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Understanding identity in a digital reality

An explorative study of consumers' identity negotiations through images on Instagram

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Abstract

Title

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Course Code

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Keywords

Identity, Consumer, Self, Instagram, Personal branding, Digital Culture

Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to empirically explore the depth and complexity of how consumers negotiate their identity project in a digital culture through images with publicity as a dimension.

Methodology

As the researchers are taking an existential-phenomenological and a pragmatic approach, the focus lies on social actions and lived experiences on Instagram. This was conducted through in-depth semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation.

Theoretical perspective

We have looked at theories within the fields of Consumer Culture Theory where we bridge the literature of Symbolic interactionism, Postmodernism and Identity and Personal Branding in a Digital Culture.

Empirical findings

The empirical findings showed how consumers in a digital culture act as billboards and brand managers, since they strategically manage their personal brand to receive confirmation and publicity in forms of likes. The consumers strive to show themselves in a favourable way by sharing positive and interesting events. This has created fabricated images and consumers experience difficulties to find true identities on Instagram.

Conclusions

Among the participants, we could see a greater need to seek publicity value through their own personal brand both through temporary interactions and from friends. Consumers modify their identity by creating fabricated images on Instagram. This has led to a one-dimension where everyone seems to have perfect lives. Consequently, this brings anxiety, pressure and competition.

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1. Introduction

The line between reality and fantasy is becoming increasingly difficult to see

Baudrillard (1994)

Baudrillard (1994) argues that consumers are creating a parallel universe that is synthesised into one (un)reality and his concept of hyperreality has never been more expressive than what it is today (Klasson, 2017). Hyperreality is defined as *”the generation by models of a real without origin or reality, hyperreality is a representation, a sign, without an original referent”* (Baudrillard, 1994). A similar depiction can be put to the current development seen on social media platforms, such as Instagram or Facebook. We are witnessing how consumers conceive themselves as directors of their own identity work (Giddens, 1991) as they are encouraged to express and create stories by sharing photos of their everyday life (Moon & Sung’s, 2016). Consumers are even able to express an *improved* self-presentation online in comparison to physical contexts (Newman, 2015, Belk; 2013).

Consumer culture theorists have since long turned attention to the relationship between consumers’ identity projects and the influence of the marketplace. Arnould & Thompson (2005) argue that consumers are identity seekers in their identity projects, where Holt (2002) explains how brands have been acknowledged as the central element in how consumers express their identities. According to Maffesoli (1996), marketers are losing their control of consumers’ identity construction as they have started to create their own culture by searching for new social spaces and today’s digital reality makes this development even more complex (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). A new consumer culture has been created and adjusted for consumers to strive for personal sovereignty in their identity projects (Holt, 2002). Therefore, it exists a further need for marketers to understand how they can take advantage of the consumer’s identity creation online through cultural resources (Klasson, 2017). The complexity of consumers’ identity construction is not new within consumer culture research. However, due to an ever-increasing digitalization, the identity project has become even more complex and there is a need for further research on the dimension how consumers’ negotiate their identity as directors of self in a digital culture (Belk, 2013; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016).

Possessions work as symbolic resources to consumers' identity projects (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Belk (1988) introduced the seminal concept of the extended self, as consumers define who they are, depending on what they own due to the objects' symbolic meanings. The symbolic resources contribute to the interpretation of meaningfulness in consumers' everyday life consumption (Wattanasuwan, 2005). In a similar manner, Klasson (2017) argues that consumption has turned into a meaning-based practice, which is understood as symbolic meanings where *“consumers value the psychological, cultural, social and symbolic brand meanings because these meanings can help consumers create their self-identity and present this identity to others”* (Klasson, 2017, p. 6). However, digital technologies have radically changed consumers' behaviour, which enable increased opportunities for symbolic self-extensions online. A photograph used to be a picture that someone else took of you but today you are both the photographer and the objective (Belk, 2013). Schwartz (2010) has a similar view and argues for the development toward a publicity-oriented photography where one is *“documenting the self for the consumption of others”* (Schwartz, 2010, p 165). In addition, Arvidsson & Caliandro (2016) also argue that consumers at times strive to receive publicity value by using brands as mediums, rather than seeing brands as the focal element in communities when constructing their identity on social media. Thus, we are currently moving from *“you are what you own”* to *“you are what you share”* as publicity and the relationship between online and offline personas is central for consumers when defining themselves in the current digital era (Belk, 2014b; Belk, 2013).

Arvidsson & Caliandro (2016) focused on a specific brand public in their research and how consumers strive to receive publicity value through a brand on social media. The researchers express a further need to explore how consumers use different ways of temporary interaction on social media in their search for publicity and how this occurs in both brands and consumers practices (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). As Internet continuously ask *“Who you are and what do you share”*, consumers are investing a large amount of effort in their identity work online (Belk, 2013). It's in light of this development towards publicity we see an apparent change currently developing in consumers' identity projects. In effect, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of how consumers negotiate their identity project as directors of self through images with publicity as a dimension in today's digital world.

1.1 Research Purpose and Question

On the basis of the problem formulation, the purpose of this research is to empirically explore the depth and complexity of how consumers negotiate their identity projects in a digital culture through images, with publicity as a dimension. In particular, we would like to see how this takes place when consumers share images of their everyday life with others.

Due to time limitation, we chose to narrow the present study by only include the social media channel Instagram. Instagram is a platform that was launched 2010 and has approximately 600 million active users (Instagram, 2017). Facebook is still one of the world's most popular networking sites. However, Instagram appear more attractive than Facebook today among younger generations (Stern, 2013). The reason is that Instagram users easily can edit and share photos with their phone. Further, consumers receive validation through social interaction in forms of likes and comments from others. Instagram has become an easy and fast way to interact in a digital culture (Moon & Sung's, 2016).

In order to explore the depth and complexity of how consumers negotiate their images they share on Instagram, we specifically focused on how temporary interaction, such as likes, in their search for publicity and how well their created image on Instagram reflect their true identity. In addition, by using Instagram, we aimed to get a deeper understanding of how consumers' identity projects relate to publicity in forms of strategies and efforts. Therefore, we argue that Instagram is an exemplary, suitable context to understand how consumers construct their identity projects through sharing images with publicity as a dimension. This guides us to the research question:

How do consumers negotiate their identity project in a digital culture?

1.2 The Objectives

Since we are moving to “we are what we share” (Belk, 2014b), the aim of this research is to contribute to current consumer culture theory by explore the depth and complexity of how consumers negotiate their identity projects on Instagram as directors of self by sharing images of their everyday life with others, with consideration of the dimension publicity. In this aspect, it is relevant and interesting to make a study of regularly active Instagram users. In addition, we used an interactive and participatory method in a combination of interviews and visual

images. This enables both the participants as well as the researchers to achieve benefits since both parties learn from the participants' lived experiences (Easterby-Smith, 2015).

1.2.1 Theoretical contribution

We attempt to contribute to existing research regarding publicity in a digital era (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Schwarz, 2010) as consumers' express who they are by sharing images online (Belk, 2013). Therefore, we aim to explore how consumers' negotiate their identity on Instagram with consideration of the dimension publicity, since their identity projects are currently changing. We aim to contribute by receive a deeper understanding of how consumers use symbolic resources and temporary interactions on Instagram in their search for publicity through sharing photos. We have moved beyond the social reality as consumers' are extending their personal network with consumers they are not familiar with (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016).

1.2.2 Practical contribution

Concerning the practical contribution, we are arguing that they are twofold and divided into two tracks. Firstly, it is of great importance for marketers to understand consumers' online behaviour as they are spending increasing amount of time online. It exists a need for marketers to get increased knowledge about consumers' identity construction online by using cultural resources (Klasson, 2017). Further, as mentioned previously in the introduction, it is nowadays the consumers who are in focus rather than brands online. It exists a new consumer culture, which enables consumers to strive for personal sovereignty in their identity projects. Therefore, we attempt to contribute by explain further how consumers are constructing their identities online, which simplifies the process for marketers to adjust their content and actions in order to regain control. Secondly, the present study aims to make contribution regarding regularly active Instagram users with insights of their behaviour in constructing their identity online and their search for publicity.

2. Theory

In this section, we present our theoretical framework, which consist of theory regarding symbolic interactionism, postmodernism, identity and the idea of the self in a digital world and lastly personal branding in a digital world.

We aim to empirically explore the depth and complexity of how consumers negotiate their identity project in a digital culture through images with publicity as a dimension. This will be explored from a consumer culture perspective (CCT) as we aim to understand consumers' behaviour and actions since many different truths exists. Identities can be constructed through consumers' consumption of specific products (Easterby-Smith, 2015). This perspective is appropriate as it focuses on how consumers actively use symbolic meanings of products and create their identity through consumption (McCracken, 1988). In addition, Arnould and Thompson (2005) further describe CCT as the relationship between cultural meanings, consumer actions and the market place.

The identity construction have become more complex in a digital era, (Belk, 2014a; Belk, 2014b). Therefore we have looked at various theories to increase our understanding and answer our research question. We start the following section with theories within the field of CCT and will discuss symbolic interactionism, postmodernism, the idea of the self and personal branding in a digital world.

2.1 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is both a theoretical framework and a perspective in sociology that addresses how interactions between individuals enable creation of their identity (Blumer, 1969). According to Charon (2009), it exists both interaction socially and with oneself only. The consumers can be understood as social individuals' since there are ongoing social interactions with each other. Depending on whom individuals interact with, they will have different perspectives, which in turn determine how they interpret situations and accordingly act. Blumer (1969) explains how individuals act independently and monitor their contribution. Similar can be seen on social media, where individuals interact and share different content depending on whom they are targeting.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on interpretations of subjective viewpoints and how individuals make sense of the world in their own unique way (Blumer, 1969). He further argues it is central that individuals use significant symbols and language in their communication with others. Along with interaction, symbol and meaning, the self is important and seen as a reflexive phenomenon where individuals can evaluate and reflect their own identity. In a similar way, Giddens (1991) concept of reflexive identity refers to the negotiation in the performance of one's identity between who I am and who I want to be. He further argues that individuals choose what meanings to create and consumer identities are based on their reflexive understanding of their personal surroundings, which later can be seen in their identity. In addition, Blumer (1969) explains how reflexivity enables individuals to see themselves from the perspective of others and thereby to conceptualize themselves. Symbolic interactionism is central in a digital culture and Instagram gives opportunity for self-reflection when interacting with others.

The concept of the looking-glass was presented by Cooley (1956) and he explains how individuals think of their appearance in the eyes of others. They tend to see themselves through others reactions. As a consequence, actions might be adjusted and directed towards how one will be perceived. This is highly related to Goffman's (1959) concept of "impression management" and refers to how individuals monitor when people respond to them when presenting themselves and further that one most likely present their self in a favourable way. Impression management is related to self-presentation since consumers' attempt to influence the perception of their image. As Belk (2013) argues, communication online allows individuals to express an improved image and presentation compared to reality. This is highly relevant in today's social world since individuals constantly make efforts to manage their impressions. First impressions are often made through social media and not in a face-to-face context, which in turn have developed strategies how to virtually convey who they are and further appeal to multiple audiences (Carter & Fuller, 2016). Instagram as a platform, offer various tools to improve your first impressions and is therefore a suitable platform to use in this study when exploring how impression management and symbolic interactionism takes place in a digital culture.

Symbolic interactionism acts as a mediator of self-definition from consumption of products to the consumer. The actual function of the product, i.e. making calls and sending messages, is

no longer as important as the social meaning behind it, which refers to social status (Solomon, 1983). Belk (2014b) argues that you are no longer only *what you own* rather *what you share* and social media contribute to this development. Further, symbolic interaction takes place when consumers post events on Instagram, i.e. a party they attended or graduation. Therefore, symbolic interactionism and the social meaning can be seen as part when building one's identity.

Interactions with others are dependent on meanings and individuals collaborate with their self-presentation by choosing preferred images and strategies (Carter & Fuller, 2016). This may be an explanation for why individuals in a digital culture share content of their graduation paper, a new job or just an exercise. Images on Instagram represent symbolic meanings and products are no longer in central, rather the self and the presentation of the self in a combination of symbolic meanings that represent and create individuals' identities. Symbolic interactionism will therefore be helpful in this study in order to understand the meanings behind the chosen images they choose to share.

2.2 Postmodernism

Before the era of mass consumption, individuals used to identify themselves through their profession. Furthermore, increased globalization of products and digitalization have led to a social change and there are blurred lines between cultures (Klasson, 2017; 2). These have changed consumers' behaviour and the way they identify themselves as a consequence of the multiple choices that exists on today's market (Brown, 2016; Klasson, 2017).

In the end of 1970s, postmodernism shared a distrust of consumer culture. This referred to that distinction between symbolic and material was blurred, since actors experienced difficulties when orientating in the world (Sassatelli, 2007). Postmodernism were described as “*a move from the optimistic and progressive modern era towards a society with an apocalyptic world of anxiety and worry*” (Brown, 2006 as cited in Klasson, 2017; 2). Baudrillard (1998) further argues that consumption was no longer something positive to individuals. Mass consumption has turned reality into imitations and events without meanings. Consumers do not purchase specific objects because of a need, instead needs are replaced with a social order of values and classifications through meanings and signs. In addition, Baudrillard (1994) believes that the postmodern society creates a world of “hyperreality” which refers to “*consumers' creation of*

one parallel universe where both reality and imaginary are taped into on unreality” (Klasson, 2017; 2). The line between reality and fantasy has become increasingly blurred as consumers constantly reproduce interpretations in their identity work.

Featherstone (2007) argues that it is difficult to find truth since everything that is constructed depends on its context within postmodernism. Today we live in a consumer-oriented and media-centred world. According to Arnould & Thompson, (2015) and Elliott & Wattanasuwan (1998), consumption has turned into a meaning-based society, where consumers use symbolic meanings to help them shape their self-identity and express this to others. As a consequence, individuals experience difficulties to develop a real identity, as they rather create an identity that will suit how society looks like. Furthermore, Featherstone (2007) explains how individuals in a postmodern culture become more individualistic and eager to create their own identity and self-presentation. Social media takes a major role in this development and trigger the postmodern individual to create a need to express personal objectives and goals which in turn affects their identity projects. Instagram works in a similar way as individuals allow creating their imagined identity. Part of this study explores the complexity of how consumers negotiate their identity projects by not telling the truth on Instagram. In addition, deeper self- insight from the respondents on how the society has changed in a digital culture was discussed in the analysis, which is highly relevant within postmodernism.

2.3 Identity & the Idea of Self in a Digital World

Identity and the idea of self has been subject of research for a long time since it is very complex. The self is expressed in various ways. According to Rosenberg (1979), the self is an object of thought, which consists of consumers’ thoughts and feelings. However, in symbolic interactionism as we have discussed above, Charon (2009) rather refer self as an objects that depends on individuals’ actions. He further argues that identity construction and the self is a social object which arises from social interaction.

The search to develop a “self” and an identity is not something new but the need for it has increased due to the postmodern society. Giddens (1991) argues that consumption have caused lack of power and diversification, which negatively affect the self. A meaning is therefore a driver for the self when individuals try to construct and maintain their identity in

this changing world. Shankar et al., (2009) and Wattanasuwan (2005) further describes that consumption makes it possible for consumers to be empowered and face competition regarding most of their life choices, which further reflect their identity construction. Likewise as in symbolic interactionism, symbolic meaning and value are found in products, which enable individuals to create an identity and place themselves in society (Belk, 1988; Bourdieu, 1984; Goffman, 1959). McCracken (1988) highlight products ability to express cultural meanings and tell a story about whom they are and what they identify themselves with.

The idea of the *extended self*, refers to how consumers understand and express themselves through possessions of material products and the symbolic meanings they incorporate (Belk, 1988). The extended self was introduced by the sociologist, Russell Belk (1988). He argued that our possessions provide our past, present and where we are going through symbolic meanings in one's possessions (Klasson, 2017).

Due to technology development, possessions no longer consist of physical material. This can be seen in consumer changed behaviours that show implications for a new extended self in a digital world. Internet and the dematerialization, allows individuals to share e.g. music and photos with a broad audience (Belk, 2014a). Belk (2013) argues that an individual's digital possessions play a major role in their digital extended self and will change if we turn off our digital devices.

A digital culture contributes with new possibilities for consumers to represent themselves online where one can choose to be any persona they prefer. This have resulted in new constructions and definitions were we present the ideal of the self and programs as Photoshop allow us to adjust representations of the self (Bryant & Akterman, 2009; Kamel 2009). Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, are two great example of how individuals use the presentation of the self in a digital world. Social media make it possible to share more, as well as more broadly than ever before. As a result, friends know more than their closest families (Belk, 2013). In addition, the digital age have replaced family album with a more individual photo gallery where self-photography is very popular. This opens up for a greater self-reflection but some researchers have become concerned with too much activity regarding managing identity and reputation, they call it "oversharing" (Zimmer & Hoffman, 2011). Telling others what car you drive, what clothes you own or stock portfolio you have, would be

considered rude and naive before entering the digital era. In the digital age, it has become normal and acceptable to share photos of these kinds of things. Zhao (2005) argues that this not only result in an inward turn in self-consciously creating our identity, but also an outward in terms of a need to show the world who you are.

The phenomenon of sharing online argues Ridley (2012) have make individuals create and express a better “true self” than they could ever do in a face-to-face context. An individual's behaviour therefore tend to change character to the one they wish to be, as the “mask” or “costume” they make will create anonymity and safety. However, since they are in a mask, Belk (2013) explains how one must rely on feedback from others, for example from Facebook and we further look at ourselves and reflect what others think of you. This is highly related to Anthony Giddens (1991) concept of reflexive identity, which refers to the negotiation consumers’ face on the market between *who they are and who they want to be*. The reflexive identity is a never-ending negotiation and constantly in a changing process. Consumers’ identity construction is based on their reflexive understanding of their personal surroundings, which further then reflect their identity (Klasson, 2017).

The phenomenon of creating a better self-presentation compared to reality by make and remake your identity work could already be seen as far back as in Goffman’s (1959), “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”. According to Goffman (1959), personal interactions are based on performances and relationships between audiences and actors. In interaction with others, individuals attempt to create a certain image, which aim to highlight positive ideas of self and desired impressions. This performance is a role rather than real characteristics and Goffman (1959) explains how this kind of performance takes place only in the front stage of others. Back stage refers to when individuals stop performing and show their true self.

2.4 Personal Branding in a Digital World

Petruca (2016) argues that personal branding is the practice of how people see their careers and themselves as a brand. For decades, personal branding has been connected to companies thus, today almost anyone can say they have their own brand. It is a strategic process where individuals perform specific activities in order to get attention in the marketplace. It is further about taking control of how you would like others to perceive you, to strategically manage those perceptions so one can achieve goals, which are often related to career (Montoya, 2002).

A similar depiction can be seen in Montoya's book (2002), "The Personal Branding Phenomenon". To show the importance of branding, he explains that a bottle of e.g. Pepsi firstly occur as a distinctive product hence, through marketing efforts, turns into a symbolic meaning and associates with certain lifestyles and persons. These associations have nothing to do with the taste or even less the product, rather the emotions around the product become increasingly important. The brand provides an emotional connection and security with the buyer. Montoya (2002) suggest that personal branding does the same for people. He draws a similar situation with a journalist that practically can choose to write about anything he or she likes, however, if they want the best jobs, they have to think strategically and do efforts when they build their personal brand so it attracts the targeted people.

To go deeper into the definition of personal branding, Jim (2013) argues that this process starts when you are born. Once the parents have named their child, a new brand is made and the person must keep build and think as a real brand. He further defined personal branding in this context as "*The way individuals acknowledge their given name and create a personality around it, based on the different choices they make throughout their lives*" (Jim, 2013, p23). In other words, in the same way as a brand, an individual need to stay true to whom they are and what they want to be in order to sustain an authentic personal brand. Chen (2013) argues that everyone has their own power to find unique characteristics and market these in their own way as to stand out from the competition. The aim is often to grow a network and build a good reputation. Moreover, Shepherd (2005) agrees with Jim (2013) and explains that it is important that the personal brand reach consumers expectations.

A new era of personal branding has evolved due to the development of technologies and social media networking sites. These platforms allow individuals to have complete control of the social relationships and how they present themselves. Further they encourage for impression management and improved self-presentation (Lee et.al, 2015). Moon & Sung's (2016) study particular focus on the social media platform, Instagram. They argue that this site is an excellent example to investigate the new era of personal branding as individuals easier than ever, can present and share themselves through images. The study indicated that self-expression and social interaction were the two key factors when using Instagram. For this reason, Shepherd (2005) predicted the problem with offline and online performance in the construction of the personal brand. He is critical as individuals can communicate to a large

audience at the same time, the risk for inconsistency of their identity and personal branding is higher.

To strengthen this study's argument of using social media and specifically Instagram to see how consumers negotiate their identity in a digital culture, a deeper explanation of how personal branding occurs on social media is needed. Petruca (2016), expresses social media as a group of online communication channels whose purpose is to share content for e.g. interaction with others or within a community. As mentioned above, Instagram is one platform, which offers great opportunities to share and interact with a large audience. Further she argues that social media is the greatest way to construct your identity or tell friends and strangers about who you are and why you are unique. According to Willet (2016), the average person today spends around 118 minutes each day on social media. The time is spent on everything from sharing personal stories to "like" others' posts. Rather than creating a professional profile, users tend to upload more personal events (Johnson, 2017).

Johnson (2017) pays attention to the importance of personal branding in social media. In that sense, he focuses on the importance for young students to create a good brand for their future career. He expresses personal branding as *"the process by which an individual actively tries to manage others' impressions of their skills, abilities and experiences. Self-awareness and understanding one's strengths and weaknesses in order to effectively present the self is essential to building a personal brand"* (Johnson, 2017, p1). Furthermore, Blair (2015) focuses on the ability to create a narrative, in other words, stories. One's professional story may include work experience or skills and can be used both online and in a face-to-face job interview.

It already exists a large amount of research in how you maintain and create a good brand, but as many of our participants use strategies, it is necessary to mention a few important implications. Hyder (2014) explains that if an individual aims to build a good personal brand online, they should have a clear image of what they tend to project, what we share both offline and online must have a meaning as every shared status or picture contributes to the identity. In a similar view, Petruca (2016) explains how strategic moves will improve your brand. She speaks for the importance of consistency through all social media accounts where name, tone, colour etc. sets the image. In order to be seen and gain followers, one should upload content

every day and constantly be connected. As advanced strategies, as just been explained was not recognized among our respondents hence, indications towards these kind of strategies will be discussed in the empirical findings. In contrast to create a good reputational personal brand, researchers have started to take a very critical stand point where they express an overconsumption of social media. They even suggest that self-promotion content on social media contribute to a narcissistic view (Carpenter, 2012). American Psychiatric association (2013) define and relate narcissism to high levels of feeling unique, importance of oneself and further negative aspects such as envy and lack of empathy. Campbell et.al, (2002) in a similar way refers to it as a personality trait which reflect an unrealistic positive self-view. This is relevant on social media as well as in our study as it both encourages and gives space for more impression management and self-esteem (Moon et.al, 2016)

3. Methodology

The researchers are presenting and give a further explanation in this section how the present study has been conducted from a consumer culture perspective. First, the research philosophy is discussed, which contains of the researchers' ontological and epistemological reasoning. Second, the researchers argue for the chosen research strategy and thereafter the selected method for data collection, sampling and participant's selection and data analysis are discussed. Lastly, the study's ethical concerns and trustworthiness are being presented.

3.1 Research Philosophy

The aim of this research is to contribute to the current consumer culture theory by explore the depth and complexity of how consumers negotiate their identity projects on Instagram as directors of self by sharing images of their everyday life, with consideration of the dimension publicity. It is essential to discuss the philosophic standpoint. The social phenomenon is how consumers are creating and expressing their stories and lived experiences through pictures continuously, which is seen as socially produced. Further, consumers have their own subjective experiences that are based on their knowledge and background (Easterby-Smith, 2015). Therefore, it finds its roots in the philosophy of constructionism due to that consumers constantly are producing through social interplay and are always in a state of revision. The researchers also present a social reality that consists of constructions (Bryman & Bell, 2013). In order to receive a more accurate understanding of consumers' behaviours, we chose to further take consideration of the philosophy and methodology of existential-phenomenology. This is an appropriate choice and an alternative way to conceptualize the lived experience of the consumers (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989). Phenomenology is a philosophic approach where the researchers want to understand how the consumers are creating meaning in their world from their perspective. It is of great importance that the researchers' subjective views are not affecting the way to understand the consumers' world (Bryman & Bell, 2013).

Overall, this research will take stance of a pragmatic approach. Further, this implies that this study not will be too fixed to theories as well as to other frameworks that will shape the reality and the truth. On the other hand, it will neither just accept that individuals have created their own reality or truth out of nowhere (Easterby-Smith, 2015). Therefore, this study sees the importance of that meaningful structure have been developed from the consumers' lived experiences.

As the researchers are taking an existential-phenomenological and a pragmatic approach, the focus lies on that social action and lived experiences are meaningful for the social actors. This aligns with our research as the consumers' on Instagram are seen as social actors due to the communication and interaction that takes place virtually. The researchers attempt to comprehend these social actions and how it taps into their identity projects. Consequently, it is important to interpret a consumer's action from their perspective, which in turn makes us reject positivism (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Social constructionism means further that the societal reality is determined by people instead of external and objective factors. Instead of searching for fundamental laws and external causes that explain their behaviours, the attention is focused on what consumers' both collectively and individually feel, think and how they communicate and interact. To continue, consumers' are generating divergent situations of human actions rather than a direct response to external factors. This epistemology is an appropriate choice as it is connected to our purpose and research question of the study, since the consumers' who are sharing pictures and presenting their life on Instagram, have different lived experiences, backgrounds and perceives things differently (Easterby-Smith, 2015).

Moreover, the researchers believe that it exists several truths and interpretations from consumers' perspective. As a consequence, this worldview is linked to the relativist ontology due to the researchers believes that we need to illuminate different truths and realities that are constructed in the consumer's everyday life. Hence, the truth can vary from time to time as well as from place to place and this standpoint is therefore suitable as it creates an increased nuanced reality. However, since we have a constructionist epistemology it exists several issues related to this perspective. The researchers might experience problems due to cultural differences when interpreting the data, getting access to the correct information from the consumers since it might be sensitive information and there might be a risk of non-transferability (Easterby-Smith, 2015).

3.2 Research Strategy

The purpose of the present study is to contribute to the current consumer culture theory by explore the depth and complexity of how consumers negotiate their identity projects as directors of self by sharing images on Instagram. Further, the purpose of this research aligns

to the chosen philosophy, existential-phenomenology methodology and photo-elicitation method. Therefore the use of qualitative strategy is appropriate in order to answer the research question since it is socially constructed and we want to understand the consumers' identity projects on Instagram in depth. Additionally, qualitative research focuses on words and thick descriptions, which is suitable as consumers' shared images both contains of explicit and implicit information (Bryman & Bell, 2013). The researchers' ability to understand consumer behaviours increases since we are conducting an exploratory research and have this combination of methodology that encourage consumers' to talk openly. Further, we are conducting an inductive approach that achieves knowledge by collecting information, which is seen as a foundation for legal regularity (Bryman & Bell, 2013)

3.3 Data Collection Method

The interview was divided in two parts. The first part consisted of questions about Instagram and our participants' behaviour and reflections. The second part, which was the photo-elicitation, we asked if the participants could explain further their behaviour by showing us their Instagram pictures. Thereafter, we asked questions regarding the pictures and their behaviours and thoughts in a more visual way to increase the understanding and decrease misconceptions.

3.3.1 Semi-structured in-depth interviews

In order to collect an increased amount of contextual data and further insights it is suitable to adopt in a more or less extent an unstructured approach. As explained in the literature review, we are studying the consumer's behaviours, lived experiences, beliefs and talks and therefore this research will conduct qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews. As the aim was to get a deeper understanding how consumers negotiate their identity project by sharing pictures on Instagram, semi-structured interviews were the most suitable method since they have a tendency to allow a higher degree of confidentiality. In addition, this method technique is suitable in a consumer culture theory research such as ours, as it enables the participants to discuss their lived experiences and different behaviours openly (Easterby-Smith, 2015). Therefore, the objective of the study is to understand social behaviours and how consumers express their story and lived experience on Instagram. Since we are conducting a phenomenological methodology, Kvale (1983) is describing in Thompson et al (1989) that interviews is probably the most powerful technique in order to understand the participants'

experiences in depth. The aim of a phenomenological interview is to receive information of specific situations from the respondents' point of view and they mostly decide the direction of the content. The interviews were in a larger extent circular, as the intention of the interviews was to have a conversation, rather than asking questions and receiving an answer (Thompson et al, 1989). Further, saturation was the point where no more data will contribute with something new to the study (Walker, 2012).

Since the topic of this research can be perceived as sensitive, we wanted the participants to feel comfortable. Therefore we chose to conduct the interviews in a relaxed context that would encourage them to talk more freely and provide us with thicker description of their experiences. For instance, we conducted the interviews while sitting in the couch, school and offered them coffee or lunch depending on what was most suitable for them. Additionally, the interviewer also had a chance to recognize facial expressions or movement pattern that could be of use for creating secondary questions. However, one should be aware of that these non-verbal interpretations also could be miscalculations and therefore having an impact on the interviews (Easterby-Smith, 2015). According to Kvale (1983), which is cited in Thompson et al (1989), is arguing that participants must experience equality between the person who ask the questions and themselves. Reason being is the negative impact of power relations, if the participants experience that the interviewers have more knowledge than them, since they should be seen as experts. One way to handle this issue is by avoiding asking the question "why" as it might make the participants feel uncomfortable and getting a defensive approach. To be able to gain deeper and richer insights from certain questions, the researchers conducted the technique of laddering down. Laddering down is an approach to reach examples and illustrations of certain events (Easterby-Smith, 2015). The researchers aimed to focus on the participants' stories and the specific lived experience. We used terms from our participants when we formulated the follow-up questions, which enabled them to express a thicker description to our questions (Thompson et al, 1989).

The researchers created an interview guide that was based on a list of main questions that could be used in a flexible approach (see Appendix 1. Interview guide). We aimed to have short explanatory questions to avoid being dominated, which would encourage the participants to talk freely and longer (Thompson et al, 1989). In addition, the interview guide

was helpful in order to focus on the relevant topics and questions during the interviews (Easterby-Smith, 2015).

3.3.2 Photo-elicitation method

In order to create trustfulness, the researchers decided to use photo-elicitation through interactive and participatory method, as we wanted to decrease the uncertainty of missing information. Therefore, we decided to support the interviews with visual data in the second part of the semi-structured interviews, which involved open-ended questions and participants' reasoning behind the Instagram pictures in order to reveal deeper insights of their behaviours and experiences. The researchers and the participants had a shared understanding of what was going on and the photographs became a tool for comfortable discussions and conversations. We discussed content, effort and messages behind the pictures, which enabled conversation about social relationships (Easterby-Smith, 2015; Torre & Murphy, 2015). Photo-elicitation gave us an opportunity to see their reactions of the pictures and we got a deeper understanding of their values since we noticed that our participants' particular enjoyed this part of the interview and talked freely. In addition, this method enabled the participants to distinguish multiple realities that might be valuable insights about their behaviour for them as well. It provided us with an increased understanding of their view of the world and more trustworthy information about the lived experiences (Easterby-Smith, 2015; Torre & Murphy, 2015). This method is beneficial for our present study since this empowers participants, increase trust and perceives as an ethical practice. According to Steiger (2008, p. 35) cited in Epstein et al (2006), photo-elicitation is beneficial since *"in the conventional interview, the roles of the participants are clearer: I received the expected answers to my questions and ideas. In the photo-elicitation interview, the informants choose a series of photographs which best illustrated their feelings. In the conventional interview, I defined the topics. Here, photographs defined it"*. Therefore, the participants are seen as experts and the power relations between interviewer and interviewee are increasingly equal, which makes the present study more trustworthy. However, we have an additional data collection method since we have also semi-structured interviews and therefore the participants are not too empowered (Epstein et al, 2006).

3.4 Sampling Method

As the researchers want to explore the behaviour of average Instagram users, the purposive sampling method named *criterion sampling* has been used since participants were not chosen randomly. Further, they appear to possess greater knowledge about the phenomenon and are therefore able to provide thicker descriptions (Palinkas, 2015). We decided strategically from the beginning to choose participants from several specific criteria of importance that needed to be fulfilled (Easterby-Smith, 2015).

Criteria based on the research question

- The potential sampling participants were required to either be university students or have a university degree. It is of great importance that they are in some way homogeneous. The reason for this is that too different consumers might affect the result negatively (Easterby-Smith, 2015).
- The target group that has been chosen is consumers who are between 20-30 as they are a part of the postmodern society and have lived by themselves for a while. Further, they are familiar with their identity projects, both online and offline since they simultaneously are using social media, such as Instagram, in a higher extent. The reason for this and the criterion above is that Côtés (1997) claims that especially younger people and university students show tendencies to have a higher need to impress and please other consumers.
- The participants need to regularly post pictures on Instagram. By regularly, the researchers mean that they post pictures, approximately every week and have uploaded at least an amount of 200 pictures.
- The participants should have between 200-16 000 followers. The reason being is that the researchers attempt to capture the average Instagrammers and how they are presenting their everyday life. Therefore, the participants need to have not too few followers since they need to have some experience and learned social norms on Instagram. On the other side, the participants cannot have too many followers, as it would not represent an average consumer in this case.

- In order to increase diversity, the participants were required to be both men and women.
- The participants must have been active on Instagram for minimum 2 years. Reason being is that the researchers want the participants to have experience on Instagram for a longer time, since they have learned the norms and techniques on Instagram.

Thereafter, the researchers were able to choose consumers who did meet our requirements and reject consumers who did not completely meet our criteria. The criterion sampling might affect the study negatively if the researchers have limited knowledge about the chosen topic and in that way choose insufficient criterion. As the researchers do fulfil most of the criteria and have experience of using Instagram continuously, we reduced the limitations of our subjective judgements when choosing the criteria.

Pseudo-names	Age	Occupation	Location	Active member	Followers
Alex	24	<i>Student</i>	Lund	2012	2585
Lisa	23	<i>Student</i>	Lund	2013	786
Simon	28	<i>Graduated</i>	Helsingborg	2012	412
Catherine	25	<i>Graduated</i>	Lund	2012	446
Daniel	25	<i>Student</i>	Lund	2012	292
Amanda	25	<i>Student</i>	Lund	2011	380
Peter	22	<i>Student</i>	Lund	2012	15600
Anna	21	<i>Student</i>	Lund	2014	620
Sofie	27	<i>Graduated</i>	Stockholm	2011	407

Figure 1. Summary of the participants

3.5 Data analysis

Since the researchers want to understand the consumers' experiences, we are putting their perspectives and views in focus. Consequently, we are taking an emic approach since we base everything on consumers, such as their stories and images. Our interpretations of the empirical material were based on their terms and words rather than our own since we wanted to explain their lived experiences. Therefore, we wanted to avoid conceptually terms and maintain at the same level as the participants. Additionally, we treated the transcript as an autonomous body created by participants' lived experiences and reflections as we wanted to understand their meaning. It was suitable to analyse the data from a phenomenology approach and to include

hermeneutical circle. According to Bleicher (1980) cited in Thompson et al (1989), hermeneutical circle concerns part-to-whole interpretation that is further done in two steps. We started to analyse the interviews separately to understand the consumers' views and thoughts. First, we read the transcript as whole and thereafter related different paragraphs to the general content. The next step was to relate the different interviews to each other in order to find common patterns and thoughts. In our coding process we noticed some common patterns among the participants, which we referred as global themes. We tried to pay attention to similar patterns even though details were different. This improves the validation of the present research. Further, names of the themes are based on participants' discussions and talks, which can be found in the transcripts. When creating our themes, we were constantly looking at the transcript as we did not want to construct abstract themes, which would move away from our participants' experiences. Therefore, we can show immediately where we found the themes in our transcript.

3.6 Ethical consideration

As the researchers made in-depth phenomenological interviews, the ethical considerations are increasingly important to pay attention to. We took consideration of Bryman & Bells (2013) ethical principles in our research regarding information of the purpose-, informed consent-, confidentiality and anonymity and correct use of data requirements or give the participants false information about the research. Before we started each interview, the participants were informed about the purpose of the research and process of the interview. Thereafter, the researchers asked for permission for making the interview and the participants needed to sign a consent form. Further, we ensured them that their participation was voluntarily and we could further cancel the interview at any point. Additionally, we asked for permission to record the interviews but guaranteed them anonymity since we use pseudo-names in the research. During all the phases of the research process, the researches payed lots of attention to assure the participants confidentiality and to respect their privacy. Since the interviews contained of sensitive questions of their everyday life, it might have felt uncomfortable and an attempt to intrude their privacy. Therefore, we told them from the beginning that we knew it was a sensitive topic and they did not need to answer questions that they were not comfortable with. However, photo-elicitation is seen as an ethical research practices since it empowers participants and make them feel more comfortable (Torre & Murphy, 2015). The participants have further approved the usage of pictures we are using in the analysis. Additionally, we

made sure that no unauthorized could access the data and sensitive information for their safety (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989). To fulfil the correct use of data requirement, we are only going to use the data from the participants to the purpose of the present research (Bryman & Bell, 2013).

3.7 Trustworthiness of the research

Within qualitative research, such as our research, there is a debate on how to assure the quality of the research. Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that qualitative research does not rely on realism's perception of the world, which is having one single truth and objective view of the reality. As a result, quality cannot be assured through validity and reliability. Instead, Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that quality should be evaluated in the terms of authenticity and trustworthiness. Trustworthiness consists of four criteria, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, which all have a correspondence in qualitative research. We are going to discuss further how these criteria are related to our present research.

The first criteria credibility involves trustworthiness regarding data gathering. Since it might exist many descriptions of a social reality, the researchers must describe the social reality in a credible way. One technique to achieve this is through triangulation, which involves usage of more than one method or measures. We accomplished this requirement in the present research since we used both contextual and visual data in our semi-structured interviews. In order to strengthen the triangulation further, we used interactive and participatory method when we discussed photographs during the photo-elicitation. Additionally, photo-elicitation increases the trustworthiness of the present study since the participants controlled parts of the data collection. Further, the purpose for taking the pictures was not meant for the study and therefore, the pictures are seen as reliable (Epstein et al, 2006). Moreover, we recorded our interviews and transcribed everything, which increases the credibility of our interpretations further (Bryman & Bell).

Transferability refers to what extent the results of the interviews can be transferred to other settings and contexts (Bell & Bryman, 2013). Thus, it is important to thickly describe the reality of the contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This research will raise the transferability by describing closely the contexts of the interviews and its' implications.

In order to create a coherent account of all phases of the research process, this study had an auditing approach from the start. This in turn, would further increase the dependability of the study. While interviewing the participants, the researchers recorded the conversations and transcribed everything. As a result from the transcription, we produced a document that consisted of 70 pages of contextual data in order to avoid losing important information and to increase the dependability. Further, our supervisor has had a high influence in the auditing process as we had continuous contact and meetings.

Confirmability concerns that researchers cannot fulfil a complete objectivity. However, researchers must have acted in good faith and not consciously let our own values affect the research. Therefore, it was appropriate to have semi-structured interviews since the participants could talk more freely and controlled some of the data collection. According to Alvesson (2003), *“reflexivity for me stands for conscious and consistent efforts to view the subject matter from different angles and avoid or strongly a priori privilege a single, favoured angle and vocabulary”* (Alvesson, 2003 p.25). The reflection process was improved as the researchers could listen to the interviews over again (Alvesson, 2003). As Easterby-Smith (2015) claims, it is very important to reflect during the research process because it is difficult for the researcher to totally remain “outside” the subject. Further, we avoided affecting the interviews with our subjective views as the themes for the analysis were decided after having transcribed the interviews. This further made it possible to reflect on the findings and increased the confirmability of this study as the researchers tried to leave subjective views outside of the process.

4. Empirical findings & Analysis

In this chapter we present our empirical findings of our research. The findings will be analysed through consumers' lived experiences, thoughts and shared images. Our empirical material further shows how consumers negotiate their identity construction in a digital culture on Instagram.

4.1 We are all billboards in a digital world

Consumers have the opportunity to act in a similar way as billboards since they purposely chose to present best parts of their life. To make a good first impression is extremely important in order to create a favourable brand. Therefore, consumers can be seen as brand managers as they are strategically working on their personal brand on Instagram.

4.1.1 First impression matters

To make a good first impression was important to all participants. To achieve this, a large amount of work and effort could be seen behind consumers Instagram accounts. On the surface, one may not pay more attention than an overall impression from friends Instagram profile, however, as we explored deeper it is no coincidence that it appears a conscious mix of shared images with friends, exercise, studies, accomplishments or parties.

Daniel: *“I get the first impression of a person by any social media platform such as Facebook or Instagram. One can tell straight away that individuals put lot of effort in making a good first impression, no matter if they are online or offline. As you only can be available to few people at the same time, it is natural that you express your first impression on social media as you always have a large audience, any time you like“*

Daniel expressed the importance of first impression on social media. Carter & Fuller (2015) have similar views in a digital culture, since first impressions are often made through social media and not in a face-to-face context. To make a good first impression might not always be easy in a face-to-face interaction but Instagram allows you to constantly show the best presentable first impression. This is a great example of Goffman's (1959) concept of *Impression Management*, where individuals automatically present themselves in a favourable way. Therefore, shared images that are daily posted, have a fair amount of thought, strategy and effort behind them.

4.1.2 We are all brand managers

To make a good first impression on social media has in turn led to the development of personal branding and as Petruca (2016) argues, “*you are the brand*”. Consumers act as brand managers since they constantly work to create a favourable brand. The participants’ personal brands on Instagram turned out to target both their social and professional sphere. Within social spheres it seems important to share images that indicate a good life, as Chen (2013) explains, the aim is often to gain reputation or build a network around you. A good life on Instagram can refer to “I got my Bachelor degree”, “A selfie where you look as happy as never before”, “A picture of a gin and tonic on the beach “or just “A crazy party picture with all your friends”. All these images represent different symbolic meanings and as Blumer (1969) argues, humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings that things have for them.

Amanda: ”When I share photos, I constantly think of what my friends would like to see and by that I mean that I purposely share photos that indicates that I have a large social network. I believe it is very important that my followers on Instagram have that perception of me“.

As brand managers, you purposely pick out the best parts of your life to present on Instagram. Therefore, the images on Instagram mainly refer to events that represent a “good life”. This was a common pattern for all of our participants and is consistent with the competition and comparison that social media create between others within your social sphere on Instagram. However, Chen (2013) explains that in order to stand out from the competition on social media, consumers need to find unique characteristics. This was shown for few of our respondents whose profile had a unique artistic theme. They did not see Instagram as a platform to construct their identity, rather an opportunity to be directors in their artistic interest. According to McCracken (1998), products have the ability to convey cultural meanings and express stories about the considered participants. For instance, Alex and Peter explained that they could not change their artistic theme to a sport account on Instagram since it would be inconsistent with their identity.

Alex: “Individuals work with their personal brands all the time and they want to reach out to as many as possible. In this digital culture, we are almost forced to do this as social media have become a foundation in our daily lives”

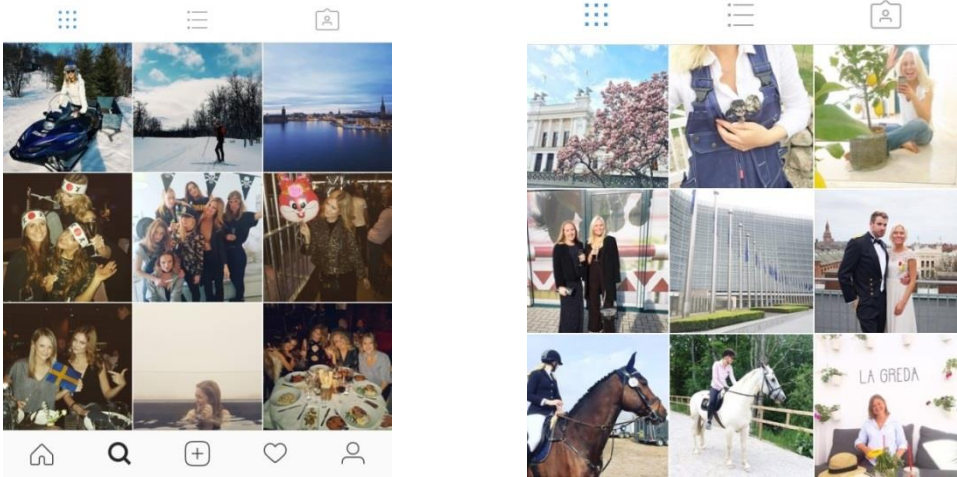
Instagram has a major impact on consumers in a digital culture and especially in the creation of one's personal brand. Montoya (2002) argues that personal branding has become a strategic process where consumers' aims to create appealing pictures that suits multiple audiences and perform specific activities in order to gain attention. He further argues that consumers take control in how they want to be perceived as by strategically manage their brand. This is further seen among our participants through images on Instagram.

4.1.3 Brand Managers' Digital Strategies

Strategies are highly important when marketing and building a good personal brand for all of our participants.

Peter: *“Sunday & Thursday evenings’ generate most likes. Especially Sundays as my friends often are hungover and check their Instagram feed all day while recovering. I often also take consideration to all of my followers and friends around the world. The time difference makes it hard but I have figured out that 16.00 in Sweden on Sundays is the ultimate time to post a picture. You have to think like an artist, you would never release an album at the same time as Beyoncé.”*

According to Peter, Thursdays and Sundays are the most popular days to upload content. The majority shared the same experience of having followers around the globe who they took in consideration when posting an image. Strategies also referred to having a mix of images that showed different characteristics and events. By using photo-elicitation, the respondents explained the importance of the nine latest images on their Instagram account, which revealed a lot of strategies. Two examples of this are shown below.



Sofie to the left aims to be perceived as an active, social consumer and want to convey that she has a happy life. To make her profile consistent, she uses strategies behind all images. To make her appear as a person with multiple interests and an active social life, she purposely do not share i.e. too many party images in a row. In other words, she strategically makes her life to appear perfect. Anna in a similar way aims to appear as a person who loves horse riding, has a large social and active life at University in Lund. These two examples can be applied to Cooley's (1956) concept of "the looking-glass". The empirical material shows how consumers' create an image and monitor their appearance and self-concept through the eyes of others. Further, Sofie and Lisa perform strategic moves to improve their brands and give a clear image of what they tend to project. This is consistent with Hyder (2014) and Petruca (2016) theories about building a good brand by using strategies. Moreover this is highly related to Shepherd's (2005) argument of the importance that brands manage to reach their expected reputation. As will be discussed later, Instagram make it easier than ever before to create an improved image that might not be consistent with the reality (Moon & Sung's, 2016). As Shepherd (2016) predicted, similar strategies and tendency to create a profile online that are inconsistent with their offline identity could be seen in the construction of their personal brand.

Alex: *"I do not share pictures of just my daily life – that is so Vanilla."*

Alex's citation speaks for the majority since sharing ordinary pictures appeared to be very unpopular. The most common content overall where travels, social events, selfies and accomplishments. What you share clearly had to be something positive, interesting or funny. Why they choose to not share images of their daily life was because it is uninteresting. It reflects the real life and reality in a larger extent, however, it did not appeared to be interesting to know what kind of coffee or dinner you were having last night. Another interesting aspect was captured by exploring what they avoid to share on Instagram.

Catherine: *"I have not and will never share anything negative online. Why would anyone think it is interesting if I have a bad day or if I am sick? Instagram and social media are made to share interesting and funny events that one can achieve confirmation from such as likes. It feels wrong if I "like" a post where one have posted that their baby is in hospital. "*

As Goffman (1959) argues, individuals attempt to create and highlight the positive ideas of self in interaction with others and this can be seen throughout this study. All participants avoided to share negative events in their identity construction on Instagram. In comparison to Goffman's (1958) concepts on front stage and back stage, Instagram tend to mainly show the front stage where consumers perform a role rather than their true self (Ridley, 2012).

During the photo-elicitation, the amount of effort behind different images was explored. Bright colours and exciting environments turned out to be the most common and important strategic factors when taking and sharing images. Additionally, good captions were also highlighted, which refer to the text connected to the picture.

Peter: "To capture the perfect picture just makes me even more curious to take more. When I travel, I always think of my Instagram account. The activities we do or places we visit are often having a specific purpose, which is to take a cool picture that I can share. Sometimes it just turns out naturally and I take a good picture without a lot of effort but mostly it takes hours to find a good spot or just get the right settings to the picture. As I see this as my hobby, I do not mind to put a great amount of work behind my images"

To give a wider picture of how much work, effort and strategies behind some pictures are made in building a favourable personal brand; two examples will be presented below.



The photo to the left was taken in Amsterdam and before taking it, Alex already in details, had made up his mind of how it should look like. What the picture cannot tell is that they went and bought oats and threw it all over their body to attract birds. Further they had to tell people to

not walk in the background and they took around 50 photos before they were happy. They dedicated around one hour when taking this image and both edited the pictures in Photoshop and Instagram before uploading it. To relate back to previous paragraphs, this photo is another example of how strategic moves are applied. Petruca (2015) speaks for a consistent look where the name, tone, colour etc. sets the image.

The second photo is taken in New York and there are lots of efforts behind it. Peter had a plan how the image would look like and went into four different shops to find the right chewing gum. They took around 50 pictures and only a few turned out to be good enough for their Instagram account. In addition, Peter spent around 30 minutes to come up with a good caption to the picture in order to receive more likes.

In brief, a good first impression is of great importance on Instagram and this has payed attention to your own personal brand. In a digital culture, all consumers seem to be brand managers as they strategically plan the images they are presenting, which aim to reflect their personal brand in a favourable way. We found interesting aspects where having a good reputational brand on Instagram could be a key to professional and social success in terms of career and love.

4.2. Instagram - A key to professional and social success

Consumers are aware of how their images they share on Instagram might affect their future career and are therefore careful with what they share. Instagram also gives space to social success as the channel today is used as a dating site.

4.2.1 Instagram as a CV

Lisa described her Instagram account as a cover letter, which aim to represent her best self and her accomplishments. Therefore she purposely chose not to include failures in her Instagram feed.

Lisa: *"I want to show the best side of myself and by that I refer to what I accomplish, who I am and what I prefer to do. My Instagram account have almost turned into a Cover Letter."*

Montoya (2002) explains in a similar way how a journalist can write about anything they like but in order to receive the best jobs, they have to strategically do efforts. A parallel argument can be seen on Instagram where the common denominator is to show the *best of your brand*. If an employee for some reason would check your Instagram account, you do not want to reveal anything negative that might affect your career. The participants both follow potential future companies whom they wish to work for and further strategically think of their appearance in order to be suitable for these companies. Majority also followed companies to gain information and insights, which reflected what jobs they had applied for. As they heard how employees sometimes check consumers' social media accounts before an interview, worry and anxiety in terms of how images may come to affect their future career opportunities existed. Peter explains how he was told before applying for a job, to make his account private, as his profile include artistic images with a sexual touch and was not consistent with the company's core-values. In order to not risk this job opportunity, he temporary made it private.

4.2.2 Instagram is the new Tinder

The empirical material further showed a strong connection to relationships, which refers to dating and a desire to receive likes from the one they fancy. As social media allows space for self-esteem and possibilities to both represent and modify your self-presentation (Bryant & Akterman, 2009; Kamel 2009), this have led to an enormous popularity within the dating industry. According to Peter, Tinder is a popular, superficial app that enables consumers to judge others by looking on few pictures. Similar can now been seen on Instagram since its popularity has increased within the gay community. Peter explains that he and his friends found similar parallels with their Instagram account compared to business cards. He further describes how he can understand what kind of person they are depending on their pictures.

Peter: *“Instagram works as a dating platform within the gay community. Many of my friends use Instagram as their “business card” to meet a partner. You no longer ask for someone’s number on the club, instead you ask if you can have their Instagram account.”*

Peter: *“Within the gay community you start to follow other accounts as soon as you find a good looking guy. That might be one of the reasons why I have this high amount of followers. Instagram has become similar to the dating app Tinder. Maybe this is more expressive abroad but you can send a private message to each other and this is how it starts. You can see each other’s pictures and then you know more how they are as a person.”*

The majority of the participants look at potential dates’ Instagram accounts before meeting them. They take consideration of what kind of content they share, amount of likes and followers. Thereafter, they know if they are a good person. Anna and Lisa describes below how their experiences about dating on Instagram.

Anna: *“I know that many of my friends look how many likes the potential date are receiving and are saying “he must be popular” if he is getting a lot.”*

Sofie: *“If I am dating someone, it is natural to check out that person’s Instagram account before. Sometimes I start to follow that person, which is a hint that you are interested. It does not have to be like that, but it might be a nice Swedish hint where you take the first contact. It is a small sign that you are interested of that person's life if you like his pictures. Even if it sounds really crazy, I do check out the persons who I date Instagram account regularly. I might receive daily habits since I check out if he starts to follow other girls and like their pictures. Maybe he dates other person’s as well and then I can feel quite bad.”*

Several of the participants explained that they sometimes post pictures to prove something for persons’ they date or to receive attention. Lisa describes her actions and secret motives behind the pictures.

Lisa: *“Sometimes I share pictures only for the purpose to my potential dates to see it and the picture I post can sometimes be a wakeup call, such as “pick me”. It is always a secret motive behind the pictures I post. I get especially happy if I get likes from special person’s, for example some specific guys. Then I can post a picture since I want to show someone how good looking I am and what they might miss.”*

Further, based on few of the respondents' lived experiences, they believe that Instagram has become the new tinder as it is an easy way to receive publicity and confirmation. Peter argues that this is especially popular within the gay community as they received lack of confirmation during growing up. This is highly connected to Arvidsson & Caliandro's (2016) and their arguments of consumers being identity and publicity seekers on social media. The key to social success, which in this study refer to finding a potential future partner, affect how consumers want to be perceived. In order to receive attention from potential partners, it is common within gay community to edit their bodies in Photoshop and Instagram, sometimes to the extent that they are not recognizable in reality.

Peter: *"It exists a huge pressure to always look good but I have a rule that never edit my body in Photoshop. What you see, is what you get. There are so many people who are editing their bodies. For instance, when I was at a gym abroad where it was many gays, a friend showed me an account and I thought, "good looking guy". Then he showed me that person in reality who was at the gym and he was totally different. People strive to look like the edited pictures and it is a shame, since reality should be much better than the pictures."*

This is highly related to Featherstone's (2007) arguments about the consequences of living in a consumer and media-oriented world today. As can be shown in our empirical material, consumers tend to have difficulties in developing a real identity as they prefer to create an identity that suit the society.

To conclude, we have given examples of consumers' awareness concerning their images and how it might affect their future career. Therefore the majority are restricted with what they share. Instagram could further be seen as the key to social success where the channel works as a dating site and give great opportunities to find a potential partner. We also find interesting aspects how consumers are socially interacting on Instagram. Much of social interaction exists through Instagram instead of interaction in a physical face-to-face context.

4.3 Let's have a coffee over Instagram

There are apparent changes in how consumers interact with friends, which can be shown throughout our study. One major reason was that consumers live in a globalized world and have friends living in different time zones. Instagram has become an excellent way to stay updated in their friends' lives. Instagram therefore almost works as a *Coffee Shop*, instead of call or message to catch up, it was slightly more common to check out your friends Instagram account. The interaction took place by giving a like or comment, which then indicated that you had seen the image or event one posted. To tag each other in funny pictures also turned out to be a popular way to interact.

Lisa explained that she uses Instagram to receive a pretty good picture of what happens in her friends lives. In that way, she can stay in contact with more people.

Lisa: "To me, Instagram is a great way to be social. Instead of calling my friends to catch up, I rather just screen their Instagram account and by that I usually get a pretty good picture of what have happened in their life lately"

Lisa: "Instagram is the first thing I check when I wake up"

Lisa expressed further how she looks through her Instagram feed immediately when she wakes up in the morning. All participants have had Instagram for many years and therefore have incorporated Instagram to be a part of their daily activities and habits. Main reason for creating an account was because "everyone else did it". The digital devices provide consumers with easy access and they can take photos and share it straight away. Further, provide space for quick response and confirmation in forms of likes and comments.

Anna: "Without social media and Instagram I would feel that I miss out a lot of social activities. I want to be connected all the time to check out if I have got any likes, or someone updated new photos or just if I am bored on the subway home."

As Charon (2009) argues, interaction occurs both socially and individually. The consumer must be understood as a social individual where there is an ongoing interaction with others. The need to stay connected and fear of missing out have dramatically increased between they

first started to use Instagram till how they feel today. Hence, being connected all the time turned out to have negative effects as well. The majority of the participants had at least once thought of deleting their account as Instagram took much time and gave them pressure. However, no one had actually deleted their account. The dominant factor was because they were scared to lose their social network and miss events. Further, Instagram is discussed among friends in physical face-to-face context and they might then not be able to contribute to the conversation. Alex explains an excellent example of how this phenomenon takes place in reality.

Alex: *"One guy in my class is very against social media and decided to refuse it by deleting Facebook and Instagram. Unfortunately he started to miss out of parties and other funny events. Further as most conversations involving studies takes place on messenger, he missed out of important information and found it hard to interact with his classmates."*

Consumers hang out on Instagram in a similar way as having a coffee in a physical context. There is an apparent change in how consumers interact with others in a digital culture and social interaction takes place through messages and images. We further see how consumers wake up with Instagram and constantly are connected in a digital culture. In addition, resistance towards this development may come to limit your social network. Social interaction can further exist of giving and taking in form of likes and comments. We have noticed that likes are central for consumers in interaction with others on Instagram. All participants mentioned how they give "support likes" to their closest friends' pictures even though they do not fancy the image. Reason being is that likes have become a validation of consumers' lives.

4.4 Life is measured in likes

From the empirical material, likes are central and a form of validation of whom you are as a person. The participants have learned what kind of pictures that generates most likes and majority described how they set a limit of likes that represent a good picture.

As mentioned in the previous theme, several of the participants expressed how they looked on potential dates' Instagram accounts to see what kind of person they are. Likes were one factor

that consumers took in consideration of and Amanda describes below how Instagram has become a way to understand what kind of person you are depending of the amount of likes.

Amanda: "People judge on social media and likes is a good measure of how good one's picture is and furthers also a measure if you are a good person. It sounds crazy, if you think about it, how can likes say anything about how you are as a person or what you have accomplished in life?"

The self is clearly a central part in most of our participants' images. It shows what you do, how you look and how you are as a person. Schwartz (2010) expresses a similar view, where consumers are moving to a publicity-oriented photography. In other words it is very personal and even though majority said they would not care if they did not receive any likes, it later showed how they said against themselves. In contradiction, they explained how they often keep an eye on the phone when posting an image to see how many likes it receives. They explained that they got worried when not receiving large amount of likes on personal content, such as selfies. American Psychiatric association (2013) and Campbell et.al (2002) relate this phenomenon to narcissism as consumers becomes more egocentric in their search for confirmation. Consequently, as our participants explain, social media brings negative aspects such as comparison and an unrealistic positive self-view.

Sofie: "If I have uploaded a photo or video, then I always keep my phone close and every time I receive a notification, in other words a like, I get happy. That day I probably open my Instagram account around 20 times."

Sofie described how often she counted the amount of likes she receives. Further, it has shown that most consumers having an Instagram account are feeling that receiving acceptance and confirmation are essential parts of the social network. Likes have become a measurement of how successful a consumer's life is. Therefore our participants described the importance to give "support likes" to their friends. Anna is describing her point of view regarding support likes below.

Anna: *“I give a support like to my closest friends on Instagram as I have a relation to them and even though I do not like the picture, I still always give my support like. I give a lot of likes as it makes people happy.”*

To seek publicity value through social media was acknowledged by Arvidsson & Caliandro (2016). This is clearly increasing and Instagram is shown to be an excellent way of receiving publicity, confirmation and status in fast pace in forms of likes and comments from a large audience. Lisa explains that she can post an old beautiful picture if she is having a bad day.

Lisa: *“If I have a really bad day, it can be anything from feeling ugly or lack of attention from the guy I am interested in, then I usually upload a beautiful selfie or travel picture as I know it will receive a lot of likes. The more likes, the happier I get and it boost my self-confidence for sure.”*

As Rosenberg (1979) argues, the self is defined as a consumer’s thoughts and feelings that refer to him or herself as an object of thought. The self on social media and Instagram can have many different object of thought thus confirmation in terms of publicity and wanted to be seen is a common object for all participants (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016).

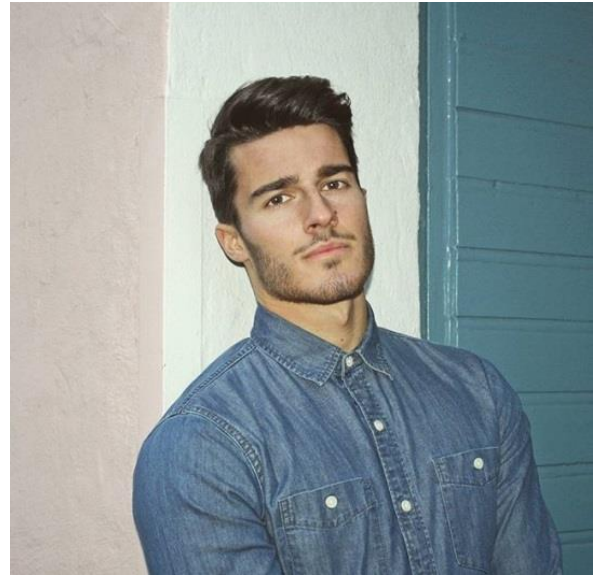
Simon: *“It would be wrong or rather naive if I would say I only share images for my own sake. Instagram encourage you to give a message to your surroundings or just express, hello look at me, I also exist. I want my friends to know what I am up to and stay updated.”*

4.4.1 Above 200 likes means it is a good picture

According to Charon (2009), the construction of the self, arise from social interaction and similar is shown among our participants as they admit that they most likely would not upload any images if the “like” button did not exists. By sharing a photo, they interact with other members and the amount of likes measure one's performance. Peter describes below the importance of likes and how this measures of how successful his pictures are.

Peter: *“I have different limits on my Instagram account. I know that if I receive over 1000 likes, then I know it is an okey picture; however 2000 means it is a really good picture and*

that makes me really happy. As I see myself as an artist while directing my images, likes is rather confirmation that I did a good job with the picture than confirmation for my identity.“



These two pictures got unusual high amount of likes. Peter to the left are used to receive a lot of likes as he got a wide range of followers and know what kind of pictures that usually his audience like. However, it was less effort behind this picture as it occurred spontaneous. He became surprisingly satisfied with the high amount of likes. Alex explained how happy he was for the high amounts of likes on the picture to the right. He was surprised as he normally does not get that many likes on selfies.

All participants answered that likes makes them happy and they almost give a “kick”. It boosts your self confidence in a way that was not possible before the digital age. In a similar comparison, Zhao (2005) explains that presenting yourself online is not only for your own identity, thus also to fill the desire to show the world who you are. There were shared opinions about how and what “likes” means to them, however as Belk (1988), Bourdieu (1984) and Goffman (1959) explains, they all agreed that consumers search for meanings when constructing their identity on Instagram through images. Nevertheless, our participants did not see the meaning achieved through just consumption, rather through their self and the events they experience or selfies they take. Further as Arvidsson & Caliandro (2016) argues, that consumers seek publicity value through brands, our participants seem to represent a further step where consumers seek publicity value through their own directed brand.

To summarize, likes are central for consumers when they share pictures on Instagram. Life is measured in likes and is a form of validation of who you are as a person. Peter and Alex explained how consumers have learned what kind of pictures that receive more or less likes. However, in the search for likes, these kinds of pictures do not necessarily reflect consumers' true identity. All of the consumers are perceived as constantly happy as they are sharing only positive content. Therefore, it seems like they are always in a euphoric state.

4.5 On Instagram we are constantly in a euphoric state

The empirical material from our interviews and photo-elicitations showed that the participants thought that their identity outside Instagram did not in a large extent reflected their images. They are continuously creating a positive image online by only expressing parts of their life as how they wish to be perceived. Therefore as previously mentioned, everyone experienced that majority of all consumers on Instagram have perfect lives, including themselves. It seems to be a one-dimension on Instagram since everyone is constantly happy and in a euphoric state, which creates misleading images. At some points, the participants shared images of certain events that were created only for the purpose to post on Instagram.

The offline identity and online image on Instagram have become a part of the participants and therefore they experience a need to be consistent in their positive pictures and flow on Instagram. The empirical material showed that majority are judgmental when they look on other accounts and the first nine pictures are extremely important as they are expressing who they are as a person. They will therefore continue to post pictures of their perfect life on Instagram in order to stay consistent. Anna explained that she had a tough period in her offline life, which did not reflect her pictures as she still posted positive pictures.

Anna: "Everyone might believe that I have the perfect life here (Instagram) even though it is not the truth. Honestly, I have had a tough period and I still feel quite bad. Therefore, I have not posted any pictures of me or specially my face in a long time where I actually am smiling. This can be interpreted in one way as the focus of the pictures has not been on me personally, but rather focus on accomplishments, work, horses or events such as proms. Now when I reflect upon this I can actually see a difference in my pictures when I am happy and sad."

Anna: “The positive about not posting negative pictures is that you are not receiving unpleasant questions, such as oh I saw what you posted on Instagram. Then it is much better to post pictures of something happy instead, such as a sun. No one wants to expose themselves actively like that. If someone had been openly, I would think it was weird since no one wants to be perceived as something negative. It is the opposite of the standard on Instagram.”

Despite Anna’s tough period, she still posts positive pictures and presents her life as perfect. The digital culture contributes with extended opportunities with self-representation online as they can take any persona they wish to prefer. Consequently, this has created new constructions and definitions where we present the ideal of the self (Bryant & Akterman, 2009; Kamel 2009). The majority of the participants were aware of that content they expressed on Instagram only showed the positive part of who they truly are. This is related to Belk’s (2014b) concept of the digital extended self *you are what you share* as all participants shared only positive pictures since they wanted to be perceived as interesting. The majority further believed that they expressed a relatively accurate identity on Instagram. However, only the positive side of them was accurate, as they did not share anything ordinary or uninteresting that rather reflected the whole reality.

Several noticed that their offline and online reality were getting increasingly blurred. Despite the fact that the majority of the participants knew that they posted mainly positive pictures, it was still a part of their identity. This can be compared to *hyperreality*, which refers to consumers’ creation of a parallel universe where reality and imagination has become blurred, since they are creating constantly interpretations when they work with their identity (Baudrillard, 1994; Klasson, 2017). It was obvious from their point of view that you cannot show the whole personality on Instagram since it was not appreciated to post negative or ordinary pictures. As mentioned in the previous theme, a consumer’s identity on Instagram is measured through social interaction and it is of great importance to show these interactions to others. The majority wanted to be perceived as happy, active and having a social life since it is important to show the best part of their lives. Sofie describes that she never shares negative pictures as her true identity is only expressed in front of her “real friends”.

Sofie: "I want to be perceived as I currently do on Instagram since I am social, outgoing and a sporty girl who loves to meet new people and enjoy traveling. I would definitely say that it reflects me pretty well in reality as well. On the other side, it is not the whole me. You need to get to know me to truly know who I am as a person. The positive and great side of me can everyone see on Instagram. However, the tragic or sad part of me cannot be seen on Instagram since it is not fun to share something that is not positive or that does not affect someone positively. I would never share something when I am sad because I will just let my real friends know the truth. I would not exploit that to the whole world."

4.5.1 My fabricated image

All participants expressed that their behaviour had changed since they started to use Instagram. The majority experienced greatest differences in what type of content they share and how they edit the pictures. During the first years, they posted ordinary and uninterested pictures, which represented their true life in a larger extent. After some time, they spent more effort on pictures as they felt they had to add some kind of meaning, i.e. accomplishments. This is also related to social interaction since they are more concerned about the meaning that is created from the picture rather than the functionality. The self and the presentation of self are in focus as it creates consumers' identities (Carter & Fuller, 2016). All of them have learned the norms on Instagram, such as what kind of pictures that are socially accepted to post and pictures that receives most likes, which has created fabricated images. Sofie expressed that in the past she posted pictures that more reflected her true reality and identity. She has learned what type of content that engage people and how to work on her personal brand into a positive fabricated image in her search for confirmability.

Sofie: "In the beginning, I could post literally everything as I did not understand what Instagram was. But now the pictures must look really nice, hot and engage people. You cannot post pictures only on your new shoes or something similar. Instagram has become a portal to express how you look like and therefore your personal brand is increasingly important, compared to the beginning."

There were also discussions about what kind of fabricated images they were creating and how they wanted to be perceived. This could be seen as Giddens (1991) concept of reflexive identity, which refers to the negotiation between who they are and who they want to be. In a

similar way do our participants use Instagram as a diary to reflect upon their identity through looking back at images they shared during the years. This clearly showed how their behaviour on Instagram has changed. Further, this argument can again be strengthened by Cooley's (1956) concept of the "looking-glass", as he claims that consumers value themselves depending on reactions of others. They have for example noticed that pictures from their perfect lives such as social events and accomplishments, have received positive reactions from others. In a digital era, this type of symbolic interactionism is of great importance since it allows consumers to self-reflect when they communicate with other consumers. Simon describes his positive fabricated image as following.

Simon: "I want to be perceived as adventurous, even though I am not completely there in reality, and I want my pictures to create enjoyable feeling for my followers. I feel a responsibility for my followers when you are taking their time and I potentially lose trust if I post a boring picture. I think the same, if someone only posts boring pictures I stop following that person."



Simon aim to be perceived as adventurous since it is symbolized with something positive, even though it does not reflect him completely in reality. Featherstone (2007), describe this as a result of the postmodern culture as consumers have become more individualistic and have a need to create their identity and show their personal goals and achievements to others. The picture above is one of Simon's accomplishments as he completed the skiing competition Vasaloppet. Further, Anna showed us the picture of herself below when she had fixed her hair and wore a beautiful dress, which attained many likes. She appreciated the likes even though it did not represent her true self.



Anna: "I feel more comfortable in an overall rather than a dress. If I would post a picture of myself in an overall, which is my "true self", I would have reacted if I just would get 20 likes. Then I would think, oh so you prefer when I have fixed my hair and wore a dress. It would be a shame if I got less likes when it actually is the true me, but I do not really care about the likes. But it is obvious what kind of pictures that people appreciate."

As Anna expressed, she did not really care about the likes, however she cared enough to avoid posting pictures that reflected her real true self. It was common with similar contradictions when it came to their true identity and the positive fabricated image they wanted to create and present on Instagram. This can be related Belk (2013) as consumers have tendencies to change who they are to who they want to be perceived as, since they are creating a "mask" that will create anonymity and safety. Belk (2013) explains that they must rely on feedback from other consumers since they are having a mask, in order to understand others perception of them.

4.5.2 Difficult to find truth in a digital culture

The majority of the participants are creating fabricated images on Instagram. Therefore, they are aware that everyone is doing the same and how difficult it is to find true identities on Instagram.

Alex and Peter explained further how nothing they had posted on Instagram was true. They have a different purpose compared to the others as they posted more artistic and creative

pictures to reach out to more followers and potential partners in the gay community on Instagram. Alex showed us a picture where he smoked in an artistic way wearing a specific hat, which was something he never would do in reality. Further he showed a picture he posted of himself meditating on a carpet in an oriental surrounding. He visited the store Ikea in Sweden, however, it looked like he was in India.



Everyone seems to beautify their lives and it is hard to find true identities on Instagram. Paradoxically, everyone still wants to be perceived as authentic even though they post pictures that clearly did not reflect their true identity. The majority share pictures that they know are socially acceptable and this assures that they will receive attention and confirmation. Similarly, Sofie and Lisa expressed how nothing is true on Instagram thus; they have learnt to accept this behaviour.

Sofie: "There is no truth on Instagram. Of course people beautify the world but how fun is it to see me as unhappy and sad? I will save that to my true friends. You want to share something that makes people engaged, smiling and makes them feel like "oh, she is nice and I want to spend time with her again."

Lisa: "Everything is not true. It is deceptive but personally I feel like I do not really have to unveil my whole life for people I do not know that well. I don't think they have something to contribute with when I am sad. However, since I am doing the same thing and post misleading pictures, I think it is fine if others do the same. It will never come to that personal level like for instance when you really know each other."

Sofie and Lisa's discussions about no truth are again closely linked to Goffman's theory about the front and back stage. Interestingly, the majority of our participants expressed that some pictures are too private to share and only the closest friends will know how they truly are feeling. Several had private accounts and their followers could be seen as friends, however, they were still reluctant to post realistic pictures that actually reflected them as individuals. They did not show their true backstage, as they are trying to create an image that would resemble a true backstage, even though it was a directed frontstage. Consequently, majority of the participants expressed modified lives, which would be more suitable to match their image. There are programs such as Photoshop and participants are using filters on Instagram, which enables them to selecting, accessorizing and modifying the representation of self (Bryant & Akterman, 2009; Kamel 2009). They experienced the back stage as too vulnerable to present openly since they do not want to be seen as uninterested. Further, it was important to stay consistent to the positive image that they have created on Instagram rather than to construct something that would be more authentic in reality. The reason for this behaviour is according to Simon "survival of the fittest" as people want to express strength.

Simon: "I think that it is a part of the biology, the survival of the fittest, since we want to show our strength and those times someone post something when they are weak is often another way to show strength. For instance, people who are really sick but still are fighting or girls who posts "before and after" pictures after fighting anorexia, they are actually showing strength. It is very rarely someone post a picture that would put you in a bad light and it is because we want to convey an improved image of ourselves, especially the ones who does not know us that well."

Consumers seem to have a clear understanding that identities on Instagram not reflect reality. They expressed how this sometimes could be annoying thus, they had similar behaviour. This is described by Simon below.

Simon: "I have reflected of other people's perfect life on Instagram. Especially, since I do come from some relationship issues lately. I can sometimes be tired of love pictures whole the time. In general, I think it is silly when people must convey to the world how good their relationships are, like their own love is not enough. It becomes like compensation when you actually have issues in the relationship or when you have a big fight and then you post a nice

picture. It is also obvious with people who just broke up and trying to convey the new fresh person, when you are a different one. This can be seen as fake.”

To summarize, we found a common pattern on Instagram as the participants experienced a need to be perceived as interesting and positive because they were searching for confirmation and publicity. Sometimes they created events for the only purpose to create an interesting picture that would receive a large amount of likes and indicate perfect lives. This has created a one-dimension on Instagram since everyone post images that constantly present happiness. This behaviour is misleading for others and we found interesting aspects where consumers experience lots of anxiety as a result of this development on Instagram.

4.6 The drawbacks of Instagram

The majority expressed how others perfect lives and their search for likes caused stress and anxiety since too much attention and time was spent on Instagram. A good example of this was given by Catherine who explained following:

Catherine: “Last party we went to in Lund had the Theme College, we were all dressed out we had some drinks before heading to the nation. However, instead of talking and hanging out, most of the time was spent on taking the “perfect picture” so it could be uploaded before the party as it receives more likes then. It did not stop there, during the party, the girl right next to me stated, “like my photo”, she looked down the phone at least every five minutes and instead of enjoying the moment and being social, Instagram had her full attention”.

Further, the majority of the participants experienced anxiety and worry as they were comparing themselves with others perfect lives. According to the empirical material and photo-elicitation, it was a clear pattern that particular women were worried when they posted a selfie regarding amount of likes or if they would look good enough. For instance, when they post a picture they would regularly check their phone to ensure they are receiving enough likes. The majority of the participants explained that they seldom posted pictures of themselves since it became too personal. Lisa told us about a picture she posted of herself in bikini. However, she did not feel comfortable to show everyone her whole body, which made her cut half of the picture. Otherwise, she would experience stress and anxiety. Catherine and

Anna paid attention to the amount of likes they received when posting selfies compared with other pictures.

Catherine: "I do not care if I post a picture that does not get too many likes since it must be a boring picture. However, if I would post a selfie and got 10 likes, I would wonder what is wrong with me and if I were ugly. I would feel horrible. Therefore, I use to avoid posting selfies and I prefer to post pictures with other people to minimize the pressure to receive likes. Maybe this is selfish but pictures must contain some kind of purpose, not only a selfie."

Anna: "It would suck if my horse would get more likes than me. I would think if my followers would like my horse more than me, or that cake was apparently more interesting than me. It is hard when you can compare that easily."

According to Ridley (2012), sharing online creates opportunities for consumers' to express a better "true self" compared in a physical context and it was clear that the participants paid lots of attention to their image and others reaction. The majority had similar views as Anna and Catherine, since they expressed anxiety when they did not receive enough likes. Several had deleted pictures at some point when they were not satisfied with either likes or content. Further, they explained how much pressure it is to always convey the perfect life. This is again related to postmodernism and we are moving to an apocalyptic era, which involves anxiety and worrying (Brown, 2006 cited in Klasson, 2017). Baudrillard (1988) and Sassatelli (2007), strengthen this argument as they claim that mass consumption, such as sharing has become a reality with no meaning. The participants experienced difficulties to orientate their identity in a digital culture as the majority experienced pressure from others when posting online. Lisa explained how worried she is when posting selfies on Instagram and sometimes she could get jealous of others perfect lives.

Lisa: "I have deleted pictures sometimes when I posted too many selfies of my selves. I thought people would think it was ridiculous when you are just posting pictures of yourself and think like "oh she has a huge need for confirmation" and then I deleted the picture since I do not want to convey that kind of image of my selves."

Lisa: "You should be perfect, good looking, have the best friends, get the best grades, party and have a great boyfriend, otherwise it is seen as a failure. Therefore, I do only post great

pictures of my life so I do contribute to showing the perfect life on Instagram. It is exactly like a chain reaction, such as “they are posting that kind of pictures, and then I also need to do it”. It is mostly girls in my age that I compare myself with, not directly my real friends, but people who I do not know that well as I think their life is really perfect. I get jealous on them and therefore I do the same thing as a way to prove myself. For instance, I know that my friends I regularly spend time with do not have perfect lives.”

An interesting aspect is that all participants are aware of that it exists no truth on Instagram, however, everyone still take it personally and are worrying about likes and how they are perceived by others. For instance, Lisa experienced a competition on Instagram as she compares her amount of likes and content with some specific consumers. This reflect her choices on what type of content she wants to share since she sometimes posted similar pictures in order to fit in. This is aligned with Shankar et al. (2009) and Wattanasuwan (2005) arguments of how competition online reflects consumers’ identity construction. Lisa experiences a need to convey that her life is as good as theirs. However, if they would get more likes she would experience lots of anxiety. One additional example was given when Peter saw a guy on the gym in reality overseas and he barely could recognize this him on Instagram as he had a different body type, tan and face shape. Zimmer & Hoffman (2011), considered this self-reflection behaviour and constant identity work as a concern since it might lead to oversharing and fake identities. Hence, this phenomenon of receiving publicity and confirmation cause problems in consumers’ identity construction. In the digital era, this behaviour has become seen as normal and acceptable. Consequently, consumers are creating their identity for themselves but also outwards as they are experiencing a desire to present themselves to the world (Zhao, 2005). This tendency was noticeable, as the majority had deleted pictures due to lack of likes or posting too many selfies. Additionally, several were feeling anxious when people post interesting pictures and are comparing if they have a better image than them, even though everyone knew it existed no truth on Instagram. This can again be related to the concept of hyperreality since the lines between fantasy and reality is blurred (Baudrillard, 1994).

Further, some of the participants experienced anxiety concerning others performance that they post on Instagram. Amanda explained how much anxiety she receives regarding others accomplishments that they are presenting on Instagram. However, she sometimes founds out that in reality nothing is perfect.

Amanda: "It is very provoking if a friend posts a happy picture if she just called me and cried earlier. The majority of the people post an unreality, the perfect life, even though it is not the case. I have also seen that those people at university who are most active, ambitious and always been a part of everything in the student union, do not pass exams. There is a backside, which you are not aware of in that moment you are seeing the pictures and you are feeling bad as you think you are not as good as them. On the surface, everyone is really great, so of course you get affected of that kind of pictures."

There was an additional pattern among several of the participants, as they were posting extraordinary pictures to prove themselves for specific consumers that they used to date. The majority had posted pictures of themselves where they looked happy in order to show their ex that they are fine without them. For instance, one of the participants posted a picture where she looked happy and she hold cinnamon buns on a plate. However, she shared this picture to prove something to her ex-boyfriend that she could be happy without him. According to Solomon (1983), the function of holding the cinnamon buns were in fact a social meaning. This is strengthened by Belk (2014b) since he argues that "*you are what you share*" rather than focusing on the functionality. Hence, it has rather changed from social meaning to negative meaning containing anxiety rather than happiness, which the participants wanted to share to others. This can again be compared to postmodernism as consumers live in a world without completely understanding of the purpose to share.

Lisa and Simon expressed anxiety and a need to show their perfect lives as they wanted to prove themselves for individuals they used to date.

Lisa: "This will sound really ridiculous but I want to have an open account. If my ex-boyfriend is dating someone new, can that girl check out my Instagram. Hopefully, she will then think "oh wow what a cool girl". This is awful and definitely a psychopath warning."

Simon: "I was close to delete my Instagram account a couple of times as I felt too addictive. Recently, I broke up with my girlfriend and I posted pictures all the time in order to convey success towards her. However, I realized it was easier to delete her rather than my account."

In conclusion, consumers compare each other's lives on Instagram, which refer to a directed perfect life. They experience a one-dimension euphoric state where everyone expresses their happiness and accomplishments. As a result, Instagram brings anxiety, pressure and competition for the consumers.

5. Discussion

In this chapter, we present our discussion from the empirical findings and are further bridged with existing theories. Secondly, theoretical contribution, practical implications and limitations of this study will also be discussed. In conclusion, suggestion for future research will be presented.

This research aimed to get a deeper understanding of consumers' complex identity construction in a digital culture. We have therefore explored how consumers negotiate their identity project as directors of self through images on Instagram with consideration of the dimension publicity. Our empirical findings show how particular Belk's (2014b) concept "*you are what you share*" and Baudrillard's (1994), "*the line between reality and fantasy is becoming increasingly difficult to see*", are more expressive in a digital culture than ever before. Arvidsson & Caliandro (2016) expressed a need for consumers to seek publicity value on social media through a brand. Correspondingly, this study shows how consumers create a strong need on Instagram to seek publicity value from others. However, rather than seeking publicity value by using brands as mediums, there is a greater need to seek publicity value through your own personal brand both through temporary interactions and from friends.

Instagram seem to be an excellent social media channel to create and monitor personal brands, since it enables consumers to express an improved first impression of self (Goffman, 1959). Consumers' put a lot of effort behind their images and take consideration of strategies. Therefore, they can be seen as brand managers in their identity projects. As the main purpose seems to be receiving publicity and status in a digital culture (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), strategies are of great importance when building a favourable brand. This was clearly shown in this study since they adjusted their content and strategies in order to receive positive feedback from other consumers.

Instagram could further be seen as the key to professional and social success. Consumers are aware of how images on Instagram might affect future careers and are therefore careful with what content they share. It was also important to have an image that represent the best of yourself, which often referred to accomplishments since employers might look on Instagram accounts. Instagram was also expressed as the "New Tinder" where *Impression Management* (Goffman, 1959) and the personal brand play an important role. This appeared to be adaptable within the gay community since consumers today ask for Instagram accounts, rather than

phone numbers. Further, consumers tend to look at other's Instagram accounts before going on a date. If their images had received a large amount of likes, they could be perceived as a popular and social person. This is further related to Belk (2014b) concepts of *you are what you share* as publicity and the relationship between online and offline personas are central for consumers when defining themselves online (Belk, 2014a).

The empirical findings further indicate a social change in consumers' behaviour where Instagram had similar functions as a Coffee shop in interaction with others. A tendency towards interaction through Instagram rather than meet in a physical face-to-face context could be shown throughout the study. By scanning a friend's Instagram account, one can receive a clear update of what have happened in their life. Nevertheless, as a great part of consumers' network exist online, Instagram created a need to constantly feel that they are connected. Majority expressed how they at least once had thought of deleting their Instagram account as it brought too much attention, pressure and competition to post pictures. However, no one had deleted their Instagram account since the fear of missing out was bigger.

The majority expressed that they would not share pictures on Instagram without the current opportunities for social interaction. Social media enables connection with a large audience at once and temporary interaction in forms of likes, have become a validation of how popular and social you are, in other words how you are as a person. Our participants explained how they often give a "support like" to their friends even though they do not fancy the picture. Moreover, consumers' lives seem to be measured in "likes" in a digital culture, which further increases self-esteem, publicity and status.

Consumers therefore only share interesting and positive activities. This is highly relevant to Giddens (1991) concept of consumers' negotiation in their reflexive identity between who I am and who I want to be. The majority of the participants expressed that likes were not too important, however, they did not share pictures that reflected their true self. As a result, consumers create fabricated positive images of themselves on Instagram. Shepherd (2005) predicted how the complexity of online and offline performance of the personal brand might cause inconsistency in their identity projects. This is clearly shown in our study as our participants appear to constantly be in a euphoric state on Instagram since they mainly show their perfect lives.

All participants knew that everyone on Instagram beautify their life and it is therefore hard to find true identities on Instagram. Despite that it exists no truth on Instagram, majority expressed that they felt anxiety and worry on Instagram due to increased competition and comparison of perfect lives. The majority took it personally and worry about likes as well as how they are perceived of others. Consumers are surrounded with a misleading image where reality and fantasy are directed into one unreality, which only make the identity construction online even more complex.

Overall, the present research expressed how well consumers perform frontstage on Instagram and how this is inconsistent with their backstage, reality (Goffman, 1959). Today, the personal brand is central when seeking publicity and confirmation from others. Therefore, consumers tend to have even more difficulties in developing a real identity as they prefer to create an identity that suit our society (Featherstone, 2007). Consequently, consumers no longer tend to believe that it is important to be truthful or authentic in their identity construction online.

5.1 Theoretical contribution

We aimed to explore how consumers negotiate their identity project of self with consideration of the dimension publicity in a digital culture. We are arguing that Arvidsson & Caliandro (2016), Schwarz (2010) and Belk (2014b) are right since consumers are moving beyond the social reality in their search for publicity value from strangers outside their personal network. Further, we have added knowledge concerning Arvidsson & Caliandro's (2016) publicity value as we argue that consumers' personal brands are in focus rather than brands. In a similar way as consumers use brands to receive publicity value (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) we argue that consumers in a digital culture have a greater need to seek publicity value from their own personal brand both through temporary interactions and from friends. The key to social success is when consumers create an ultimate social and professional personal brand on Instagram to reach out for both temporary interactions from strangers, such as "likes" and "comments", or potential partners and friends. Everyone experienced some type of positive self-esteem on Instagram since "*you are what you share*" (Belk, 2014b), and participants appreciated likes and comments. Additionally, there are apparent success factors that all take consideration of since they want to post interesting pictures, such as accomplishments or some specific event.

This clearly shows how consumers seek publicity value by negotiating their identity and image in a favourable way on Instagram. This is further validated from temporary social interaction from others in forms of “likes” and “comments”. As a result, the search for likes to receive publicity and confirmation, contribute to an unreality on Instagram where everyone’s life appear to be perfect. Consumers expressed how these misleading images cause anxiety, pressure and competition, which trigger to receive even more confirmation and publicity on Instagram.

The need for confirmation is huge and consumers are creating and adjusting their identity constantly in order to be seen. Consequently, it does not exist true identities and Goffman’s constructed front stage is nowadays very expressive on Instagram. Despite the fact that all participants were aware of that exists no truth on Instagram, they still felt anxious and worried when seeing others’ perfect lives. Therefore, we are arguing that Baudrillard’s (1994) concept of hyperreality also are very expressive today since the lines between reality and fantasy is becoming increasingly blurred. The participants experienced difficulties in understanding what was real and fake.

5.2 Practical implication

The empirical material has shown that Instagram is extremely popular and of great immediate interest for consumers, which companies should utilize. As a result, it might be worth for marketers to consider paying for ads on Instagram rather than Facebook. According to our findings, the majority appreciated to keep updated about companies, such as happenings, inspiration for latest fashion or product releases. We currently see tendency towards personal sovereignty in consumers’ identity projects. Our study strengthen this arguments since focus on self is stronger compared to focus on brands. Therefore, our implication is that marketers must understand consumers’ behaviours and how much effort that actually takes place behind posting images. Marketers can adjust their content by cultural resources to receive attention and attract consumers to take pictures at their store and on their products. To continue marketers should pay attention to post inspirational pictures about products and happenings on their Instagram accounts in order to wake an interest.

Moreover, we aimed to provide insights of consumers' behaviour on Instagram. The practical contribution is to highlight their behaviour and how their search for publicity affected them negatively.

5.3 Limitations of this thesis

This study holds both monetary as well as time limitations. It is important to discuss these as it may have had implications on the result. As we aimed to gain deeper knowledge in how consumers negotiate their identity project based on their lived experiences, we conducted a qualitative study. Hence, this method is often criticized for being too subjective and it is difficult to achieve a total objective study (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In order to minimize the subjectivity through our study, we had carefully formulated our interview questions so it would open up for self-reflection and thinking. In addition, the transcripts were analysed separately at first and then later discussed together throughout the process of coding, which is further described in methodology chapter.

Furthermore, as time was limited, we had to narrow this study. This was done by setting a few criteria for the participants. Therefore, we decided to choose consumers with a University degree or those who currently are students. All the participants were between 20-28 years old and lived near or in the city Lund in Sweden. Consequently, this only reflects a small part of the population. A greater age span and geographic diversification would achieve a greater understanding and strengthen our result. As this research also holds a phenomenological approach, interviews should also have been conducted during a longer period of time. According to Bryman & Bell (2007), this would have given wider aspects and a deeper understanding of our participants lived experiences.

Overall, this study aimed to see how consumers' negotiate their identity through images in a digital culture. To accomplish this, we used the popular social media channel Instagram and our participants had to be active users, which we refer to posting an image or video once a week. Main reason being was its easy access and availability to discuss photos during the interviews by using a method called photo-elicitation. However, as Instagram is one among many channels that encourage for self-extension and identity construction, this will come to narrow our result.

5.4 Suggestion for future research

As proposal for further research, our findings should be explored through other social media networking sites. This study is limited to Instagram, hence, our participants explained that Snapchat was almost as popular and gives space for self-esteem and publicity. An apparent difference was shown between the genders throughout this study. In the search for publicity and confirmation in forms of “likes”, women expressed a greater need to receive likes and comments. Further Instagram and living in a digital culture was shown to bring drawbacks such as anxiety, competition and pressure. Therefore, we express a further need to explore deeper into the negative aspects of Instagram. It may also be applicable to add a gender perspective in order to see differences.

Consequently, pressure, competition and search for publicity creates a misleading euphoric world full of directed perfect lives that are expressed through images on Instagram. In our study, few of the participants explained that this phenomenon is also relevant for their younger siblings since they still are creating their identity and are using Instagram in a larger extent. Future research should therefore focus on investigating how generation Z negotiates their identity in a digital culture and specifically explore the drawbacks of a digital identity.

This study shows how social interaction in a digital world is changing the way consumers network. Moreover, consumers stay in touch by interaction through social media rather than in a physical face-to-face context. How this might come to develop both within consumers' social sphere and further in their professionals is suggested for future research. In addition, Instagram as a marketing channel tool will become even more popular and important. Thus it may provide key insights for brands to do a quantitative study in order to see how business strategically in a digital culture can reach out to their future target.

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7. Appendix Interview Guide

Part 1

Main questions

How long have you been a member of Instagram?

How much time would consider that you use for Instagram every day?

Tell us about when did you start use Instagram?

When it comes to privacy, do you have an open account or closed to your followers?

What is your purpose to share photos on Instagram?

What are the most common kinds of picture you share on your profile on Instagram?

What kind of images do you like? What kind of images do you usually not like?

Do you follow famous individuals?

What are the important factors when taking a picture for Instagram?

Tell us about the last post you shared on Instagram and your thought about it?

Is there anything you avoid to share and further absolutely not want to share?

How do you feel when you receive many likes and comments?

Have you ever deleted a picture or video?

Do you have any strategies behind your posting on Instagram, E.g special days, times, content, and caption?

Do you use hashtags?

Do you think you are influenced by others when you post content on Instagram?

How would you describe yourself as a person?

How well do you think your pictures on Instagram reflect your identity in reality?

How do you think your followers perceive your life on Instagram?

How do you want your followers to perceive/catch you?

Do you reflect on others Instagram account, what they post, share and likes?

How do you relate truth on Instagram?

Do you believe it is important to you and others to show “your best” on Instagram?

What are the reasons to Instagram increasing popularity to share photos of your life?

What stops you from deleting your account and not use Instagram anymore?

Do you think that your own behaviour on Instagram have changed over the years?

Part 2. Photo-elicitation

Ask the respondents if we together can look at their account and discuss some pictures

Can you show us a picture that you put lots of thought and effort behind it?

Can you choose a picture with many likes?

Can you show a picture with less likes?

Can you show a picture you feel extra proud of?

Can you explain further what you were thinking behind this specific picture? (We choose pictures)