



Students' perceptions of online personal branding on social media sites

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Abstract

This paper starts by an explanation of the context of personal branding and online personal branding and the problem identified by the authors. Thus, the purpose of the study is to investigate on the perception of students towards online personal branding through their own personal brand and with the perspective of matching employer's expectations. A section reviewing online personal branding and related literature is provided in order to describe among others, the several components of the elaboration of an online personal brand and the different employers' expectations towards this brand. Next, a section describing the different methods used in the study is implemented. The data of this paper is gathered through 13 semi-structured interviews based on an operationalization of the different concepts presented in the theoretical framework section. The results are then presented in the empirical investigation section following recurrent identified themes bring by the respondents: The need to fit the norm, to stand out and of control. Then the data is analyzed through the theories and is therefore following the different components of an elaboration of a personal brand including the different items related to employer's consideration and practices. Then the conclusion is drawing in order to answering the research question as well as providing some acknowledgement and recommendations. This paper has permitted to describe the perception of student towards online personal branding with the perspective of matching employers' expectations. This perception is a rather incomplete online personal brand, consisting of a normalized image of the self, a tool for a certain self-realization towards a limited audience and a have a certain perception of an overall control of this online personal brand.

Keywords: *Personal branding, Online personal branding, Self-branding, Non-professionally and professionally oriented social media, Online platforms, Online presence, Digital footprint, Cybervetting.*



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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Originally, branding is a strategy used to differentiate products, services, and companies themselves, in order to build value for both the consumer and the brand owner (Tsiotsou, 2011). Today, branding has developed itself into broader areas including the personal life of individuals. According to Holmberg and Strannegård (2015) “the need to define identities and stand out in branded landscapes is not limited to formal organizations (p.182).” The concept of branding can constitute a strong and effective tool for not only companies but also other organizations such as schools and cities. As an example, the city of Malmö in Sweden has suffered of being associated with ‘relative poverty’ and ‘high unemployment rate’. In order to solve this problem, the municipality has branded itself, in order to change its image and being identified as a creative, young, and global city. (Holmberg and Strannegård, 2015). Another example is the branding of higher education institutions. According to Holmberg and Strannegård, “universities and business schools are becoming promotional institutions and have adopted corporate managerial principles and strategies” (p.182).

Branding is therefore no longer exclusively related to the domain of large corporations but can also concern other identities such as non-profit oriented institutions and individuals. (Holmberg and Strannegård, 2015).

The theory of the personal brand has been introduced by Tom Peters in 1997. The personal branding literature claims that it has become indispensable regarding the global job market condition that tend to be increasingly competitive or even saturated (Holmberg and Strannegård, 2015 ; Sheperd, 2005).

Moreover, the notion of personal brand has become even more important along with the numeric innovations such as the emergence of social medias and macro-environmental modifications over time (Labrecque, Markos and Milne, 2011; Sheperd, 2005).



1.2 Problem discussion

The emergence of Social media and online platforms in general have considerably changed the workplace environment, skills, and work search process. Social medias are increasingly creating a synergy and connection between companies and job seekers, that have now the opportunity to develop their personal brand online and have a better control on it (Harris and Rae, 2011; Labrecque, Markos and Milne, 2011).

Social medias are indeed new places where an individual can express himself through different platforms by managing “self-presentation tactics to present themselves in favorable ways” (Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011, p.2). Having control over its self-presentation is directly linked with the impression management concept, defined “as an attempt to control the images which are presented to others usually to increase the power of the individual (Lee et al., 1999, p.701)”.

According to Hemetsberger (2005), building an online presence is not only pushed by employment interest but also by social reasons, which is called “self-realization”. Indeed, internet could be seen as a “physical location of the subject independent of the body”, where an individual can express him or herself in a free and liberal space (Hemetsberger, 2005, p.653).

Managing a personal brand online could manifest some barriers that individuals can struggle to control, especially on social media where “ownership of online information is ambiguous and difficult to control” (Labrecque, Markos and Milne, 2011, p.38)”. Furthermore, individuals have to deal with the problems of audiences. Indeed, a profile activities on social media could be inappropriate for a specific segment (eg: Content that is not appropriate for employer point of view) (Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011).

According to Lam (2016), employers have today realized the opportunitie of social media for hiring processes. Organizations can exploit several advantages of social media for its recruitment processes. In fact, the use of social media can be considered as quite inexpensive and permit a broad spread of the information (Lam, 2016).

According to Hood et al. (2014), employers tend to focus on several aspects while looking at an individual as a brand. Thus they could perceive a job-seeker through its personal brand for the decision making process. First, employers investigate on the competences, the past job



experiences, and the scholarship of the candidate (Hood et al., 2014). It can be considered as rather basic personal information that would appear on a professionally oriented social media like LinkedIn as an online Curriculum.

However, professionally oriented social media are not the only websites employers are looking at in the recruitment process. In fact, Hood et al (2014) argues that nonprofessionally oriented social media such as Facebook, for example, are also used by employers, but as an elimination tool. The personal brand that is reflected online can indeed be highly impacted by other social networking websites which are not only professionally oriented. Indeed, because of a rather high number of contacts or a lack of awareness, the personal branding can here suffer for a certain loss of regulation and become an issue in a job seeking context (Hood et al, 2014).

Cybervetting is a rather emergent practice in the recruitment and selection field that is linked to these unofficial social networking websites. It is the process of accumulating information about the job candidates by using networked unofficial sources (Berkelaar, 2014). Here the perception of the candidate towards this proceeding does have an importance. Indeed the job seeker could for example refuse to work for a company if he/her perceives strong ethical issues toward the approach of cybervetting. Moreover, in some cases the candidate can even take some legal measure against the organization if the invasion of privacy has been too invasive or if the method used is legally questionable. (Berkelaar, 2014). Therefore, Berkelaar (2014) argues that the workers investigated in her study wanted a certain transparency regarding cybervetting but without actually awaiting it.

The online personal brand can therefore be considered as constructed with two different sides. The official side where an individual promotes himself by providing relevant professional information and the unofficial side where the individual can share a broad kind of information that are not primarily intended to be destined for employers (Hood et al, 2014). Moreover, according to Mccorkle (2014), students are not accustomed to use social networking websites with a professional objective.



‘Despite the importance of branding and the high adoption rate of social media’, Karaduman (2013) pointed out, ‘there have been only few specific, empirical studies dealing with these issues.’

The current personal branding literature focuses and discusses mostly the different ways and steps of constructing a successful personal brand. A rather high number of these studies are quantitative and examine the approach, methods and practices used by the recruiter and also by the employees/candidates toward personal branding items. The literature is also oriented on the perception and the center of interest of employers regarding a personal brand while using qualitative data collection methods such as interviews.

According to Philbrick and Cleveland (2015), the universal, notion within the several personal branding definitions that exist is perception. However, there is a certain lack regarding the perception and awareness of students regarding the different strategies and items to take into consideration, while establishing a personal brand, in the current literature.

1.3 Research question and purpose

The purpose of this paper is to investigate on the perception of students towards online personal branding through their own personal brand and with the perspective of matching employer’s expectations. The research question guiding this paper is therefore.

How students do perceive online personal branding with the perspective of matching employer’s expectation?

With this research question, two research objectives have been identified.

- Discovering an insight of how student perceive their own online personal brand.
- Discovering an insight of which items and aspects of personal branding student perceive as the most important in their current or future job seeking context with the perspective of matching the employer's expectations.



1.4 Delimitation

First of all, the study is based on a qualitative research method, thus the number of participants for the data collection is restricted to a rather small size. Indeed a larger number of participants could have provided more details on student perception. Furthermore the convenience sampling does not permit to make generalization, indeed the findings will not provide representative information for a specific population but it “could provide a springboard for further research or allow links to be forged with existing findings in an area”.(Bryman & Bell, 2011, p190). Moreover, all the participants have been selected within the same area for convenience purposes.

Furthermore, personality trait of the participants is also related to online personal branding, however, the authors choose to not taking in consideration this concept. Indeed the methodology chosen do not permit to exploit in a relevant way this concept.



2 Theoretical framework

This section of the paper reviews the literature of several researchers in relation to the purpose of this research. The concept of perception is a central item of this paper as it constitutes the core of the purpose. After describing the general concepts of personal branding and online personal branding, the different processes composing the elaboration of an online personal brand according to the researchers are defined through the concepts of creation, communication and promotion and auto-surveillance. Then the concept of perception is described followed by the theory of impression management which is composed by the notions of self-monitoring and audience expectations. Finally employer's expectations are described in order to allow an understanding of the requirement of today's job market.

2.1 Personal branding

The concept of personal branding was firstly introduced by Tom Peter (1997). He acknowledged that identity is created by the person's skills, personality traits and other features that will make him different from others. "Brand YOU, everything you do – and everything you choose not to do –communicate the value and character of your brand" (Peters, 1997: 83)." Therefore, such as a product or a service, individuals are able to differentiate themselves and "commercialize their personal brand" in order to "stand out from the crowd". (Holmberg and Strannegård, 2015, p.182).

Lee and Cavanaugh (2016) suggest that a person's values, characteristics, and beliefs should all be expressed through their personal brand. More specifically, Ward and Yates (2013) argue that "it is important to include one's leadership brand with integrity, authenticity, and consistency when developing both online and offline personal brand (p102)". Individuals with their own personal brand can express their brand mainly through in person, on paper, and online (Brooks and Anumudu 2016).

Brooks and Anumudu (2016) explain that "in-person" marketing can be done through people's direct interactions such as elevator pitches, interview strategies, networking, and hosting one's first impression, while "on-paper" marketing indicates any interactions made on paper, including resumes, biographies, cover letters, and business cards (p26).



In addition, peoples now need to manage their personal brand online from the time Web 2.0 emerged, since digital footprint provides information about individuals' personal brand. (Labrecque, Markos and Milne, 2011). Therefore, individuals need to make sure that what appears about themselves online is constant with how they want to market themselves (Brooks and Anumudu, 2016).

Indeed, the actual digital space and its platforms allow individuals to create a consistent online identity through blogs, social medias, and personal websites. Individuals can be engaged in online self-presentation for several reasons, “including to conduct business, to establish friendships, or simply to express themselves” (Chiang and Suen, 2015, p517)

By creating online self-presentations, individuals have now the opportunity to manipulate a rather high number of characteristics, to highlight and put forward some aspect of themselves, such as personalities traits or center of interests. It is therefore considered that individuals can manage their self-presentations more strategically than in face-to-face situations (Krämer and Winter, 2008; Mnookin, 1996; Walther, 1993).

Building an online personal brand involves several steps that individuals should consider. These steps are the creation, the promotion and the communication, and the auto-surveillance (Gehl, 2011).

2.1.1 Creation

Numerous authors acknowledged that individuals need to look back on their strengths and weaknesses, and highlight positive attributes to a target audience. By taking an introspective look at themselves, individuals are capable to understand which characteristics will be persuasive to a specific audience (Shaker and Hafiz, 2014; Philbrick et al, 2015; Johnson, 2017). More than that, it allows individuals to identify the “unique promise of value” that will forge a determinant factor of differentiation. (Sheperd, 2005, p.592)

The field of research argues secondly on a reflection about the use of the different online platforms (Gehl, 2011). Indeed, considering the audiences and the usage purpose of these channels permit to be relevant regarding the aim of the online personal brand. (Gehl, 2011).

According to the literature, the form and means of presentation also have to be taken into consideration (Gehl, 2011). As one way of self-investigation and as an approach of presentation, several researchers suggest individuals to use narrative identity.



According to McAdams, narrative identity is “a person’s internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed the autobiographical past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose (p.233).” It permits for the individuals to stand out by elaborating a coherent image and highlighting their strengths (Brooks and Anumudu, 2016; Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs, 2006).

2.1.2 Promotion and communication.

After establishing an online identity statement, individuals have now the opportunity to communicate, promote and monitor their content which forms their entire online identity. (Philbrick et al, 2015; Edmiston, 2014)

Social media can constitute a strong instrument in order to promote content, by for example sharing, posting news, commenting on people’s page or participating on forum discussions (Philbrick et al., 2015). According to Gehl (2011), those communication methods allow individuals to reach more audience, by giving to others attention. Therefore, users can expect a certain increase of interactions toward themselves in response to this attention and by consequence increase the network and gain in visibility (Johnson, 2017; Gehl, 2011). However, according to Edmiston (2014), users have to be vigilant to the audience when addressing the message and content (The concept of audience expectation is elaborated below).

Moreover, after establishing an online network, the literature argues for the importance of being proactive by managing the interconnection between the individuals and their audience (Johnson, 2017). Indeed, the discussion about the participation in various themes on professionally oriented social media such as LinkedIn as well as actively asking and answering questions about various center of interests is valuable for an online personal brand (Johnson, 2017).



2.1.3 Auto-surveillance.

The notion of auto-surveillance is concerned with the issue of the management of the perception of other towards an individual (Gehl, 2011). It relies on the idea that in the context of massive content sharing an individual examines other and is examined by others (Gehl, 2011). Therefore it is possible to have an impact on what will reflect yourself online in a certain extent (Gehl, 2011). This concept constitutes the last step and a crucial point in the personal branding process (Gehl, 2011). Indeed, practices like cybervetting (an elaborated explanation of cybervetting is available below) and the several digital footprints which appear along with the different interactions and projects of an individual. Managing among times, the brand images that Internet reflects, has thus become an important issue in the employment context (Gehl, 2011; Berkelaar, 2014). Therefore, numerous tools exist in order to supervise the online personal brand (Johnson, 2017; Edminson, 2014).

In fact, individuals can rely on tools such as Google alert, Social mention, Klout, BackType.com, BoardTracker.com, or SocialMention.com., in order to discover who has investigated them or review their presence on social media with an external point of view (Johnson,2017; Edminson, 2014)

2.2 Perception

As mentioned above, the notion of perception seems to constitute an important component in the personal branding literature (Philbrick et al, 2015). Indeed, personal branding will, among other, aim to manage the perception of others towards an individual (Philbrick et al, 2015). The concept of perception is defined by Solomon et al (2013) as a process by which a set of stimulus will be picked, formulated and finally interpreted. According to Solomon et al (2013), “Interpretation refers to the meaning that people assign to sensory stimuli. Just as people differ in terms of the stimuli that they perceive, the eventual assignment of meanings to this stimulus varies as well. Two peoples can see or hear the same event, but their interpretation of it may be completely different.” (p.50) Indeed, the interpretation can be influenced by several factors such as the culture, the language or the age (Solomon et al, 2013). Variation can therefore be observed between individuals regarding their interpretations of the stimulus (Solomon et al, 2013).



In the employment context, it can therefore be assumed that the crucial points taken into consideration, as well as the different common investigation practices of recruiters while considering a personal brand, can differ between the employers and the job-seekers, but also among themselves.

According to Solomon et al (2013), the concept of attitude is related to perception and consists of the propensity of an individual to appraise an item in a favorable or unfavorable way. Three different elements arise from the notion of attitude: the affect, the beliefs and the cognition, and the behavioral intentions (Solomon et al, 2013). The affect is defined by the manners in which an individual appraise an attitude item (Solomon et al, 2013). The behavior component can be described as the intention of act regarding attitude item (Solomon et al, 2013). Lastly, the cognition and beliefs are the set of assumption that an individual has towards an attitude item (Solomon et al, 2013).

2.3 Impression management

Individuals can market themselves as a process of obtaining positive impression from others. "Individuals need to manage their own personal brand strategically, consistently, and effectively (Philbrick and Cleveland, 2015. p.182)".

The concept of impression management was conceptualized by a sociologist, Erving Goffman in 1959. He highlighted the fact that individuals exposed themselves strategically regarding the different situations and interactions. People's behaviors are hence defined as a game and are handled in order to enact a positive impact on the interlocutor's (audience) perception. In other terms, people consciously and unconsciously express themselves and control their image for inducing a positive impression (Goffman, 1959; Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Hogan et al., 1985; Lee et al., 1999).

According to Leary and Kowalski (1990), motivation and construction are the main components of impression management. Impression motivation is articulated by three factors the goal-relevance of impressions, the value of desired outcomes, and the perceived discrepancy between one's desired and current social image: "where impression construction is leading by the notion of: self-concept, desired and undesired identity images, role constraints, target's values and current social image. (Leary and Kowalski, 1990, p.36-39)



2.3.1 Self-Monitoring

It appears that an individual is more or less sensitive to a specific situation and by consequences will act and behave differently regarding their own personality traits (Snyder, 1974; Turnley and Bolino, 2001; Rosenberg and Egbert, 2011). By providing the self-monitoring approach, Snyder identified two types of self-presentation profile in a social situation.

Individuals who are sensitive for showing the appropriateness image in a specific situation are characterized by the “high self-monitoring approach”. Individuals are hence in position to manage content about themselves, in order to enact a positive impression toward their audience (Snyder, 1974, 1987). Furthermore, online users that are considered as high self-monitor tend to have more contacts and post more contents on social medias (Hall and Pennington, 2013).

Individuals that present a low self-monitor seem to be less aware and concerned for showing an appropriate image, they tend to be less engaged and expose their true selves without thinking about enacting a positive impression (Snyder, 1974,1987; Day and Schleicher, 2006).

The concept of impression management and self-monitoring could both be applied in an online environment where “appearance, physical ability and socioeconomic status” are in a major part eradicate (Labrecque, Markos and Milne, 2011) and where the user is confronted by a larger audience.

2.3.2 Audience expectation

According to Rui and Stefanone (2013), an online user needs to deal with the diversity of the audience (eg: Professional network, family network,etc) and a larger audience size (eg: Friend number on Facebook) and by consequence, satisfied the online audience expectation appears to be more difficult than in face-to-face interaction (Rui and Stefanone, 2013; Labrecque et al., 2011).

Indeed, job-seekers encounter several difficulties for managing online information and creating multiple impressions especially for matching recruiter’s expectations, which tend to use different methods in order to evaluate candidates (Bohnert and Ross, 2010; Schwämmlein and Wodzicki, 2012; Davison et al., 2011; Johnson, 2017).



In fact, a rather high amount of users are sharing information to the wrong audience without realizing that information could impact people's perception negatively. However, social media allows the user to control their content by making it visible or not to a specific audience. The case of Facebook, allows users to create a public or private account, furthermore, by creating pages, individuals are able to bring people together in a common interest or use it for professional career (Schwabel, 2009).

The use of social media in employment context has become a rather indispensable tool either for recruiter and job seekers in the recruitment process (Lam, 2016). Thus, today, more than 80 percent of companies are using or plan to use social media platforms in their recruitment process (Lam, 2014; Hood et al., 2014). This utilization can be divided between two different categories of social media, the professionally and non-professionally oriented (Nikolaou, 2014). Both sides are currently commonly used in recruitment processes but not exactly for the same purposes. Several advantages as well as upcoming issues can appear while using these approaches (Nikolaou, 2014). Recruiters are thus investigating on some items which constitute elements of selection essentially for the professionally oriented social networking websites (Hood et al, 2016; Nikolaou 2014). Therefore, elements of exclusion are the items that are the most looked at on non-professionally oriented social media (Hood et al., 2014; Nikolaou, 2014).

2.3.3 Employer expectations on professionally oriented social media

Companies realized the potential of the use of social media for recruitment process (Lam, 2014).

According to Hood et al (2014), employers tend to use professionally oriented social media websites such as LinkedIn with a purpose of first selection of candidates (Hood et al., 2014). Indeed, this kind of web sources provides a certain amount of information that can be useful for an employer such as the past professional experiences or the skills. In other words, professionally oriented social media permit to investigate different potential candidate acting as rather huge databases of online curriculum (Hood et al, 2014). Thus, according to Hood et al. (2014), Professional photos, keywords, specific skills, desired positions, a complete profile (job history, education ...) volunteering and civic experiences, as well as the relevance and the number of contact are among others the main preoccupation of managers while investigating a candidate in a recruitment process.



However, the users of social media websites aimed for recruitment as LinkedIn are not generalizable to the overall population (Lam, 2016). Several variables such as the age, the gender or even the ethnicity of an individual can influence its use of a certain social media website (Lam, 2016; Nikolaou, 2014). First issues of discrimination towards the people who are not users have to be taken into consideration (Lam, 2016).

2.3.4 Employer expectations on non-professionally oriented social media

Personal branding literature provides different aspects of how to construct a brand as an individual. It argue for the construction of a controlled personal brand online. However, according to Berkelaar (2014), in a context where reliable information about candidates could be difficult to access, employers tend to practice more and more Cybervetting.

Cybervetting is the means by which a recruiter seeks to collect different informations about a candidate by using unofficial web sources such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs or e-commerce websites in order to assist the decision-making process (Berkelaar, 2014; Appel, 2014).

According to Harris and Rae (2014), several crucial points are investigated on when an employer decides to go over unofficial web sources to judge a candidate for a job. Indeed, “information about alcohol or drug use, inappropriate photos or informations posted on a candidate’s page, poor communication skills, “bad-mouthing” of former employers or fellow employees, inaccurate qualifications, unprofessional screen names, notes showing links to criminal behavior, and confidential information about past employers” are the most important items considered for the exclusion of a candidate (Harris and Rae, 2014, p 17). Moreover, the investigation does not only focus on criminal and inappropriate behavior (Appel, 2014). It can also examine several online customs in order to acquire some less direct information about the candidate such as cognitive capability or concentration issues (Appel, 2014).

Difference of perception can be observed towards cybervetting when its concern employers and employees (Berkelaar, 2014). Therefore, several issues toward the different methods and approaches of cybervetting can be outlined (Appel, 2014). Indeed ethical issues about among others, invasion of privacy and discrimination appears. The perception towards this method could interfere with the company and its own brand image by bringing moral consideration and even laws affairs (Mikkelson, 2010; Berkelaar, 2014; Appel, 2014).



3 Methodology

3.1 Ontological and epistemological assumptions

The concept of ontology underlines the possibility to differentiate the impact of social actors on social entities (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Moreover, the concept of ontology has to be associated with concerns while establishing a study within the business field. In fact, the hypothesis related to the concept of ontology will have an impact on the establishment of the research question as well as the main consideration of the study, and thus determine the research design and the methods for gathering the necessary data. The concept of epistemology is related to natural science research methods and the dimension in which it should be similar to business research (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The purpose of this paper is to investigate on the perception of students towards several crucial aspects of what build an online personal brand in the context of job seeking. Thus it is necessary to aim for a deeper understanding of this specific topic by interpreting the point of view and expression of participants. The appropriate approach is therefore not about elaborating measurement but to analyze these discussions in a qualitative manner (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), it exists typical ontological and epistemological assumptions associated with qualitative research that correspond to this paper. Indeed, the concept of constructionism is the usual ontological assumption of qualitative research. It argues for the implication of the interaction of persons on the evolution of social entities and not an existence of these item regardless from its different actors (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Moreover the concept of interpretivism is the expected epistemological assumption within the qualitative research field. Indeed this concept describes the fact that the natural science model of research should be revisited in order to bring a more human focused dimension on the research.



3.2 Research design

3.2.1 Cross-sectional research design

Yin (2009) argues that for any research, it is necessary to determine a research design in order to make a consistent connection between the research question and its empirical investigation so that the outcome of the research should appropriately answer the research question. This research will employ cross-sectional research design, which is defined by Bryman and Bell (2011) as “a research design that entails the collection of data on more than one case and at a single point of time in order to collect a body of quantitative or quantifiable data in collection with two or more variables which are then examine to detect patterns of association (p.53).”

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), cross-sectional design fits to research which aims for investigating variety of empirical data, because the idea of this design is to establish more than one case within the research. The focus of this paper is to investigate students’ perception of the use of the online self-branding strategies regarding their future or current job-seeking. Indeed, each student has various backgrounds, different experiences and desirable future career paths. Thus, those experiences could be considered as several different cases depending on the individual's perceptions.

Moreover, the empirical data is collected within the same period of time in cross-sectional research design (Bryman and Bell, 2011). As mentioned earlier, cross-sectional research design usually pairs with quantitative research or quantifiable research, but Bryman and Bell (2011) describe the fact that qualitative research also entails a form of cross-sectional design.



3.2.2 Abductive research

According to Dubois and Gadde, abduction is about investigating the relationship between "everyday language and concepts". According to these authors, this approach allows researchers to manage the interconnection between several elements in the research work (Dubois and Gadde, 2002).

The main idea of this approach is using the logic of reasoning and explanation in order to discover things which have never been discussed (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). Abductive reasoning is considered as "the process of looking for an explanation of a surprising observation (Nepomuceno, Soler and Velázquez, 2013, p.943)." Dubois and Gadde (2002) continue that abductive approach is mainly about exploring the new concepts and then developing the existing theories, rather than researching to confirm those theories.

As mentioned above, the research field describes employer's perspectives of online personal branding but students' perception towards this concept has not been thoroughly investigated. Therefore, the focus of this research is not a confirmation of the existing theories but to further develop the understanding of student's perspective towards a rather new concept which is online personal branding. Hence, this research applies abductive approach which is designed for analyzing new facts and finding the best explanations that facilitate their understanding (Krupnik, 2012).

3.3 Semi-structured interview

According to Cresswell (2014), qualitative research is a research method which permit to investigate deeper the overall knowledge about the attributed meaning of a phenomena. This research will design a semi-structured interview in order to gather empirical data. This research will assign the face-to-face administration of the semi-structured interview. McIntosh and Morse (2015) pointed out that face-to-face approach can optimize the provided insights since both verbal and nonverbal communications are possible. Moreover, an ethical aspect appears when interviewers have the possibility to detect any kind of discomfort and misunderstanding and thus discussing about it or skipping a part of the interview (McIntosh and Morse, 2015).



The method of semi-structured interview provides personal answers, considerations and perception of the participants towards a specific concept or phenomena (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). This method takes its interest when a concept has already been studied but present a certain lack concerning subjective angles (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). In Semi-structured interview, the interviewer has an interview guide with a list of questions on a specific phenomenon to be covered, but interviewer does not have to follow the scheduled order depending on how the respondents answer to each question so that the interviewee can quite freely answer to the questions (Bryman and Bell, 2011). The interviewer can also ask new questions that follow up interviewees replies. Unlike the structured interview, semi-structured interviewing often encourage disjointed answers and to go a bit out of the topic to be able to collect interesting insights (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

According to McIntosh and Morse (2015), a semi-structured interview starts first with planned questions which permit to introduce the topic and the interviewee as well as the context. Then, follow-up questions and probes are completing the overall questionnaire in order to elaborate on the subjective point of view of the respondents according to their answers. The overall aim of the questions are thus to provoke a discussion (McIntosh and Morse, 2015). During the interviews, it has to be taken into consideration that the meaning of the question should be the same for all the interviewees. Therefore, the monitor should focus on making sure that the respondents understand well the meaning of each question and correct possible misinterpretations rather than the exact way of asking the questions. (Berg, 2004).

The several interviews are conducted in a period of ten days' time. The interview itself last about 45 minutes to an hour. During the interviews, the participants are asked if a quick overview of their several online profiles, with a public settled point of view, as well as their resume can be done with the monitor. The questions start with basic informations about the interviewees in their job seeking context. Then more precise questions are asked according to the method of operationalization. Different points such as their habits and point of views and perceptions are thus investigated. A detailed document with the all of the prepared questions is available in the appendix.



3.4 Sampling

In order to find out a better understanding on student's perception toward their personal branding, the selection of the participant has been made in Linnæus University. By providing the convenience sampling concept, Bryman & Bell, (2011), describe this method as easy to implement for a qualitative research. Considered as a nonrandom sampling "where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included for the purpose of the study "(Etikan, 2016, p.1)

Linnæus University, located in Sweden provides a certain number of students from all part of the world. It is a good opportunity for this study to show different cultural perspectives on personal branding perception.

The criteria that participant has to meet:

- Participants must be student at Linnæus University
- Participants must have at least one social media account/blog/personal website



Table 1 : Sample Characteristics

Gender	Nationality	Age	Study field/year	Social media used
Eva (F)	Sweden	23	Global Issue,Peace and development/1 st Year	Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat
Arthur (M)	France	23	Marketing / 5 th year	Facebook, LinkedIn
Pauline (F)	France	21	Economy/ 3 rd year	Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Youtube
Anna (F)	Sweden	21	Substance abuse counselling / 2 nd year	Facebook, Instagram, University platform, tumblr
Wally (M)	Tunisia	23	Programming/3 rd year	Facebook, LinkedIn
Marie (F)	France	21	Business administration/3 rd year	Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Youtube, Twitter
Gadis (F)	Indonesia	27	Bioenergy Technology / 5 th year	Facebook, Instagram, MyCareer (university), LinkedIn
Yannie (F)	Hong Kong	22	Visual Art/3 rd year	Facebook, Google +, Wechat, LinkedIn, Pinterest
Marleen (F)	Netherland	23	Economic/ 3 rd year	Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn
Katharina (F)	Italy	24	International Economics / 3 rd year	Facebook, photo blog
Wanit (M)	Thailand	22	International relation	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Wechat, Line
Axel (M)	France	22	Business administration / 3 rd year	Facebook, Soundcloud, LinkedIn
Adrien (M)	France	24	Human Resources / 4 th year	Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn



3.5 Ethical issues

When conducting an interview, some ethical issues need to be considered. The question of ethics is directly linked with the attitude of researcher that has to adopt a professional and respectful behavior toward participants. Indeed regarding the research method, students were involved in a discussion process, and by consequences some ethical issues could occur. (Eide and Kahn, 2008)

Harm to participants

“Harm can entail a number of facets: physical harm; harm to participant’s development or self-esteem; stress; harm to career prospects ...” (p.128)

The researcher has hence the responsibility to avoid harming participant’s integrity and dignity. By assuring and maintaining the interview confidential and anonymous, interviewee has to be not identifiable regarding the findings, hence, pseudonym has been used for all the interviewees.

Lack of informed consent

“The principle means that prospective research participants should be given as much information as might be needed to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to participate in a study” (p.133)

All the participants have been fully informed regarding the nature of the topic. In fact, without elaborating too much in order to avoid any influence on the answers, the approach is explained to the participants as well as brief explanation of the topic.

Invasion of privacy

“The objectives of any study do not give researchers a special right to intrude on a respondent’s privacy nor to abandon normal respect for an individual’s values” (p.136)

The invasion of privacy could appear when research needs to deal with certain kinds of data. Participants’ privacy has been respected during all the interview by assuring the respect of privacy and confidentiality. However, the issue of invasion of privacy has to be considered when the monitor asks to the participants for going over its different social media profiles. Nevertheless, the monitor does insist for the agreement of the interviewee before starting and the information investigated are already available for a public content.



Deception

“Deception occurs when researchers represent their research as something other than what it is “... “Researcher must provide full and accurate explanations to participants at the conclusion of the study, including counselling, if appropriate.” (p.136-137)

3.5.1 The Quality of Research

In order to determine that the research has sufficient quality, researchers confirm the reliability and validity of their research. However, the authors argue for a different set of items which are considered as more suitable in order to evaluate the qualitative research (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Thus, they suggested using the items of trustworthiness and authenticity as the main criteria to evaluate qualitative research (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Guba and Lincoln, 1985).

Trustworthiness consists of four sub criteria; *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. *Credibility* shows how believable are the findings. To establish the credibility of the findings, the investigator needs to certify that the study is following the right assumptions as well as establishing an accurate apprehension of the social context (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The idea of credibility is thus related to the quality of the descriptions provided into the methodology section. It is also based on the capacity to demonstrate how the overall work is following this method (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

The aim of *Transferability* is to evaluate whether the findings of the research can be applied to another context. Furthermore, it is necessary to provide a description of the context in order to disclose how the participants have contributed to the study and hypothetically make correlations to other feasible circumstances (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Geertz, 1973).

Likewise, the concept of *dependability* guarantees that findings could apply at other times (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). As a process of the approach, the research argues for storing the development of each section of the study even the part that are not systematically provided to the reader such as the interview transcriptions and drafts. It can indeed provide certain validity for the reader. To fulfil this criterion, this paper provides explanations of problem



discussion, sample selection, semi-structured interview questionnaire (available in appendix) and data analysis decisions fully based on qualitative research methodology.

Guba and Lincoln (1985) argue for the importance of the item of confirmability. Indeed, in qualitative research, the will of keeping objectivity concerning the findings and oversee it with a critical point of view as much as possible have to be expressed (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

According to Guba and Lincoln (1985) and Bryman and Bell (2015), *authenticity* should also be considered in addition to those four trustworthiness criteria. Authenticity includes five criteria; *fairness*, *ontological authenticity*, *educative authenticity*, *catalytic authenticity*, and *tactical authenticity*. According to the same authors, it has to be answered by the following questions:

In order to complete the criteria of *fairness*, researcher should consider if “the research fairly represent different viewpoints among members of the social setting?” (p.398)

Concerning the ontological *authenticity*, if “the research help members to arrive at a better understanding of their social milieu” (p.399)

The educative *authenticity* refers to whether or not “the research help members to appreciate better the perspectives of the members of their social setting?”(p.399)

Catalytic authenticity should take into consideration if “the researcher acted as an impetus to members to engage in action to change their circumstances?” (p.399)

Tactical authenticity concerns if whether or not “the research empowered members to take the steps necessary for engaging in action?”. (Bryman and Bell, 2015, p.399)



3.6 Operationalization

Several sources acknowledged that the researcher has to translate and make specific concept measurable and understandable in a qualitative research method. The process of operationalization is a method to sub classify an abstract concept into specific and concrete terms in order to make them measurable (Albaum and Duerr, 2011).

More precisely it “consists of the development of a measuring instrument by means of which it is possible to obtain accurate data about specific phenomena”. (Mouton and Marais, 1988, p.64)

Table 2 shows the breaking down of two core concepts of this study; Online personal branding and Impression management and Perception. Online personal branding is consisting of three components; creation, communication and promotion and auto-surveillance. Impression management and perception is divided into five components; motivation and construction, audience expectation, self-monitoring, employers consideration for professionally oriented social media and for non-professionally oriented social media. Each component has its items respectively, which is the basis for semi-structured interview question lists.

Table 2 : Operationalization

Concept	Component	Item	References
Online Personal Branding	Creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Self-examination ➤ Channel used ➤ Reason why ➤ Form of presentation ➤ Storytelling ➤ Content (hobbies, interest) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shake and Hafiz (2014) • McAdams (2013) • Gehl (2011) • Brooks and Anumudu (2015) • Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, (2006) • Philbrick et al., (2015) • Edminson (2014) • Johnson (2017) • Edminson (2014) • Berkelaar (2014)
	Communication and promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Sharing contents ➤ Posting contents ➤ Commenting, liking, following ➤ Participate to forum discussion ➤ Pages created 	
	Auto-surveillance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Tools used ➤ Recurrence 	
Impression management and Perception	Motivation and Construction	➤ The goal of impression	• E.Goffman (1959)
		➤ The perception of the current reflected image	• Leary and Kowalski, (1990)
	Audience expectation	➤ Size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schwabel (2009) • Davison et al., (2011) • Bohnert and Ross, (2010) • Rui, J. and Stefanone, M. (2013) • Johnson, (2017)
		➤ Diversity	
	Self-monitoring	➤ High/low level of self-monitoring	• Snyder, M. (1974)
		➤ Perception of control	• Labrecque, Markos and Milne, (2011)
Employers consideration: Professionally oriented social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Private/public information ➤ Professional photos ➤ Keywords, ➤ Specific skills, ➤ Complete profile ➤ Relevant contacts ➤ Volunteering and civic experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lam ,(2016) • Hood et al, (2016) 	



	<p>Employers consideration: Non-professionally oriented social media</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ <i>Information about alcohol or drug use</i>➤ <i>Inappropriate photos or information posted on a candidate's page</i>➤ <i>Notes showing links to criminal behavior</i>➤ <i>"bad-mouthing" of former employers or fellow employees</i>➤ <i>Confidential information about past employers</i>➤ <i>Unprofessional screen names</i>➤ <i>Poor communication skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Berkelaar ,(2014)• Harris and Rae (2014)• Appel , (2014)• Mikkelson, ,(2010)
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4 Empirical investigation

The theoretical framework could be considered as divided into several parts. One of these sections regroups the theories corresponding to the strategy of elaboration of an online personal brand according to the field of the research, another part could regroup the theories regarding the idea of control towards online personal brand. These theories have been operationalized into more precise items in order to make the questions understandable for the participants. However, it has to be acknowledged that most of the interviewees tend to not consider the elements of online personal branding strategy, especially towards the creation, promotion and communication, and tend to focus on the control of their online presence.

This section consists of the findings that emerged from the conducted semi-structured interviews. Several quotations have been included in order to make the reader more involved into the point of view and perception of the interviewees. The students, who participate to the interviews, have expressed themselves and several common points and variations around common items have been identified. Thus the interviews provided different themes. These themes permit to categorize the empirical material into different sections which highlight the common items. A rather high quantity of codes emerged from the data and thus has been combined into more general themes in order to provide an understandable and not too repetitive reading. Therefore, the discovered themes are Normality, Extreme positions, Anxiety, Privacy, Control, Expressing entertainment, Indifference and Reaching a good look. Accordingly, the three themes which arises are the need to fit the norm, the need of standing out and the need of control. Thus, the need to fit the norm is composed of Normality, Extreme positions and Expressing entertainment. The need to stand out comprise Differentiation as well as Reaching a good look. Finally, the need of control consists of Fears, Privacy, Control and Indifference. The table underneath provides a brief explanation of the different themes.



Table 3 : Codes for Empirical Investigation

Themes 1	Themes 2	Explanation
The need to fit the norm	Normality	The idea of appearing as a normal person in general.
	Extreme position	The idea to avoid any extreme positions, mostly about politics and public preoccupations.
	Active social life	The idea to show other that you are active and have a social and “healthy life”
Need to stand-out	Differentiation	The idea to differentiate the profile regarding the others in a general way.
	Reaching a good look	The idea to appear as the best version of oneself as possible.
Need for control	Control	The idea of controlling the content about oneself online.
	Privacy	The idea of keeping certain items private and the idea of privacy in general.
	Anxiety	The different fears and preoccupations of the participant towards their online presence.
	Indifference	The idea of not paying attention of others point of view about oneself



The need to fit the norm

When the respondents were asked about their reflected image and how they would like to be seen by the others through online platform, they were quite divided in their positions. Being seen as a “normal” person appears consistently in the transcript: *“I want to be seen as a normal person”* Pauline, France, *“I don’t want to be out of the norm”*. Katharina, Italy

The term normal remains very general and difficult to interpret, but participants were able to discuss the several components that should appear in order to be considered as “normal”.

Most of the respondents emphasized that showing an active, social and healthy life fit with the online behavior norms.

Firstly, respondents emphasized that contents about travels and hobbies are aspects that they put the most in value in their non-professional social media account.

One of the participants emphasized that showing travels photo is a good mean to promote himself on social media. *“I think on social media it is important to show up the good side of you, by sharing travels photos, doing sport...”* Eva, Sweden. Indeed, those contents are often used by participants to communicate with their audience, considered as appropriate, respondents were confident and “proud” to bring it out.

One other critical aspect that appears the most, is the interest of showing a certain engagement in association (school associations, volunteering), humanitarian organization and social issues (to a certain limit). *“Nothing that can shock any public”* Yannie, Hong-Kong ;

Considered as appropriate, participants have highlighted that showing those engagement is *“totally beneficiary”*, in both professional and nonprofessional social media.

“I think that supporting ecological issues is totally appropriate on social media...” Pauline, France;

“I don’t hesitate to share volunteering work, previous jobs and hobbies activities”; Axel, France;

But to a certain extent, indeed, participants insisted on being transparent regarding political point of view. *“I think social medias are not appropriate places to take a political position”* Marleen, Netherlands;



Considered as inappropriate in a job seeking context and toward friend and family network, most of participants admitted that political point of view and “extreme ideas” should stay private. *“Since I do not put any too extreme posts. I just post what others usually do, like posting my daily photos or sharing cute animal videos, nothing special.”* Yannie, Hong-Kong;

The majority of participants acknowledged that they have some photos related with festivity. Some of them considered it as “normal” activities since it a part of social and cultural life. *“I used to share photo of me when partying, I think when you are a student it is totally normal to do it.”* Wally, Tunisia. One of the participant recognized that he used to share photos of him and his friends during celebrations, but as long as it is well controlled, he considers it as valuable regarding to his current volunteering job in a radio station.

The general opinion that emerge throughout transcripts is that content about festivity is generally not appropriate for a professional audience but it could be acceptable regarding several conditions: “not have too much contents about it”, “it could be appropriate regarding the future job expected by showing that you are good at socializing with people”, “Avoiding any habits that could be linked with the use of alcohol”.

Another aspect of what most of participants are calling being normal is to avoid “over posting” content. In fact, they argued that posting pictures every day, commenting too much, express yourself about private things in public and everything that could be considered annoying. In fact some of participants do not want to expose their personality traits and too personal information at all. Thus, most of the participants explain that a certain balance should be kept about how active oneself is on social media, especially on non-professionally oriented social media.

Moreover, most of the respondent explained that they do not feel the need to participate to any forum discussion or polls. They often communicate with their closed audience around subject that does not concern political or societal subjects.



The need to stand out

The participants expressed themselves in several ways about how and why they try to make their different online profile standing out. The idea of general differentiation appears on non-professionally oriented social media such as Facebook and Instagram as a rather important item for several participants. The idea is to appear differently in order to stand out in a positive way. One of the participants confessed for example that he seeks to appear as relatively “superior to the others” in a general way and for every audiences. Some of the participants also consider non-professionally oriented social media as platforms that they could use for professional purpose and thus feel the need to bring some items that could constitute a certain advantage. Some participants are therefore posting actively about the different organizations they are working with and try to reach contacts for their networks towards these platforms. For example, one of the participants is a music artist who really considers taking care of his “brand” in order to maximize its chance of developing its activity. However most of the participants have not really been capable of explaining the reason why they trying to differentiate themselves on non-professionally oriented social media.

- *“I just want to be seen as an original person who is doing original things”*. Gadis, Indonesia;

. - *“I would like others to be jealous when they stalking me (laughs) “*. Adrien, France;

However, the idea of general differentiation appears mostly when it comes to the elaboration of professionally oriented social media such as LinkedIn. In fact, it appears that participants seek for items, such as the profile picture or the narrative description, to appear different from others in order to stand out. For example one participant explained that she thought thoroughly about the background of her profile picture which is a design area of study in her hometown university school with a board filled of brainstorming keywords. Indeed as she is really interested in working in a Start-up in the near future she wanted to appear as a motivate student working in original workplaces and used to group project.

Moreover, participants also explained that having a complete and elaborated profile is quite simply a differentiation item itself. Indeed, they argued that not all students possess a professionally oriented social media profile and most of them tend to have an incomplete profile with missing information and a rather small network. Some of interviewees also explained that they already did a “SWOT” (analysis of the strengths and weaknesses) as an exercise in order to help them for every times they have to present themselves. However,



most of the participants confessed that they are not really doing it with precise strategy or do not really know what to do about it in reality. Thus, most of the participants are not considering putting any keywords, specific skills linked to their professional project or desired positions. Finally, most of the people who do not have or really using any professionally oriented social media expressed their will to create one in the near future.

-” I have LinkedIn because people told me that it was important, but I am not really active and I don’t really know how does it works” Arthur, France;

The idea of standing out is mostly underlined by the fact that the participants seek to have a good-looking profile if it is not the “perfect profile “.

The idea appears on non-professionally oriented social media as being an interesting person who differentiate himself or herself by posting “interesting things” such as scientific articles about environment or new discovery for example. It can also be seen through the participation in events and several photos of theses “valuable activities”. Those activities can take several forms such as sports, music and cultural activities.

- “I want to show to others that I have a busy life and do things that people usually do not “. Wanit, Thailand;

On professionally oriented social media, the idea is to be “noticed”. In fact the participants described several items that they perceive as valuables for employers. Those items are the profile picture, putting interesting experiences, as well as volunteering experiences in associations. They argued mostly for a neutral professional picture, with a smile, neutral clothes and a “nice” background: Some of them argue for a completely neutral profile pictures, with a unicolor background, professional clothes and neutral face expression. They mostly argue for pictures that looks “natural”. Most of the interviewees also argued that they should put all of their experiences to demonstrate their motivations. Moreover, some of the participants explained that they perceive a narrative form of presentation as possibly really advantageous.

- “I put all my experiences because it is always good to see even if it is summer jobs!” Marleen, Netherland;



The need of control

The participants are perceiving in different ways their needs of control towards their overall content related to themselves online.

Firstly, a part of the participants do not feel the need to control on a regular basis their online content for different reasons. In fact, certain indifference have been expressed for some participants about how the others think about themselves and thus does not practice “any auto censure” while posting on non-professionally oriented social media. Moreover, some participants consider that the several information provided by their profiles do not constitute any problems. Therefore, they expressed a certain indifference about controlling what people can see. Regarding the professionally oriented social media, most of the participants do not consider it as a determinant tool for professional success and job seeking. Thus their certain indifference about the content appearing on these social media has been expressed by most of the participants.

- *“I really don’t care about how others see me, so I don’t really think about what I am posting”* Anna, Sweden;

- *“If somebody would look for me on Facebook, he would not find anything. I don’t have anything to hide anyway!”* Marie, France;

Furthermore the question of privacy has been brought to the conversation. Indeed, some participants feel that the content posted on non-professionally oriented social media should not be taken into consideration in a recruitment process. They argued that private life does not influence the professional life. Therefore, most of the interviewees explained that they make a real differentiation between non-professionally and professionally social media regarding their audience. They also explain that the privacy settings on the different social media are sufficient to protect yourself. Thus they do not think about it as something that they should control on a regular basis.

- *“It does not matter, it is my private life!”* Wanit, Thailand;



Secondly, another part of the interviewees do feel the need in controlling their online content on a regular basis for different reasons. Indeed while investigating students' personal brands, several fears and preoccupations about their digital footprints and their online presence have emerged. Some of the participants argued that they were often reached by strangers for inappropriate purposes and that constitute a preoccupation. Moreover, most of the interviewees see the online content about themselves as something broadly available for a really large audience. They therefore argued for the needs of control towards those audiences. The interviewees explain that "basically anyone" could see their online profiles and mentioned employers and government among others. They therefore never considered to post in a negative way about their previous jobs. The participants also explain that they are afraid of the presence of inappropriate content online which they do not know or remember about when or who posted. Moreover, while going over the different online information about themselves online available in public, most of participants, at different levels, expressed their surprises and fears when they saw items that they perceive as inappropriate appears.

- " On LinkedIn, you can know how many people are look at your profile, but on Facebook, I do not have any possibility to check who is looking at my account. " Arthur, France;

- " I don't know how those people can contact me! " Katharina, Italy;

The question of privacy also appeared for the participants who do consider the need to control the content related to themselves online. Indeed, a part of the interviewees argued for the idea of privacy in general and as something that should be taken into consideration by everyone. The concept has been brought through the fact that the students expressed the need to protect their privacy in a general point of view. The interviewees explained that they should protect their private life from anybody who they wish should not have access to their information.

- " I need to control what is posted now, I don't want something strange or personal comes out later in the future " Eva, Sweden;

- " It is all about ethics and privacy! " Marie, France;



Therefore, the different students interviewed explained how they are controlling their online personal brand through the management of the information about themselves online.

First of all, the approach that most of participants mentioned is the management of the several privacy settings available on the different platforms and not putting too much direct information. For example, several participants are using the Facebook function which alert oneself when somebody mention about this person in any posts or contents. They also perceived that they put the maximum privacy security regarding what is available for a public audience. They can thus, choose if they allow those contents to be related to them and appeared on their profile page. Another approach widely mentioned by the interviewees is quite simply the management of their own posts and content share. In fact they argue for the avoidance of anything they perceive as inappropriate.

- "I put an option in which I can accept or decline posting photos of me because I want to have a full control about my image online" Arthur, France;

- " I have pictures of me partying but I pay attention to delete photos where I seem drunk or doing stupid things "Axel, France;

Moreover, some participants discussed thoughts about their names on different platforms. All the interviewees who possess a profile on a professionally oriented social media such as LinkedIn explain they are using their real names on the platform in order to provide the possibility to be found for professional purposes. However, when it comes to non-professionally oriented social media, a part of the students argued that they changed their names in order to hide themselves from people who could investigate on them.

- "I took away the consonants of my last name to avoid the look of employers" Adrien, France;

- "I felt so scary when I knew that strangers saw my Facebook contents since I set my privacy setting as public. I changed it immediately and I changed my Facebook name as well." Karen, Japan;



Furthermore, a part of the interviewees considers their contacts in the different platforms as something they should manage too. Indeed, on the non-professionally oriented social media, some of them explain that they try to keep their contacts with people that they really know. Most of them argued that their contacts were mostly composed of friends, family and acquaintances. However, a part of the interviewees considers some of their platforms such as Instagram as something public and do not consider to control its audience. On professionally oriented social media, some of the interviewees consider the management of their contacts according to their relevance towards their professional projects and fields of activity as something important for their own networks and for employers.

- “I often delete some friends of Facebook because I sometimes see people that I absolutely do not remember about “. Marleen, Netherland;

-” I only accept and ask to students in business school, teachers, and people with interesting profiles”. Marie, France;

Most of the interviewees already have searched their name on internet browsers like Google. A part of them are doing it in a regular basis with the real intention of “cleaning” every unexpected content they could find. Another part of the students just did it once or twice by curiosity and to see what is appearing. However none of the participants knew about specific tools created to investigate oneself on the internet.

-“I researched my name on internet and I found photos about me from party for example. I thought it was kind of scary since I didn't know in advance what kinds of photos would appear.” Katharina, Italy;

Most of the respondents perceive the practice of cybervetting as a rather normal practice to do as an employer. Some of them perceive some ethical issues towards this practice but they mostly agreed to say that they were not shocked about it.



5 Analysis

As a reminder, the purpose of this paper is to investigate on the perception of students towards online personal branding through their own personal brand and with the perspective of matching employers' expectations. Therefore, the research question guiding this paper is: How students do perceive online personal branding with the perspective of matching employers' expectations?

This section of the paper is destined to attribute a meaning of the different findings which result for the conducted semi-structured interviews throughout the different notions brought within the theoretical framework. Indeed, this analysis will follow the components related to the elaboration process of an online personal brand bring by the different sub headings: Creating an online personal brand, Communicating and promoting the self-online and Managing and controlling the online image of the self. The discussion will also bring the different items which constitute the employer's expectations about an online personal brand within the correspondents sub headings. The final part of the analysis concerning the control and the management of the self-online is separated in two parts which representing the level of self-monitoring for the different items. Moreover, a short abstract of the theories and a table summarizing the link between the theories and the findings are provided in order to make the pattern of this analysis more easily understandable. The variation between students perception about all these items and components will be thus be discussed in order to provide interpretations and finally permit to draw the conclusion of this research.

Table 4 : Link between theory, data, and analysis

Analysis headings	Theories	Codes 1	Codes 2
Creating an online personal brand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need to stand-out • The need to fit the norm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normality • Reaching a good look
Communicating and promoting the self online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and promotion • Audience expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need to stand-out • The need to fit the norm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiation • Reaching a good look • Active social life
Managing and controlling the online image of the self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-monitoring • Audience expectations • Auto-surveillance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need for control • The need to fit the norm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control • Privacy • Anxiety • Extreme position • Normality

This table provide a better understanding regarding how the theories are linked to the empirical data and its codes, and thus to the analysis. Some of the codes and theories have been brought several times into different sections and thus appears several times in the analysis section as well.



Perception is a central notion in this paper and for personal branding (Philbrick, 2014). In fact it is present in every objectives of this research and constitutes the basis of the different conducted interviews. Perception can variate between peoples for different reasons (Solomon et al, 2014). A variation of this perception towards different topics can be observed among the participants. The employer's expectations towards an online personal brand in an employment or recruitment process have been illustrated within the theoretical framework. The table underneath will remind the different items highlighted by the literature review and appearing the operationalization table which will be bring within the following discussion.

Table 5 : Items of employers' expectation

Professionally oriented social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Professional photos• Keywords• Specific skills• Complete profile• Relevant contacts• Volunteering and civic experiences
Non-professionally oriented social media	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information about alcohol or drug use• Inappropriate photos or information posted on a candidate's page• Notes showing links to criminal behavior• “Bad-mouthing” of former employers or fellow employees• Confidential information about past employers• Unprofessional screen names• Poor communication skills



As a recap, participants have future perspectives to match the employer expectation, therefore, this study will demonstrate that students are more or less engaged and involved for showing an appropriate image regarding a job seeking context.

Creating an online personal brand

The researchers argue for taking an introspective analysis before creating an online personal brand by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses based on their previous experiences and to be fit themselves with what they are looking for (McAdams, 2013; Gehl, 2011). The next step is to choose a certain reflection and the channels which should be used (McAdams, 2013; Gehl, 2011). Then, the form of presentation should be reflected as well in order to be adequate (McAdams, 2013; Gehl, 2011).

Some of the participants are considering taking an introspective look of themselves before creating a professionally oriented social media profile. It consists of reflecting their strengths and weaknesses based on their past experiences before filling information and present themselves online. They explained that it was a consideration which they were used to think of. However, most of the interviewees do not consider about taking an introspective look before creating an online profile. This could be related to the field of study and the categories of school the interviewees have been studying as explained before. Indeed the students interviewed which are in a business or administration field of study tend to be more prepared for this kind of task than the others.

Every participant differentiates in the use of the different online platforms they have and therefore choose which one to use and for which purpose. All the interviewees are using non-professionally oriented social media, but they have different perceptions about how they should be used. In fact most of the students are using non-professionally oriented social media such as Facebook and Instagram in order to communicate and promote themselves with their friends, family and acquaintances. Thus most of the interviewees perceive having a limited public concerning their online personal brand. The interviewees mostly do not perceive non-professionally oriented social media as something potentially professional, it can be assumed that they do not perceive the need to provide as strict and professional presentation. However, few interviewees do consider that non-professionally oriented social media can also have a professional aspect for developing networks and being noticed in a positive way. They are therefore also considering these kind platforms as part of their online personal brand strategy



towards rather broader range of audiences, such as future employers or person who works at their interested area.

Some of the interviewees do have a consideration of their means of presentation. In fact, on professionally oriented social media, some students feel the need to describe themselves in a narrative form. Moreover, some participants described how their profile pictures should appear as professional. They mostly justify it by elaborating a neutral photo but without being too formal in order too seems “natural” The exercise of self-presentation and online self-presentation is not something that is in common in every universities or schools and could explain the usefulness perception of this approach. Concerning the information provided on professionally oriented social media, only a few participants perceive their profiles as perfectly completed with relevant information, focusing on theirs skills and experiences, including volunteering and civic experiences according to their objectives. Some of them are also considering putting keywords according to their field of activity. They therefore perceive professionally oriented social media as part of their online personal brand and reflect on the different items that they have to put into value. The majority of them do not possess a profile because they do not recognize its usefulness in their lives today even if they mostly consider to create one in the future. Concerning the respondents who have a professional online profile, most of them perceive that their online profile as incomplete and highly improvable regarding a future job seeking. In fact, on those social media, most of the interviewed students simply present themselves with the mandatory information without having a deep reflection about it. Most of them do not put any keywords or desired position within their information. Moreover, on non-professionally oriented social media, most of the students do not put direct information and are presenting themselves towards their communications and promotions. They are thus missing an important consideration according to the researcher for the creation of a personal brand.



Communicating and promoting the self online

Communicate and promote the self online is one of the crucial steps in the process of personal branding. (Philbrick et al, 2015; Edmiston, 2014)

All the participants present capacities to promote and communicate their content but not at the same level and not for the same reasons. Indeed, the study has shown that participants pay attention about the content they are posting or the way they are communicating. The next section will present the different student's perception toward their communication and promotion abilities around different items that they consider as part of their online presence.

Participants who present high capacities to communicate and promote themselves tend to use a neutral style of language through non-professional social media such as Facebook. They often considered that content relating with travels hobbies are appropriate and adopt it as a mean to promote themselves. Often associated with common things that people do, participants admitted that travels and hobbies are important items that shows up a healthy and active life. It appears that participants who were already engaged in "professional activities" tend to address and adapt communication to a broader audience, by promoting content about their association or volunteering activities, in specific public group or simply in their personal profile page. Those respondents have benefited of their current network to promote their current activities. However, it is mostly throughout professional platforms that participants perceive their communication skills better adapted to a professional audience.

Participants that present lower capacities in term of communication have recognized that platforms such as Facebook or Instagram were used for non-professional purpose. Indeed, content shared (for example. photos, news, social causes) represent for the major part of the interviewees a mean for expressing their interests, hobbies and ideas. Thus, they admitted that their style of communication were more adapted for friend and family audiences than for a professional one. Accordingly, some participant admitted to post content relating to festivity. Thus, they explained that different posts and pictures with "funny" facial expression, costumes, dancing or alcohol related content for example, can appear on their profiles.



Indeed, the students interviewed perceive it as appropriate to a certain extent and mentioned that it was part of a “normal” social student life.

The students interviewed do not participate in any forum discussion or public discussions online. Indeed, this study found that respondent tends to participate to group discussion in private circle only for their study work. Furthermore, students do not feel a special need to interact with people that they do not know, around a specific subject. This could be link to the fact that they perceive expressing themselves to a public audience can have a negative impact on their images towards their friends, especially within their point of view it could be considered as extreme and might be out of their norm. However, a few participants are still considering promoting themselves by developing their network on social medias. In fact, a few amount of participants acknowledged they have been contacted by companies (on LinkedIn). Such as explained by Gehl (2011), students that have made the effort to expand their network have in result, gain in job opportunities.



Managing and controlling the online image of the self

The management and the control of the online image correspond to the last crucial part of online personal branding. Referred to the auto-surveillance process acknowledged by several authors, the study has shown two tendencies regarding the management and the control of the online-self.

The following analysis part will be organized regarding to the two approaches on the self-monitoring theory acknowledged by Snyder (1974). Based on the employer's consideration theory, this part will in fact, separate student that "tend" to present a high or low capability to control and manage their online content.

High self-monitoring

Most of respondents perceive that they have a sufficient control of their online image. This perceived control consist essentially of the management of security settings used on non-professional social media. In fact, the respondents emphasized on security setting while considering their control over their overall online image. Moreover, some of the participants explained that they perceive their identity protected after changing their names, for nicknames or by deleting some letters, on non-professionally oriented social media. Most of the interviewees already have searched for their names on internet browser such as Google in order to see what is appearing and eventually correct it. However, they are not doing it in a regular basis as an investigation tool but more by curiosity. Moreover none of the participants know about specific self research tools. It can therefore be assumed that they do not really perceive this approach as indispensable. Finally, almost every respondent explained that they are managing the content related to themselves within the online platform they are using. In fact, according to their principles such as the general idea of privacy and what they perceive as appropriate or not, the students are deleting or quite simply avoiding to post content. Some participants will therefore delete some pictures and posts which they perceive as inappropriate such as the content which could be related to the use of alcohol or items which they perceive as too personal. However, despite those controls, most of the participants have been at least a bit astonished by what appeared while investigating on their non-professionally social media profile with public settings. Some of them have been also surprised by the findings appeared after entering their name on Google.



Several major reasons appear: Respondents want to convey a good image of themselves by enacting a good impression toward their non-professional network (eg: friends). Moreover, students are concerned with future employers' expectations. Indeed, most of the student are at least partially aware of the practice of cybervetting and consider it as ordinary. Some of the interviewees also consider the overall wide internet user population and anybody who could investigate on them in general. It is because of those reasons that students manage their content in social media, more than that, this control appears to be a spontaneous initiative by the student that daily used social media. It can therefore be assumed that students in a certain way are keeping watching the evolution of the content related to themselves and thus engaged in the auto-surveillance process.

Low self-monitoring

Some of the participants do not perceive the need of controlling their image on non-professionally oriented social media. In fact, the respondents expressed their indifference towards others individual's point of view, moreover, some of them explain that they consider the principle of privacy, and thus do not want to control what's appear on what they perceive as private domain. Therefore, some of the participants acknowledged that non-professionally oriented social media should be considered as free place of expression, and by consequences, do not express the will to manage of auto-censored themselves.

Furthermore, it appears that respondents that not highly participate in the auto-surveillance process seem to be less informed regarding the practice of cybervetting and by consequences less involved in their content management.



6 Conclusion

6.1 Discussion

This section draws the conclusions of this paper. It provides an answer to the research question by summarizing and discussing the outcomes of the research. Then the several strengths and weaknesses of the study are acknowledged. Finally, some recommendations about who could be interested of reading this paper and about further study are provided.

The focus of this research is the perception of the students towards what the authors believe being an important new consideration in the marketing and management field, the personal brand and more precisely the online personal brand. This perception has been studied through in depth semi structured interview in order to investigate thoroughly the variation of perception along with the different items composing the elaboration of an online personal brand. It also takes into consideration the employer's considerations towards an online personal brand according to the field of research. Indeed, the research available about online personal branding tends to focus on these employers consideration and the different steps and items needed to elaborate a “successful” online personal brand. Thus there is a certain lack regarding the point of view and perception of students, who are the employees of tomorrow, concerning this concept. Therefore this research provides a different insight of how personal branding is perceived from a different angle.



Normality against Differentiation

The study has shown that students are concerned regarding their online image on social media, most of the time, they considered their online presence as a normalized reflection of themselves. However, the term normal was often used by the participants but described in different perspectives and with several criteria which differ from one student to another. They perceive that their online personal brands should reflect the image of a “normal” person by keeping their overall content uniform.

However, the global process (creation, communication/promotion and auto-surveillance) of a personal brand suggests to possess an “outstanding” profile by being active in all the steps process. The literature has indeed, highlighted the idea to differentiate the self from the other in order to attain professional ambitions. Indeed, employers tend to seek for distinguished profiles, and by consequences, the notion of normality could appear to be double edged. On the first hand, it seems to be the perceived attitude to adopt on social media for the students but in the other hand, normality is not a determinant criteria for an employer point of view and could be considered as “insufficient” in a context where employer can have access to a rather high number of potential future employee.

Moreover some items which constitute the perception of the norm for some students are perceived as differentiation items by other students. It appears important to acknowledge that participants are individuals from different countries and cultures and by consequence, it can play an important role toward their perception of their personal branding and employer’s expectation.



Professional and non-professional social media overall students' perception : A spontaneous online personal branding elaboration.

It appears that students have a precise idea regarding the utility of their social media account.

The students perceive their profiles on professionally oriented social media as incomplete and improvable. The accounts were mostly created spontaneously without specific purpose and strategy. Professionally oriented social media are thus perceived as a professional tool in an employment context but are neglected for different reasons by most of the participants.

Non-professionally oriented social media were in globality perceived as non-professional channel. Indeed, they tend to not consider it as a professional tool but as a mean for express themselves toward a close audience (Friends and Family). It could be explained by the fact that social media such as Facebook and Instagram were originally created for interacting with friends, and by consequences the perception of the participants toward those channels, tend to be perceived in a similar angle. Indeed, the study has shown that students do not seem to perceive the importance of building a personal brand in a job seeking context, they tend to use social media more by social realization than for a professional objective.

Almost all the students interviewed possess a profile on non-professionally oriented social media and have for several years with daily use and has developed without especially noticing it, amassing a rather large amount of contents. Social media tends to help and motivate individuals to being active and promoting the self with several means, such as pages/contacts suggestions, notifications, or dedicated information emplacement to fulfill. Therefore, numerous steps composing the elaboration of an online personal brand are done spontaneously without a special carefully thought out strategy. It appears those students are crafting their "brand" without considering most of the different approaches and aspects which are underlined within the online personal branding literature. Thus, crafting an online personal brand gives the feeling of being an unpremeditated and unconscious process for the students.

However most of the students still consider that this content reflecting themselves online should be controlled through different tools and for different reasons.



The auto-surveillance step : a spontaneous way to fit the norm.

The control and the management of the online personal brand is defined as an indispensable step in the online personal branding literature. It also constitute, the main and only common consideration among all the interviewees regarding online personal branding. The perceived control remains important for the students. Indeed, most of the participants emphasized to attempting managing the overall flow of information related to themselves online as much as possible. This perceived control is done for different reasons among the interviewees. Indeed, students have some preconceptions about their future or current employers' expectations and the idea of privacy in general. This perceived control is done through several tools such as the privacy settings available in the different online platforms or quite simply overseeing regularly what they are posting or what it is posted about them. However, a certain astonishment has been observed for a rather high number of respondents regarding what information and contents are actually public.

Therefore, students emphasize on a reactive approach of suppression of contents. In fact, almost all the participants explained that they are going over what others are posting about them in order to delete some contents if they consider it inappropriate or unfavorable. The aim is to avoid to stand out in a negative way and to fit the perceived norm they are seeking. Moreover, the participants are not using specific tools or approach in order to be active in this process and are reactive when they encounter undesired content. Students therefore perceive the process of auto-surveillance consisting of the suppression of unexpected and unintended content in order to craft their normalized reflection of themselves over time. Thus, even if this practice is perceived as necessary for the students, it is mostly not for specific reasons regarding a job-seeking context but more by concern about the general reflected image.



6.1.1 Strengths and weaknesses

The main strength of this research is the in depth semi-structured interview method conducted which has permit to discuss thoroughly the perception of students towards every item the authors has considered for the notion of online personal branding. It provided unexpected findings by letting them express themselves freely. Moreover, the variety of the participants has been also a strength. In fact, being able to investigate on students with different nationalities, ages and overall backgrounds has provided a rather broad perspective toward the perception of online personal branding. Indeed participants were issue from different parts of the world where the different social norm impact directly the participant perceptions and attitudes on online platforms.

Furthermore, it has allowed students to realize at which point that building a personal brand is important today, and most of them have acknowledged that they will reconsidered some aspects of their online presence. Indeed, creating a personal brand is a long and fastidious process that should be taking in consideration as early as possible.

The first weakness to take into consideration for this research is that a central point of this paper which is employer's expectation criteria were based on a secondary data collection method and used as a theory. Then, it has to be acknowledged that some of the interviews have not been conducted in English. It can therefore be assumed that some questions have not be asked exactly in the same way. However, the semi-structured interview patent and follow up questions have permitted to the monitor to reformulate and ask again when some kind of misunderstanding had appeared.



6.1.2 Recommendations and further research

This study has enumerated the different student's perceptions toward online personal branding. It has been acknowledged that a large amount of the students tend to not be trained regarding the use of social media and other online tools for professional perspectives. As a result, the authors recommend that students in university need to be trained in being sensitive to several large concept of how to build an efficient online personal brand, in order to help them fulfil their future role better in the workplace environment. This research can therefore, provide an insight to universities and schools about what they could include in their guidance processes to develop their student's knowledge towards online personal branding.

This research can also permit to raise awareness of students regarding the different employer's criteria in a job seeking context, as well from an employer's point of view, it could be interesting for them to have an insight on student perception toward the practice of cybervetting.

Several tendencies have been observed in this study while interrogating and analyzing the answers of the participants.

First of all, a variation of the perception of the students has been observed regarding their country of origin. Indeed, as mentioned before, the international university where this study took place has permit to interview people from various part of the world. It could thus be interesting to comparing variations of the habits and attitudes towards online personal branding between different countries.

Moreover it appears that students who tends to be more engaged in their online personal brand are about to seek for a job or are already engaged in professional activities. Thus, it could be interesting to discover whether or not, the professional statues of students have an impact on their perception.

Furthermore, it seems pertinent to study the students' perceptions of their personal branding over time, so as to measure whether the concept of personal branding tends to be more impregnated and understood by the students.

Finally, as mentioned in the limitations, this paper does not take into consideration the personality traits of the participants. It constitutes an interesting angle which has not really been investigated in the online personal branding literature yet.



Therefore, several further researches about this rather new topic and phenomena which is the online personal branding are possible. Qualitative research could permit better comparison and generalization and a longitudinal research could help oversee the evolution of the perception of this concept overtime.



7 Appendix

Semi-structured interview : Questionnaire

Basic information

- What is your name/age/nationality? What are you studying? ... (Make the interviewee talk a bit about himself).
- Have you ever applied for a job? When? How?

Creation

Self-examination

- Have you already considered your own strength and weaknesses? For what purpose ?

Channel used

- Which online channel /tools do you use? Since how many times? for what purpose?
- Is it your real name in those channels? Do you use the same in all the channel? (Let speak about its choice)

Form of presentation

- How do you present yourself in the different platform? What you put in value? in which form ? (storytelling, others)

Communication and promotion

- Do you share/post any contents ? What kind of content ? How often ? For which public ? (make a differentiation between the different channel used).
- Do you comment/liking/following in the different channel ? How often ? Which public? (make a differentiation between the different channel used).
- Do you participate to forum discussion/Facebook page/group discussion/polls ? How often which kind ? (make a differentiation between the different channel used).
- Have you got your own pages/groups/ blogs ? Which kind ?



Autosurveillance

- Have you ever research your name on the internet ? How often? what did you find?
Do you use specific research engine ? (which one)
- How often do you log on your different online account ?
- Can we try to do it together and see what appears ?

Impression management and Perception Motivation and Construction

The goal of impression

- Do you think you manage/organize content about yourself? For what purpose? (make a differentiation between the different channel used).
- How do you think about your current reflected image? What information support it (photos, post, ...) (make a differentiation between the different channel used)?
- How you would like to be seen by the others?

Audience expectation

- How many contacts do you have on the different channel? (Ask about the diversity/proportion regarding the different channel eg:family/professional oriented)
- What do you think about employer expectation in your home country ? Do you think that your actual online presence could fit with their expectation ?

Self monitoring

- Are you aware of the different audience which have access to your content while communicating on social media ?
- Do you think you have a full control about what information is posted about yourself online ?



Employers considerations

Professionally oriented social media

- Can you define your profile picture as professional ?
- Do you consider to put keywords according to the kind of job/sector you are seeking?
- Do you consider to put specifics skills according to the kind of job/sector you are seeking ?
- Do you consider your profile complete and up to date ?
- Did you put any civic/ volunteering experience ?
- Are all your contacts relevant ? How many contact do you have ?

Non professionally oriented social media

- Do you have some content related to the use of alcohol or drugs ?
- Do you have some notes/content which could be link to a criminal behaviour ?
- Do you have some unprofessional names ?
- Do you have some inappropriate photos or content shared ?
- Did you ever post content in a negative way about your past employers/colleague ?
- Did you ever shared some confidential information about your previous jobs ?
- What do you think about your overall communication skills on unofficial social media ? (grammar mistakes ? familiar language ? Misspelling ?)
- Can we go over your Facebook / LinkedIn account with a public profile together in order to see what is appearing ?

Ending questions

- Which items do you think are important for an employer while looking to a professionally oriented social media profile ?
- What do you think about the practice of cybervetting (brief explanation of the concept) ?



- In your opinion, what form a perfect/appropriate personal online branding ?



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