to brand co-creation and selects the three most relevant approaches (the stakeholders, stakeholder engagement, and brand identity negotiation) for a more detailed discussion that also addresses the interaction on social media. The third section presents the identity work perspective which is used to complement the branding literature.

To alleviate the progressive understanding of the conceptual framework, at the end of each (second level) section, a visual display of how ideas in a study related to another are provided. In this manner, the reader can follow the construction of the tentative conceptual framework presented in the final section 2.4.

## 2.1 Human brand as a multifaceted concept

The broadening of the brand concept to people was started by marketing icons Kotler and Levy (1969) by arguing that personas could be marketed similarly to products. The idea was brought into wider discussion by Peters (1997) who in a Fast Company web article encouraged people to brand themselves similarly to big brands like Nike stating that “Starting today you are a brand.” However, it was Thomson (2006) who first defined human brands, and since then, numerous academic studies from different disciplines, such as marketing (e.g., Shepherd, 2005), management (e.g., Schlosser et al., 2016), and psychology (e.g., Gorbatov et al., 2019) have addressed the phenomenon (see for a review Gorbatov et al., 2018; Osorio et al., 2020).

The term “human brand” (e.g., Osorio et al., 2020; Centeno & Wang, 2017; Moulard et al., 2015; Thomson, 2006) has many synonyms that are often used as parallel concepts, such as “personal brand” (e.g., Jacobson, 2020; Gorbatov et al., 2018), “person-brand” (e.g., Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Osorio et al., 2020), and “self-brand” (e.g., Erz & Christensen, 2018). However, the human brand is often used as a general term and often referred to any well-known or emerging persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts (Thomson, 2006; Close et al., 2011).

The concept has mostly been studied in the context of well-known human brands – celebrities (see e.g., Centeno & Wang, 2017; Thomson, 2006) – whose relation to branding differs from less-known persons, such as professionals. This study separates celebrities from professionals by focusing on professionals who apply brand strategies on themselves in search of professional advancement, referred to here as professional brands. Notably, until today, there is only one study that has used the term professional brand (Parmentier & Fischer, 2020). The context of the study is professionals working on high-profile jobs (i.e., creative directors in the field of high fashion). Although Parmentier and Fischer (2020) do not clearly define the professional brand concept, they draw distinctions between celebrities and professionals as brands by stating that "*celebrity entails being famous beyond a restricted field of endeavor, whereas professional branding typically does not*" (p. 2).

Whereas few studies argue that the role of a human brand is emphasized in the industries where the work results are public, such as sports (see Green, 2016), social media (see Jacobson, 2020), or journalism (see Holton & Molyneux, 2016), a professional brand can be seen essential for all professionals who possess specific, unique skills and knowledge (Kucharska & Mikolajczak, 2018), and seeks enhancement in employability (see Peters, 1997; Wee & Brooks, 2010; Manai & Holmlund, 2015; Gorbatov et al., 2019). For professionals, motivations for building a brand are self-improvement (Grénman et al., 2019), standing from the crowd (Labrecque et al., 2011; Parmentier et al., 2013), and interaction and networking (Gandini, 2016).

Recently, the academic literature on human brands (e.g., Parmentier & Fisher, 2020) has come to realize that the insights of product marketing cannot be applied to individuals, particularly to professional brands, as such. The overall challenge in studying professional brands is that professionals are not a homogenous group nor should they be treated as one (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). The discussion now turns to the key insights that have emerged from this research.

### *2.1.1 Human brand characteristics*

The degree of a product-like approach does not appear to adequately explain the various ways in which human brands are presented (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019).

Human brands can be regarded as more difficult to manage than product brands (Shepherd, 2005) and more prone to misdeeds that might harm their reputations (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Thus, recently, few studies have pointed out characteristics that are unique to human brands. Next, these characteristics are discussed in detail.

First, the most natural characteristic of a human brand is *mortality* as eventually the person in the human brand will die (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). In their case study of Martha Stewart (an American retail business owner and television personality) Fournier and Eckhardt (2019) referred to mortality as a source of economic brand risk, which should be managed by the brand managers in charge (i.e., instances that are managing the brand) by being prepared for the person's inevitable passing. Although this is a reality all human brands have to deal with, in the case of professional brands, a death typically implies the death of the whole brand, not needing to be handled posthumously by a separate brand manager. Thus, mortality is not necessarily an issue on its own, but merely a practical question of what happens to the channels where the professional has been showcasing the brand, such as social media accounts, after the passing. In the academic literature, this is referred to as a management of a "digital death" (see e.g., Moreman & Lewis, 2014) which includes backing up the data one wants to preserve, but also taking care of the accounts. Social media platforms have regulations and processes when dealing with death. One can nominate a "legacy contact" who manages the account after death. In Facebook, for example, the legacy contact can then decide either delete the passed person's account or leave the profile page up as a memorial (Moreman & Lewis, 2014).

The second aspect unique to human brands is *unpredictability*, which is regarded as the misalignment of the person and the brand (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). For example, in Martha Stewart's case, the core of the brand (perfection – Stewart as the perfect housewife and craftsperson, etc.) is embedded in a rhetoric of hominess, balance, and loving. However, in the public eye, Martha Stewart's real personality, which was revealed by those working closely with her (e.g., mistreatment of her staff), misaligned the managed brand. (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019.) Unpredictability can be dealt with by taking care of the consistency of the human brand (Osorio et al., 2020). This notion aligns with Wee and Brooks (2010) who state that: "*Someone whose personal brand involves being calm or humorous is thus expected to consistently project calmness or humor in all their relationships if their brand is to be a "strong" one*" (p. 53).

The third characteristic that the studies (e.g., Kucharska et al., 2020; Moulard et al., 2015) regard as essential for human brands is *authenticity.* As one of the most commonly studied brand characteristics (Osorio et al., 2020) in the context of human brands, authenticity, has various definitions. Broadly said, it refers to what is genuine, real, and true (Thomson et al., 2006; Moulard et al., 2015) and can be defined as a feeling and practice of being true to one's self and others (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Accordingly, authenticity can be considered an essential part of a professional brand as individuals who truly express their thoughts and present themselves sincerely and transparently, are found more credible and thus, succeed better professionally (Kucharska et al., 2020: Khedher, 2019). For example, in the context of graduate students, Khedher (2019) found that employability was positively affected by authenticity which consists of three elements: 1) Personal style (i.e., the distinct representation of an individual), (2) Sincerity (i.e., the degree of alignment between internal values and external manifestations), and (3) Integrity (i.e., behaving according to a moral perspective and ethical standards according to better build good social relationships and acceptance by the audience). Notably, in this study, authenticity is treated as a dynamic concept, linked to the term continuity which emphasizes "*becoming authentic instead of being authentic*" (Dammann et al., 2021, p. 2). The approach highlights the evolving nature of authenticity, the shifting interactions between a human brand and others, as well as the social conventions that shape the human brand's existence (Dammann et al., 2021).

### 2.1.2 A dynamic view on human brand identity

In the marketing literature, identity is seen as the core character of a brand (Aaker, 1996), an element, a brand does not exist without (Michel, 2017). Traditionally, researchers define brand identity in terms of intangible attributes and regard it as a static construct, as noted by Aaker (1996, p. 68) who describes brand identity as "*a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain.*" In general, a distinct brand identity can assist to highlight the brand's economic and functional benefits while also increasing perceived levels of important intangible linkages (Keller, 2013).

Identity is also considered a central element of a human brand (e.g., Labrecque et al., 2011; Centeno & Wang, 2017), as it refers to those characteristics that make a human brand unique Khedher (2019) and relevant to others (Pluntz & Pras, 2020a). However, as a research topic as well as in practice, human brand identity has proven to be quite elusive. Although the number of brand identity studies in the context of humans is small, there are debates about what identity consists of (see Osorio et al., 2020) and how it should be approached (see Gorbatov et al., 2019).

The extant human brand studies approach identity mainly by adopting conceptualizations that are originally developed in the context of product/service brands. In several papers, the researchers have been interested in the possible link between identity and image. Consequently, the human brand is often described as having two dimensions (described in Figure 3): what the brand intents to project to the target audience (desired identity) and the audience's reaction to it (perceived image) (Gandini, 2016; Gorbatov et al., 2018). The human brand's aim is then to try to close the gap between these two dimensions by communicating the desired identity to the audience. This is because any disparity between human brand identity and image damages the brand's trust (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015).

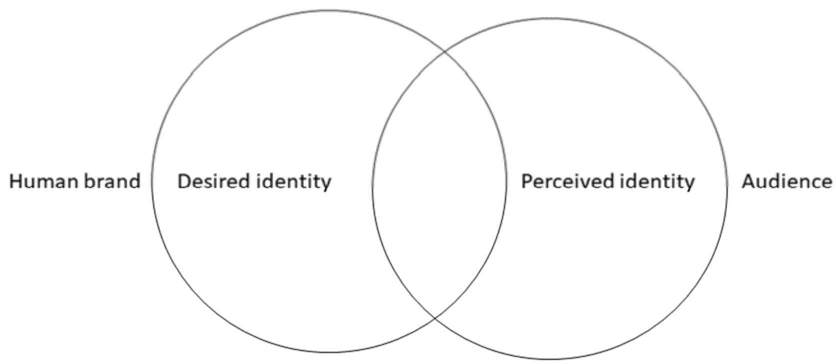


**Fig. 3. Static view on human brand identity.**

This kind of approach to human brand identity suggests that the identity is unilaterally determined by the individual (c.f. Kapferer, 2012) and constructed through a brand management process (e.g., Gehl, 2011; Jones & Leverenz, 2017; Edmiston, 2014; Ilies, 2018; Manai & Holmlund, 2015) where the individual controls the identity construction work. The process is often suggested starting with a profound self-analysis (Rangarajan et al., 2017; Edminston, 2014) about the person's core values and competencies, which are then connected with the human brand's mission and vision that eventually direct the brand's actions (see Rangarajan et al., 2017 for a detailed process description). The process aims to differentiate oneself from others in the job market (Labrecque et al., 2011; Close et al., 2011).

However, recently human brand researchers (Pluntz & Pras, 2020a; 2020b; Centeno & Wang, 2017) have contested this traditional view of brand identity as a stable and unilateral construct and emphasized its dynamic nature. For example, in their empirical study of four celebrity brands, Centeno and Wang (2017) argue that instead of being, human brand identities can be described as becoming a result of social construction involved in their creation. Drawing from this literature, three characteristics that are central to the dynamic view of human brand identity, particularly in the case of professionals are discussed.

The first is the *person-related characteristics*. For example, Bendisch et al. (2013) found that, in the case of CEOs, brand identity includes such human characteristics as appearance, lifestyle, and behavior. In practice, this means that every human brand identity is more or less unique.

The second characteristic is *co-existing personal identities*. Researchers (Bendisch et al., 2013; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017) have suggested that instead of one identity, human brand identity consists a variety of co-existing identities which vary in prominence depending on the person and situation. One of the few studies offering empirical evidence on this is Ottovordemgentschenfelde's (2017) study where she investigated 20 political journalists' Twitter profile pages and found that professionals were using "a hybrid strategy" as they were simultaneously reflecting three brand identities: the organizational, the professional, and the personal identities.

Although her view on brand identity represents the "*conventional conceptualization of brand identity*" (von Wallpach et al., 2017, p. 444), by referring to human brand identity as "*a set of attributes, beliefs, and values that indicate how the journalist defines him/herself in his/her role which is based on his strengths and uniqueness in relation to the expectations of a target audience*" (Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017 p. 7), the study illuminates human brand identity as contextual and socially embedded.

In the study, Ottovordemgentschenfelde (2017) argues that the human brand identity of a journalist reflects four different identities. First, *organizational brand identity* is actively communicated through a range of features on journalists' profile pages, such as bio statements. Secondly, journalists reflect their *professional identity* which is also actively broadcasted for example by stating their educational background in their Twitter biography. Additionally, unique professional expertise, such as "the author of a book" or previous employment are found relevant to mention on the Twitter profile as well as visuals, such as profile and background photos as they were reflecting the journalist's occupational value. Third, displaying *personal brand identity* was the most commonly occurring from these three forms of identity (i.e., organizational brand identity, professional identity, and personal brand identity) among journalists as they often mentioned personality attributes, individual traits, private details, and shared visuals, such as family snapshots, in the profile biography. Fourth, she (ibid.) found that *digital media skills* represent an additional kind of brand identity in journalist branding because that is generally found an important skill for this particular occupational field.

Bendisch et al. (2013) offer a more detailed notion of how a personal identity and professional identity are linked through human brand identity. They discovered in their empirical study of CEOs that it is crucial to consider not just personal identity but also role (i.e., management) identity, which are both vital to a CEO's human brand identity. CEOs must continually shape and restructure their identities as a result of the situation, social interaction, culture (see Watson, 1996), and/or identity of the organization for which they work (see Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Finally, because humans are inherently embedded in social relationships, for example, professionals with members of their professional community, a human brand identity is considered *socially embedded* (Pluntz & Pras, 2020a; Centeno & Wang, 2017). This approach views human brand identity as a flexible construct (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015) that is shaped by repeat interactions and negotiation with different stakeholders (Centeno & Wang, 2017). In the case of professionals, social embeddedness is often related to legitimatization (i.e., a feature that describes how a human brand is seen to correspond to a socially formed (professional) persona) (see, e.g., Pluntz & Pras, 2020b; Dion, 2013) Legitimatization is the process where the stakeholders, as sources of legitimacy, give their validation (see Dion & Arnould, 2016) to the professional after an evaluation of such attributes that are relevant to the context.

### *2.1.3 Human brand on social media in a career transition*

As said earlier in this study, the researchers on the human brand field (e.g., Labrecque et al., 2011; Vitberg, 2010; Karaduman. 2013; Harris & Rae, 2011; Gandini, 2016; Jacobson, 2020) have argued that the emergence of the Web 2.0 is one of the catalysts of the human brand phenomenon and that the development of a professional brand is highly depending on platforms that offer a wide range of tools to improve the professional presence in the networks (Brems et al., 2017;

Seidman, 2013). Consequently, there is a bunch of research dedicated to exploring the link between human brands and social media. Of the single social media platforms, Twitter seems to be the most popular channel for the research (e.g., Hedman, 2016; Brems et al., 2017). In addition, LinkedIn (Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavets, 2018), Instagram (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016), YouTube (Chen, 2013), blogs (Pihl, 2013), academic portals, such as Researchgate and Mendeley (Van Noorden, 2014), and emerging platforms such as TikTok (Ravikumar et al., 2021) are also covered in academic research. These studies focus on social media either as a driver for the human brand phenomenon (see e.g., Harris & Rae, 2011) or a tool that professionals use for communicating (see e.g., Brems et al., 2017) or branding (see e.g., Jacobson, 2020).

Although having a social media presence is considered essential in many careers, such as journalists (Hanusch & Burns, 2017), fashion models (Parmentier et al., 2013), librarians (Gall, 2012), sales executives (Rangarajan et al., 2017), academics (Close et al., 2011; Zamudio et al., 2013), chefs (Dion & Arnould, 2016), and social media managers (Jacobson, 2020), there is a lack of consensus whether it is equally important to all professionals. While some researchers argue that building a brand on social media has become a (forced) necessity for everyone throughout the job hierarchy in all professions (Labrecque et al., 2011) and all professionals who possess specific, unique skills and knowledge (Kucharska & Mikolajczak, 2018), others limit the need to particular professions. For example, Jacobson (2020) argues that a professional brand is increasingly important in professions that rely heavily on social media and Web 2.0 technology (e.g., social media managers) while it is less important in more traditional areas. Furthermore, it has been suggested that particularly the professionals higher in the job hierarchy, such as managers or CEOs, are obligated to develop their brand also on social media as it has a powerful effect on a corporation by enhancing goodwill, brand equity, brand attachment, and business culture (Chen & Chung, 2016).

Notably, scholars have also reported disadvantages caused by branding on social media. According to Jacobson, who termed “always-on-the-job-market” (p. 723) refers to a mentality where professionals are expected to be constantly “on” and available to address any issues that may arise with their brand’s social media presence or to take advantage of unexpected opportunities to promote the brand, social media can be both a blessing and a curse. On the other hand, it allows professionals to stay connected to their stakeholders and respond to their needs quickly. On the other hand, it can lead to blurring of the lines between work and personal life (Jacobson, 2020) which can be detrimental to a professional’s overall well-being. Whereas during face-to-face interactions individuals can adjust the information they share about themselves, social media blurs the boundaries between public, private, and professional selves (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Another viewpoint is the involuntary aspect of professional branding on social media. Professionals can perceive social media more or less as a compulsory part of work-life (Gandini, 2016) because the absence of a human brand could be interpreted as a lack of digital communication skills and complicated employment (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015) and networking with future employers (Jacobson, 2020). This can be distressing for those professionals who are not willing to brand themselves on social media.

In this study, social media is considered an enabler of interaction (Labrecque et al., 2011) between professional brands and stakeholders. In career transitions, the role of interacting through professional brands on social media has been seen as fundamental (Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque et al., 2011) as it offers various functions for professionals seeking career enhancement (Brubaker, 2020; Harris & Rae, 2011; Karaduman, 2013). The employment environment which favors part-time and contract-based work (see Lair et al., 2005) forces individuals to stand out and actively seek job opportunities (e.g., Gandini, 2016; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). It has been suggested that the ability to brand oneself on platforms like Twitter (e.g., Brems et al., 2017), YouTube (e.g., Chen, 2013), LinkedIn (e.g., McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012), and Facebook (e.g., van Dijck, 2013) can enhance career transitions (Edminston, 2014; Jones & Leverenz, 2017) and improve employability (see Gorbatov et al., 2019) of a professional. Moreover, branding is reasserted as emerging career competence requiring specific competencies, such as technological, metacognitive, creative, and critical skills (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Khedher (2019) takes this idea even further by regarding human branding in social media as "*a critical differentiator between the proactive and the reactive job seekers*" (p. 101). This suggests that professionals who actively engage in human branding on social media are categorized as "proactive." This proactive approach enhances their chances of being noticed by potential employers and gives them a competitive advantage in the job market.

Altogether the studies on human brands (e.g., Labrecque et al., 2011) suggest that professionals are responsible for their own success or failure in the work-life. This new standard might partly explain why a growing number of high schools, colleges, and universities offer career management courses that include branding for career success (see e.g., Jones & Leverenz, 2017; Ilies, 2018). The assumption is that, if correctly applied, a student from any field can transform into a brand on social media by adopting the techniques of product brand management (see e.g., Edminston, 2014). By highlighting their positive attributes that are valuable to such stakeholders as future employers, peers, and professors, the student can differentiate oneself from other individuals (Parmentier et al., 2013) and deliver market value (Hofmann et al., 2021) to the stakeholders. This provides access to networks and connections that further assist the student in career transitions.

Notably, in the case of professional brands, this approach means contrasting job markets to commodity markets where the economic mechanisms regulate supply and demand (see Peck, 1996). This observation leads to the question of whether commodities can be used as an analogy to the job market. Gershon (2016) points out this conflict by questioning whether metrics or other data can serve as the base of adequate market information for comparing different applicants or whether purchasing labor-power is equivalent in nature to purchasing any other form of commodity. Also, juxtaposing the job market with commodity markets means treating all jobs as uniform in nature of the job or the conditions of the workplace, which is not the case in the real world. Thus, constructing a professional brand, which operates mainly in the context of work-life, is a more versatile phenomenon where the stakeholders cannot be generalized into one group that has authority or power over the human brand.

### *2.1.4 Summary of human brand characteristics*

Figure 4 summarizes both the characteristics that are unique to human brands (i.e., mortality, unpredictability, authenticity) as well as the characteristics that comprise the dynamic view of human brand identity (person-related characteristics, co-existing identities, and social embeddedness). These notions mean that instead of treating human brand identity as a fully stable and controllable construct, this study acknowledges its dynamic nature.

This movement towards understanding brand identity as dynamic and socially constructed where it is negotiated with others (Centeno & Wang, 2017) is called co-creation (see e.g., Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; da Silveira et al., 2013). In the next section, this perspective is discussed and collided with human brand identity research.

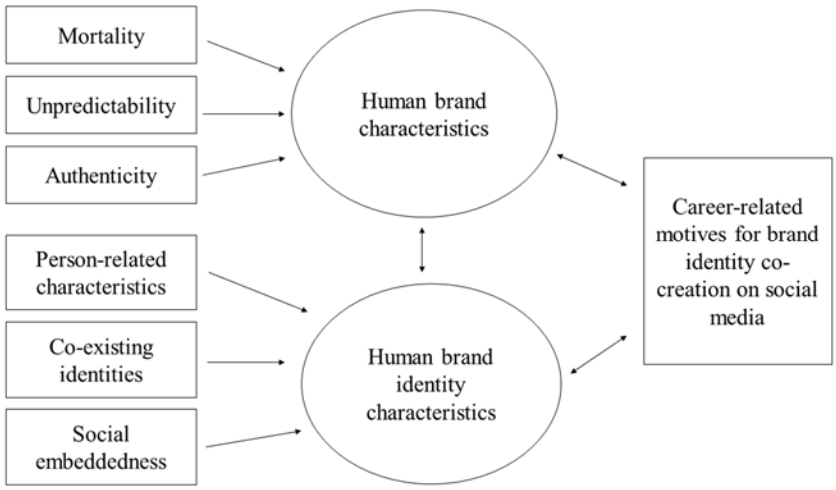


**Fig. 4. Human brand and human brand identity characteristics.**

## 2.2 Brand co-creation perspective on human brand identity

Although the notions in the previous section offered an adequate view of the human brand identity as a unique, dynamic, and social construct, those do not explain how human brand identity is constructed in a multi-stakeholder-environment, such as social media. Therefore, in the next sections, the co-creation perspective on human brand identity is discussed in detail. The examination starts with a discussion of the origins of the concept and continues with a synthesis of the general discussions on brand identity co-creation as a social process. The following two sections discuss the role of the stakeholders particularly in human brand identity co-creation in the context of social media. The final section concentrates on human brand identity negotiation.

### *2.2.1 Origins of brand co-creation*

Co-creation as a concept has been applied to various marketing and management fields, including strategic management (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), service relationship marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), and branding (Törmälä & Saraniemi, 2018; Iglesias et al., 2020). In brand research, co-creation describes a new paradigm in brand management as it considers a stakeholder perspective on the brand-building process (Baumgarth & Kristal, 2019). Although the concept lacks a general agreement on its meaning (Sarasvuo et al., 2022), in the context of brands, co-creation can be regarded as a social process that provides value for stakeholders and benefits all parties involved (von Wallpach et al., 2017).

The empirical contexts in brand co-creation research are numerous, including corporates (Törmälä & Saraniemi, 2018), places (Green et al., 2016), and products (Stach, 2019). Altogether these studies have found that brand co-creation can lead to benefits such as better insights, more relevant ideas, a stronger feeling of connectivity with other stakeholders, cost efficiencies, reduced risk, and competitive advantage. Additionally, human brands are covered by recent brand co-creation research (see Centeno & Wang, 2017; Dumont & Ots, 2020) and the findings from those studies are reviewed and discussed in the following sections.

According to Baumgarth and Kristal (2019), the theoretical roots of brand co-creation are in service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Based on service-dominant logic, co-creation discusses how the collaboration of many market actors develops value through *interactions*. It is based on the idea of actors as active players who contribute to the creation of value propositions via the exchange of intangible skills, information, and connections (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Randall et al., 2010). Hence, according to this viewpoint, other actors are also co-creators of the brand's identity (da Silveira et al., 2013). Next, this is discussed in detail.

### *2.2.2 Brand identity co-creation as a social process*

Starting from brand research in general, brand scholars (e.g., von Wallpach et al., 2017), drawing from social theories (e.g., Goffman, 1956), emphasize that in modern environments, a brand identity is created through *continuous interaction* in social contexts. Consequently, a brand identity itself is seen as a social process (Suomi et al., 2020) where the brand identity is co-created through stakeholder-based negotiations (da Silveira et al., 2013). In the quest for a dynamic view of human brand identity construction, from now on, this study focuses on the brand co-creation approach, particularly from the brand's (i.e., the professional's) perspective.

Considering the brand identity domain in general, the co-creation perspective has brought to light some previously overlooked features. According to von Wallpach et al. (2017), it (1) views brand identity as dynamic, fluid, and adaptive over time and (2) considers brand identity constructed through multiple networked interactions and relationships between the brand and the various stakeholders

(Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). This discussion has led brand researchers (da Silveira et al., 2013) to re-conceptualize brand identity as "*a dynamic concept that originates among brand managers, and that further develops through mutually influencing inputs from managers and other social constituents*" (p. 33). This process approach has been regarded as suitable for human brands as the human brand identity forms in collaboration with relevant others rather than in isolation (Erz & Christensen, 2018). The focus is now turned on brand identity co-creation discussions in the context of human brands.

Although there has been a growing trend that sees social interactions as important and legitimate approaches in the human branding literature, there are only a few studies (e.g., Dumont & Ots, 2020; Centeno & Wang, 2017; Preece & Kerrigan, 2015; Close et al., 2011) that examine human brands from brand co-creation perspective. Few of those, such as Close et al., (2011), acknowledge co-creation only somewhat implicitly (i.e., a brand can be formed through the dyadic interaction at faculty job interviews). Few others, such as Dumont and Ots (2020), although they explicitly acknowledge the stakeholder's presence in human brand construction, view co-creation from a value perspective. The value approach in marketing, in general, concentrates on interpersonal relationships from a service perspective. Additionally, existing studies on human brand co-creation are limited to business settings, which often overlook the human aspects (e.g., Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) discussed previously in this study (see Section 2.1.1). Therefore, it feels fair to say that the findings of the previous studies are at best of limited use when attempting to understand human brand identity from a co-creation perspective.

However, although there are only two studies (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015; Centeno & Wang, 2017) that concentrate on examining human brand identity from the co-creation perspective, they offer valuable insights into the stakeholders' participation. It has been argued that because of the social nature of human beings, co-creation, in general, can be considered as *repeat interactions and responses to the interactions* (Centeno & Wang, 2017). For example, Centeno and Wang (2017) draw from von Wallpach et al. (2017) by referring to human brand identity co-creation as the interaction between a multitude of stakeholders who contribute to each other's brand identities by sharing experiences, perceptions, and insights. Thus, to understand human brand identity co-creation, it is critical to understand the nature of the interaction (see Section 2.2.5). In the following sections, the co-creation approach in discussed by focusing on human brands.

### 2.2.3 The stakeholders contributing to human brand identity co-creation

As stated previously in this study, human brand identity co-creation is examined only by a few studies. Centeno and Wang (2017) argue that the brand identity of a celebrity is co-created by "*multiple stakeholder-actors who have resources and incentives in the activities that make up an enterprise of a human brand*" (p.133). Drawing from actor-network theory, which describes the mechanics of actors and their power to establish and cultivate a network that involves both human and non-human actor forces, Centeno and Wang (2017) identified three key stakeholders who play roles in the co-creation process of a celebrity's human brand identity. Although this current research differs from Centeno and Wang's (2017) as it focuses on professionals, not celebrities, and contributes to the human brand identity research instead of network research, Centeno & Wang's (2017) study offers valuable insights into identifying the stakeholders.

First is the celebrity as *a focal stakeholder*, meaning that the celebrity participates actively in the construction of his or her brand identity. The second is the *primary stakeholder,* which consists of consumers and fans who feel social legitimacy to react to the posts of the focal stakeholder. The third group consists of the media, advertisers, and talent management who have business interests in celebrities and is labeled as *instrumental stakeholders.* The instrumental stakeholder-actor's role is to act as infomediaries, sources, and channels that facilitate the co-creation process of brand identities. (Centeno & Wang, 2017.)

Another study that builds partly on the abovementioned Centeno and Wang's (2017) findings is a paper from Dumont and Ots (2020) which examines human brands in the context of professional mountain climbers. They suggest that the stakeholders consist of all of those who may have an interest in the role, performance, and behavior of the human brand including family and friends. Instead of following Centeno and Wang's (2017) idea of grouping media with the actors that the brand does business with, Dumont & Ots (2020) separated those by arguing that the four stakeholders' contribution is central to shaping the human brand (1) the professional climber, (2) sponsor firms of the outdoor industry (such as Patagonia), (3) media producers working with the professional climber to produce media content, and (4) followers (i.e., fans) who are consuming climbing-related media content and products from sponsoring firms and thus interact with the professional climber.

Of special interest to the present work is Jacobson's (2020) conceptualization of the "*future audience*" which, according to her describes "*how individuals project their personal brand for all future and unknown audiences on social media, which emphasizes the professional identity for future employers*" (Jacobson, 2020, p. 719). Future audiences shape human brand identity by acting as a filter through which the person curates his/her social media content (Jacobson, 2020). The reasoning behind this curation is safeguarding because it is acknowledged that the "internet never forgets," since platforms and third-party data consumers (such as researchers) preserve public social media posts which can cause problems since "*at the end of the day, you never know who you're going to work for*" (Jacobson, 2020, p. 719). Jacobson's (2020) future audiences are comparable to media theorists' (e.g., Scolere et al., 2018; Ettema & Whitney, 1994) ideas about the imagined nature of audiences, in which "the audience" is a socially manufactured category based on the views of media makers, executives, advertisers, and others, rather than a singular, clearly delineated set of persons.

### *2.2.4 Engagement in human brand identity co-creation*

Instead of referring to any kind of interaction, the form of interaction in human identity co-creation is *communication* (Tähtinen & Suomi, 2022; Pera et al., 2016). As this research taps into social media, it is necessary to widen the view on social media research which often views interaction as *engagement* (see e.g., De Vries & Carlson, 2014) including text (Kozinets, 2002), images (Li & Xie, 2019), emojis (McShane et al., 2021) as well as likes and shares (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Thus, the focus is now turned to stakeholder engagement on social media.

The previous studies (e.g., Parmentier et al., 2013; Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2012; Erz & Christensen, 2018) have demonstrated that engagement significantly enhances the relationships between the human brand and the stakeholders leading to such outcomes as increased brand value (Parmentier et al., 2013) and professional validation (Erz & Christensen, 2018). However, the existing human brand studies provide only little insight into how engagement particularly on social media is actually done. One of the few is Smith and Fischer's (2020) research where they analyzed human branding in digital platforms. They found that human brands evoke and sustain stakeholders' attention in social media through a recursive process that involves three strategies. The first strategy is *attuning to attentive audiences* which refers to a process where the brands observe the behavior of the stakeholders on social media and select to target those that can engage attention to the author's content. This stakeholder selection guides the selection of topics on which authors create content. The second strategy, *creating content using distillation*, consists of distilling (i.e., creation of headlines that signal that a post has stakeholders-relevant content), constructing ante-narratives (i.e., creation of content that constitutes a text that includes story-like elements such as characters and settings), orienting (i.e., the practice of offering direct, rationalized, advice or guidance to the stakeholders), and disrupting (i.e., offering novel and counterintuitive perspectives on events, issues or objects in provocative ways). The third strategy, *encouraging amplification,* refers to encouraging stakeholders to engage in actions that help attract further attention to the human brand, such as commenting on social media posts. (Smith & Fischer, 2020.)

As this study taps into the world of professionals, who, instead of pursuing economic profits, are interested in professional growth and career enhancement, the ways they engage the stakeholders in co-creation differs from celebrities. For example, an actor's human brand is interconnected not only to the brand of the film producer but also to several other commercial brands, such as the brands in which advertisements they are starring (see Jenner, 2018). Thus, the brands of these celebrities are carefully authored by their PR staff through compelling narratives (see e.g., Thomson, 2006). Professionals, in turn, are independently responsible for their brand. In her recent study on community managers, Jacobson (2020) found that professionals working in social media are quite selective in their social media strategies, and they use curation as their main self-presentation practice. Curation refers to a storytelling strategy through which the human brands select the type of content (i.e., images, videos, moments, vignettes that showcase how they wish to be seen by others) they include and exclude in crafting their brand. Consequently, curation works as a reflection of one's professionalism that the stakeholders may use to evaluate the potential of the professional. (Jacobson, 2020.)

In the context of social media influencers Ki et al. (2020) found that the more the influencers satisfy the followers' needs of ideality (i.e., individuals' desire to seek a person who possesses the traits that they feel they lack but would like to possess), relatedness (i.e., sense of intimacy) and competence (i.e., a feeling of proficiency), the more influencers are being perceived as human brands with whom the followers desire to develop an intense emotional bond – attachment – with (Ki et al., 2020). Conversely, to maximize engagement, human brand identities need to pursue the stakeholder's attachment by satisfying their needs. Human brands can fulfill the stakeholders' needs for ideality by sharing inspiring content on social media (Ki et al., 2020). The reason for this is that people like and emulate role models, such as professionals, whose actions and attitudes inspire them enough to change their attitudes and behaviors to match the professional's (Ruvio et al., 2013). The need for relatedness, in turn, can be enhanced by displaying the authentic human characteristics of the brand (Ki et al., 2020). This notion is based on King's (2015) suggestion that if a person finds commonalities with another social media user, he or she experiences a close emotional connection with that person.

### *2.2.5 Human brand identity negotiation*

The branding literature in general suggests that interaction between the brand and the stakeholders leads to brand identity negotiation (e.g., Essamri et al., 2019). Previously in this study, it has been argued that brand identity negotiation refers to the responsive nature of the communication (Sarasvuo et al., 2022) between the brand and the stakeholders involved in the brand identity co-creation.

The human brand's ability to negotiate and adapt its identity is crucial in co-creation, as Erz and Christensen (2018, p. 80) note: "*adopting a process view demonstrates that human brands can develop within a multiple-stakeholder system if they manage to constantly negotiate and adapt their identity.*" However, in practice, human brand identity negotiation is a complex process where the brand balances between adapting according to the stakeholders' needs and staying true to the brand's core characteristics. For example, Centeno and Wang (2017) found that every time a celebrity is attached to a certain product, the celebrity's brand identity has to be adapted according to that product's or company's brand identity. However, the adaptation is limited to the extent that does not jeopardize the congruency underlying the celebrity's human brand image. Similarly, Preece and Kerrigan (2015) argue that in the case of artists, the "*continuous pressure to adapt to shifting market developments and stakeholder preferences must be balanced against the need to preserve brand uniqueness over time*" (p.1224). Thus, in the case of humans, it can be concluded that not all parts of brand identity are negotiable.

#### *Tensions involved in human brand identity co-creation*

There is some evidence that negotiation, in the case of human brands, results in tensions (e.g., Preece & Kerrigan, 2015; Holton & Molyneux, 2016; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017). Two empirical studies validate this notion. In the context of social media influencers, Audrezet et al., (2020) found that influencers face tensions due to commercial opportunities as they felt their brand identity characteristics (in this case particularly authenticity) were being threatened if the values between their brand identity and the company (i.e., a brand stakeholder) whose products/services they were marketing were found mismatching by their audiences (i.e., a brand stakeholder). Similarly, Parmentier and Fischer (2020) found that artists experience brand identity-related tensions connected to the constant need to strike a balance between the logic of art and commerce.

However, the tensions are not only due to meeting pressures from multiple stakeholders but also misalignment of the human brand identity and various other personal identities. Brand identity negotiation is then an internal process, where the individual tries to build one cohesive identity. For example, Preece and Kerrigan (2015) found that, in the case of artists, tensions arise when instead of acting in complementary ways, different personal identities (artist identity, brand identity, personal identity) interact in contradictory ways. Ottovordemgentschenfelde's (2017) empirical study provides more evidence for this. In her study of journalist brands, she reported on tensions that arise when journalists were trying to develop consistencies between the different identities given the changes in the profession, technology, society, career, employer, and personal resources, such as time. Consequently, the construction of a coherent human brand identity depends on the brand's ability to negotiate with the stakeholders but also with the self. This refers to the activities where the human brand is required to reflect his or her multiple personal identities and take a conscious attempt to make sense of and find a balance between the identities (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2017).

### *2.2.6 Summary of human brand identity co-creation*

To summarize, a co-creation perspective views human brand identity as an ongoing process that is constantly open for negotiation (e.g., von Wallpach et al., 2017; Centeno & Wang, 2017). It suggests that in the social media context, brand identity is dynamically co-created through communication between the human brand and the stakeholders. The stakeholders shaping human brand identity consist of all of those who may have an interest in the role, performance, and behavior of the human brand including family and friends (see Dumont & Ots, 2020; Centeno & Wang, 2017), and "future audience" (Jacobson, 2020). Human brands engage the stakeholders in brand identity co-creation by using social media strategies (Smith & Fischer, 2020). Stakeholder engagement leads to human brand identity negotiation in which the human brand adapts his or her brand identity according to the stakeholders' needs (Erz & Christensen, 2018). This can lead to identity tensions (e.g., Preece & Kerrigan, 2015), which further influences human brand identity characteristics. This process is described in Figure 5.

Thus far, this thesis has reviewed the extant literature relating to human brand identity co-creation as it is seen within branding research. In the following section, the discussion moves to the organization literature and identity work perspective.

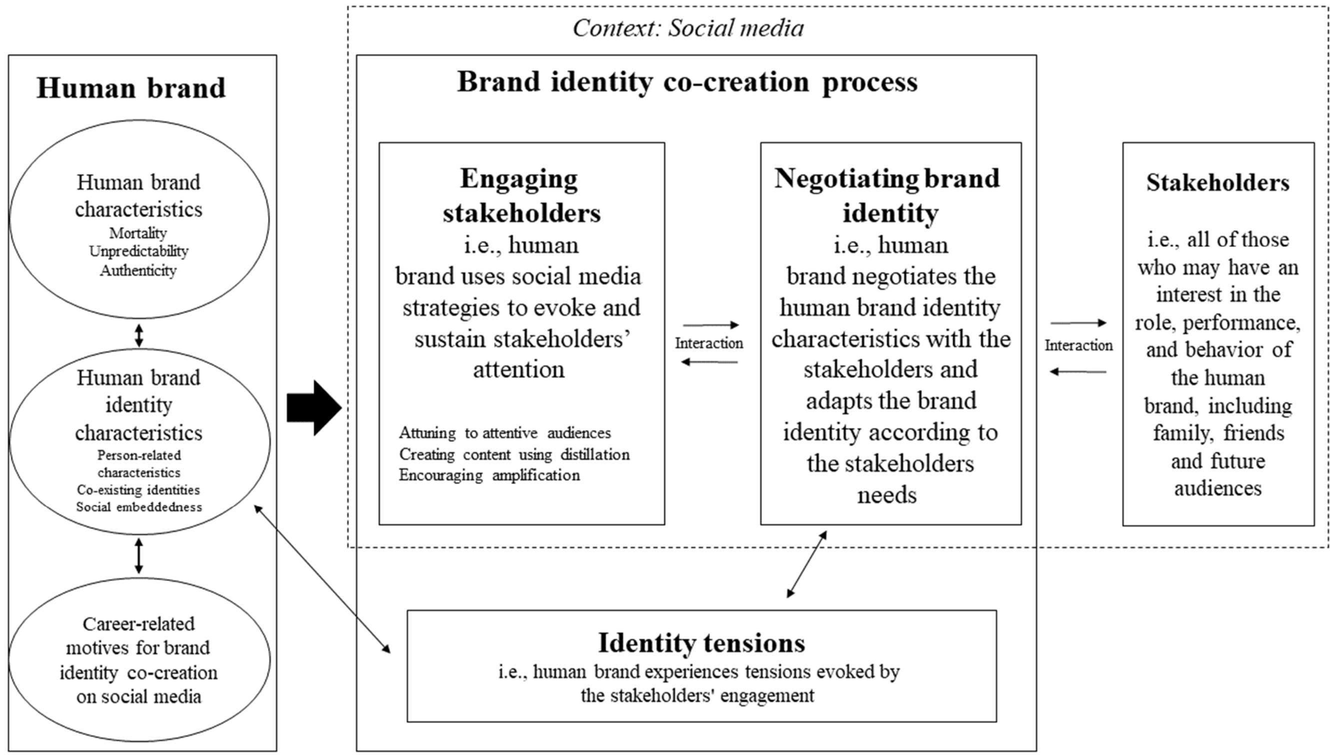


**Fig. 5. Human brand identity co-creation.**

## 2.3 Identity work perspective on human brand identity

In the previous section, the human brand identity was viewed mainly from the perspective of the brand. Despite the notions of brand identity resulting from negotiation with the brand stakeholders (e.g., von Wallpach et al., 2017; Centeno & Wang, 2017) being explicit in extant human brand identity research, it was found that the understanding of the process and its intrapersonal implications remain generally low.

Identity work researchers have studied personal identities as the interplay between the individual and the social interaction based on the notion that professionals negotiate their unique individual identities. Next, the identity work perspective (e.g., Ibarra, 1999, Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Pratt et al., 2006; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) is presented by synthesizing the relevant literature. However, the focus of the synthesis is narrowed down as follows. Within the brand co-creation perspective on human brand identity, discussed in the previous section, it was suggested that co-creation involves tensions (e.g., Preece & Kerrigan, 2015; Holton & Molyneux, 2016; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017). Consequently, the following chapters focus on identity work dealing with identity tensions.

But before that, the work is positioned against the current debates in the identity work perspective starting with professional identity construction, which is followed by the identity work perspective as a strategy to resolve identity tensions. Finally, identity work as an emerging process of a professional's "becoming" is being discussed.

### *2.3.1 Identity work in constructing professional identity*

Since this study taps into the world of professionals, it is necessary to start the identity work discussion with what is known about professional identity. Scholars widely recognize that identity, in general, is a complex construct that consists of multiple parallel identities (Peel, 2005) that differ along characteristics such as their relevance to the individual and whether they reflect existing or projected achievements (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), and their temporal orientation (i.e., their past, present, or future) (Strahan & Wilson, 2006). In the case of professionals, this means that for example, university lecturers can identify themselves as practitioners, researchers, as well as academics, etc.

However, although the connection between role and self-definition is particularly strong for professionals as they "*are often defined by what they do*" (Pratt et al., 2006, p. 236), role-based understandings of professional identity have been criticized for ignoring the dynamic nature of both of the concepts, professional and identity (Beech, 2008). Critics, such as Järventie-Thesleff and Tienari (2015), question the part that role has in the process by claiming that "*the assumption is that roles remain relatively stable over time when identities of role-holders may be in flux*." (p. 239). This notion of the lack of dynamism is significant because each role is connected to identity through values, goals, beliefs, conventions, interpersonal styles, and time frames (Ashfort, 2001), which are also constantly changing.

Thus, considering modern professionals, for whom role transitions (i.e., enactment of multiple work roles) are frequent and multiple work-related roles can be adopted simultaneously (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), the identity construction is not necessarily bound to any specific organization, role, or profession. Consequently, the researchers (e.g., Ibarra, 1999) suggest the constructionist approach that incorporates somewhat different emphases in understanding professional identity. It highlights the importance of social context as individuals create and re-create identities through social interaction (see Stryker, 1987; Ibarra, 1999), constantly throughout their careers (Caza et al., 2017). Consequently, drawing from the aforementioned and of special note in the context of the present work (i.e., social media), in this study, professional identity is defined as *the recognition of who the professional is and how she/he interacts with others in the professional contexts* (Scanlon, 2011)*, including digital spheres* (Marwick & boyd, 2010).

Defining professional identity this way can be easily associated with social identity. However, as social identity is defined as "*a self-definition in terms of social category membership*" (Turner, 1999, p. 10), there are different dynamics between professional identity and those of other types of social identity. In their interesting analysis of physicians' identity construction Barbour and Lammers (2015) found that a professional's identity construction is underpinned by a desire for professional *autonomy* and a dedication to professional *values.* The development of reasoning abilities, a clear understanding of the responsibilities involved, technical skills, professional knowledge and experience, self-directed learning, critical self-evaluation, and reflective practice are additional *generic competencies* that are involved in the formation of a professional identity (Trede et al., 2011; Paterson et al., 2002). Social identity theory emphasizes also the need for individuals to construct an identity that is validated by others. In the case of professionals, the process of validation is more or less continuing as they change their work roles (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018).

#### *Defining identity work*

A considerable amount of the literature has been published on the identity work of a professional. In the academic literature, the identity work approach is often used in organization and management studies (c.f. Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). The concept can be traced back to organization theorists Snow and Anderson (1987, p. 1348) who first defined the notion as "*the range of activities individuals engage to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept*." Identity work is inspired by various social theorists, such as Mead (1934) and Goffman (1956) who understand identity as "*a thoroughly social phenomenon*" formed and sustained in "*ongoing social interaction and performative enactment*" (Brubaker, 2020. p. 772). The concept was later re-defined by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1165) who suggest that "*identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness*."

Although Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003) formulation of the concept is perhaps the most widely cited, it has been criticized for lacking an interactive and processual view of identity (Caza et al., 2018). Instead, it has been suggested that the concept of identity work should be context-sensitive (Dickie, 2003), because it often occurs at transition moments where "*strains, tensions, and surprises are prevalent, as these prompt feelings of confusion, contradiction, and self-doubt, which in turn tend to lead to examination of the self.*" (Brown, 2015, p. 25). Professionals' career transitions are an example of this kind of moment (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006). The transition context can help in making sense, receiving formal or informal feedback, obtaining comparison goals, gaining social support (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010), and learning how to perform required role behaviors (Ibarra, 1999).

### *2.3.2 The role of identity work in identity tensions*

Of special interest to the present work is to understand how professionals engage in identity work to resolve identity tensions. Earlier in this study, it was argued that human brand identity co-creation can include tensions caused by the presence of multiple internal identities and the influence of multiple stakeholders on the brand identity. It has been suggested that, through identity work, individuals can become aware, make sense of, and resolve their identity tensions (Sannino, 2010). Therefore, this study concentrates next on identity work processes suggested by previous studies in order to resolve identity tensions.

In the previous section, it was discussed that professional identities are linked to the fulfillment of professional roles (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006). Role identities can be transitory or permanent reflecting and altering identity based on perceptions of a role's attractiveness (Ashforth, 2001) and how occupants understand and enact roles (Pratt et al., 2006). An example of this “role identity work” in the context of career transition comes from Van de Ven & Thompson (2002) who discovered that doctors' identities changed from that of practitioner-owners to those of employees when their own clinics were acquired by a healthcare system. Through a complex process of identity work the physicians managed the tensions arising from co-existing identities (i.e., role, personal and professional identities) (see also Kreiner et al., 2006; Chreim et al., 2007).

Another example of an identity tension resolved through identity work describes a transition from school to work-life. In situations that challenged their pre-existing identities, junior doctors were found to use work-identity integrity assessments to make sense of the consistency between who they are and what they do (Pratt et al., 2006). If the junior doctors found differences in these work-identity integrity assessments, it resulted in different identity customization processes. This led to a renewal of their professional identities, which were then "validated" by peers and mentors. (Pratt et al., 2006.)

It has been suggested that acknowledging the simultaneous existence of multiple identities (Ashforth et al., 2008) and the tensions this arises (Berger et al., 2017) is central to identity work. Based on the notions made previously in this study about human brands, it can be argued that there are multiple personal identities involved depending on the individual (Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017; Bendisch et al., 2013). Thus, it can be argued that the construction of a professional brand identity also involves multiple individual identities, particularly in a career transition. According to Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010), in a career transition, the primary function of the professional is compliance with the requirements of a work role: when professionals are moving into new roles, they use identity work to provide images that are consistent with the prototypical features (for example language used) of those roles. As described in Figure 6, the identity work is then undertaken to achieve a sense of consistency and coherence (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008); to protect one's own identity from excessive or unwelcome role demands (Kreiner et al., 2006), and to manage the uncertainty involved new role identity (Moore & Koning, 2015). In other words, while identity is dynamic, it needs a sense of continuity (Henkel, 2000).

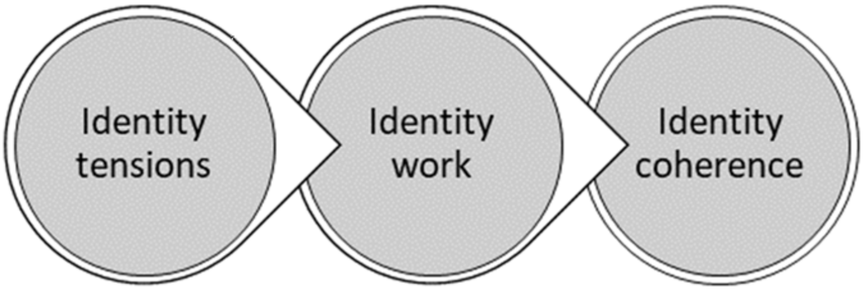


**Fig. 6. Identity work in identity construction.**

The literature provides insights into the identity work processes that individuals engage in to solve identity tensions. One of the processes regards searching for optimal balance between multiple personal identities (Kreiner et al., 2006). Based on organization research, the extant literature suggests three major categories of identities professionals work upon (Caza et al., 2018): collective (i.e., professionals define themselves as part of a collective), role (i.e., identity is positioned to others), and personal identities (identity derives from personal attributes and qualities). Thus, in the context of organizations, the purpose of an individual's identity work is to establish the optimal balance of these identities (Kreiner et al., 2006) which is referred to as "*a state of being neither too distinct/independent nor too inclusive/dependent in relation to a given social identity*" (p. 1033). Further, optimal identity balance is linked to the well-being of the individual in two ways. First, it's the opposite of an identity imbalance, which can be emotionally draining and drain valuable cognitive resources away from effective role execution (Ashforth, 2001). Second, identity balance has been connected to significant individual perception and identity characteristics such as higher self-worth and personal self-esteem (Brewer, 2003; Kreiner et al., 2006). Thus, optimal identity balance has the potential to improve individual well-being.

Since the focus of this study is exclusively on individual identities (Who am I), collective identities (Who are we?) are not examined. Although developed in the context of organizational studies, searching for optimal balance is found relevant as it captures some important features of internal identity processes in general that could further the understanding of the establishment of identity coherence, and in that way resolve the identity tensions of professional brands.

Another identity work process addressing establishing and maintaining identity coherence and resolving the identity tensions suggested by earlier studies is external and internal evaluations. External evaluation is connected to professional identity, where its primary purpose is to ensure a work-role-appropriate self-presentation (Goffman, 1956). In external evaluation, the individual seeks validation from others (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) by asking "*did I secure validation as a fully-fledged role occupant by those around me?*" (p. 14). In turn, by making internal evaluations, individuals compare their public persona with their representations of the kind of person they "really" are or would like to become (Ibarra, 1999).

Interestingly, analogous to these notions of making evaluations, human brand researchers (e.g., Ilies, 2018; Edmiston, 2014) acknowledge that conscious comparison between self-identity and others' perceptions of that identity is one of the core processes in human branding. An example of this is Rangarajan et al.'s (2017) empirical study of 33 European professionals, suggests that the human brand co-creation process starts with self-analysis and composing a mission and a vision for the brand. This future aspect together with analyzing personal values, past experiences, strengths, weaknesses, and skills creates a base for the desired brand identity. In the next phase, this desired brand identity is compared to the current brand identity. A current brand is defined by examining how one is perceived by the target audience (the audience must be identified before this examination). If a gap exists, the brand tries to close the gap by changing behavior or gaining new skills. A gap analysis should also take into consideration employer brand fit (i.e., does the personal brand identity reflect the values of the employer). A final step is to formulate communication tactics that connect audiences with the personal brand. (Rangarajan et al. 2017.)

The third, and final, identity work process identified as relevant for this study concentrates on future perspectives. Ibarra and Petriglieri's (2010) notions on aligning the past, current, and future selves to ensure the continuity of the self are particularly relevant in the context of identity work during a career transition. They argue that professional identity is constructed through the idea of prospective selves, or the ideas one has about whom they may become, would want to become, should become, or are afraid of becoming. In other words, professionals make sense of their identities through stories that connect their past, present, and future selves (Rasmussen, 1996). In the identity work literature the stories are defined as "*stories that make a point about the narrator*" (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010, p. 135) and provide a sense of continuity between who they have been and whom they are becoming. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010), referring to Ashforth (2001), noted that "*Self-narratives are powerful instruments for constructing a "transition bridge" across gaps that arise between old and new roles and across identities claimed and granted in transition-related social interaction*" (p. 138). By this, they mean that, in transitions, such as career transitions, people start to find new directions, and, thus, are forced to explain their background, and their future goals (Ibarra, 2006).

According to Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010), narrative identity work, i.e., telling stories about oneself, is prevalent, particularly in career transitions. This is because professionals want to establish their foothold (Ibarra, 1999). Stories help people articulate provisional selves and link the past and the future into a continuous sense of self (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Here, again, analogies can be drawn to the literature on the co-creation of a human brand identity. In their case study of an executive career transition from the for-profit sector to non-profit organizations, brand researchers Schlosser et al. (2016) found that in transitions, executives use narratives and stories to project their identity to demonstrate how their leadership brand fits into the new organization.

Note that not all stories are equally satisfying or effective in achieving the goals that inspired their telling (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). In the case of humans, using stories similarly as in product branding, making a unique brand promise (e.g., Keller, 2013) has its downsides. Education scholars Brooks and Anumudu (2016) who examined the discourses of marketing online courses that focused on human branding noted that identity narratives can be problematic if they are constructed to serve only one purpose (e.g., employability) because they can give a false impression of the professional that "*they should have a single unambiguous identity*" (p. 25) instead of embracing the variety of identities.

### 2.3.3 Identity work and becoming

Based on previous considerations, identity work can be viewed as a comprehensive approach to intrapersonal human brand identity co-creation in which multiple identities are linked. Until recently, a general understanding has been that identity work is *a conscious process including* rational decision-making (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2017). For example, Kreiner et al. (2006) found that priests used differentiation tactics, such as separating the role "*this is what I do as a priest*" from identity "*this is who I am because I'm a priest,*" to consciously separate their personal identity from social identity (p. 1043). Contrary to this, in recent studies (e.g., Driver, 2017), researchers have suggested that identity work is a continuous, automatic, and unconscious process wherein professionals struggle with "*unconscious desire and underlying lack*" (Driver, 2017, p. 630).

Despite the aforementioned two contradictory perceptions, few notions support the idea of identity work in the context of professionals as the more unconscious process of becoming. According to Hong et al. (2017), the process of becoming is the development, formation, or building of a professional identity. As discussed earlier in this study, professionals' work-life and life, in general, are more or less in constant movement. Thus, it is likely that they continuously move between the role-appropriate identity and "desired identity" (see e.g., Beech, 2010; Gergen, 1991) which is not restricted to conscious, controlled, and logical processes (e.g., Petriglieri & Stein, 2012, Alvesson & Willmott 2002; Brown, 2017).

When applied to professionals, identity work seeks to account for the enjoyment, discovery, fantasy, experiment, and intuition (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) sides of identity construction by employing the concept of **identity play**. Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) suggested that instead of emphasizing only rationality, logic, and goal orientation which are often connected to work, identity play focuses on future identity. They explain the difference between work and play using an analogy from a child's world: "*When children play at being "mummy," for example, they are rehearsing a possible future identity. Likewise, when adults play, they are rehearsing future possibilities.*" (p. 12). Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) define identity play as "*the crafting and provisional trial of immature (i.e., as yet unelaborated) possible selves.*" (p. 13). While identity work aims to preserve current identities or to conform to externally imposed criteria, identity play focuses on inventing and reinventing oneself. Another notable distinction between these two concepts is the focus on process versus outcomes. Whereas activities framed as "work" tend to have an ends orientation, the term "play" has means orientation meaning that it is often regarded as not proceeding in the most logical, easy, or linear manner (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010).

Drawing from the notions above, an interesting discussion within identity work, which is analogous to human brand discussions (see Centeno & Wang, 2017), is the idea of becoming. In their research Hong et al. (2017) extends the idea of identity as an ongoing process by claiming that professional identity is a result of the more or less conscious process of becoming a professional in different social contexts.

### *2.3.4 Summary of identity work*

To conclude this section, the identity work processes professionals engage in resolving identity tensions are presented as an illustration (Fig. 7). First, identity work is initiated by identity tensions (Ibarra, 1999). Earlier, this study argued that analogous to the construction of professional identity, human brand identity co-creation includes tensions caused by the presence of multiple internal identities and the influence of multiple stakeholders. Based on the previous literature, it is suggested that, through identity work it is possible for individuals to become aware of, understand, and overcome their identity conflicts. Thus, by engaging in identity work and identity play processes, such as searching for identity balance, making evaluations, and telling stories that connect past, present, and future, the professional can establish, maintain, and support identity coherence. Altogether, identity work is undertaken to resolve identity tensions by achieving a sense of identity coherence (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008).

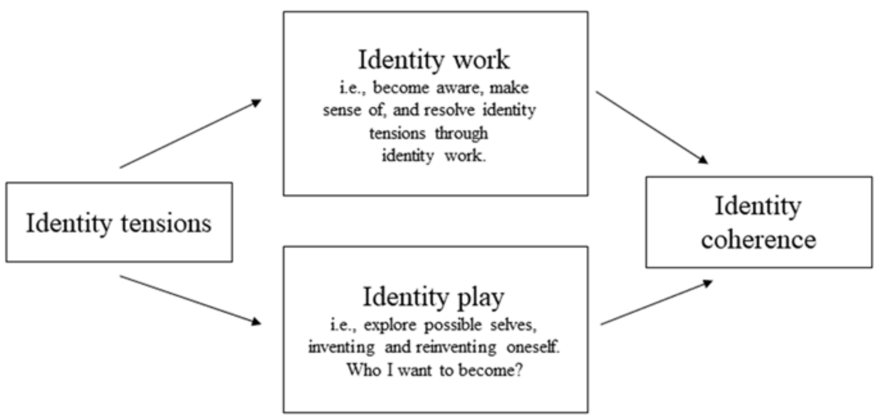


**Fig. 7. Resolving identity tensions through identity work.**

## 2.4 Conceptual framework

The purpose of this final section is to combine the preceding section's considerations of human brand identity, brand co-creation perspective, and identity work perspective. Additionally, a tentative conceptual framework for exploring professional brand identity co-creation in the context of social media is proposed.

There have been several demands for study on co-creative (e.g., Dumont & Ots, 2020; Centeno & Wang, 2017) and person-focused (e.g., Osorio et al., 2020; Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) human brands. The present conceptual framework of human brand identity co-creation is an adaptation based on previous studies on human brand identity (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) and human brand co-creation (e.g., Pluntz & Pras, 2020b; Dumont & Ots, 2020) with the additions from identity work studies (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006; Kreiner et al., 2006).

A conceptual framework is a set of ideas, assumptions, and beliefs that serve to guide and assist research. It defines the major components, constructions, and variables and assumes connections between them (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Furthermore, the conceptual framework summarises what has been discovered in order to better explain the natural course of the researched phenomena (Camp, 2001). Particularly, it demonstrates the researcher's epistemological and ontological worldview and approach (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

The meaning of this conceptual framework (see Figure 8) is to present the most essential issues which will form the analytical tool that can be used in the empirical part of this study to understand **How professionals construct their human brand identity on social media in a career transition?** In the proposed framework, human brand identity construction is described from a human brand's (i.e., professional's) viewpoint. It is divided into three parts. The first part presents the preface: The process is driven by the human brand and is initiated by a career transition including career-related motives, such as professional growth and overall career enhancement. The human brand consists of human brand characteristics (i.e., mortality, unpredictability, and authenticity), and is closely linked to human brand identity. In this study, human brand identity is referred to as a dynamic process that includes, person-related characteristics and multiple co-existing identities and is socially embedded.

The second part of the framework presents the brand identity co-creation process which includes two sub-processes. The first sub-process is engaging stakeholders where the human brand uses social media strategies (i.e., attuning, creating content, and encouraging amplification) to evoke and sustain stakeholders' attention. The second sub-process is negotiating brand identity where the human brand negotiates the human brand identity characteristics with the stakeholders and adapts the brand identity according to their needs. In this study, the context in which human brand identity is co-created is publicly available social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Instagram. Consequently, in addition to the human brand, multiple stakeholders are contributing to human brand identity co-creation. Stakeholders refer broadly to all of those who "may have an interest in the role, performance, and behavior" (Dumont & Ots, 2020) of the human brand including family, friends, and future audiences. Due to the effort required in adapting the brand identity according to the stakeholders' needs and in aligning the multiple co-existing personal identities the human brand experiences identity tensions, which influence human brand identity.

Consequently, the human brand enters into part three of the framework, with processes focusing on retaining identity coherence (i.e., a sense of self-continuity across time, clarity in knowledge of the linkages between many identities, a sense of completeness/wholeness, and acceptance of the self's integrated nature). By engaging in identity work where the human brand becomes aware, makes sense of, and resolves identity tensions and identity play where the human brand explores possible selves she/he gains identity coherence in a way that results in career-related outcomes, such as increased employability (i.e., increased ability identify and realize career opportunities).

To illustrate and further investigate the conceptual framework, it is next collided with empirical data.

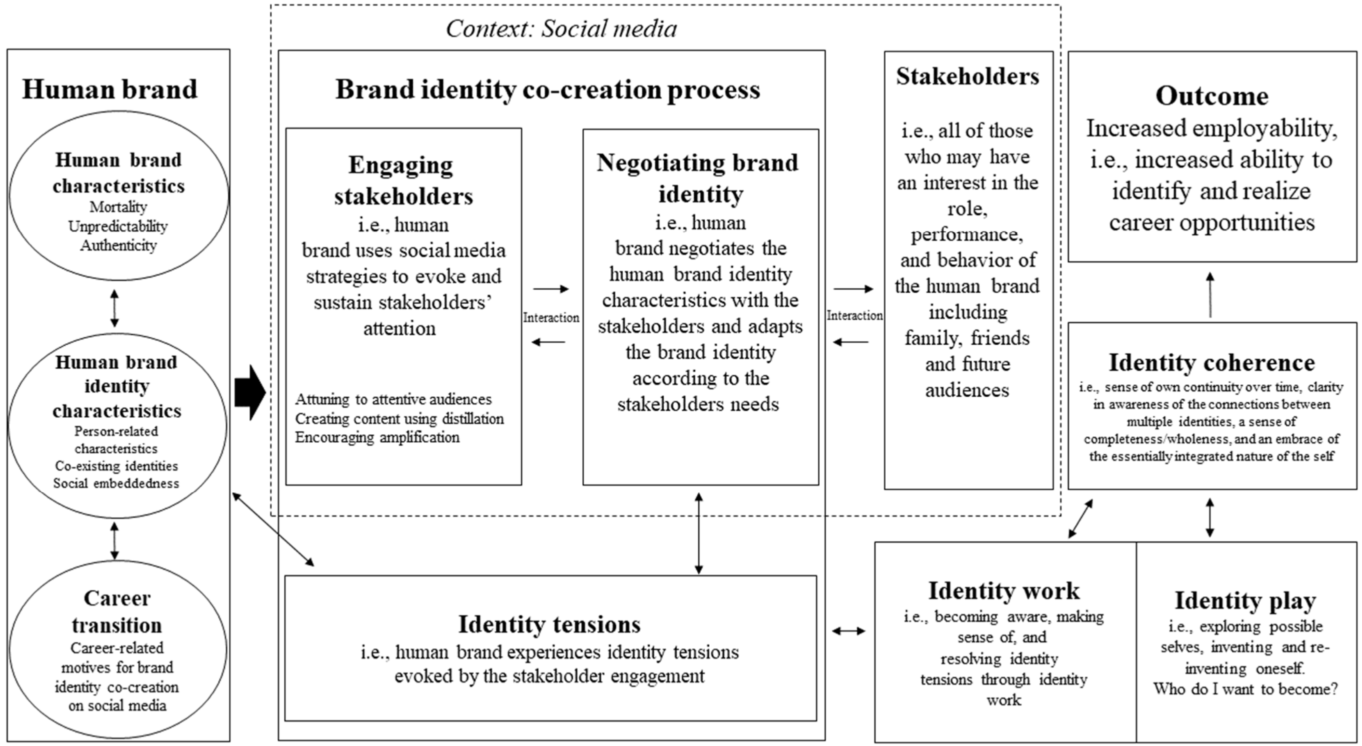


**Fig. 8. Human brand identity co-creation framework.**

# 3 Qualitative inquiry

This chapter presents and justifies the research approach of the study. The chapter starts by explaining epistemological and ontological assumptions. After that, the research strategy and the methods to analyze the data are explained and described.

## 3.1 Research paradigm

The philosophical assumptions of research are determined by how the researcher understands the social reality and the truth (ontology), how an understanding of knowledge and the truth is to be obtained (epistemology), how the researcher's values and ethics guide this process (axiology), and how the research process has been conducted (methodology) (Creswell, 2013; Denzing & Lincoln, 2011; Patton, 2002). These assumptions are referred to as a research paradigm that establishes the scientific approach and methodologies of the research chosen by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). The research paradigm of this study is summarized in Table 3.

The purpose of research is to improve the knowledge of a certain phenomenon. Choosing a research method that best suits the purpose of the research is critical. The selected method and meta-considerations should comprise a coherent whole together with the research purpose (Weber, 2004). The purpose of this dissertation is to increase understanding of human brand identity construction on social media and extend the theory of brand co-creation within branding research, as described in the introduction. The aim is not to construct an ultimate truth but to approach reality through qualitative interviews and, as a final output, to make proposals in the form of a conceptual framework regarding the phenomenon that may be examined further.

The ontological and epistemological premises of research in the area of human brands are rather undeveloped, which has been suggested as deriving from a multidisciplinary approach to the subject (Scheidt et al., 2020). The extant human brand literature has sought to understand the construction of human brand identities through a variety of epistemological perspectives. While some of the research has been framed within the post-positivist tradition (e.g., multiple methods are necessary; see, e.g., Kushal & Nargundkar, 2020), others have implicitly or explicitly adopted interpretive perspectives (i.e., multiple truths and interpretations have to be analyzed and assessed; see, e.g., Preece & Kerrigan, 2015).

**Table 3. Research approach summary.**

| Element | Chosen approach |
|---|---|
| Ontology (nature of reality or being) | Ontology: subjectivism |
| Epistemology (what constitutes acceptable knowledge) | Epistemology: social constructivism |
| Approach to theory development | Aims at theory advancement, new knowledge, and worldviews as a contribution |
| Research strategy | Abduction: using existing theory as a lens through which to frame empirical results |
| Methods | Qualitative methods<br>Semi-structured interviews, thematic data analysis |
| Participant selection | Purposive sampling, snowball |

This dissertation's underlying meta-consideration is social constructivism, which views reality as socially created mental constructions of people (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A constructivist perspective focuses on human interpretations, comprehension of their experiences, and the relationship between these and actions. Reality is defined as people’s socially constructed mental creations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Social constructivism is regarded as a highly suitable approach for studies that aim to capture the complexity and process of human action and interaction (Creswell, 2013). In social constructivism, the guiding epistemological belief asserts that individual experiences influence reality, which is co-constructed by the researcher and the researched. Instead of viewing the researcher as a data collector, the constructivist approach considers the researcher as a constructor of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). From the researcher’s point of view, this means that (1) it is important to recognize the influence of one’s own background that shapes the interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2013), and (2) There are several interpretations of the same data that are all possibly significant (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016; Creswell, 2013). Consequently, this study aims toward an understanding of social reality instead of trying to measure or explain it, as positivist researchers would do (Creswell, 2013).

The constructivist approach connects the present work also to the present movement toward co-created brands. By adopting a social constructivist stance, this study sees "brand" as a socially produced assembly where understanding is created by collaboration with others rather than independently within each person

(Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009, p. 891). In branding terms, various stakeholders participate in co-creating brands (Merz et al., 2009; Mäläskä et al., 2011). Similarly, human brands are seen as social constructs (e.g., Centeno & Wang, 2017).

Additionally, this study follows the identity approach in branding, which, according to Hatch and Schulz (1997), is grounded in social constructivism. They theorize that in the context of corporate brands, a brand is seen as the identity of the company which develops interactively between the organizational culture, strategic vision, and corporate image (Hatch & Schultz, 2003) and is thus co-created between organizational members and the organization's stakeholders. In addition, by using an identity work perspective (e.g., Ibarra, 1999) this study adopts a constructivist paradigm of a person's identity, which often addresses the "processes" of interaction among individuals (Creswell, 2013).

This dissertation is built on the ontological premise that people's reality is conceived as subjective, formed via interaction and derivation, evolved by interpretation, and shaped by the social context. According to this subjectivist interpretation of ontology, a person's perception of reality results from social and cognitive processes (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, two realities alike cannot exist (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016, p. 14). From the axiological perspective (i.e., a researcher's ethics and values, and how he or she reconciles his or her views with the values of the participants), this means that the researcher needs to adopt an empathetic position (Saunders et al., 2019) and reflect on his or her values during the research to embrace the informants' interpretations and multiple perspectives.

Because it is critical to convey to the reader all of the circumstances that impacted the study (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011), here, the background for the researcher's interest in this particular topic is discussed. Summarily, the researcher's positive experiences of branding herself on social media led her to teach the subject at Lapland University of Applied Sciences and various other organizations as well as seminars and other public events. The public interest in the subject encouraged her to study the phenomenon more deeply. To this end, it cannot be avoided that the author's background informs the interpretation aimed to make sense of the realities of the professionals interviewed in this study.

However, since reflexivity (i.e., an awareness of the researcher's role in conducting research and questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions) is essential in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013), researcher bias was considered in all phases of the research, and attempts to minimize them were taken. First, the power relationships that often exist between the researcher and the participants were de-emphasized by collaborating directly with participants, both in reviewing the questions and discussing with them the interpretations that were made in the research (Creswell 2013, p. 48). Second, since the researcher's own experiences concerning professional brand identity co-creation were positive, particular attention was paid to avoiding disclosing only positive results. Although the participants were all developing their professional brand identities on social media for career management reasons (generally seen as a positive goal for branding), they were encouraged to share authentic experiences which also included negative implications and experiences. (For a critique on human brands, see Zarkada, 2012).

## 3.2 Research strategy

A research strategy explains how the current research need will be handled. A deliberate and systematic research strategy is necessary for the rigorous application of ideas and procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013). Methodology refers to the organizational principles that govern the research process and study design (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). It describes how a given issue or problem can be addressed. This study used a qualitative approach. Qualitative research methods are intended to assist the researcher in the interpretation and explanation of complex, contextual, and abstract social phenomena that are difficult to access or quantify (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2002), such as human brands.

This study employs abductive logic (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) to interpretation, which is typically seen as particular to social constructivism (see, e.g., Easton, 2010). The abductive approach can be seen as a combination of deductive and inductive logic (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). It is a method of producing knowledge that accepts current theory while also allowing data-based theory production (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) that aims to develop conceptual understandings inspired by empirical material (Alvesson, 2010). Central to this approach are critical reflection and an iterative process, wherein assumptions are challenged and alternative understandings are considered.

In this study, the theoretical background offered a lens (Creswell, 2013) through which the empirical world was examined. This approach is often used when the research phenomenon lacks robust theoretical foundations (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), as is the case with human brand identity co-creation (see Gorbatov et al., 2018). In practice, in this study, the theory was used to build a tentative, analytical framework (presented in Fig. 8) for approaching human brand identity construction. However, as the researcher's theoretical grasp of the phenomena grew throughout the study project, it changed concurrently with the awareness that came from the empirical data. As the research process was abductive, where the empirical data and theory are closely linked, it was found to be impossible to identify all the literature in advance. Thus, instead, the requirement for theory was discovered throughout the process (see Dubois & Gadde, 2002), as was the case in adopting the identity work perspective (e.g., Ibarra, 1999) as a theoretical lens.

Overall, the theoretical understanding helped to approach the data with an open mind, allowing for discoveries of new and unexpected empirical materials (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Although existing theory provided a foundation for understanding human brand identity construction, constant movements from data to theory (and vice versa) in the data analysis stage as well as the development of theoretical and empirical knowledge, were required to extend the existing theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In terms of this study, the alignment of the unpredictable empirical findings and theoretical insights, which Dubois & Gadde (2002) call "*cross-fertilization*" (p. 559), has been an interesting journey and has resulted in a novel conceptual framework. As a result, the abductive research method can be seen as playing a significant part in this study and further advancing brand co-creation theory (see Charmaz, 2011, p. 361).

The qualitative interview method was used to gain an understanding of the phenomena, which is influenced by the setting in which it emerges. Interviews are a widely used data collection method in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This study utilized semi-structured interviews because it allowed the exploration of the experiences, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of the participants (Creswell, 2013).

## 3.3 Research process

The research was conducted in three stages, each of which was abductive in nature. While the research process outlined in the following sections appears simple, the research process may actually be regarded as recursive rather than linear, as is inherent in qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Next, the research process is described in detail.

### *3.3.1 First stage: finding the research focus*

The preliminary idea was to study "personal branding" in the context of social media. However, after conducting an extensive review of academic literature (including the identification of the key researchers), the study focused on the human brand identity of professionals apart from celebrities. Because the previous literature had found that branding happens mostly in the context of careers to enhance employability, it was decided to narrow the focus of the study to those professionals who had used social media to brand themselves in a career transition (i.e., shift to an occupation, role, or organization that is different from the past). Although it is often difficult to determine a person's agency (i.e., active initiative and participation) in the career transition, the researchers divide transitions into two categories: voluntary (e.g., the person autonomously decides to change) or involuntary (e.g., the person is laid off and forced to change) (Fouad & Bynner, 2008). The professionals interviewed for this study had experiences from both voluntary and involuntary career transitions.

Further, the different approaches to human brands within the marketing discipline were reviewed and compared. The brand co-creation perspective was chosen as the most suitable for this study. Altogether, this phase can be regarded as theory-driven (deductive), as it focused on the creation of the pre-understanding of the phenomenon. Although the ongoing repetition between data collection and analysis in qualitative research makes it difficult, if not impossible, to separate a discussion of data collection from that of analysis (Welch, 2001), both processes are detailed separately in the following for methodological clarity.

### *3.3.2 Second stage: collecting the data*

The second stage of the research process concentrated on collecting empirical data. The interviews were conducted between September 2019 and February 2020 by following the recommendations presented by Creswell (2013, pp. 163–164): Decide on research questions, identify interviewees, determine the type of interview, use recording procedures, design an interview protocol, pilot-test the questions, determine the place of the interviews, obtain consent by using a consent form, and follow good interview procedures.

The constitution of the interview questions was guided by the initial research question: What is the process of personal branding in the context of social media? This question was refined later. In a qualitative study, the research questions are typically developed or refined in all stages of a reflexive and interactive inquiry journey (Agee, 2009). Table 4 shows the connection between the research purpose, the research questions, the main concepts of the study, and the interview questions. The first part of the questions (interview questions 1–10) focused on the professional's human brand identity and interaction on social media. The professionals were encouraged to describe their brand, the ways they interact with others on social media as well as situations, feelings, and people they consider related to their brand. The second part of the questions (interview questions 11–14) concentrated on identity tensions and solving the tensions. The professionals discussed the challenges they have had when branding themselves on social media and the ways they have dealt with those challenges. Additionally, professionals were asked to describe their reactions to the feedback they receive from the stakeholders. The final part of the interview questions (questions 15–17) focuses on collecting the professionals' experiences on the outcomes of the brand identity construction. The professionals are asked to reflect on the results of professional brand identity construction on social media in a career transition. Initially, the interview protocol included 21 questions. But after pilot-testing them with one of the participants, six were deleted because of overlapping, and two questions were added to the interview protocol. Additionally, four of the remaining 17 questions were re-formulated.

**Table 4. Interview questions used to address the purpose of the study and their relation to the main concepts and research questions.**

| Purpose of the study | Research question | Main concept | Interview question |
|---|---|---|---|
| To understand professionals' human brand identity construction on social media in a career transition. | (1) How do professionals describe the process of brand identity construction on social media in a career transition? | Brand identity | (1) Are you a brand?<br>(2) How would you describe your brand?<br>(3) How did the branding process start from your point of view?<br>(4) Does your brand have a goal or a vision – what kind?<br>(5) What do you consider when being visible on social media?<br>(6) Do you have a key message you want to convey as a brand – what is it? |
| | | Brand co-creation | (7) Which social media channels are you involved in, and why?<br>(8) What do you do on social media?<br>(9) Describe the people you interact with on social media?<br>(10) In what ways do you interact with them on social media? |
| | (2) How do professionals experience the intrapersonal tensions that are involved in professional brand identity co-creation? | Identity tensions | (11) How do others' reactions to your social media posts influence you?<br>(12) What kind of challenges have you experienced in building a brand? |

| Purpose of the study | Research question | Main concept | Interview question |
|---|---|---|---|
| | (3) How do professionals solve identity tensions involved in professional brand identity co-creation? | Identity work | (13) How have you overcome these challenges?<br>(14) Can you give me an example of how you've handled a challenging situation? |
| | (4) How do professionals experience the outcomes of professional brand identity construction? | Professional brand | (15) How branding on social media has influenced your professional career? - Give an example of a situation.<br>(16) Has building a brand influenced you or your everyday life, and how?<br>(17) How do you measure your brand's success? |

While a broad range of occupations, professions, or groups might have been a good choice in seeking to gain a comprehensive picture as possible of the phenomenon, a multi-faceted group of people that intentionally and actively uses social media was finally identified as subjects for the study because it was assumed that by investigating the phenomenon through a variety of experiences, an in-depth understanding can be acquired (Creswell, 2013). To collect rich and descriptive data, 18 informants were selected using the purposive sampling method, which is a strategy commonly used in qualitative research for identifying and selecting information-rich examples to make the most use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). The sampling rationale followed three pre-defined criteria that allowed the identification and selection of individuals who were information-rich informants (Miles & Huberman, 1994) possessing in-depth knowledge and experience (see Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011) of constructing their brand identity in a career transition on social media.

The criteria were: (1) the informant is active on social media by sharing profession-related content (the social media channels used by the participants are summarized in Table 5), (2) the informant's branding activities on social media supported his or her recent career transition, and (3) the informant was willing to participate and articulately share his or her experiences. Participants' availability and willingness to participate, as well as the ability to communicate experiences fluently (see Bernard, 2006), was emphasized because at the time of data collection (2019–2020) professionals generally did not share their career experiences on social media as openly as they do today. Thus, in the participant selection, the snowball method (Patton, 2002) was also applied by asking the recruited professionals to identify people that generally had similar experiences to theirs. Altogether, both sampling methods followed the three selection criteria mentioned above.

To guarantee that all facets of the phenomena were investigated, particular attention to the heterogeneity of the informants was paid in the selection phase. (See a summary of the information about the participants in Table 5.) The selected participants varied in their job positions and career stages as well as gender, age, career stage, educational background, and location. This helped to gain variation to document unique and diverse experiences, as suggested by Blaikie (2010).

A total of 21 professionals were contacted. Three of the selected professionals refused to participate claiming a lack of time. Six out of the remaining 18 participants were found via recommendations from the other participants. The selected participants were contacted via social media channels, mainly via

LinkedIn and Twitter, which according to the pre-understanding, were the channels professionals mainly used to brand themselves.

### *Remarks on ethics*

This research follows the guidelines of the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics by respecting the autonomy of the research subjects, avoiding harm, and ensuring the participants' privacy. Therefore, after the participants had agreed on participating in the study, each was sent an individual email including a brief description of the study and its procedures, and a consent form adapted from Seidman (2006, pp. 76–77). The form included the researcher's full name information, assurances that participation was voluntary and that the responder has the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, confidentiality assurances, and information about how the data acquired will be used. The participants were asked to give their agreement by replying to the e-mail. The agreement e-mail and the consent form of each participant were then saved on an external hard drive.

The most relevant ethical consideration was to secure the participants' identities and data confidentiality when managing the data and reporting the results. The anonymity of the participants was preserved by not associating their identities and the data. Overall confidentiality was secured by storing the data in two external memory drives and making regular backups. Only the author has access to this data.

### *Semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews with the participants were conducted both face-to-face and by telephone. Those participants, who were located within 200 kilometers of the researcher's home, were met face-to-face. One participant was met at her home and two at the researcher's workplace in a quiet meeting room in Rovaniemi, Finland. The other 15 participants were interviewed over the phone. The duration of the interviews varied from 35 to 80 minutes. The average interview lasted 52 minutes.

To be able to concentrate on the discussions, the interviews were documented with a Zoom audio recorder. Additionally, notes were taken including emerging ideas and follow-up questions during the interview. Although the questions were used to steer the discussion, the interviews did not necessarily follow the sequence on the schedule. In some cases, the organization of the questions was changed, for example, if a question was appropriate to ask earlier than scheduled because of what the respondent had just said. Similarly, the phrasing of the questions was partly dependent on the response. In cases where the initial question was regarded as insufficient to elicit a satisfactory response or the respondent gave a short or tangential reply, the question was made more specific. Similarly, relevant follow-up questions were addressed if some points needed to be discussed in more detail. The data-collecting continued until signs of data saturation emerged as the interview data offered no new insights into the analysis.

Directly after each interview, the recordings were transcribed into Word documents. Transcriptions resulted in approximately 180 single-spaced pages of text, which were saved on an external hard drive. The transcriptions of the participants were marked with an identifier. To ensure that the file of the names combined with the identifiers and the interview data could not be connected, the files were saved on separate external hard drives. Additionally, backup copies of the files were made on a third external hard drive.

**Table 5. Summary of the information of the participants and the social media channels used.**

| Identifier | Age | Degree | Position | Years of career | Social media channels used | Interview length (min) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| N1 | 39 | Bachelor | Receptionist | 15 | Facebook, Instagram | 72 |
| N2 | 35 | Bachelor | HR-specialist | 10 | Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, | 69 |
| N3 | 27 | Bachelor | Entrepreneur | 7 | Instagram, own webpages, LinkedIn, | 52 |
| N4 | 24 | Master | Entrepreneur | 2 | Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram | 73 |
| N5 | 42 | Ph.D. | Community manager | 18 | Twitter, LinkedIn, own blog, Facebook | 53 |
| N6 | 32 | Master | Comms specialist | 7 | Own webpages, LinkedIn, Facebook | 48 |
| N7 | 42 | Master | Marketing manager | 16 | Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn | 60 |
| N8 | 26 | Bachelor | Student, athlete | 4 | Own blog, Instagram, LinkedIn, | 40 |
| N9 | 44 | Bachelor | Community manager | 19 | Podcast, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook | 55 |

| Identifier | Age | Degree | Position | Years of career | Social media channels used | Interview length (min) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| N10 | 38 | Bachelor | Fly attendant | 16 | Instagram, own blog | 58 |
| N11 | 29 | Bachelor | Growth manager | 6 | Instagram, LinkedIn, own webpages | 42 |
| N12 | 44 | Bachelor | Event manager | 18 | Facebook | 40 |
| N13 | 49 | Bachelor | Entrepreneur, partner | 26 | Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, own webpages, YouTube | 80 |
| N14 | 34 | Master | HR director | 10 | LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook | 35 |
| N15 | 39 | Bachelor | UI/UX designer | 17 | Facebook, LinkedIn | 42 |
| N16 | 35 | Bachelor | CMO | 9 | LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, own webpages | 36 |
| N17 | 40 | Master | Mayor | 15 | Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn | 42 |
| N18 | 44 | Bachelor | CMO | 19 | YouTube, LinkedIn | 37 |

### *3.3.3 Third stage: analyzing the data*

The third stage proceeded more or less inductively. The analysis phase in this study followed the six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012): (1) getting familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. These steps (summarized in Figure 9) were partly overlapping. However, for the sake of clarity, the steps are described here sequentially.

First, the interviews were transcribed from audio files to Word documents, which were then read through two times, and ideas were noted down in a process of familiarization. The files were subsequently transferred to NVivo12 software, allowing for systematic organization and improvement of the coding and interpretation (Huberman & Miles, 1994). The use of software improved the analytical process' credibility by making organizing, coding, looking for similarities, and interpretation more effective (Sinkovics et al., 2008).

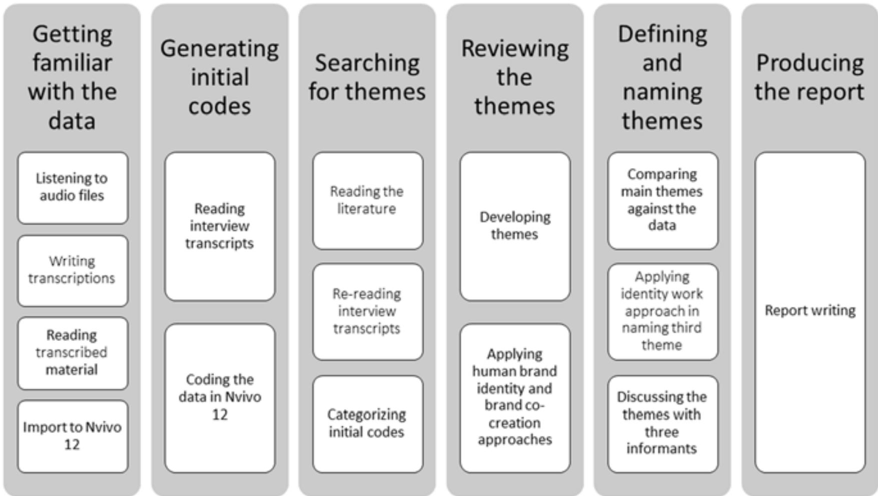


**Fig. 9. The data analysis process (modified from Braun & Clarke, 2006).**

Second, a coding frame to develop initial codes was applied. Thematic analysis is a method that is used to systematically identify, analyze, synthesize, and interpret themes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thematic analysis may be seen as a flexible means of conducting research rather than a rigid approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Following the initial coding frame suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) gave a “rich perspective” on the data set (Saldaña, 2013, p. 63) and supported maintaining an open mind to all conceivable theoretical paths suggested by the data (Charmaz, 2006). In initial coding, the data is coded into separate sections, which are then thoroughly compared and examined for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). Figure 10 below illustrates the initial coding phase, where the initial codes are italicized and underscored in the excerpt from the data.

"*It [professional brand] has developed half-accidentally. I haven't branded myself consciously (unconscious). I'm one of those social media users who find marketing terms strange (unintentional), even though I have my background in business studies. Marketing has never been one of my strengths, it doesn't come naturally (authenticity). Maybe that's why I'm not comfortable using those terms either. But I've understood that it [becoming a brand] has happened as I've been active in the network. And I've unintentionally (unintentional) been profiled as a social media expert (past achievements) who knows about working conditions of the academics, the challenges in their career path. And who organizes peer events (voluntarily organizing meetings). That is one side. Another side are my professional competencies (professional competences), internet networks and especially using social media in professional work and networking and creating knowledge (career opportunities). Those are the issues others connect me with (making sense of perceptions of the stakeholders)*." (N5)

Note: Initial codes are *italicized and underscored*. [Square brackets] are used when the author has completed the original quote of a participant with words that are not part of the original quote in order to make a quotation clearer to understand.

**Fig. 10. Example of initial coding from the data.**

After the whole data set was grouped under similar codes, 117 codes that arose from the data were identified. At this stage, all proposed codes were treated as tentative and provisional. In the third stage, the identified codes were analyzed and described in detail, which resulted in 48 initial codes, as some of the codes were re-worded and emerged with other codes (Saldaña, 2013). The codes are summarized in Table 6. The codes were then analyzed by looking for patterns (Saldaña, 2013). This was done through reviewing, refining, defining, and considering relationships to each other and followed by re-organizing into wider groups using NVivo. This phase resulted in 10 categories summarized in Table 6. Particularly the first four categories were an essential result at this point of the study, as they indicated that the experiences of professionals varied greatly. Thus, the research question of the study was revised and re-formulated. The categories were then double-checked to make sure they were supported by the original data by reading the interview transcripts again.

**Table 6. Categories constructed from initial codes.**

| Codes | Categories | Description of the category |
|---|---|---|
| Personal attributes<br>Personal and professional values<br>Past achievements<br>Responsibility to the profession<br>Responsibility to society<br>Authenticity<br>Co-existing identities<br>Professional competencies<br>Social embeddedness | Constructing professional brand identity | Defining the characteristics that guide, control, and advance the professional brand identity construction. |
| Human stakeholders<br>Non-human stakeholders<br>Future audiences | Identifying stakeholders | Identifying the various actors who contribute to the professional brand identity construction process. |
| Attuning<br>Themed storytelling<br>Emotional storytelling<br>Knowledge sharing<br>Professional advice and guidance<br>Optimizing brand content based on indicators<br>Inbound marketing | Engaging stakeholder | The ways professionals engage the stakeholders in professional brand identity construction: (1) attuning their actions on social media according to the needs of the stakeholders, (2) creating content on social media through storytelling, knowledge-sharing, and providing advice and guidance, (3) encouraging amplification through optimizing and inbound marketing. |

| Codes | Categories | Description of the category |
|---|---|---|
| Identity struggle<br>Seeking identity coherence<br>Staying true to the authentic self<br>Staying true to self-given brand identity definitions<br>Acknowledging co-existing identities<br>Acknowledging the definitions others provide | Negotiating brand identity | Misalignment between the various brand identity characteristics and/or between the brand identity and other personal identities (tension of identity alignment)<br>Misalignment between the self-given brand identity definitions and the definitions provided by others (tension of identity validation). |
| Integrating identities<br>Excluding identities<br>Prioritizing identities | Searching for optimal identity balance | The ways a professional seeks balance between the multiple internal identities to manage brand identity tensions. |
| Making sense of identity definitions<br>Drawing boundaries between identities<br>Making sense of the perceptions of the stakeholders | Making evaluations | The ways professionals evaluate the definitions they and the stakeholders give to the professional brand identity to manage the brand identity tensions. |
| Connecting different identities<br>Exposing prospective self<br>Stories about past, present, and future | Telling stories | The ways professionals tell stories to manage brand identity tensions. |
| Unconscious process<br>Unintentional process<br>Unpredictable consequences<br>Identity play | Emergent process | Professional brand identity co-creation as a long-term process that includes unconscious and unintentional elements. |
| Self-actualization<br>Enhanced self-esteem<br>Increased self-confidence<br>Career opportunities | Career resilience | The career-related outcomes of professional brand identity co-creation. |
| Bonding professionally<br>Developing friendships<br>Linking to the professional community<br>Voluntarily organizing meetings<br>Feeling trust<br>Reduced feeling of acceptance | Sense of belonging | The ways professionals share close emotional connections with the stakeholders. |

In the fourth stage, the characteristics and underpinnings that connect similarly coded and related data passages were analyzed. Writing analytic memos in NVivo assisted in documenting the coding processes and choices that were made in different stages. The memos included all ideas on the emergent patterns, categories, themes, and concepts that can be used when developing theory. Potentially contradictory findings were also investigated, analyzed, and written down in the analytic memos (Saldaña, 2013). Finally, the 10 categories were defined and merged into three main themes, described in Table 7.

In the fifth stage, the main themes were compared against the data set to make sure that the themes were accurate and useful representations of the data. After that, the themes were named and defined by formulating exactly the meaning of each theme. At this stage, the results were discussed with three informants who agreed to read and comment on the results via email. This technique (see Blaikie, 2010, p. 90) was used to make sure that the informants' perspectives were heard and that the study's primary audience accepts and understands the findings.

**Table 7. From categories to themes.**

| Categories | Themes |
|---|---|
| Defining brand identity characteristics | Constructing professional brand identity |
| Identifying stakeholders | |
| Engaging stakeholders | |
| Negotiating brand identity | |
| Searching for optimal identity balance | Managing identity tensions through identity work |
| Making evaluations | |
| Telling stories | |
| Emergent process | Becoming a professional brand |
| Career resilience | |
| Sense of belonging | |

In the final stage, the findings from the data analysis were reported. The report consists of three parts, covering the following chapters 4–6, which discuss the findings by presenting the three identified themes: (1) Constructing professional brand identity, (2) Managing brand identity tensions through identity work, and (3) becoming a professional brand.

In the following three chapters, the themes will be discussed with specific reference to how they arose from the way professionals described their experiences and illuminated their insights. Each theme has been divided into categories that are the second-level titles. Within categories, the codes are bolded on their first appearance in the body of the report. The research refers to selected extracts, sometimes several extracts, from the interviews to validate the findings identified. Wherever direct quotations are used in the report, they have been translated from Finnish to English by the author. Square brackets are used when the author has completed the original quote of a participant with words that are not part of the original quote in order to make a quotation clearer to understand. To disguise participant information, pseudonyms for all 18 participants are assigned. Direct quotations presented in the report are anonymized by using pseudonyms N1–N18 (see Table 5). Direct quotes represent various participants who have provided especially compelling or illustrative points of view.

# 4 Findings Theme 1: Constructing professional brand identity

This chapter presents the first theme, “Constructing professional brand identity,” which refers to the process where professionals define their brand identity, identify the stakeholders of the brand identity co-creation, engage the stakeholders in the brand identity co-creation, and finally negotiate the brand identity with the stakeholders.

It is suggested that this first process (Constructing professional brand identity) forms the basis for the following process (Managing brand identity tensions through identity work) because it involves personal as well as professional views, morals, and values that have an impact on all facets of becoming a professional brand. The first theme presents four professional brand identity construction sub-processes labeled as (1) Defining professional brand identity, (2) Identifying stakeholders, (3) Engaging stakeholders, and (4) Negotiating brand identity. These sub-processes are examined in the next sections.

## 4.1 Defining brand identity characteristics

Professional brand identity can be referred to as dynamic (e.g., Bendisch et al., 2013; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017). Defining professional brand identity requires a self-reflective inventory of the brand characteristics (Gad, 2001) as well as the ability to expand the identity to include other perspectives (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015) by determining how the definitions one has given to himself or herself are being perceived by others (discussed in detail in Section 2.1).

Overall, different understandings and interpretations as well as confusion about using the term brand were identified. While some of the interviewees were unsure about the meaning of the term “brand,” others refused to call their actions “branding.” Consequently, the interviewees often found it hard to describe their professional brand identity or a specific goal or motive for constructing one.

Some of the professionals struggled to find the words to describe their brand. The question "*Are you a brand?*" resulted in various kinds of comments, such as *“it’s hard to answer this”* (N5) or *“this is a complicated question"* (N12), or *"this is hard to assess"* (N2), which revealed the challenge of defining how the professionals perceived their brand identity. Similarly, when asked: *"Do you have a professional brand?"* the answers varied, and both yes and no answers were expressed. Often, this question was answered with process-related meanings where human brand identity was considered as constantly evolving, and long-term work such as "*a work in progress*" (N3), "*something not ready yet*" (N4), "*in its early days*" (N1), and "*depending on the situation*" (N9) by the interviewees.

The professionals who answered not having a brand identity explained their answer depending on the negative feelings they had towards the term brand. They linked the term to persons with vast public visibility, such as celebrities, rather than persons like themselves, persons with influence restricted to a certain field or professional context. Some professionals acknowledged that brand identity is more than being active on social media. They also regarded the brand as beneficial for them. Despite the negative attitudes towards being labeled as "a brand," the professionals acknowledged that a brand identity is necessary for them in their current work-life. Notably, some professionals consider branding on social media generally challenging, particularly for Finnish people. One participant referred to humility as a cultural character where being publicly proud of oneself and one's achievements can be easily considered as bragging:

> *"What is sad is that not all my contacts are ready for this. Where I come from [a little town in Finland], you don't flatter yourself. If you buy a new car, you don't tell anyone about it. So, if I post on social media, even the person nearest to me can start asking me what is this, why are you bragging about yourself on social media? This made me question myself and what I was doing on social media. It was a process of growing a thick skin and changing my mindset as I started thinking that the more they criticize, the more I post." (N1)*

This indicates that professionals link brand identity to self-promotion, which challenges the humble mindset they relate to Finnish people in general. This contradiction is found confusing and sometimes restricting, as professionals want to avoid being perceived as arrogant or pushy.

Despite these findings underscoring the challenges defining human brands, the professionals discussed the human brand identity characteristics that they considered the most important from their perspective. The following sections discuss these in detail.

When asked what their brand identity consists of, the participants' views varied. Some of them characterized their brand identities by listing **personal attributes**, such as enthusiasm, easygoing, adeptness, approachability, warmth, professionalism, happiness, problem-solver, innovation, empathy, and brave were mentioned. Some professionals pointed out their professional competencies as differentiating characteristics. Distinctive characteristics, such as tone of voice, communication style, personality traits, social media storytelling, and visual appearance were mentioned as ways to stand out from other professionals.

A brand identity was also characterized by **personal and professional values**. Professionals emphasized values as a base for all communication they engaged themselves in. For example, one professional acknowledged:

> *"I have strong values which I trust and act on. In branding, this means, for example, that I've never shared a post just to get employed. Rather, I bravely let my voice and values be heard. I'm not editing myself, but I act on my values." (N6)*

While some professionals regarded the values as changeable and dynamic, some professionals emphasized that values are prominent in that they are not a result of a negotiation with others but merely a result of a person's own reflection.

The professional brand identity was also defined according to how the professionals thought the stakeholders perceived them based on their **past achievements**. Displaying professional achievements on social media and being perceived as knowledgeable by their stakeholders were particularly important to those professionals who recently changed jobs to a new organization.

The professionals noted that a trustworthy professional brand is guided by a sense of responsibility. They outlined that a professional brand identity is about sharing "professional" social media content, meaning that it is not acceptable for a professional to use branding strategies that are compelling to the masses, such as provocative imagery. The interviewees seemed to have accepted that they, as professional brands, are held to a higher standard of responsibility and recognized that the way they portray themselves on social media had consequences for their credibility. A closer examination reveals that the participants' views can be divided into two categories, (1) their responsibility to the profession and (2) their responsibility to society.

**Responsibility to the profession** refers to acting as a trustworthy source of information on professional issues in a particular domain as well as acting according to professional codes of ethics and the promotion of the public good within their expert domain. Participants pointed out that providing value on social media can extend beyond blog posts, videos, social media posts, and other content. For example, commenting on an influencer's blog post or answering others' questions in the Quora service were regarded as powerful as well. The following excerpt illustrates the responsibility of the professional view:

> *"Professional brand has to stay truthful, share only content that comes from credible sources, and make sure that it is accurate. If you make a mistake, you must correct it, because building trust is a long process, but you can lose it just like that, during one night." (N13)*

Additionally, participants discussed the norms and expectations linked to their job roles. A professional who had recently transitioned from university to work-life and found it important for his professional brand to follow the rules underpinned by the professional association:

> "*One has to display a strong professional base and knowledge of the basic theories. Let's take sales and marketing. There [in interviewees social media networks] prevails commonly accepted rules about what works in practice and what doesn't*." (N11)

Notably, the professionals considered social media presence as their responsibility. According to them, participating in industry-related discussions on social media, sharing relevant articles, responding to the latest news, and connecting with other experts in their field could be considered a part of their professional position. The responsibility to the profession was sometimes regarded as a burden because it includes dealing with feedback. When asked how the participants deal with the feedback they receive, they often discussed the negative feedback and how they address that. They emphasized that the inability to see their own mistakes and justifying unprofessional behavior were considered errors that professionals want to avoid when co-creating brand identity. The participants believed that making public mistakes on social media, such as using professional terms incorrectly, fueled their professional growth rather than eroded their credibility as a professional.

**Responsibility to society** refers to a broader view where the acts of the professional were guided by a commitment to integrity, morality, and the promotion of public good within. For example, a few participants expressed that their professional brand identity was guided by a profession-related public agenda rather than a personal purpose. One professional reported having *"a mentoring ideology,"* meaning that she acknowledged the responsibility of being able to influence other people. As a professional athlete, she displayed responsibility to society by emphasizing to her stakeholders that she is not a healthcare professional:

*"I often say to my followers that I don't have a psychologist's education and that's why I don't give any health recommendations. But I share stories of my own life and maybe my audience is inspired by my journey." (N8)*

The participants also demonstrated responsibility to society by intentionally co-creating joint moments of learning. One professional referred to these as "*an ideology of common good*" (N7). At the core of the ideology is the saying "sharing is caring." While most of the professionals found responsibility as a constraining factor (meaning that because of the demand for responsibility, they cannot use social media strategies similar to influencers, such as lotteries), a few interviewees found responsibility to be liberating because it guided the brand. The following quote explains this notion:

*"I can't have a professional brand without the relevant content. I can't build my brand like a lifestyle influencer or someone making their living by shaking their booty on YouTube. I could also start doing that and gain half a million followers in a flash. But it doesn't fit the professional role I'm having on social media. To satisfy my audience, it is necessary to publish professional content." (N17).*

Responsibility was also linked to work ethics. A few participants worked in a field where publishing work-related content on social media was strictly directed by work ethics. One of those industries was aviation. Despite one professional working in the aviation industry who did not receive a clear policy from the employer, she outlined various core ethical concepts common to their practice such as confidentiality and privacy issues she considered while co-creating her brand identity. She was cautious not to commit boundary violations, utilize advertising, or use unprofessional language in her social media posts. In general, professionals outlined ethical behavior on social media. Many participants had a strict policy not to copy content from other sources without crediting them (plagiarism) and sharing videos or pictures without the permission of the people depicted.

Although some of the definitions, such as authenticity, could also be considered as a static character in a case of a brand, the fact that here it is viewed in the human context makes it more dynamic (Dammann et al., 2021).

**Authenticity** (e.g. Kucharska et al., 2020) was regarded as an important characteristic of the professional brand identity. Ambiguity in the interviewees' reports about authenticity can be identified as the concept of authenticity having multiple meanings or an imprecise meaning. However, the approaches can be divided into three categories. First is authenticity as consistency. Here, the authenticity can be judged as consistency between online and offline behavior:

> *"If I meet in person someone I've followed on social media. When we meet and start to discuss the first time, so do I get the feeling that this person equals the online person? That's the common thread for me. And that's super important in sales in general. It would break the trust if words and actions don't meet." (N11)*

Alternatively, consistency can refer to consistency between various social media platforms, meaning that, for example, the visual outlook and content on a professional's Instagram and YouTube channels should be aligned. They also pointed out the consistency between the tone of voice and aesthetic, reminding that it provides the brand with a unique personality and makes it recognizable and memorable. This was regarded as especially important in visual platforms such as Instagram.

The second approach is authenticity as openness. Some professionals expressed frustration for their inability to show personality as openly as they wanted, as they felt that professional brand identity should reflect "professionalism," not personality. In addition, some concluded that those professionals who were more extroverted could be more open on social media and thus be regarded as more authentic than those professionals who had more introverted personalities and thus did not share personal content. An example from Participant N18 explains this interpretation:

> *"Openness is more a question of personality. I know that opening up is something that works well on social media. For example, Patrik Sarinko [a Finnish entrepreneur] announces publicly what he wants and thinks and yet manages to be credible. If you are not naturally open as a person, the kind of person who shares difficulties with your friends, you are not that guy on social media either. So, I guess it [openness] depends on your personality." (N18)*

Openness was also considered situational. In some situations, such as having a baby, it was considered a personal issue but still an issue that could be shared as it is also associated with professional life.

Finally, authenticity as humility was also highlighted. By this, professionals meant that being grateful for career success and giving recognition to other professionals is important in being perceived as authentic. The fear of being perceived as selfish made many of the participants frame their request for help in a way that helped others in the same situation to enrich the overall discussion about the topic at hand. Professionals want to avoid bragging, but at the same time, they acknowledged that not presenting their achievements publicly could be regarded as a lack of enthusiasm for the work. LinkedIn was recognized as a channel where it was possible to discuss career successes without being perceived as overly self-promoting. Moreover, participants emphasized that when talking about their accomplishments, they often underline the situation, not themselves. The interviewees emphasized authenticity as an essential characteristic of professional brand identity because being perceived as inauthentic would cost the credibility of the brand.

**Co-existing identities** (see Bendisch et al., 2013; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017) were brought up by a professional who identified herself as an athlete, a student, and a human brand. She discussed how social media enabled the expression and exploration of all those identities. The professionals defined their brand identity also by referring to their **professional competencies**. An example of this comes from a marketing professional:

> *"I'm after a strong b2b marketing specialist professional brand. And to be more specific, I'm a modern marketing specialist who also understands the selling perspective." (N7)*

Notably, professional competencies are often connected to work roles, as discussed earlier in this study. Both can be treated as rather fluid elements when connected to identity (Ibarra, 1999). The following excerpt demonstrates this:

> *"I see both my brand and my career as strongly developing. It [brand] changes now and then as the professional interests are directed to something new. I have periods in my life when I'm interested in certain issues, and it can be something different after three years. I see this as quite normal." (N2)*

Finally, **social embeddedness** (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) was pointed out as a brand identity characteristic, as some professionals used relationship-based claims when defining their brand identities. Based on the data, the professionals engage the stakeholders both unintentionally and intentionally in constructing their brand identity on social media. Here is an example of unintentional engagement:

> *"A brand is a complicated question because I feel that I do have a brand, but I don't like to use that term. But I understand, as I have done big events and posted about that on social media, that people reach out to me when they need*

*help with organizing protests or other events. I guess what I've done is branding. I write about things I'm passionate about and tell stories about everyday life. For example, being active about climate issues and organizing events around that has put the "good guy" label on me." (N12)*

On the other hand, few professionals discussed how they intentionally engaged others to construct their brand identity. They referred continuously to the connections they had consciously built with their peers and other stakeholders. (The stakeholders are discussed in detail in the next section). Notably, physical closeness was also brought up, as the conversion of online acquaintances into trusted colleagues and friends seemed to be the reason some professionals connected with other professionals online. Some professionals highly valued meeting face-to-face with those they had connected with online. This indicates that professionals seek a deeper attachment (Ki et al., 2020) with their stakeholders than just seeking support for their professional outlets.

**Table 8. Professional brand identity characteristics.**

| Professional brand identity characteristics | Exemplary quotations |
|---|---|
| Personal and professional attributes | "I'd say that my brand is built upon two qualities I'm known for. The strongest is my LinkedIn skills, people ask my help in using LinkedIn for selling. The other side is personality traits. I'm enthusiastic and always willing to throw myself into new things." (N11) |
| Personal and professional values | "I have strong values that I trust and act on. In branding, this means for example that I've never shared a post just to get employed. Rather, I bravely let my voice and values be heard. I'm not editing myself, but I act on my values." (N6) |
| Past achievements | "A personal brand is someone that people speak about. If I think of myself, the best indicator for success is when I meet people, and they share warm memories about how I had taught them something." (N13) |
| Responsibility to profession and society | "A professional brand has to stay truthful, share only content that comes from credible sources, and make sure it is accurate. If you make a mistake, you must correct it, because building trust is a long process, but you can lose it just like that, in one night." (N13) |
| Authenticity | "If I meet in person someone I've followed on social media. When we start to discuss for the first time, do I get the feeling that this person equals the online person? That's the common thread for me. And that's important in sales in general. It would break the trust if words and actions don't meet." (N11) |

| Professional brand identity characteristics | Exemplary quotations |
|---|---|
| Co-existing identities | "My approach to branding is that it equals with portraying your authentic passion, motivation, and professional competence. There's no use building a brand that doesn't exist in the real world." (N17) |
| Professional competencies | "I'm after a strong b2b marketing specialist professional brand. And to be more specific, I'm a modern marketing specialist who understands the selling perspective also." (N7) |
| Social embeddedness | "A brand is a complicated question because I feel that I do have a brand, but I don't like to use that term. But I understand, as I have done big events and posted about that on social media, that people reach out to me when they need help with organizing for example protests or other events. I guess what I've done is branding. I write about things you are passionate about and things you hustle with, tell stories about everyday life. For example, being active about climate issues and organizing events around that has put the "good guy" label on me." (N12) |

In summary, professionals demonstrate a variety of characteristics in defining their professional brand identity. Table 8 summarizes the professional brand identity characteristics. The characteristics include personal attributes, personal and professional values, past achievements, responsibility to the profession as well as to society, authenticity, co-existing identities, professional competencies, and social embeddedness. The comments from the professionals demonstrate that, despite including some static elements such as responsibility to the professional and society, the brand identity is often defined with characteristics that emphasize active "doing" and dynamism, including multiple identities and involving other people. However, the degree of consciousness and intentionality of engaging others in the construction of the brand identity varies. Taken that the professional brand identity is socially embedded, the focus is next turned to the stakeholders involved in the process.

## 4.2 Identifying stakeholders

In the previous section, professionals acknowledged the important role of the stakeholders in co-creating their brand identities. Some of them regarded the connection to their stakeholders as the main motivation to produce social media content that was done purposefully with certain stakeholders in mind. In identifying the stakeholders, the professionals described the stakeholders co-creating the brand identity (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015; Dumont & Ots, 2020; Centeno & Wang, 2017).

Although the professionals noted that the larger the networks, the harder the content creation is, as it is important to create content for all stakeholders, the general attitude here was “the more stakeholders, the more possibilities.” The professionals used a varied vocabulary when describing their stakeholders, such as “*audience*,” “*network*,” “*followers*,” “*mass*,” “*field*,” “*scene*,” and “*friends*.” The professionals who also labeled themselves as entrepreneurs often used the term “audience,” as in this quotation:

> *“I feel that social media is the place where I can easily nurture relationships with my audience. My current customers, congenial people, potential customers, and work-life networks, in general, are mainly on social media.” (N3)*

Altogether, social media was considered “*a social dimension of life*” (N9) where actions were motivated by daily discussions with like-minded professionals around the world. The notion indicates that professional identities are not only “socially embedded” (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) but also “socially shaped” by their stakeholders. Various statements by informants highlight the importance of brand identity co-creation, particularly during career transitions. For many, the trigger for brand identity co-creation on social media was the uncertainty caused by career transition. Thus, it can be concluded that the stakeholders’ role in the human brand identity process is emphasized during career transitions. One professional noted that career opportunities can depend on one particular person who sees his post on social media, and, thus, he found vast networking to be important. The stakeholders helped professionals to advance their careers in many different ways, such as by giving tips about a job, suggesting co-workers for projects, pointing out conference calls, and providing direct job offers. In addition to providing career-related benefits, the stakeholders sometimes seemed to have an important role in big life decisions, such as accepting a job offer.

Based on the interviews, the stakeholders can be divided into three categories: human stakeholders, nonhuman stakeholders, and future audiences.

The identified **human stakeholders** consist of seven partly overlapping groups of stakeholders (i.e., a colleague can also be considered a friend). The first group consists of colleagues and clients from former and present workplaces. The descriptions of the benefits that this stakeholder group provides include professional skills like analyzing and applying knowledge together, online collaboration, internationalization, and ICT (information and communication technology) skills. The following quotes illustrate the variety of professional benefits:

> *"Twitter is the most beneficial social networking platform I use to interact with my colleagues. It is an extraordinarily powerful way to connect with inspired, innovative educators who possess a wealth of resources and information to share. It's easy to develop a network in a short time with this tool, and it's very easy to share ideas and resources. Reading posts on the Internet is interesting but can only go so far. It is through conversation and connections that our professional skills develop." (N5)*

The previous quote also emphasizes a sense of belonging, which was also found to be one of the benefits resulting from brand identity co-creation on social media. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 6. The same interviewee continued explaining why the sense of belonging is important for her:

> *"I've learned multiple skills from them [colleagues]. For example, communicating with them on Twitter has taught me to summarize my thoughts and find the most relevant content. Those are important skills for the future as well. In general, I've learned the courage to express myself and a sense of belonging to a community, which I highly appreciate since I live in a small city." (N5)*

The second human stakeholder group includes former and present employers. Building relationships was found crucial to succeeding in career transitions and work-life in general. Fostering relationships with former employers was highlighted as a good way to keep the door open in case of a sudden need for returning and get recommendations for future jobs. Relationships with the present employer in turn were found to be important as they could lead to promotions and other work opportunities.

The third group contains peers: professionals working in the same industry as the professional, other people having similar work roles or positions, and people who share similar interests. The interviewees reported a variety of benefits regarding this stakeholder group, such as gaining new insights and ideas, testing ideas, getting help, sharing best practices, getting feedback, and career mentoring and coaching. For example, one professional discussed how he was after professional growth and learning, and he experienced getting more relevant guidance on work-related issues from his stakeholders on Twitter than he could get by searching information from the Web.

The fourth identified group of stakeholders covers family and friends. Professionals often noted that brand identity co-creation was easiest to start from this group. This group includes also people sharing the same life situation, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> *"My social media activity started when I become a mother of twins. I wanted to find peer support and share thoughts about twin pregnancy. Both times that I've been pregnant, I've activated social media. Those experiences then encourage me to start sharing professional content as well." (N13)*

The benefits provided by this group were general support (i.e., "my family likes all my posts on social media") and emotional support.

The fifth group of stakeholders consists of media representatives (journalists, and podcast hosts). Media representatives were considered important, as they provided access to greater visibility. For example, Twitter offered the possibility to connect directly with those journalists who were found relevant by the professionals. The sixth identified stakeholder group is customers. Many professionals acknowledged the power of social selling, i.e., engaging potential customers and serving present customers by sharing their expertise on social media. Finally, interacting with other well-known professional brands and influencers in or outside the professional industry was also considered valuable to extend their reach and boost visibility with the target audience.

In addition to human stakeholders, **non-human stakeholders** (see Centeno & Wang, 2017) were also found to influence the professionals' brand identity. Here, the platform algorithms are considered a non-human stakeholder (Scolere et al., 2018) influencing professional brand identity co-creation. Algorithms, with their power to prioritize which content a social media user sees first in their feed, were found to influence the brand identity because professionals often discussed how social media algorithms shape their posting behavior and, thus, their brand identity. For example:

> *"My posts are more of an inbound style nowadays. I ask questions and include a call to action verbs and stuff. It is intentional because LinkedIn rewards those posts that get loads of comments. Asking questions activates people to comment." (N7)*

In the previous excerpt, a professional explains how she creates content for LinkedIn in a way that pleases the algorithm. It can be concluded that she engages in generating discussions in the LinkedIn comments section because it increases the engagement of the stakeholders. By doing this, she also brands herself as a professional who willingly discusses with others and listens to them. In other words, she is likable.

Notably, stakeholders also included "**future audiences**" (Jacobson, 2020). In creating content for social media, the professionals projected their brand identity for future unknown and unanticipated stakeholders. The following extract illustrates this:

> *"Then there is this large mass of people whom I regularly exchange messages with. That is an interesting mass that should be explored more in the future." (N11)*

In the case of professionals in career transition, the future audience also included potential future employers whom the professionals desired to work with. One professional described how he posts to social media with certain stakeholders in mind. By doing this, he desires to connect with the people he desires to work with in the future. Primarily, the reason for addressing future audiences was the professionals' perceived insecurity towards work-life. Some professionals regarded contemporary work-life as precarious, where one has to proactively manage a career by connecting with future employers or people that have influence. The following excerpt shows this:

> *"Although I have a permanent job at the moment, I still want to keep my brand alive because you never know what happens. One might well need help with a job search in one month. Even the permanent places are not forever nowadays." (N12)*

The process of identifying stakeholders provides professionals the possibility not only to become aware of whom their brand identities are currently connected with on social media but also whom they should connect with in the future. Figure 11 summarizes the identified stakeholders.

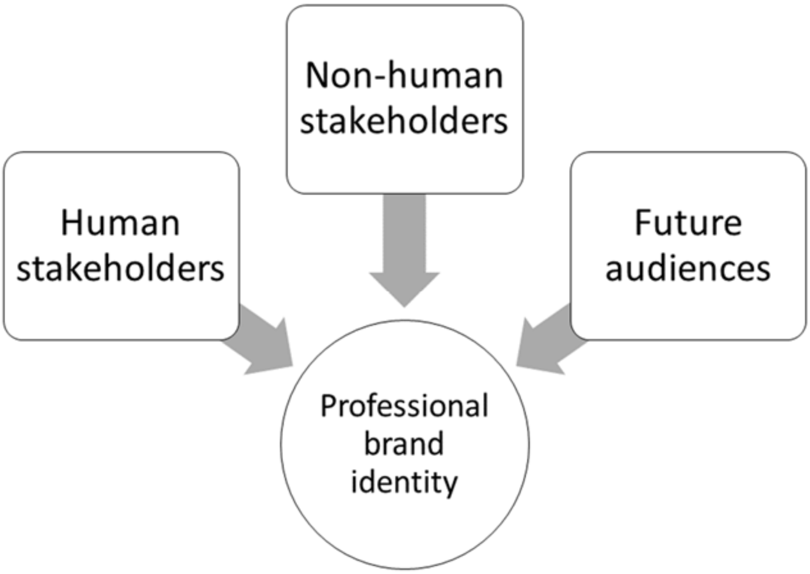


**Fig. 11. Stakeholders of professional brand identity co-creation.**

In summary, the stakeholders can be divided into three categories: human stakeholders, nonhuman stakeholders, and future audiences. The identified human stakeholders consist of seven groups that are partly overlapping (i.e., a colleague can also be considered a friend). The groups included: (1) colleagues and clients from former and present workplaces, (2) former and present employers, (3) professionals working in the same industry and people with similar work roles or positions or share similar interests, (4) family and friends, (5) media representatives, (6) customers, and (7) well-known professional brands and influencers. The study also found non-human stakeholders—the social media platform algorithms. Special attention was also paid to the finding of the future audience (Jacobson, 2020) as a stakeholder. Although identifying the stakeholders was not the focus of this study, the importance of this sub-process is to further understand how the professionals engage stakeholders in the brand identity co-creation process. This is discussed in the next section.

## 4.3 Engaging stakeholders

Within the sub-process of "engaging stakeholders," professionals follow social media engagement strategies concerning fostering social media engagement (Scolere et al., 2018)—and attachment (Ki et al., 2020)—between themselves and their stakeholders. From the professional's point of view, engaging stakeholders to involve strategies that "*attempt to ensure that the individual is in control of the information presented to the audience*" (Jacobson, 2020, p. 720).

Given the importance of stakeholder involvement in the human brand identity co-creation (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Ind & Schmidt, 2019) found in this study (see previous section) and discussed previously in this study's theoretical part (see Section 2.2.3), the relationships to stakeholders and nurturing them is critical for professional brand identities. Engaging others in professional brand identity construction can be regarded as beneficial for the professional because it offers various benefits, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, it is notable that the professionals were not only after the benefits, but they were also providing benefits to others. This can be seen from some of the professional's statements about the reciprocal nature of benefitting, i.e., benefitting that is conditional to providing benefits to others. For example:

> *"I've utilized opportunities to grow professionally in social media, and now I can help those who need similar support. I have transmuted from a receiver to a giver." (N15)*

Engaging stakeholders in professional brand identity construction proved to be a process followed consistently by professionals to develop their brand identities. Here, the data was analyzed using Smith and Fischer's (2020) theorization on human brand social media strategies: attuning to attentive audiences, creating content using distillation, and encouraging amplification. In the following, the strategies are discussed in detail.

### *Strategy 1: Attuning to attentive audiences*

**Attuning to attentive audiences** refers to a process where the professionals observe the behavior of the stakeholders on social media and selectively target those who have significance to the professional. This is a strategy that guides the selection of channels and topics on which professionals create content. In the following excerpt, a professional describes his strategy:

*"For me, social media is one big arena where I can act with a bunch of different people. And if I want to work with particular people on a particular topic, I must, and I want, to take part in that conversation, what is being discussed about that topic, and what questions are being asked around those topics. That is impossible to do if you only follow anonymously. I'd rather put myself out there and participate in the conversation, and that way can impact that [industry conversation]." (N9)*

In this case, the professional has a flexible attitude towards attuning as it follows his interests. He outlines his own active engagement in attuning. Those who described having a stable period in their career at the time of the interview reported less active attuning, as they found that they can re-activate their brand identity in case they needed support from their stakeholders, such as in a career transition. Participants who were experiencing a more turbulent period in their career at the moment of the interview were very aware of the behaviors and the needs of their stakeholders. The following excerpt is from a professional who had recently got a new job after a half-year period of unemployment:

*"The use of LinkedIn and sharing content was very active during the unemployment period. About 2–5 hours per day, networking, developing my own profile, writing articles, and publishing a post every day. Participating in a discussion where you can make your skills visible. Searching for job ads. Now, when I have a job, it is not that systematic. I'm not visiting LinkedIn every day any more." (N14)*

However, attuning to attentive audiences was also connected to authenticity of the brand, pointing out that attuning is appropriate only to a certain limit. In the following, a professional explains how she makes decisions about what to post on social media:

*"I refuse to post content only because I know that it's not getting any likes. I try not to think about that [audience engagement] too much because that would cost me authenticity." (N8)*

In the excerpt, the professional was cautious not to please stakeholders at the expense of her brand identity's authenticity. For some professionals, creativity in terms of attuning was highly appreciated. For example, one professional recalled building a Spotify playlist and sharing the link to the playlist on her LinkedIn profile, as she knew that the person whom she wanted to work for preferred music from a particular decade. This act of creativity resulted in her getting a new job.

### *Strategy 2: Creating content using distillation*

The strategy of creating content using distillation refers to the selection of the topics and content forms professionals produce on social media to engage their stakeholders in brand identity co-creation. Creating content using distillation is a strategy as it guides how professionals use stories to engage their stakeholders. In terms of professional identity co-creation, this strategy provides guidance for engaging behavior on social media, which, in the best case, can lead to attachment (Ki et al., 2020) between the professional and the stakeholders. This strategy can be divided into two practices: *storytelling and orienting*, which are discussed below.

Storytelling practice includes two approaches to storytelling. **Themed storytelling** refers to a strategy in the pre-determined themes guiding what kind of stories the professional shares on social media. For example, Participant N14, who wanted to be known as an inspirational example of chasing dreams shared stories that represented herself as a courageous chaser of dreams who does not settle for being average but actively seeks career progression:

> *"My criteria for choosing the topics that I post is actuality. I use only pictures that are taken today or yesterday. My brand is about sharing what's going on right now. Of course, the content of the picture must have relevance for the brand. If I share a picture of my skiing, I usually add a notion with a basic remark or observation that I've made. Those are usually also interesting to others.." (N8)*

The second approach is **emotional storytelling**. The participants liked to share personal stories they knew would raise emotions even though they expressed their concern about those not being considered professional content by their stakeholders. They experienced emotional stories as a good way to present authenticity, be regarded as influential, and experience closeness at the same time:

> *"For me, the most important thing is to be able to show the authentic me. I've been open about difficult experiences I've had, such as workplace harassment and payment default. I want to give them [stakeholders] the message that I'm just like any other job seeker, and this is my story. The stories must include struggles and personal challenges. Positive all-good stories can give an*

*inauthentic image of the brand. The authentic professional brand has a life behind the work-life curtains. To open the curtains of the private part of the person's life brings the brand closer to the audience." (N16)*

While the professionals found it relevant to share personal stories, stating that it is necessary to inspire others as it brings the audience closer to the brand, they were cautious about sharing overly personal stories, such as about illness or family. Some professionals were open to emotional storytelling that demonstrated their passions only if it was considered helpful in engaging potential employees or customers. The degree of how private the shared stories are varied, depending on the channel the professional used for brand identity co-creation. However, some professionals were not afraid to share emotional stories even if they could have negative impacts on their brand identity. For example, Participant N5 shared a story about her experiences of unfair treatment at work via her blog despite her knowing beforehand that her previous employer would find it unacceptable. Thus, it can be concluded that the practice of storytelling contains the idea of responsibility. The professionals are not avoiding difficult issues, particularly those the professionals feel passionate about, but the story has to add value to the stakeholders. A professional can engage stakeholders by speaking publicly about issues that are normally kept silent.

Creating content using the distillation strategy also included another practice the professionals use to engage their stakeholders—orienting. Orienting refers to a practice where a professional gives direct rationalized advice and guidance to their stakeholders. **Knowledge-sharing** in general was one of the biggest reasons to connect with others, as it was seen as mutually beneficial by the professionals. By knowledge-sharing, professionals meant sharing best practices, getting feedback for one's thoughts, reporting insights, getting new ideas to work, and crowdsourcing. The following excerpt is an example of this:

*"When I've learned something and then teach that to others and when I see that others learn that, too, that is the moment I live for. That is the best thanks one can gain. That feedback gives us chills. I've learned that often we think that the knowledge you provide to others is something already commonly known. But it isn't." (N13)*

In orienting, professionals provided content to their stakeholders for **professional advice and guidance** because it was considered a good way to engage particularly those stakeholders interested in similar professional topics. Professionals expressed being motivated by the change they thought they can make in others' mindsets by being an example for others, giving voice to minorities, and raising topics considered taboo. Although professionals emphasized both receiving and giving help, they often referred to the "being able to help" mentality as one of the major motives for connecting with others, as it increased their inner sense of belonging. The professionals also referred to helping as the "giving back" mentality that they felt they owed to their stakeholders. The ideology of "sharing is caring" was also discussed as professionals described how they help their stakeholders to get their posts to go viral by sharing their posts. Some interview comments suggested that using one's own life stories as an inspirational or cautionary example was also a form of helping. The following excerpt illustrates this:

> *"I feel that I want to help others, particularly if somebody is in a similar situation that I've experienced. I can help by sharing my story, how it went for me, and how I acted. Not telling how they should act, but following my path could be something for you to think about." (N15)*

In addition to sharing professional knowledge and giving guidance and help, orienting also included career-related orienting, such as giving and receiving recommendations from others via LinkedIn. Also, providing free services, such as free coaching and mentoring work, was considered a good way to foster trust. For example, one participant explained how she provided help to the stakeholders by reading through their CVs and giving suggestions. For her, this was a way to foster trust and, at the same time, educate her stakeholders about the service she provided (career coaching). On the other hand, she found providing free services gave purpose to her brand identity.

### *Strategy 3: Encouraging amplification*

Within the final engaging strategy, "Encouraging amplification," professionals emphasized the importance of making sure that the content they produce reaches and optimally engages the relevant stakeholders in brand identity co-creation. The strategy involves two different practices that vary in scope and complexity: optimizing brand content based on indicators and inbound marketing.

The first practice, **optimizing brand content,** is based on indicators that emphasize the importance of actions that are directed by long-term goals, such as building sustainable relationships with future employers. Optimizing brand content is about the use of indicators to monitor whether or not actions on social media are taking the professional closer to the goals. The use of the indicators differed in their systematicity and characteristics. For example, those whose livelihood depended on social media, such as social media entrepreneurs, experienced more pressure to monitor their success than those not in the same situation. An excerpt from Professional N5 explains this:

> *"Here, my answer is quite different from someone who makes their living working in social media; of course, then you should measure the results. I measure them only because I find it fun. I'm interested to know how my tweets perform. Once a month, I check the summary of my blog, and especially how the readers locate it. I haven't felt it necessary to measure results more systematically." (N5)*

Apart from the professionals who labeled themselves as entrepreneurs, professionals were not systematically monitoring their engagement in social media. Monitoring was also regarded as stressful, and thus many were trusting their gut feeling about how they were perceived on social media. However, the participants reported applying both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Quantitative indicators refer to indicators that measure quantity, such as the number of likes. Qualitative indicators, in turn, refer to change and are linked to the career-related objectives of the professional. Although both indicators were regarded as important, most of the professionals preferred qualitative metrics over quantitative ones because they offered in-depth knowledge that could be used as guidance for brand-related decisions in the future.

Professionals described a diverse assortment of qualitative indicators, depending on the goals they had set for their brand. The first qualitative indicator was whether the professionals had those relevant connections that had led or could potentially lead to a career change. The content was found to work well if the career-related goals were met, as one professional noted:

> *"I was home with my kids for a year, and after that, I resigned from my permanent job. I posted one post to Facebook telling that I'm open to any kind of work. It was shared over 200 times, and I got people contacting me. Then, I got a job from a start-up through that Facebook post. So, I guess that's a sign of successful branding." (N12)*

Another qualitative indicator that one professional pointed out was the notion of whether the professional had received messages from headhunters or recruiters, cooperation requests, and paid gig-work bids. Miscellaneous requests from media, requests to visit podcasts or blogs, mentoring requests, and recommendations they had gotten from stakeholders were also considered good indicators of engagement. A participant who hosted a podcast listed such indicators as whether it was easy or hard to recruit podcast visitors. He also liked the idea of getting his tweets on the publicly highest-performed tweet listings published by third parties. Another professional mentioned that the best indicator for her is if those "issues" she wants to advance by communicating on social media are progressing inside the organization she works for. An interesting indicator one participant brought up was receiving negative feedback. He explains:

> *"When you cross a certain point and hustle long enough, it is evident that you start to get negative comments. But fortunately, it works as a great indicator, because you know that you have succeeded. If you don't raise negative feelings in anyone, you probably haven't done enough. What you do can then be considered as a dull mass that nobody cares about. I get negative feedback now and then." (N11)*

The quantitative indicators professionals pay attention to varied depending on the platforms used. On Facebook, professionals measured the number of engagement acts, such as comments, likes, and shares. On Twitter, this translated to retweets, mentions, and replies. LinkedIn engagement was analyzed with the social selling index, and profile views were also used as an indicator. On websites, engagement was measured by examining the number of readers, the length of a page visit, and saves for the posts. In Instagram, the reach (i.e., the number of people who saw your content) was seen as a valuable indicator.

Participants also reported the use of quantitative indicators "that need more handcraft" (i.e., not directly available from the platform or channel statistics). Those were cost savings (i.e., using money on advertising versus organic content), number of discussions, own posting frequency, minutes used in social media per day, and increase in contacts. Additionally, the participants outlined search engine optimization (SEO) as beneficial to boost amplification. For example, a professional who also worked in marketing explained how he used SEO tactics to make his posts stand out:

> *"I have a huge benefit from my marketing skills. I know how to produce content, and I understand how algorithms work. I know what to write, how to structure the post, and what kind of title works. It is easy to stand out by producing pretty*

*basic but interesting content. Quite a few can produce text because you need to be familiar with human psychology, how people function." (N18)*

Based on the results provided by both quantitative and qualitative indicators, the professionals optimized the content they posted. Optimization included changes done at the individual post level as well as the brand level. Individual post-level brand content optimization included changing the posting time, polishing images, adopting inbound marketing techniques, and varying the type of content. For example, professionals often considered publishing times when adjusting content to reach a wider audience during peak hours. A few professionals had experienced a situation where Facebook algorithms had changed so that their content lost visibility. They expressed frustration about their inability to control the changes made to the algorithms by the social media channels.

Brand-level optimizing refers to those changes that need deeper reflection and more time to make those conducted to the individual post level. These included platform inventory and tone of voice. Many professionals described the platform inventory including compromises. While presence on the same platforms as their stakeholders was acknowledged as important, the professionals preferred the platforms they were most comfortable with.

The interviewees also noted that their content depended on the platform, as certain channels could be identified as more professional than others:

*"As a knowledge management specialist, Twitter is the channel I'm most comfortable with. It is, first of all, the best tool to manage knowledge I've seen. It is clear and easy to use, and it's fast and organizable using hashtags." (N5)*

The professionals used multiple platforms for brand identity co-creating because they did not want to be known only from one platform or content form. This was also a way to manage risks. The professional brand identity was then not dependent on one platform. Additionally, this multi-platform approach guaranteed the stakeholders more opportunities to engage with the professional.

However, the professionals made a regular inventory of the social media platforms they used. The platforms favored by the stakeholders were usually found to be the most relevant. However, sometimes inventory led to abandoning a platform. For example, Facebook was considered old-fashioned, which forced professionals to remove their profiles. The platforms used varied also depending on the situation. Some professionals found being present on certain platforms as their professional responsibility, as a participant who works as a mayor, outlines:

*"Of course, I want to be easily accessed by the citizens. Twitter is followed by journalists, so it is crucial to be present there. Other channels, such as Facebook and Instagram, are directed more to the local audience." (N17)*

Testing new platforms was also mentioned, as it was found to be important to adopt new platforms to foster stakeholder engagement.

Another way the professionals optimized their brand based on the results of the indicators was by adjusting the brand's tone of voice:

*"I used to write overly complicated sentences and use overly sophisticated words. But that made my brand come out the wrong way. What I wanted was to present my professionalism, but I didn't succeed. I polished the posts too much. I gain more engagement by writing more direct and shorter posts. It is important to use popular rather than professional language. That brings more feeling and one's own experiences into it." (N2)*

According to a few interviewees, a gentle and empathetic tone of voice could harm their brand, as it could be interpreted as unprofessional by the stakeholders. But there were also contradictory views, as one participant (N13) regarded an empathetic tone of voice as a differentiating factor for her brand identity. She wanted to be regarded as an example of how a professional brand does not necessarily need to communicate in a critical, aggressive, or businesslike tone.

In addition to optimizing brand content, professionals reported **using inbound marketing methods** (i.e., a command to the audience intended to elicit a prompt reaction, typically employing an imperative verb like "call now") to encourage amplification. An example of this is a call to action (i.e., an instruction to the audience designed to provoke an immediate response, usually using an imperative phrase such as "call now"), which was mentioned by a professional who works in marketing and sales:

*"I use a call to action if it fits at the end of the post, where I ask people to connect themselves to my network. I don't send connect requests anymore on LinkedIn. It has turned into an inbound style meaning that I write that if you found this interesting, please connect with me. It is intentional because in LinkedIn, more is more, and the question activates people. I also ask questions like 'how did you find this post?' to get more comments." (N7)*

Another professional who also uses inbound marketing to encourage amplification explained how she uses a story template and emojis, which her stakeholders found intriguing, to construct her posts:

> *"The typical post for me starts with a false quote, something like the best employees don't have to be visible online. Then I use emojis to show that this is wrong, and then I explain why I think that it's false, and then I give like three tips on how to stand out online as a job seeker. The post usually ends with an encouraging quote. I don't include selling, such as links to my webpage in my social media posts. Those who get interested will find them by themselves." (N16)*

Notably, the professionals felt obligated to avoid unprofessional communication styles, such as threatening, false promises, and shutting out communication. Instead, they emphasized having deep conversations through private modes of communication with the relevant stakeholders.

In summary, professionals use three kinds of strategies to engage stakeholders in brand identity co-creation. The strategies are summarized in Table 9. The first is attuning to attentive audiences, which refers to a process where the professionals observe the behavior of the stakeholders on social media and choose to target those that have significance to the professional. This strategy guides the selection of channels and topics on which the professional creates content. The second strategy is creating content using distillation, which was divided into two practices: storytelling and orienting. The strategy guides how professionals use stories and professional knowledge and skills to engage their stakeholders, which, in the best case, can lead to attachment (Ki et al., 2020) between the professional and the stakeholders (see Section 2.2.4).

**Table 9. Professional brand engagement strategies.**

| Engagement strategy | Description | Exemplary quotations |
|---|---|---|
| Attuning to attentive audiences | Professionals observe the behavior of the stakeholders on social media and select to target those that have significance to the professional. | "Social media is one big arena where I can act with a bunch of different people. If I want to work with particular people on a particular topic, I must and I want to take part in that conversation, what is being discussed about that topic, and what questions are being asked around those topics. That is impossible to do if you only follow anonymously. I rather put myself out there and participate in the conversation and that way can impact that [industry conversation]." (N9) |
| Creating content using distillation | Selection of the topics and content forms professionals produce on social media to engage their stakeholders in brand identity co-creation. Two strategies were identified: storytelling and orienting. | Storytelling:<br>"I have always been afraid of speaking in public, it was somewhat impossible for me. But once it became a major part of my work, I was forced to learn practices to help it. Now I enjoy it. This is the story I've shared with others about me. My story has raised loads of reactions on social media. I think this kind of story resonates well with the Finnish audience." (N14)<br>Orienting:<br>"When I've learned something and then teach that to others and when I see that others learn that too, that is the moment I live for. That is the best thanks one can gain. That feedback gives us chills. I've learned that we often think that the knowledge you provide to others is something already commonly known. But it isn't." (N13) |
| Encouraging amplification | The importance of making sure that the content they produce reaches and optimally engages the relevant stakeholders in the brand identity co-creation. Two strategies were identified: Optimizing brand content and Using inbound marketing methods. | Optimizing brand content based on indicators<br>"Here, my answer is quite different from someone who makes their living working in social media, of course then you should measure the results. I measure only because I find it fun. I'm interested to know how my tweets perform. Once a month I check the summary of my blog, and especially how the readers locate it. I haven't felt it necessary to measure results more systematically." (N5)<br>Using inbound marketing methods |

| Engagement strategy | Description | Exemplary quotations |
|---|---|---|
| | | "I use a call to action if it fits at the end of the post, where I ask people to connect themselves to my network. I don't send connect requests anymore on LinkedIn. It has turned into an inbound style meaning that I write that if you found this interesting, please connect with me. It is intentional as in LinkedIn more is more, and the question activates people. I also ask questions like 'how did you find this post?' to get more comments." (N7) |

In the third strategy—encouraging amplification (i.e., making sure that the content they produce reaches and engages the relevant stakeholders in the optimal way)—stakeholders are engaged by adopting two practices. In optimizing brand content based on indicators, the professionals use quantitative and qualitative indicators to monitor whether actions on social media are taking them closer to the goals they have set for their brand identities. Based on the results, they then optimize the social media brand content. In using inbound marketing methods, the professionals used such methods as call-to-action to encourage their stakeholders to respond to their posts and have deeper conversations with them on social media. This continuous interaction with the brand stakeholders (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015; Dumont & Ots, 2020) is called negotiation (Iglesias et al., 2020; von Wallpach et al., 2017), which is discussed in detail in the following section.

## 4.4 Negotiating brand identity

The reciprocal process in which the professional and the stakeholders both co-create their identities is called negotiation (Goffman, 1956; Centeno & Wang, 2017; Kornum et al., 2017; Iglesias et al, 2020; von Wallpach et al., 2017). Since negotiation is a dynamic process that constructs the human brand identity (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015), in this study, the focus is on the ways negotiations construct professional brand identities. Previous studies have suggested that in the case of human brands, this negotiation process leads to tensions (e.g., Preece & Kerrigan, 2015; Holton & Molyneux, 2016), which the interviewees of this study referred to as a "***struggle**." (N2)*

Based on the interviews, two brand identity tensions were identified: (1) the tension of identity alignment caused by requirements of **staying true to one consistent "authentic self" brand identity** and acknowledging the other personal identities' (professional, role, and personal identities) influence on the brand identity and (2) the tension of identity validation caused by requirements **of staying true to the definitions the professional has given to his or her professional brand identity**, meanwhile acknowledging the definitions others provide. These tensions are discussed next.

Starting from the tension of identity alignment, it was noted earlier in this study that professional brand identity includes multiple brand identity characteristics (i.e., personal attributes and competencies, values, past achievements, responsibility to the profession and society, authenticity, co-existing identities, professional competencies, and social embeddedness). The tension of identity alignment emerged when the professional experienced misalignment between the brand identity characteristics and/or their personal identities. This was because in career transitions, professionals found it important to communicate one brand identity to the stakeholders, and thus there was a need among the professionals to actively **seek a coherent brand identity**.

In the following, one professional discussed the tensions between two professional brand identity characteristics, the responsibility to the profession and authenticity.

> *"This is how I am authentic on social media. Now and then I notice a psychological conflict that I can't do this or that in social media because of my work. I once even said to my client that you know what kind of a person I am, that I can't help it [express her opinion frankly], and I would feel terrible if I couldn't fulfill myself this way." (N4)*

In the example above, a professional discussed how awful she would feel (tension) if she could not display her authentic brand characteristics because of the requirements of her new work role. The tension emerged when the professional tried to find a balance between the different professional brand identity characteristics.

The tension also emerged in the situation where the professionals felt that their multiple identities were not aligned. In the following excerpt, one participant discusses how she finds it hard to align her personal identity with her brand identity.

> *"I've agonized with professional content. I have so many interests, and it has made me think about how those affect the image I present in professional contexts. One example is playing video games, which is often perceived as a waste of time and a young boy's hobby. Although, in reality, it is so much more. But in the professional mainstream, in my community, it's considered weird. But I like it." (N2)*

In this case, the professional decided not to publicly display her interest in video games, although it was a huge part of her personal identity because she perceived it as an activity that would not match her brand identity. As someone who had just changed from a smaller company to a larger corporation, she felt that adjusting her brand identity by excluding her passion for video games was safe because of the possible negative image of playing and how that could affect her brand identity. Similarly, in the following excerpt, one marketing professional describes how changes in his professional identity during various career transitions have affected his brand identity:

> *"During these last 10 years, I've had a social media presence. The wheel has changed many times. So I have had to start the brand all over again many times. I'm kind of jealous of those who only have one thing they want to present or who can communicate their professionality in one sentence. I have so many things I'm interested in right now and things I have worked with in the past, and that makes this challenging. There's only so much information that fits in social media profile descriptions." (N9)*

In the example above, **a professional acknowledges that his new work role and continuously changing professional identity are linked to his professional brand identity.** The tension arises as the professional finds it impossible to align new roles and professional identities into one consistent and coherent brand identity in which past achievements are considered as well.

These findings indicate that, for the professionals, the willingness to portray one coherent brand during a career transition was related to becoming aware of continuously changing identities. Massive changes in brand identity characteristics during a career transition (e.g., work role identity changes, the emergence of a new identity, for example, becoming a parent) led to the tension of alignment as the professionals attempted to create one coherent brand identity while going through changes in their personal, role, and professional identities.

The second tension identified in this study—the tension of brand identity validation—concerns the validation often referred to as legitimatization (e.g., Pluntz & Pras, 2020a) in the human brand literature. In negotiating brand identity, the professionals experience the requirements of staying true to the definition they have given to their professional brand identities, meanwhile **acknowledging the definitions that others provide**. The tension originates from the professionals' efforts to align these two.

The external stakeholders provided definitions of the professionals' brand identities, both publicly on social media and via private messages. The tension emerged when the professionals were evaluating whether there is a correspondence between the feedback they got from others and the brand identity definitions they gave to their brand identity, as can be seen in the following:

> *"It started from social media. I was comparing myself to others and started to feel anxiety, of course, once you started to think about things so intensively.*

*You get new insights and feedback when talking to others. I had loads of moments when I sat down and wrote down who I am, what I want to be, what I don't want to be, and how I showcase this in social media." (N4)*

In this case, the professional experienced tension as she found a gap between the definitions she had given her brand identity and the feedback she got from others. Tensions triggered a thorough self-reflection process where the professional questioned herself about the professional, brand, and personal identities ("*Who I am, what I want to be, what I don't want to be, and how I showcase this in social media")*. This led later to a career transition from an employee to an entrepreneur. On the other hand, if the definitions aligned, the professionals felt their brand identity being validated (legitimatized) by the stakeholders, which encouraged them to carry on. Particularly the professionals working in large organizations emphasized the importance of being legitimatized by their colleagues and peers. One professional working in a large aviation company shared her experience of being cheered by her colleagues for her professional competencies.

*"When I started to share more professional information considering my field, such as the safety regulations on social media, I think I became more respected by my colleagues and supervisors, which, in turn, affected the possibilities to advance in my career inside the organization." (N10)*

In this case, the professional felt the definitions she had given to her brand identity aligned with the definitions provided by her peers and thus felt legitimatized by them.

Notably, non-human stakeholders, such as algorithms, were also regarded as causing tension in validation, as professionals agonized with the fact that algorithms prefer certain kinds of content (length, posting regularity), and, on the other hand, posting takes time away from more important things in life, such as family. The professionals were also constantly evaluating the impact of the non-human stakeholders on their brand identity characteristics (e.g., authenticity). For example, using too many hashtags (preferred by the algorithms) could lead to being perceived as inauthentic by the stakeholders.

The examples above demonstrate the notion that professionals experienced tensions originating from the misalignment between their brand definitions and those provided by their stakeholders. The efforts to resolve the tensions included self-reflection (see Gad, 2001) on whether they wanted to adjust their brand identity characteristics according to other people's needs to gain their validation.

Overall, the findings show that brand identity negotiation leads to two kinds of tensions: (1) the "tension of identity alignment" caused by requirements of staying true to one "authentic" brand identity and acknowledging the other personal identities' (professional, role, and personal identities) influence on brand identity, and (2) the "tension of validation" caused by requirements of staying true to the definitions the professional has given to his or her professional brand identity while acknowledging the definitions others provide.

## 4.5 Summary of the findings – Theme 1

For the first theme, it was found that four sub-processes are prevalent in constructing a professional brand identity. Although the professionals found it hard to label themselves as human brands, they provided definitions of their brand identity characteristics. The characteristics were categorized as personal attributes, personal and professional values, past achievements, responsibility to the profession and society, authenticity, co-existing identities, professional competencies, and social embeddedness. The characteristics provided clarity and direction for brand decisions. For example, personal values (e.g., privacy, sustainability) were something that the professionals found non-negotiable despite their acknowledgment that changing or adapting their values would make them more visible on social media. On the other hand, professional brand identity characteristics were in constant flux. For example, co-existing identities (i.e., professional brand identity characterized by multiple personal identities) are a dynamic characteristic because, in career transitions, professional identities are also changing—after all, a professional identity tends to adapt according to work-role changes (Ibarra, 1999). Consequently, changes in professional identity force professionals to redefine their brand identity as well.

The second sub-process of the theme of co-creating brand identity was labeled "Identifying stakeholders." The professionals recognize that stakeholders influence their brand identity. Stakeholders were divided into three categories: human and non-human stakeholders and future audiences. Human stakeholders, such as friends, co-workers, and potential employees, interacted with the professional's brand identity in various ways and gave them feedback, support, and career-related benefits. Non-human stakeholders—social media platform algorithms—in turn, shaped the social media behavior of the professional and thus influenced the professional's brand identity. Additionally, professionals were found to change their brand identity according to a "future audience" (Jacobson, 2020) to enhance their careers. For example, they would emphasize certain personal/professional values if they found them desirable by those the professional would like to work with in the future, although they were not able to describe those persons/companies as "stakeholders".

The third sub-process of the theme of constructing professional brand identity was labeled "Engaging stakeholders." The professionals were nurturing the relationships with their stakeholders through three different social media-related strategies: (1) attuning to an attentive audience, (2) creating content using distillation, and (3) encouraging amplification. In attuning to an attentive audience, the professionals attuned their actions, such as social media channels and topic selection, according to the needs of the external stakeholders. However, it was found that attuning happens only to a certain limit as some of the brand identity characteristics, such as responsibility, guided the behavior more than the stakeholders' opinions. The second strategy, creating content using distillation, was found to occur through storytelling and orienting. By using the third strategy, encouraging amplification, the professionals made sure that the content they produced reached and optimally engaged the relevant stakeholders. This strategy included two practices: utilizing inbound marketing methods and optimizing brand content based on indicators.

The fourth and final sub-process of the theme of constructing professional brand identity was labeled "Negotiating brand identity." The main finding was that the professionals negotiate their brand identities through identity tensions. Two tensions were identified. The tension of identity alignment was caused by the requirements of staying true to one consistent "authentic self" brand identity and acknowledging the other personal identities' (professional, role, and personal identities') influence on the brand identity. And the tension of identity validation was caused by the requirements of staying true to the definitions the professional has given to his or her professional brand identity meanwhile acknowledging the definitions others provide were identified. To manage these tensions, the professionals were found engaging in "identity work." In the next chapter, this process is discussed in detail.

# 5 Findings Theme 2: Managing brand identity tensions through identity work

Within the second theme, professionals follow identity work processes to manage the identity tensions (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) incorporated in the co-creation of professional brand identity. The theme addresses the internally driven aspects of professional brand identity by addressing what professionals do for and by themselves to negotiate identity (see Kreiner et al., 2006).

As discussed in the literature review, identity work processes ultimately the question: "Whom do I want to become in the future?" (Ibarra, 1999). It refers to the intrapersonal efforts that professionals invest to achieve identity coherence—first, between the multiple identities (Kreiner et al., 2006) tied to the professional brand identity, and second, between the definitions they have given their brand identities and the definitions others provide to them (Ibarra & Petrglieri, 2010).

This chapter presents three identity work processes that aim to seek identity coherence. The processes were labeled as (1) searching for optimal identity balance, (2) making evaluations, and (3) telling stories that connect the past, present, and future.

## 5.1 Searching for an optimal identity balance

To seek identity coherence, professionals search for the optimal balance (Kreiner et al., 2006) among their identities. This process concentrates on the relation between the professional's personal, professional, and brand identities. In the following example, a professional explains the relation between the various identities:

> *"I'm not even trying to separate personal and professional social media channels or content. Of course, the content that I share is quite professional, but that's part of me and I can't think of professionality as a separate personality. For me, transparency is important, and trying to build a separate brand for personal and professional use could easily get a false nuance. It is the same me who reports about both regular weekdays and professional issues. And as an entrepreneur, this is a reasonable way to act." (N3)*

Note that the professional searches balance her identities by highlighting the importance of **integrating all identities into one "authentic" brand identity.** For her, the best balance is found when all identities are present in one "transparent" identity. However, some professionals saw challenges in balancing brand identity this way. Although they acknowledged the advantage of having one coherent brand identity, bundling all identities together would be problematic. One professional explains this:

> *"I find it strange to have a slogan. I've had multiple jobs and projects and they all are based on certain values, but I've never been able to bundle myself in a way that I would be recognized for one single topic in social media. I mean, I have my work and hobbies, but they are not separate. I read books in my free time to be able to discuss reading on my podcast, which is work for me." (N9)*

In the example above, the professional compared ideas about "Who I am as a brand" to the other identities. Although he is unwilling to integrate his identities into one coherent brand identity, he explains how he integrates all identities by identifying the underlying values. The underlying values work as a glue that makes it easier to integrate the identities. Similarly, one professional, who had recently changed from healthcare to the hospitality industry, discusses how she makes decisions on balancing her identities:

> *"If I think about my employer and its values, how they have acted as a pioneer in many responsibility issues and responsibility is an important value for me both personally and professionally, so that kind of material I could post. If my values align with the employer, it's okay to re-post their content on my own channels, because those same issues are important for me personally as well." (N1)*

In this example, the dialogue on whether the professional could re-post her employer's social media content on her social media accounts was simultaneously an internal dialogue on personal, professional, and brand values which were then connected to the values of her employer. For her, the values represented the core of each identity, and identifying the shared values helped her to find the balance between the identities. These findings indicate that finding coherence between the identities is easier if the professional identifies the shared values.

For some professionals, the balance between the identities was found by **excluding the identities** that were threatening the balance. The following example illustrates this:

> *"And even if I have a company to represent in social media, I primarily choose to represent only myself. Because of the multiple role transitions within the*

*university, it is not my priority to profile myself as an employee of a certain company." (N5)*

In the previous excerpt, the professional discussed how her brand identity was tied to a role identity that was further tied to the institutional position. She found finding a balance between these two identities difficult or even impossible as she was unwilling to associate her brand identity with a particular organization. This was because she anticipated future changes in her work roles or employers that would affect her role identity and further her brand identity, which could be perceived as confusing by the stakeholders.

Professionals were also found **prioritizing their identities**, depending on the situation. One professional who was working full-time and running her own business on the side explained how she "regulates the demand" by giving prominence to different identities on social media:

*"If I must meet the goals at work, I post about employer branding, and then I show my expertise in that issue. If I need to get more customers as an entrepreneur, I start posting about mentoring. It has direct effects on my workload. I can easily regulate the demand this way." (N16)*

In the excerpt above, the professional prioritized different identities in a flexible manner according to her work roles and situation. However, in the case of entrepreneurs, prioritizing identities can be challenging because of the strong overlap of identities, as one professional noted: *"An entrepreneur is a brand herself."* (N13). In the extract below, a professional who had recently started her own business explains how difficult she finds it, in the middle of a career transition, to separate or prioritize her professional and company brand identities that are both evolving:

*"My professional brand and the brand of my company are both evolving rapidly as I have entered work-life and started my own business. The goals are intertwined, as everything I choose to communicate on social media has effects on the company as well. This is hard." (N3)*

Prioritizing identities involved weighing the public and private parts of the identities. For example, one participant had a personal experience of identity theft in social media as her Twitter account was hacked, and the hacker pretended to be her by posting embarrassing images online, which led her to cut down her personal identity to a minimum and share only brand-related content on social media.

Another example comes from a professional who wondered if sharing a picture of her newborn was something she wanted to do, although she had previously shared images of her pregnancy on social media as she wanted to protect the baby's privacy. She then decided to stop showing her personal identity, which was mostly colored by motherhood at the time, and focus on showcasing professional angles only. In general, there was a trend among the participants to progressively reduce the amount of content that linked their personal and brand identities. Few professionals reported reducing personal content after having confronted cyberbullying, such as threatening private messages and public harassment. Altogether, participants' words revealed that they were continuously weighing between the public and private parts of their identities. This was even despite their acknowledgment that the more private things they share publicly, the deeper the stakeholders' attachment to their brand.

In summary, professionals engage in searching for optimally balanced processes to seek coherence. The professionals are aware of the risks related to linking multiple identities into one because changes in one identity might result in changes in the other identities as well as an imbalance between the identities. Thus, finding the optimal balance through integrating the identities and excluding and/or prioritizing the identities (depending on a situation) were found to be useful approaches to maintaining a coherent brand identity.

## 5.2 Making evaluations

Making evaluations is a process that aims to maintain the internal coherence of a professional brand identity (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). The process involves two parts: internal and external evaluations. First, professionals reported making internal evaluations to consciously **make sense of their personal, professional, and brand identity definitions**. Here, a professional compares the brand identity to the representation of who she "really" is:

> *"In situations when I've struggled with these [identity] issues, I've always reminded myself about the fact that we are all humans, my name is a name of a human being, and this human being is a professional and also an entrepreneur. And if you follow me on social media, I'm so much more, and my life consists of all these things, similar to anyone else. Accepting and understanding that it is okay to showcase more than the professional side, has*

*helped me build my brand and post about really personal stuff on social media." (N4)*

The description above demonstrates that the professional is making sense of the multiple identities that she holds. While she sees herself as a brand, she wants to be seen as the human "she really is." Whereas the professional presented above decided to emphasize her personal identity on social media, some participants reported that they were avoiding sharing any information related to their personal identity on social media as they were **drawing boundaries between personal identity and brand identity.** Drawing boundaries helped the professional to build coherence in brand identity.

While internal evaluations were focused on coherence between the multiple internal identities, external evaluations ensured that the brand identity is coherent with the perception others have of the professionals as a brand. The external evaluations aim to resolve the tensions caused by the engagement of multiple stakeholders by **making sense of the perceptions of the external stakeholders**. In other words, the aim is to find out the stakeholders' opinions about their professional brand identities. In the following excerpt, a professional discusses how the positive feedback from a peer, whom she did not know well at that time, made her feel. She notes:

*"We had a Facebook group where we were planning an event for the Finnish community managers when one man chatted to the group that he'd join the event only if I would be one of the keynote speakers. I become delighted to hear this as I didn't know him that well at the time. I think they [peers] had perceived a certain kind of professional image of me based on the blogposts I had written. That felt so good." (N5)*

The case above shows that positive feedback from stakeholders is vital as it gives the sense of being accepted and validated. Based on these external evaluations, professionals were "making corrective adjustments" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010, p. 14) to their brand identity. An example of this is provided by a professional who reduced the content of her social media accounts in a more "role-appropriate" direction:

*"When I started to consciously build my brand in Instagram, I deleted nature photos and selfies and loaded up pictures of projects where I was attending client meetings, hoping that would have an effect [getting the attention of the employers]." (N4)*

The example above illustrates how the professional adjusted her Instagram account according to what she thought was context-appropriate. By doing that, she aimed at being seen as an "eligible candidate" for a job and securing the validation of her brand stakeholders. Few participants noted the importance of getting validated by the "internal" stakeholders, which were colleagues and superiors of the company they currently worked at. They emphasized that validation opens up opportunities such as co-working opportunities. The willingness to adapt the brand identity was linked by a few professionals to being relatable, and, in that way, meeting the expectations of the stakeholders. However, it is notable that professionals were not willing to endlessly adjust their brand identity according to others' needs. As part of adjusting, professionals found it important to nurture the authenticity of their brand identity. For example, Participant N9 stated:

> *"It [authenticity] means that there is no difference if you meet me face to face or on social media. Except that there's always a filter on the Web. You choose what you put in there and what you leave out. For example, I'm more versatile when you meet me in person." (N9).*

In the previous example, the professional acknowledged that, although he made conscious adjustments in what to include in his brand identity, it is important to ensure that he was perceived as authentic regardless of where the stakeholders would meet with him: online or offline.

In summary, these results show that internal and external evaluations are used to build identity coherence to resolve identity tensions. Brand identity coherence is established through internal evaluations, which consist of making sense of the professional's identities and drawing boundaries between different identities. Coherence is also established via external evaluations, which refer to a professional's acts in making sense of the perceptions of the relevant stakeholders. The knowledge gained via the evaluations was used to make corrective adjustments to the brand identity, but only to a certain point.

## 5.3 Telling stories that connect past, present, and future

While the two other previous processes addressed the past or current situation, this final identity work process focuses on the future aspects. As noted in the theoretical part of this study, to seek coherence within their brand identity, the professionals claim a sense of continuity between who they have been, who they are, and whom they are becoming (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). It has been suggested that this happens through stories that connect the past, present, and future (Rasmussen, 1996).

The following excerpt provides evidence of how professionals of this study are using this process to seek identity coherence:

> *"After that [career transition], the goals for branding culminated, so I was able to communicate the competencies I had and the future goals to others also. When I had determined my goals, it was easier to start developing future-relevant competencies as well. That journey I have displayed to others on my posts, and it seems that it has been interesting to the audience." (N3)*

In the excerpt above, a professional who was in the middle of a career transition at the time of the interview found communicating one coherent brand identity challenging because **all her identities were simultaneously under construction**. She discussed how she progressively created a coherent story of self (i.e., a story that includes events that makes sense sequentially) and claimed a sense of continuity by stating publicly her current professional goals and competencies as well as future goals. The professionals were also telling stories about their "prospective selves" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010):

> *"I try to show what I'm interested in and how I approach the issue at hand. I unveil my future goals and the position I come from. To see if someone else is interested in the same kind of stuff. And there has always been someone." (N9)*

In the capture above, a professional describes how he by revealing his "goals and position," **exposes his "prospective self,"** a professional self he dreams of, to maintain brand identity coherence. The professionals emphasized that the stories should be authentic. The following excerpt shows that professionals strive to seek authenticity by including personal stories of themselves in their brand identity stories:

> *"The brand stories must include struggle and personal challenges. Positive all-good stories can give an unauthentic image of the brand. The authentic professional brand has a life behind the work-life curtains. To open the curtains of the private part of the person's life brings the brand closer to the audience." (N16)*

Although the stories included personal stories as well as storytelling elements, the interviewees took up the professional approach to creating a brand identity story. Professional brand identity stories consist of storified elements such as "from rugs to riches," but the content should be "role-appropriate." This finding was connected to the professional brand identity characteristics and responsibility to the profession and society, which are discussed in Section 4.1.

In the following excerpt, a professional describes how using brand identity stories resulted in a career transition, as she convinced her employer to hire her for a position she created for herself (i.e., employer brand manager) by telling stories that emphasized certain role-appropriate competencies. Here she describes how the brand identity stories played a role in her career transition:

> *"My social media activity had a huge role in how I overall got promoted to a new role internally. I trained my colleagues to use social media, shared content and showed interest in social media. So, I kind of created a job for myself and justified the role partly with the activities I had started to do on social media." (N3)*

This testifies that by **telling stories that connect the past, present, and future**, professionals claim a sense of continuity. In discontinuous careers, brand identity stories have an important role in providing professionals with a sense of being in charge of their future. Another example that validates this notion comes from Participant N9, who stated that the reason he shares stories on social media is to attract "*prospective employers who appreciate workers who have engaging personalities*" (N9). In the same breath, he continues:

> *"I can't see a life without participating in social media. Unplugging feels absurd. I don't know what my next career steps are. My opinion of career paths and life, in general, is that it consists of multiple projects. Those projects can be short or longer; those can be my projects or my employer's projects. It remains to be seen." (N9)*

In the above excerpt, the professional finds sharing stories securing the continuity of his brand on social media even though the work itself is more or less without boundaries, consisting of multiple and potentially parallel projects, and the space between work and leisure has been blurred.

In summary, stories that connect past, present, and future selves are used to build a coherent brand identity. The process incorporates three types of stories: the coherent self, the prospective self, and the story of the role-appropriate self. Through this process, the professionals secure a sense of continuity in a turbulent and future-oriented work-life.

## 5.4 Summary of the findings – Theme 2

Taking together the findings within the second theme, the professionals engaged in three different identity work processes to establish a coherent brand identity and, consequently, to manage brand identity tensions. The processes, summarized in Table 10, are: searching for optimal identity balance, making internal and external evaluations, and telling stories that connect past, present, and future.

**Table 10. Identity work processes engaged by the professionals to resolve professional brand identity tensions.**

| Tension | Caused by | Identity work processes | Desired outcome |
|---|---|---|---|
| The tension of identity alignment | Requirements of staying true to one consistent "authentic self" brand identity and acknowledging the other personal identities' (professional, role, and personal identities) influence on brand identity | Searching for the optimal identity balance<br>Making internal evaluations<br>Telling stories that connect past, present, and future | Identity coherence |
| The tension of identity validation | Requirements of staying true to the definitions the professional has given to his or her professional brand identity meanwhile acknowledging the definitions others provide | Making external evaluations<br>Telling stories that connect the past, present, and future | Identity coherence |

In searching for the optimal identity balance the professionals integrate, exclude, and prioritize identities, depending on the situation. In making evaluations, the professionals were making sense of their personal, professional, role, and brand identity definitions, drawing boundaries between them, and seeking feedback from their stakeholders about their brand identity. Finally, by telling stories that connect the past, present, and future, professionals claimed a sense of continuity between who they have been, who they are, and who they are becoming to establish and maintain brand identity coherence.

# 6 Findings Theme 3: Becoming a professional brand

Typically, processes have outcomes. In the theoretical section of this study, it was suggested that the outcome of brand co-creation is a co-created brand identity (see Section 2.2.2). But what does this mean in the case of a professional? As suggested in the previous sections, professional brand identity constructs a non-linear process where the collective and individual processes fluctuate. Thus, instead of describing linear, causal, or direct consequences, the outcomes of brand identity co-creation through identity work are described here as "becoming" (see Centeno & Wang, 2017). Becoming extends the idea of human brand identity as an adaptive (Preece & Kerrigan, 2015), ongoing (Pratt et al., 2006), and unconscious (Driver, 2017) process.

The professionals discussed that the two processes described in two previous chapters (i.e., constructing professional brand identity and managing brand identity tensions through identity work) had various internal implications. This was interpreted so that while professional brand identity co-creation aimed to gain success in a career transition, the professionals noticed that the process had its "side-effects," both on a personal and professional level.

This final sub-theme describes "becoming a professional brand," referring to the outcomes that the professionals related to the co-creation of their brand identity. Despite the process being reciprocal, emphasizing the outcomes for both the professional and the stakeholders, it is notable that "becoming" is here described solely from the professionals' viewpoint. Three sub-themes within the theme of "becoming a professional brand" were identified: becoming as an emergent process, as career resilience, and as a sense of belonging. These findings are discussed next in detail.

## 6.1 Becoming as an emergent process

Although in the previous sections, the process of brand identity co-creation through identity work is described as a linear process (i.e., progressing from one stage to another), it is notable that considering the core of the becoming—identity— which is a considerably fluid and ongoing process (Pratt et al., 2006; Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), this section discusses brand identity co-creation as an emergent process of "becoming a professional brand."

In the theoretical part of this study, it was noted that ongoing movements between identities are not just restricted to deliberate, controlled, and conscious procedures (e.g., Petriglieri & Stein, 2012; Brown, 2017). This follows the views of the professionals in this study. This was often expressed with process–related meanings that could be interpreted as acceptance of becoming as a constantly evolving and long-term work such as "*a work in progress*" (N8), "*something not ready yet*" (N4), "*in its early days*" (N1), and "*depending on the situation*" (N9) by the interviewees. Becoming was also considered something that happens over a lifetime. The following excerpt clarifies this interpretation:

> *"It is hard to understand what comes from branding and what comes from sports because they are linked. To have a successful career as an athlete, you must figure out what you like, what you want, and where are you going. The branding process and developing yourself as an athlete are linked so tightly that it's hard to understand which are the concrete results of the banding process and which comes from being an athlete." (N8)*

In this case, the professional finds it hard to control her becoming a brand as it is strongly intertwined in her daily life. She describes the outcomes of becoming as "hard to understand." This indicates that becoming is partly an emergent and non-controllable process.

Becoming was also connected to the term **unconscious** by some of the participants. Their experience in becoming a brand was linked to being actively present on social media and networking with stakeholders. The term **unintentional** was also used by professionals when they described becoming a brand. In the following excerpt, a professional who had been writing a professional blog and tweets for a decade, explains how she became aware of her brand:

> *"I haven't branded myself intentionally. At some point, I understood that I've unintentionally been profiled as social media expert specialized in working conditions and challenges academics face in their career." (N5)*

The above excerpt illustrates that becoming a professional brand can happen without a conscious decision. Various notions were found that provide more evidence of becoming a brand as an emergent process that included **unpredictable consequences**. An example of this is the following case where becoming had taken the professional by surprise:

*"When I got appointed to this big board of directors, I become dumbfounded. I thought that I didn't even know those kinds of tasks were possible for me because one cannot ask to be committed to those. What happened was, I had been visible on social media by sharing my competencies, and they [recruiters] later on told me that my LinkedIn profile made a big difference. I described my skills there, and that helped me forward in the process. Of course, networks also played a major role in the process." (N13)*

In the excerpt above, a professional describes how she was recruited to a position that she regarded as "out of her scope." She was elected to the board of directors of a Finnish public service company, based on her LinkedIn activity. For her, becoming a professional brand resulted in positive career-related consequences that she could neither predict nor control. Another professional discussed how she had been rolling the idea of becoming an entrepreneur in her head for a long time before taking the decision. She gives credit to her stakeholders for helping her in her career leap by assuring her that she would be able to make this transition. In this case, the professional can be considered as having "played" with and tested the new entrepreneur identity on social media before making her dream come true. In the literature part of this study, this was referred to as **identity play** (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), where the professionals test future identities. Viewing becoming this way, can be contrasted to a "self-fulfilling prophecy."

In summary, becoming a professional brand consists of elements that are both emergent and unpredictable. Thus, becoming a professional brand cannot be fully controlled or its results predicted. Becoming can, in some cases, be contrasted to "identity play" where instead of "working" towards the desired identity, the identities can be played with without knowing where the next conversation or shared piece of content leads.

## 6.2 Becoming as career resilience

Several interviewees mentioned how brand identity co-creation had increased their ability to adjust and adapt to career changes in the future. This was interpreted as career resilience. In the following example, a professional describes this by stating:

*"It has enhanced my self-esteem and my reason to exist in this world. I've found a purpose for my life, as mentoring is my Ikigai. The professional brand made it possible to earn a living with mentoring. The experience that I cope with in this life is because I have my own thing that no one can copy. After all, there's*

*so much authentic me in this [brand]. And I do this [branding] with personal passion. The world is full of job search mentors, but no one is me." (N16)*

In the example above, a professional who had previously experienced two prolonged unemployment periods explains how she found her Ikigai ("a reason for being"), which can be also linked to **self-actualization** (e.g., I am becoming who I am: I sense a deeper purpose in my life). She emphasized the authentic characteristics of her brand identity, which guaranteed the uniqueness of her brand that no one can copy. This **enhanced her self-esteem** and made her feel confident about the future and, thus, enhanced her career resilience. Some of the interviewees made correlations between becoming and increased professional self-confidence. Here's an example of this:

*"I used to be afraid of giving presentations. It was impossible for me, but via being visible on social media, I've gotten practice and gained self-confidence." (N14)*

In the excerpt above, the professional discussed how, through "being visible" on social media, she became aware of her professional skill in giving presentations. This, in turn, **increased her self-confidence**. On the other hand, sometimes the professionals found that becoming a professional brand had the opposite effect. Here, a professional speaks about how comparing herself to others made her question her potential more completely which, in turn, negatively impacted her self-esteem:

*"There were times when I swam in deep waters with why I do what I do, and I even doubted if marketing was my thing at all. When I saw what goes on with my colleagues on social media, I observed how my friends from other fields were acting and how they branded themselves and their professional skills. It was distressing for me because I suffered from an inferiority complex all the time. I even thought that I'd delete all social media accounts because I felt I was not a marketing professional. I found it hard to accept myself." (N4)*

Several professionals reported that becoming a brand has **increased their career opportunities**. The vast network of stakeholders offered various opportunities for career growth. In the following statement, a professional describes how she generated connections with people who helped her advance her career:

*"In 2013, I started a job-hunting blog. It wasn't that professional, but it was a step in the right direction because as a communications professional, I found*

*it to be the best platform to make my skills visible. Because I didn't have a large network, it [the visibility of the blog] was on quite a small scale since I've re-activated the blog whenever I faced an unemployment period. Now I can say that it has started to bear fruit after all the years of experimenting. The work I'm doing now I got when a friend from school saw my LinkedIn post about my searching for a job. She then hinted to me about this job. So it worked." (N6)*

In this case, the professional emphasized how becoming a brand has been a slow-paced work that has recently started to pay off. Also, particularly in career transitions, becoming a brand is seen as a process that can be activated when needed. In addition, the interviewees listed several other career opportunities, such as finding co-workers for projects, finding conference calls and calls for papers, getting direct job offers, and getting new customers or sponsors.

Altogether, it was found that professionals linked becoming a professional brand to several outcomes that were interpreted as career resilience. Becoming a professional brand had positive effects on self-esteem and self-confidence, and the connections to multiple stakeholders increased their ability to adjust and adapt to future career changes. Notions made in this section also demonstrate that becoming a professional brand enhances possibilities for career opportunities such as landing a new job.

## 6.3 Becoming as a sense of belonging

"Becoming a professional brand" was also associated with a sense of belonging. The professionals referred to close emotional connections with the stakeholders. Given that a sense of belonging is defined as the degree to which one regards having positive relationships which extend to a subjective feeling of having relationships that provide a safe sense of fitting in (Lambert et al., 2013), it stands to reason that belonging can be enhanced through social media. However, the participants did not often elaborate explicitly on the sense of belonging. Rather, it was expressed through remarks relating to their brand identity and the relationships with stakeholders. Becoming as a sense of belonging came up when interviewees mentioned specific aspects of the **close professional relationships** they had built online. One professional described the whole trajectory from social media acquaintance to trustful advisers and then friends. This indicates that becoming a professional brand is linked to a sense of belonging as the professionals experience close emotional connections with their stakeholders. An example of this comes from a professional, who recently moved to another city for a new job. He highlighted how the relationships he had built via LinkedIn turned into **friendships**:

> *”On LinkedIn, I have about 100 persons I’ve got to know better and have a close relationship with. I’ve got a couple of good friends with whom we meet often. I bought a new apartment in May when I moved to Helsinki to start a new job, and at the housewarming party, there were five people whom I had met on LinkedIn.” (N11)*

The excerpt demonstrates that becoming a professional brand made a big career and “life” transition easier for him because it satisfied his need for belonging. Many participants experienced relationships on social media as empowering because the positive responses from their network had encouraged them to become professional brands. One person shares a highlight:

> *“The people whom I had looked up to suddenly became my fans, wanting to work with me. That felt so good.” (N13)*

It was also found that becoming a professional brand provides a sense of belonging particularly to those professionals who consider themselves more introverted. One participant described this referring to social media as a good way to connect for people like himself, who “*don’t feel comfortable in big networking events*” as “*you can build the network at your own pace*” (N18). A few professionals even valued online connections more than meeting people face to face. Notably, the interviewees often discussed how, in the situation of unemployment when work-life contacts are more restricted, participating in work-related discussions acts as a **link to the professional community** and provides a sense of belonging. The following demonstrates this:

> *”I’ve seen it [communicating brand identity on social media] as particularly important because I hope that my brand doesn’t die while I’m not actively involved in work-life. I can still write and discuss work-life despite being on maternal leave. Another point is that I see social media as a counterweight to life at home. It’s nice to be part of professional communities and follow what’s going on in the field” (N2).*

To strive for a sense of belonging during career transitions, the professionals reported having **voluntarily organized get-together meetings** with like-minded people they had met online. Few participants had built online communities where they welcomed people who shared the same interests that did not necessarily have anything to do with a particular project or need. For example, Participant N7 established a network of people interested in marketing because she wanted to bring people from her hometown physically together during an unemployment period. Furthermore, one interviewee had founded an online group for professionals who were experiencing similar life situations as her, a fresh Ph.D. struggling to find a job. She emphasized that by becoming trusted by others that way, long-lasting professional connections are built, which can further lead to other benefits.

Almost all professionals continuously referred to **trust**, which they highlight as the "glue" that connects them to others. Trust typically appeared in connection to terms such as authenticity and responsibility, which allows for an understanding of how professionals situate trust. The interviewees pointed out that trust works as "a memory" in professional networks, as once a professional had been perceived to be trustworthy by his or her stakeholders, that image does not easily vanish. In other words, as the professionals put it, "*losing the trust*" would be *"the worst thing that could happen to my brand"* (N11). One participant shared an experience where she felt that trust played a big role in her life, as she explains:

> *"I started to get accusations of having gotten plastic surgery on my face on Instagram. First, I answered back something proper, like "Everybody has the right to have their thoughts about what beauty is," but then I noticed that this person continued to argue off-topic, and I opted out of the conversation. But suddenly my most devoted followers started to defend me, and the discussion started to live a life of its own, and finally, it dried up." (N10)*

In this case, the stakeholders with whom she had built close connections defended her by publicly responding to the negative comments made about her physical appearance. The discussion dried up fast after she got backed up by others she had connected with.

Notably, social media was also considered a tricky channel to build trust, as professionals paid close attention to social media privacy and data protection issues, which could be the reason why many participants preferred discussions in small-scale communities and private messaging. Many participants had a social media strategy where brand identity co-creation was started by broadly sharing content, and then after a while, the professionals moved to more private discussions with their most trusted persons. While social media platforms like LinkedIn were preferred for maintaining professional networks, most participants noted that the strongest professional networks also involve in-person connections.

However, some professionals brought up the other side of belonging—a **reduced feeling of acceptance**. The following excerpt comes from a professional who had been active on social media for years and had experienced both negative and positive feedback:

> *Particularly then, if the feedback is critical, it has effects on the brand. You ponder what happened and why I didn't reach this person and why we didn't meet. For me, a professional brand is attached to my identity as a coach. You always tend to think that people praise you, and you get feedback, which helps in developing yourself and finding different approaches. It [feedback]has effects on the professional side, but it of course filters into the personal side as well, which is not necessarily a good thing. Thus, you must take care of the recovery and understand that if 99 people thank you and give critical feedback, it's not the whole truth. This is a question of self-esteem, how the self is built." (N13)*

Although this professional did not report consequences similar to previous studies on belongingness on social media (c.f. Allen et al., 2014), such as social isolation or ostracism, she described how the feedback from her stakeholders could lead to a reduced feeling of acceptance and self-questioning. In the statement above, the professional highlighted that, over time, feedback from others becomes more irrelevant in terms of impact on a personal level. She referred to "good self-esteem" as a way to cope with negative feedback.

Additionally, one professional discussed her experiences of being accused of plagiarism by her peers on social media. Since the accusations were made in public on social media, it made the situation hard for her, causing feelings of humiliation and stress, interpreted here as a reduced feeling of acceptance. One professional reported receiving threatening messages on Twitter and feelings of being unable to defend herself properly as she wanted to avoid public confrontation. Thus, the accusations were never agreed on, and she did not receive any explanations for the reactions as the discussion faded after she tried to have a proper conversation with the opponent. This affected her self-confidence as she hesitated to carry on brand identity co-creation on social media. This was also interpreted here as a reduced feeling of acceptance.

In summary, becoming a professional brand is linked to a sense of belonging, as professionals connect with their stakeholders on a deeper level to satisfy their needs for belonging. Particularly in career transitions, the stakeholders are important sources of acceptance, trust, and support. On the other hand, negative feedback and actions from the stakeholders can diminish the feeling of acceptance.

## 6.4 Summary of the findings – Theme 3

Drawing together the findings from the third theme, it can be suggested that the professional brand identity co-creation merged with identity work can be regarded as becoming a professional brand. One could argue that becoming an ongoing process increases career resilience and satisfies a professional’s need for belonging. However, as suggested in the theoretical part of this study, becoming requires that professionals overcome the idea of managing their brand identity, as it can rather be regarded as an emergent process that is uncontrollable, at least in certain parts.

# 7 Discussion

This chapter presents the answers to the research questions of this study. The main research question of this study is: How do professionals construct their human brand identity on social media in a career transition? The sub-questions aiming to partially solve the main research question are: (1) How do professionals describe the process of brand identity construction on social media in a career transition? (2) How do professionals experience the intrapersonal tensions that are involved in professional brand identity co-creation? (3) How do professionals solve the identity tensions involved in professional brand identity co-creation? (4) How do professionals experience the outcomes of professional brand identity construction? In the following, these questions are answered one by one.

## 7.1 RQ 1: How do professionals describe the process of brand identity construction on social media in a career transition?

The first research question—How do professionals describe the process of brand identity construction on social media in a career transition?—resulted in an empirically grounded conceptual framework of professional brand identity co-creation described in Figure 12. To do so, a tentative conceptual framework was developed based on the literature (see Fig. 8) and re-visited based on the empirical findings.

Contrary to extant studies on human brand co-creation, the focus of this study is not on the management of the brand (e.g., Centeno & Wang, 2017; Dumont & Ots, 2020) but on the active role of the human in the human brand identity construction. The empirical part concerning the first research question concentrates on professionals in a career transition and gives insights into (1) professional brand identity characteristics, (2) stakeholders involved in the brand identity co-creation, (3) strategies professionals use to engage stakeholders, and (4) negotiating process of brand identity.

Table 11 provides the codes representing the four sub-processes found in the study, along with a description of the codes and samples of the text. By accounting for how professionals engage in brand identity construction through defining brand identity characteristics, identifying stakeholders, engaging stakeholders, and negotiating brand identity as part of their career transition, this study reveals the complexity and fluidity of the process. Professionals who encounter multiple roles, identities, and career transitions engage in human brand identity co-creation in a complex way, often struggling to make sense of the whole process.

**Table 11. Processes, description of the codes, and samples of the text.**

| Process | Description | Codes | Samples |
|---|---|---|---|
| Defining brand identity characteristics | A process where the professionals qualify the characteristics of their brand identity. | Personal attributes<br>Values<br>Past achievements<br>Responsibility<br>Authenticity<br>Co-existing identities<br>Professional competencies<br>Social embeddedness | "I have strong values that I trust and act on. In branding, this means, for example, that I've never shared a post just to get employed. Rather, I bravely let my voice and values be heard. I'm not editing myself, but I act on my values." (N6) |
| Identifying stakeholders | A process where the professionals identify human and non-human stakeholders contributing to their brand identity co-creation. | Human stakeholders<br>Non-human stakeholders<br>Future audiences | "There are those people that I've coached, mostly people from the marketing and communication fields. There are also the networks comprised of people from current and former workplaces." (N14) |
| Engaging stakeholders | A process where professionals use social media strategies to engage the stakeholders in brand identity co-creation. | Attuning<br>Themed storytelling<br>Emotional storytelling<br>Knowledge-sharing<br>Professional advice<br>Optimizing brand content<br>Inbound marketing | "I have always been afraid of speaking in public; it was somewhat impossible for me. But once it became a major part of my work, I was forced to learn practices to help it. Now I can say I enjoy it. This is a story I've shared with others about me. My story has raised loads of reactions on social media. I think this kind of story resonates well with the Finnish audience." (N14) |
| Negotiating brand identity | A dynamic process where the stakeholders participate in shaping the professional's brand identity leads to identity tensions. | Identity struggle<br>Seeking identity coherence<br>Staying true to the authentic self<br>Staying true to the self-given brand identity definitions<br>Acknowledging co-existing identities | "It started from social media, I was comparing myself to others and started to feel anxiety, of course, once you started to think about things so intensively. You get new insights and feedback when talking to others. I had loads of moments when I sat down and wrote down who I am, what I want to be, what I don't want to be, and how I showcase this in social media." (N4) |

| Process | Description | Codes | Samples |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Acknowledging the definitions others provide | |

### *Defining brand identity characteristics*

Brand identity is a process (Suomi et al., 2020; da Silveira et al., 2013) that emerges from interaction (Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; Swaminathan et al., 2020). In other words, brand identity is a socially constructed, developmental process (Sarasvuo et al., 2022). In line with these suggestions, this study found that in the case of professionals, brand identity is constructed in a process that includes conscious and intentional parts as well as unconscious and unintentional parts. This led to the conclusion that professional brand identity is a fluid and ongoing process. However, the professional has an agentic (i.e., proactively involving; see Hall & Mirvis, 2014) role in crafting his or her brand identity. The agentic role of the professional emerged as an empowering feature across the brand identity construction process.

This study found that the process of constructing human brand identity included a sub-process of defining brand identity where the professionals qualified the characteristics of the brand identity. In other words, defining brand identity refers to how professionals think and feel about themselves as professional brands. This study, in line with the findings of Bendisch et al., (2013), found that professional brand identity as defined by the professionals involves various characteristics that are related to the multiple personal and role identities of the professional. However, this study extends the previous studies by showing from the professionals' perspective, how these characteristics are inseparable and interdependent, as changes in one characteristic may lead to changes in other characteristics as well.

This study argues that, although part of the characteristics were characteristics that professionals referred to as non-changeable, providing "a cognitive compass" (see Fugate et al., 2004, p. 17) that guides and controls the brand identity construction, minor adjustments were possible. In addition to previously reported human brand identity characteristics (e.g., mortality, unpredictability, authenticity, person-related characteristics, co-existing identities, past achievements, social embeddedness, and personal and professional values), this study identified the responsibility to the profession and society as an emerging professional brand identity characteristic. Responsibility is closely linked to work-role and is found to be important in the contemporary social media climate of disinformation (i.e., deceptive information) and misinformation (i.e., inaccurate information), where there is a need for real and accurate information provided by trusted professionals (Melchior & Oliveira, 2022). Professionals as embodiments of fidelity and responsibility have a responsibility to their profession (work-role) as well as to society at large. This responsibility informs professionals as brands to be vigilant against endorsements of misleading information, recommending commercial products or services, and maintaining their reputation as a reliable source of information. In other words, responsibility regulates their actions on social media.

Although the finding partly aligns with Cederberg (2017), who suggests that ethical considerations—i.e., ethical principles, guidelines, and standards—are focal to psychologists, as they "*should continually question the truthfulness and accuracy of their brand*" (p. 189), this study argues that responsibility is a key character of professional brand identity, as it refers to the moral and professional obligations that professionals have to the greater community as well as to the rules, requirements, and boundaries of the profession. This characteristic is rather stable and non-negotiable because bargaining in responsibility characteristics would have effects on whether or not the professional brand identity could be trusted by the stakeholders.

In defining their brand identities, professionals use terms that emphasize the identity as an assemblage of identities. Thus, this study confirms previous findings of co-existing identities (e.g., Bendisch et al., 2013) but emphasizes the connection between professional brand identity and the other multiple personal identities. Particularly in career transitions when professionals look for strategies to actively deal with identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), the connection between the professional brand identity and professional identity is emphasized.

### *Identifying the stakeholders*

Constructing a professional brand identity involves stakeholders (see Fig. 11). The professionals interact with the stakeholders on social media. However, this study argues that in the case of professionals, in addition to human stakeholders, non-human stakeholders, such as social media algorithms, also shape the brand identity. Because professionals must negotiate between being relevant and credible, they have to assimilate their brand into the changing technological affordances of social media platforms. Providing the professionals with "incentives," algorithms shape the professionals' communication behavior on social media. Communication behavior, in turn, is related to one of the key brand identity characteristics—authenticity. This study found that professionals often regard aligning their communication behavior according to the algorithm as "fake," leading them to be perceived as less authentic by others. Thus, the algorithm can be found to shape the professional brand identity.

This study argues that it can be challenging particularly for professionals dealing with career transitions to identify their brand stakeholders. This is because career transitions might take unexpected turns, which makes it hard to identify all of the stakeholders that participate in the professional brand identity construction from the professional work and nonwork domains. Consequently, this study found that the future audiences (Jacobson, 2020)—referred to here as future unknown stakeholders—were found to influence the professional brand identity. The professionals shape their brand identities by emphasizing different identity characteristics according to whom they regard as their potential future employers or co-workers. For example, if the future audiences were found to value sustainability issues, the professional made sustainability a core value of her brand identity on social media. Thus, it can be concluded that future audiences shape the professional brand identity.

Additionally, this study identified seven partly overlapping groups of human stakeholders (i.e., a colleague can also be considered a friend) that shape a professional brand identity: (1) colleagues and clients from former and present workplaces, (2) former and present employers, (3) peers: professionals working in the same industry as the professional and other people having similar work roles or positions, and people who share similar interests, (4) family and friends, (5) media representatives, (6) customers, (7) well-known professional brands and influencers. By identifying the human stakeholders, this study elaborates on the previous findings of Dumont and Ots (2020), Preece and Kerrigan (2015), and Centeno and Wang (2017).

The role of the stakeholders was considered as brand identity co-creators, as they provided feedback but also career-related benefits, such as career opportunities. In addition, this study found that stakeholders facilitate professionals with feelings of belonging to a wider professional community as well as deeper emotional connections. Thus, the stakeholders may satisfy multiple needs of the professional. Notably, this study found that the reciprocal nature of co-creation, identified earlier in brand identity co-creation in the context of company brand identities (see von Wallpach et al., 2017), is similarly crucial in the context of professionals. The professionals of this study emphasized their role as both receivers and providers.

These findings on the stakeholders' role in shaping the professional brand identity challenge the findings of the studies that suggest that the individual has full agency in decisions about their brand identities (e.g., Lair et al., 2005; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018). Instead, the findings support the notions of Centeno and Wang (2017) and Erz and Christensen (2018) that suggest that the stakeholders contribute to the human brand identity.

### *Engaging stakeholders*

The third sub-process this study found within the process of constructing a professional brand identity is "Engaging stakeholders." With multiple human and non-human brands to interact with every day, the stakeholders choose the human brands that resonate with them (Gandini, 2016). To attract engagement, professional brands need to become relevant on social media (Labrecque et al., 2011). Professional brands may develop engagement with stakeholders through a recursive process of three strategies: attuning to attract audiences, creating content using distillation, and encouraging amplification (Smith & Fischer, 2020). This study extends this thought by providing insights into these strategies in the context of professional brands.

It was found that the professionals attuned their actions, such as social media channel selection and post-topic selection, according to the needs of the stakeholders. However, it was found that attuning happens only to a certain limit. The boundaries for attuning were created by the professional brand identity characteristics: authenticity, personal and professional values, and responsibility. For example, the professionals considered which platforms would be the most suitable in terms of their professional role. (For example, the mayor considered it her responsibility to be present on many different channels to provide possibilities to the citizens to engage with her brand identity.) In other words, consideration of the stakeholders—be it peers, customers, or family—directed the professionals' brand decisions.

The second strategy, creating content using distillation, was found to occur through the practices of storytelling and orienting. The stories professionals share are filtered through one of the professional brand identity characteristics—responsibility—and designed to add value for the stakeholders. Two types of storytelling were identified. The professionals used themed and emotional storytelling to engage their stakeholders. Creating content using a distillation strategy also occurred through orienting. In orienting, the professionals shared knowledge (such as industry insights) to engage their stakeholders. Also, advice and guidance were seen as a good way to engage the stakeholders.

Finally, in the strategy of encouraging amplification, the professionals made sure that the content they produced reached and optimally engaged the relevant stakeholders. This strategy was found to involve two practices: optimizing brand content based on indicators and using inbound marketing methods. In optimizing brand content, the professionals applied quantitative and qualitative indicators to measure and evaluate their social media performance. With quantitative indicators, the professionals measure quantities, such as the number of followers or the reach of the posts. With qualitative indicators, the professionals measure the performance concerning their career-related objectives as they described a diverse assortment of qualitative indicators depending on the goals they had set for their brand, for example, whether or not it was easy to recruit guests to a podcast.

It was found that the professionals adjusted their brand content according to the indicators. The actions were adjusted on two levels: a brand level (i.e., adjusting their tone of voice) and a post level (i.e., adjusting the posting time). The professionals also used inbound marketing methods to encourage amplification, for example, using a call to action in their social media posts. Interestingly, some of the professionals did not find optimizing the brand content relevant, as they wanted to "stay authentic," not wanting the indicators or inbound marketing methods to influence how they engaged with their stakeholders.

### *Negotiating brand identity*

The fourth and final sub-process in constructing brand identity is "negotiating brand identity." Similar to other types of brands (c.f. Gyrd-Jones & Kornum, 2013; Iglesias et al., 2013), human brand identities are also changed and adapted through a dynamic process of negotiation (von Wallpach et al., 2017; Centeno & Wang, 2017).

The professionals were found negotiating their brand identity characteristics through interaction, which in this study, took the form of communication (Sarasvuo et al., 2022) through social media. Although there is evidence for the interaction in previous human brand research (Dumont & Ots, 2020), the current study found that professionals adjusted their brand content based on feedback they received from the stakeholders. This shaped their brand identity by shifting the emphasis between the co-existing personal identities. On the other hand, when professionals got positive feedback from their peers and thus experienced being validated by them, the brand identity was regarded as “good” and did not need adjustments. Thus, it can be concluded that the professionals negotiated their brand identity characteristics with the stakeholders.

However, this study found that the negotiation process involved intrapersonal identity conflicts, referred to here as brand identity tensions. The antecedents and consequences of the tensions are discussed in detail in the next section.

## 7.2 RQ 2: How do professionals experience the intrapersonal tensions that are involved in professional brand identity co-creation?

With different feedback from stakeholders (Dumont & Ots, 2020) and the existence of multiple co-existing personal identities (Bendisch et al., 2013), it is difficult, if not impossible, for professionals (particularly in career transitions) to develop one coherent brand identity, as suggested by both human brand researchers (see, e.g., Cederberg, 2017) and practitioners (see Brooks & Anumudu, 2016). This study found that professionals experience two kinds of brand identity tensions when negotiating their brand identity characteristics with the stakeholders. The tensions originated when brand identity negotiating revealed previously hidden or conflicted feelings about who the professional is as a brand and/or who he or she wanted to become as a brand.

Furthermore, the first brand identity tension—the tension of identity alignment—originates from the misalignment between multiple co-existing intrapersonal identities. And the second tension—the tension of identity validation—originates from the misalignment between the professional’s brand identity definitions and those provided by various stakeholders. An example of the first is a situation where the professional has just started working in a new professional role. Because role changes influence the professional identity (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt & Dutton, 2000), the professional experienced tension caused by the misalignment of the “new” professional identity and the brand identity that was still defined according to the previous work role (and the professional identity linked to that role). The professional felt the tension as she understood that the brand identity should be adjusted regarding the new role, but that meant that she should stop showing her passion for gaming in public on social media, which has previously been a big part of her brand identity. This caused a tension of alignment and ultimately led the professional to redefine her brand identity.

An example of the second brand identity tension—the tension of identity validation—comes from a professional, who through finding a gap between the definitions that she had given her brand identity and the feedback she got from others, created the tension that came out as insecurity about who she is as a brand, as a person, and as a professional, as she described it: "*Who I am, what I want to be, what I don't want to be, and how I showcase this in social media*." This tension and questions related to that (often regarded as self-reflection in both the human brand literature and identity literature, c.f. Cohen, 2010; De Weerdt et al., 2006) led to a career transition later on.

Therefore, this study suggests that brand identity co-creation involves dynamic tensions (see Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019) between the professional brand identity and the other intrapersonal identities (such as the personal identity and professional identity) as well as between brand identity definitions provided by the professional and others. These findings are significant in at least two major respects. The inclusion of intrapersonal tensions as potentially involving professional brand identity co-creation extends prior research that focused on the tensions between commercial expectations and a single human brand characteristic (see Molyneux et al., 2017). While social media offers brands, the option to construct a brand identity with stakeholders (Swaminathan et al., 2020), in the case of professional brands, the process can function as a double-edged sword, as it challenges the distinction between the identities constituting the human brand identity. The process of professional brand identity negotiation can activate less salient personal identities and the values attached to them. In this sense, this finding deepens the understanding of the sources of intrapersonal tensions that professionals may experience in co-creating their brand on social media.

Additionally, this study is the first to show how the interrelatedness of multiple co-existing intrapersonal identities and human brand identity causes brand identity tensions. By considering brand identity as a multifaceted construct, rather than one coherent identity, this study extends the dynamic view of brand identity (da Silveira et al., 2013). This interrelatedness can shape the person's self on a deeper level by influencing the conceptualization of the self. This study found that identity tensions not only happen between characteristics belonging to different personal identities but also between characteristics that are associated with one identity, i.e., the professional's brand identity.

**Table 12. The professional brand identity tensions.**

| Tension | Characteristics | Illustrative example |
|---|---|---|
| Identity alignment | Misalignment between the various brand identity characteristics and/or between the brand identity characteristics and the characteristics of the other personal identities. | "I've agonized with professional content. I've so many interests and it has made me think about how those affect the image I present in professional contexts. One example is playing video games, which is often perceived as a waste of time and a young boys' hobby. Although, in reality, it is so much more. But in the professional mainstream, in my community, it's considered weird. But I like it." (N2) |
| Identity validation | Misalignment between the self-given brand identity definitions and the definitions provided by others. | "It started from social media. I was comparing myself to others and started to feel anxiety, of course, once you started to think about things so intensively. You get new insights and feedback when talking to others. I had loads of moments when I sat down and wrote down who I am, what I want to be, what I don't want to be, and how I showcase this in social media." (N4) |

To answer the second research question: ”How do professionals experience the intrapersonal tensions that are involved in professional brand identity co-creation?” it can be concluded that brand identity co-creation involves two forms of identity-related tensions presented in Table 12: the tension of identity alignment and the tension of identity validation. However, this study is not suggesting that these two identified tensions are the only possible tensions that can occur; this study proposes that these are illustrative of brand identity co-creation triggered tensions. An additional notion supports the idea of the existence of other tensions. Tensions are also related to authenticity. As the multiple identities that are involved in brand identity are also constituted through social and continuous processes (e.g., Ibarra, 1999), the efforts of professional brands to stay "true" to their real selves (Ibarra, 1999) or maintain the authenticity of the brand identity (Moulard et al., 2015) can create tensions (see e.g., Shamir & Eilam, 2005). In the following section, identity work is used to resolve identity tensions and seek identity coherence.

## 7.3 RQ 3: How do professionals solve the identity tensions involved in professional brand identity co-creation?

The previous section of this study suggested that professionals engaged in brand identity co-creation face identity-related tensions. As a logical follow-up question, this section focuses on answering the third research question: How do professionals solve identity tensions involved in professional brand identity co-creation?

This study contributes to the literature on human brands by unraveling how identity work processes can be used in resolving professional brand identity tensions. This study was the first to show that identity work is an appropriate lens to explore human brand identity co-creation. Studies within organization research so far have shown that identity work processes are involved in professional identity construction (Ibarra & Petrglieri, 2010; Pratt et al., 2006) and have a role in developing a coherent identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008; Kreiner et al., 2006). Extending this further, this study shows that identity work is reciprocally interlaced with professional brand identity co-creation through resolving brand identity tensions.

Tensions can facilitate identity work processes through their connection with the brand identity as well as the multiple personal identities of a professional. These findings support the findings from identity studies that have argued that identity work takes place when there is a need to resolve identity tensions (Beech et al., 2012).

Professionals engage in identity work processes to achieve a sense of consistency and coherence (perceiving the identity as similar across life changes) (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008; Kreiner et al., 2006) and to protect their multiple identities from excessive or unwelcome demands of stakeholders. Thus, it can be concluded that while professional brand identity is dynamic, it needs a sense of continuity (Henkel, 2000).

The first identity work process identified in this study—searching for an optimal identity balance—is directed to the past, present, and future of the professional. It involves integrating, excluding, and prioritizing identities. In integrating the identities, professionals seek an optimal balance by aligning their personal, professional, role, and brand identities into one brand identity. Alignment occurs through identifying the underlying values that are found to be important and relevant in terms of brand identity communication. Excluding identities is defined as uncovering those identities that were anticipated to go through big changes in the near future and ignoring them. Excluded identities were found as a threat because changes in one identity could cause misalignment of the identities. Finally, the professionals prioritize, i.e., give prominence to one of the identities over the others, depending on the situation. This finding extends the study by Kreiner et al. (2006) by suggesting that searching for optimal brand identity balance has the potential to partly resolve professional brand identity tensions through integrating, excluding, and prioritizing different identities within an individual.

The second process—making evaluations aimed at identifying coherence through resolving professional brand identity tensions—was oriented to the past and current situation of the professional. The process includes two parts: internal evaluations (Ibarra, 1999) and external evaluations (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Internal evaluations included making sense of and drawing boundaries between the multiple internal identity definitions. While professionals who engage in this process make sense of their personal, professional, role, and brand identity definitions, they simultaneously draw boundaries between them. This conclusion is consistent with Ibarra's (1999) ideas that individuals compare their public image to representations of the type of person they "actually" are.

In external evaluations, the professionals embraced the stakeholders' feedback as a valuable way to understand how the brand identity was perceived and to search for signals of validation. This finding supports the earlier findings of Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010), who note that by conducting an external evaluation, the individual seeks validation from others. This study found that the positive feedback from stakeholders strengthened the professional's sense of being accepted, and thus signaled validation. The professionals utilized the knowledge that internal and external evaluations were produced to make corrective adjustments (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) to the brand identity to build identity coherence. This study extends the idea of corrective adjustments (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) by suggesting that professionals only make adjustments to a certain point. Professionals' identity work was found to be underpinned by a desire to be perceived as authentic and committed to values and responsibility. These characteristics defined the extent of the corrective adjustments followed by making evaluations.

Finally, this study found that professionals tell stories that connect not only the past and present but also the future aspects. Three types of stories were identified: the story of the coherent self, the story of the prospective self, and the story of the role-appropriate self. Through storytelling, the professionals gain a sense of continuity in career transitions, which assists them in establishing a coherent brand identity and figuring out who they desired to become. This finding aligns with the previous notions suggesting that, through storytelling, individuals claim a sense of continuity between who they have been, who they are, and who they are becoming (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010, drawing from Markus & Nurius, 1986). This finding also supports the notions of Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) of identity play (i.e., crafting and trialing provisional and immature (i.e., as yet unelaborated) possible selves). While identity work aims to preserve current identities or conform to externally imposed criteria, identity play focuses on inventing and reinventing oneself.

To answer the third research question, it can be concluded that to resolve brand identity tensions, professionals seek coherence within their brand identity and claim a sense of continuity between who they have been, who they are, and whom they are becoming. Thus, they engage in three identity work processes that appear to be conducive to establishing brand identity coherence: searching for an optimal balance between multiple individual identities, making internal and external evaluations, and telling stories that connect the past, present, and future. Additionally, they engage in identity play to figure out who they want to become.

## 7.4 RQ 4: How do professionals experience the outcomes of professional brand identity construction?

In the final research question, this study sought to explore the outcomes of professional brand identity construction. While identity tensions are addressed in the extant literature (e.g., Alvesson & Robertson, 2006), the idea is that identity work, when effective, leads to resolution. However, this study did not find a clear resolution or outcome for professional brand identity construction. Rather, it appeared that the outcome was more or less processual. Thus, the outcome can be termed as becoming a professional brand, which is similar to discussions within the identity literature (Hong et al., 2017; Pratt et a., 2006) as well as the branding literature (Centeno & Wang, 2017). It is not suggested that becoming is a stable outcome followed by resolving brand identity tensions, but becoming is an inherent part of human brand identity. This point is regarded as being additive to the extant theory of human brands. In addition, this study further identified three conditions that favor becoming a professional brand. In doing so, this study extends the discussion on human brand identity by emphasizing its connection to the personal, role, and professional identities, which act as a foundation for the process of becoming a professional brand.

First, this study argues that becoming a professional brand is connected to increased self-esteem (how people feel about themselves). The professionals are motivated to construct their brand identities characterized by feelings of self-esteem (Gecas, 1982). Although this study did not provide evidence on the exact mechanisms through which self-esteem increases, it may be linked to career resilience, which was emphasized as an outcome by the informants. Typically, human brand researchers argue that professionals brand themselves to increase their employability (Khedher, 2019), which is closely related to a person's self-efficacy and career satisfaction (Dacre Pool & Qualter, 2013). Based on the findings of this study, becoming a professional brand extends beyond employability, encompassing overall career resilience—a person's ability to adjust and adapt to career changes in the future. Drawing from these notions, it can be argued that becoming a professional brand enhances a professional's self-esteem by increasing career resilience. Thus, this study extends earlier notions by Khedher (2019), suggesting that, in addition to being motivated by increased employability, becoming a professional brand is motivated by increased career resilience, which in turn has positive effects on a professional's self-esteem.

In addition, based on the findings of this study, there seems to be a reciprocal connection between becoming a professional brand and a sense of belonging. Identity research, particularly self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), claims that a sense of belonging is a primary motivator for identity formation and affects the overall well-being of an individual. This study found that becoming a professional brand can strengthen and consolidate the connections with external stakeholders, which in turn satisfied the professional's need for belonging, particularly in career transitions when connections to work-life can be vague. The stakeholders then provided acceptance, trust, and support to the professional. On the other hand, professionals also reported reduced feelings of acceptance followed by critical feedback on their brand identity. This finding is supported by past studies that suggest that a lack of validation by relevant stakeholders can lead professionals to question their identity (Pratt et al., 2006).

Finally, a significant element in becoming a professional brand is social media because it provides professionals with the possibility of human brand identity co-creation. Communication with stakeholders enables professionals to consciously engage stakeholders in the construction of their brand identity. However, the findings related to the final research question show that the process includes unconscious (Driver, 2017) and unpredictable elements where identity tensions and managing those tensions fluctuate (Beech et al., 2012). The people co-creating and those being co-created do not have equal responsibilities in professional brand identity co-creation, but co-creation would not be co-creation if the person receiving co-creation did not reciprocate in some manner. It emphasizes negotiation as a central process and empowers professionals to have control over their own brand identity process.

Although, in some cases, brand construction can occur accidentally without stakeholder intent (Hollebeek et al., 2020), in the case of professional brands, the one whose brand identity is being constructed (the professional) must have taken a conscious action to be exposed to co-creation on social media. Similarly, stakeholders take conscious actions to construct their identities when interacting with the brand. This idea of conscious reciprocity is particularly true in addressing the implications in the context of this study—social media—where co-creation, through its possibilities for co-creation, is unavoidable (Deighton & Kornfield, 2009; Scolere et al., 2018). For professionals, direct interaction on social media can be seen as a prerequisite for becoming a professional brand. On the other hand, the active involvement of others includes uncontrollable elements that can cause discomfort, such as identity theft on social media. This facilitates the need for professional brands to take care of privacy issues on social media.

## 7.5 Revisiting the conceptual framework

This research explored **how professionals construct their human brand identity on social media in a career transition**. The semi-structured interviews with professionals offered relevant empirical insight into exploring and analyzing the experiences of the professionals. However, these experiences differed among them in specific ways. In this section, the findings have been aligned with the tentative conceptual framework that was suggested based on the literature. The human brand identity co-creation framework, presented in Figure 8, is revisited and developed based on the empirical findings.

The framework (Fig. 12) consists of three parts. Similar to the tentative conceptual framework (Fig. 8), in the first part, brand identity co-creation was initiated by the professional facing a voluntary or involuntary career transition. The motives for brand identity co-creation were career-related, and social media enabled the contribution of the stakeholders. The second part is the brand identity co-creation process that enables sub-processes that aim to engage stakeholders in brand identity co-creation. This attempt leads to tensions that are resolved both through identity work processes and identity play (playing with possible selves).

Once the tensions are resolved at some point, the professional moves to the third part of the framework, focusing on becoming a professional brand. Becoming a professional brand includes three conditions that favor its realization: increased self-esteem through enhanced career resilience, fulfillment of the need for belonging, and the overall fluctuation between tensions and managing those tensions.

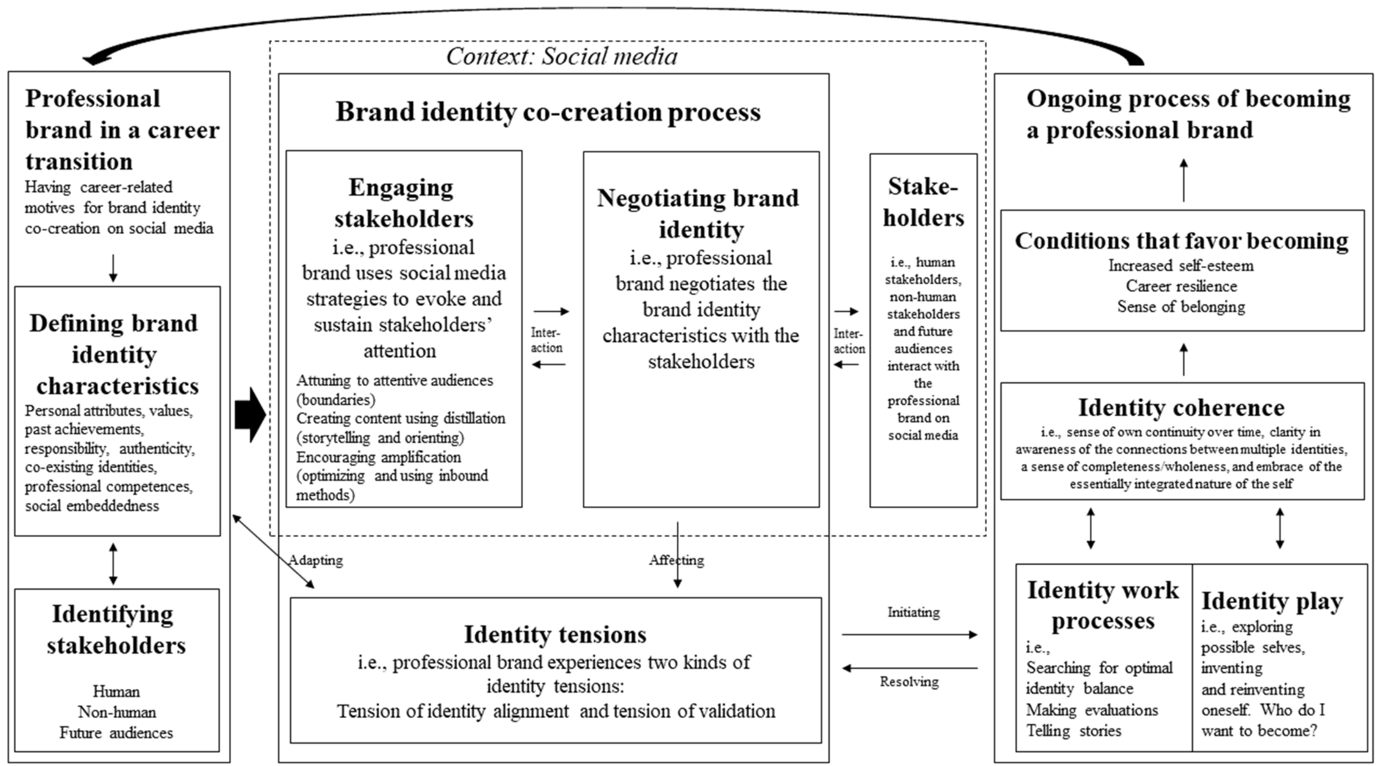


Fig. 12. Professional brand identity co-creation framework.

# 8 Conclusions

Despite increasing interest in brand co-creation and the importance of identity in branding, there is little research on how humans co-create brand identities. This study aimed to build and enrich theory in this area. This chapter discusses the study's contributions from theoretical and practical viewpoints, followed by an evaluation of the study. Finally, suggestions for future research are presented.

## 8.1 Theoretical contributions

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on branding by increasing the understanding of the co-creation of human brand identity among professionals. The study elucidates the processes through which professionals actively construct their brand identity by engaging in identity work. In the field of branding, this research makes dual contributions by enhancing our understanding of human brands and brand co-creation. These contributions are visually presented in Figure 12, which outlines a conceptual framework illustrating the co-creation of professional brand identities involving various stakeholders, as well as the subsequent interpretation of outcomes by the professional brands themselves.

The introduction chapter of this study identified three key gaps in the branding literature: (1) Insufficient research on human brands beyond celebrities, (2) Undertheorized stakeholder and process perspectives, and (3) Limited studies that focus on individual experiences and outcomes. Subsequently, the theoretical contributions of this study are directly aligned with addressing these identified gaps.

First, previous research has focused on celebrities and artists but has not examined how "average professionals" interpret their human brand identities, particularly in career transitions where multiple intrapersonal identities are in flux. This study addresses this gap by arguing that a professional brand is based on identity characteristics that guide and support the construction of the professional brand identity on social media. The findings of this study contribute to the understanding of the relationship between professional brand identity and multiple other intrapersonal identities such as professional identity.

Second, previous studies of branding have not dealt with human brand identity co-creation in detail. This research examined the construction of professional brand identity on social media which has changed how professional brands engage and interact with the stakeholders. This study provides insights into how the professional brand identity develops in the process of negotiation that is based on interaction on social media between the professional brand and human, nonhuman, and future-oriented stakeholders. This study explains how the brand identity co-creation process leads to identity tensions that professional brands can solve by using identity work strategies.

Third, very little is known about the individual outcomes of human brand identity construction. This study addresses this gap by extending the understanding of the intrapersonal processes and outcomes involved in human brand identity co-creation. Relying on the constructivist paradigm, this study suggests that professional brands are better understood in terms of becoming rather than being. In establishing these developments, this study may serve as a foundation for future research on human brand identity co-creation.

## 8.2 Practical implications

This study is built upon the accounts of "becoming a brand" in career transition where brand identities are co-created with stakeholders on social media. As social media sites evolve and career transitions increase, "average professionals" are provided with more opportunities to co-create their human brand identities.

The findings of this study would be of special interest to practitioners valuing a more conscious approach to becoming a professional brand. The unstated reality is that professionals need to know "how to become a professional brand" because it is assumed that personal agency will rise and career transitions will happen more frequently, which is aligned with the idea of becoming a professional brand and its potential to enhance careers.

Instead of attempting to manage and control the process of becoming a professional brand, professionals should allow benefiting from identity work by consciously engaging in processes that aim toward identity coherence and the crafting of possible selves. As a result, professionals can feel more secure about their future through increased career resilience and satisfy their need for belonging even during a period of absence from active work-life, such as parental leave. Especially in career transitions, becoming a professional brand can turn out to be an invaluable "asset" in dealing with the transition.

For career and human branding coaches, consultants and educators this research informs understanding of the differences between traditional product brands and professional brands. They need to consider the human and professional as well as the social dimensions of professional brands, and how these influence the process of becoming a professional brand. This can be particularly important in career transitions when the multiple identities of the professional are in a flux.

## 8.3 Evaluation of the study

In the following chapter, the research process is evaluated. Although this research adds to the understanding of brand identity co-creation of professionals, it should also be acknowledged that, as with the majority of studies, there are some restrictions on the current study that can be noted and discussed. It is critical to evaluate scientific research based on the study's aims, conceptual foundations, and methods (Creswell, 2013). First, some of the limitations of this study are discussed. Second, the trustworthiness of this study is evaluated according to the criteria by Lincoln and Cuba (1985).

Initially, the study is exploratory, using an abductive analytical method. The difficulty with an abductively created framework is that the reasoning evolves during the qualitative research process as a result of the ongoing interplay between theory and empirical data. In abductive studies, there is no advanced theorizing or a prior hypothesis (Creswell, 2013), and the reasoning starts with the empirical world (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study, no prior hypothesis was established before the data collection. However, a tentative conceptual framework was developed to guide the analysis of the empirical data. The tentative framework was used as a starting point, but it was revisited and modified during the research process based on the findings from the empirical data to result in a professional brand identity co-creation framework. This ongoing interplay between the empirical and theoretical worlds, which is a common feature in this knowledge-building process, is consistent with abductive reasoning (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The second limitation concerns the study design and specifically the generalizability of the results. One must be cautious when generalizing these findings to other populations, as with any attempts to construct a complex theory from a small sample. For example, the focus of this study has been on professional brand identity as it is co-created. Co-creation of other human brand entities, such as celebrities, identities may be qualitatively different. Despite this or any other qualitative study's lack of statistical generalizability, this study's findings can be applied to "*naturalistic generalization*" (Pratt et al., 2006, p. 259), which permits the identification of commonalities based on knowledge of comparable "cases" without using statistical inference (Stake, 1995). There are four reasons why the generalization of the results of this study should be made with caution.

First, because this study is based on a selected sample of professionals, the findings regarding professional brand identity co-creation are not transferable to other human brand entities per se. This deficiency also represents a significant opportunity for further inquiry. For example, it is worth investigating whether celebrities—who have different brand identity characteristics—understand their brand identity as the similarly flexible process of becoming as professionals do.

Second, the proposed conceptualizations on professional brand identity have been derived from a limited number of professionals, and they focus on career transitions on social media. Nevertheless, the underlying conceptualizations are considered to be generic enough to be repeated in the setting of professionals, and researchers are encouraged to confirm their generalizability, especially across diverse career-related situations. Third, the results of this study originate from participants selected from a single country, Finland. This inevitably affects the findings. For example, how professionals regard branding, in general, can be culturally bounded.

Fourth, as always when a study aims to use information gathered through informants' interviews to explain behavior, there may be a gap between what the informants say they do and what they actually do (Blaikie, 2010). Thus, some form of observation involving periods of "*sustained immersion in the life of the people being studied*" (Blaikie, 2010, p. 206) combined with the interviews, could have produced more detailed information on the phenomenon.

Lincoln and Cuba (1985) provide the assessment criterion of trustworthiness concerning the study in the case of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Table 13 summarizes the criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of this research. Credibility addresses the alignment between the informant's views and the researcher's interpretation (Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, *credibility* was addressed through the processes of using multiple informants, providing a clear chain of evidence, and using member checking by presenting the results to three informants who agreed on reading and commenting on the results via email. This technique (see Blaikie, 2010, p. 90) was employed to guarantee that the informants' views were heard and that the study's main audience accepted and comprehended the findings. The member check also addresses credibility by checking that the scientific narrative has not been unduly tainted by the researcher's creation (Blaikie, 2010; Silverman, 2014).

*Transferability* refers to the generalizability of the research (Nowell et al., 2017). However, in qualitative studies, the findings are context-specific, and therefore generalizability is not the goal of the study (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the findings were compared and analyzed in light of current theory, and their applicability was demonstrated. Also, purposive sampling was used to ensure the richness of the perspectives and thus enable a thorough understanding of the phenomena. Additionally, transferability was addressed by providing a description of the context and the participants in sections 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.1.3, and 3.3.

*Dependability*, which refers to the ability of others to examine and judge the research, was addressed by providing logical and clear documentation of the research process (Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, the results were presented to a scientific audience in different phases of the study through seminars, increasing transparency (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010). *Confirmability* refers to demonstrating that the researcher's interpretations and results are based on the data (Lincoln & Cuba, 1985). This was ensured by following the data analysis method by Braun and Clarke (2006) and using abductive logic (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) throughout the study. Additionally, confirmability was sought by clarifying researcher bias (Creswell, 2013) (see Section 3.1) and documenting the complete research process in a logical, traceable, and unambiguous manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Table 13. Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of this dissertation.**

| Construct | Possible strategies | How applied in this dissertation |
|---|---|---|
| Credibility | 1. Employ multiple sources of evidence (Creswell, 2013).<br>2. Develop a chain of evidence.<br>3. Review the draft report with key informants (Blaikie, 2010). | 1. Multiple informants were used to collect the data.<br>2. The study's progression and chain of evidence have been described in detail. Quotations were used. The choices concerning data collection were made explicit in the methods section.<br>3. To collect input and minimize misconceptions, empirical data was shared with the participants. |
| Transferability | 1. Attempt at analytical generalization.<br>2. Provide an overview of the background and explain why the informants were chosen (Nowell et al., 2017). | 1. The findings were compared and analyzed in light of current theory, and their applicability was demonstrated.<br>2. Multiple informants were used to collect the data. |

| Construct | Possible strategies | How applied in this dissertation |
|---|---|---|
| | | 3. A justification for the selection of participants was provided, and the context of the study was outlined. |
| Dependability | 1. Be precise and transparent.<br>2. Make sure that if some other researchers were to look over the data, they would arrive at similar findings (Nowell et al., 2017.) | 1. The chain of evidence and the progression of the study have been represented clearly.<br>2. Quotas were used. The choices concerning data collection were made explicit in the methods section.<br>3. The findings were presented to a scientific audience through seminars and informal discussions with research colleagues (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010). |
| Confirmability | 1. Understand the research subject (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008).<br>2. Provide a coherent chain of evidence (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008).<br>3. Address the researcher bias (Creswell, 2013). | 1. The research process started by building a tentative conceptual framework that guided the data collection.<br>2. The interviewing guidelines were founded on Braun & Clarke (2006).<br>3. The researcher bias was clarified (Section 3.1).<br>4. The entire procedure followed an abductive research methodology (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). |

## 8.4 Suggestions for future research

The notion of becoming a professional brand provides ample opportunities for further research. Just as any discipline that studies social phenomena, future research is suggested to pay attention to the wider influence of professional brand identity co-creation by addressing issues that matter to different stakeholders. Furthermore, studying becoming, a professional brand from the perspective of the stakeholders such as colleagues and employees, would clarify the identity co-creation process. Thus, researchers are encouraged to study professional brand identity co-creation also from this perspective with a focus on each stakeholder's identity co-creation (see Black & Veloutsou, 2016). Further research is required to provide a better answer to the questions about the role of stakeholders and how the interaction takes place in human brand identity co-creation.

Another idea for future study is to look at other individual and contextual elements that may influence professionals' possibilities to become professional brands. Personal identity-related elements, such as personality or culture, may provide information on how and to what extent human brand identities are co-created. What, for instance, makes certain professionals more successful than others at resolving brand identity tensions?

Finally, a fascinating extension of the study would be to look at how the social media landscape (i.e., new platforms, new ways of communicating, etc.) will change the engagement strategies employed by professionals during career transitions.

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# Appendices

Appendix 1. The interview questions.

(1) Are you a brand?
(2) How would you describe your brand?
(3) How did the branding process start from your point of view?
(4) Does your brand have a goal or a vision – what kind?
(5) What do you consider when being visible on social media?
(6) Do you have a key message you want to convey as a brand – what is it?
(7) Which social media channels are you involved in and why?
(8) What do you do on social media?
(9) Describe the people you interact with on social media?
(10) In what ways do you interact with them on social media?
(11) How do others' reactions to your social media posts influence you?
(12) What kind of challenges have you experienced in building a brand?
(13) How have you overcome these challenges?
(14) Can you give an example of how you've handled a challenging situation?
(15) How has branding on social media influenced your professional career? – Give an example of a situation.
(16) Has building a brand influenced you or your everyday life – how?
(17) How do you measure your brand's success?

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