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Instagram Perceptions and Coherent Impressions

An Exploratory Study Regarding Perceptions of Personal Brands

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how individuals perceive a personal brand online on social media, compared to how it is perceived offline in real life, and whether there is a difference in the perception of the personal brand. By using Instagram as an empirical context, this thesis explores similarities and differences in the perceptions of a personal brand from a perspective of ordinary users and the everyday identity. The aimed contribution is to broaden the understanding of personal brands, as a way to express identity, when exploring how a personal brand can be perceived in an online and offline context. As the perspective of the recipient has been emphasised the contributions are expected to add to existing literature regarding personal branding, whereas a conceptual framework for comparison has been created. Furthermore, the thesis has adopted a qualitative research approach, where the empirical data was collected through semi-structured group interviews. Based on the empirical findings, it is interpreted that the perception of a personal brand is influenced by what is visually perceived in the shared pictures, yet also by incorporating personal experiences to the perception. By applying the conceptual framework, consisting of the three components First Impression, Personality, and Values, on the empirical data it has been possible to gain an understanding of how personal brands are perceived. The results were found to be in contrast to what has been expressed in previous research, as the online perceptions were discovered to be more accurate compared to the offline perceptions than predicted beforehand.

Keywords: Personal Brands, Personal Branding, Perceptions, Online, Offline, Social Media, Instagram

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1 Introduction

In this initial chapter, the authors of this thesis present a background to the field of research, where the growth of social media has affected how individuals communicate and portray the self online. The background leads to a problematization, which aims to bring understanding to the research gap, and continues with the purpose of this thesis and the formulated research question. Finally, the research contributions, delimitations and the outline of the thesis are presented.

1.1 Background

Personal branding is a concept within the branding literature, and it was first in 1997 that Tom Peters, in his article “The Brand Called You,” made the term famous. Even though the concept can be related to personal selling, due to the usage of personality traits to gain success in sales, the main difference is that personal branding refers to present and market yourself rather than a company’s products (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005; Machaz & Shokoofh, 2016; Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015; Rampersad, 2008). As Peters (1997) stressed the importance to manage and continually work with your own brand, it may have become even more of relevance in today’s digital world.

The way the Internet is used has changed throughout the years. Internet started as a digital medium to gather knowledge, by reading and watching, along with buying products and services online. It has transformed into a medium where consumers are utilising Internet platforms such as blogs, content sharing sites, and social media to share, create, and discuss various topics. Consumers can now not solely be in contact with companies online, they can also interact with other consumers and individuals (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). Among companies, there is a focus on using digital tools and be present in the digital space to increase brand awareness, and eventually, build brand loyalty. However, in today’s digital society it is not solely companies and celebrities that are developing and communicating their brands digitally. With a transformation of the Internet, from a place to gather in-

formation to a place where individuals can be participants in creating information, the marketing online has changed.

Over the last years, social media has grown into a medium that is used on a daily basis and is affecting how the people of today carry out social interactions (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). The phenomenon has enabled new forms of communication, where an extended number of digital platforms have provided individuals with the possibility to build and manage their own personal brand and it has become a fast growing trend (Chen, 2013). This due to that social media enables interactions with more people at the same time, along with offering users to form new and more diverse relationships (Baym, 2010). By actively being present on digital social media platforms, consumers can send out a higher amount of signals, descriptions, and impressions of themselves than they are aware of (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015), along with the opportunity to connect with millions of people worldwide (Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). Additionally, there is an increased usage of smartphones with well-equipped cameras, and a prediction that over 36% of the population in the world will use smartphones by 2018 (Statista, 2017a). By this, pictures are taking a larger part in creating a personal brand on social media and have become a powerful way to communicate the self.

Today, there are several online platforms with the purpose of sharing pictures. Instagram, a mobile photo-sharing service, was launched in October 2010 and has since then grown into the largest social media platform (Instagram, 2017; Forbes, 2013). The platform is based on image sharing where the users can take photos or videos through their phones, tweak the photos by using filters and share them instantly with friends and followers. As of today, Instagram has 600 million monthly active users worldwide (Instagram, 2017). Statistics show that Camera & Imaging Products Association's (CIPA) members had a decrease in sales of digital cameras by 80% in 2010, the same year that Instagram launched (Statista, 2017b), and research has shown that the success of Instagram relies on the photos and short videos that the members share (Erkan, 2015; Lee, Lee, Moon & Sung, 2015; Phua, Venus & Jay, 2017).

In the digital era of today, the Internet has enabled new ways for individual's self-expression and self-presentation, and furthermore a way to create and maintain a personal brand identity (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011). Now, the everyday person can build and manage a personal brand on social media platforms. As it is the individual that is in charge, they have the opportunity to choose how they want to portray themselves and their lifestyles. The image that is portrayed can vary depending on the situation, the mood and what purpose the picture

or text has, and therefore is not always representative in comparison to reality (Smith-Lovin, 2007). However, if an individual aims to have and maintain a strong personal brand, as an accurate representation of one's character and life, it is important that the personal brand is coherent both online in the digital world and offline in reality (Benton, 2016).

1.2 Problematization

In agreement with Philbrick and Cleveland (2015), this thesis takes the perspective that everyone has a personal brand, which identifies, clarifies, and communicates who we are to the world around us. By this, an individual creates the image of how he or she wants to be portrayed, through strategically and efficiently forming a personal brand (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015). A strong personal brand enables an individual to position him- or herself in a competitive and constantly changing environment, both digitally and in real life. Hence, it is critical to recognise the attributes that make an individual particular from others and is representative of the unique character. Furthermore, successful personal branding involves managing and influencing the way that others think of oneself in an efficient manner (Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005; Machaz & Shokoofh, 2016; Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015; Rampersad, 2008) As the amount of time people spend online is increasing, the importance of personal branding online is growing (Chen, 2013).

Due to the increase in everyday usage of the Internet and social media, along with the aspect of consumers being able to create and manage their own personal brand, the authors of this thesis want to further explore personal branding in an online versus offline context. Researchers stress the importance of creating and maintaining a strong personal brand, along with portraying a favourable image of the self (Chen, 2013; Hood, Robles & Hopkins, 2014; Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; Machaz & Shokoofh, 2016; Peters, 1997; Petrucă, 2016). A strong personal brand is dependent on being authentic regardless if the context is online or offline, yet being consistent in the degree of authenticity enables the brand to become even stronger (Benton, 2016; O'Neil, 2016; Shaker & Hafiz, 2014; Shepherd, 2005). However, the previous research that has been found can be considered to be limited in the sense that it does not compare whether the online personal brand is coherent with the offline personal brand and if the two are representative of each other.

Despite the popularity of Instagram, little research has been carried out regarding viewing the social media platform in the context of personal branding. Many of the conducted studies explore how companies, rather than individuals, use Instagram as an online platform to market themselves (Ahmadinejad & Asli, 2017; Barnes, Lescault & Wright, 2013; Garifova, 2016; Guidry, Messner, Jin & Medina-Messner, 2015; Gholston, Kuofie & Hakim, 2016). The social media platforms LinkedIn and Facebook have been given more attention from researchers than Instagram, where the interest of personal branding has been mainly in a context of employment or social interactions. Research regarding LinkedIn has often been conducted in a context of a professional aspect, where the primary function of the personal brand is to attract employers and stand out among the competition to ensure employment (Hood, Robles & Hopkins, 2014; Stankiewicz & Bortnowska, 2016). Hood, Robles, and Hopkins (2014) also found that LinkedIn, and other social media channels, was used to find suitable candidates along with include or exclude candidates from the selection process based on the personal brand. Although employers take an interest in individuals' personal brands, Machaz and Shokoof (2016) state that an online personal brand is not solely a way for promoting educational aspects, skills, and interests. It is also an opportunity to show one's character. Hence the importance that photos and online posts, which are publicly displayed, are complementing the personal brand (Machaz & Shokoofh, 2016). Additionally, Petrucă (2016), states that to grow a personal identity, along with establishing a reputation and become visible in a specific job industry, social media is the best and easiest tool to use. By this, Petrucă (2016) means that social media opens doors for personal branding. However, it is crucial to know how to use it and to use it in a favourable way to gain digital success. Although Petrucă (2016) examines personal branding in social media and provides the reader with recommendations of how often individuals should update their social media accounts, it is not explored how the online personal brand can be perceived by other individuals.

Regarding personal branding on Facebook, Enli and Thumim (2012) discuss the social media platform as a democratic process of media production, where individuals are allowed to produce meaning through sharing personal content and to establish digital friendships. The study found implications when users were combining aspects of sharing content digitally while managing the position of being private and being public. Enli and Thumim (2012) further concluded that self-representation is an essential part of online socialising. By this, as individuals often present themselves and share personal information online, in a way that is coherent with the purpose of Facebook, it is found easy to fake the image of the self and portray

an image that is not self-representative to the offline life. This can be connected to Baym (2010), who states that disembodied identities are created online, where the self is separated from the body and offline identity, which enables an individual to manage multiple identities of the self rather than portraying one coherent image.

As social media, and online platforms such as Instagram, can be used in a way where the user only displays a selective and favourable image of the personal brand, previous research tends to focus on the underlying motives and behaviour of the individual behind the personal brand. The number of studies that are tied to a specific online platform, which explores how the owner of the personal brand is perceived has been found limited. Additionally, online personal branding has commonly been studied with a focus on gaining professional advantages (Hood, Robles & Hopkins, 2014; Stankiewicz & Bortnowska, 2016), rather than to brand the self in an everyday context. As a strong personal brand needs to be coherent both online and offline (Benton, 2016), the personal brand has to communicate the self both inside and outside of a professional context (Blacksmith & Poepelman, 2014). By this, the authors of the thesis take an interest in the everyday context, rather than the professional, which in this thesis means how individuals market the self in their daily life including displaying personal characteristics and interests. Moreover, with the increased amount of time people spend on social media, the authors of this thesis believe it to be important to explore the online and offline aspect further. As research conducted on personal branding online seldom takes on the perspective of the recipient and examines how a personal brand is perceived, there is a gap in the previous research, exploring whether a personal brand is perceived in a way that is true to reality and representative both online and offline.

1.3 Research Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how individuals perceive a personal brand online on social media, compared to how it is perceived offline in real life, and whether there is a difference in the perception of the personal brand. As personal branding is about creating an image and to market the self, this thesis is conducted by using Instagram as an empirical context, through which the authors will study how the personal brand is perceived online compared to offline. Furthermore, this thesis is exploring personal branding from the perspective of the

recipient, rather than examining underlying motivations of content sharing from the owner of the Instagram account.

Based on the purpose, this thesis seeks to address the following question:

- *How is a personal brand perceived by other individuals online compared to how it is perceived offline?*

1.4 Research Contribution

In contrary to previous research on personal branding on social media platforms, this thesis is exploring personal brands from the perspective of the recipient rather than examining underlying motivations of content sharing from the perspective of the owner of the Instagram account. As the perspective of the recipient is unusual among the existing literature, this thesis will be a valuable contribution to the field of personal branding. By this, the aim is to add to existing knowledge and broaden the understanding of personal brands, as a way to express identity and personality, when exploring how a personal brand can be perceived in an online and offline context. As the theoretical contribution will be in the field of personal branding, the results of this thesis are of interest for both marketers and individuals. The first, to gain insights regarding how the perceptions of a personal brand is formed, and the latter, to evaluate whether the personal brand is coherent both online and offline.

1.5 Delimitations

To conduct this thesis, Instagram has been chosen as the social media platform to gather the empirical data, in examining perceptions of a personal brand online. As the social media platforms of today are many other platforms, such as Facebook or LinkedIn, could have been used for the same purpose for conducting this thesis. However, as opposed to previous research, which often views personal branding in a context of employment and professional identity, this thesis aims to explore personal branding regarding everyday identity, in daily life. Therefore, Instagram has been chosen to be a more suitable platform in regards to the purpose of this thesis.

Due to the interest in the everyday identity, this thesis seeks to explore the perception of personal brands online and offline from a perspective of ordinary users. Rather than using celebrities and Instagram users with a large number of followers, it has been decided to explore Instagram accounts of ordinary users and individuals. Since everyone has a personal brand (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015), the authors of this thesis argue that the phenomenon of online versus offline personal branding can be applied to every person, and is not dependent on the level of fame or the number of followers an Instagram account has.

Additionally, Instagram has various ways to communicate, such as pictures, text, hashtags, geo-mapping, videos, comments, and likes. This thesis has not excluded any scope of communication behaviour, as they all play a part in forming a perception of the personal brand. However they are not separately analysed, instead they are discussed and considered as a unity of the personal brand.

1.6 Disposition

The outline of this thesis is divided into six main chapters: *Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Empirical Findings, Analysis, and Conclusion*. The introduction chapter includes the background to the topic of study along with a problematization, research purpose and research contributions and delimitations. The second chapter contains the literature review and theory that is used as a base for the analysis. The third chapter describes the methodology of the thesis, including research approach and design, the used data collection method and data analysis, followed by a reflection upon the method. The fourth chapter presents the empirical findings regarding the online perception of the research objects followed by the offline perception of the research objects. The fifth chapter analyses and discusses the empirical findings by comparing the online perception of the research objects to the offline perception and provides a modified conceptual framework based on the findings. The sixth chapter is answering the research question and summarises the thesis with a final conclusion. Additionally, the final chapter also contains the thesis' practical implications and suggestions for further research.

2 Literature Review

This chapter presents previous research and theory that will be applied in the analysis. Based on the purpose of this thesis, the review has been structured in three main categories: Personal Branding, Perceptions and Impressions, and Social Media, which all have a part in exploring the perception of a personal brand online versus offline. Finally, one additional category has been added, Conceptual Framework, where a theoretical framework has been created to be coherent with the purpose of this thesis.

2.1 Personal Branding

As this thesis is exploring the phenomena of personal brands, it is of interest to look at previous studies defining personal branding and researching how and why individuals are branding themselves online. The term branding was initially applied to products but has now developed to include branding of services, and through the Internet, transformed to also include personal branding (Machaz & Shokoofh, 2016). As mentioned earlier, the management expert Tom Peters coined the term “personal branding” first 1997. Since then, several authors have developed the concept of personal branding and built upon it with their own theories. An example of this is Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney (2005) who in their article express that personal branding is a concept that has evolved from self-improving theory. However, rather than focusing on self-improvement, Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney (2005) suggest that personal branding is related to “self-packaging” and regulating the public's views on one's brand. Personal branding is further defined by Machaz and Shokoofh (2016) as a method that successfully can decrease or exclude competition for a product or a person. This is described to be done through controlling and influencing people's perception. Rampersad (2008) builds on this theory as the study defines branding as a way of influencing people's thoughts and emotions concerning a planned perception. According to Rampersad (2008), personal branding involves handling views and regulating how others perceive and think of an individual. By this, the personal brand that is demonstrated includes the expectations, image, and perception that others will connect to the individual (Rampersad, 2008).

2.1.1 Building a Personal Brand

According to Shepherd (2005), personal branding is about building an own personal brand to stand out among competitors. The personal brand can be built through discovering unique personality traits and market them in the best possible way for external people to see. Furthermore, Shepherd (2005) argues that the personal brand has to deliver what the individual is claiming to be. Hence, the confidence of the message lies within the credibility of the communication. However, online platforms can come to cause confusion regarding the personal brand, and its truthfulness compared to the offline brand. Shepherd's work (2005) shows that an individual can communicate multiple types of personal brands online at the same time, to multiple receivers, which leads to an inconsistency in the message sent. The desire for a favourable image stems from the longing for popularity, which indicates the importance of building a strong personal brand to be successful both socially and on the job market. According to Stanton and Stanton (2013), it is significant for individuals to market themselves and nurture the personal brand, similar to how a product is branded. By constantly developing and working with the personal brand, an individual can gain both social and job-related success. Further, Rampersad (2008) states that building a strong personal brand is the key to success for distinguishing oneself in a competitive job market. However, personal branding is not solely about promoting one's education, skills and abilities but also about promoting one's character and personality (Machaz & Shokoofh, 2016), and this is what the authors of this thesis will be focusing on.

2.1.2 Consequences of Personal Branding

To be able to understand how personal branding can be perceived, it is important to investigate reasons for why people are branding themselves as well as possible consequences of doing so. The reasons for why people are using personal branding are being investigated in Lair, Sullivan and Cheney's (2005) study where the researchers describe the primary strategies behind personal branding. Lair, Sullivan and Cheney (2005) demonstrate that the phenomenon of personal branding is a consequence of the recent innovations in technique, globalisation, and the economic situation in society. Additionally, the researchers state that these factors have led to an increased importance of branding oneself and sustaining a strong position on the market to be competitive. Along with this, engaging in the digital world through for instance online chatting, online gaming, and online dating has in previous studies been pro-

posed as tools for personal empowerment and ways in which to investigate parts of the self (Buchanan-Oliver & Cruz, 2011; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Whitty, 2008). Digital platforms and social media enable users to have an open communication without certain boundaries, such as appearance (e.g. gender, race) or physical ability, which might constrain the offline identity. As the usage of social media is increasing, so is the customer-to-customer driven information. The interaction between customers has turned into a vital approach to establish personal awareness, create credibility, and oversee prospects into personal branding (Vitberg, 2010). By this, social media has created new platforms for users to brand themselves and to develop the personal brand. It is the context of social media, and more specifically Instagram, that will serve as the empirical example for this thesis, and where the personal brand will be further explored.

2.2 Perceptions and Impressions

Since the authors of this thesis have chosen to study personal brands from a perspective of the receiver, rather than to examine underlying motives from the owner of the Instagram account, aspects of how individuals form their perceptions are of interest. The term perception is defined by Johns and Saks (2001) as a process to create meaning and explain the environment by interpreting the messages of our senses. The definition can be compared to how Fridgen (1987) describes the term image, as “a mental representation of an object, person, place, or happening which is not physically in front of the observer” (p. 102). Although Fridgen (1987) describes both perception and image as parts of creating environmental understanding and comprehension, he differentiates the two. The differentiation is based on a presence of environmental stimuli for justification of perception, and Fridgen (1987) argues that the concept of image lacks this stimulus. However, the authors of this thesis believe that the concept of perception is related to image. The reason is that perceptions can be formed on the basis of an individual’s portrayed image of the self, and the image is, therefore, dependent on the ways it is perceived.

Further, Johns and Saks (2001) state that the creation of a perception includes three key components, the perceiver, the target of perception and the situation. The former contains aspects of previous experiences, motivational state or needs that reflect what the perceiver wants to perceive, the emotional state and whether there is any ambiguity regarding the target, which

all affect how people will form a perception. Further, the target of perception refers to the object that is being looked upon, and the last component is the situation and the context in which the perception is formed (Johns & Saks, 2001). In this thesis, perception is studied in the context of social media, where Instagram accounts and the perception of the individual behind the account is of interest.

While studying people's perceptions, there are different biases to consider and be aware of, such as primacy and recency effects, implicit personality theories, projection and stereotyping (Johns & Saks, 2001). In this thesis the authors find two of these to be of certain interest: primacy effects and stereotyping. The former refers to the first impression the perceiver receives from the target, and these perceptions are hard to change short-term. The latter is connected to generalisation, where the perceiver place target objects in different social categories and ignores variation among them (Johns & Saks, 2001). Since this thesis examines how the personal brand is perceived online versus offline and uses selected Instagram accounts as a basis for perception and analysis, there is a risk that primacy effects and stereotyping will occur. Therefore it becomes highly important for the authors to be aware of the possible biases and view them as a part of the personal branding process in a digital context, rather than viewing them as a problem.

2.2.1 Symbolic Interactionism and Personal Identity

To provide insight regarding how perceptions can be formed and to gain knowledge of what might affect an individual's creation of a personal brand in social media, aspects of how interactions can unfold is of interest. An interaction can take place both on a personal level, as an interaction with oneself, and among several individuals. Symbolic interactionism is a perspective addressing the way individuals use language and different symbols in their communication with others. The theory stems from a sociological perspective, which explains how society is created and maintained through the usage of interaction between individuals, where the interest lies in the creation of meaning between the participants of the interaction (Carter & Fuller, 2016). The perspective involves four dimensions to take into consideration while studying it, including: (1) the meaning objects have for individuals will determine how they will act, (2) interactions occur in certain social and cultural contexts where different situations, along with physical and social objects, have to be defined or categorized based on individual meanings, (3) meanings are created from interactions among individuals and with society, and

(4) an on-going process of interpretation enables meanings to constantly be created and recreated while interaction among individuals take place (Blumer, 1969; Carter & Fuller, 2016).

One central function of symbolic interactionism is that interactions between individuals create a personal identity, where focus lays on the self, and by using interactions individuals can present and form a personal identity to display to others. Charon (2009) describes the self as “an object of the actor’s own actions”, which is part of a process of constant on-going definition and redefinition. Further, as symbolic interactionism addresses interactions between individuals along with the creation of meaning, there is a need to ensure that the social understanding among the participants, and their views of the world, are coherent. When interactions take place there are different expectations within the social situations, and these expectations need to be controlled by reducing uncertainties; hence the theory of affect control is necessary (Carter & Fuller, 2016). Affect control is closely linked to reflexivity, which underlines the importance to reflect upon the personal identity that is presented and on possible outcomes for what will happen if the expectations are violated. Furthermore how one may act to restore identities that have been discredited. As humans are social beings, they are dependent on forming their self-concepts through others perception of them and then act upon how others think of that appearance (Cooley, 1965). The concept of self-presentation can, therefore, be viewed as a collaborative process where individuals together create and maintain a personal identity.

As Instagram is based on sharing content among people, it can be used as a reflection of an individual’s life and a platform where the users can create social meaning. However, if the individuals, who take place in the interaction, do not have a social understanding and knowledge of each other’s views of the world, it can affect the personal identity of the owner of the Instagram account. The theory is underlined by Smith-Lovin (2007), who emphasises that the surrounding social structures often lead individuals to stage personal identities which are not central to the definition of the self. Rather than allowing society to shape the social interactions, it is proposed to view society as a foundation to create a correlation between the self and social interactions (Smith-Lovin, 2007). By doing this, the personal identity can become representative of the self, along with being understood by others.

2.2.2 Impression Management

As one of the most inspirational and cited sociologists, Erving Goffman incorporates aspects of interactionism, such as symbols, shared meaning, and identity, within his work (Carter & Fuller, 2016). The social performance that is taking place on social media, and in this thesis on Instagram, can be compared to Goffman's (1959) idea of *impression management*. The theory explains an individual's need to oversee the response other people have to a presentation of the self. According to the theory of impression management, individuals tend to present oneself in a way that is considered to be most favourable to themselves, and it is closely linked to the aspect of a theatre; depending on the scene, the actor has a particular role, wardrobe, and backdrops to present the self. Further, this is done to reach the desired impression individuals have of the self, and then to make adjustments for the audience to be satisfied (Goffman, 1959).

However, while applying this notion in a context of social media, it becomes important to consider that there is a wide range of people who can access the content and that the creation of identity cannot be done through face-to-face interactions. Therefore, the perceptions become of interest for the owner of the social media account, and in this thesis related to Instagram, since he or she is dependent on first impressions to be favourable for the personal brand.

Furthermore, the aspect of creating and maintaining a personal brand identity on social media, along with the creation of multiple identities, the authors of this thesis believe can be related to Goffman's (1959) theory about viewing each case in life as a performance. Goffman (1959) distinguishes the on-stage and off-stage personality. The former refers to the situation where an individual is on stage performing for an audience with the purpose to portray a favourable image of the self, using various forms of stage props to strengthen the desired image. The latter is looked upon as the backstage of the performance, where the private self is on display. The off-stage personality is often contradicting the on-stage personality since the private self does not have to put on an act and are not forced to relate to certain norms and expectations (Goffman, 1959). Connected to branding, the platform, where the interaction takes place, is an individual's stage and the individual adapts the way he or she acts in each situation to give a favourable image of the self and the personal brand. Further, the authors of this thesis believe that the concept of on-stage and off-stage can be linked to an online and

offline personal brand, where the online world is the performance individuals displays in social media and the offline is the private self that is hidden from the digital world.

2.3 Social Media

The phenomenon of social media can be traced back to the 1950's when Bruce and Susan Abelson founded "Open Diary", bringing online diary writers together (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). By 1979, Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis created a discussion system that allowed the Internet users worldwide to post messages available for other users to see (Reid & Gray, 2007). As the use of the Internet expanded, more sites were introduced such as MySpace, in 2003, and Facebook, in 2004 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Although social media can be traced back to the 1950's, it was not until the early 2000's that social media was shaped into what we know it to be today. By this, social media can be considered to be a relatively new phenomenon, and despite its fast spread and rapidly increase in popularity, there is an amount of limited literature available on the subject. However, existing studies define social media as a digital media, where people can connect and interact with each other (Correa, Hinsley & Gil de Zúñiga, 2009). Further, Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) define social media as a "group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User-generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60). Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) stress the importance of social media by stating that marketers that do not use social media are in fact, irrelevant online. However, the study point at the importance of having a strategy in place for social media to be successful. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) further describe how individuals are using social media as a tool for creating the desired image of oneself. This thesis is not exploring which motivations and factors are the foundations to why an Instagram user is portraying a particular image of the self, and instead, it focuses on how this image is perceived. However, the authors of this study believe it to be important to highlight how social media is used and how users behave on the online platforms. By doing so, the aim is to bring further understanding to whether the personal brand in the online world is representative and true in comparison to the offline world.

2.3.1 Motivation to Use Social Media

The reasons for why people are creating social media accounts and their intentions with it has been researched by several authors (Bagic Babac & Podobnik, 2016; Pittman & Reich, 2016; Chen, Sin, Theng & Lee, 2015; Schau & Gilly, 2003). Regarding the social measurement of social media, the notion of self-introduction implies that in a social collaboration individuals want to control the impressions that other individuals gain of them (Goffman, 1959). From the one hand, this is done with the goal of impacting others to pick up rewards (e.g. impress your future in-laws); then again, it is driven by a desire to create a picture that is similar to an individual's personal identity (e.g. wearing a trendy outfit keeping in mind the end goal to be seen as youthful and popular). The key motivation for why individuals choose to use social media is, for instance, the desire to present themselves on the internet (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Typically, such an introduction is done through self-exposure; that is, the cognizant or oblivious disclosure of individual data (e.g. thoughts, emotions, likes, dislikes) that is steady with the picture one might want to give. Self-disclosure is a basic stride in the improvement of close connections (e.g. amid dating), however, it can likewise happen between total strangers. Connected to the setting of social media, individuals accept that a classification can be made given the level of self-disclosure it requires and the sort of self-presentation it permits (Kalia, Patel, Moriarity & Canon, 2016). For this reason, the way individuals use social media to present themselves is highly relevant to gain further insights regarding personal branding and eventually answer the research question.

2.3.2 How Individuals Behave on Social Media

As mentioned earlier, social media enables the individual to manage and be in charge of his or her own personal brand and portray whatever image is most favourable of the self. Since social media has become a large part of the everyday life, it is of interest for this thesis to explore how different behaviours can be portrayed and explained online. By this to further seek insights and explanations to how a personal brand can be perceived and compared online and offline. According to Ong, Ang, Ho, Lim, Goh, Lee and Chua (2011) many young people behave in a narcissistic way on social media. In their research, Ong et al. (2011) studied young adults' Facebook profiles, and variables that were taken into account were: profile pictures, the number of photos, and the frequency of their status updates. The result from the study showed that narcissists had higher self-evaluation through their profile pictures, as they

chose pictures where they thought they were attractive. They also updated their accounts and statuses more frequently than extroverts. Further, no difference was seen between narcissists and extroverts regarding the number of friends on Facebook or the number of photos (Ong et al, 2011). According to Ong et al. (2011), the result indicated that the narcissistic self-representation is shown through self-generated content on social media rather than content that is generated by the system of Facebook. Furthermore, Ong et al. (2011) state that the young adults showing narcissistic traits are taking advantage of the opportunity of positioning themselves online through projecting a false image of the self.

The way that social media is influencing users' behaviour has been further researched by O'Brien (2010). In his study, O'Brien (2011) suggests that social media usage has led to consumers becoming more demanding. His study found that social media users are developing egocentrism due to the empowerment and control that the social media landscapes contribute. Additionally, Whitty and Gavin (2001) conducted a qualitative study around social cues in online relationship development. The researchers found that even though the majority of the 60 study participants mentioned honesty as one of the most important factors while engaging in developing relationships online, they frequently used lies to portray a different image of themselves. The behaviour on social media and the way people sometimes use it to portray a false picture of the self are therefore highly relevant for the authors of this study.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

While reviewing existing literature, it has been found that theory often revolves around the creation of a personal brand with a perspective from the individual behind the brand. As this thesis takes an interest in how individuals perceive personal brands online, and whether this perception is compatible with the offline personal brand, the authors of this thesis have decided to create a new conceptual framework as a basis for the analysis. The new framework streams from existing literature, discussed in the literature review. However, it has been selected and modified to be applicable in the perspective of the recipient of an individual's personal brand rather than focusing on the perspective of the individual behind the personal brand. In the design of the new framework Johns and Saks' (2001) model of the creation of perception, with the components of the perceiver, the target, and the situation, has functioned as the central pillar.

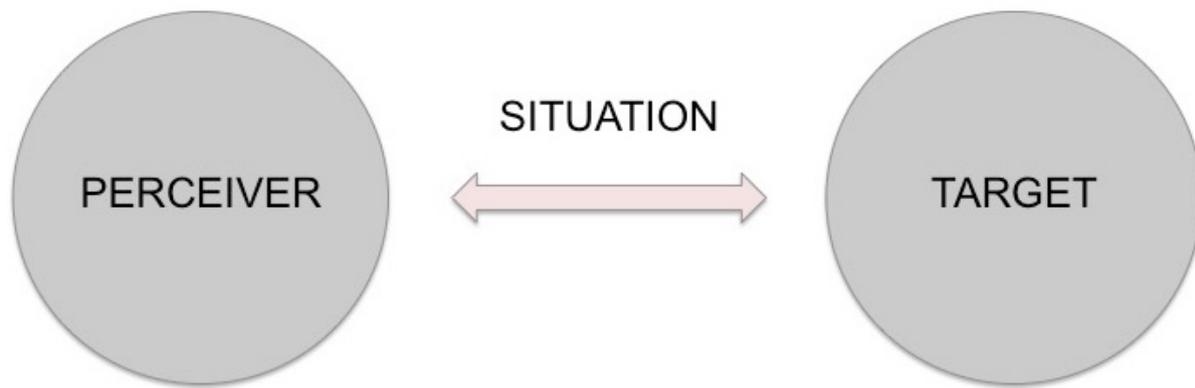


Figure 2.4. Model of How Perception is Created (Johns & Saks, 2001)

2.4.1 Online Part

The new conceptual framework has two different components, online and offline, which are compared to each other. These two components are related to Johns and Saks' (2001) component "situation" since they provide the context of what and where the perceptions are being studied. The online component represents how individuals perceive the personal brand online and the perception of the owner of the Instagram account, and consists of three dimensions: *First Impression*, *Personality*, and *Values*. The First Impression is based on initial thoughts and impressions individual's form when they are viewing the Instagram account for the first time. This dimension explores the overall impression of the owner of the Instagram account and whether the personal brand is perceived in a positive or negative way. By this, First Impression is the first step for the perceiver to enable a deeper exploration of the personal brand. By understanding the First Impression, the authors of this thesis can evaluate possible biases, such as primacy effects and stereotyping (Johns & Saks, 2001).

The Personality dimension goes one layer deeper from the First impression, where the owner of the Instagram account's perceived characteristics and interests are in focus. The Personality dimension can be related to Goffman's (1959) theory of impression management, Machaz and Shokoofh's (2016) and Shepherd's (2005) focus on promoting an individual's characteristics and personality to stand out in a digital context. However, instead of promoting the personal brand to seek advantages in a competitive job market, a personal aspect is of interest and how the individual is perceived to be on a personal basis and in everyday life.

The final and deepest dimension is the Values, where the interest is towards what the owner of the Instagram account is perceived to value and think is important in life. By discussing which perceived values the owner of the Instagram account has, symbolic interactionism becomes necessary. Since Instagram is an image-based platform, the shared pictures may contain symbols, such as words, gestures, and ideas, that will affect the perceivers' impressions. However, this thesis does not aim to identify which symbols each Instagram account portrays, instead the aspect of symbols as visual images and how these are perceived are of interest. Based on Cooley's (1965) idea of self-concepts, and how people are dependent on others' perceptions in creating an identity, symbolic interactionism can help the individual to form an opinion of the personal identity of the owner of the Instagram account and create meaning to it. Although Cooley (1965) refers to self-concept from the perspective of the individual behind the personal brand, the idea is based on collaboration from the perceiver and the object being perceived. In this thesis, the personal brand is explored through how it is perceived and is defined by how individuals will react to it online. By this, the Values is linked to Charon's (2009) description of the self as an ongoing process of definition and redefinition. However, the interest regards how the personal brand is perceived rather than how the owner of the personal brand desires it to be perceived.

2.4.2 Offline Part

As the online part of the framework centres around how individuals perceive the personal brand in a digital context, the offline part is about how the personal brand and the owner of the Instagram account is perceived in real life. The offline part consists of the same three dimensions as the online part: First Impression, Personality, and Values. However, here the dimensions differ in the sense that these are used as a validation for how the owner of the Instagram account's personal brand is perceived in real life and on a personal basis. Therefore, the First Impression offline relates to whether individuals, with a close relationship to the owner of the Instagram account, believe the personal brand of the account owner to be a truthful reflection of reality. Further, Personality offline is an explanation of characteristics, interests and a description of the individual behind the personal brand, based on personal experiences and perceptions of individuals with a close relationship to the owner of the Instagram account. Additionally, the Values of what is important in life for the owner of the Instagram account are accounted for.

2.4.2 The Online and Offline Perception of Personal Branding

As mentioned above, the created conceptual framework streams from Johns and Saks (2001) theory around how perception is created. While constructing the new framework, Goffman's (1959) distinguishment of on-stage and off-stage personality has been taken into consideration. The on-stage personality refers to how individuals act when being exposed to a public setting and having an audience (Goffman, 1959), which is comparable to the online context. However, as the on-stage personality is managed with awareness of that it is being publicly displayed it is not always an accurate reflection of the self. By this, the on-stage personality is connected to the First Impression where the deeper levels of the framework, such as Personality and Values, are hidden from the public. On the contrary, the off-stage personality can be related to the hidden levels of the framework and the offline context. In the off-stage personality, individuals are more relaxed and comfortable in showing the self (Goffman, 1959). Therefore it can be easier to determine whether the first impression is coherent with personality and values in an offline context.

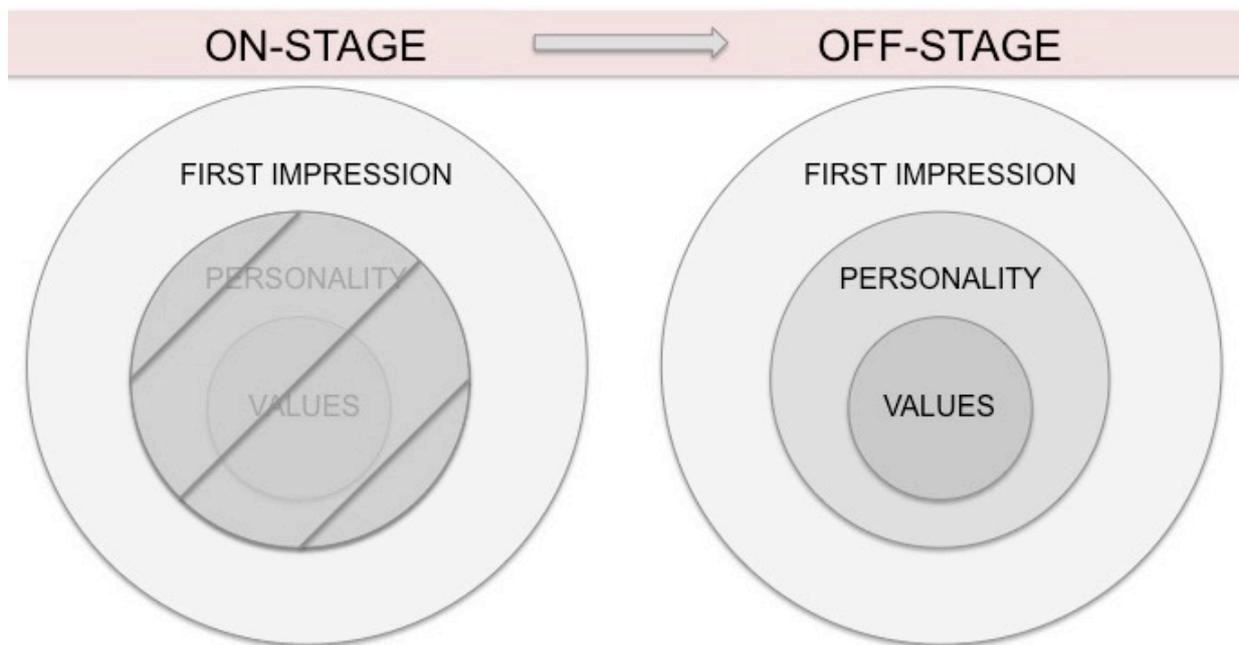


Figure 2.4.2. Interpretation of Goffman's (1959) On-Stage and Off-Stage Personality

Goffman's model of on-stage and off-stage personality has the deeper levels of Personality and Values are hidden in the on-stage perspective. However, by constructing a new conceptual framework based on the theory of perceptions and on-stage and off-stage personality, this

thesis aims to explore all three levels and gain a deeper understanding of how a personal brand is perceived in an online and offline context.

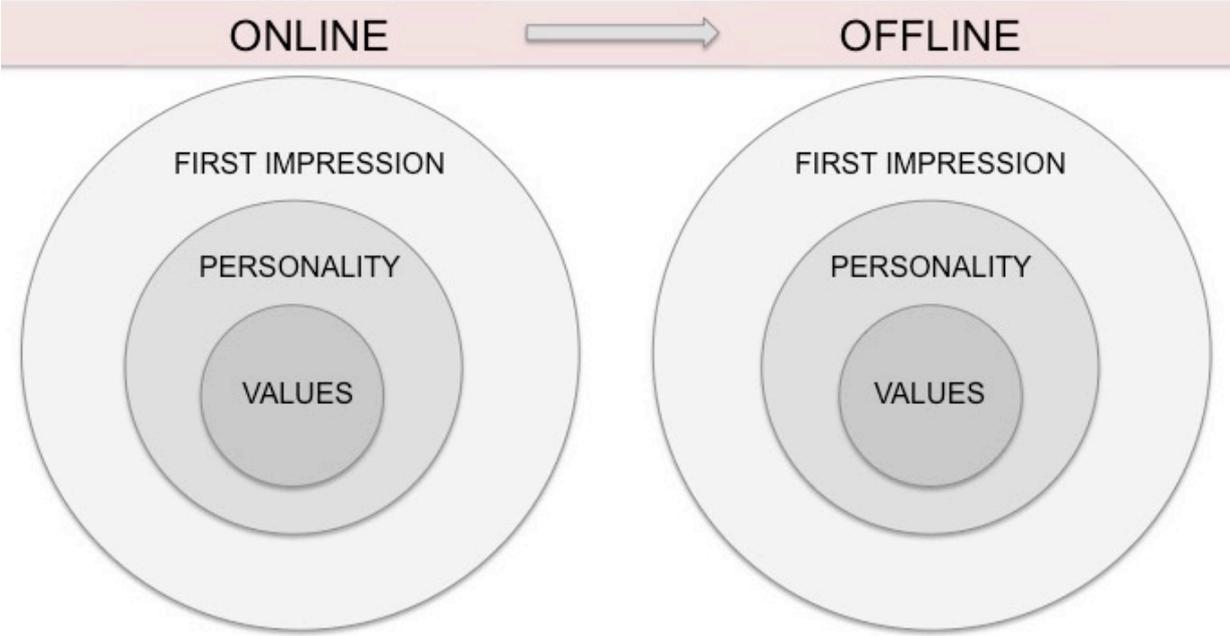


Figure 2.4.2. Conceptual Framework: The Online and the Offline Perception of a Personal Brand

3 Methodology

This chapter provides an explanation for the methodological approach of the thesis. Based on the purpose, the research design, data collection method, data analysis and reflection upon methodology are be presented. This to provide transparency in how this thesis has been conducted.

3.1 Research Approach and Design

As this thesis focus on interpretation and perception of personal branding, it has been chosen to adopt a social constructionist position, which depends on a view that social partakers build and modify the social phenomenon through interactions with each other (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Since the aim is to understand how individuals interpret and perceive a personal brand online and offline, this thesis explores a multifaceted display of an individual's identity and the truthfulness behind it. Hence an epistemological approach that enables interpretation is suitable, which implies that it is necessary to understand a social context to be able to comprehend how people within the environment interpret it (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

Since the purpose of this thesis is to explore and understand how personal brands are perceived and focuses on words rather than quantification, a qualitative research approach has been used (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The data has been gathered through a mixture of interviews and focus groups, which will later be referred to as *group interviews*. While conducting qualitative research, there are two main ways to approach the research design of the study, a deductive or an inductive approach. The deductive approach refers to testing a current hypothesis reasoned from an already existing theory (Bryman & Bell, 2007), and Alvesson and Sköldeberg (1994) problematizes this approach since the researcher can adjust the analysis to be coherent with the already existing theory. The inductive approach, however, attempts to create new theory by generating knowledge through the search for patterns and is considered to be rather neutral in relation to the existing theory (Bryman & Bell, 2007). As the inductive

approach revolves around the empirical data to provide insights and conclusions, it is commonly used in qualitative research. However, due to the motivation behind this thesis, to get a comprehension for a particular human conduct regarding perceptions of personal brands, this thesis has taken on a combination of the previously mentioned approaches - *an abductive approach*. The reason to why an abductive approach has been chosen is that the authors aim to analyse and draw conclusions from the empirical data, yet still use existing theory as support for the analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Eksell & Thelander, 2014). Alvesson and Sköldeberg (1994) suggest that an abductive approach is suitable for the understanding of underlying patterns while analysing complex situations. Additionally, it enables creativity in the process of analysis (Kirkeby, 1994), which has been necessary while conducting this thesis due to the limited amount of existing frameworks regarding the topic.

3.2 Data Collection Method

The intention of this thesis is to explore how personal brands are perceived online, and whether it differs from the offline perception of a person. Based on the purpose, a qualitative research approach has been adopted. Due to the fact that the thesis aims to explore how a particular phenomenon is perceived, the observations and insights have been collected through primary data from group interviews. Using primary data gives the researchers control over the research design as well as the ability to modify the strategy of collecting data to fit the research question (Hox & Boeije, 2005). Primary data also enables the authors to gather relevant ideas that fit the field of interest. Further, the ability to collect primary data allows coherence in the received data, which ensures the authors that the gathered data is relevant to answer the research question.

3.2.1 Group Interviews

To explore the perception of a personal brand online and compare it to the perception of the offline personal brand, a mixture of focus groups and in-depth interviews have been used to collect data. The reason for combining the two methods of collecting data is to gain advantages from both methods. Qualitative in-depth interviews are recommended to use while exploring social realities and perceptions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). However, since this type of data collection is conducted as directed conversations, the authors of this

thesis wanted to enable for discussion among interviewees, rather than having the authors' opinions influencing the answers. Therefore, the characteristics of a focus group, with a group setting encouraging discussion and offering a sense of comfort (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), was chosen to be a part of the method. From this on, the selected method including a mix between in-depth interviews and focus groups will be called group interviews.

The group interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews, as this interview form allows the researchers to ask follow-up questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Additionally, the authors did not want to have full control nor be directing the conversation; instead, the focus was on encouraging the participants to speak as freely as possible (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Further, the authors aimed to ensure that the participants of the group interviews were comfortable in being interviewed and would be giving truthful answers. Hence why the locations of the group interviews were important, and the authors chose to conduct the interviews in a relaxed social setting at various cafés to ensure a neutral, comfortable atmosphere. Moreover, all participants in the group interviews have given informed consent for their participation, including the opportunity to obtain knowledge about the purpose of the thesis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Additionally, the participants are aware that the observations and statements made during the group interviews will be displayed in this thesis. However, since the outcome of this thesis is not dependent on the identity of the participants, the authors have chosen to anonymise all participants.

3.2.1.1 Design of the Group Interviews

The group interviews took place during three separate occasions, and each occasion included one of the three groups participating in the study. The groups, called G1, G2, and G3, each consisted of two participants who knew each other well and have similar lifestyles and cultural backgrounds. However, there were no prior relationships between the three different groups as they were situated in different cities and had never met. Along with the three groups of two people in each, the study includes three research objects, called R1, R2, and R3. Each group has a research object that is unique to the group, which is a person that the two participants within that group have a personal relationship with and interacts with on a daily basis. For example, the two participants within G1 had a close relationship to R1 but had never met either R2 or R3. Similar to the groups, R1, R2, and R3 had no prior relationship with each other and had never met. The research objects, R1, R2 and R3 was the basis of the group interviews

with G1, G2 and G3, where the perception of the research objects' offline life and personal characteristics were discussed as well as the perception of their online Instagram account.

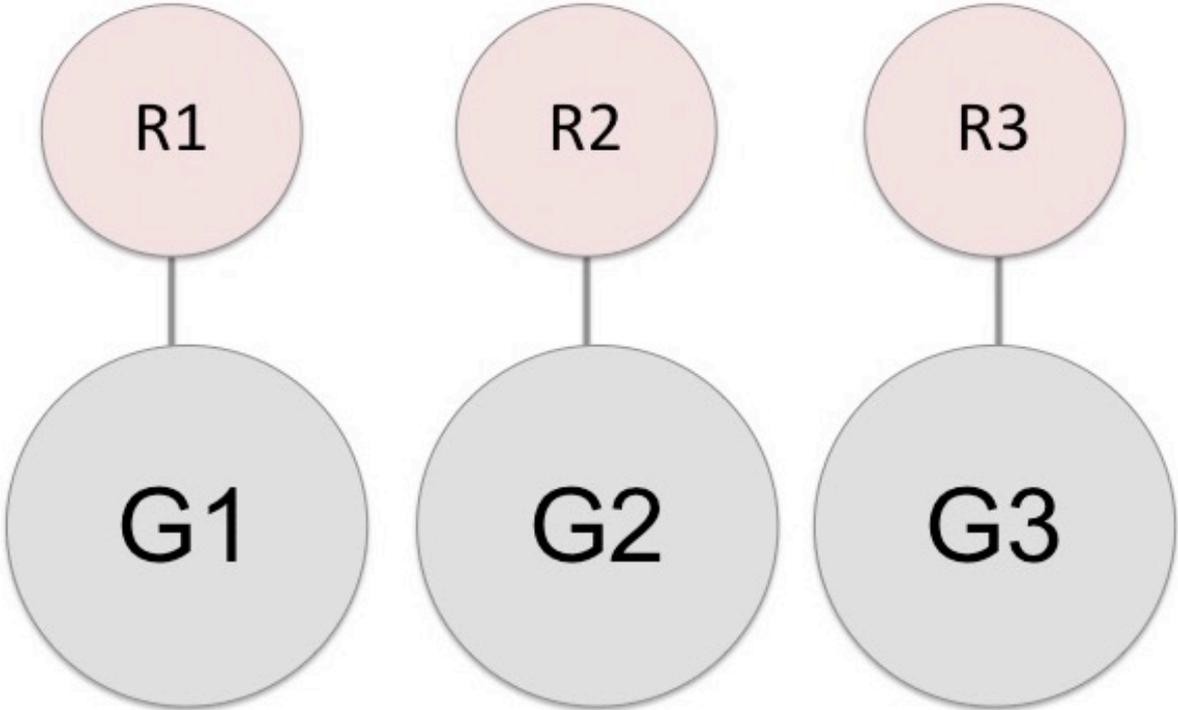


Figure 3.2.1.1. Research Groups and Research Objects

The interview process consisted of three main steps, each step including interview questions about the perception of the three research object's online and offline personal brand (see Figure 2.4.2). The interview questions were all developed and based on the conceptual framework, the previously mentioned model *The Online and the Offline Perception of a Personal Brand*. The framework stemmed from the literature found within the field of interest and was the foundation of the interview questions. The first step of the interview included an "inside-in perspective". In this step, G1 were asked to answer and discuss questions regarding offline aspects of their particular research object, R1. This step included questions divided into three different themes: 1) *First Impression*, 2) *Personality* and 3) *Values*. The interview questions were carefully chosen to fit the research purpose and understand the research object on an offline and personal level. For the first theme, First Impression, questions about how the interviewed groups believed that strangers perceived R1 were asked. Here the participants in G1 were asked to reflect on experiences they had when meeting R1 for the first time and situations when R1 had met new people for the first time, along with the reactions towards meeting strangers. Regarding the second theme, Personality, the insights were gained through

questions about how G1 believed R1's personality to be, based on their friendship. Such questions involved R1's interests, personality traits, and characteristics. The final theme, Values, was the most difficult area to gain valuable information from. For this theme, the authors had to be careful of what interview questions to ask in order to gain data that were accurate and applicable to the research object's real values. It was decided that using hypothetical situations where G1 had to reflect on R1's behaviour in certain situations, was the more efficient way of gathering the necessary information. The chosen interview questions for the three themes provided the authors with an accurate image of how R1 is in real life, to gain insights to compare this image to the results gathered from the other two groups. The first step was, therefore, acting as verification, which provides the authors with information for comparison.

Step two in the research process involves an "outside-in perspective". In this step, G1 was asked to discuss and answer questions regarding the online perception of R2 and R3, both people they had never met before, by viewing their Instagram accounts and analysing the pictures that had been shared. Similar to the first step, the interview questions in step two were divided into the three themes: 1) *First Impression*, 2) *Personality* and 3) *Values*. In this second step, the questions within the three themes were comparable to the questions in step one. However, since G1 had no prior relationship with R2 and R3, the responses were simply assumptions based on the perception of their Instagram account and the pictures that had been shared. The first theme, First Impression, was based on questions about the mental image of R2 and R3 that G1 obtained when first looking at the Instagram accounts. For the second theme, Personality, questions about how G1 perceived R2 and R3's personalities through the Instagram accounts and why they made these assumptions were asked. Finally, to gain knowledge about the third theme, Values, the questions asked were connected to hypothetical situations of how G1 believed that R2 and R3 would act in certain situations. Furthermore, it was in step two that the interest was towards perception and how strangers perceived the research object online. Since G1 did not know R2 or R3 prior to the group interview, the authors of this thesis are confident that personal relationships and previous impressions did not influence the participants' perceptions of the Instagram accounts. The information gathered in step two from G1 (the online perception of R2 and R3) was later compared to what was found in step one from G2 and G3 (the offline perception of R2 and R3). Finally, the third and final step was to repeat the two-step process in all three groups and ensure consistency throughout the entire process.

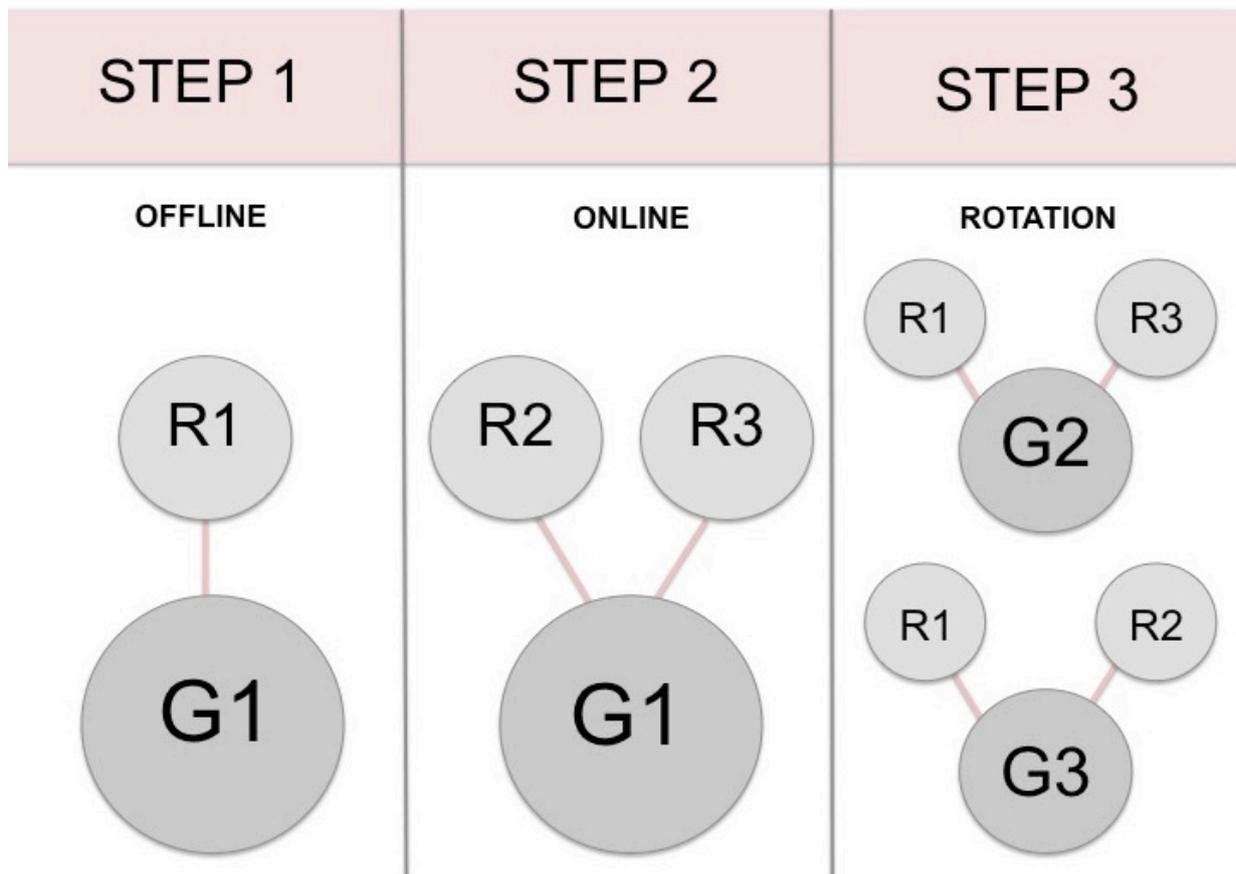


Figure 3.2.1.1. Steps of Interview Process

3.2.1.2 Research Objects

The three groups participating in the qualitative group interviews have, as mentioned above, one unique research object tied to them, G1 is connected to R1 for example. These research objects have personal relationships with their particular group; however, they are not participants in the discussion of the thesis. They are solely objects of research, both based on the perception of their Instagram accounts and their personal relationship with their particular research group. To delimit the discussion around the Instagram accounts, the authors of this thesis have chosen to use pictures shared by the research objects on their personal Instagram accounts from April 2016 until April 2017.

3.2.2 Sample and Selection of Participants

Sample sizes within qualitative studies tend to be relatively small with 5-25 participants within an interview study (Kvale, 1997). For this reason, it is important to ensure a high quality of the selected sample (Marshall, 1996). Therefore a non-random sampling method has been

adopted, allowing for a close evaluation of the participants to ensure consistency throughout the sample. The selected sample consists of three research objects (R1, R2, and R3) and three groups (G1, G2, and G3) that the authors of this thesis know on a personal level. The reason for selecting participants with a personal relationship to the authors of this thesis, is dependent on two factors. Firstly, since this thesis is exploring individuals' personal brands, it was important for the authors to ensure that the research objects felt comfortable to participate in the study and to trust the authors to handle the material respectfully while having the Instagram accounts publicly displayed. Secondly, the personal relationship was to ensure that all the participants within the three groups knew the research object, connected to their particular group, well to be able to provide the authors with valuable insights and information. To confirm the relationship between the group and their chosen research object, interview questions about the research objects' personal life was asked. These questions included the age, education, occupation, and relationship status of the research object.

Along with the importance for the authors to have a consistent sample, it is also vital to choose participants that can provide the authors with rich insights within the field of study (Marshall, 1996). By this, the authors have used purposive sampling, where four different criteria have been developed for the research objects to meet for participating in the study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Merriam, 1994). The criteria involve: 1) an age range from 20-30, 2) Swedish, 3) an active Instagram account, and 4) update their Instagram at least two times a month. These criteria have been established to facilitate an easier sampling process for the authors, along with making the research result legitimate.

3.3 Data Analysis

After conducting all the interviews and gathering the data, the authors transcribed the interviews along with added handwritten notes to find patterns, similarities, and differences among the respondents (MacLean, Meyer & Estable, 2004). The group interviews were conducted in the participants' native language, Swedish, and during the transcription, the data was translated into English by the authors of this thesis. To further analyse the collected data the authors used the three steps suggested by Mayer (2015): 1) *data reduction*, 2) *data display*, and 3) *drawing and verifying conclusions*. The first step, data reduction, was done through categorising and labelling the collected data. This prevented the authors from losing out on potential

information that could help in the process of answering the research question. The second step, data display, was carried out to notice patterns and trends. This was conducted through condensing the data into a chart together with colour coding different categories and themes to provide the authors with a better overview of what had been collected. The themes that the data were categorised into were based on the conceptual framework (see Figure 3). Based on this, the data was divided and colour coded into the themes: First Impression, Personality, and Values. The final step, drawing and verifying conclusions, was done with help from the two previous steps as they both helped the authors conclude the collected data. Further, the last step included answering the research question based on the analysis along with the empirical findings gathered from the collected data (Mayer, 2015).

3.4 Reflection upon Methodology

As qualitative research takes an interest in subjectivity and creation of meaning, rather than presenting measurable results, the main criticism is towards how it should be measured (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Heide & Simonsson, 2014). Instead of applying quantitative evaluation terms, such as validity, reliability and objectivity to this thesis, the authors are using Lincoln and Gruba's (1985) four criteria: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*. These criteria, and how they have considered in this thesis, will be discussed below.

As the aspect of credibility refers to how the gathering of data has been conducted, the method of data collection is of interest. Since the method, group interviews, has been carefully carried out by three different steps the authors have been able to obtain data both regarding how a personal brand is perceived online, and also gain knowledge of the reality offline. Although this thesis is not using a traditional approach of triangulation with several different methods (Bryman & Bell, 2007), the construction of group interviews and the three steps have enabled data from several sources and perspectives. Further, since the group interviews have been recorded and transcribed, and also have been intensively discussed between the authors, the citations within the analysis are of high credibility.

The transferability of a qualitative study concerns the ability to apply the results of the research in another social context (Bryman & Bell, 2007). In this thesis, the social context refers to Instagram, whether the perception of the personal brand online is coherent with the percep-

tion of the offline persona. The authors of this thesis find Instagram to be a suitable platform due to its popularity, along with the aspect of being able to show personal identity by sharing pictures instead of solely sharing an academic or professional outline. However, it is important to add that even though the number of Instagram users are growing, the majority of the world population is still not using Instagram. Additionally, it is also important to consider that the sampling of the thesis consisted of a rather homogenous group, where the participants come from a similar background, are well educated, and are close in age. Therefore, due to the aspect that this thesis is regarding the perception, rather than Instagram as a social platform, the results of this thesis not applicable in all aspects of online personal branding and to all users of social media platforms. However, they are possible to transfer to similar social contexts and individuals with similar traits as the research objects.

The dependability in qualitative research refers to if the same results are achievable by conducting the thesis on another occasion, where Larsson (2010) argues this can be accomplished by having a transparent and clear work process. Since qualitative studies are founded on the interpretation of the researcher, it is important to have this in mind while processing the data. Therefore, the authors have adopted an as neutral part in the presentation of the results as possible, which has been accounted for by recording the interviews, along with carefully discussing the data together.

Confirmability is hard to obtain in qualitative research since the primary interest is towards interpretation rather than the aspect of being objective (Lincoln & Gruba, 1985). In this thesis, the aspect of conformability, therefore, concerns the ability of the authors to act in good faith while collecting and handling the data, and not actively influence the participants' discussion and responses. Hence why semi-structured interviews were used, along with open-ended questions to avoid simple responses such as yes or no. Additionally, the aim of letting the participants lead and be co-producers of the discussion the authors of this thesis the authors believe can strengthen its conformability.

4 Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings regarding the perception of the research objects based on the group interviews. The chapter is divided into two parts, where the first part presents the online perceptions of the research objects and the second part the offline perception of the research objects.

4.1 Online Perception

The first part of the empirical findings aims to present the data, collected from the group interviews, regarding the online perception of the research objects. Based on the conceptual framework (see 2.4), this part has been divided into the three separate sections presented in the conceptual framework: First Impression, Personality, and Values. The section of First Impression contains information of how the research objects, based on their Instagram accounts, initially were perceived by the participants of the group interviews. The Personality section presents how the participants tried to determine the identity, characteristics, and interests of the research objects based on their Instagram accounts. Finally, the section regarding the Values demonstrates which aspects of life that were perceived as important for the research objects.

4.1.1 First Impression Online

The First Impression is the first layer of the conceptual framework and the first step when forming a perception of the personal brands on Instagram. When the participants of the group interviews were asked to describe their First Impression of the different owners of the Instagram accounts, words such as *happy*, *social* and *active* were frequently mentioned to describe all three research objects. The participants' descriptions were all connected to positive emotions, and they agreed upon all the research objects to be perceived as likeable and genuine persons online. This was for instance demonstrated by the participants in the group interviews in the following ways:

“My first spontaneous thought is also that she’s a happy girl [...] she also seems sporty [...] and her family seems very important.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 20, 2017)

“She looks like a happy, young girl who likes to party and who is in her early twenties [...]. She seems to have an exciting life”.

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)

“She is a very cute girl. Based on the posted pictures her life seems to be a mix between family, party, and fika with friends. It is a mix of a lot of things. [...] She seems like she works out a lot”.

Online Perception: Participant from Group 3, about Research Object 2 (interview, April 16, 2017)

While further analysing the gathered data from the group interviews a pattern, mutual for all research objects, regarding the First Impression was found. The pattern consisted of how genuine the research objects were portrayed to be through the shared pictures, where the aspect of being genuine was discussed among the participants. For instance, one of the participants felt that Instagram users often portray glamorous and desirable lifestyles that are not true to the actual lifestyle of the user. The aspect of being genuine was underlined in the following way by one of the participants:

“Since Instagram has become this way now, the more fake the pictures look the more I think that their life are not this way. As you call the “Instagram-life” and the everyday life, the Instagrammers show “behind the curtains” and you sit there and think “oh my god” [...] This seems genuine.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 20, 2017)

Further, the perception of being genuine was expressed to be enhanced if the picture was portraying a certain event or activity from the daily life of the research objects. By sharing pictures of the daily life, the participants discussed that these could display a sense of meaning to the life of research objects, rather than being perceived as staged pictures. It was found that for the specific research objects of this thesis, the more pictures that were shared from the everyday life, the more genuine he or she was perceived to be online. The participants expressed that the pictures that seemed staged were giving the impression of the research objects as being less genuine than when the shared pictures contained happenings from an everyday life. For instance, pictures that contained everyday activities such as celebrating that it was Friday by having a cup of coffee, or pictures of working out and being sweaty, were perceived by the participants as genuine. In contrast, the pictures containing pretty table settings and food, or nice environments with extraordinary views, were perceived by the participants of

the group interviews as less genuine and not a true reflection of the actual life of the research object. The aspect of being genuine was further defined in the following ways:

”There are multiple pictures that look staged with food and things like that [...] However, she posts sweaty pictures, when she is in the water with her hair all wet, and here is another picture with a helmet where she rides her bike. It is very “this is how I look”. My first thought was, “her followers really get to follow her daily life”. It feels like you are a part of her everyday life, for real. It does not feel like a very staged everyday life, there are pictures of her buying a car, getting some flowers, cleaning the apartment, and drinking coffee.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 20, 2017)

”She wants to show off a good and nice surface of who she is on Instagram [...] She likes dressing up and she likes taking pictures of herself [...]”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)

Further, the research objects who shared pictures from the daily life were perceived as more genuine and to be easier for the participants of the group interviews to relate to. However, stereotyping did occur among the some of the participants while forming the First Impression. It happened in the sense that the First Impression was coloured based on the perceivers’ previous experiences, which for instance influenced factors such as the age of the owner of the Instagram account. Two participants made the following observations when discussing the perceived age of one of the research objects:

“When people post pictures of mirror selfies [self-portraits] and very edited photos, it personally gives me the impression of a younger person. [...] Also, the more people that are in a picture, the younger I think that they are.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)

“I think she reminds me of the way I was right after high school, so that is why I would guess that she is around that age.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)

Based on the participants’ observations and discussions, the empirical data portrayed a positive online perception regarding the First Impression of the research objects. Further, the participants of the group interviews perceived the research objects as genuine and likeable individuals, where the research objects were described to be happy, social and active.

4.1.2 Personality Online

The Personality is the second layer of the conceptual framework and represents the identity, characteristics and interests of the research objects. The participants of the group interviews initially based the perception of the research objects' Personalities around the similar characteristics that were mentioned regarding the First Impression. Characteristics, such as *happy*, *social*, *energetic*, *kind*, *sweet* and *self-confident*, were discussed by the participants and described to apply to all the research objects. However, regarding the perception and understanding of the Personality of the research objects, the participants tended to base their assumptions on what was directly portrayed in the shared pictures. For instance, if there was a picture where one of the research objects was visiting an art exhibition, art was perceived as a primary interest. Further, if another research object had shared pictures of attending social events, the conclusion among the participants was stated that it was a person who had a very social and outgoing personality. The following comments are examples for what was expressed by the participants, regarding the research objects' Personalities:

“She’s seems happy and social. When she does social things I think it is very important for her to be positive and happy and talk to everyone.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 22, 2017)

“She likes pictures of herself [...] She does not have an issue with taking up space, she’s more fine with that [...] She has a larger self confident I would say, but she still has both feet on the ground.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)

“Her personality seems to be based on her interests in partying and travelling [...] here she is at a Lars Wallin exhibition so I think she is interested in art [...] here is a picture of a dog too, so maybe dogs are an interest as well.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 3, about Research Object 2 (interview, April 16, 2017)

Despite the fact that all of the research objects were expressed to be perceived as social and outgoing individuals based on the shared pictures, the degree to how social and outgoing they were varied and changed throughout the discussion. One aspect that was expressed by the participants was that if the majority of the shared pictures were in group settings, rather than of the individual alone, the person behind the Instagram account was perceived to be a shy and modest person. The perception was described in the following way by one of the participants of the group interviews:

“I think that maybe she is a little bit shy based on the fact that she does not have any pictures of only her [...] just because she has a lot of pictures with people, it does not necessarily mean that she takes up a lot of space. Maybe she is more comfortable with posing together with other people beside her because she is shy and does not want to post pictures of only herself.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 20, 2017)

In contrast to being perceived as shy and modest when the majority of pictures were portraying group settings, the participants considered the research objects with numerous pictures of oneself to be very self-confident. The participants speculated whether the self-confidence could be interpreted as narcissistic behaviour, where the research objects’ motives for sharing pictures of themselves were discussed. However, the participants of the group interviews did not describe the research objects as narcissists. The following comment demonstrates an example of the participants’ discussion regarding narcissism:

“If there is a variation between pictures of themselves and pictures with friends it is great, if there is either only pictures of the person themselves or only pictures of their friends it seems like they are either narcissistic or very shy. [...] She does seem genuine though and not narcissistic. You can still see her personality behind the picture.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)

Whether the underlying motivations for why the research objects were sharing pictures on Instagram were narcissistic or not, the participants of the group interviews pointed out that it was harder to determine the Personality of the research objects when the pictures were extensively edited with a lot of filters. The extensive editing was expressed to make the participants suspicious towards the research objects being genuine. The suspicion was for instance expressed by the participants in the following ways:

“I absolutely think it says something about how edited it is and how staged it is, and how you are as a person.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 2 (interview, April 20, 2017)

“I think it all looks very nice and pretty, everything is very well polished, which makes me a little suspicious [...] I feel like she has a lot of accomplishment anxiety. She seems like she is “the good girl” and wants to live up to that, but at the same time has anxiety over that and does not feel very good about herself. She is trying to live up to something.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 22, 2017)

Further, it was mentioned that if the research objects’ Instagram accounts gave the impression of staging the pictures, the participants of the group interviews perceived the Personality to be

pedantic with a high need for control. By this, the initial level of being genuine that the First Impression had provided, was decreased as it made the participants question both the character and the daily life of the research object. While discussing the perceived Personality of the research objects, the aspect of using Instagram as a tool for self-exposure in relation to having a desirable life was observed in the following way by the participants:

“I think that [Research Object 1] catches everything she does in a picture, compared to [Research Object 2] for example who does a lot of fun things but doesn’t necessarily feel the need to post pictures of everything she does. I think [Research Object 1] lives a life that is about actively creating moments that can look good on Instagram and share on social media.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)

“The question is if she does some of these things only because she wants it to look good in pictures.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 22, 2017)

When discussing the Personality, the participants’ of the group interviews initial perception of the research objects as being very self-confident changed. The previously perceived high level of confidence was changed into self-doubt and insecurity. As the participants started to question the motivations behind the shared pictures, the research objects who initially were perceived with a Personality of very self-confident were instead described to be seen as more insecure and seeking confirmation from other individuals online. For instance, the discussion regarding self-confidence can be seen through the following two comments:

“She seems to have thought through everything she posts carefully. She seems like she wants to show the image of belonging to a certain social group. [...] she cares about what other people thinks generally. People that she barely knows but that still know who she is, she cares about what they think of her. She does not only care about the confirmation from her closest friends.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 3, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)

“I do not think that she is very secure and self-confident. I was just like that when I was younger. I wanted confirmation because I was a little insecure and I wanted it to be confirmed that I looked good because I actually was not too sure of myself.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)

When the participants were asked to discuss how they perceived each research objects’ Personality to be like, the primacy effects from the First Impression were noticed regarding all of the research objects. For instance, when the First Impression of one of the research objects had been formed and decided to surround a social lifestyle with partying as a primary interest,

this was reflected in the answers of how the same research object's Personality was described. Furthermore, in this case, the participants of the group interviews tried to reason for why this particular research object liked to party. However, at the same time, the initial perception tended to change when the participants tried to go deeper and understand the research objects' different personality traits, which created a contradiction towards the initial perceived Personality. The contradiction will be further discussed in the analysis (see 5).

4.1.3 Values Online

The final layer of the conceptual framework, the Values, is representing the most inner part of an individual. During the interviews, the participants discussed Values as aspects in life of great importance for the research objects, and recurrent words describing the three research objects' Values were *time with friends and family* and *having a career and being successful*. The participants' descriptions of the research objects were all connected to the importance of nurturing already existing relationships with family members, old and new friends, and a significant other. The importance of relationships with friends was highlighted throughout the interviews through answers and discussions about who the closest people to the research objects were and how much these meant to the research objects. Based on the empirical data, collected from the group interviews, it was found that all three research objects were perceived to value their closest group of friends a lot. Indications of highly valuing close friends were seen through the shared pictures as a large number of the pictures included one or multiple friends, and the same friends also recurred multiple times in the pictures. By this, the participants thought that the research objects found it important to spend an extensive amount of time with friends along with caring for them. The importance of friendship was recurrently mentioned regarding all three research objects and observed in the following way by one of the participants:

“I think she values her close friends very very much and she seems to have a girl gang that she is extremely close to and that she is doing a lot of things together with.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)

Although relationships regarding friendship were the most frequently mentioned Value by the participants, the importance of family was also perceived as high. If the research object had posted pictures with their families, they were described as genuine and sweet individuals who valued their parents and siblings as well as a longing to start a family of their own. Pictures of

family members were further considered as an indication of valuing time with family, rather than being out and partying on the weekends. The choice of picking family over parties was reflected upon by one of the participants in the following way:

“On a Friday night she would have dinner with her boyfriend or maybe go on a double date with another couple. Or maybe she spends her weekends with going home to her family that lives very close by and have dinner with them and hang out with them. I think that she would pick her family over a night of partying.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 22, 2017)

Further, the participants thought the importance of having a career and being successful was highly valued by all three research objects. However, the importance of having a career was observed as being less significant than maintaining a close relationship with friends and family. The perception of all three research objects was that they would not choose a career over friends and family. The aspect of choosing friends and family over a career was highlighted by the following two comments from participants of the group interviews:

“I think that she values starting a family, a career does not mean as much to her as her family does. Her relationship with her boyfriend seems extremely important too. [...] she also seems like she cares what others think of her”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 22, 2017)

“I think she values friends and family, but also success. Not that she is extremely focused on making a career but wants to do well and it is important for her [...] but she would not want to move far from her friends and family.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 3, about Research Object 2 (interview, April 16, 2017)

Another pattern that was observed through the empirical data from the group interviews was that the participants believed there to be a relationship between posting pictures online of oneself and valuing looks and appearance. In contrast to sharing pictures of friends and family, the research objects who updated Instagram with an extensive amount of pictures of themselves were perceived as self-centred. The participants of the group interviews expressed that if a larger number of the shared pictures had included friends and family instead, the perception of the research object would be different. The importance of publicly displaying how the individual looks was described as seeking for confirmation from other individuals online. By this, the participants expressed that they perceived the research object as being insecure. The aspect of valuing looks and appearance was further underlined in the following way by participants in the group interviews:

“She only posts pictures when she looks good.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 3, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 16, 2017)

“Some of her pictures I think are only posted because she wants herself and her life to look good.

She seems like she loves confirmation too, I could see that through some of the comments. She

wants to show her friends what clothes she is wearing and so.”

Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)

As mentioned above, the participant's' observations during the group interviews led to common themes of the research objects' perceived Values: time with friends and family, along with having a career and being successful. These themes together with the expressed relationship between sharing pictures of oneself and valuing looks and appearance lay as the base for understanding how the research objects' Values were perceived online.

4.2 Offline Perception

The second part of the empirical findings aims to present the data, collected from the group interviews, regarding the offline perception of the research objects. Similar to the online part, the findings have been divided into the three sections presented in the conceptual framework: First Impression, Personality, and Values. The section of First Impression contains information of how the research objects were perceived offline. It is important to underline that it could be difficult for the participants of the group interviews to describe the First Impression of the research objects. The reason for this, being that the participants had close personal relationships with the research objects and had known them for a long time. However, the participants' descriptions of the research objects are important for the comparison between the online and the offline perception that will be presented in the analysis (see 5). Additionally, this part includes statements of how the participants, with personal relationships to the research objects, believed that the personal brand on Instagram would be perceived by other individuals who did not know the particular research object. The Personality section presents how the participants, with personal relationships to the research objects, described the identity, characteristics, and interests of the research objects. Finally, the last section regarding the Values demonstrates which aspects of life the participants with personal relationships to the research objects perceived as highly important for the research objects.

4.2.1 First Impression Offline

As mentioned above, the participants had known the research objects for a long time and it was, therefore, difficult to discuss the First Impression regarding the offline perception. However, the participants' descriptions of the research objects' were of importance for the purpose of this thesis, and therefore the First Impression has been discussed related to the overall description of the research objects. The collected data showed that the participants while discussing the offline perception described the research objects in similar ways. All of the research objects were perceived as being satisfied with their life and nurturing in their relationships with friends and family, along with being socially driven individuals with active lifestyles. Words such as *happy*, *sweet*, *thoughtful*, *nice*, *social* and *fun* were recurring in the participants' descriptions of the research objects. To provide examples of the participants' descriptions of the research objects, the following comments have been selected:

“She is happy. And I would say she is VERY family oriented, she is very close to both her parents and her older brother [...] Her biggest interests are sports, gym in the winter and bicycling in the summer.”

Offline Perception: Participant in Group 3, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 16, 2017)

“I would describe her as happy. She has a lot of energy and wants to have people around her and things happening. [...] She is a social joy spreader I would say.”

Offline Perception: Participant in Group 1 about Research Object 1 (interview, April 20, 2017)

Additionally, the participants expressed the research objects to be likeable individuals. Although the research objects were described with similar traits, one of them was described to have a tougher and harder appearance regarding the First Impression than the other two. One of the participants explained it in the following way:

“On many job interviews, she says herself that the biggest misconception about her is that she looks “hard” and that it is something she is working on, and is aware of. [...] That is the reason for why we have talked about her both as the happy girl and the “hard” girl. She is becoming more aware of this and is starting to realise that she actually is the lively and happy girl but is perceived as hard.”

Offline Perception: Participant in Group 1 about Research Object 1 (interview, April 20, 2017)

The gathered data showed that none of the participants in the three group interviews believed that the First Impression of their particular research object would be a fair representation of the individual. Further, the participants did not believe that it would be possible for other

individuals to form a correct perception of the research objects based only on the First Impression. The expressed concern about not being able to perceive a correct First Impression of the research objects was discussed by all participating groups and highlighted in the following ways:

“People probably do not get a very good first impression of her, but then I also think that the first impression is not true towards who she is.”

Offline Perception: Participant in Group 1 about Research Object 1 (interview, April 20, 2017)

“From just looking at her Instagram I would say she is a party person that likes to show around. It shows her as a more extrovert person than she actually is in reality.”

Offline Perception: Participant in Group 2 about Research Object 2 (interview, April 22, 2017)

“I think that in person she appears as more social and open and trying new things than she actually is.”

Offline Perception: Participant in Group 3 about Research Object 3 (interview, April 16, 2017)

The reason for why the participants of the group interviews did not believe that the First Impression was going to be perceived in a way which was accurate to reality, was that the participants thought that the Instagram account was embellished. The participants expressed that the impression they had of each research object could not be obtained through solely viewing their Instagram account. The participants stated that for other individuals to be able to perceive the research objects similar to how they did, the impressions had to be formed by personal relationships with the research objects.

4.2.2 Personality Offline

Regarding the offline perception of the research objects' Personalities, the participants expressed words such as *happy*, *social*, *sweet* and *caring*, which were similar for all three research objects. The participants also described the research objects as helpful, compassionate and reliable friends. To provide examples of the discussed Personalities of the research objects, the following comments are demonstrated:

“She is an extremely helpful friend [...] and is always there when you need her to be. [...] Generous, both emotionally and that you are allowed to come to her place and you are always welcome. [...] It is like “now we will talk about your problem” and she understands that you need her sometimes. That I think is the best thing about her.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 20, 2017)

“It is very easy for her to talk to people and to be social and nice and stuff like that. She is very likable if you say so. It is hard not to like [Research Object 2], there are no reasons for not liking her.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 2 (interview, April 20, 2017)

“Calm, caring, very family oriented and sweet towards everyone she knows.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 3, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 16, 2017)

Although the overall perceptions regarding the offline Personalities were positive and similar to each other, some observations differed among the three research objects. For instance, the Personality regarding the social life of the research objects in the sense of how social and outgoing they were differed among the three. One research object was described as very energetic and enjoying to be the centre of attention:

“She is very social and outgoing, and has no trouble with talking to people. She loves being the centre of attention.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 20, 2017)

The two other research objects were also expressed to be social, yet not to the same extent. The participants explained that it was not until personal relationships had been formed with the research object that the social side entirely showed. Further, one of the research objects was described as calm and rather quiet in social settings. The participants described the social aspect of the two research objects with the following comments:

“She is very social with the people she knows well, but she is holding back towards strangers. [...] She does not love being the centre of attention and she is not the loudest person, but she is always a part of the group and conversation.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 2 (interview, April 22, 2017)

”I think that she at first appears as more social and open and trying new things than she actually is. [...] I know that one of her new year resolutions this year [2017] was to be more social. So I think that last year [2016] she felt that she was not social enough and could improve on that.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 3, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 16, 2017)

Another aspect that was discussed during the group interviews was how self-confident the research objects were in social settings. None of the research objects was described as uncomfortable in social settings, and all were expressed to enjoy engaging in conversations with people they knew. However, the participants stated that the research objects were not as self-confident in meeting new people. As mentioned above one of the research objects was de-

scribed to be holding back the true Personality when meeting strangers, and another one was explained to be challenging herself to become more social. The participants believed that the research objects should take a greater place and become more self-confident in social settings:

“She should stand up for herself sometimes and stand up for her own personal opinions. I know that her friends have very strong voices and sometimes she is struggling with getting her voice heard. She should be surer of herself.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 2 (22 April 2017)

Further, the self-confidence was discussed by the participants in the sense that the research objects embellished the self-image that they were portraying to other individuals, who did not know them. For instance, the self-confidence was expressed in the following way by the participants:

“I think that on her pictures, she can seem to be really confident in herself and really like how she looks and stuff. [...] And she is one of the prettiest we know, and she is just so nice, but I do not think she always sees it, and can be rather self-conscious. She is just more modest in real life... [...] She is much more humble in how she views herself and her looks than I think that many that do not know her perceives her to be.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 20, 2017)

Similar for all research objects was that they were not expressed to have any particular hobbies. Instead, the participants described the research objects' interests to revolve around social gatherings with friends and family, along with being active and interested in fashion and home interior. For instance, the participants described the research objects' interests in the following way:

“Her main interests are fashion, design, furnishing and making her home look pretty. [...] She is also an active person, but not a typical sports person [...] I would say that her major interest is social settings [...] food and drinks [...] and doing fun things together with other people.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 2 (interview, April 22, 2017)

“She does not have a particular hobby, but she likes going to the gym during the winter and goes biking during the summer. [...] She is interested in fashion and clothes.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 3, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 16, 2017)

As mentioned above, the research objects' Personalities were all expressed to be happy, social, sweet and caring. Further, they were not perceived to have any particular hobbies, yet interests were described to revolve around social gatherings, being active, along with liking

fashion and home interior. However, the description of the Personalities varied between the research objects regarding how social they were perceived and how self-confident they were. The similarities and differences found between the research objects' Personalities are of importance for the analysis (see 5), where the offline perception of the research objects will be compared to the online perception of the same research objects.

4.2.3 Values Offline

Regarding the offline perception of the research objects' Values, the participants of the group interviews mentioned *time with friends and family*, and *having a career and being successful* as the most important things in life for all three research objects. The importance of having close relationships and to spend time with friends and family were frequently mentioned by the participants. It was also described to be important for one of the research objects to be popular both within the closest group of friends and also among strangers. Further, the research objects were described to value a career and to be successful, however, when comparing the career to the relationship with friends and family all participants stated that the relationships were more important than job-related success. The aspect of choosing friends and family over job-related success was expressed by participants in the following two comments:

“She wants to have people and things that are happening around her and she loves to hang out with people. She is very social and outgoing [...] I think being popular is important to her. [...] Since she is very social, she maybe has a hard time to be alone and therefore she is afraid to end up in that situation. Therefore it is important for her to be surrounded by people, and to have a lot of friends. But she wants a lot career-wise as well, but I think that if she has to choose between career and friends she would choose friends.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 20, 2017)

“She values family and relationships [...] She also wants a good career, but that will never come before friends and family. A career is not the most important thing to her and she is not that type of person that would sacrifice everyone to move somewhere for a good job. At the same time she wants to reach a specific point in life where she has a good career”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 2 (interview, April 22, 2017)

In addition to the Values mentioned above, looks and appearance were also underlined by the participants as important for the research objects, and they were all perceived to have an interest in fashion. The materialistic aspect of buying new fashion items was considered to be important for the research objects. For instance, one of the research objects was described to

have a need for accentuating new fashion items. The importance of looks and beauty was expressed in the following way by the participants:

“I think she thinks that it is important that she is well dressed. She very often buys new clothes, and they are always things that are trendy and fashion clothing. You can determine what the current trend in society is by looking at [Research Object 1]. She does not have the same clothes today as she did a year ago. Her wardrobe changes constantly.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 20, 2017)

“She does not care about the outside a lot and would not show off expensive things. At the same time I know that she values those types of things and would like to have expensive purses and things like that. When she can afford expensive bags, she will buy them. Those things will be important for her in the future, but she is not the one that would brag about it or show it off.”

Offline Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 2 (interview, April 22, 2017)

As mentioned above, the research objects were perceived by the participants to have similar beliefs of what was considered to be important in life. The Values discussed during the group interviews included nurturing relationships by spending time with friends and family, along with having a career and being successful. Additionally, looks and appearance were expressed to be of importance, yet it was considered to be more important for one of the research objects. The offline perceptions of the research objects' Values that have been described in this part will be further analysed and compared to the online perception of the Values in the analysis (see 5).

5. Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis where a comparison between the online perception and the offline perception of the personal brands has been conducted. The comparison is structured based on the conceptual framework and is discussed in relation to existing theory. Finally, this chapter ends with a discussion around the conceptual framework, which has been created for this thesis.

5.1 Comparison Between the Online and the Offline Perception

As mentioned earlier, in agreement with Philbrick and Cleveland (2015), this thesis takes on the perspective that everyone has a personal brand, which identifies, clarifies, and communicates who we are to the world around us. Personal branding is expressed as a way to regulate how others perceive and think of an individual, where the personal brand is demonstrated through the expectations, image, and perceptions that other individuals will connect to the owner of the personal brand (Rampersad, 2008). Based on this definition, the Instagram accounts can be interpreted as a platform where individuals can communicate the personal brands, as the owner of the account is in charge of regulating the content that is shared. Moreover, as the purpose of this thesis is to explore how individuals perceive a personal brand online, on social media, versus offline in real life and whether there is a difference in the perception of the personal brand, a comparison between the perceptions has been conducted. The analysis highlights differences and similarities that have been found based on the empirical findings, which are discussed in relation to existing theory and previous research. Similar to the presentation of the empirical findings, the analysis has been structured based on the conceptual framework and divided into three sections: First Impression, Personality, and Values, where each section discusses and highlights the empirical findings for each layer of the conceptual framework. Finally, the analysis is concluded by a discussion regarding the conceptual framework.

5.1.1 Tables of Comparison

To provide an overview of the empirical findings, which is the foundation of the analysis, the two following tables have been constructed. The tables contain findings from each layer of the conceptual framework, obtained through the group interviews. The first table presents keywords regarding the online and the offline perception of the research objects and the second table demonstrates quotes from the participants.

Table 5.1.1. Keywords From The Group Interviews

	Online Keywords	Offline Keywords
First Impression	Happy, social, active	Happy, social, sweet, thoughtful, nice, fun
Personality	Happy, social, sweet, kind, energetic, self-confident, tough, shy	Happy, social, sweet, caring, self-conscious, humble, reserved
Values	Time with friends and family, having a career and beings successful, cares what people think, looks and appearance	Time with friends and family, having a career and beings successful, being popular, looks and appearance

Table 5.1.1. Quotes From The Group Interviews

	Online Quotes	Offline Quotes
First Impression	<p>“My first spontaneous thought is also that she is a happy girl [...] and her family seems very important.”</p> <p>Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 20, 2017)</p>	<p>“She is happy. And I would say she is VERY family oriented, she is very close to both her parents and her older brother [...]. Her biggest interests are sports, gym in the winter and bicycling in the summer.”</p> <p>Participant from Group 3, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 16, 2017)</p>
	<p>“She looks like a happy, young girl who likes to party and who is in her early twenties [...] She seems to have an exciting life.”</p> <p>Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)</p>	<p>“I would describe her as happy. She has a lot of energy and wants to have people around her and things happening. [...] She is a social joy spreader i would say.”</p> <p>Participant in Group 1, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 20, 2017)</p>

Personality	<p>“She seems very happy and social. When she does social things I think it is very important for her to be positive and happy and talk to everyone.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 22, 2017)</p> <p>“She likes pictures of herself [...] She does not have an issue with taking up space, she is more fine with that [...] She has a larger self confident I would say, but she still has both feet on the ground.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 22, 2017)</p>	<p>“I think that she at first appears as more social and open to trying new things than she actually is [...] I know that one of her new year resolutions this year [2017] was to be more social. So I think that last year [2016] she felt that she was not social enough and could improve on that.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Participant from Group 3, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 16, 2017)</p> <p>“I think that on her pictures, she can seem to be really confident in herself and really like how she looks and stuff. [...] And she is like one of the prettiest we know, and she is just so nice, but I do not think she always sees it, and can be rather self-aware and self-conscious. She is just more modest [...] She is much more humble in how she views herself and her looks than I think that many that do not know her perceives her to be.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 20, 2017)</p>
Values	<p>“I think that she values starting a family, a career does not mean as much to her as her family does. Her relationship with her boyfriend seems extremely important too. [...] She also seems like she cares what others think of her”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Online Perception: Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 3 (interview, April 22, 2017)</p>	<p>“She wants to have people and things that are happening around her and she loves to hang out with people. She is very social and outgoing [...] I think being popular is important to her. [...] Since she is very social, she maybe has a hard time to be alone and therefore she is afraid to end up in that situation. Therefore it is important for her to be surrounded by people, and to have a lot of friends. But she wants a lot career-wise as well, but I think that if she has to choose between career and friends she would choose friends.”</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Offline Perception: Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 1 (interview, April 20, 2017)</p>

	<p>“I think she values friends and family, but also success. Not that she is extremely focused on making a career but wants to do well and it is important for her [...] but she would not want to move far from her family and friends.”</p> <p>Participant from Group 1, about Research Object 2 (interview, April 20, 2017)</p>	<p>“She values family and relationships [...] She also wants a good career, but that will never come before friends and family. A career is not her most important thing and she is not that type of person that would sacrifice everyone to move somewhere for a good job. At the same time she wants to reach a specific point in life where she has a good career.”</p> <p>Participant from Group 2, about Research Object 2 (interview, April 20, 2017)</p>
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5.2 First Impression

Based on the conceptual framework, the layer of First Impression contains information around the participants’ initial thoughts and impressions of the research objects when viewing the Instagram accounts for the first time. Additionally, the First Impression explores whether the personal brand is initially perceived in a positive or a negative way, and furthermore if the participants with personal relationships to the research objects believed the perception of the First Impression online to be coherent with the perception offline.

5.2.1 The Prediction of a Skewed First Impression

During the group interviews, it was stated that the participants with a personal relationship to their particular research object, did not believe that the online perception of the research objects would be coherent with the offline perception, by solely viewing the Instagram accounts. Instead, the participants expressed that individuals had to form personal relationships with the research objects to be able to obtain a First Impression that was accurate to the offline perception. The participants stated that the First Impression most certainly would be skewed in the sense that the First Impression on Instagram would be more favourable. The participants’ pre-

diction of a skewed First Impression can be interpreted to be in agreement with Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) description of individuals using social media to portray a desired image of the self, instead of portraying an accurate and truthful image. Additionally, Lair, Sullivan and Cheney's (2005) suggestion that personal branding is related to "self-packaging" where individuals can regulate the public's view of a personal brand can also be connected to the participants' statements regarding the skewed image of the predicted online perception of the personal brands. As previous research recurrently has described personal branding on social media as a way to display a favourable image of the self, which is not always true to reality, the participants' predictions regarding the First Impression can be interpreted to be in agreement with existing research.

5.2.2 A Coherent Perception

The First Impression might indicate an initial resemblance with Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) view on personal branding as a process that enables the individual to be in charge of what to express and display publicly, which not always portrays an accurate and truthful image. However, as the group interviews exploring the online personal brands were conducted, it was shown that the perceived First Impressions by the participants with no prior relationship to the research objects were similar to the offline perceptions of the personal brands. When describing the First Impression of the research objects' online personal brand, words such as happy, social, and active were expressed. These words corresponded with the descriptions regarding the research objects' personal brands offline.

In the specific case of this thesis, the participants' initial statements regarding the challenges of perceiving an accurate image of the research objects through a First Impression online were interpreted to be incorrect. Instead, the First Impression perceived online was understood to be in agreement with what was said about the research objects offline. However, when relating the coherence in perception to Lair, Sullivan and Cheney's (2005) view of "self-packaging", as the ability to regulate the public's view of one's personal brand, one can question whether the personal brand was managed and altered by the research objects or if the personal brand was communicating a truthful image of the self. In this particular thesis, the empirical findings are interpreted as the personal brand is communicating a truthful image of the self, as the offline description was coherent with the online description. Furthermore, in the particular case of this thesis, the similarities that were found concerning the First Impres-

sion can be interpreted as contradicting Whitty and Gavin's (2001) theory that individuals frequently use lies to portray a more favourable image of themselves online. As the participants perceived the research objects as genuine online, they were believed to portray an accurate image of the self on Instagram. The coherence in the perceptions that was observed in this experiment can be interpreted as an indication of authenticity and honesty among the research objects participating in this thesis. Additionally, it can be understood as there was no further need to embellish the online personal brand.

Overall, there were no signs of differences between the perception of the online personal brand and the offline personal brand concerning the First Impression. Instead, various similarities were found that indicated that the perceptions of the online personal brands and the offline personal brands were relatively comparable in the case of the research objects in this particular thesis.

5.3 Personality

The layer of Personality is the second dimension of the conceptual framework and explores the research objects' perceived characteristics and interests. Based on the empirical data, similarities were found in how the participants of the group interviews perceived the research objects' Personalities online compared to how the research objects were described offline. The similarities can be understood by the participants' usage of words to describe the research objects, where words such as happy, social and sweet were mentioned both regarding the online perception and the offline perception. However, the similarities were not as evident regarding the Personality of the research objects as in the layer of First Impression. As earlier discussed, the participants' perceptions regarding the First Impression of the research objects' personal brands online, indicated a coherence with the offline perception despite the doubts from the participants. However, the perception of the research objects' Personality indicated more differences when comparing the online and the offline perception.

5.3.1 Embellishing a Personal Brand Online

Previous research has described social media to enable users to create multiple identities and staging the personal identities online to portray a more favourable image of the self (Kaplan

& Haenlein, 2010; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Shepherd, 2005; Smith-Lovin, 2007). Although the creation of multiple or staged identities was not discussed nor found to be a problem among the participants while forming the online perception of First Impression, based on the empirical data it can be interpreted to have been present regarding the discussion about the research objects' Personality. A possible explanation for why the aspect of staged identities was emphasised during the discussion of Personality, rather than during the discussion regarding the First Impression, could be that this thesis' definition of Personality belongs to the off-stage personality. Goffman (1959) suggests that the off-stage personality is hidden from the public, in the sense that the image an individual portrays is controlled and altered depending on the situation and whether it is favourable for the public's perception of the individual or not. Related to this thesis, it can be interpreted as the personal brand is managed in a certain way only to display what is considered to be favourable for the owner of the personal brand. By this, it can be interpreted as being difficult for the perceiver to get a coherent impression of the real person behind the brand.

One reason for why the authors of this thesis interpret the participants' observations to be connected to staging identities is, for instance, based on differences regarding how social and outgoing the research objects were perceived to be online compared to offline. All participants, who viewed the personal brands on Instagram, perceived the research objects as very social individuals based on their online personal brand. The perception of the research objects as being social was also discussed on an offline basis by the participants with personal relationships to the research objects. However, it was solely one of the research objects who was described to be as social offline as perceived to be online, by participants with no prior relationship. Furthermore, one of the research objects was described to be rather calm and quiet in social settings in real life, and the participants also mentioned that this particular research object had a new year's resolution to be more social. In contrast to being perceived as calm and quiet offline, the online perception of the same research object was as a very social individual who enjoyed various social gatherings. By this, the online perception can be interpreted to be coherent with the image the research object wants to portray of the self rather than what is true to real life. The particular example can be connected to the desire of embellishing the personal brand on social media, to become more favourable to the self-identity (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Shepherd, 2005; Smith-Lovin, 2007).

5.3.2 The Complexity of Personality

When discussing the research objects' Personalities with the participants of the group interviews, the participants' online observations were interpreted to demonstrate a sense of complexity. The complexity was displayed when the participants discussed the online perception of the research objects, as the participants' observations were often contradicting previous statements that had been made regarding the Personality. For instance, the initial online perception of the research objects' Personalities was that all of them were very social. However, as the participants were exploring the Instagram accounts more extensively, there was a change in the perception, which was based on the observations that one of the research objects had a majority of the shared pictures taken in group settings. The participants expressed that the research object was perceived as shy, based on the many group pictures, which was found to be a change from the initial perception as very social and outgoing. When comparing the online perception of the research object as shy to the offline perception, the perception of being shy was not entirely accurate to how the personality was described by the individuals with a close relationship to the research object. Although the research object was described as a very social person by the participants offline, it was expressed that the research objects' social side was not entirely shown until personal relationships had been formed.

Similar to how the online perception of the research objects' Personality changed from being perceived as very social to shy, the online perception also demonstrated complexity while discussing how self-confident the research objects were perceived. The participants initially expressed the online perception of all the research objects to be self-confident. However, this perception was interpreted to change when the participants incorporated personal experiences into the discussion of Personality. By incorporating personal experiences, the participants displayed tendencies to question the initial perception, where research objects who were perceived as very self-confident were instead interpreted as insecure and seeking for confirmation. The participants' change in perception was connected to the research objects' shared pictures portraying only the research object. Furthermore, the initial perception, where the participants expressed the research objects to be self-confident, differed from how the research objects were described to be offline. In the offline perception, the participants described the research objects not to be as self-confident as they presented themselves. For instance, one of the research objects who was perceived as self-confident online was in contrast described as rather self-conscious and unsatisfied regarding looks and appearance offline. By this, the offline perception of the research objects was interpreted not to be coherent with the

initial online perception of the research objects as very self-confident. However, when the participants incorporated personal experiences in discussion, the online perception became more coherent with the offline perception. For instance, one of the participants of the group interviews related the discussion around sharing pictures of self-portraits to personal experiences and motives for why these types of pictures are shared. The participant further expressed, based on personal experiences, that the reason for why one is sharing self-portraits online was to gain confirmation from other individuals.

5.3.3 Stereotyping and Primacy Effects

When the participants were applying the personal experiences onto the research objects, it can be understood as the participants were using stereotyping to form perceptions around the personal brands of the research objects. Johns and Saks (2001) highlight stereotyping as a possible bias when individuals form perceptions since the incorporation of personal experiences can influence the perception. The participants' usage of personal experiences can be interpreted to show resemblance with Johns and Saks' (2001) description of stereotyping, as the personal experiences influenced and in some cases even changed the initial perception of the personal brands. Further, as previously mentioned the participants' usage of stereotyping and personal experiences when describing the research objects online indicated a more accurate perception compared to the offline Personality. By this, the empirical findings of this thesis indicate a correlation between the accuracy and truthfulness in perception online compared to offline when the participants of the group interviews incorporated personal experiences to form their perceptions.

As stated above, the participants of the group interviews were interpreted as having a hard time forming coherent online perceptions of the research objects' Personalities. A reason for this might be related to primacy effects. As mentioned earlier, the empirical findings were indicating tendencies of primacy effects regarding the online perception of the research objects' Personalities. The observations that were made by the participants about the First Impression of the research objects were interpreted to linger when the participants were discussing the Personality since expressed perceptions indicated similarities between the First Impression and the described Personality. For instance, when the First Impression of one of the research objects was described to surround a social lifestyle with partying as a primary interest, this was reflected in the answers of how the research object's Personality was perceived.

Furthermore, if the research object was perceived to attend an extensive amount of parties, assumptions of being very outgoing and involved in organising student events were made. In this specific example, the primacy effects made it harder for the participants to determine the age and the Personality of the research object based on the Instagram accounts. Johns and Saks (2001) underlined primacy effects to be a possible bias in the creation of perceptions, where the initial impression the perceiver obtains from the target can make it harder to form a comprehensive perception and further develop the perception. Based on the specific example in this thesis, it can be interpreted that the primacy effects indicate similarities to Johns and Saks (2001) description of primacy effects.

In this thesis, the stereotyping and primacy effects can be considered to have been valuable assets in interpreting how the participants of the group interviews came to certain conclusions about the research objects and while forming the perceptions. The authors of this thesis would, therefore, stress the importance not to disregard nor try to minimise the possible biases, and instead incorporate and view them as a part of the research process. If primacy effects and stereotyping had been excluded from this thesis, the findings would not be able to have been as deeply understood since the two offered a more extensive understanding of how perceptions are being created.

5.4 Values

5.4.1 The Interpreted Coherence of Values

Values are in the final dimension of the conceptual framework and represent the most inner parts of the research objects. For instance, the Values contains aspects of what is perceived to be of great importance and highly valued by the research objects, along with what is perceived to be of high priority in the research objects' lives. During the interview process the participants' observations regarding the research objects' perceived Values, were understood to indicate similarities between the online and the offline perception among all research objects. Furthermore, the online observations were interpreted as a shared understanding among the participants of the group interviews, where all research objects were perceived to highly value time with friends and family, having a career and being successful, along with being popular and care about looks and appearance. When comparing these perceived Values to the research objects' offline personal brand, and the Values that were expressed by the partici-

pants with personal relationships to the research objects, the empirical findings indicated a consistency throughout the perception of the research objects' personal brands and certain similarities were found. One of the most evident similarities was found in regards to valuing family. All participants of the group interviews who discussed the perception of the online personal brand expressed some kind of reflection over the high value of friends and family and the importance of nurturing existing relationships. Additionally, the same indication was made during the group interviews regarding the offline personal brand, where the importance of friends and family for the research objects was a recurrently discussed topic.

Another interpreted similarity regarding the Values discussed by the participants during the group interviews, regarding the offline perception, was that one of the research objects was described to find it important to be surrounded by friends. In addition to this, the research object was perceived to find it important to be popular, both within the closest group of friends and among strangers. While comparing this description to the participants' online perception, the same research object was perceived to value the importance of having close relationships with friends and family above all else, together with finding it important to gain confirmation from other individuals online. In addition to this, another example where the participants' discussions indicated coherence in the online and offline perception of the personal brands, was regarding the perceived relation between spending time with friends and family compared to having a career and being successful. Although the participants' observations were interpreted as perceiving a career and job-related success to be very important for the research objects, the participants expressed that they never thought the research objects would choose a career and be successful over spending time with friends and family. The perception that the research objects valued and found personal relationships more important in life than having a successful career, was found to show coherence with the offline perception expressed by participants with personal relationships to the research objects.

5.4.2 The Publicly Displayed Values

The interpreted coherence between the online and offline perception of the research objects indicated that, in this specific experiment, Goffman's (1959) argument regarding that everyone has an off-stage and an on-stage personality and that these two differ from each other, does not fit in the category of Values. Goffman (1959) argues that the off-stage personality is hidden from the public, containing the deepest part of the self that is solely displayed in pri-

vate. However, the perceived Values in this specific experiment, obtained by the group interviews through the participants' observations and descriptions, demonstrated similarities between the online and the offline personal brand. By this, it can be interpreted to indicate that the on-stage and off-stage personal brands showed similarities which were not predicted on beforehand.

Further, the similarities in perception between the online personal brand and the offline personal brand that were discovered in this particular experiment can be related to Shepherd (2005), who argues that the personal brand has to deliver what the individual is claiming to be and stresses the importance of communicating a personal brand in a credible way. Since the research objects' Values were perceived in similar ways online compared to offline by the participants of the group interviews, it indicates that in the specific case of this thesis, Shepherd's (2005) statement was applicable to the authenticity of the personal brands. However, Shepherd (2005) also states that online platforms can come to cause confusion regarding the personal branding and its truthfulness compared to the offline brand since multiple personal brands can be created online. Even though the differences in maintaining multiple identities can be seen in the previous part of the conceptual framework, Personality, evidence of such arguments has not been noticed in this experiment regarding the Values. The coherence that was found in the participants' perceptions of the research objects online compared to offline indicates that, in this thesis and context, it is difficult to alter the perception of Values online. Although the Values that were perceived may have been carefully managed by the research objects to be coherent with the perception of the self, the Values still were not hidden from the public and were able to be understood truthfully when comparing the online perception to the offline perception.

5.4.3 Values in a Larger Perspective

Symbolic interactionism was on beforehand predicted to be of importance while analysing the Values since it can be viewed as a collaborative process where individuals together create and maintain a personal identity (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Cooley, 1965). In this thesis, the research objects' perceived Values were based either on shared pictures online on Instagram or on personal relationships offline with the three research objects. As Cooley (1965) suggests that humans are social beings, people are dependent on forming their self-concepts through others perception of them and then act upon how others think based on that appearance. By relating

Cooley's (1965) statement to the research objects' perceived Values, it can be considered to be important to reflect upon whether the Values that were expressed by the participants during the group interviews were, in fact, the true Values of the research objects or not. Related to the aspect that humans are social beings, one can question if the Values that were expressed by the participants were true in the sense that they were all interpreted to be positively understood, and further if the perceived Values were described based on societal factors. For instance, the importance of friends and family, along with caring about looks and appearance, can be considered to be Values that are commonly applicable to individuals. By this, the Values may be connected to the function of symbolic interactionism as a process occurring in certain social and cultural context, which is based on creating meaning for individuals (Blumer, 1969; Carter & Fuller, 2016). Moreover, as the participants of the group interviews can be considered to be a rather homogeneous group, with similar social and cultural backgrounds, the aspect related to personal experiences can be a possible explanation to why the perception of the research objects' Values was coherent online compared to offline.

Regardless of what has been the actual motivations to why the participants' perceptions displayed similarities regarding the Values online compared to offline, the similarities that were found indicated a coherence in the perception of the personal brands. The empirical findings were understood as indicating that the previous research, regarding a difficulty of maintaining a consistency in the perception of the personal brand offline and online described by Shepherd (2005) and Goffman's (1959) idea of the off-stage personality to be hidden and private, were not supporting the specific findings of this thesis. The similarities that were highlighted between the Values of the online personal brand and the Values of the offline personal brand indicate that, in the particular case of this thesis and experiment, the online perceptions of the research objects' Values were coherent with the offline perceptions.

A possible explanation for the similar perceptions regarding the Values between the offline personal brand and the online personal brand might stem from the Values being the most inner part of a human being. Compared to the First Impression and the Personality, the Values are deeper rooted in a person and might be a better definition of the true self. Therefore, it might be more difficult to conceal and alter the Values online, on social media platforms, as these belong to the essence of the self and might still shine through. Thus, this finding enlightens the possibility that even though Values is considered to be the most inner part of a human being, it does not necessarily mean that the Values are hidden online on social media.

5.5 Discussion

While analysing the collected data and observations from the participants of the group interviews, it was found that the perception of the online personal brand and the offline personal brand were similar in terms of the First Impression and the Values. These findings can be understood as inconsistent to some of the previous literature, which argued that the First Impression is be altered and not comparable to the offline perception of the person (Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005; Rampersad, 2008; Shepherd, 2005) and that the Values belong to the most inner part of the self and therefore are hidden from the public (Goffman, 1959). The differences that were observed in the perception regarding Personality can be interpreted to be more similar to the previous literature. It was understood to be more difficult for the participants to determine the Personality of the research objects based on the Instagram accounts than it was to determine the First Impression and the Values. However, the Personality was found be more complex than the First Impression and Values, as the perceptions were interpreted to change during the discussions.

5.5.1 The Three Layers of the Conceptual Framework

The First Impression was predicted, according to previous research and the participants with close relationships with the research objects, to be altered and embellished to portray a more favourable image of the personal brand online than what was true to the offline personal brand. As the results of this thesis indicated coherence in the perception between the First Impression online and offline, it might be interpreted that the First Impression is not necessarily altered nor carefully managed online, yet also be authentic towards the perception of the individual's offline personal brand.

According to Goffman's (1959) theory regarding on-stage and off-stage personality, the layers of Personality and Values were expected to be hidden from the public and difficult for individuals to perceive. In the specific case of this thesis, this was found to be true regarding the Personality. The results from the group interviews demonstrated a complexity around the Personality and multiple dimensions of perception, which unfolded based on the participants' incorporation of personal experiences while forming the perceptions. For instance, the initial perception changed several times and offered new explanations of how the personal brands were perceived. The complexity of the perceived Personality indicated a dependence on the

perceiver's personal experiences to be able to form a perception of the personal brand, which was similar to the offline personal brand. If the perceiver was using these experiences to form the perception, it turned out to be more cohesive than the perception without incorporated personal experiences. By this, the authors believe that the Personality of a personal brand is hidden on social media and hard to perceive. However, when basing the perception on previous and personal experiences, the empirical findings showed indications of a larger possibility to perceive the personal brand truthfully online.

Finally, similar to the Personality, Values were before the experiment expected to belong to the off-stage personality and to be hidden from the public. However, the findings based on the group interviews can be understood as the Values not being hidden from the public, based on the coherence in the collected data. As the perception was coherent online compared to offline, Goffman's (1959) statement of off-stage personality being hidden, which in this thesis has been similar to the definition of the Values, might not be applicable in this particular thesis. Additionally, the findings demonstrate that the Values were in fact not the deepest layer of the framework online, but rather easier to perceive truthfully than the Personality were. Hence, the experiment conducted in this specific thesis indicated that Values are not hidden from the public on social media, and is possible to perceive truthfully towards the offline personal brand. As a result of this, the conceptual framework (see Figure 2.4.2) is proposed to be modified to be more accurate towards the findings of this thesis.

5.5.2 The Modified Conceptual Framework

Based on the empirical findings of this thesis, the online component of the initial conceptual framework has been adjusted while the offline component remains the same. Instead of placing Values as the deepest dimension of the framework, the findings are translated into placing Personality as the most complex and inner layer of the framework, with various possible perceptions and interpretations of the personal brand.

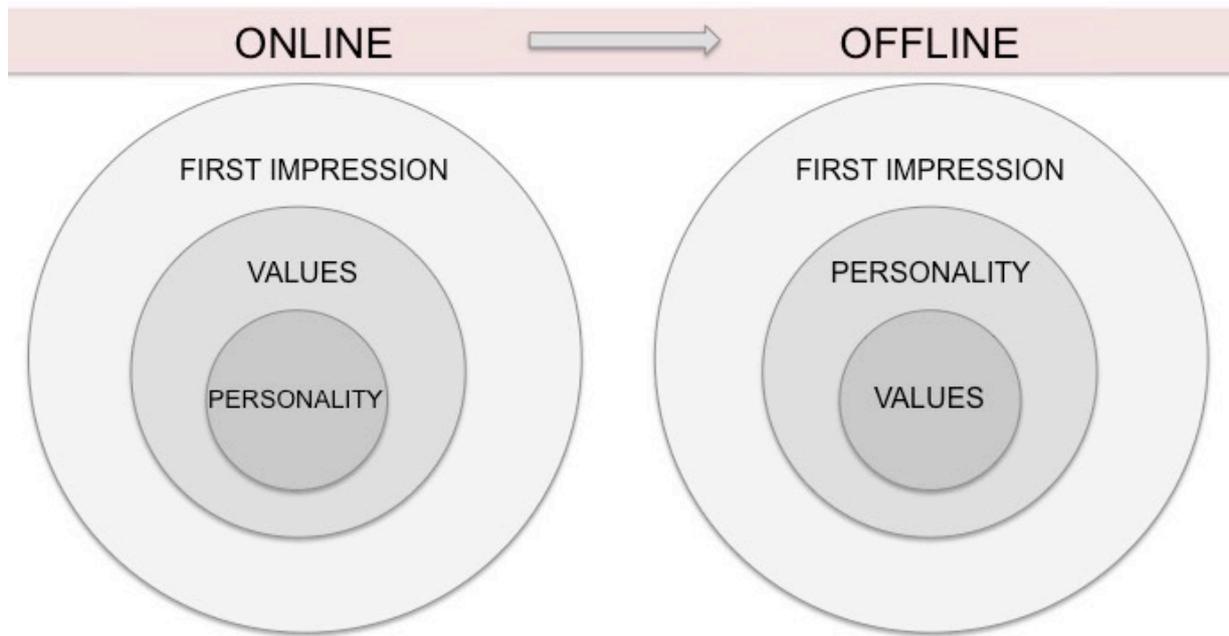


Figure 5.5.2. Modified Conceptual Framework: The Online and the Offline Perception of a Personal Brand

6 Conclusion

This final chapter relates back to the research purpose and provides a summary of the findings of this thesis, as well as answering the research question. Additionally, this chapter contains practical implications along with suggestions for further research.

The purpose of this thesis has been to explore how individuals perceive a personal brand online on social media, compared to how it is perceived offline in real life, and whether there is a difference in the perception of the personal brand. Based on the purpose, this thesis addressed the following question:

- *How is a personal brand perceived by other individuals online compared to how it is perceived offline?*

The conclusion of this thesis is that the perception of a personal brand is influenced by what is visually perceived in the shared pictures, yet also by incorporating personal experiences to the perception. Based on the conceptual framework it has been possible to gain an understanding of how personal brands are perceived, where in contrast to what has been expressed in previous research the online perceptions were found to be more accurate compared to the offline perceptions than predicted beforehand. Furthermore, in this experiment it has been found that a personal brand is perceived differently online compared to offline depending on which layer of the conceptual framework that is discussed. The First Impression along with the Values, showed similarities which indicated that the perceptions of the personal brands in this thesis were coherent online compared to offline. The results of this thesis show that the most inner parts of an individual, being the Values, were, in fact, perceived truthfully in an online context, rather than being hidden from the public. Although the Personality demonstrated similarities, more differences and variations among the perceptions of the personal brands were found when comparing the online perception to the offline perception. Additionally, the findings also indicated that the perceptions in many cases could change multiple times, which was specifically seen regarding the Personalities. The many changes in perception regarding Personality can be interpreted as this layer of the conceptual framework being mostly hidden and altered compared to the other two layers. However, the findings indicate that when incorpo-

rating personal experiences while establishing the perceptions of a personal brand, there is a larger possibility for the personal brand to be truthfully understood in comparison to the offline personal brand.

6.1 Practical Implications

This thesis is predicted to be of interest for both individuals and marketers. For individuals, the results can be of interest as the conceptual framework can be used as a tool to evaluate their own personal brand on social media. For marketers, this thesis can be of interest by considering the modified conceptual framework while branding both the company and the products/services online. In this scenario, the research objects that have been used in this thesis can be compared to a brand and the way the perception differs between loyal customers and potential customers. The research object's close friends, who evaluated the offline perception, could, therefore, represent loyal customers who know the brand well and are aware of what the brand represents. The participants with no prior relationship to the research object, who evaluated the online perception in this thesis, could then represent potential customers who do not have any previous experience with the particular brand. The insights from this thesis could thereby provide valuable understandings for marketers regarding the perceptions from both loyal customers as well as potential customers. By this, the understandings can provide knowledge regarding positioning within the two groups of customers. Furthermore, by interpreting the differences in perception between the three levels of the conceptual framework, businesses can gain competitive advantages by understanding customers' perceptions.

6.2 Further Research

During the process of this thesis, several empirical findings have been collected that would be of interest to further explore. Firstly, it would be interesting to gain insights of differences and similarities in the perception of the online personal brand by applying the conceptual framework to several social media platforms and compare the results among the platforms. Secondly, this thesis is conducted with a relatively homogenous sample of group interview participants and research objects. By using a larger sample size with more variety among the participants and the research objects, along with incorporating a larger amount of factors for social

identities, such as age, gender and nationality, further insights about the perception of a personal brand online and offline could be discovered. Finally, it could also be of relevance to explore how businesses brand themselves on social media and how the perception of their corporate brand correspond with the offline perception of the same business. Data regarding the perceptions would provide valuable insights and understanding for companies who are interested in learning more about the importance of branding on social media and to find out more about how the company is perceived in the modern society.

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Appendix A

Interview questions to the friends of the research object

Basic knowledge:

- What is person X's age?
- What is person X's occupation?
- What is person X's education?
- What is person X's relationship status?

Personal characteristics:

- How would you describe person X, based on your friendship?
 - Which personality traits would you describe person X with?
 - How would you describe person X with one sentence?
 - Could you name a few good and a few bad characteristics of person X?
- What does person X value in life?
- What is person X's interests?
- What does a typical Friday night look like for person X?
- How does person X feel about her social life/social situation?
- Do you think person X cares about how she is perceived by others?
 - If yes/no - why do you think so?
- Do you think it is important for person X how she is perceived?
 - If yes/no - why do you think so?
- Do you think that your description of person X is true to the first impression she portrays?
 - In person
 - On Instagram

Appendix B

Interview questions to the strangers of the research object

- What is your first impression of person X?

Basic assumptions:

- Based on Instagram, what do you think is person X's:
 - Age?
 - Occupation?
 - Education?
 - Relationship status?
 - Why do you think so?
- What do you think is person X's interests?
- How do you think person X feels about her social life?
 - What do you think a typical Friday night looks like for person X?

Personal characteristics:

- How would you describe person X, based on Instagram?
 - Which personality traits would you describe person X with?
 - What do you think person X values in life?

Appendix C

Summary of the research objects

Research Object 1:

- Age: 24
- Living Location: Skåne, Sweden
- Education: University degree
- Occupation: Employed within the retail sector

Online Perception:

- First Impression: Social, happy, student who likes to party
- Personality: Happy, social, sweet, self-confident
- Values: Friends, family, social life, looks and appearance, experiences

Offline Perception:

- First Impression: Do not think that the First Impression online is coherent with the one offline. Do not think strangers get a good first First Impression, think she seems tougher online than she is in reality.
- Personality: Happy, social, tough on the outside and soft on the inside, hard to get close to
- Values: Social life, friends, family, career, being popular,

Research Object 2:

- Age: 26
- Living Location: Skåne, Sweden
- Education: University degree
- Occupation: Student

Online Perception:

- First Impression: Happy, social, sophisticated, smart, independent
- Personality: Positive, social, happy
- Values: Family, friends, career, food, travelling

Offline Perception:

- First Impression: Do not think that the First Impression online is coherent to who she is as a person. Think that her Instagram shows a more social and open side of her that is not true offline.
- Personality: Sweet, thoughtful, giving, scared of conflicts, does not stand up for herself
- Values: Family, relationships, career

Research Object 3:

- Age: 26
- Living Location: Östergötland, Sweden
- Education: High-school degree
- Occupation: Employed within the retail sector

Online Perception:

- First Impression: Sporty, likes to be cozy, happy, down to earth, genuine
- Personality: Energetic, natural, optimistic, positive
- Values: Family, friends, health, relationships

Offline Perception:

- First Impression: Do not think that the First Impression online is coherent to the one offline. Think that she appears as more open and willing to try new things than what she is in reality offline.
- Personality: Calm, relatively quiet, cozy, structured, organized
- Values: Family, relationships, security, routines

Appendix D

LUSEM Master Thesis Consent Form



LUND UNIVERSITY

School of Economics and Management

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick the appropriate box):

1.	I understand the information about the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	If applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	Select only one of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none">I would like my name used and understand what I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other re-	<input type="checkbox"/>

	<p>search outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I do not want my name used in this project. 	<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Participant:

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher:

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date