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School of Economics and Management

Personal branding behind the firewall

An analysis of consultants' perceptions about personal digital branding



Amanda Nilsson (19921215-2061)

Dorottya Mezofi (19900215-T406)

Master's Programme in Managing People, Knowledge and Change
Thesis supervisor: Stephan Schaefer

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Dorottya

Abstract

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Authors	Amanda Nilsson & Dorottya Mezofi
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Course	BUS 49 Master Level Degree project in Managing People, Knowledge and Change
Purpose	This research aims to create a better understanding of a little-known phenomenon by exploring the ways consultants create and perceive personal digital brands on an internal collaboration platform, together with the different dimensions of expectations they experience.
Methodology	Following the interpretive paradigm, our primary method contained ten semi-structured interviews with consultants working at a global consultancy firm. In order to gain deeper insights about their personal digital branding, we also conducted a small-scale netnography on the internal collaboration platform and analyzed two internal documents related to the topic.
Findings	While the consultancy industry is often described as image-driven, we also discuss the struggles and concerns consultants seem to experience regarding personal digital branding. Furthermore, we describe hybridization as an underlying theme, which appears to have significant impacts on consultants' sensemaking and activities on the internal collaboration platform.
Contributions	Our findings contribute to the closing of a research gap by combining the two concepts, personal digital branding and ICTs focused on knowledge management. The combination of different methods provides a more nuanced understanding of how consultants create, perceive and experience expectations regarding internal personal digital branding.
Key words	personal branding, personal digital branding, information and communication technology, ICT, internal collaboration platform, consulting, knowledge management, hybridization

“I’m not really the posting kind of person, you know. I deal with that the way I can, but it’s not necessarily by blogging or sending out big messages about how excited I am because many people can be unusually frequently excited.”

Managing Consultant, participating in our study

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1. Introduction

‘You never get a second chance to make a first impression’ seems to be a statement that most of us are familiar with. However, we could argue that first impression nowadays can be made well before one has the chance to have a face-to-face interaction. By looking at the growth of social media usage (Chaffey, 2016), this statement becomes even more significant in today’s contemporary world. Labrecque, Markos & Milne (2011) highlight that personal branding starts when entering the online space, while we can also assume that active online presence can reach a great - yet partially unknown - audience in shorter time. Therefore, we might create a first impression in the digital space, without being aware of the potential observers. Hence, to manage one’s online presence appears to be crucial. Peters (1997) argues that everyone should and can create an attractive brand, which is supported by the endless array of pop-management materials for those who are curious to learn more and improve their personal brand. However, there are critical approaches towards personal branding as well, describing it as potentially superficial and calculated (e.g. Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005; Alvesson, 2013). Despite the growing attention given to social media platforms in research on professionals’ personal branding (e.g. Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015), according to Cassinger (2015), there is a lack of sufficient theory on personal branding and the existing terminology is more focused on social aspects than the strategic ones, such as creation, maintenance and evaluation of personal branding.

While external social media platforms can provide opportunities for the creation of personal digital brands, there appears to be a growing interest from organizations to implement internal collaboration platforms, which is indicated by, for instance, the recent news about Facebook at Work (Alba, 2015). Based on our observations, the recent versions of these platforms combine the traditional knowledge management approach, including features such as file sharing, with interactive functionalities similar to social media platforms. The interest for the usage of this type of software is especially significant in knowledge-intensive firms, for example, consultancies, where knowledge is considered as the main competitive advantage (Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough & Swan, 2009). On the other hand, this industry seems to go through turbulent times, where changes are indicated by new competitors, reshaped business models, changing nature of assignments and procurement practices from the client’s side (Christensen, Wang & van Bever, 2013). For this reason, we align with Alvesson (2004), that the importance of image and knowledge management in the consulting world can be even more relevant these

days. While this industry is discussed extensively by academics (e.g. Alvesson, 2004; O'Mahoney, 2010; Sarvary, 1999), we could identify a gap considering the internal aspect of personal digital branding, which we aim to explore in this thesis.

Our research site, Sky, is one of the major global consulting firms with 80 000 employees. In an industry, where employees work remotely most of the time, there is arguably a great internal need to facilitate knowledge sharing, communication and collaboration to overcome geographic distance. For the last eight years, Sky has used an internal collaboration platform, called Cloud, for this purpose. In its recent initiatives to promote eminence - an internally applied concept for personal branding - Sky emphasizes the importance of 'going digital', pointing to external digital platforms, as well as Cloud. While Sky encourages employees to follow the trend of being present online, we were curious to explore and understand the consultants' perspectives on how they experience these and other expectations regarding personal digital branding on the internal collaboration platform and furthermore, how they create and perceive personal digital brands.

The purpose of our research is not to provide any general conclusion nor specific managerial advice but rather to contribute to a deeper theoretical as well as practical understanding of the concept, personal digital branding, within the context of an internal collaboration platform at a consultancy firm. Therefore, we have formulated the following research questions regarding the internal collaboration platform:

How do consultants experience expectations regarding personal digital branding?

How do consultants create their personal digital brands?

How do consultants perceive personal digital branding activities?

For this purpose, we have applied qualitative methods since these are suitable to gain insights into thoughts, opinions and experiences (Denscombe, 2010). While semi-structured interviews have been our primary method, we have chosen to contrast the findings from our conversations with the consultants with observations of their activities on Cloud through a small-scale netnography. We argue that personal digital branding might be a sensitive topic in the sense that it relates to questions of identity, image and power, therefore having access to the internal collaboration platform could improve the trustworthiness of our findings since we could observe empirical material that existed prior to our research, in contrast to the interviews. In

addition to that, we looked at internal documents as well to better understand how the company refers to our research topic.

After conducting our research, we came to the following findings: while the internal expectations were experienced as rather vague, the consultants described personal branding and knowledge management as important in their practice. According to them, visibility is a mean to become influential but there must be substance behind, which is especially important when the visibility is created online. We believe that this ambiguity is also fuelled by the hybridization of traditional knowledge management tools and social media features that we identified on Cloud. Therefore, the consultants at Sky understood the internal platform in multiple ways, meaning that the way they create and perceive personal digital brands varied to a great extent. Interestingly, most consultants emphasized that their online presence was authentic, while they criticized the grandiosity they could identify in others' online activities. For this reason, the consultants highlighted the importance of real-life interaction on the side of online connections. Lastly, all consultants agreed that their network is important in general, and by looking at their activities on the Cloud, it is our observation that they connect with both 'weak ties' and 'strong ties' in order to develop and gain approval of their personal digital brands, which the vast majority of them believed must be managed.

2. Literature review

Our aim with this chapter is to introduce the reader to the theoretical fields which we base our research upon. First, we will introduce the concept of personal branding and how it is influenced by the increasing digitalization. Next, we will look into ICTs with the purpose of knowledge management, which provide context for our research questions, and highlight how these provide the opportunity for social interaction and personal digital branding. Finally, the consultancy industry will be explored from the perspectives of image and knowledge management.

2.1. Personal branding

Brands are often associated with the relationship a corporation tries to create between itself, its offer and its environment, including potential consumers (Ind, 2007). The art of branding can be read about extensively mainly in marketing research and as described by Ind (2007, p. 16) “there are almost as many definitions of branding as there are books on the subject”. He highlights three key points concerning corporate brands; a brand is a promise of performance, it differentiates and it provides insights to the attributes of a product or a service. According to Kurtuldu (2012), branding was primarily a mean to indicate ownership of, for example, timber and cattle, but it has transitioned into a method to make others desire this ownership and seduce them to acquire it. In this sense, branding has taken place since the 1800’s (Kurtuldu, 2012). In contrast, personal branding is a relatively new concept, which has been fashionable since the late 1990’s. Despite its newness, there are various definitions for personal branding, and we will refer to it as the strategic process in which a person attempts to impact an audience’s perception of oneself through the creation of a personal brand (Cassinger, 2015).

Personal branding is thus created on an individual level and in this sense, the concept relates to image as well as identity. While a person’s image concerns how others perceive the person, identity is defined by how one understands oneself and answers the question “who am I?” in an existential way (Alvesson, 2004). Peters (1997) is commonly referred to as the one who made the concept of personal branding popular, and he argues that everyone should and can create an attractive brand. The creation of a personal brand can have several purposes. However, it is most commonly referred to in relation to work and concerned with how an individual can create a beneficial perception of oneself on the labor market (Cassinger, 2015). In order to do this in a successful way, one can turn to an endless array of material providing

advice on how to improve one's personal brand (e.g. Arruda, 2007; Peters, 1997; Vitberg, 2009; Rampersad, 2008).

The aim of personal branding is to communicate the value one can add (Johnstone, 2015; Peters, 1997). According to Rampersad (2008), this value is realized once the personal brand reflects reality and can be proven by actual actions. However, Lair, Sullivan & Cheney (2005) take a critical approach, arguing that personal brands reflect a person's ability to present their skills, even when these do not correspond to reality. In line with this, Cassinger (2015) maintains that personal brands sometimes replace professional skills, while Peters (1997) describe personal brands as shaped by both content and design. He refers to personal branding as a challenging, yet inevitable process, in the contemporary world, shaped by both actions and non-actions. In other words, in the creation of a personal brand, everything matters, even non-participation in branding activities.

2.1.1. Personal branding in the online space

Besides real-life actions to create a personal brand in order to promote oneself professionally - such as preparing an elevator pitch or attending networking events - social media presence is an increasingly emphasized theme in research on personal branding (Johnstone 2015; Kleppinger & Cain, 2015; Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015). In contrast to the amount of research on personal branding via social media, the concept has not been explored in-depth regarding internal collaboration platforms, as mentioned in the introduction, even though these consist of similar features like social media platforms. Labrecque, Markos & Milne (2011) emphasize how the process of personal branding is initiated as soon as a person enters an online space. According to Philbrick & Cleveland (2015), emerging technology can be described as a driving force in personal branding, and they refer to the creation of a digital footprint as the most important step in building a personal brand. In a similar vein, Vitberg (2009, p. 10) argues that "the game has changed", meaning that creating a personal brand is a process that should involve both real-life and online actions. Kleppinger & Cain (2015) refer to personal brands that are mediated via social media platforms with the aim to display a person's professional skills as personal digital brands and describe them as increasingly important. Nevertheless, they consider the possibility of an exception, deliberating upon whether professionals whom already have established their reputation through years of experience need to create a personal digital brand. Regardless,

digital platforms facilitate personal branding, as it reaches a greater audience in short time and enables continuous updates (Cassinger, 2015).

When focusing on external digital platforms, statistics can help us place social media's reach, and its potential to influence others in perspective. According to figures presented by Chaffey (2016), 2.3 billion people were active social media users at the beginning of 2016, meaning that 31% of the total population could be found on one or more social network sites. Based on the number of active users, the most popular social network site worldwide is Facebook, followed by Youtube and Twitter. Close behind the top 3 in popularity, as well as growth, is LinkedIn, making it the leading professional network site (Chaffey, 2016). LinkedIn has more than 433 million members allocated in over 200 countries and territories (LinkedIn Corporations, 2016). According to Desreumaux (2014), one out of three professionals has a LinkedIn profile and over 25 million profiles are viewed each day.

2.1.2. Challenges of personal digital branding

Besides being a facilitator in personal branding, digital platforms can complicate the process. Due to the wide access to what goes online, it is difficult to preserve ownership of information about oneself once it becomes digital (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011). Social media has made it possible for everyone to share his or her thoughts and opinions on everything and everyone (Vitberg, 2009). Hence, it might be a challenge to remain relevant in the digital noise. According to Vitberg (2009), this issue can be solved by frequent and consistent communication. Rampersad (2008) also emphasizes the importance of frequency but believes that constant refinements and updates are what will maintain the interest in a personal digital brand. Nevertheless, it is difficult to control fully what shape the personal brand will take since it is partially influenced by those with whom one associate (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011). Who you know and who knows you are essential components of the personal brand according to Vitberg (2009). The digital age has uncovered previously intimate details of social relationships, revealing the numbers of relationships a person has, but also their character (Hearn, 2010).

Apart from being exposed online, social relationships can also be formed and maintained through online activity. Altogether, these relationships will create a digital reputation (Hearn, 2010). However, Lair, Sullivan & Cheney (2005) argue that these relationships will rarely last since they are not built on trust but on careful calculations to achieve competitiveness either on

the labor market or within an organization. They mean that this is the effect of “a professional work world where personal branding predominates” (Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005, p. 335). This relates to Hearn’s (2010, p. 426) explanation of a new way of life, where personal branding is central: “we see a shift from a working self, to the self *as* work in the form of a self-brand with reputation as its currency”. Personal branding can be understood as a commodification of the self, which implies that the individual holds an increasing responsibility for both success and failure to advance at work in the contemporary world (Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005).

2.1.3. Grandiosity - When everyone wants to be an expert

According to Alvesson (2013, p. 118), “today’s working life can be understood in terms of grandiose ideas, illusion tricks and zero-sum games” where there is a growing importance given to knowledge and expertise. For so-called knowledge workers, being identified and identifying oneself as knowledgeable is a way to obtain prestige and status (Newell et al., 2009). Alvesson (2004) argues that knowledge has become synonymous with everything and nothing. Despite its ambiguity, he believes that the notion of knowledge achieves certain things. In relation to this, it is interesting to deliberate upon the explanation of knowledge as a modern source of power (Alvesson, 2004). Hardy (1996) defines power as a force that makes something happen and it can refer to both ‘power to’ and ‘power over’. When others’ perceive a person as knowledgeable, a type of trust is created, that Newell et al. (2009) refer to as competence trust. They argue that while this type of trust can be developed through interpersonal exchange, it may also stem from a reputation created by, for example, a person’s online actions or network. Competence trust is fragile in the sense that the expected competence must be demonstrated in order for the trust to last (Newell et al., 2009). Thus, power from knowledge will only endure if it can deliver value. Furthermore, time and situation moderate what type of knowledge is considered as important (Alvesson, 2004). In other words, power from knowledge should always be seen as temporary.

Following Alvesson (2013), the discussion above boils down to some of the issues that according to him are associated with grandiosity. As discussed by him, grandiosity comes from the general desire in our contemporary world to define ourselves and to be defined by others in the most attractive way, often without any substance behind. Similarly, Hearn (2010) describes branding as a central component in capitalism - everything is branded, including people and relationships. This case is arguably strengthened by social media, where it seems

like only imagination limits the shape a personal brand can take and where the creation of multiple personal digital brands is possible. Alvensson (2013) states that for some, this will lead to advantages, which by all means results in fewer advantages for others. According to him, an individual's success is always achieved at the expense of someone else, not everyone can have high status and great influence. Nevertheless, concrete circumstances - what we refer to as reality - will reveal some images as mere surface. This way, a personal brand that is nothing, but a construction, can cause problems for those who believed in its promises and for those who cannot fulfill the expectations that it has created (Alvensson, 2013). As Hearn (2010, p. 424) writes, a reputation is a construction; "in the end... a reputation inevitably exceeds the control of those individuals who generate it or the individual who must 'carry' it; typically, we are 'subjected to' a reputation". Finally, Alvensson (2013) points to four major problems related to grandiosity: decreasing quality, diminution of trust and confidence, reinforcement of narcissism and the creation of 'functional stupidity' in which limited and unreflexive thinking takes place. By drawing upon previously mentioned aspects of personal digital branding, such as the wide and constant accessibility, we could assume that these issues are present or maybe even magnified in the online space, where there seems to be a lack of tangibility.

2.2. ICT platforms

After discussing the literature on personal branding and its digital aspects, we will now detail the relevant theory about the consultancy practice and ICT platforms in general. In addition to that, we will also highlight a new version of these platforms, which contains some elements of social media and therefore, provides space for personal digital branding activities. In other words, we will provide insights into the context of our research.

Information and communication technology seems to be changing our way of working by its ability to create greater access to information and communication. The definition of this umbrella concept is described and classified in several ways by the literature (Newell et al. 2009; Carbonara, 2005; Papastathopoulos & Beneki, 2010). Most of the times, it refers to the usage of telephone networks, computers, storage, Internet and enterprise software among others, all of which enable the connection between people living and working in different geographical locations. These technological advancements are often discussed by mass media and pop-management books as factors revolutionizing the way we work, especially in the context of knowledge-intensive firms, where intellectual skills are viewed as the most significant dimension according to Alvensson (2004).

Newell et al. (2009, p. 55) highlight a more critical viewpoint stating that “new technologies provide constraints on, and opportunities for human action”. They also emphasize that the social and institutional context can encourage and control employees’ behavior, on the other hand, human action and interaction shape the way technologies are being used. While the top management’s goals by rolling out an ICT platform are often aiming to achieve positive organizational change and process improvement, the outcome seems to be less obvious. As Standish Group’s report (2007) states approximately 70% of software implementations fail. Even though failure can be interpreted in several ways, Newell et al. (2009) argue that employees can resist technology and additionally, they often use it in multiple different ways. Orlikowski (1992) refers to this latter consequence as ‘interpretative flexibility’, which means that different people can interpret the same technologies differently. We believe that this aspect is especially relevant in the case of ICTs, where knowledge management is the main underlying motive. For knowledge management purposes, there seems to be several software options available for the employees, such as email, chat, video conferencing tools, internal collaboration platforms and so forth. Therefore, knowledge workers have a certain extent of freedom to decide which types of software they use in a specific situation.

2.2.1. Knowledge Management platforms

Scoping down the repertoire of ICTs, this section will highlight some aspects of knowledge management, which is the empirical context of our study. Alvesson (2004) argues that almost everything an organization does can be considered as Knowledge Management (KM), therefore it has highly ambiguous interpretations. He also highlights that KM is most frequently reduced to the implementation of ICT systems. These platforms are probably present in all major knowledge-intensive organizations since employees are using e-mails, relatively static intranet pages or collaboration platforms to capture, share, search, transfer and reuse information and knowledge across individuals (Alavi & Tiwana, 2003). These verbs also reflect how most KM initiatives view the concept of knowledge.

According to Newell et al. (2009) there seems to be two main viewpoints on knowledge: the epistemology of possession, which considers knowledge as something people have, and the epistemology of practice, which assumes knowledge is something that people do. They also highlight that most KM initiatives seem to treat knowledge as the property of the individual, therefore this resource is possible to be captured and transferred from one individual to

another. This approach also indicates that instead of promoting the exploration of knowledge, these initiatives are aiming to benefit from the already existing knowledge by codification (Alvesson, 2004). These platforms are often criticized because of their too simplistic view on managing knowledge (Alvesson, 2004; Newell et al., 2009). On the other side, we can find ICTs encouraging employees to create online dialogues internally as well. Therefore, these tools can be viewed as a representation of the epistemology of practice, in a digital way, in contrast to the purely file sharing tools, which reflect the approach of epistemology of possession. For instance, by motivating employees to brainstorm about specific topics on the internal collaboration platforms, new knowledge, which is negotiated and socially constructed, can be created. Such discussion also means that there might be several ‘truths’ out there, and that actors negotiate during the process of ‘sense-making’ (Weick, 2001). Robey and Boudreau (1999) suggest that we should recognize that there is a complex and reciprocal relationship between ICTs and organizations. It also means that the results of ICTs’ implementations are highly context-dependent, therefore we will describe the consultancy industry and later on the selected company more in-depth in order to provide the reader with a better understanding about the context.

2.3. Consultancy industry

2.3.1. Knowledge Management at consultancies

Even though Scarbrough & Swan (2001) argues that Knowledge Management as a label seems to be less fashionable these days, the process itself is of special interest to consulting firms, since knowledge is the main source of their competitive advantage according to Newell et al. (2009). They also point out that since these firms actually do not have ownership over their human resources, their long-term interest is to capture and build on their existing internal knowledge (Newell et al., 2009). Therefore, it is not surprising that consultancy firms were among the first ones introducing KM initiatives aiming to benefit from the economies of scale by capturing and reusing the accumulated internal knowledge (Kubr, 2002). What differentiates consultancies from companies in other industries is that the most valuable parts of knowledge originate from client assignments to a great extent, instead of being generated by internal experiences (Sarvary, 1999).

Depending on the type of consultancy firm, Hansen, Nohria & Tierney (1999) highlight that codification is often present at IT consultancy firms, where projects can be replicated to a

certain extent. On the other side, personalization is present at strategy consultancies, where customized solutions are offered for a client's specific needs. If we look at the ICT usage linked to these two aspects, we can conclude that personalization is aiming to connect experts and create internal networks. On the other hand, codification is mainly focusing on material sharing, which can be reused by experienced consultants who can translate, interpret and apply the existing knowledge in another environment (O'Mahoney, 2010). While Sarvary (1999) refers to KM processes as the perhaps most critical process within consultancy firms, there seems to be a specific challenge of knowledge management within consultancies according to Newell et al. (2009). Since project teams work together on a temporary basis, consultants move to the next project right after finishing one assignment, which can be a constraint for knowledge sharing activities. On the other side, they also highlight that billability is often used as one of the main key performance indicators within consultancy. Therefore, project delivery has priority over internal activities.

In addition to the often challenging KM aspect of the consultancy industry, many authors also mention other dimensions, which are essential for the success of this type of company. O'Mahoney (2010) emphasizes that it is "the combination of performance, reputation, and relationship that enables a consultancy to take the lead in client engagement". While performance can be supported by proper KM processes, reputation and social relationships also have significant importance for these highly image-driven and image-sensitive firms, which are strongly dependent on how relevant others view them (Alvesson, 2004). Mainly due to these previously mentioned factors, the industry is discussed critically in research literature (e.g. Alvesson & Johansson, 2002; Clark & Salaman, 1996; Sturdy, 1997, 2011; Werr & Styhre, 2002).

Looking at consulting firms, Bailyn (1988) states that many consultants have operational autonomy without close management from top levels. In addition to that, Alvesson (2004) mentions that consultants are often more skilled in their area of expertise than their managers, which is a reason for flat hierarchy, less formal rules and more flexible managerial approaches. The elitism is also reflected back by the 'up or out' system, which can be viewed as a Darwinian form of evolution, as stated by Robertson & Swan (2003). This system not only creates a prestigious image but also encourages competition among consultants (O'Mahoney, 2010).

2.3.2. Image sensitivity

Alvesson (2004) states that all employees, to various degrees, “do” image management in their interactions with the outside – sometimes in line with the intentions of top management and sometimes not. When it comes to consultancies, the perceived degree of image management seems to be even higher, than in case of other industries. Kelley (1990) uses the concept of ‘gold-collar workers’ for those who perform non-repetitive and complex work that is difficult to evaluate by relying on their problem-solving skills, talent, creativity and intelligence. Similarly, pop management books often describe consultants as well-educated and highly paid knowledge workers, who create value by using their superior knowledge and symbolic skills. On the other side, the evaluation of the actual work done by consultants is highly ambiguous due to its intangible nature. Therefore, according to Alvesson (2004), consultants often portray what they are doing in more glamorous terms since they are expected to present themselves as experts, even if they are often generalists (O’Mahoney, 2010).

While being ‘knowledge intensive’ seems prestigious and highly distinctive, both Alvesson (2004) and O’Mahoney (2010) highlight identity and image creation as significant challenges for consultants, who are expected to project themselves as experts. They work in an environment where, for example, co-location (Newell et al., 2009), adhocratic organizational structure (Mintzberg, 1993), blaming/crediting games (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011) are all impacting their identity and, therefore, image creation activities. Besides the corporate marketing efforts, the corporate image is also created by how employees talk and act in everyday situations and highly visible settings. Alvesson (2004) uses the metaphor ‘broker of meaning’ for consultants to emphasize the significance of rhetoric in the industry and he also points out that consultancy firms often develop shared vocabularies. Furthermore, the use of discourses can have a persuasive effect, and it can also reflect that consultants belong to the right knowledge networks, therefore their advice should be considered as reliable and leading-edge.

Besides the image-sensitivity, it is also important to highlight that consultants work default remotely most of the time (O’Mahoney, 2010). It means that they are in need for tools that can facilitate the knowledge sharing between them, even when they are at various locations. More recently developed ICTs provide this opportunity along with features that encourage internal collaboration and communication. Meanwhile, digitalization has been given increasing

attention in relation to the concept personal branding, but rather in relation to social media than internal collaboration platforms. We believe that these aspects set the scene for our study, through which we aim to gain a better understanding of how they are interrelated within the specific research context.

3. Methodology

With this chapter, our aim is to guide the reader through our research process. We will start by explaining our metatheoretical standpoint, which inevitably determined a specific design for our study (Merriam, 2002). Next, an explanation of our chosen research methods will be given. To provide the reader with some context, relevant details about the research site and the sample will be shared. Finally, we will outline our data analysis process and reflect upon our entire research process. By providing this overview, we allow the reader to evaluate the way we have conducted our research with the aim to create a high level of trustworthiness for the findings we present.

3.1. Metatheoretical starting point

We have conducted our study within an interpretive paradigm. Proceeding from this epistemological position, we seek to understand rather than explain a phenomenon through the research participants' point of view (Bryman, 2016). Following, social constructivism is our ontological position, meaning that our fundamental understanding is that reality is a social construction, of which every person constructs their version, in relation to oneself and their social and historical context (Creswell, 2014). Thus, the aim of our research is to achieve a better understanding of how consultants are currently creating and perceiving personal digital brands on the internal collaboration platform within the specific consultancy firm and how they are experiencing expectations regarding personal digital branding.

In line with Prasad's (2005) description of social constructivism, we understand that there is no objective truth - but multiple and subjective truths - meaning that a certain phenomenon exists in itself, but also in the interpretations through which it is given meaning. However, some constructions are more commonly shared and may even become treated as objective and true, which is referred to as reification (Prasad, 2005). Nevertheless, we will not be able to achieve a complete understanding, and our findings will only represent one version of the social reality (Bryman, 2016). Subjective meanings are constructed by both research participants and by the researchers themselves, for this reason, it is important to create awareness of the context in relation to both (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, we will outline and examine our pre-understandings later in this chapter. In order to better understand how the research participants constructed meanings in their stories and statements about their usage of

the internal collaboration platform, we will follow a hermeneutic approach throughout our research process, which we will elaborate on further below.

3.2. Research design

Based on our interpretive approach, we decided to apply qualitative methods in order to answer our research questions in relation to the internal collaboration platform:

How do consultants experience expectations regarding personal digital branding?

How do consultants create their personal digital brands?

How do consultants perceive personal digital branding activities?

Qualitative methods are suitable for our research since they can provide insights into people's perceptions, opinions and experiences regarding a social phenomenon (Denscombe, 2010). More specifically, we have conducted semi-structured interviews in combination with a document analysis and a small-scale netnography. Merriam (2002) argues that the application of multiple methods to gain multiple types of data creates a greater trustworthiness for the research findings. Likewise, Tracy (2010) describes it as crystallization and according to her, it is a practice through which qualitative researchers can gain credibility since crystallization acknowledges the complexity and facilitates an in-depth understanding of a certain topic. As detailed below, we believe this can be compared to taking a hermeneutical approach, where we as researchers go back and forth between the whole and its parts in order to understand the two (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

3.3. Research methods

Described in terms of hermeneutics, we have treated the ten semi-structured interviews as the whole, since our data collection primarily relied on them. This type of interview allowed us to be flexible since we did not rely on our interview guide purely (Bryman, 2016). Instead, we could adjust to each interviewee and develop on points that we found interesting, as long as these were in line with our research purpose. Since our research concerns a phenomenon which exists in the digital space within an organizational context, we were curious to explore how online social behavior, in general, was described in corporate communication and how online social behavior actually looked like among our respondents. In this sense, we refer to the document analysis and the small-scale netnography as the parts, helping us to make sense

of the whole. In other words, we have contrasted what our respondents said they do on the internal collaboration platform with what they have been advised to do by their employer and what they actually have done.

The document analysis focused on two internally published documents providing advice, respectively regulations, regarding social online presence and personal branding to employees at the company. Our aim was to gain insight into how the company refers to external, but mainly internal, digital platforms and its employees' usage of them. According to Bowen (2009) document analysis serves this purpose well since it can provide background information and context to a phenomenon, as well as signal change and development. We believe that the corporate communication most likely creates certain expectations on the employees, which presumably influence their actions, as well as how they talk about their actions. Another advantage of the document analysis is that the empirical material often already exists at the time for the research (Bryman, 2016). This was our case, and therefore, the documents were not created for the purpose of our research or influenced by us as researchers.

Additionally, we conducted a small-scale netnography on the internal collaboration platform which we had been provided access to by the company. Bertilsson (2014) describes netnography as fieldwork within an online environment, which means that it shares several characteristics with ethnography. A netnography is normally a long-lasting engagement in, and with, the members of an online community (Bertilsson, 2014), which is the reason for why we refer to ours as a small-scale netnography. Instead of making continuous observations of our respondents' actions on the platform, we have analyzed their feeds dating one year back in time. Furthermore, we limited our netnography to include our ten respondents since it supports our metatheoretical starting point, even though we had access to the entire employee pool on the platform. We also took the opportunity to use the platform to facilitate our work and thereby, we could gain an even better understanding about the respondents' comments regarding their usage of it. However, we did not interact with the respondents since this work took place in our own, private group. Therefore, we argue that we have taken the role of complete observers during our netnography, as described by Bertilsson (2014). Similar to our document analysis, the source for data collection already existed at the time for our netnography. Thus, we have analyzed posts and interactions that normally occurs between our respondents (Bertilsson, 2014). According to Langer & Beckman (2005), a passive researcher

role is especially advantageous in studies concerned with sensitive topics. In this sense, we believe that the choice to be complete observers during the netnography suited our study since the topic of our research, personal branding, relates to questions of identity, image and power, as described in the literature review.

3.4. Research context

The research has been conducted at one of the major consulting firms, which has global presence with more than 80 000 consultants in 170 countries. While the company mainly provides technological advice for its clients, it also offers strategy, operations management and business advisory services among others. As in most other large consultancy firms, the default way of working appears to be remotely which means that the company is in need of tools that can facilitate collaboration and communication between the consultants even though they are at various locations. By signing the non-disclosure agreement with the company, we agreed on full confidentiality. Therefore, the information we gathered will be anonymized within this paper. We will use fictional names for the consultants, the pseudonym ‘Sky’ for the company itself and ‘Cloud’ for the company’s ICT platform.

Cloud is an internal collaboration platform, which has been used within Sky for the last eight years. While several of its features were started as grass root initiatives, nowadays Cloud is seen as a platform for all employees, which can, for instance, facilitate project management, knowledge management and executive communication by using features such as blogs, file sharing, community creation and so forth. There are also regular improvements made on the platform, the most important one from our research perspective is the digital dashboard, which measures the Cloud activities of any given employee (see: Appendix B). Since this information is considered as sensitive, only the individual can see his or her current score and its history, based on different dimensions, such as network size, eminence, activities and reactions on them. Besides seeing their own score, employees can compare themselves with the averages of their business unit and the entire workforce.

To initiate the interviews, we created a list of potential interview candidates by relying on our network, thanks to one of us having previous work experience at Sky. Besides benefiting from already established relations, we also received suggestions indirectly during some of the interviews, when the interviewees mentioned other colleagues as digitally active consultants. In addition to that, our contact person created an ideation blog, where his network provided us

with suggestions of interesting interview candidates. These collaboration efforts helped us to arrange interviews in a short timeframe from a large pool of candidates. Additionally, it created a trustworthy atmosphere for the interviews since we were somewhat considered as ‘insiders’ with common connections and some pre-understanding about the company, when we approached the interviewees.

However, since it was our aim to achieve diverse insights into consultants’ experiences and perceptions of personal digital branding, we consciously selected interviewees from the pool of suggestions based on social features, such as age and gender, and professional profiles, including current job role and tenure (see: Table 1). By doing so, we aimed to target individuals with various approaches to the internal collaboration platform and not only those who are considered as active and therefore, presumably could have a positive attitude. This approach was in line with Merriam’s (2002) suggestion to create a ‘purposeful sample’, which is the most commonly used sampling strategy in qualitative data and proceeds from the chosen research questions (Bryman, 2016). Thus, the sample included both women and men, representing eight different nationalities and different age categories. Additionally, Schein (2010) suggests interviewing ‘old timers’ to get a more accurate sense of the deeper level assumptions that are shared within an organization. For this reason, we approached respondents on different hierarchical levels, including trainees who started a few months ago as well as more experienced consultants, who have spent more than ten years within Sky. Following the social constructionist view, we are convinced that social identities, for example, national culture, age and gender, influence an individual’s personal digital branding activities. However, it is not our intention to compare practices and perceptions of personal digital branding between different social groups, rather we strive for a nuanced understanding of personal digital branding within the consulting industry. In this sense, we consider the diverse sample as beneficial for our study, and we believe it gave us insights to multiple truths about personal branding activities, instead of capturing only one side of the story (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

Table 1: Research participants

	Name	Job title	Tenure (in years)
1	Harry	Senior Managing Consultant	9
2	Adam	Managing Consultant	3
3	Stijn	Managing Consultant	8
4	Carl	Senior Consultant	3
5	Nicoline	Consultant Trainee	2
6	Marta	Consultant Trainee	>1
7	Zoe	Senior Managing Consultant	10
8	Norbert	Associate Partner	14
9	Xander	Consultant Trainee	1
10	Otto	Consultant Trainee	2

We are aware that, as highlighted by O’Mahoney (2010), different job titles are used by different consulting firms. Therefore, the table below, describing job hierarchy at Sky, aims to provide the reader with some background understanding.

Table 2: Hierarchy of consultant jobs at Sky



Our sample contains interviewees from all levels of the job hierarchy except partners, which is illustrated by the line in the pyramid above. By moving up in the hierarchy at Sky, a consultant's responsibilities are usually shifting towards more sales related activities. Partners are not involved in the delivery of client engagements, but focusing on business development and management of internal processes, which is a very different role compared to less senior consultants' responsibilities. For this reason, it could be argued that partners should no longer be considered as consultants. Therefore, we decided to not include any partners from Sky in our sample, since our research is focused on consultants.

3.5. Data collection

3.5.1. Interview guide

After defining our research questions and research design, we created a draft version of the interview guide with open questions (see: Appendix A). To review it, we asked our contact person to take a look at it. Besides that, we piloted the interview guide between ourselves, which allowed us to measure the time required and more importantly, improve the structure and the wording of our questions. This exercise also provided us the opportunity to see in-depth what sort of assumptions and biases the researcher who is familiar with the research site had. We considered this interview guide as the skeleton for our semi-structured interviews, providing us with structure by reminding us to discuss the key topics and at the same time flexibility to explore interesting areas raised by the interviewees (Kvale, 1996). Based on our experiences from conducting the interviews, we captured the lessons learned after each session and improved the guide by modifying or adding extra questions. Hence, our interview guide was adjusted several times.

3.5.2. Interview process

As a first step, we contacted the consultants via email explaining our interest in interviewing them about their usage of interactive collaboration platforms. Some of them asked for further background information, in order to prepare properly for our discussion. In our answers, we tried to minimize the information provided upfront, as we were reluctant to steer the respondents in a certain direction.

Initially, we were considering visiting the interviewees' offices, but as consultants often spend their days at the clients' side, we decided to use phone and Skype based on the interviewees'

preferences. It turned out to be an optimal solution since it provided us flexibility and saved significant time from travelling at the same time. The interviewees were very collaborative and usually had time slot available within two to three working days. Therefore, we could conduct all interviews within one and a half weeks. From the interviewees' perspective, we tried to book the appointments before lunchtime or at the end of the working day, hoping that they would feel less pressure to finish up the interview and rush to another meeting right after. Since we expected that actively listening and responding for 45-60 minutes would require our full concentration, we scheduled a maximum of two interviews per day. This daily limit regarding the interviews also allowed us to work on the transcriptions in parallel, which ultimately led to new ideas considering the interview guide and potential interview candidates we could approach.

Right before the interviews, we looked at the interviewees' profiles on external social media and discussed briefly their role at Sky along with the concepts and abbreviations used within the company. This way the researcher who was not familiar with the company and the respondents could gain some necessary background information and clarification. On the other side, we could also spot potentially interesting topics that might be relevant for the given interviewee, for instance, recent promotions or project successes. The interviews were conducted in English, which was neither the native language of the participants nor the researchers. However, language did not appear to be a problem since English is the official language at Sky and each consultant uses it almost on a daily basis. We recorded all interviews with mobile phone after receiving permission from the participants, and both of us actively participated in the interviews, which helped us to clarify and challenge interesting comments from the interviewees' side. Since one of us knew the majority of the interviewees personally, the atmosphere was relaxed and open from the start with these participants. On the other hand, the interviewees whom none of us had met before seemed more reserved in their way of expression, aiming to be more 'politically correct'. Even though the openness varied slightly among respondents, we felt that there was a natural flow in our conversations.

We started each interview with an introduction of ourselves and the confidentiality aspect of our research. In order to help the interviewees to feel comfortable and attain some background information, we started the conversation about their current role. After that, we asked questions regarding their social media usage internally and externally as a professional. By having an initial understanding of their digital behavior, we could customize our questions

accordingly. Our main focus was the internal collaboration platform, so-called Cloud. Therefore, we asked several questions concerning how the consultants use it, what kinds of expectations they experience from different angles and how they perceive others' behaviors on it. We encouraged them to share personal stories and their thoughts and feelings in relation to these topics. By doing so, we could learn about the corporate environment and compare the consultants' views upon themselves to how they view their colleagues. Since there is a tool measuring the consultants' activities on Cloud, we asked the participants whether they had used it and for what purpose, which led to our final discussion points. We believed using the concept of personal (digital) branding could have influenced the interviewees' answers, therefore, we consciously avoided mentioning this phenomenon until the end of the interviews. As the last step, we discussed the definition and relevance of personal digital branding in more details and talked about the remaining questions from the interviewee's side.

3.5.3. Complementary data collection

In order to gain a better understanding of the interviews, we collected secondary data through document analysis and a small-scale netnography. The document analysis relied on two sources, an internal document providing employees at Sky with guidance on how to create their personal brand externally as well as internally and a web page for business guidelines focusing on online social activities. We conducted the netnography by looking at each respondent's profile on Cloud over the last year. While doing so, we paid attention to actions taken by the respondents themselves, but also by people in their network who posted on our interviewees' profiles. Furthermore, we studied how the respondents described themselves in their profiles, the size of their network, what tags they have assigned to themselves and whether they provided links to any external profiles.

3.6. Data analysis

Our sense-making process of the empirical material started already as we collected it, which according to Creswell (2014) characterizes qualitative research. In line with the application of semi-structured interviews, we formulated follow-up questions and decided to leave some questions out depending on what we considered relevant and interesting during each interview (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2009). Furthermore, we adjusted our interview guide and initiated the transcribing as we progressed. In addition to our primary interpretations, our respondents contributed to the construction of our empirical material by making more or less conscious

adjustments to us, the topic and the situation (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). In this sense, applying netnography and document analysis as complementary methods appeared even more relevant to us since, as previously mentioned, the empirical material is not created for the purpose of the research as it already exists when analyzed (Merriam, 2002).

We decided to start analyzing the interview transcripts separately with the aim to reduce biases, prevent group-thinking and unlock potential advantages due to our diverse backgrounds in relation to our research topic. While one of us is familiar with the phenomenon we seek to understand from previous work and therefore could relate it to personal experiences, the other one of us could place it in a new light. Nevertheless, both of us were somewhat familiar with the theoretical fields our research is concerned with. Besides participating in a course on knowledge work, we had to prepare a research proposal, which required some initial reading. However, we decided to not gain more in-depth knowledge through further reading prior to conducting our interviews and the additional data collection. This means that we took an abductive approach, which can be described as a mixture of inductive and deductive, keeping a dialogue between the empirical material and theory (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). In our first readings, we underlined and made comments in the margins according to what we found interesting while trying to stay as open-minded as possible. As we developed our analysis we became more involved with theory, striving to relate it to our empirical material and vice versa.

Our next step was to contrast our interpretations and develop our analysis together. In doing so, we were guided by Creswell's (2014) steps of data analysis and interpretation. We started by discussing our respective findings, first for each respondent while listing keywords in a document and second across the different respondents while trying to create a high-level understanding of what was said during the interviews. In this process, we paid attention to repetitions, similarities as well as differences, metaphors, aspects that made us ask questions and aspects that we sensed were missing, as advised by Ryan & Bernard (2003). The next step was to code our findings and for this purpose, we used an Excel sheet where we inserted the previously listed keywords marking them with numbers of the interviews in order to highlight more salient themes. By grouping the keywords we could identify three themes, which we then tried to formulate in ways that could answer our research questions.

Next, we considered how the themes we had developed from analyzing and coding the transcripts related to our findings from the document analysis and the netnography, which were analyzed in a similar way as described for the interviews. As researchers within the interpretive paradigm we are aware that we will never achieve a complete understanding, but by relating our findings from the interviews with other empirical material we seek to improve our understanding. In this sense, we follow the hermeneutic tradition, as described previously. Our findings from the netnography have enabled us to describe how consultants create their personal brand on the internal collaboration platform, but also supported us in our analysis to answer the other two research questions, by contrasting the respondents' stories and statements with our observations. On the other hand, the document analysis facilitated our sense-making of how the respondents refer to their own and other consultants' usage of digital platforms, since we could gain insight into how Sky refers to employee presence on digital platforms. Thereby, we could get an idea of what expectations the company communicates toward its employees and what behaviors that seems to be encouraged.

3.7. Reflexivity

As qualitative researchers within the interpretive paradigm, we are interested in exploring how reality is socially constructed and given meaning. However, it is important to acknowledge that we will not be able to do so without being subjective ourselves (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). According to Merriam (2002), researchers should identify their own biases, and consider what impact these may have on the research result. Thus, we have strived to remain reflexive throughout our research process. For instance, by using first person writing, we were continuously reminded about our involvement and its influence on the findings and so is the reader of our study.

The interface between the two of us as researchers has characterized our entire research process and helped us to create self-awareness. Alvesson & Sköldbberg (2009, p. 271) explains reflection as something that "occurs when one mode of thought is confronted by another". Hence, one way for us to remain reflexive has been by discussing and contrasting our respective thoughts and opinions with each other. This is also the reason for why we were both actively involved during the interviews and did initial analysis of our interview transcripts separately, which has also been the case for the document analysis and the netnography. Our ongoing discussions have also helped us to surface the biases we initially had about the topic

of our research, which will be outlined to the reader as well. From learning about consultancy during our courses at university, we understood both firms and consultants as image-dependent, relying on how others view them to be assigned with projects. Therefore, we assumed that consultants would consider personal branding as an important element in career advancement and that it would be something that is encouraged within their practice. Even more drastically, we thought that almost everyone must be interested in personal branding, due to the hype coming from pop-management books, articles and digital materials. However, this assumption was challenged throughout our interviews as well as our observations during the netnography, which will be detailed in our analysis.

Even though all our research methods demand consideration regarding reflexivity, we have chosen to emphasize the interviews since these have been our primary method for data collection. In relation to this, we would like to point to one of the advantages with document analysis and netnography, namely the fact that the empirical material exists prior to the research. This increases the trustworthiness of these methods and eliminates some of the issues, which will be discussed below regarding the interviews.

3.7.1. Reflecting upon our interviews

An interviewee's narrative about a certain event captures three focuses: the objective, the subjective and the discursive (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). That is, what the interviewees told us about their experiences from working with the internal collaboration platform is partly mirroring the event itself but mainly how the interviewees felt and thought about it and how they believe they should feel and think about it. The latter is influenced by the context within which the event took place, in this case, the internal collaboration platform, as well as the context in which it is described, in other words, the interviews with us. In relation to this, we find it important to deliberate upon possible influencers on our interviewees' narratives.

Consultancy is often presented as a highly image-dependent industry (Alvesson, 2004; O'Mahoney, 2010), while the topic of personal branding itself meant that our interviewees were asked to speak about themselves. In other words, our discussions touched upon identity and how the interviewees see themselves in relation to others. Additionally, our literature review showed that personal branding is often promoted as a 'must have' on different digital platforms. Altogether, this could have tempted our respondents to talk about their experiences from working on the internal collaboration platform in ways that present themselves and their

practice in a favorable light. In an attempt to counteract this, we asked our respondents to share stories and give examples, which we could then analyze not only based on the exact wording but even more on what we could read between the lines. In doing so, our hermeneutical approach helped us, as we focused on the different layers of text and could relate them to what we observed during our netnography and document analysis (Prasad, 2005).

As previously mentioned, one of us has work experience from the research site and the majority of our interviews were conducted with her previous colleagues. We believe that these already existing relationships meant that the respondents were eager to help and thus accelerated our research process in two ways. First, we were able to schedule interviews with ease and on short notice. Second, we could have in-depth discussions about our actual research topic. Nevertheless, the respondents' willingness to help us presents potential challenges. There may be a risk that they attempted to give us the 'right' answers, in other words, telling us what they thought we would like to hear. Some of them even joked whether we would like to hear the 'truth' during the interviews, which might reflect a potential conflict between the interviewee's view and the external expectations or discourses. Thus, it could be questioned to what extent the interviewees felt comfortable to share their honest opinions about this relatively personal subject. In relation to this, we believe that our netnography played an important role, giving us the opportunity to monitor the interviewees' actual actions and contrast them to their statements. This helped us to determine whether the respondents spoke from experience and if not, facilitated the analysis concerning why they did not.

Another aspect to consider is the use of English during the interviews. As previously mentioned, neither the interviewees nor we as researchers are native speakers and even though it is our judgment that the interviews were smooth, it is a point to reflect upon. In order to avoid misunderstandings, we started the interviews by encouraging our respondents to interrupt and ask if anything was unclear, which they did at some points. This reminded us to keep our questions simple and straightforward. We strived to create an open atmosphere during the interviews and dared to remain silent and await further reflections from the interviewees as well as tried to challenge their answers. We believe that some details of the interviewees' stories may have been left out, as they were considered not important or necessary because of the shared understanding between one of us and the respondents working at Sky. To overcome this challenge, we decided that the one of us that can be described as an

‘outsider’ would lead the interviews, which meant that we could ask for clarifications or further explanations, when needed. However, both of us asked follow-up questions and in relation to this, we believe it has been a great advantage to be two researchers instead of one. Due to our different ways of relating both to the respondents and to the topic we could create a broader, yet deeper, conversation with our interviewees.

By being transparent about the way we have conducted our research, we hope to improve the credibility of our findings. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that these will not present any objective truth, and it is neither our aim to generalize, but rather to understand consultants’ current constructions of personal digital branding activities and personal digital brands within the context of an internal collaboration platform at a specific consultancy practice.

4. Analysis

Our aim with the following chapter is to describe and analyze our empirical findings in order to provide answers to our research questions. The document analysis, the small-scale netnography and the interviews will be addressed one by one since we believe it gives structure to this chapter. However, these should not be considered as separate entities, but rather as closely interrelated as outlined below.

First, the document analysis will help us to explore how Sky communicates online presence to its employees through an internal leaflet and a regulatory document. It reflects that the external trend of ‘going digital’ is recognized by Sky and how the company would like to respond to it, externally as well as internally. In relation to this, Sky is dependent on its employees. Therefore, certain behavioral expectations are clearly communicated, such as dealing carefully with client information. Other actions, such as microblogging, come forward as encouraged and appreciated. In this section, we will also outline Sky’s way to refer to its own designation of personal branding, eminence, along with the advice provided to its employees for how to achieve it.

Next, what consultants at Sky actually do on the internal collaboration platform Cloud will be explored through the netnography. By examining ten consultants’ activities on Cloud, we could get an idea of how they interact with others and present themselves, in other words, how they create their personal brands. We presumed that the consultants’ activities on Cloud were influenced to some extent by corporate communication, including the documents we have analyzed. By listening to the same ten consultants, we could explore whether this was the case and reveal other ways in which they relate to their own and others usage of Cloud.

Lastly, we will integrate our findings from the document analysis and the netnography with the interviews to reflect upon how consultants at Sky experience expectations regarding personal digital branding, how they create their personal brands online and finally, how they perceive personal digital branding activities, on the internal collaboration platform Cloud. This last aspect boils down to a discussion about the perceived authenticity of personal digital branding, and how this, in turn, affects the value-adding.

4.1. Document analysis

As highlighted in the introduction chapter, the consulting industry seems to go through turbulent times. These circumstances are also impacting Sky, which has been going through several transformational initiatives during the last few years. Following the current trends of digitalization, Sky started to promote personal digital branding by encouraging its employees to become famous for their expertise in areas that are valued by the market and by doing so, represent the company as well. This is referred to as eminence, which is the quality of being important and famous, thus, an eminent person is respected (Longman, 2005). One of the Communications Managers at Sky informed us that while eminence is used as a synonym for personal branding within the company, there are few corporate materials discussing this topic explicitly. Therefore, she created a leaflet in 2014 aiming to guide Sky employees through what creating a personal brand essentially means, including available methods for creation as well as rules and guidelines to be followed. One main aspect emphasized in this document is how to ‘go digital’, which includes both internal and external dimensions. During our discussion, the Communication Manager mentioned that there is a growing attention paid to this topic by top management and that being visible digitally is highly encouraged within the company.

4.1.1. Sky recognizes the trend

A personal brand or eminence is defined as expertise in combination with a strong and good reputation in the brochure by Sky. However, the latter is emphasized, which could signal to the employees that surface is more important than the substance behind. To be knowledgeable without being known appears to be worthless. On the other side, awareness regarding the trend of creating personal brands is expressed not the least through the statement “how others see you matters more than ever”. In relation to this, ‘going digital’ and being frequently present online is stressed as highly important. This is an expectation that is described as not only coming from Sky but also from the clients. Therefore, online presence should be created both internally and externally. Within this document, an employee’s profile at Cloud is described as an internal business card, profiles on external social media are presumably considered as the external equivalent.

The document provides advice on how employees at Sky can design these business cards and communicate their personal brand. An underlying theme seems to be that it is insufficient to

have an online profile, as it must also be carefully managed. When managing their online presence, Sky consultants should be relevant, interesting and add value. They should promote what they want to be known for. It appears as if it is more encouraged to be seen as an expert in a specific field, than as generalist who knows little about everything. Another aspect that is underlined is to share and contribute to others, for this purpose expertise is also needed. Therefore, those employees who are yet unsure in what field they would like to be considered as experts or who do not consider themselves as experts yet, creating a personal brand and ‘going digital’ can be perceived as challenging.

4.1.2. Promotion and control

To motivate employees to follow the recommendations in the leaflet, Sky presents advantages that are associated with the creation of a personal brand, such as good reputation which positions the employee as an expert and increased awareness of the employee’s competencies and skills, which can lead to interesting project opportunities. However, there are also regulative aspects to Sky employees’ online presence, which can be found both in the leaflet and in the online document for social media business guidelines too. These warn employees about the difficulties to control online information and underline the relation between Sky employees’ personal brands and the corporate brand. What employees do privately is private. Nevertheless, the line between personal and professional is blurred due to digitalization. In this sense, trust is presented as the key, but with trust comes expectations; “Sky’s value is best represented by its people”. Hence, whatever Sky employees do online, internally or externally, as well as, privately or professionally, should add value.

As a final comment, the social media business guidelines states that online presence should not affect employees’ job performance and client commitments. In this sense, the online presence can be interpreted as something additional to consultants’ everyday workload, an extra that is encouraged, but not at the expense of job responsibilities. Similarly, the booklet presents other ways to create a personal brand, than ‘going digital’, such as by becoming a great presenter or building one’s network, which could show that online presence is not enough to be known as an expert, but a valuable complement to real-life actions.

4.2. Netnography of Cloud

While our main topic is personal branding, ICT with knowledge management purpose is highly linked to our research, since it is the context of our analysis. By using Cloud during our research process, we concluded that this tool combines the two previously discussed types of epistemologies - namely 'knowledge as a possession' and 'knowledge as a practice' - by offering various features to the users, such as file sharing across the organization, brainstorming tools, space for project teams and so forth. The internal platform also contains some elements comparable to external social media sites, such as personal profiles, blogs and status updates. By having such diverse features, employees actively engaged in this platform cannot only contribute to knowledge management but also create their personal brand in several ways by being present in the digital space. By this sort of hybridization of social media and knowledge management, it seems that the line between work and fun is somewhat blurred on the internal collaboration platform.

4.2.1. Email signature

Although we mainly focused on the internal collaboration platform, Cloud, we realized during the interview scheduling phase of our project, that there are several types of email signatures used by the interviewees. Besides the key contact details and corporate logo, half of them provided additional links to their external social media profiles, such as LinkedIn, Twitter and to the internal one, Cloud. While most interviewees stated that they did not or barely used Twitter, still it was most often listed one in their signatures. In some cases, we also found inspirational quotes or URL links to their own or their team's website. While Sky provides several signature templates, it is the choice of the consultants what they actually include. From this perspective, we consider the customization of the email signature as a personal branding activity, which can create an impression, but also trigger the email recipient to visit one's profile. Based on the researcher's experience, email is still the most frequently used communication tool internally as well as externally among Sky employees. Therefore, we believe the selection of email signature might be considered as a minor - but potentially impactful - aspect of personal digital branding, since it is an integrated part of the day-to-day communication process.

4.2.2. Internal profiles

The above-mentioned email signatures led us to the interviewees' internal profiles on Cloud. This profile is created for all employees once they join the company, therefore, in contrast to external social media platforms, the presence on Cloud is unavoidable. However, it is up to each and every employee to choose if and how to manage this profile. Another contrast with social media is that every employee within Sky can see the activities and posts of their colleagues, unless they take place in a closed group environment. By looking at the interviewees' profiles, we concluded that - even though to a different extent - all interviewees edited their introduction page, for instance, by adding a profile picture and using tags to describe their expertise, industry focus, previous clients and so forth. This latter action can improve the visibility of consultants since the search engine will list their profile based on the keywords that they have highlighted. Sky employees also have the opportunity to write a short introduction, which most interviewees filled out. While reflecting back their expertise area seems to be the main intention, some of them also indicate that they are ready to connect with and support other colleagues. We also recognized that junior consultants tend to mention their soft skills, such as creativity, teamwork or communication, while more experienced ones rather list specific expertise areas and previous clients.

As on most social media platforms, updates are posted within one's network within Cloud, therefore, we could expect that digitally active consultants try to create a bigger network. Our sample challenged this assumption. Consultants who posted the least, approximately five times over the last year, often had more than 200 contacts, while the most active ones had only 60 to 80 employees in their Cloud network. It seems that instead of expanding their networks and looking at the potential benefit of having a larger audience, consultants notify colleagues by mentioning them in their posts. This way, the mentioned persons receive an email notification, which can trigger response, even if they are not frequently present on Cloud. So what are the key themes that consultants post about internally? Based on our observations, we recognized three main themes: sharing project success, attending training or business events and seeking for support, which we will discuss next.

4.2.3. Main themes on Cloud

Almost all respondents shared posts about their recent projects, where they show acknowledgment towards their team members as well. Interestingly, they also mention experts

in the field or high-level managers, whom they seem to believe should know about their achievements. While few interviewees are rather factual in their tone, others share achievements of their 'awesome team' in a more enthusiastic and inspiring way. Still, overall all of them try to create a very positive image about their contribution to the client and Sky. These posts often receive responses from direct colleagues, whom due to working at another client's side, might be less informed about others' current project. In addition to that, some consultants also posted more informal updates stating that they finalized their intensive workload for the week, perhaps with a note to wish colleagues a great weekend. These statements appear to reflect an image of them as busy, but working efficiently, which can be considered as an achievement at the end of the week.

The second common theme is related to education and business events, which are almost always illustrated by team pictures or photos of interesting slides. These posts often include appreciation towards the organizers and reflect the expert and networking aspect of these social occasions. By posting about the events, the consultants can project that they have learned something new, which presumably brings them closer to be considered as an expert in a specific field. Besides that, they also interact with other experts in the field. When some of the interviewees have been co-facilitators during the events, they often shared some of the materials and received online 'thank you notes' from the organizers. These acknowledgments are shared automatically with the consultant's direct manager as well, who this way gets informed about the consultant's internal knowledge sharing activities. Surprisingly, one of the more senior consultants had frequent posts on his wall, which were created by others. Based on the posts, it could be argued that his real life activities create spillover effects into the online space, creating a personal digital brand, even though he is not managing it himself. Apart from the internal educational events, consultants shared news about business events, - where clients and/or competitors are often involved - especially, where there was an achievement in the background, such as winning an award by participating in competitions for young professionals or attending industry related conferences. These are mostly posted by trainees, who share the achievement of their teams or promote events and encourage others to join.

The last aspect is linked to knowledge management, which is one of the key processes in the consulting world, as Sarvary (1999) pointed out. Consultants can benefit greatly from previous projects and replicate them to some extent at other clients (Alvesson, 2004). We recognized

this aspect, although it is a significantly less frequent topic, compared to success sharing or event attendance related posts. Based on our observations, the more digitally active consultants posted messages on other employees' wall looking for client references or experts internally who could support them with their current challenge. We could argue that this approach is also a way to show that they are connected to these experts. Besides reaching out for help, some of the consultants also shared links to files or tools that might be interesting for their network. While traditional KM tools are often focusing on document sharing and by doing so codifying knowledge, it seems that our sample of consultants at Sky shares more news than in-depth content, that could be easily reused by others.

Besides the posts that the consultants create, we also looked at their reactions, such as likes and comments, and the interaction with other Sky employees. This perspective is important, because even though these actions might be considered as less impactful for creating a personal digital brand, compared to creating posts or sharing materials, they can still impact others' perception. For instance, two of the interviewees often appeared as 'supporters of others', they responded to others' challenges and connected people to help them exchange knowledge. As we observed, most people responded to messages when their names were mentioned in the post, the notifications seem to trigger their reactions. There were also three interviewees who reacted only to those posts, which included their name. Besides that, they did not have other visible interaction on the platform. In contrast with the less digitally active consultants, trainees seem to 'like' others' posts. Successes of others and leadership announcements are often cherished by the juniors, which might make them viewed as friendly, up-to-date colleagues, who are not passive and therefore 'invisible' readers.

In addition to the three main themes, we also identified three additional topics, namely competition, career advancement and troubleshooting, which were present in the interviewees' wall on Cloud. Competition is in the background of many post, and it can take several forms. Besides the obvious tension with external competitors, there can be competition within internal teams, but also among individuals, which are indicated by award related posts. On the other hand, it seems that some consultants also look at their digital activities as a sort of competition, which might be fuelled by the previously mentioned internal gamification tool providing a score based on one's interaction on Cloud. For example, one of the interviewees shared his score on his profile and encouraged others to improve their score and thereby achieve better results than other Sky employees. While the previously discussed project success is often

presented as a team effort, especially junior consultants often post about their new certifications or work anniversaries, which is more focusing on the individual's achievements. Interestingly, more senior consultants tend to receive congratulations from others regarding their promotions, even if they have not posted anything about it previously. Lastly, the third aspect we found is more focusing on the day-to-day challenges of consultants, such as issues with the laptop, looking for specific link and so forth. Usually, the digitally more active consultants take this step and they often mention others in their questions who can potentially help them. This way they also recognize their colleagues as being experts or being up-to-date about internal matters and at the same time, hope for quick solutions from their networks.

The findings through the document analysis and the netnography provided us with insights related to two of our research questions. On one side, we studied the expectations from the company's side, besides that we could also observe how personal digital brands are created by the consultants. We will now move to the primary method of our research, which will highlight additional aspects to these two questions as well as help us answer our third research question regarding perceptions of personal digital branding.

4.3. Interviews

4.3.1 Expectations are everywhere

To understand how consultants view the expectations around personal digital branding, we will discuss this topic by observing three interconnected levels: the macro-environment, the micro-environment, in this case, the company itself, and the perspectives of the individual consultant.

4.3.1.1. Follow the hype

During initial discussions about collaborative platforms, including external ones and the internal one at Sky, most of the consultants mentioned that they have observed a growth in the usage of these tools. While more senior consultants talked about collaborative platforms as a sort of new trend, digital presence on different websites seems to be obvious for the ones who recently started their career at Sky:

People see us as digital natives and we are a selected group within Sky. Actually, I can compare my usage and way of thinking about social, for us it's the normal way. If you look at how older

people see social, they see it as something outside and they are not used to it, like my mom...
(Nicoline)

In contrast with her view, two more senior consultants highlighted that many colleagues just follow the trend blindly, for instance, by giving likes to someone simply because they liked one's previous post. One of them even challenged the reason why people start using platforms for professionals: "...a lot of people just make a LinkedIn profile, because everybody else does" (Stijn). Others were positive about the usage of these collaboration platforms in general and they often described them as valuable sources of information. Therefore, they believed that those who are not actively engaged on them are missing out. By contrasting his informedness with his colleagues, one of the consultants raised the question whether it is actually expected from consultants to follow news in the digital space:

I hear sometimes colleagues, who are very surprised about some development. It's like 'okay, I've never heard about this' or 'this is new for me' and I'm like 'yeah, you could've known, but...' and that's the thing, do we expect people to do this or not? (Xander)

While Alvesson (2004) points out that being, and being considered as, up-to-date about the latest trends is key in the consulting industry. Although, there are potential improvement points for consultants at Sky according to our interviewees. Besides following what is new, O'Mahoney (2010) argues having close relationships with clients can matter as much as reputation:

We are getting more and more social, like digitally social and therefore, we will have different target groups at clients than before. So in order to understand and to be able to follow these clients, I think you also really need to do and know what they are going through. (Marta)

This observation was made by other trainees as well, who suggest that Sky should make a greater effort to follow its clients and target them also online. However, the statement below indirectly indicates that Sky seems to be somewhat lacking behind with the trend: "I think it would help if leaders would be online, because I think it is more about being where your clients are, right?" (Chris). Most of the times consultants in team leader positions and executives are mentioned as responsible for developing and maintaining client relationships, but several millennial interviewees' assumed that they need some support to 'go digital'. As one of the consultants mentioned, it can even happen that junior consultants coach executives

in their first digital steps. While these expectations are not mentioned clearly by Sky, the interviewees seem to understand the background reasons why their senior colleagues are not that present online. As one of them indicates:

Maybe they don't really know how to get started. If I put myself in her [referring to his team lead] place now for example, and I never post... How do you get started then on sharing things?
(Xander)

In contrast with the view about consultants in higher positions, there is another type of impression about junior colleagues. Altogether, four people with Managing Consultant or higher position shared Zoe's opinion: *"Youngsters, who are really young, they are into that 'liking euphoria' and they will like everything"* (Zoe). They believed this euphoria is also fueled by the traineeship itself, because within two years trainees are expected to become senior consultants and *"the only way to do that is by following certain behavioral pattern"*, as Adam pointed out. This opinion was confirmed by a previous trainee as well:

When we joined Sky within the traineeship, there was more focus on using social media and we see a lot of opportunities on how to use social media for building your eminence. And of course, we were very ambitious also to achieve eminence. (Chris)

Besides the contrast between higher management and starters, consultants also compared themselves to others in a general way. Some of them expressed that they feel a sort of pressure to be digitally active, but at the end they do not act upon it. One of them even think a plan would be helpful to create her personal digital brand: *"I should care, but actually I don't care. I should make a plan, you know, on how to be successful on social media"* (Marta). This pressure to be present online seemed to be fuelled by Sky as well. For instance, one of the interviewees pointed out that team leaders have started to recognize the need to share news within their teams on Cloud, while executives, who are officially measured on their digital eminence, have created (video) blogs to reach large audiences and start an internal dialogue.

4.3.1.2. Expectations within Sky

While the interviewees sensed a kind of pressure to be visible online, their answers were very diverse when we asked them about the internal expectations. The majority of them said that online social activities were not expected from their managers and being digital is not part of their job, in line with Newell et al. (2009) statement about project delivery as main priority.

One of the experienced consultants even challenged whether being active in the digital space is in line with his profession: *“Otherwise, I become... an inspirator... or I change job. I’m not anymore working as a consultant, that’s different... Yes, if you are somebody, who is really like a thought leader taking speeches everywhere”* (Harry). On the other side, three consultants believed that it was part of their job responsibility. It is important to highlight that consultants have different profiles and targets to reach within Sky. Therefore, expectations might vary accordingly. One of them believed it is a characteristic of the industry to be present online and follow the news: *“That is also because, in consultancy, it’s expected of you that you keep your knowledge up-to-date. You don’t need to be pushed on that because that’s just part of your role”* (Stijn). Interestingly, an Associate Partner working in the global Center of Competence had a different view on personal branding, than most other consultants:

Global team members need to present themselves as eminent in their field and the way to do that is through social media and through white papers or patents. All those channels you have to use to make yourself known out there, so people come to you and say ‘hey, help us, you’re the expert!’
(Norbert)

He highlights that eminence is important because clients are willing to pay the high consulting fees in exchange for having experts supporting them. This view somewhat confirms Alvesson’s (2004) statement about image sensitivity within the industry. Of course, expectations are tangible in this case, since there is a clear guideline for how global team members should achieve eminence, which was, for instance, further encouraged by competition within the team. Competition is not only present in the above-mentioned teams, but Sky also recognizes knowledge sharing behavior, for instance by rewarding individuals. The example below shows that Sky, similarly to other IT consulting firms, focuses on the collection of codified knowledge, which, as stated by Hansen et al. (1999), can be reused in other client engagements:

I did get a recognition for knowledge sharing, an award. So globally within Sky, or if it was Europe, but I was recognized as one of the best knowledge sharers, I think it must have been within Europe. So of course, that’s something. Yes, you get a recognition and your name gets seen by some managers, at least some executives, at least for a day. (Otto)

Despite the recognition, the statement above also projects that the effect of personal digital branding seems to be only temporary, which explains why other interviewees emphasized the

importance of frequent posting. While the creation of eminence is not clearly expected according to our sample, which is in line with our conclusion from the document analysis, the importance of knowledge sharing is expressed more frequently, as one of the Senior Managing Consultants pointed out:

I think maybe in the beginning when they launched Cloud. Maybe a few years ago, there was more talk about it. I don't really feel now that there is any expectation... Of course, there is lots of vibe around sharing everything; share your thoughts, share knowledge, share information, so that's for sure. (Harry)

His view is confirmed by another consultant, who not only observed the internal emphasis on knowledge sharing but considered sharing as part of his job: “*I do feel that I have a role to share knowledge... and I need to be up-to-date with what's happening within Sky*” (Stijn). One thing that all interviewees agreed upon was that consultants should do more in order to build their personal brands. For doing that, there is a need for extra support, but more importantly, internal expectations should be clear:

I think it would be really good if everyone got encouraged to post more and share their knowledge and share their experience, because I think yourself and everybody else would benefit from it. I'm not sure how that would work, who you could encourage people, including myself. (Xander)

In addition to that, another interviewee emphasized that the main focus is on billability, which consequently means that Sky does not consider eminence creation for consultants as main priority:

I think Sky really let it be, so we leave it up to the people how they want to do it or where they want to focus. If I look at the service lines, they don't really care about your personal branding. They really care about utilization primarily, so they think about 'yeah, I don't care, he or she is a consultant, we just want them to be on a project somewhere'. So it's really short-term focused, quarterly focused. (Chris)

Some others presumed that corporate communication has a strong link with personal branding or in another word, with eminence:

I think, because of the very big word, eminence, we are using within Sky at the moment. Internal profiling, that's something that you are pushed on by your manager. You have to show that you are fit for the job, that you can do it. You need to show expertise and people should know you. But you cannot talk to everybody, so that means that in the online tooling, whether it's LinkedIn externally or Cloud

internally, you have to display yourself in a certain way and it's... Well, it's not a character that you show, it's just 'look, I'm very good at this'. (Stijn)

4.3.1.3. The individual benefits

From the individual's perspective, the consultants often mentioned that they benefit from others' online activities by becoming up-to-date about 'hot topics', therefore "*staying ahead of the group*", as Stijn highlighted, or hearing what others are doing, which can potentially lead to reusing existing knowledge. Some of them also mentioned that updating others is important because success is only recognized once it is made visible by the consultants:

If you want to be successful, you have to make your results visible, because if you are just successful without showing the people around you that you are successful, that's like: 'Yeah, who knows that you are doing good and that you are delivering results?'. You are the only one who knows it and with these social platforms, you just show how you are doing, what you are doing, what your opinion about certain topics is. (Zoe)

While several consultants believed sharing success is beneficial for others, but mainly for their visibility, a more senior consultant took a critical standpoint about sharing success as an individual achievement. He expressed that he finds it hard to identify himself with these behaviors:

I have seen that others had that great project, went through all the executives and told how great project that was, and what he [sic] did to make it such a success. I would never do that. Not even knowing that I might, that I maybe should do it because it would help me in my personal branding. (Stijn)

Even though, there are multiple opinions regarding sharing success stories, all consultants mentioned their dependency on each other, whether it is about business development or finding new project or relevant insights about previous projects. By having a personal brand and thus sufficient visibility, this dependency seems less of a challenge, especially from the perspective of future projects: "*We are in the people business and people buy from people. So, if I'm looking for a new project, then people will know who I am and basically, they will know my brand*" (Nicoline). Another trainee highlighted that not only being known is important, but also the quality of the reputation one creates matters:

No one else is finding projects for us, you do it yourself. If people like you, they want to have you on their next project as well, but if not, if they dislike you, they don't fight to have you on their next project, when you have three competitors that want the same role. It's as simple as that. So personal branding is important. (Otto)

Although the majority of the interviewees were not aware of the gamification tool measuring their social behavior on Cloud, they all got curious to see their numbers when we told them about it. One of them felt that being measured on this topic is scary if it would be used by the managers for evaluation. Meanwhile, few of them already used or planned to use their digital score during the yearly evaluation session and demonstrate it as a knowledge management activity:

Of course, if I share a file and people download it, I get a higher recognition. So it boosts my reputation and I used it a lot during my performance review, for example, saying that this is actually how much I contribute to other Sky employees. (Otto)

Besides benefiting as an individual, some also raised that being an ambassador for Sky is primarily beneficial for the company:

No one knows, it's like a black hole, people are not going to ask a black hole to set up a big data strategy. If you build that eminence and get more clients in and you build the big data team, then I think you gain from it as a person, but yes, initially it would be Sky. (Carl)

According to several of the consultants, they need to do more personal branding and even though they position themselves in various ways towards it, all of them seem to experience an external trend in being online. They agree that the expectations directed towards them by Sky in this sense are rather vague and they express a need for clearer expectations as well as support regarding the creation of personal brands, not the least in the digital space.

4.3.2. Creation of personal digital brands

Even though our focus is to explore how consultants at Sky use the internal collaboration platform, Cloud, the consultants often mentioned external social media during our interviews. This made it clear to us that they use external platforms frequently in their role as professionals. Furthermore, they contrasted these with the internal one, many times in terms of usefulness and value creation.

When we asked the respondents what external platforms they use, some of them mentioned Twitter and Facebook, while all of them mentioned LinkedIn. All the interviewees have a profile on LinkedIn and the majority of them refer to it as a must when profiling oneself professionally. The general opinion seems to be that LinkedIn facilitates the creation and maintenance of a professional network through which the consultants can stay updated of news within their field. The main advantage of LinkedIn compared to Cloud, as highlighted by the respondents, is that it offers a greater audience, which consists of colleagues at Sky, but also other professionals. Despite the emphasize on its benefits through its reach, several of the interviewees described themselves as not being very active on LinkedIn. For some, being active means that they do not go on the platform very often and for others that they read a lot, but do not react or post themselves. In this sense, LinkedIn is considered as a news feed and résumé bank, where the consultants are more concerned with their own and others' profiles than with actions. On the contrary, actions seem to be prioritized over profile creation on the internal platform since Cloud does not provide the same opportunity to create a profile as LinkedIn does, according to one of the consultants:

On your Cloud profile, you actually don't have that many options to portray who you are. You got a section, where you can put 'this is me and this is the description of me'. I don't think anyone ever updates that. If I like something, then it will show on my profile that I have liked something. So if people do that, it's more of their behavior I think on Cloud than actually putting something on their profile. (Nicoline)

When focusing on how the consultants described their activities on Cloud, we could identify three main themes and we will refer to these as being social, communicating expertise and sharing success. These themes are at large comparable with the themes we identified through the netnography, namely seeking for support, attending training and business events and sharing project success. In other words, what the consultants say they do and what they actually do on Cloud is to a great extent aligned. However, there was an additional type of activity mentioned in the interviews.

While the three main themes can be considered as connected to relationships with others and thereby image work, this type of activity appears to be more concerned with work on the self: *"I've heard that people say that I'm boring, that I only post things about technology and events that are not part of their interest. But fine, I mean, fine – that is part of my interests"*

(Zoe). This respondent described other's opinion on her posts as insignificant, as long as her actions are in line with what she is passionate about. According to her, posting is highly connected to emotions and therefore, she sometimes has to wait before she shares something. It is our understanding, that even though Zoe's activity is driven by personal interest, she considers how others will perceive it. Several other respondents described their actions on Cloud in a similar way: *"My goal is not to be the most social person at Sky. My purpose is to show what I find interesting and what makes me tick"* (Nicoline). While Nicoline acts upon her interests, she wants to show what these are to others. Another respondent emphasized sharing based on one's interest areas as a great way to express oneself:

I think building your eminence should be about explaining and sharing with people the things that you are passionate about, which most of the time automatically are the things you know about and what you are good at. (Carl)

This quote shows that while some of the consultants activities are driven and/or shaped by identity work, these will ultimately align with their image work. Thus, the additional type of activity can be seen in all the three main themes, being social, communicating expertise and sharing success, which will be detailed further in the following paragraphs.

4.3.2.1. Being social

As described by Hearn (2010), social relationships can be created and maintained through online activity and the importance of networking is what defines the theme being social. For many of the consultants, being social online is described as something that comes naturally. They referred to themselves as a 'social person' and/or a 'curious person' eager to interact with others. One of the consultants described being social online as something she wants to do, since she enjoys it, while another one simply stated that interacting with others on Cloud is part of who she is. Hence, this theme is distinguished by identification, but it also connects to image: *"It's in me now, but I don't think it was when I started. You hear the customer they say 'well, if you say Stijn, you say social business'"* (Stijn). He described being social online as a behavior that has become internalized and argues that others, even outside his network, perceive him accordingly.

Some of the consultants described a large network as beneficial on both corporate and individual level, as it can help them broaden their view on certain things. In this sense, the

number of people in their network appeared as meriting in itself, while other respondents underlined that whom becomes part of their network is of greater importance than how many. For example, one respondent described how she is selective regarding allowing people to become and remain a part of her network internally, as well as, externally:

I do dare [to unfriend someone], because I look at my LinkedIn, Facebook and Cloud profile, as something that is part – that's a reflection of myself. So, from that point of view, I am the one that is managing. That's my garden. I am the one who is managing my garden and I decide if it's time to clean the friends list or to get connected with somebody. (Zoe)

During the netnography, we discovered that while some of the respondents rarely shared anything on Cloud, their feed could still provide us with insights about them since people in their network have interacted with them in various ways. Zoe seemed to believe that online actions taken by others with whom she associates with will spillover on her personal brand. For this reason, another respondent thought twice before posting a photo of herself with some colleagues in a bar: *“Do I want to be known as someone who likes to have a drink? I mean, I wouldn't mind, but there were other people on the picture, so we didn't do it”* (Nicoline). In this sense, Nicoline adjusted her personal digital brand with consideration for others.

Besides this aspect of networking, several of the consultants expressed that they strive to connect with like-minded colleagues on Cloud, who share their interests: *“My own network, of course, consists of social-savvy people because that's the people I connect with, because I'm interested in what they are doing”* (Stijn). His way of building his network can be understood as a strategy for him to ensure that he can take part of updates and material that he himself can benefit from. This is a tendency we recognized for several of the other consultants as well. Next to this, there appeared to be an urge to help others and the majority of the consultants explained that they post, or would post, if they know that what they share will be valuable for others:

If I share something, I always share something that I know that at least a good amount of people will appreciate if they see it. I don't write random messages if I know that no one cares. (Adam)

This connects to our findings in the document analysis, where we indicated that Sky recommends employees to have a focused approach with a clear target audience when creating

their personal brand. Hence, being social on Cloud can create mutual benefits since it enables sharing of knowledge that is relevant for the individual consultants. In addition to that, several respondents argued that in turn, these mutual benefits can lead to benefits on corporate level since it improves the employees' competencies and thereby Sky's competitiveness. However, some of the consultants have experienced skepticism from others, directed towards knowledge sharing:

I also know other people, who say that 'no, we should not share this with others, because they are also going to do it and then we will relatively reduce our market value' to say it like that. So they really see it as a competition and I never looked at it from that perspective actually and I'm also not planning to do so. (Carl)

Carl's experience highlights that there are consultants who treat knowledge as a source of power, which ironically seem to reduce their opportunity to create an attractive personal digital brand and maintain their power position. We previously mentioned that being considered knowledgeable appears to be dependent on others and therefore, knowledge must be made visible to be powerful. The ideal to be knowledgeable seems to guide the consultants to a great extent in their actions in line with the second main theme, which we will turn to next.

4.3.2.2. Communicating expertise

The second theme, communicating expertise, is characterized by an explicit desire to be considered as an expert and thereby become influential. Some of the consultants described themselves as already having achieved this goal, through years of experience in the practice and/or their current position. On the other hand, one of these consultants pointed out that: *"Well, it [being active on social media] is part of my job. If you want to be regarded as an expert, you need to do that kind of stuff"* (Norbert). While Norbert seems to consider his expertise as already established, he believed that he must communicate it so that others can approve it and one way of doing that is to be actively engaged on Cloud as well as external social media. For another more senior consultant, being present online is not only a way to show expertise, but also to maintain it: *"This is my expertise area and now you know more about it than I do, you are not even working in my expertise area. So well, yes you have to stay up-to-date"* (Stijn). In addition to gaining useful information by online presence, Stijn described how he comments, shares information and support others as well in order to *"walk the talk"*. According to the younger consultants, that is what makes an expert since simply

being present online is not enough if you want to become influential. One of them even described online presence as something that is created first through activity: *“A status update is making my social presence on Cloud, so people see what I’m doing and what I’m good at”* (Otto). To these respondents, it seems like being knowledgeable becomes valuable first when others are aware of it:

You need to build up some credibility and I think the best way to do that is maybe posting frequently about what’s going on in your markets, so that’s how you show that you are on top of the latest trends in the industry. (Carl)

Several of the consultants promoted content sharing in front of *“feeling sharing”* as Adam referred to it since they believe it is more helpful for themselves and others in everyday work. Communicating expertise is similar to the first theme - being social - since the consultants who described their activities in line with this theme also emphasized value creation. Nevertheless, the individual benefit appears to be in focus. The contribution to others is a means to an end, namely to become recognized for one’s action and referred to as an expert:

I have uploaded it [his social online score] as a public file on Cloud, because I think it is one of the things that ‘wow, Otto, what a social presence, you’re sharing a lot’. I mean, everybody like people that helps other people. (Otto)

While Otto referred to a *“selfish benefit”* besides a *“practical benefit”* of actively sharing with others, another respondent explained that even though Cloud has a collaborative purpose, standing out from the crowd is encouraged by Sky:

I’m looking more at the greater goal, than what’s in it for me. Which is also the part of me that doesn’t fit in Sky, because Sky thinks that ‘if you want to be hired higher up in the organization, present yourself as if you did it on your own’. (Stijn)

This quote refers to individual achievements as a basis for personal digital branding and how there are various approaches towards the purpose and manner of sharing. Thereby, it relates to the third main theme, sharing success, that we will elaborate upon next.

4.3.2.3. Sharing success

Sharing success via Cloud is a less salient theme than being social and communicating expertise when it comes to how our respondents referred to their activities on Cloud. It is characterized by image work but it is also about contributing to the greater good. One respondent showed how success sharing can include giving appreciation to others in one's network:

I think if you want to say 'we really had a great time at the client, this went good and this is what we achieved, so congrats to the team', then I think Cloud is a very helpful way basically to share that. (Carl)

Carl continued to describe how sharing success is important since it enables replication by making the processes and knowledge behind the success visible, an advantage that is highlighted by other respondents as well. Zoe explained that she shares success when it can be useful for other people. However, she pointed out that meanwhile, it can be good for her visibility and referred to it as “*self-promotion*”, making known what she is capable of delivering. In contrast, sharing success “*is more about how can the organization learn and reuse what we have done here*” than his own promotion, according to Stijn. The common ground for all the respondents who have shared success internally at some point seems to be the idea that it should add value: “*I think when you make more progress on the content and you achieve results, then it's worth to really start sharing*” (Harry).

In sum, we could identify three main themes - being social, communicating expertise and sharing success - for how the consultants describe their activities on Cloud. However, throughout this section we have tried to show the variation within each theme by referring to how the consultants relate to them in several ways. Hence, there seems to be multiple ways for the consultants to create their personal digital brand on Cloud. In the next section we will treat our third and final research question by analyzing the consultants' perceptions regarding personal digital branding on Cloud.

4.3.3. Perceptions of personal digital branding

4.3.3.1. An important, natural and conscious process

At the end of the interviews, we asked the participants about their views on personal digital branding. By mentioning this concept only at a later stage, we could see whether they consider their previously discussed activities on the platform as personal digital branding and how they perceive others' digital brands. When asking consultants about personal branding, all agreed without exception that it is important, while a Senior Managing Consultant also pointed out the growth of its significance:

I think it's important, not only at Sky but in general. Because the things are changing, the world is changing, I think Sky is also changing, few years ago it was not important at all, but nowadays it's becoming that. (Zoe)

In addition to that, when asking about the definition of personal digital branding, interviewees believed that each and every activity and even non-activity matter. Most of them referred to personal branding as *“it is in everything you do. It's what you want to be known for”* (Otto). Another interviewee indicated that being digitally active can provide more insights for others: *“There will be always an image and maybe it's not a complete image because you don't share much, and you don't have a complete profile”* (Xavier). While being visible in the digital space contributes to one's reputation, consultants should be *“very conscious of what they put and where”*, according to Nicoline, and cautious how they project themselves, which is stressed by a new joiner at Sky:

Professionally, we all have our label, so our brand, and we should be really careful with that because it's coming with your reputation and obviously, you don't wanna come over as someone who is not capable of stuff. (Marta)

Similarly, a Managing Consultant came to the same conclusion; he believed that personal branding *“is something that needs to be, at least from my side, chosen very carefully, because sometimes you come across as, you know, too much”* (Adam). When we asked the interviewees whether they see personal digital branding as a natural or conscious process, the answers were very diverse. Most of them said that their activities are mainly natural, while they believed that some of their colleagues' activities were conscious and some were natural:

If I look at myself, then sometimes it comes natural, when I just come across something, that I think is relevant for others, then I just share it. Saying 'hey, this is what I stand for'. And on the other hand, consciously I know, if I look at my own side, that I need to blog more. But there are different priorities, and sometimes I just say 'now it's really time to put up another blog, just to keep the momentum alive a little bit, keep my website alive'. (Carl)

We also observed that the more experienced consultants tend to look at digital activities as “*something that you need to push and plan. It doesn't happen by itself*” (Norbert). Besides the planning aspect, two of them also indicated that personal digital branding is against their personality to some extent, and they also questioned the necessity of posting:

It's a conscious process and for others, it's very natural. So it's not in my character to, let's call it, brag about my successes. Because I think, well, that's why I do this work to create successes. So why do I have to tell everybody that this was a success? (Stijn)

When asking about the digitally not that active Sky consultants, most interviewees had rather neutral opinions. For instance, according to Norbert: “*[They are] digitally invisible. That's their choice. Everybody can choose to do that. I mean, it's not expected from them*” (Norbert). One of the consultants expressed his view in a more critical way:

I think they are a little bit like 'grey mice', how we call it sometimes in the Netherlands. So it is not really sure what they are doing, so they are a little bit left in the dark. You know, the way it is within Sky and I think in every organization, you just need to show yourself, be out there. (Carl)

4.3.3.2. Question of adding value

In line with the leaflet's suggestion, expertise should be made visible according to the majority of the consultants. As the digitally more active consultants often mentioned, by 'going digital' they feel that they can not only inspire, motivate others, but also influence them:

It gave me the feeling that there are people reading and my message matter. This is worth doing because somehow you are making an impact on people by sharing the knowledge and experience. (Marta)

From the business process' perspective, it seems like personal digital branding can be helpful, for instance, in the case of knowledge management and project staffing:

Sometimes you gonna cross people that are actively using Cloud. They are posting a lot and sharing a lot, they have their profiles filled out, they have their tags. Then you can really see the value of it and see it's really worth it. When I was searching for someone with a relevant skill. I just searched on tags for profiles and I came across some very interesting profiles and I contacted them, and they were exactly the persons that I needed. (Xavier)

In contrast with the views above, some interviewees expressed their opinions about the content being shared on collaboration platforms in a different light:

There is so much rubbish being shared, that's actually more annoying than adding value. This is the problem, when everybody is rushing to share. You don't know anymore who knows what, everybody is an expert suddenly. I mean rubbish is maybe exaggerated, although sometimes it could be rubbish, yes, but sometimes it could also be something, which is misleading... So I think the risk there is that you will be actually not really contributing to solve the problem. (Harry)

Besides judging the quality of the shared content and the intentions behind, few consultants differentiated the communication of executives from other employees' digital activities:

You get all these notifications in email, this drives me crazy by the way. They also manage to annoy people much more, than they manage to lead them towards what is desirable. I think primarily these people want to influence others, and they try to - let's say - steer others towards certain kind of behavior or thinking. (Adam)

In addition to that, another consultant also questioned the reliability of the messages coming from top management. He believes that these messages “*can give the impression sometimes that things are okay while they are not okay*” (Harry).

Finally, consultants argued that activities should be meaningful for others. As Nicoline suggested in a joking way: “*If you post something, it should be something... good, I don't just post things*”. While Adam criticized the nature of the posts on Cloud: “*I prefer and appreciate content sharing much more, than let's say feeling sharing, not the right word, but I hope you understand*”. He also emphasized that he is “*more of a content person, not so much a talker*”, which leads to our last part of the analysis.

4.3.3.3. Authenticity

Although we consciously avoided questions directly related to identity, several interviewees stressed the importance of being authentic and represent themselves. As Nicoline explained, her personal brand reflects back who she is. This view was shared by several other consultants as well:

It is really important for me that I can be myself because at the end, if you gonna act like you are someone else or something you are not, you are not gonna be sustainable in an environment.
(Marta)

It seems that being authentic is a beneficial long-term strategy, which according to three of the interviewees includes self-development. Therefore, personal brands can change over time: “*Of course, we grow, we develop luckily, of course, at a certain moment, you really need to rebrand yourself*” (Zoe). Besides being genuine in their digital communication, they also highlighted that their actions were in line with their feelings and impressions. As Zoe explained:

Although I'm not a person who will like just to like. I really need to like, I really need something to come from my heart. Like 'wow, that's really great, and I really like it' and then I will click. (Zoe)

Nevertheless, the ambiguous concept of authenticity was mentioned not only by the digitally more active interviewees, but also by the ones who have concerns regarding personal branding and a critical view on the more active ones:

I'm not really the posting kind of person, you know. I deal with that the way I can, but it is not necessarily by blogging or sending out big messages about how excited I am because many people can be unusually frequently excited. (Adam)

While defining his own path in the digital space, Adam also critiqued the grandiosity aspect of some of the posts on Cloud:

People keep showing how perfect their lives are. That makes me frustrated. Therefore, I avoid those. And then let's say, we see that there are certain problems to be solved, and everyone still talks about how great things are. That is also a frustrating thing because we are not addressing the problem, but we are trying to.... how to say... dream our way out of it. (Adam)

In contrast with his view, some others see personal branding as a beneficial marketing tool, which appears to be ambiguous:

It's your sales pitch, your unique selling point, your marketing and you know how marketing works, it doesn't tell the details – it paints a pretty picture. It works, it's advertising. Advertising works, but it's such a difficult thing to differentiate. What is advertising and what is reality and where do you draw the line? And what is too much and what is still okay? (Norbert)

When asking about the perceptions of others, most people stated that they do not see significant differences between the real life experience they have with the colleagues and what they have observed digitally. Even though, sometimes there might be a gap between expectations based on digital brand and experience in person: *“Sometimes you get disappointed. We were interviewing someone to get him on the project. Good portfolio of design until we spoke to the person... Well... ‘You talk a lot, but you don't say that much’ ”* (Stijn). Another consultant agrees with Stijn's critique, but in addition, he mentions that the strive for recognition in the worst case can lead to the diminishment of value creation:

I think people are many times more concerned or focused on building this personal brand more than really the content behind it. Yes for sure, if somebody will be active, will be sharing, will be talking, will be shouting, for sure this person is working on a personal brand. (Harry)

Several of the consultants expressed a dislike towards communicating expertise without any real substance in order to be seen by others, on Cloud as well as on external platforms. They argue that content should be the core of any online activity, communication for the sake of communicating makes them confused: *“When people are talking in very generic, vague and wise terms, then at some point I just... I'm just not able to follow anymore because I'm a content person“* (Adam). Or as another consultant expressed in an annoyed manner: *“I mean there is lots of talk, lots of sharing and discussion, but I find that there are very few people who, first of all, know what they are talking about or are really tackling the core of the problem”* (Harry).

To summarize the consultants' perceptions regarding personal digital branding on Cloud, several of them stated that a personal digital brand should be authentic, while some of them questioned the quality of others activity on Cloud. They believed that being present online can

create visibility, which can give the power to influence others but according to the consultants, there must be substance behind. However, one of them pointed to the difficulty in separating between what is branding and what is reality. In relation to this, several of them described personal digital branding as a natural process from their side. On the other hand, they argued that it should be managed in the right direction since others will have an impression of you regardless.

5. Discussion

Our initial research questions will now be revisited in contrast to our empirical findings and our literature background. We will address the questions one by one by first relating expectations regarding personal digital branding to the consultancy practice and its characteristics. Second, we describe Cloud as a hybrid of social media and knowledge management platforms and point out the implications this has for the creation of personal digital branding. Finally, we will highlight the perceptions related to personal digital branding in contrast to Alvesson's (2013) view on grandiosity. We believe it is important to highlight to the reader that since our three research questions are strongly interrelated, some points will appear under different sections of the discussion.

5.1. Expectations towards consultants

Based on the three methods we used, we can confirm Philbrick & Cleveland's (2015) as well as Vitberg's (2009) statement about the growing importance of personal digital branding, since all interviewees recognized and acted upon the pressure to 'go digital', even though their actions and opinions varied significantly. Based on our understanding, there might be several forces behind this trend. Therefore, we will discuss them on a macro level, then move to the context related points and finally detail the individual's perspective.

As Newell et al. (2009) highlight, consultancies main competitive advantage is knowledge and according to our observations, personal digital branding activities on Cloud are also built around this topic. As our netnography and interviews revealed, being seen as knowledgeable and competent is a background motive for many actions, since it is believed to create a positive image, but also competence trust (Newell et al., 2009). This trust should be created not only internally, but also towards the clients' who are already undertaking their digital journey. It seems like this is one of the main reasons why Sky has started to pay attention to the topic as well.

ICTs enable everyone to take part in the digital interactions (Vitberg, 2009), which is also the case within Sky. While it could be seen in a positive light, several interviewees expressed their concerns regarding the growing amount of 'experts', whose adding value is highly questionable, similarly to Lair, Sullivan & Cheney's (2005) viewpoint. Consultants are often described as 'gold-collar workers' (Kelley, 1990), who belong to a somewhat superior and

elite group thanks to the possession of leading-edge knowledge (Alvesson, 2004). Interestingly, we came to the conclusion that even though consultants sense the external pressure for representing themselves online, most of them do not follow the trend by frequent activities, and some of them even reject to do so. On the other hand, the some digitally active consultants seemingly try to benefit from their personal digital brand, while climbing the corporate ladder in the ‘up or out’ system.

The external changes are also impacting the way Sky looks at employees’ digital behavior. Although eminence has been developed as an internal expression for personal branding, it is perceived as a vague term by our respondents, which does not provide clear expectations towards the consultants. While Sarvary (1999) argues that KM is one of the most critical processes for consultancy firms, KM and personal branding seems to be marginal in contrast to short-term business performance within Sky, according to our interviewees. This aspect is also confirmed by the document analysis, where client engagements were emphasized as the main priority.

While there are no clear expectations towards consultants, by looking at the interviewees’ input and how they described their colleagues, we identified three groups based on their digital activities. The respondents pointed out that even though some executives provide a good example, most of them seem to struggle to fulfill the expectations to be more present online, especially externally. They are many times criticized because of their forced messages, which are often considered as misleading or manipulative. The other group contains younger consultants at Sky, who are relatively active, but more in a responsive manner. Their approach seems to be informal and concerned with news rather than in-depth knowledge, for example, they give ‘likes’ to an extent that it is described by a more senior consultant as a “liking euphoria”.

On the other hand, Peters (1997) argues that non-actions also matter in the creation of personal branding, this aspect somewhat divided our interviewees: some were neutral towards digitally not visible consultants and described it is a personal choice. On the other side, the active ones believed that the non-active were missing out and that they became ‘grey mice’, whose success remain invisible for others. In conclusion, it seems as if there are no generally accepted ways to create a personal digital brand in the context of our study. Although Peters (1997) acknowledges the challenges of creating a personal brand, he believes that it is an inevitable

process. This was supported by our interviewees' input as well. While, opinions are contrary, there seems to be no clear path that consultants should follow, and they seem to perceive the potential expectations in various ways.

Finally, Alvesson (2004) describes the consulting industry as highly image-sensitive, where consultants are trying to portray themselves in glamorous ways. This statement was slightly challenged by our findings focusing on the internal collaboration platform. Even though, the interviewees seemingly felt the pressure to create an image in real life as well as online, the majority of them rarely acted upon this pressure on the internal collaboration platform. In addition to that, none of them considered it as a priority compared to day-to-day activities, which we believe is strongly linked to the perceived lack of clear expectations from the company.

By looking at the expectations from different aspects, we came to the conclusion that the external pressure on 'going digital' appears to be more significant, than the internal one. Besides that, while consultants are often described as image-driven (Alvesson, 2004), in this case, they seem to have struggles or lack the interest to present themselves as 'gold-collar workers' (Kelley, 1990) on Cloud.

5.2. Creation through hybridization

While observing our respondents actions on Cloud during the netnography, we could also become familiar with the platform itself, such as its functions and appearance. Arguably, Sky's ICT is a hybridization of traditional ICTs, as described by Newell et al. (2009), and social media platforms, since it offers various features to its users as outlined in the analysis. While this results in a broad scope of potential applications, it blurs the line between two dimensions of life, which often are considered as separate, such as professional and private, work and fun. This seems to create some confusion, which is reflected in how the respondents understand their own as well as others' activities on the platform according to the interviews. Besides the lack of clear expectations, as previously mentioned, the document analysis also showed that corporate communication is still limited regarding how to act online, including internal as well as external platforms. Following, there seems to be an 'interpretative flexibility' (Orlikowski, 1992) among the consultants, as our netnography revealed multiple approaches towards the platform, ranging from informal news sharing to in-depth knowledge sharing.

The image sensitivity of consultancies (Alvesson, 2004) was arguably highlighted when our respondents described themselves as dependent on each other and working in the ‘people business’. For this reason, they emphasized the importance of visibility, externally as well as on Cloud. We argue that visibility is a separate concept to image, even though they are closely related to each other, in the way that visibility is not concerned with *how others perceive you* (Alvesson, 2004), but rather with the fact that others *have a perception* of you. According to the respondents, it is important to be visible and to be seen, thereby avoiding the other extreme – being a ‘black hole’ – as expressed by one of them. This visibility is especially challenging to create on digital platforms since anyone can claim the online space (Vitberg, 2009), which also can explain the initial signs of competition that we observed within Sky. In this sense, frequency seems to be the key according to the respondents, not only in terms of keeping others updated about oneself, as recommended by Rampersad (2008), but also in keeping oneself updated about others and what they are up to. As a hybrid, Cloud creates the conditions required for the previously mentioned activities. By frequent activities on Cloud, others can get an idea about the consultants’ interests together with their projected skills and competences, which we conclude is closely related to *how others perceive you*. By using Cassinger’s (2015) conceptualization of personal branding, as outlined in our literature review, we suggest that in the context of our research, personal digital branding is the bridge between visibility and image.

According to the consultants, mere visibility is not enough, as it should also add value, which is in line with how Johnstone (2015), as well as Peters (1997), describe the aim of personal branding. This is further confirmed by how several of our respondents relate to their actions on Cloud. Even though they describe their actions as if they would be driven by identity work, the respondents still seem to shape their actions with consideration for others, aiming to add value. While expressing it in more and less explicit ways, all consultants appear to share a desire to be considered as knowledgeable, or even experts, which arguably reflects the centrality of knowledge in consultancy firms (Newell et al., 2009). By this, the respondents hope to inspire others, make a positive change and thereby become influential. This confirms Alvesson’s (2004) way of describing knowledge as a source of power, but it also relates to the idea that this power is dependent on others, as they approve what is considered as knowledge. In relation to this, we argue that the consultants understand the social aspect as important for the creation of their personal digital brand, which is reinforced by their way of expressing themselves about their interactions on Cloud.

While personal digital brands are created on the individual level (Cassinger, 2015), it appears to be a process in which others are highly involved according to our findings. This confirms the influence of social relationships on personal digital branding, as defined in the literature review (Hearn, 2010; Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; Vitberg, 2009). Even though some of the respondents emphasized the benefits of a big network in general, we observed that they have a relatively small network on Cloud and that they tend to focus on connecting with the right people rather than having a great audience. To shed light on our respondents' ways to express themselves on this matter, we turned to Granovetter's (1973) theory on 'weak ties' and 'strong ties'. In contrast to previous research, he argues that a network of weak ties, meaning that the individual's connections do not know each other and can link the individual to new connections, is valuable since it creates channels for ideas, influence and information that cannot reach an individual who only has strong ties. A network of strong ties means that the individual's connections know each other and have connections, which the individual also knows (Granovetter, 1973).

Since every employee at Sky has a profile at Cloud from the day they start, the platform appears to provide the opportunity to establish an internal network of weak ties. Nevertheless, we understood through our interviews that several of our respondents connect with those they have worked, or are currently working with, on their projects. Additionally, connecting with like-minded was described as important by our respondents since it creates a feed with topics of interest and relevance, as described by several of them. Arguably, this creates networks of strong ties, which we believe can be related to the previously highlighted social aspect of knowledge and personal digital branding. According to Granovetter (1973), strong ties lead to fragmentation and we could observe some tendency towards this, for example, when one consultant described that she 'manages her garden' to have a network that reflects herself and her interests. However, Granovetter (1973) describes this fragmentation as something negative while it is our understanding, that in the case of Sky, it creates mutual benefits for the individuals and thereby, the company. Furthermore, our findings point to the possibility that a network of strong ties on Cloud increases the chances for the individual to be approved as knowledgeable and gain influence since activities are posted to colleagues who share the same fields of interest.

Nevertheless, all respondents expressed that, as a consultant, it is important to learn continuously and therefore, they strived to have a high-level idea of what is new. During the

netnography, we could observe that while some of the consultants have relatively small networks, they ask for information, help or advice for whom to contact regarding certain issues, by mentioning colleagues outside their network in their posts. By doing so, they also reach out to these colleagues' networks and thereby, create weak ties. Thus, according to our findings, we believe that both weak ties and strong ties are important for personal digital branding: the former since it facilitates knowledge exploration as underlined by Granovetter (1973) and the latter because it can lead to strengthening and approval of this knowledge.

In sum, both weak ties and strong ties appear to be important for personal digital branding on Cloud, which as a hybrid, provides a special context for personal digital branding giving importance to both visibility and image. In relation to this, we could identify some ambiguity in how the consultants perceive activities on the internal collaboration platform, which will be elaborated upon next.

5.3. Perceptions of grandiosity

By asking the interviewees about their views on others' activities on the platform, we could reveal some self-reflections as well. Altogether, this helps us to discuss our findings regarding our third research question, how consultants perceive personal digital branding on Cloud. When talking about others' strive to become 'experts' online by trying to portray themselves in the most attractive way, the interviewees seemed to recognize the grandiose aspect (Alvesson, 2013) of personal digital branding. We presume that grandiosity can be even more emphasized in the consultancy industry, where image, discourse and ambiguity due to intangible results are major elements (Alvesson, 2004). During the interviews, the consultants often judged others for 'misleading talk' and 'shouting' about successes, while in reality, not addressing the 'real' problem. One interviewee ironically pointed out that everyone is an expert on Cloud, and argued that there often is a lack of substance in others' activities.

In contrast to the opinions about 'wannabe experts', the consultants described themselves and their actions on Cloud in the opposite way. It seems that being authentic is the most important aspect when it comes to personal digital branding. Interestingly, while describing their activities as being authentic, they define authenticity in various ways, which points to the ambiguity of the concept itself (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2011). Arguably, next to the lack of clear expectations, this is one of the reasons why the consultants blame others' way of branding themselves. According to some of the more experienced consultants, the emphasis

given to personal digital branding is nothing but a ‘hype’, and they would prefer to focus on the professional level, by sharing content rather than feelings on Cloud. In contrast, more junior consultants seem to consider grandiosity as a natural part of the digital space, including Cloud as well. Arguably, the respondents’ ways of expressing themselves around this issue create a sense of ‘we’ and ‘them’, which is also reflected in their how the respondents chose to connect with like-minded colleagues who share relevant things and can reflect themselves in a good way. It seems that digitally everything - even relationships - are branded, which aligns with Hearn’s (2010) reflections on our contemporary world.

Nevertheless, we could identify one point that the respondents agreed upon; because of the grandiose aspect of personal digital branding, real-life interactions function as an important baseline. According to our interviewees’ stories, personal digital brands can create competence trust (Newell et al., 2009). They told us how their activities and appearance on Cloud have given them work-related benefits. However, Newell et al. (2009) describe competence trust as fragile and this was exemplified in one interviewee’s story about a hiring situation when he identified a significant gap between the applicant’s personal digital brand and real-life interaction. Hence, the grandiose aspect of personal digital brands can backfire, and we argue that this is the reason why the consultants emphasized the importance of alignment between personal brands and the perceived reality which according to them, is less grandiose. In this chapter, we have discussed our empirical material from a more theoretical perspective, aiming to place our main findings in the light of previous literature within our field. We will now proceed to the conclusion of our thesis.

6. Conclusion

The purpose with this thesis has been to create a better understanding of how consultants create and perceive personal digital branding on an internal collaboration platform, together with the different dimensions of expectations they experience regarding the practice. As our document analysis showed, Sky has taken recent initiatives towards the promotion of eminence, an internally applied concept for personal branding. One aspect that is emphasized as important in relation to eminence is to 'go digital', which aims at both external social media platforms and the internal collaboration platform - Cloud - which has been the focus of our research. Despite this, our respondents appeared to experience management's expectations regarding personal digital branding as rather vague and during our interviews, several of them expressed insecurity about how to - and why - they should make their presence on Cloud. This lack of clarity is further fuelled by the design of Cloud, which contains elements from both traditional ICTs and social media, for what reason we refer to it as a hybrid. Following, the line between professional and private has been blurred and through the netnography, we could reveal an 'interpretive flexibility' (Orlikowski, 1992) amongst our respondents, who use the platform for in-depth knowledge sharing but mostly informal news sharing. Hence, the consultants create their personal digital brands in multiple ways.

Nevertheless, we could identify visibility and value creation as recurring themes in the ways the consultants described their activities on Cloud. In our discussion, we argued that visibility is a separate concept to image since it is concerned with *being seen* rather than *being seen in a certain way*. However, we believe that visibility and image are linked to each other by personal digital branding. Since in this process, the consultants try to gain visibility on Cloud and impact their colleagues' perceptions of them. In addition to that, all of our respondents expressed a desire to be considered as knowledgeable - or even expert - since they believed it will make them influential, which we suggest shows the links between personal digital branding and knowledge, but also power and social relationships. To enhance our understanding of this interface, we discussed our findings from the netnography as well as the interviews in terms of 'strong ties' and 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973). We argue that the consultants seek to create 'weak ties' in order to develop their knowledge and 'strong ties' to strengthen and gain approval of it. In addition to that, it seems that the consultants are selective with whom they associate with on Cloud, which confirms Vitberg's (2009) argument that who you know and who knows you are important elements of your personal digital brand.

Furthermore, we could identify a critique directed towards others' actions on Cloud, creating a sense of 'we' and 'them' and underlining the grandiose aspect of personal digital branding. Interestingly, most of them described themselves as being authentic on Cloud, while they blamed some others' actions for being grandiose.

Our conclusion is that hybridization can be identified in several dimensions of our discussion. Cloud is a hybrid with features of knowledge management as well as social media, which seem to support the hybridization of visibility and image creation in the consultants' personal digital brands. At the same time, the consultants rely on hybrid networks, consisting of both 'weak ties' and 'strong ties', to develop and gain approval of these personal digital brands which are built around knowledge, with the aim to become influential. Finally, we observed that consultants prefer a combination of online and real-life interactions in order to overcome the perceived grandiose aspect of personal digital branding.

6.1. Theoretical contribution

During our research process, the interpretive paradigm has enabled us to gain insights into the complexity of personal digital branding. We realized at an early stage that while the concept has been explored in the context of social media, it is yet not developed in terms of internal collaboration platforms. In relation to this, our research findings can contribute to the closing of a research gap. Although we could identify multiple approaches and perceptions regarding personal digital branding amongst our respondents, we believe that previous theories on personal branding, highlighting some aspects of personal digital branding, have been confirmed at large. On the other hand, consultants are often described as image-driven (Alvesson, 2004), but we believe that our research gives a more nuanced understanding by also showing the struggles and concerns some consultants experienced in the creation of their personal digital brand. We shed light on this aspect of personal digital branding by contrasting it with the concept of grandiosity (Alvesson, 2012). Lastly, we believe that by exploring how hybridization takes place in several dimensions related to personal digital branding on the internal collaboration platform we contribute to the existing research literature.

6.2. Practical implications

Based on our research, we concluded that the concept of personal digital branding is highly ambiguous. Therefore, the creation of it might raise several questions and concerns. Even

though we believe that the context strongly influences the implementation and usage of ICTs as well as the creation of personal digital brands, we would like to provide some generic practical implications for the reader. Firstly, we would recommend companies that implement this type of platform to strive for finding a balance between the knowledge management and social media aspects in order to reach potential long-term benefits through knowledge exploitation as well as knowledge exploration, which can be achieved by the creation of weak ties. Second, to tackle the ambiguity of personal digital branding, clear expectations and guidance should be communicated towards employees to create more aligned understandings internally. In addition to that, the internal collaboration platforms should be promoted as an integrated part of work processes and evaluation as well.

6.3. Limitations and further research

During our study, we collected a rich amount of empirical findings and therefore, encountered several points, which would be interesting for further exploration. Firstly, from the consulting industry's perspective, it would be valuable to gain insights about the sensemaking of middle- and top-management regarding personal digital branding. Second, we conducted our analysis in a specific context, but we believe that by observing other companies, industries and potentially taking into account the aspect of various social identities (such as gender, age or national culture) additional insights about personal digital branding could be provided. Finally, we believe that hybrid platforms will become more commonly implemented within a wider range of companies in the near future, one example of this trend could be the recent announcement of Facebook at Work (Alba, 2015). Therefore, we hope that our thesis contributes to the meaning creation of researchers and practitioners alike, who will potentially explore personal digital branding within this context.

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Appendix A:

Preliminary interview guide

1. Introduction

- Introduce ourselves (First of all, thank you for letting us interview you. My name is Y, and this is X. We will keep discussion within the agreed timeframe, which will be approximately 45 minutes etc.)
- Briefly introduce the topic (Our research is about how consultants use and view the internal collaboration platform and we are interested in how you yourself are using the collaboration platform.)
- Inform on ethical points (To facilitate our research we need to record the interview, however, neither the recording nor any of the sensitive content will be linked to you or Sky and will not be shared in our thesis or within Sky. We will treat everything strictly confidential. We are happy to share our findings once we have written our thesis and we think that you could benefit from gaining insight to your own usage and how it is compared to others.)
- Any questions before we start?

2. Introducing questions

- Can you tell us a bit more about yourself and your role at Sky?
- How should we imagine you at work? (Interesting aspects: position, work location: office/outside office, way of working: individually/team, frequency of travelling, tenure at Sky)
- Which are the interactive platforms that you are active on as a professional? What do you use them for?
- How do you view Cloud in particular?

3. Questions on activity on platform

- What elements do you use on Cloud? For what purpose?
- Can you tell us about the last time you used the platform? (When, what and why?)
 - If not posting, how come not?
 - Did you expect that? How did it make you feel? Has it influenced how you use the platform?
- Is there something you would not do on the platform?
 - Do you consider your actions in relation to a certain group?

4. *Questions on why activity on platform and outcomes of activity*

- So you have told us that you do this and that on the platform. What motivates you to do so?
- To what extent do you consider yourself as socially active online? Why is that?
- Do you feel like being socially active online is expected of you?
 - By whom? What makes you feel like that?
- Can you give an example when the platform has been useful for you?
Ask for detailed narrative: what, why, one actions/others' actions etc.)

- What actually happened? Did you learn something? What was the result of learning that? In what way did it benefit you?

5. *Questions on viewing on others' activity*

- Can you give an example when someone else did on the platform made an impression on you? (Positive/negative)
- Have you seen any example of what you do not think belongs on the platform?
 - If not, can you think of anything?
- How do you view managers/executives on Cloud? Do you see them online? Do you think it is important?
- Whom do you see online? (Any specific group?)
- How do you feel about those who post a lot on the platform?
- How do you feel about those who does not post at all on the platform?
- If you compare yourself with your team regarding the platform, how do you see yourself?
- Have you noticed any difference in what your colleagues do on the platform and what they do in the office?

6. *Questions on the social statistics*

- Do you know your social score?
- Is your social score relevant? Why/why not?

7. *Ending questions*

- Do you see any connection between what we have talked about and personal branding?
- How relevant do you think it is for you to build a personal brand? Where is it relevant to do so?

8. End

- Answering remaining questions, discussing follow-up opportunities.

Appendix B: Digital dashboard of Cloud

