NAVIGATING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSONAL BRAND

A Case Study of IDBM Alumni

Master’s Thesis
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Abstract

In today’s competitive labor market, characterized by frequent job changes and career transitions, personal branding has become essential for standing out. However, there is limited research on how individuals in emerging fields navigate personal branding. As interdisciplinary education programs continue to grow, understanding how these individuals approach personal branding is crucial.

This thesis explored how interdisciplinary graduates construct their personal brand as well as what challenges they face when building their personal brand. To get an in-depth overview of the phenomenon in a real-life context, a single-case study of International Design Business Management (IDBM) graduates was conducted, with 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews with IDBM graduates from various years and tracks.

The study findings indicate that while the graduates may not intentionally adopt a personal branding strategy, the elements they find valuable in building and maintaining a positive image align with established personal branding frameworks. However, the study identified that interdisciplinary graduates face challenges in constructing and communicating a simple, clear, and/or concise personal branding message. Additionally, employers' limited awareness of the benefits of interdisciplinary education presents challenges for interdisciplinary graduates in constructing their personal brand. Finally, the research revealed nuances of personal branding specific for interdisciplinary graduates, such as the need for intentional degree design, the value of multiple adaptable brands, and leveraging existing awareness of the benefits of interdisciplinary education.

By expanding the existing body of knowledge on personal branding, this research underscores the necessity of studying personal branding within emerging fields. Furthermore, the findings of the thesis offer practical and actionable insights that can be utilized by interdisciplinary programs, as well as by their students, and graduates.

Keywords personal brand, interdisciplinary graduates, interdisciplinary higher education
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

In the modern labor market, the growing gig economy, and competitiveness have resulted in an increasingly insecure job market, where frequent job changes and career transitions are more common than ever (Gorbatov et al. 2018). To face those challenges, the presentation of oneself and standing out from the crowd has become the key.

One of the phenomena that has emerged as a means for presenting oneself is personal branding. Sitting at the junction of different disciplines such as marketing, sociology, communication, psychology, organizational behavior, and management, personal branding can be defined as:

... “a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based on a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery.”

(Gorbatov et al. 2018, p.6)

The act of promoting oneself is not a new phenomenon. However, the term personal branding was popularized at the end of the 1990s by the business management guru Tom Peters who argued that prospering in the job market requires using branding techniques on oneself (Peters, 1997). Since then, the popularity of personal branding grew rapidly within the industry (Sheperd, 2005).

Subsequently, in the following decades, research on personal branding accelerated. Initially, academics mostly focused on celebrities or leaders in business and politics (Scheidt et al., 2020). However, with the rise of social networking sites, personal branding is now recognized as a relevant marketing task for everyone to enhance one’s visibility and opportunities (Shepherd, 2005).

Personal branding is built on the premise that the main job of everyone is to be one’s own marketer and that every person has their own brand, whether they like it or not - or whether they are aware of it or not (Peters, 1997). This is often accompanied by a warning that if one does not
manage their brand actively, surrounding people will still do it “somehow” and that “the chances are that their brand description won't be what you have in mind” (Kaputa 2005, p. 8; Labrecque et al., 2010)

1.2. Research Gap

Within the existing literature, personal branding is frequently tied to the specific demands, expectations, and limitations within various roles and industries (Gorbatov et al. 2018). Currently, the specific professions covered focus mostly on occupations that are highly conducive to personal branding, such as celebrities, executives, politicians, academia, and journalists, and only a few studies focused on specific roles such as psychologists and librarians (Gorbatov et al. 2018).

However, there is a scarcity of research on the personal branding of individuals who work in more ill-defined and less established areas, and might therefore struggle with the simplicity and clarity of their branding message. One group that is likely to engage in those kinds of jobs is interdisciplinary graduates.

As a response to the complex problems of the global and rapidly changing world, over the past decades, there has been a surge in interdisciplinary educational programs, which prepare graduates to be able to work across disciplines (Jacobs & Frickel, 2009; Nadan & London, 2013). Therefore, as the number of interdisciplinary graduates is likely to increase in the future, it is important to understand how these individuals engage in personal branding.

1.3. Research Objectives and Questions

This thesis aims to explore how interdisciplinary graduates construct their personal brand. More precisely, this thesis investigates the elements that interdisciplinary graduates find helpful when “selling” their skills in practice. Furthermore, this thesis aims to examine the extent to which interdisciplinary graduates consciously develop and communicate their personal brand.

RQ: How do interdisciplinary graduates construct, explicitly or implicitly, their personal brand?
To answer this question, the graduates of one interdisciplinary Master’s program - the International Design Business Management (IDBM) program from Aalto University are studied.

However, the aim of the study is not to create a manual on how to do personal branding but rather to explore the nuances of personal branding that are specific to interdisciplinary graduates. For this, the study will compare and contrast the personal branding approaches of IDBM graduates with the current literature on personal branding. Furthermore, the study aims to identify the challenges or obstacles that interdisciplinary graduates face when constructing and promoting their personal brand. Therefore, the research question is supported by the following subquestion:

**SQ: What challenges do interdisciplinary graduates face when building their personal brand?**

This thesis offers both academic and non-academic contributions. First, as the research on personal branding is continuously developing, this study offers breadth to the researched area, by studying how the concept relates to more ill-defined and emerging professional identities, such as those of interdisciplinary graduates. Second, by uncovering the best practices for personal branding of interdisciplinary graduates, this study can be directly used by interdisciplinary programs, such as IDBM, to support their students, faculty, and alumni in developing their personal brands, contributing to their employability in the competitive labor market.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the literature related to both aspects of the research question: personal branding and interdisciplinarity.

Firstly, the context of personal branding is explained, by analyzing the evolution and presence of the concept, both in popular science as well as in academia, after which the definition is discussed. To understand what personal branding means in practice, academic literature on building a successful personal brand is analyzed. Further, the challenges of personal branding are highlighted. Finally, as personal branding is closely linked to employability, graduate employability is discussed (Kheder, 2019).

Second, the rise of interdisciplinary higher education is discussed, to further showcase the need for research. Finally, the study explores some of the challenges associated with interdisciplinary higher education that may also affect the personal branding endeavors of graduates.

2.1. Personal Branding

2.1.1. The Evolution of Personal Branding

In some ways, the branding of individuals can be considered to be as old as human interaction (Scheidt et al., 2020). According to historians, already Alexander the Great deliberately designed his reputation so that he would be “worshipped as a god in his lifetime” (Barron, 2014).

Therefore, it is no wonder that in academia similar topics have been studied by different disciplines over time (Scheidt et al., 2020). Some researchers relate the phenomenon of promoting oneself with Goffman’s (1956) dramaturgical perspective on “the presentation of the self”, according to which people have the desire to influence the perceptions of others (Gorbatov et al. 2018). Other researchers point out that human brands also gained popularity in the 1980s of marketing studies, where they were looked at as a way to broaden the traditional concept of marketing (Vallas & Cummins, 2015).

The term “personal branding”, however, was popularized in 1997 by Tom Peters in his article “The Brand Called You”, where he provocatively encouraged everyone to learn from big brands
about how to promote oneself in order to succeed in the new world of work: “We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You” (Peters, 1997). Subsequently, there was a surge in the popular business and self-improvement books, websites, courses, and consultancies that address this subject (Shepherd, 2005).

Subsequently, academia began to research personal branding as a self-standing concept in the early 2000s (Gorbatov et al. 2018). Shepherd (2005) conducted a review of the popular literature, with an attempt to analyze personal branding within the context of marketing as an academic discipline, raising the fundamental question, whether science can “reclaim personal branding from the enthusiasts” (Shepherd, 2005, p. 12).

The subsequent surge in scientific focus on personal branding resulted in a widespread, but fragmented academic presence of the phenomenon (Scheidt et al., 2020). From its origins in the field of marketing, the expanding body of literature on personal branding today ranges across disciplines, aiming to define personal branding, explain how it works, and to conceptualize it with regard to different factors influencing it (Gorbatov et al. 2018). In absence of consistent terminology, terms such as “self-marketing,” “self-branding,” “personal marketing,” and “human brand” have also been used to describe similar ideas (Scheidt et al., 2020). However, “personal branding” remains the most frequently used and accepted term (Scheidt et al., 2020).

2.1.2. Defining Personal Branding

To address the disconnectedness of the literature on personal branding, and therefore strengthen the foundation for future research, Gorbatov et al. (2018) conducted an interdisciplinary systematic review of personal branding, analyzing more than 100 scholarly papers published on the topic thus far. A complementary effort was made by Scheidt et al. (2020) in a systematic bibliographic review, contributing to the positioning of personal branding.

The review of the existing literature indicated that personal branding has been frequently used without any commonly accepted definition and that the existing attempts lacked either comprehensiveness, rigor, or both (Gorbatov et al. 2018; Scheidt et al. 2020). Oftentimes, instead of attempting to define personal branding, scholars propose simply extending the definition of
branding to individuals (Lair et al., 2005). However, the existing definitions of personal branding shared some common grounds, focusing on: (1) what the individual brings (e.g. skills, competencies, experience, or expertise); (2) the audience or specific target groups (from specific relationships such as “employee trying to impress his boss” to abstract “the world around you”); (3) the differentiation as the result of the branding (e.g. distinguishing oneself from peers by leveraging one’s points of difference and defining individual unique selling proposition) (Gander, 2014; Khedher, 2015; Scheidt et al. 2020; Shepherd, 2005; Parmentier et al., 2013).

Aiming for future construct clarity, Gorbatov et al. (2018) systematic review identified the key attributes of the construct and proposed the following definition for personal branding:

“*Personal branding is a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based in a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery.*” (Gorbatov et al. 2018, p.6).

Whereas “personal branding” is the term used from the process perspective, “personal brand” is considered as the product or outcome of the branding process. To further decrease the fuzziness, Gorbatov et al. (2018) also proposed a definition for the term personal brand:

“*Personal brand is a set of characteristics of an individual (attributes, values, beliefs, etc.) rendered into the differentiated narrative and imagery with the intent of establishing a competitive advantage in the minds of the target audience.*” (Gorbatov et al. 2018, p.6).

2.1.3. Building a Successful Personal Brand

The process of personal branding is often described as analogous to product branding (Kaputa, 2005). Like any brand, it is argued that a successful personal brand needs to be simple and clear since that makes it easier for the audience to remember (Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque, et al., 2011). However, when it comes to personal branding, this may raise conflicts, as it is natural for individuals to have multiple roles, personas, and self-images in their personal, social, and working lives (e.g. as a mother, an activist for animal rights, a marketing specialist, etc.) (Shepherd, 2005). Nevertheless, from a branding perspective, constructing several brands or having an unfocused one is seen as a cause for confusion for the target audience (Shepherd,
To avoid brand conflict or dilution, it might be necessary to decide the focus, align the different roles, and suppress stories that dilute the branding message (Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque et al., 2010).

In addition, researchers emphasize the importance of the authenticity of the personal brand, both in the offline as well as the online world (Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque, et al., 2011). The personal brand should reflect the true self—one’s true character, values, strengths, and flaws (Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque, et al., 2011; Rampersad, 2009). That is especially important from the perspective of brand coherency, as personal branding happens all the time, so an inauthentic personal brand carries the risk to be revealed in everyday situations (Labrecque, et al., 2011).

However, there is no straightforward process or one-size-fits-all framework that describes how to arrive at a successful personal brand. Different personal branding self-improvement guidebooks and websites offer personal branding advice and step-by-step guides, generally involving steps like defining brand identity, followed by active communication of it to the target group through brand positioning (Labrecque et al., 2010). Nevertheless, academic literature on the process of personal branding is fragmented. Some researchers rely on the models from popular literature (e.g. Gander, 2014; Brooks & Anumudu, 2016), while others develop their own approaches such as the “4Ps” self-branding model by Resnick et al. (2016). Additionally, as personal branding can be considered as an extension of previous forms of branding, traditional branding practices are often adapted and applied to the context of personal branding (Scheidt et al. 2020). Some of the most commonly adopted practices include brand personality (Aaker, 1997), points of differentiation and parity (Keller et al., 2002), brand visibility (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020), and similar.

Instead of describing how exactly personal branding should be done, the focus of the academic literature tends to be rather on the various factors that should be considered in personal branding. Gorbatov et al. (2018) analyzed papers discussing the different models for personal branding and pointed out the key processes that should be iteratively addressed in personal branding: raising self-awareness, needs analysis and positioning, constructing brand architecture, self-reflection and feedback-seeking, and sense-making. Each of these processes is further elaborated.
Raising self-awareness

Often as the starting point of the personal branding process, both academic, as well as popular science, seem to encourage raising one’s self-awareness through self-discovery (Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015; Gorbatov et al. 2018). Introspection is considered a critical skill to explore and understand the “true self”, i.e. the composite of self-identity, personal values and beliefs, self-image, and personal aims (Lorgnier & O’Rourke, 2011; Kucharska, 2017).

Needs analysis and positioning

In line with marketing theory, individuals are encouraged to focus on meeting the needs of the target audience when constructing a personal brand (Shepherd, 2005). However, this “customer-oriented” approach is misaligned with the guidance on personal branding, which advises focusing rather on self-packaging than self-improvement: the goal is not to change oneself but just to arrange, crystallize, and label one’s strengths, skills, motivations, and interests (Shepherd, 2005; Lair et al., 2005). To address this impasse, a balance between the two should be achieved by keeping the needs of the target audience and competitors in mind while doing the self-audit (Shepherd, 2005).

A similar tricky balancing needs to be met when positioning the brand. On the one hand, in compliance with the brand positioning principles (such as establishing points of parity and points of differentiation), uniqueness and differentiation are considered crucial parts of a personal brand (Gorbatov et al., 2018). On the other hand, one still needs to make sure to fit into the expectations for the particular field (Gander, 2014; Parmentier et al., 2013). This paradox in personal branding describes the need for “fitting in while standing out” (Parmentier et al., 2013).

The positioning of a personal brand, i.e. the impression management and communication of one's brand identity to a particular target audience, happens both offline and increasingly online (Labrecque et al., 2011).

Constructing brand architecture

According to branding theory, a thorough understanding of the brand identity is crucial in establishing a strong brand (Manai & Holmlund, 2015). In the personal branding context,
personal brand identity elements are (1) the core identity, including education, skills, personality, values, experience, etc; (2) extended identity, covering abilities, attitudes, cultural aspects, etc.; and (3) the value proposition, describing the functional, emotional, self-expressive and relationship benefits (Manai & Holmlund, 2015).

Most academic research on personal branding processes focuses on the formation of the *desired self*, i.e. how individuals aspire to be perceived by their target audience (Gorbatov et al., 2018). However, in the context of personal branding, it is important to recognize not only our intended projection to the target audience (desired self) but even more importantly, the audience’s response to it (perceived identity) since the latter will determine the actions towards us (Gandini, 2016).

**Self-reflection and feedback-seeking**

Engaging in self-reflection and feedback-seeking allow for ensuring one’s relevance and competitiveness in the long term, as it encourages reflexivity of the individual and encourages greater self-awareness, both necessary for a strong personal brand (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Khedher, 2015). Feedback can be also considered the key to closing the gap between desired self and perceived identity (Labrecque et al., 2011). However, it is important to be aware of the self-verification theory, according to which it is a natural human behavior to seek confirmation of both positive and negative self-conceptions (Gioia et al., 2014).

**Sensemaking**

Due to the instability of the modern labor market, people have a greater need to construct their working identities, since identity helps individuals to make sense of their environment, as well as place themselves in it (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). Since identity forms as a result of meanings attached to an individual by oneself as well as by others, both parties engage in the process of reciprocal sensemaking (Gioia et al., 2014; Gorbatov et al., 2018).
In conclusion, effective feedback-seeking, self-reflection, sense-making, and greater self-awareness are a prerequisite for a strong and coherent personal brand, as they help to minimize the gap between the desired self and perceived identity (Gorbatov et al., 2018). However, it is important to keep in mind that personal branding is a dynamic construct, which is subject to continuous adjustment and change, especially during career transitions as well as at the beginning of the career (Gorbatov et al., 2018). As illustrated by Figure 1, it is an ongoing process that requires monitoring and maintenance, including constant re-evaluation of the brand (Gorbatov et al., 2018).

2.1.4. Challenges of Personal Branding

Both in popular and academic literature, usually the benefits and positive aspects of personal branding are emphasized. Despite its rising popularity, the challenges of personal branding get limited attention in the academic literature. Instead of being explicitly discussed, the challenges are mostly mentioned as a part of the general discussion.

However, some scholars have drawn attention to the potential downsides and challenges that accompany the personal branding phenomenon. Most notably, Shepherd (2005), Lair et al.
(2005), and the systematic review from Scheidt et al. (2020) take a critical perspective on personal branding and highlight some of the conceptual, practical, and ethical challenges it poses. Other scholars discuss the challenges in the context of online personal branding (Labrecque et al., 2011). As follows, some of the problems are discussed, ranging from more conceptual issues to practical and ethical concerns.

**Theoretical concerns**

Despite the widespread adoption of personal branding among practitioners and the increasing amount of attention in academic literature, many theoretical concerns arise around the concept of personal branding. In their systematic review, Scheidt et al. (2020) concluded that despite some efforts, there is a lack of a comprehensive personal branding theory or a framework. In practice, the field of personal branding is rather dominated by intuitive and informal approaches (Shepherd, 2005). Shepherd (2005) takes it as far as posing the question of whether personal branding can be “reclaimed from enthusiasts”.

The theoretical concerns around the personal branding phenomena scrutinize whether the traditionally product-focused branding theory can be applied to humans, and thus, personal branding. Shepherd (2005) pointed out a conflict between the modern consumer-oriented approach to marketing and the product-driven approach of personal branding. Namely, as personal branding experts advise constructing a brand image based on the existing attributes, instead of making a personal makeover based on the market needs, it can be argued that personal branding adopts an outdated product marketing approach (Shepherd, 2005). However, it can be argued that this conflict can be resolved by constructing one’s brand image vis-à-vis one’s target market and competitors (Shepherd, 2005).

Nevertheless, the applicability of branding theory to personal branding remains up for discussion. The extension of branding theory to personal brands has supporters (see Close et al., 2011; Ternès et al., 2014) or critics (see Russell & Schau, 2010; Preece and Kerrigan, 2015). To date, there is a lack of research on the holistic process of personal branding, which hinders the understanding of how it develops (Scheidt et al., 2020). For example, despite the branding theory arguing that great brands require deliberate efforts, it is still uncertain to what extent individuals are conscious of their own personal brand and the process of building it (Scheidt et al., 2020).
Nevertheless, many of the aspects of the traditional branding theory, such as brand personality, brand visibility, points of difference, points of parity, and others, have already successfully been incorporated into the realm of personal branding (Scheidt et al., 2020).

**The Deceptive Promises of Personal Branding**

While acknowledging the benefits of personal branding, academics have pointed out the discordance of some of its promises. For example, Shepherd (2005) points out how engaging in personal branding is often sold as a “must-have” on top professional competencies, in order to survive the competitive labor market and gain visibility and competitive advantage. In a similar vein, Lair et al. (2005) question whether the elevation of brand image over substance is the only way to navigate the modern labor market. As discussed by Kleiner (2001), such views can be questioned, as many successful business people are not seemingly actively developing their individual personal brands.

Furthermore, according to Shepherd (2005), there is insufficient empirical evidence to argue that personal branding is the most effective answer to the problem of visibility. He goes on to explain that according to the distribution of awareness, only a few will benefit from the majority of public awareness (Shepherd, 2005). Thus, considering the competition from the immense size of any local labor market, as well as the increasing globalization of the labor market, reaping the benefits of personal branding can prove to be more challenging than promised - especially for young professionals who are just entering the job market (Shepherd, 2005). While personal branding authors such as Kaputa (2005) suggest targeting a specific niche, Shepherd (2005) argues that even within a particular niche, the competition is usually simply too high.

Finally, Shepherd (2005) points out that personal branding follows the law of diminishing returns, arguing that personal branding is only effective if it is not exercised by the majority. Thus, the promises of personal branding might only hold true for early adopters (Shepherd, 2005).

**Brand conflict and authenticity**

Aligned with the theory of branding, a personal brand is expected to be simple, clear, and consistent (Shepherd, 2005). Both practitioners such as Montoya (2009) but also scholars such as
Stanton and Stanton (2013) emphasize that in the world of personal branding, you should avoid being a generalist and rather specialize as much as you can because having a too broad brand or multiple simultaneous brands can cause a brand conflict. Therefore, stories that could cause brand dilution and cause confusion should be suppressed (Shepherd, 2005). While some scholars bring artists such as David Bowie as an example of having multiple brands at once, Shepherd (2005) pointed out that this exemplifies rather a sequence of brands instead of multiple simultaneous brands (Shepherd, 2005).

Similar to traditional branding, authenticity is seen as the key to a successful personal branding strategy (Holt, 2004; Kaputa, 2005). However, compared to product branding, having a simple, clear, and consistent personal brand is challenging, as the self consists of multiple components (Holbrook, 2001). According to Scheidt et al. (2020), postmodern social psychologists acknowledge that in response to the multiple demands of today’s world, people have developed multiple selves. The evident query that arises is whether people accustomed to creating and maintaining various identities in their personal and social spheres can effortlessly formulate a single, genuine personal brand (Shepherd, 2005).

Labrecque et al. (2010) found that some of the participants of their study used segmentation of the audiences in order to manage their multiple identities. However, if personal branding requires micro-targeting, it raises a question of its effectiveness (Shepherd, 2005). Furthermore, Labrecque et al. (2010) cautioned that failing to segment the different brand identities might come across as inauthentic, as those identities might be conflicting or contradicting.

This is particularly visible in the online context, as the high-reach digital footprint makes it challenging for people to maintain a coherent brand (Scheidt et al., 2020; Labrecque et al., 2010). According to Labrecque et al. (2010), aligning one’s online presence with one’s personal branding strategy posed a key challenge to the participants of their study.

Therefore, even if the construction of a single unique personal brand could be achieved, tensions might arise when living as a constrained version of oneself. Although personal branding experts endorse that a personal brand is merely a representation of oneself, the expectation to live up to the brand creates a contradiction where one will become the brand (Shepherd, 2005). In other words, to benefit from personal branding, individuals who have established their personal brand
are expected to embody it and limit themselves to a singular persona. While this aligns with the idea that a brand should be simple, clear, and concise, it remains unclear what are the psychological or social side effects of such behavior (Shepherd, 2005).

A form of brand conflict may also surface in the workplace if the employee’s personal brand contradicts the employer's brand (Shepherd, 2005). While most of the authors emphasize the importance of putting oneself first, Peters (1997) highlights that the employee might benefit from creating a synergy between their personal brand and the corporate brand.

In general, personal branding is presented mostly as a very individualistic form of marketing, sometimes even promoting selfishness (Peters, 1997). Shepherd (2005) challenges that by suggesting that personal branding can be more effective when done in collaboration with others, as it currently tends to overlook the possibility of branding individuals as part of a group.

**Brand image**

In their study, Labrecque et al. (2010) found several challenges related to the brand image of the participants. As the study looked at personal branding in the online context, it was emphasized that while individuals can exert a degree of control over their personal brand, it is also subject to the influence of the people with whom they associate (Labrecque et al., 2010). These people, however, might not always meet the desired brand identity, leaving the brand image vulnerable to brand dilution or even negative repercussions (Labrecque et al., 2010).

Furthermore, the study found that some participants simply did not engage in branding activities enough to successfully communicate their brand identity (Labrecque et al., 2010). Others had challenges in communicating their brand message, thus, leading to a dissonance between the brand identity and image (Labrecque et al., 2010).

As described earlier, when it comes to personal branding, it is crucial to take into account not only the brand identity, i.e. desired self that we aim to present to our audience but also the perceived identity (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to evaluate one's brand image, particularly when starting new ventures (Labrecque et al., 2010).
However, Labrecque et al. (2010) found that the participants often overlook the extent to which others interpret them based on small pieces of information and only use their own judgment to assess whether they have reached their branding goals. Consequently, the participants found facilitated brand image assessment and feedback from others enlightening, and it often motivated them to make improvements (Labrecque et al., 2010).

**Ethical concerns**

The ethical issues related to personal branding were initially brought up by Lair et al. (2005), who highlighted that race, culture, class, age, and gender are often excluded from the conversation surrounding personal branding. According to Lair et al. (2005), the concept of personal branding seems to be mostly targeted toward white, middle-aged professionals and avoids the question of its applicability to a more diverse group of people. For example, as personal branding is often sold as a chance to (re-)create oneself in a world full of opportunities, it places the responsibility of one’s future success on the shoulders of the individual, not considering those who are marginalized (Lair et al., 2005).

Furthermore, scholars have pointed out some gender differences in the concept of personal branding. Specifically, personal branding might be problematic for women, due to the conflicting and high expectations (Lair et al., 2005; Scheidt et al., 2020). Scheidt et al. (2020) summarized it as the following:

> "Women are expected to reach for the top, but also to look feminine, pay attention to their appearance, be there for their children and husbands and routinely take on the role of caretaker at work. Consequently, working women with families run the risk of experiencing even greater tension between work and family if they commit to becoming a human brand” (Scheidt et al., 2020, p.13).

Moreover, research by Dobbins et al. (1990), Oakley (2000), and Singh et al. (2002) has shown that women tend to engage in self-promotion less frequently than men. Despite being aware of the benefits of impression management, self-expression, and networking, many women utilize these strategies less often (Singh et al., 2002). Women have also been found to assess their own performance less positively than men (Scheidt et al. 2020).
Finally, Lair et al. (2005) pointed out that as personal branding is often centered around work, some personal branding advocates encourage people to sacrifice their relationships to prioritize the development of their personal brand. This raises ethical considerations regarding the potential negative impact on individuals' personal lives and well-being, as well as the implications for society if personal branding practices prioritize self-promotion over genuine human connections.

2.1.5. From Personal Branding to Graduate Employability

The concept of personal branding is closely associated with job seekers enhancing their professional opportunities, including their employability (Lair, et al., 2005; Parmentier, et al., 2013). Especially for graduates, it has been argued that personal branding could facilitate the transition from university to work life (Gorbatov et al., 2019; Kheder, 2019). There is some evidence that personal branding leads to greater perceived employability, i.e. “one’s ability to identify and realize career opportunities” (Gorbatov et al., 2019, p.3). However, in reality, employability is influenced by many other factors. Due to the lack of literature in relation to personal branding, this chapter discusses some of those factors from the lens of employability in general.

Graduate Employability and “Soft Skills”

There is a growing recognition that possessing solely technical skills is inadequate for achieving success beyond the initial stage of a career (Laker & Powell, 2011). The current job market's rapid technological progress and business complexities have led to a growing need to improve students' soft skills, also called transferable skills (Remedios, 2012).

Soft skills are often explained as “life skills, social skills, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, social competences and meta-competences” (Succi & Canovi, 2020, p.1835). In contrast to hard, i.e. technical skills that are easily demonstrable and measurable, soft skills are intangible and challenging to quantify, but they play a vital role in promoting human connections (Laker & Powell, 2011). While hard skills tend to be specialized for a specific task or role, soft skills possess a more universal application (Laker & Powell, 2011).
When looking into reports from academia as well as the industry, the most demanded skills in the future indeed include largely soft skills, such as creativity, leadership, active learning, problem-solving, critical thinking, and teamworking skills, etc. (Dondi et al., 2021; Whiting, 2020; Succi & Canovi, 2020). Therefore, it is argued that soft skills are a crucial factor to increase the individual employability of graduates, especially in light of the future of work (Piercy & Steele, 2016). Harvey (2000) explained that obtaining these soft skills can aid students in adapting to organizational culture, taking initiative, and contributing to organizational success. This view is echoed by studies on emotional intelligence, which suggest that interpersonal skills are a predictor of career success as well as play a crucial role in the rise of teamwork (Succi & Canovi, 2020).

However, the lack of soft, i.e. transferable skills remains one of the most debated and disputed topics in recent literature on higher education (Succi & Canovi, 2020). In particular, Succi and Canovi (2020) argue that collaboration between companies and Higher Education Institutions is needed to enhance students' understanding of the significance of soft skills. Additionally, students should be guided to take personal responsibility for obtaining and honing these skills (Succi & Canovi, 2020).

**Graduate Employability and Generalists**

It has been argued that due to the changing labor market, generic skills could ensure graduates’ employability (Knight & Yorke, 2003). However, there is still little research on the potential differences in employability between the graduates of specialist and generalist degrees (Donald et al., 2018).

Puhakka et al.'s (2010) quantitative study looked at graduate employability and the differences between generalists and specialists in the context of Finland. According to their classification, generalists are graduates who have obtained a degree that does not target a particular profession or result in any specialized qualifications (Puhakka et al., 2010).

Aligned with findings from Kivinen et al. (2000), the study conducted by Puhakka et al. (2010) confirmed that it is harder for generalists to find their place in the job market, as they confront more challenges in their transition to work life. In Finland, both generalist and specialist students
start their transition to work life often already during their studies (Puhakka et al., 2010). However, when studying the graduates who were not working at the time of graduation, generalists were clearly off to a more challenging start, with the median waiting period for starting their first job after graduation being twice as long (4 months) compared to specialists (Puhakka et al., 2010).

In a qualitative study by Schelfhaudt and Crittenden (2005), however, business leaders seemingly did not prefer specialists over generalists for entry-level positions, but were rather looking for a combination of both. However, realizing that recent graduates rarely possess both, the leaders claimed that they would prefer one over the other only depending on the requirements of a specific position (Schelfhaudt & Crittenden, 2005). For example, accounting and consulting were some examples where a specialist would be preferred over a generalist in an entry-level position (Schelfhaudt & Crittenden, 2005).

Corresponding to the more challenging start identified by Puhakka et al. (2010), Donald et al. (2019) found that the graduates with specialist degrees were more confident in their employability compared to the students with generalist degrees. Thereafter, Donald et al. (2018) found that students with generalist degrees might need personalized support, e.g. from career services. It was indicated that especially female students would need extra support to enhance their self-confidence and -worth, so they could carry that forward during the job-seeking process (Donald et al., 2018). The participants from Donald et al. (2018) identified nine opportunities that would improve their employability: tailored and equal support, help in narrowing down options, lecturers sharing their industry contacts, increased awareness of the university career services, a compulsory career services session, career services being more proactive in engaging students, presence of career services across campus, a more versatile selection of partner companies, and getting support after rejected applications.

Puhakka et al. (2010) also found that generalists might need to be more flexible in their careers, as only 52% of generalists agreed that their careers have gone according to their plans, compared to 70% of specialists.

However, despite facing initial difficulties in finding their footing in the workforce, the study by Puhakka et al. (2010) indicated that generalists seem to have a higher likelihood of progressing
with their careers once they enter the professional world with almost half of them seeing the possibilities for advancement in their current jobs, compared to only one-third of specialists. Similarly, Schelfhaudt and Crittenden (2005) argued that while entry-level employees get employed for their specialist skills, they often advance in their careers due to their generalist knowledge.

2.2. Interdisciplinary Higher Education

2.2.1 The Need for T-Shaped Professionals and the Rise of Interdisciplinary Higher Education Programs

Our society today faces increasingly complex, interconnected social and environmental problems, such as climate emergencies, pandemics, poverty, and conflict, among many others. This class of problems is often referred to as “wicked problems” - “complex, contentious, defy complete definition and resolution, and for which there is no single solution” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p.4).

Addressing these complex socio-environmental issues demands innovative thinking that transcends the limitations of any singular academic discipline (Brown et al., 2010). Instead, managing wicked problems demands skills and knowledge from a diversity of disciplines. It means that wicked problem solvers must be capable of interdisciplinary work, and moving beyond disciplinary silos (Brown et al., 2010).

As a result, in recent years, academics have argued that while higher education mostly produces "I-shaped professionals" (see Figure 2) with deep but narrow training in a single discipline, it is not enough to meet the growing demand for interdisciplinary cooperation required to keep up with the rapidly changing global contexts (Bierema, 2019). Similarly, Demirikan and Spohrer (2018) pointed out that the traditional approach to education, which produces "I-shaped" graduates, was suitable for a time when the change occurred at a slower rate and technology remained relatively stagnant.
Scholars have proposed that in the current knowledge-based economy, we need so-called T-shaped professionals in order to address complex issues such as climate change, war, world hunger, etc. (Barile et al., 2016; Bierema, 2019). A T-shaped professional combines the specialized knowledge of an I-shaped specialist with versatile and broadly applicable generalist skills, forming a metaphorical T-shape (see Figure 3) (Bierema, 2019). Thus, T-shaped professionals have both depth and breadth of skills and knowledge (Bierema, 2019). In essence, T-shaped professionals promote interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, as it allows for the synthesis of ideas that go beyond the individual discipline (Bierema, 2019).
However, as the trend towards inter- and transdisciplinarity has been on the rise, academics emphasize that interdisciplinarity cannot exist without disciplinarity, and hence the significance and value of training deep experts have not diminished (Kruusmaa, 2017; Van Noorden, 2015). Instead, the shift is in developing the ability to collaborate effectively with individuals and organizations from diverse backgrounds (Bierema, 2019).

In the same vein, the need for a balance between specialization and general skills was also a notion identified by Schelfhaudt and Crittenden (2005), who found that business leaders are looking for the “best of both worlds”. More particularly, they are not satisfied with a specialist who has only their disciplinary lens but at the same time, they are not willing to sacrifice the need for expertise (Schelfhaudt & Crittenden, 2005). In other words, business leaders are looking for someone who can say “I can do other things but I am excellent at this” (Schelfhaudt & Crittenden, 2005, p.950).
Building on the argument that being a specialist in a discipline is necessary but at the same time, insufficient, Demirkan and Spohrer (2018) suggested that higher education should take the lead in cultivating the so-called T-shaped professionals who would be capable of blending specialized and generalist knowledge to become versatile problem-solvers. Similarly, Saviano et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of taking inter- and transdisciplinary approaches in higher education to create T-shaped professionals in response to the current hyper-specialized society. According to Demirkan and Spohrer (2018), the curriculum for developing T-shaped professionals should focus on connecting multidisciplinary teams to real-life problems.

However, Demirkan and Spohrer (2018) warned that while acquiring technical skills is relatively straightforward, achieving cross-discipline and cross-cultural collaboration is far more difficult and time-intensive. In the same vein, Bierema (2019) acknowledged that “becoming a T-shaped person is a developmental process” (p.74). She proposed viewing the development of T-shaped professionals by identifying different developmental stages, presented in Figure 4 (Bierema, 2019).

**Figure 4**

*T-shaped Expertise Matrix*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Boundary Spanning Competencies</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Novice</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Boundary Spanning Capacity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Discipline Depth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Horizontal Expert</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Boundary Spanning Capacity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Discipline Depth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>I-shaped Expert</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low Boundary Spanning Capacity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Discipline Depth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>T-shaped Expert</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Boundary Spanning Capacity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Discipline Depth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Adapted from Bierema, L. L. (2019). Enhancing employability through developing T-shaped professionals. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 2019(163), p. 74*
Novices have both low discipline depth and boundary-spanning competencies, and they usually begin with developing their I-shaped disciplinary expertise first, as it is generally better supported by higher education curricula (Bierema, 2019). The I-shaped Experts thus have high discipline depth but low boundary-spanning capacity (Bierema, 2019). An I-shaped Expert should be able to complete the phrase "I am an expert in..." with ease (Kruusmaa, 2017, p. 30).

Horizontal experts, also known as generalists or dash-shaped professionals, are often described as “a jack of all trades, a master of none”, as they are knowledgeable in a variety of areas (high boundary-spanning capacity) but are not specialized in any specific discipline (low discipline depth) (Bierema, 2019). Ultimately, T-shaped experts are well-rounded professionals and acclaimed collaborators, who possess profound knowledge in both their disciplines as well as have high boundary-spanning capacity (Bierema, 2019).

As higher education is facing increasing pressure to better brace students for working and living with wicked problems, universities have slowly but surely taken action (McCune et al., 2021). There is a growing number of inter-, cross-, and multidisciplinary degree courses in various countries which integrate different fields of study to develop professionals that would be able to operate across disciplinary boundaries successfully (Koria et al., 2009). One such program is the International Design Business Management (IDBM) master’s program at Aalto University, the case studied in this research (Koria et al., 2009).

2.2.2. Challenges in Interdisciplinary Higher Education

The growing body of literature explaining the benefits and opportunities of interdisciplinary higher education is increasingly complemented by research exploring the challenging factors of such education. The challenges are often studied from the perspective of implementing interdisciplinary study programs, where factors such as institutional boundaries and the need for increased levels of support hinder the development of interdisciplinary study programs (Self et al., 2019; Van den Beemt et al., 2020). However, in this chapter, I will focus on the challenges of interdisciplinary education from the perspective of personal branding.
Communicating the Value of Interdisciplinarity

While research shows that today’s complex problems require an interdisciplinary approach, Karjalainen & Salimäki (2004) have pointed out that one of the challenges of interdisciplinary educational programs is to convince the external stakeholders, e.g. partner companies of the advantages of the interdisciplinary approach. When collaborating with companies, it is easier and more understandable to showcase the potential of the business, engineering, and design students separately (Karjalainen & Salimäki, 2004). Given that the projects that interdisciplinary teams work on are often unambiguous and complex (e.g. innovation creation and new product development), the holistic approach of integrating these capabilities often remains unconventional, especially for companies with lower design maturity (Karjalainen & Salimäki, 2004).

Shifts between Disciplinary Identities

The aim of interdisciplinary programs is to equip students with the ability to acknowledge and appreciate the value of the tools, practices, and mental models of other professions (Koria et al., 2009). The goal, therefore, is not to train a business person to become a designer or make a marketer out of an engineer (Koria et al., 2009). Quite the opposite - it has been argued that having a strong disciplinary identity (i.e. knowledge, awareness, and skills from one’s own field) is crucial for achieving success in interdisciplinary teamwork (Koria et al., 2009). However, Koria et al., (2009) also acknowledge that in interdisciplinary programs, shifts between disciplinary identities can, and have happened. This can influence the quality of interdisciplinary teamwork but also pose a challenge from the perspective of personal branding, as it calls for reinventing one’s personal brand.

There is currently a lack of personal branding research that would focus on the needs and challenges caused by career or professional identity shifts. However, a marketing strategist Dorie Clark (2011) has given attention to the nuances that are specific to rebranding oneself. Contrary to common advice on personal branding, which advises to “work with what you have got”, Clark (2011) acknowledges that rebranding efforts require defining one’s destination and subsequently, putting in some effort to acquire the skills needed for credibility. Moreover, rather than discarding an individual's previous brand, Clark (2011) advocates utilizing its distinctive features
to differentiate oneself, particularly in the digital age where remnants of the former brand persist. Finally, the author emphasizes the need for evidence of competence to establish confidence in the fresh personal brand - something comparable to a portfolio of art students (Clark, 2011).
3. METHODOLOGY

To explain and argue for the methodology used in the thesis, the structure of The Research Onion by Saunders et al. (2019) is used. Following the nested model, first, the overarching philosophy is explained, after which layers are gradually “peeled off” to dive deeper into the approach of theory development, and research design. Finally, the process of data collection and analysis is explained.

**Figure 5**
*The Research Onion*

![The Research Onion Diagram](image)


3.1 Research Philosophy

It is important to start by addressing the research philosophy, as it inherently influences the way the thesis is formed. Guided by the researcher’s beliefs and views of the world, research philosophy describes the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge (Saunders et al., 2019). To characterize the philosophy used in the thesis, the assumptions made about the
nature of reality (ontological assumptions) and human knowledge (epistemological assumptions) are discussed (Saunders et al., 2019).

From the ontological standpoint, this thesis adopts a subjectivist view, believing that there is no single reality - instead, reality is a social construct that is perceived differently by everyone based on their beliefs and experiences (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). This means that the studied personal branding phenomenon is believed to be in constant flux and revision based on social interactions (Saunders et al., 2019).

Accordingly, the epistemological position of this thesis is interpretivism, meaning that the researcher does not believe that there is one universal law, but instead seeks to create new, richer meanings (Saunders et al., 2019). It is believed that social situations, such as constructing a personal brand, are complex and often unique, so by trying to create law-like generalizations, the richness of the complexity would be lost (Saunders et al., 2019). Thus, instead of trying to find a unified rule about how interdisciplinary graduates construct their personal brand, this thesis seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the concept in relation to one interdisciplinary program example.

3.2 Approach to Theory Development

This thesis follows an inductive approach, as currently, there is no theory developed that would cover personal branding and interdisciplinarity. Furthermore, the goal of the thesis is not to test the already existing personal branding theory in the context of interdisciplinary graduates. Instead, following the inductive approach, the data is collected and the theory is developed as a result of the data analysis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). In other words, this thesis aims to make sense of how interdisciplinary graduates construct their personal brand, by allowing new meanings to emerge from the data and gathered insights.
3.3 Research Design

3.3.1 Methodological Choice

When constructing research, there are three main methodological choices: quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods (Saunders et al., 2019). Narrowly defined, the term ‘quantitative research’ is used for data collection and analysis of numerical data, focusing on the relationship between variables, and ‘qualitative’ for non-numerical data, studying the meanings given by participants and the relationships between them (Saunders et al., 2019). A researcher can decide whether to conduct the study using a mono (single) method or combine multiple methods (Saunders et al., 2019).

The thesis utilizes a monomethod approach to provide a more in-depth exploration of the specific case and the experiences of the graduates. In compliance with the interpretivism philosophy and the inductive approach to theory development, the methodology adopted in this thesis is qualitative. Thus, both the data collection and analysis procedure rely on non-numerical data, which is in this case derived from interviews. This method allows one to explore and gain a deeper insight into the subjective and socially constructed meanings expressed about the personal branding of interdisciplinary graduates (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015).

3.3.2 Research Strategy

Research strategy works as a link between the philosophy and choice of method, and thus, explains how the researcher plans to achieve the goal of answering the research question (Saunders et al., 2019). In order to choose a strategy for this study, three aspects were considered: (a) which kind of question the research is looking to answer, (b) whether the research is focused on contemporary events, and (c) is control over behavioral variables required (Yin, 2014).

To begin with, this research seeks to find answers to questions such as “how”, as the research question proposed was “How do interdisciplinary graduates construct their personal brand?”. Thus, the focus is on an exploratory approach. Secondly, the study focuses on the current labor market and how interdisciplinary graduates engage in personal branding in that context, and thus,
it can be considered a contemporary event. Finally, to have results as close to real life as possible, control over behavioral variables is not required.

Taking all these considerations into account, the strategy employed in this thesis is a single case study, as it studies the phenomena in its context (Yin, 2014). A single case was chosen, as it allows for more depth in analyzing a phenomenon that has not been studied before (Saunders et al., 2019).

3.3.2.1. Case Description: International Design Business Management Master’s Program

The International Design Business Management (IDBM) Programme is an interdisciplinary joint master's program between all the Schools of Aalto University: School of Arts, Design and Architecture, School of Business, School of Chemical Engineering, School of Electrical Engineering, School of Engineering and School of Science. The program is unique, as there are only a few tri-party multidisciplinary programs in the world, that aim to address three academic audiences at once, integrating knowledge from the fields of business, technology, and design (Koria et al., 2009). As shown in Figure 6, the three IDBM tracks are often referred to as ARTS, BIZ, and TECH.

![Figure 6](image)

*The Three Tracks of IDBM*
The Programme was born already in 1995 as a joint minor program between three leading Finnish universities: the Helsinki School of Economics and Business Administration (HSEBA), the University of Art and Design Helsinki (UIAH), and the Helsinki University of Technology (HUT) (Karjalainen & Salimäki, 2004). Today, the program operates under Aalto University (the merger of the previously mentioned universities) as both a 2-year master’s program and a minor (IDBM, n.d.).

According to Aalto University’s website, the objective of the program is to “gain knowledge in multiple disciplines and to learn to connect one's own disciplinary expertise to a wider multi-disciplinary design business framework” (Aalto University, n.d.-a). By bringing together experts in different fields, the program aims to cultivate skilled professionals for key roles in the field of the international design business (Karjalainen & Salimäki, 2004). Furthermore, Karjalainen and Salimäki (2004) argue that IDBM fosters a so-called T-shaped skill set, as the students gain expertise in their chosen disciplines while simultaneously developing multidisciplinary skills, thus shaping the horizontal stroke of the T-shaped skillset.

The program consists of 40 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) credits of mandatory IDBM major studies across all of the tracks (Aalto University n.d.-b). The courses emphasize the significance of design as a competitive factor within other business functions, such as technology and marketing (Karjalainen & Salimäki, 2004). The underlying principle is to recognize design as an essential capability of a company, whereas design is viewed holistically in its various forms: products, processes, organizational issues, and the overall strategic use of design (Karjalainen & Salimäki, 2004).

The heart of the IDBM program is industry projects, commissioned by various organizations (Karjalainen & Salimäki, 2004). During nearly the whole academic year, multidisciplinary teams of three to five students address real-life problems provided by the organizations (Karjalainen & Salimäki, 2004).

Besides the mandatory IDBM major courses, all the IDBM master’s students need to finish a master’s thesis (Aalto University, n.d.-b). Furthermore, the students from the BIZ and TECH track have to take a compulsory minor from their respective schools (Aalto University, n.d.-b).
3.3.3. Time Horizon

The time horizon of a study can be either cross-sectional or longitudinal. The former studies the subject at a specific point in time, while the latter looks at the same data point over a certain period (Saunders et al., 2019).

As this research studies the phenomena of personal branding of interdisciplinary graduates at a specific point in time when the interviews were conducted, this study is to be considered a cross-sectional study. Due to time constraints, it is not possible to use a longitudinal study, though it would possibly give a better overview of how the importance and process of constructing a personal brand changes over time.

3.4 Data Collection

Since the goal of the thesis is to gather in-depth insights to understand the experience of personal branding from the perspective of interdisciplinary graduates, semi-structured interviews were the chosen method for data collection. Using semi-structured interviews allowed for covering key themes and questions while leaving flexibility to navigate, omit or add questions depending on the context. To avoid groupthink, individual interviews were preferred over focus groups (Saunders et al., 2019).

The study focused on the IDBM graduates who have done IDBM as a major, as opposed to a minor. Participants graduated between 2012-2022. For sampling, a non-probability sampling technique was used, as the study did not aim to make statistical generalizations about the whole population (Saunders et al., 2019). Given the exploratory approach and the objectives of an in-depth study, the focus was choosing a sample that would give an information-rich case example to explore the research question and provide theoretical insights (Saunders et al., 2019).

To get a comprehensive overview of the phenomena, 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 75 minutes, with an average length of 58 minutes. Following the data saturation principle, the interviews were conducted until no further key insights were gained from additional interviews (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015).Aligned with the recommendation of Saunders et al. (2019), as the aim of the
study was to understand the commonalities of a somewhat homogeneous group of IDBM graduates, 10 interviews were considered sufficient.

Typical to case study research, purposive sampling was used to select particularly informative participants while keeping in mind that purposive sampling includes an element of subjective judgment and that the samples cannot be considered statistically representative of the whole population (Saunders et al. 2019). In particular, within the population of IDBM graduates, heterogeneous sampling was used, to provide the maximum variation possible in the collected data. According to Patton (2014), patterns that emerge from a sample with diverse characteristics are likely to represent valuable key themes, while at the same time allowing to document uniqueness.

Prior to sampling, covering different tracks, graduation years, and genders were chosen as characteristics to maximize variation within the sample. To understand whether the field of the graduates has an influence on how they need to construct their personal brand, graduates from all the fields of the International Design Business Management program were interviewed. To understand how personal branding evolves after graduation, graduates from different years were interviewed. Additionally, a variance in genders and current professions/industries was preferred. To further protect the privacy of the participants, all of the participants are referred to as “they/them”. However, as identified by the participants, half of them were male and half of them female.

Due to the lack of access to an official and updated database about the graduates, the interview candidates were chosen and contacted through LinkedIn. To find potential candidates, the members of the IDBM alumni group on LinkedIn were scanned, which was complemented by a regular LinkedIn search using the keywords “International Design Business Management” and “IDBM”. Therefore, it is important to note that only graduates who have a LinkedIn profile and who have marked IDBM as their education were considered. However, this limitation can be argued to be aligned with the purpose of this study, as in the context of personal branding, it is important to develop and maintain a personal brand on LinkedIn (Marin & Nilă, 2021).

The interviews were conducted with IDBM graduates from all fields: 2 participants from ARTS, 4 participants from BIZ, and 4 participants from the TECH track. While the aim was to have a
roughly even number of interviews with participants from each track, the slightly uneven number can be attributed to the limited information presented on LinkedIn, as many of the participants did not explicitly mention their study track on their profile.

When choosing participants, personal acquaintances were avoided in order to avoid having dishonest answers due to the existing relationship with the interviewer. However, the participants were made aware that the interviewer is an IDBM student as well as an employee of the program. On one hand, this might have provided more in-depth discussions, but on the other hand, the participants might have been less willing to share strongly negative views about the program. To mitigate that, a trustworthy and open conversation was facilitated throughout the interview. As all the interview candidates agreed to participate in the study, it can be argued that the participants did not self-sample themselves to not participate in the study.

In Table 1, the overview of the research participants is presented. To protect the identity of the participants, the starting year is given as an interval. Due to the structure of the IDBM program, where most of the major courses are taught during the first year and students might take longer than the nominal time to finish their studies, the starting year was considered a more relevant indicator.
Table 1
Overview of the Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Track at IDBM</th>
<th>Starting year interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant #1</td>
<td>TECH</td>
<td>2010-2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #2</td>
<td>BIZ</td>
<td>2010-2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #3</td>
<td>TECH</td>
<td>2010-2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #4</td>
<td>ARTS</td>
<td>2014-2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #5</td>
<td>BIZ</td>
<td>2014-2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #6</td>
<td>BIZ</td>
<td>2018-2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #7</td>
<td>TECH</td>
<td>2018-2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #8</td>
<td>ARTS</td>
<td>2018-2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #9</td>
<td>TECH</td>
<td>2018-2023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant #10</td>
<td>BIZ</td>
<td>2018-2023</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with the support of an interview guide that was prepared in advance. The guide was re-visited after every interview as well as adjusted before every interview to maximize the outcome of every consecutive interview. An example of a general interview guide can be found in Appendix A. The questions were formulated after getting acquainted with the general theoretical background of personal branding but without following a specific theory. The guide was conducted carefully, trying to avoid influencing the participants’ answers.

Due to geographical constraints, the time limits of the participants, or illnesses, all the participants preferred an online interview, though an alternative of a physical meeting was offered to the 8 participants who were located in Finland. It limited the ability to read the body language during the conversations, which can often be a great source of additional information.
(Saunders et al., 2019). However, as the calls were conducted over a video call, the communication of emotions was still facilitated to some extent.

The interviews were audio- and video-recorded with the consent of the participants. To preserve the anonymity of participants, the transcriptions were not added to the final thesis. To add richness to the data, after each interview, notes are taken on small details that might not be later trackable through the recordings. At the end of the interviews, permission to contact the participants again for clarification was granted. Although no further follow-up questions were required, the participants were contacted once more to review the final thesis.

3.5 Data Analysis

To reduce the time required for preparing the collected data for analysis, the interviews were transcribed with the help of online software. Following the advice of Saunders et al. (2019), for time-saving purposes, only the parts of the interviews that were relevant to the research were manually corrected. In addition to the transcriptions, self-memos generated after each interview, capturing observation notes and ideas that occurred during and after the data collection, were included in the analysis. The data was examined throughout the data collection process to explore which themes emerged as well as what needs to be followed up or concentrated on (Saunders et al., 2019).

Related to the exploratory purpose of the research, the gathered qualitative data was approached from an inductive perspective. Compared to the deductive approach, the inductive qualitative analysis is less structured and relies more on interpretation (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). Although the findings are influenced by the research questions, the core intention of the inductive approach is to enable the research findings to emerge from the raw data, unaffected by expectations or existing models (Thomas, 2006).

Following the process of inductive coding by Creswell (2012) shown in Figure 7, the process of inductive coding started with data cleaning by preparing the raw files, followed by careful rounds of readings. After getting acquainted with the raw data, the data was coded by identifying emerging categories, and themes. During the initial iteration, the categories were primarily generated based on literal phrases or meanings found in particular sections of the text (Thomas,
In the following iterations, the categories were continuously revised and refined, to eliminate overlaps and redundancies (Creswell, 2012; Thomas, 2006). Finally, the uncoded text was re-visited to ensure that relevant data is considered. To speed up this whole coding process, the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti was used.

**Figure 7**

*The Coding Process in Inductive Analysis - Reflecting the Current Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial reading of text data</th>
<th>Identify specific text segments related to objectives</th>
<th>Label the segments of text to create categories</th>
<th>Reduce overlap and redundancy among the categories</th>
<th>Create a model incorporating most important categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many pages of text</td>
<td>Many segments of text</td>
<td>33 categories</td>
<td>15 categories</td>
<td>6 main categories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Finally, the findings were categorized into 2 key themes, which include 6 main categories and 15 subcategories. The categorization can be found in Section 4.

### 3.6 Research Quality

Traditionally, to assess the quality of the research, positivist researchers traditionally evaluate the reliability and validity of the research (Saunders et al., 2019). In short, *reliability* in research means achieving consistent results through the replication of an earlier research design (Saunders et al., 2019). *Validity* in research refers to three key aspects: appropriateness of the measures used to assess the phenomenon, accuracy of the analysis of the results, and whether the research findings can be generalized (Saunders et al., 2019).

However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested alternative evaluation criteria to qualitative interpretivist research. They proposed that such research should be evaluated in terms of its *trustworthiness*, with better-suited, alternative constructs such as *credibility, transferability, and dependability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Credibility represents the internal validity of the research, meaning that the researcher needs to ensure that the research reflects the socially constructed realities that the participants were expressing (Saunders et al., 2019). To ensure this, many direct quotes were used throughout the thesis to support the interpretation of the data. When in doubt, the researcher discussed the understanding of the analysis with the supervisor or with a peer. Throughout the thesis, the researcher was aware of and critically evaluated the possible predetermined ideas they might have due to the personal and professional relationship with the subject. Finally, to ensure credibility, the thesis was sent to each participant for review before submitting it.

Reflecting external validity, the transferability of the research can be ensured by providing a comprehensive description and overview of the research questions, research design, context as well as findings and analysis, so that a judgment can be made on whether the research could be transferred to another setting (Saunders et al., 2019). This research aims to do that throughout the study, offering an in-depth, thick description for each section.

As a parallel criterion to reliability, dependability reflects that the researcher should create trust in the readers by offering a clear overview of the research process (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). To ensure dependability, the interview guides were evaluated carefully, to evoke unbiased answers. The interview guide can be seen in Appendix A. Furthermore, the interviews were digitally recorded and supplemented with notes, to allow for rigorous analysis.

In this chapter, the credibility, transferability, dependability, and potential pitfalls in this research were described, in order to meet the criteria of trustworthiness and ensure research quality in this study.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

While research ethics are important across all types of research, ethical considerations are particularly critical in qualitative research due to their in-depth nature (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). As ethical concerns emerge throughout the study, it is important to recognize and mitigate them. Thus, various ethical concerns relevant to this study are further discussed.
The researcher’s integrity and objectivity play a crucial role in determining the quality of the research. This involves being honest, accurate, and transparent as well as avoiding dishonesty and misrepresentation by declaring any conflict of interest or commercial associations (Saunders et al. 2019). As the researcher was employed by the IDBM program as well as funded by the European Union under the EIT HEI initiative C-ACCELERATE, both of these aspects were communicated to all the participants as a part of the informed consent form as well as at the beginning of the interviews.

When contacting the participants, the aim of the research was introduced to avoid being misleading about the topic (Saunders et al., 2019). Participation in the study was on a voluntary basis, meaning that no participant was convinced to participate as well as have the right to withdraw their participation at any given time. To ensure that the participants were fully informed and that the aforementioned aspects were understood by the interview candidates, a participation confirmation (see Appendix B) together with a research data privacy notice (see Appendix C) was sent to each participant via email. Data collection commenced only after obtaining their written consent to participate.

For the purpose of this study, the identities of the interviewees were not required to be introduced. Thus, to ensure confidentiality and avoid any potential harm to the participants, the privacy of the participants was protected by anonymizing the gathered data during the analysis process. The personal data is only accessible to the researcher and is not included in the thesis.
4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This section focuses on presenting the empirical findings from the research interviews. Following the grounded theory analysis process, two key themes and six main categories emerged from the interview data. To give further structure to the findings, the data is organized into 15 sub-categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key themes</th>
<th>Main categories</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Challenges of Personal Branding for Interdisciplinary Graduates</td>
<td>Constructing and communicating a simple, clear, and/or concise personal branding message</td>
<td>Possessing mainly soft skills rather than hard skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Being knowledgeable in a variety of areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transitioning between fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The lack of general awareness of the benefits of interdisciplinary education</td>
<td>The need to promote interdisciplinary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Simplifying the value of interdisciplinary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Finding jobs that utilize interdisciplinary education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3
**Key Theme 2: Elements perceived helpful for Personal Branding by Interdisciplinary Graduates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key themes</th>
<th>Main categories</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding oneself, the program and the job market</td>
<td>Gaining insight to the job market</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intentional degree design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualizing knowledge</td>
<td>Showcasing skills by concrete projects, examples, and stories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adjusting personal brand based on the context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leveraging existing awareness</td>
<td>Highlighting popularized aspects of the master’s program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establishing and utilizing networks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopting an iterative approach</td>
<td>Learning and gaining confidence through practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Incorporating feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.1. The Challenges of Personal Branding for Interdisciplinary Graduates

The section describes what the participants consider the main challenges for personal branding of interdisciplinary graduates, both based on their personal experiences in the present and the past, as well as reflecting on the possible pitfalls that current graduates might face.

4.1.1. Constructing and Communicating a Simple, Clear, and/or Concise Personal Branding Message

The analysis of the interview data shows that the participants perceive creating a simple, clear, and/or concise picture of their skills and competencies as one of the key challenges of personal branding. While this challenge was mentioned implicitly by all the participants and often came up naturally as part of the discussion at some stage of the interview, six of the respondents explicitly mentioned the struggle of formulating and communicating one’s competencies as their biggest challenge.

“It's been and it will be: to communicate what the heck can I do? I think that is super tricky… How do you frame the essence of your skills?” - Participant #2

“That's definitely still something that I struggle with a little. You know these kinds of questions that your grandma or grandpa might ask: “So what is it that you actually do?” And then trying to explain that in a concise and clear-to-understand way.” - Participant 5

As illustrated by the quotes above, the lack of simplicity, clarity, and/or conciseness in the personal branding message is something that the respondents need to confront in both professional but also in personal contexts. Furthermore, several of the respondents expressed that it is an issue that they continuously face today, despite finding a job.

When delving deeper, the respondents opened up several different factors that encumber the creation of a simple, clear, and consistent branding message, including:
● possessing mainly soft skills rather than hard skills,
● being knowledgeable in a variety of areas, and
● transitioning between fields.

All of these factors are further discussed in detail.

4.1.1.1. Possessing Mainly Soft Skills rather than Hard Skills

The analysis showed that while the respondents believe that their interdisciplinary master’s program provided them with valuable skills, they struggle to formulate those skills in the context of personal branding. According to Participant #3, the challenge of summarizing one’s unique value results from the fact that the skills that interdisciplinary programs teach tend to be vague or intangible. At the same time, they acknowledged that this might be the case with many master’s programs.

Participant #5 pointed out a similar reason, explaining that the IDBM master’s program in particular is not so much focused on teaching students hard skills but rather soft skills, such as how to work with people, approach problems, and similar. Half of the respondents discussed explicitly the problems related to possessing mainly soft skills, while two more touched on the topic indirectly, using words such as “abstract skills” or similar.

“I felt like I had a lot of soft skills that couldn't be translated into hard design skills.” - Participant #6

The only three participants that did not bring up the challenge of possessing mostly intangible or soft skills were all graduates from the IDBM TECH track.

The respondents argued that from the personal branding perspective, hard skills are easier to explain in cover letters and CVs. As described in the following quotes, the respondents find describing soft skills more challenging, since there are no hard facts or numbers to back up the claims or to make the skills tangible:

“It's not as clear as if you'd be, for example, a developer. Then you can just say: “I'm really good at JavaScript. I've done this and that much code.” ... But it's a bit different from that - more qualitative than quantitative... So how do I bring in the soft skills in a
way that makes sense, and makes it tangible? Or even better - so that there's some kind of KPI? ” - Participant #5

While the benefit of possessing tangible skills was often exemplified by comparison with more technical professions or study fields, participant #4 compared their skillset to graduates of the one-year Design Thinking program at Hasso Plattner Institute, which they considered to be similar to the IDBM program. The respondent argued that the graduates from that program possess more concrete skills, such as facilitation skills, which they felt lacking from themselves.

While some of the respondents realize that they also got some hard skills from the program (e.g. how to use service design tools), the analysis shows that they utilize the soft skills gained through the program more.

A couple of the participants suggested that their master’s program should consider incorporating more hard skills into its curriculum, as it would make its graduates more appealing in the job market.

“Let's say as a BIZ student, in order to have a complete look at the business environment, you also need some of the key fundamentals of business management - for example, finance, accounting, strategic management, these kinds of things. I think that's something that was a little bit missing in IDBM.” - Participant #6

Despite the struggles of formulating soft skills into a branding message, almost all respondents highlighted the value of such skills and admitted that those skills are something they use almost daily in their work.

“The interpersonal skills - like getting out of the business school bubble, also working with other nationalities, and especially being exposed to the different ways of thinking from the design and tech perspective - were important. Because teamwork is what professional life is - you never do anything by yourself. So, those are the most important skills in everyday work in a way.” - Participant #10

Participant #8 explained that the IDBM program teaches skills that are typically taught to more senior people or leaders, so recruiting companies might have difficulties in positioning a fresh
graduate with those skills. Nevertheless, participant #5 has noticed that the recognition of soft skills among recruiters and companies is on a rising trend, especially with changes in the workplace, such as the rise of hybrid work.

4.1.1.2. Being Knowledgeable in a Variety of Areas

The analysis revealed that another aspect that hinders constructing a simple, clear, and/or concise personal branding message is having a breadth of knowledge in various areas, rather than a depth of knowledge in one specialized area.

Three of the participants considered themselves as T-shaped professionals - having a depth of knowledge in one area and breadth of knowledge in a variety of areas. While being a T-shaped professional was not something they used to communicate their skillset, participant 7 saw it as their strength, and as something that will be increasingly more in demand in the future.

However, some other respondents took a more critical perspective. Participant 2 compared interdisciplinary graduates with a metaphor of a garden rake: being wide, with a million tines, i.e. having a breadth of knowledge, with little depth in many different subjects. Likewise, participant 6 explained how the IDBM program in particular has no specific track (e.g. service design or product design, etc.), but instead, a bit of everything, making it difficult to put one’s skills into words.

Figure 8

Interdisciplinary Graduates as “Garden Rake” Professionals - a Metaphor by Participant 2
Overall, three of the participants explicitly mentioned that in their opinion, IDBM educates generalists, and they also consider themselves as one. A similar message was conveyed by three other participants implicitly.

“We are quite generalists in IDBM. Many of the topics we studied are quite high-level topics. In the end, we can map those as the skills we have but they would all have like 50 subcategories of different skills. So that's something that IDBM should consider in personal branding: You quite automatically become a generalist, in my point of view. And I think that already dictates a lot of your personal branding.” - Participant #8

The analysis indicated that being a generalist is challenging from a personal branding perspective since formulating different areas of strengths and skills into cover letters or other applications can lead to a diluted branding message. Furthermore, while participants #1 and #9 believed that being a generalist means being good in many things, some of the participants implied that it can also feel like you are not knowledgeable in anything specific.

“It was a bit hard to explain what I can do as I studied IDBM ... It's sometimes a bit hard to say what you can do when you are such a generalist that you kind of can do anything but at the same time nothing.” - Participant #2

The feeling of being able to “kind of do anything but at the same time nothing” as a generalist can be related to outside expectations and how generalists are perceived in the job market. Participant #1 pointed out that the job market seems to be focused on specialist roles, which can cause generalists to question their competencies altogether.

“I had issues being a generalist because, in the job market, there really aren't many people or companies out there that know concretely what to do with people like us. It's really difficult to articulate what you're good at because there are so many things that you're really good at... So we also suffer a lot from anxiety and imposter syndrome and it's really easy to doubt and second-guess yourself because you're a generalist.” - Participant #1
Similarly, participant #9 pointed out that the current job market does not yet see the value of generalists, and is rather expecting an employee to have one specialization area, and therefore, clear key competencies.

According to participant #1, combating these insecurities requires changing one’s internal monologue as well as using different metrics to measure oneself. Participants #1 and #8 emphasized that while it might be challenging to formulate the generalist skills they got from their master’s program, then they recognize the value of being a generalist in positions that require strategic overview, problem-solving and/or management.

“I think the superpower that generalists have is that you put a generalist head-to-head with a specialist, and then you try to come up with like who's going to create the most comprehensive, most complete product - not just in terms of the technology or the functionality, but in terms of the business model, the adoption, the understanding the users, and how it's going to enter different markets - and I think that the generalists will outperform the specialist, 9 out of 10 times.” - Participant #1

However, the participants also acknowledged that even if companies see the benefit of being a generalist, it can be challenging as a junior employee, since those skills are typically necessary for more senior positions. For example, participant #8 shared that at the beginning of their career, the company had difficulties in positioning them in a junior position, despite seeing a lot of potential in them. Correspondingly, one of the participants admitted that it was only later in their career that they had figured out how to harness the benefits of being a generalist.

Participant #8 discussed that being a generalist also dictates what kind of companies hire the graduates. For example, they believed that IDBM graduates often end up in consultancies, as they are good at utilizing a broader skill set. While the participant believed that more companies could benefit from hiring generalists, they also understood that this might not be feasible in hiring situations, where the company needs to be certain about the depth of the applicant’s skills.

On the other hand, the analysis showed that being a generalist also guides the graduates in their choice of positions, as participants #4, and #9 emphasized that developing oneself in a breadth of areas is something that they enjoy, and therefore, also expect from their position.
“I really need to emphasize, for example, during the interviews that I have this multidisciplinary background and I have been developing myself in different kinds of areas - and that's also what I'm expecting from the future, from the position. That I don't have to focus on one thing and I can develop myself in different kinds of areas because that's what I'm enjoying the most.” - Participant #9

4.1.1.3. Transitioning Between the Fields

A less prevalent, but still noteworthy challenge of creating a coherent branding message comes from having uncommon study paths. Namely, as interdisciplinary program’s students get a chance to work closely together with other disciplines, and get an insight into those, it is not uncommon for them to get interested in other disciplines during their studies. For example, participant #3 described how being exposed to designers during the master’s program made them discover that instead of their current field as an engineer, they would like to work as a designer:

“It was getting exposed to the design process and enjoying it. And then I just remember being a little bit jealous of some of the designers in the program and I was like oh, I actually would really want to do that.” - Participant #3

Among the participants of this study, it can be considered that 3 of the participants changed their disciplinary identities compared to the track they studied during their master’s degree, while most of the others work somewhere in-between disciplines.

Supported by the flexible program structure, the students that are curious to transition between the disciplines have the chance to explore other disciplines during their studies. However, as participants #6 and #8 pointed out, the graduates might find themselves disappointed, since the master’s program is too short to change the “core” of one’s profession, and fully transition to another field. This can lead the graduates to a situation, where the graduates are having difficulties in positioning and formulating their brand message, as they have only some understanding of the new desired discipline, while their previous experience would support another discipline.
“I think that was the biggest challenge - not really sure how to position myself. I obviously had an engineering background, but I tried not to put that much focus on it, as I was trying to brand myself as a designer.” - Participant #3

Similarly, participants #6 and #9 both admitted that they had been more excited about another discipline during their studies, but entering the job market made them question their competitive advantage within the new discipline. However, they discovered that instead of fully transitioning to another field, their strength could be in combining the disciplines.

“Let's say that I was really excited about design thinking during the IDBM program. So I was really looking for positions that would be more related to design thinking and service development and so on... But later on, I noticed that maybe the best position for me would be somewhere in between. So not fully focusing on that area, but somewhere in between technology and that design side.” - Participant #9

4.1.2. The Lack of General Awareness of the Benefits of Interdisciplinary Education

The analysis of the interview data shows that the other key challenges of personal branding for the graduates stem from the lack of public awareness of the benefits of interdisciplinary education as well as the value of design - both integral parts of the IDBM master’s program.

The lack of awareness of the benefits of interdisciplinary education can be considered natural, as interdisciplinary degrees are less common than specialized degrees. Additionally, participant #6 explained that it might be difficult for the public to be aware of the value of an interdisciplinary master’s degree, such as IDBM, since the topics that these programs work with are inherently fuzzy and thus, convoluted.

“A lot of things that we do are quite unknown and difficult to make people understand.” - Participant #1

While it was not explicitly discussed by the participants, the analysis revealed three subcategories of interrelated challenges in the context of personal branding, that all linked to the lack of general awareness of the benefits of interdisciplinary education:
● the need to promote interdisciplinary education,
● simplifying the value of interdisciplinary education,
● finding jobs that would utilize interdisciplinary education.

All of these subcategories are further discussed in detail.

4.1.2.1. The Need to Promote Interdisciplinary Education

Some of the participants pointed out that in addition to communicating their own skills, they often need to advocate for the value of interdisciplinarity, design, and the thought behind the whole degree in general, as it is tightly linked to the benefits that the graduate can bring to the employee. For example, participant #10 explained that even though they think that interdisciplinarity (i.e. having an understanding of different areas and combining them) - is what makes the graduates appealing in the job market, it still requires extra effort from the graduate to convince the hiring team of this benefit:

“\textit{You need to sell the benefits of having multidisciplinary thinking. Not just expect them (the recruiters) to understand it, not just expect them to have the knowledge of what is the value... Instead selling, because it needs a lot of explaining and a lot of extra work. But the better you can sell IDBM, the better you can sell yourself.”} - Participant 10 (emphasis added)

While the need to advocate for the value of interdisciplinary education was especially emphasized in the context of hiring decisions, participant #6 explained that this is also relevant later in work-life - for example, when working together with a new team or clients who are not familiar with the benefits.

However, participant #2 also acknowledged that it is difficult to convince others of the value of having an interdisciplinary education, especially as a young graduate, as there is usually no measurable impact. Both participants #1 and #2 emphasized that convincing others of that value requires confidence.
4.1.2.2. Simplifying the Value of Interdisciplinary Education

Another challenge that interdisciplinary graduates face when needing to promote their degree is that due to its complexity, explaining the value it entails requires resources - e.g. time during a job interview or space from a cover letter.

“I know that IDBM is not familiar to everyone, so when writing a cover letter with limited space, one practical challenge is: How to describe it shortly?” - Participant #7

As the quote above illustrates, the graduates often find promoting their study program challenging, and therefore, might consider not emphasizing it at all, or reducing it to something more simply understood. For example, participant #10 admitted that for them it is easy to reduce having an interdisciplinary degree to being able to work with different people, although they believed that the benefits of the program are more widespread than that. Simplifying one’s expertise might also continue in work-life, as the professions that interdisciplinary graduates have are not always widely acknowledged. Participants #1, #5, and #8 all discussed how they sometimes need to simplify their expertise based on who they are talking to.

“I sometimes say that I'm a business designer when I'm talking with someone who knows something about business or design. But then many times for friends and family, I might say that I'm a consultant. Just to avoid the confusion.” - Participant #8

4.1.2.3. Finding Jobs that Utilize Interdisciplinary Education

Despite appreciating what their master’s program had taught them, some of the participants pointed out that as a graduate, it was difficult to find jobs that utilize the skills. Participant #6 pointed out that while an interdisciplinary degree can open up graduates’ minds to many, perhaps even unconventional job possibilities, then in reality, materializing that into an actual career is challenging.

“OK, so this is very cool, and I totally can agree with what we're doing is good. But where do I actually apply it?” - Participant #6
While not explicitly mentioned, it can be assumed that the limited supply of positions that would directly suit interdisciplinary graduates might be due to a lack of general awareness of the benefits of such programs. Nevertheless, participant #7 pointed out that the demand for such skills might still be there in the market, but not always explicitly.

In participant #4 experience, the demand for the kind of skills they had learned from their master’s program was even smaller abroad, where the awareness of interdisciplinary education and design maturity is lower than in Finland.

“I had this “backpack” with all that stuff [skills learned from IDBM] but no one [in my home country] really knew what it meant and what it is.” - Participant #4

4.2. Elements Perceived Helpful by Interdisciplinary Graduates for Constructing a Personal Brand

The results indicate that all of the participants were familiar with personal branding to some extent, with most of them able to summarize the essence of it. However, only one of the respondents said they had intentionally worked on their personal brand. The majority of respondents admitted that despite not using the same terminology or intentionally constructing it, they recognized having a personal brand. Therefore, the findings suggest that the participants construct their personal brand implicitly.

This section aims to explore what interdisciplinary graduates find helpful in communicating their personal brand. The analysis takes into account the reflections on the personal experiences of the interviewees in the present and the past; as well as what the interviewees think would have been helpful for personal branding and the advice that the interviewees gave to the current graduates.

4.2.1. Understanding Oneself, the Program, and the Job Market

4.2.1.1. Gaining Insight into the Job Market

The analysis suggests that having a stronger understanding of hiring and recruitment would help interdisciplinary graduates to successfully brand themselves in the job market. Participants reported that having more practical knowledge about what employers are looking for in job
candidates and how to meet those expectations would help them to position themselves better in the market.

“I wish I would have gotten more hard truths about what people are looking for and then how to actually meet those expectations.” - Participant #6

Participant #6 suggested that a course structure that includes "harsh truths" about career prospects and hiring could be beneficial for interdisciplinary students. Additionally, other participants proposed that having companies that are hiring particularly for IDBM-related positions come in and discuss the specific skills necessary for those roles would assist in framing one's skills and comprehending what to emphasize in job applications and interviews. The graduates would be able to understand how to use their competencies in practical settings and create a strong personal brand by gaining insight into the particular skills and competencies required for potential positions.

Moreover, the analysis shows that interdisciplinary graduates need to have a better understanding of different job possibilities to better position themselves in the job market. While participant #6 highlighted that interdisciplinary degree opened up their mind to different career possibilities, then both participants #7 and #9 reported that they initially focused too narrowly on certain positions or industries and only later discovered opportunities in other areas. They suggested that being bold and trying different things can help interdisciplinary graduates discover new career opportunities and find their own paths.

4.2.1.2. Self-Awareness

The analysis reveals that the participants acknowledge that creating a personal brand requires understanding oneself. Participants #3, #7, and #9 all emphasized that for a clear branding message, it is important to crystallize one’s competencies, interests, and future career goals to oneself, before trying to communicate the brand message externally.

“You really need to dig deeper and try to find the answer yourself first (what do I want to do), and then try to clarify that to others. You really need to do some self-research before trying to describe that to others.” - Participant #9
Participant #7 recognized that the process of figuring out one’s competencies, interests, and goals in work-life requires effort and time, and strength to not conform to external expectations. This was echoed by participant #1, who admitted that with the external pressure from the family, peers, or society in general, it can be challenging to give oneself time and space for self-reflection and finding out individual interests and goals. However, they encouraged graduates to not be swayed by external opinions but instead, being stubborn about defining one’s own strengths and success metrics.

Comparison to others was also mentioned by participant #5, who found it helpful for positioning oneself, though they cautioned against negative self-comparison of putting either oneself or others down. Participant #3 also referred to the process as figuring out one’s unique value proposition compared to others. Participant #1 found it helpful to reflect on their peers’ experience, in order to understand oneself better:

“It (going to IDBM) allowed me to view myself through the lens of other people, saying like: Wow, this person is really talented but they themselves are struggling with self-doubt and trying to find a fit in the world”. But if I can see them as really talented individuals, then I wonder what sort of image they have of me. So that kind of provided me with that mirror and that perspective on myself.” - Participant #1

Participant #1 indicated that figuring out one’s values can boost self-confidence, and help with positioning oneself in the job market. Likewise, participant #6 shared that focusing on figuring out their competencies helped them to find a niche in the job market to fill.

4.2.1.3. Intentional Degree Design

The findings suggest that besides having a clear understanding of one’s competencies, interests, and future career goals, it is also important to reflect on how interdisciplinary studies contribute to that.

However, participant #3 admitted that it can be challenging to summarize what the interdisciplinary master’s program has given you, as it is rather intangible. Similarly, participant #2 acknowledged that this requires individual reflection on what the different concepts taught in the program mean to the individual (for example, how they view design).
Participants #6 and #8 explicitly mentioned that instead of trying to figure out their interests along the way, they wish that they would have taken time at the early stages of their studies to map out what they would need to learn in order to have a stronger personal brand in the future. Participant #8 especially emphasized that before branding, one needs to develop their professional identity:

“But I think before you can brand yourself, you have to have your own identity - you need to develop that before being able to do the final touches in the branding itself. And I think that's pretty much about recognizing the opportunities and starting to map those.” - Participant #8

According to the participants, having an early overview of one’s interests as well as opportunities in the job market allows the students to have more intentional degree design (e.g. course selection), which can result in a stronger brand by the end of the program. Participant #6 explained that spending some time on reflecting can help the students to “take the most out of the program”, as well as to figure out activities outside of their degree that would support the construction of their brand.

The participants brought several examples of how intentional degree design had helped them or would have helped them in the process of personal branding. For example, participants #3 and #4 explained that figuring out which hard skills one should acquire to combine with the soft skills learned from the major courses could make the graduates very appealing in the job market. Similarly, participant #4 believes that intentionally choosing more project-based courses would have given them a stronger base to explain their skills. Participant #8 used the concept of the T-shaped professional to reflect on their experience and explain that intentional degree design is even more important when one is trying to change one’s professional identity, as choosing the right courses can help to formulate new “core” skills.

While the participants acknowledged their own responsibility in designing a suitable degree for themselves, several participants highlighted that they would have appreciated more support from the program side. For example, participant #6 proposed that guidance on intentional degree design for a stronger personal brand could be something that is taught in the program:
“It could be taught in the structure of the program: in order to get to different career paths, what would you need to learn to complement the studies that you have? You might have this IDBM core structure, but then what? What kind of minor would you need? In order to have this full portfolio of competencies to go into different kinds of fields or positions.” - Participant #6

Furthermore, participant #5 believes that besides having the program contribute to the degree design, having more direct guidance on how to formulate and position one’s skills would support students in creating their personal brand.

“Well, I think maybe something that I would have appreciated ... would be providing IDBM students help in explaining or describing the skills better. And maybe highlighting even further, what is the advantage of these skills over some others. Because I feel like that was something that you kind of had to read between lines and kind of learn yourself, which I think is also important, but I think that would be definitely something that would be helpful” - Participant #5

Participant #3 stated that during the studies there was no guided reflection on what the program has given to you and what is the value to you as an individual to kind of contribute to your existing skill sets. However, participants #5 and #8 were unsure whether such support might have actually been provided but they just did not know to look for it or were not mature enough to accept it. Nevertheless, participant #8 emphasized that there should be efficient communication from the program to remind the students to be more intentional about their degree design in relation to their future career outlooks.

The participants gave several practical examples of how the program could support students better in constructing their own personal brands. Participant #8 expressed that besides teaching the subject, the professors could push the students to challenge themselves as professionals, for example by asking them to reflect and helping them to navigate what kind of change they would like to facilitate in the future, and how they could use their learnings for that. Participant #7 proposed that there could also be a clear contact person to ask for help or to have discussions with. Instead, they found help from the university’s mentoring program. Participant #5 proposed
having more facilitated connections with alumni since hearing tangible examples of alumni’s experiences would help them to formulate their own skills.

4.2.2. Contextualizing Knowledge

4.2.2.1. Showcasing Skills by Concrete Projects, Examples, and Stories

Based on the participants' experiences, it can be concluded that using concrete projects, examples, or stories to communicate one's skills helps interdisciplinary graduates in communicating their personal brand. When asked about what they found the most helpful in communicating their skills and/or value to the employees, 7 participants explicitly mentioned the usage of concrete examples and/or stories.

The participants explained that using stories and examples made it easier for people to understand what they had learned in the program and what they could do. Furthermore, participant #9 emphasized the fact that people usually remember stories better. Participant #6 indicated, however, that based on the person or the context, the examples or stories might need to be different.

Participants #1 and #5 emphasized that using concrete examples also helps to avoid sounding buzzwordy, and instead, opens up the meaning behind those words. Participants #5 and #6 further explained that it is important to bring substance to one’s higher-level vision by showcasing your values, experiences, and skills through tangible examples.

“I remember my interview when my then-to-be-manager asked me: “So in your CV you said you have creative problem-solving skills. Can you explain those to me?” And I was like “****, what did I mean?” But then I kind of jumped into the different projects that we had done.” - Participant #6

As a result, project-based courses were deemed helpful by the graduates, as those experiences could be used to exemplify their competencies. Many of the participants especially highlighted the 6-month-long Industry Project course, central to the IDBM program, as the students got the chance to work together with a real-life industry partner. However, participant #2 highlighted that when introducing group projects, it is important to also emphasize personal contribution.
Several participants also discussed the value of having a portfolio, as it summarizes their skills and experiences into an easily-digestible format.

### 4.2.2.2. Adjusting Personal Brand based on the Context

The research reveals that instead of having a static personal brand, interdisciplinary graduates often need to be strategic in how they present themselves and adjust their personal brand based on the context they are in.

> “Which is another thing about personal brand. Of course, you can be very astute as in “this is my personal brand which I have”. But then you also have to kind of tweak it based on your environment and who you're talking to.” - Participant #6

As interdisciplinary graduates often have skills from different areas, they need to evaluate what aspects of their personal brand to emphasize. For example, participant #7 explained that when applying to more technology-related positions, they would emphasize their technical background and their bachelor's degree but for innovation-related roles, they would highlight the skills learned during the master’s program.

Correspondingly, the participants emphasized the importance of understanding the needs and requirements of different organizations, to be able to tailor their personal brand accordingly. While participant #7 recognized that there are some more general skills that can be brought up in many contexts, they stressed the need to also make connections with the specific situation, e.g. the position they are applying to. However, participant #9 indicated that adjusting to every position requires extra effort. Furthermore, they admitted that this might necessitate limiting which aspects of the brand are communicated.

> “Before every interview, I need to try to think about the position and then try to find the areas which could contribute to this certain position. I cannot really tell all kinds of
things that I have been doing because there are so many. So I just need to think about the position and what best fits that position.” - Participant #9

When adjusting their personal brand, the participants used several guiding questions. For example, participant #7 recommended focusing on how could they apply their competencies to the company they are applying for, while participant #10 formulated the question as “what is the value you bring to the company?”. Similarly, participants #1 and #2 highlighted the need to talk about one’s impact, using metrics that matter to the company.

“There's always going to be metrics to help you make a strong case, and I think generalists really need to understand how to formulate a very, very compelling narrative of the value that we're delivering. And understand what sort of language the other party is going to be responsive. Find out what metrics they're using to make business decisions.” - Participant #1

4.2.3. Leveraging Existing Awareness

4.2.3.1. Highlighting Popularized Aspects of the Master’s Program

As discussed in previous paragraphs, the generally low awareness of the benefits of interdisciplinary programs, and IDBM in specific, can cause challenges for personal branding for the graduates. On the other hand, however, the participants noted that if people are aware of the value of such programs, they highly appreciate them.

“I think the program itself is really much appreciated if people just know more about it. All the people who know about it are like “whoa, you have done IDBM” and “it's really cool” and stuff like that. But the problem itself is that many are not familiar with it.” - Participant #9

Participants #7 and #9 pointed out that even if people do not know about IDBM beforehand, then when explained well, people often find it interesting and see potential value in the interdisciplinary and design-driven approach of the program. Moreover, according to the experiences of the participants, concepts such as design thinking and T-shaped professionals are
increasingly gaining attention, and therefore, mentioning those often sparks curiosity, even if the conversation partner does not fully understand the value of such approaches.

“The whole design thinking framework, it's ridiculously helpful. Very, very helpful. I don't know who on Earth started to market it and turned it into a hot topic in executive circles. But we owe those people a bit of gratitude. Because even if people in management don't understand it, at least they're curious to find out about it because peer pressure dictates that they should find out. FOMO is a powerful thing.“ - Participant #1

Instead of design thinking, the participants also use terms such as problem-based thinking or creative problem-solving to explain a similar idea. According to participant #6, this aspect is something that every graduate should incorporate into their personal brand, as “it is what everyone wants to hear”.

Similarly, half of the participants discussed that highlighting interdisciplinarity in their personal brand draws attention, as they have noticed that being a so-called “T-shaped professional” is currently unique, highly appreciated, and sought-for, though they expected that to be mainstreamed soon.

However, participant #1 cautioned that using these popularized concepts in one’s personal brand can also come across as empty buzzwords. Here, being able to apply the concepts in practice as well as to articulate the meaning behind them is crucial. According to participants #1 and #6, when articulated correctly, those competencies can help one to outpace the competition, since despite the increasing popularity, they can still be considered relatively unique.

4.3.2.2. Establishing and Utilizing Networks

All but one of the respondents discussed the importance of utilizing personal connections as well as other networks, such as alumni and partner companies, in order to effectively communicate one’s personal brand for hiring purposes. While some participants disliked the word "networking", they emphasized that surrounding oneself with people and seeking advice is highly valuable, yet underutilized by fresh graduates.
Utilizing networks to draw on the existing brand awareness of the master’s program was deemed especially beneficial by the participants, as it helped them to avoid explaining the value of the master’s program, and instead, focus on communicating their individual personal brand. However, participants #8 and #9 pointed out that understanding the value of interdisciplinary education and the complementing skills is often dependent on a particular person, and therefore, having personal connections with those people might be important for being able to work on relevant projects.

“With this (more related to IDBM) project, I tried to tell the managers about my (interdisciplinary) background. And one of them was from Aalto and she was familiar with the (IDBM) program, so I think she really got my point, my message... I think we understand each other. It's been easy with her because she understands these kinds of programs but with other people who have a more traditional way of thinking about backgrounds, they might not realize (the different skills I have)” - Participant #9

The benefit of individuals understanding the program was further echoed by participants #2, #6 and #10, who all shared an experience where it had been easier for them to get a job, as there had been alumni working for the company they had been applying for. While for participant #2, the alumna had been able to directly support them in explaining what the master’s program entails during the interview, then participants #6 and #10 explained that thanks to other graduates working in the company, the companies already understood the different aspects of the program in general, and thus, appreciated the interdisciplinary background. Utilizing alumni networks were also mentioned by participants #4 and #5, who emphasized that having a stronger alumni network would offer support for the students in figuring out different possible career paths.

“For example my role here: they have a lot of IDBM alumni here, so they also understand what IDBM means, and what these kinds of different aspects actually mean in day-to-day life.” - Participant #6

“I think it helped that the company already knows what IDBM is. Yeah, they have IDBMers working there so they appreciate the background.” - Participant #10
Additionally, the participants found it helpful to utilize the connections they had made on different company visits during the study program. However, they also emphasized that these connections need to be made throughout the studies, and it requires being proactive and brave from the students' side.

“Just go to IDBM Klubi (IDBM student association) or student union or anything else where you're doing excursions... Then you get to actually meet the people and go talk with them... Watching anyone present and leaving after that without having a conversation is making sure that no one remembers you. Go and talk with them. Then there's a chance that if you apply somewhere, these people can help out.” - Participant #2

On the other hand, participants #3 and #4 shared that utilizing the benefits of networks and existing awareness is more challenging when trying to find a job outside of Finland. Participant #3 further explained that while in Finland, they had felt that their IDBM education was one of their biggest strengths that excited people. However, when they moved abroad, they learned not to talk about it as much because people were not aware of the program and did not understand its value.

4.2.4. Iterative Approach

4.2.4.1. Learning and Gaining Confidence through Practice

Drawing on the insights of the participants, constructing a personal brand is an ongoing process that requires an iterative approach. Furthermore, as different participants have found various approaches beneficial, they emphasized the need to learn personal branding as you go. For example, participant #7 reframed job interviews as a place to learn about personal branding.

“I would say that I've also learned from job interviews I've taken part in. That's one place where one needs to explain the competencies and the study background. So then it becomes a place of learning: if they always come up with the same questions or if something is especially interesting to the recruiters? Then I think that's a place of learning.” - Participant #7
Participant #7 further explained, that even though personal branding does not feel easy for them, they have noticed that over time they get better at communicating their competencies. Furthermore, some participants indicated that personal branding gets easier, as there is previous “material” (e.g. CV, cover letter, portfolio) to build upon.

Similarly, a couple of the participants indicated that personal branding also gets easier over time, as one gathers more confidence through experiences.

“Before I think I was trying to justify myself a lot, so kind of always trying to express everything I know. But nowadays, I'm more confident in specific areas, and I have the understanding of what I should say in which context; which skills are the ones that matter the most.” - Participant #5

Several respondents highlighted the importance of confidence for personal branding. For example, participants #3 and #6 discussed how confidence and belief in one’s skills help to tell one’s story better, without being too modest. Furthermore, participant #1 explained that being confident can also help to communicate the value of interdisciplinary education since sometimes it might require argumentation and staying stubborn to one’s message.

4.2.4.2. Incorporating Feedback

Participants #5 and #10 pointed out that asking for feedback helped them to strengthen their personal brand by clarifying and wording the core of their branding message. Writing in particular was perceived as helpful for clarifying one’s thoughts and iterating on the branding message based on feedback. However, participant #5 also cautioned to be critical about the feedback, as people have different opinions, so it is important to find a balance with one’s own message.

“I think it helps, at least when you're applying for jobs and stuff, to have like second opinions... But of course, people are different and they have different opinions, so it's always this balancing you have to do. I think you have to stay true to who you are and what do you want to say but at the same time... It's good to think that some people might not interpret this the same way that you might want it to sound.” - Participant #5
Seeking for feedback regarding one’s personal brand was discussed with half of the respondents. While 2 of the respondents had had insightful discussions regarding their personal branding message with their peers before applying, then generally, feedback was mostly only searched for from recruiters after unsuccessful job interviews, focusing on the weaknesses. Furthermore, the participants were rather careful when discussing the extent they actually incorporate the given feedback into their personal brand,

“If possible I try to ask for the feedback and then try to remember it and incorporate when possible.” - Participant #7

When discussing feedback in relation to their personal brand, several participants noted that they would like to incorporate more feedback in their personal brand in the future.

“I haven't really tested my personal brand with anyone - I haven't freely collected feedback or acted on the feedback. Maybe I should actually.” Participant #3
5. DISCUSSION

This thesis aimed to explore and understand how interdisciplinary graduates implicitly or explicitly construct their personal brand, based on the example of graduates of the interdisciplinary International Design Business Management (IDBM) Master’s program from Aalto University. The purpose of the study was not to develop another instruction manual on personal branding but to scrutinize the nuances of personal branding that are distinct to interdisciplinary graduates. The emphasis was on exploring the elements that interdisciplinary graduates have perceived as useful for promoting their skills as well as the difficulties they have encountered while doing so. The research question guiding this research was:

**RQ: How do interdisciplinary graduates construct, explicitly or implicitly, their personal brand?**

The research question was supported by the following subquestion:

**SQ: What challenges do interdisciplinary graduates face when building their personal brand?**

This chapter will focus on the key findings of the study and their relevance to the existing literature. The discussion will be structured around the research questions that formed the basis of the thesis.

5.1. What Challenges Do Interdisciplinary Graduates Face when Constructing their Personal Brand?

The challenges that interdisciplinary graduates anticipate and face when constructing their personal brand can be grouped into two major categories. First and foremost, the graduates have challenges in constructing and communicating a simple, clear, and/or concise personal branding message. Second, the graduates face challenges that can be attributed to the employers’ lack of awareness of the benefits of interdisciplinary education and, in this specific case, the IDBM program.
5.1.1. Constructing and Communicating a Simple, Clear, and/or Concise Personal Branding Message

Consistent with branding theory, it has been highlighted that a successful personal brand ought to be simple, clear, and concise (Shepherd, 2005). However, it has been acknowledged that creating such a message is challenging, as the self compromises of many components (Holbrook, 2001).

Complimentary to the common challenges of crafting a personal branding message, this section focuses on the nuances that are specific to interdisciplinary graduates. The results indicate that interdisciplinary graduates struggle with creating a simple, clear, and/or concise branding message, as they possess mainly soft or “intangible skills” that are more difficult to demonstrate or quantify (Laker & Powell, 2011); consider themselves a generalist which is not recommended in the world of personal branding (Montoya, 2005; Stanton and Stanton, 2013); or have transitioned between the fields which adds another layer of complexity in creating clarity in the branding message (Clark, 2011).

Each of these challenges is further discussed.

**Possessing mainly Soft Skills rather than Hard Skills**

Research by academia as well as reports by the industry seem to agree, that due to the rapidly changing nature of work, the future of work requires increasingly more soft skills (see McKinsey, 2021; Whiting, 2020; Succi & Canovi 2020). The findings of this study align with this notion, as the participants recognized the gradual increase in demand for soft skills in the job market.

As the value of soft skills for employability continues to rise, higher education literature frequently criticizes the lack of soft skills among graduates (Piercy & Steele, 2016). However, contrary to this critique, most of the participants of this study indicated that the IDBM master’s program is heavily focused on teaching soft skills, such as how to work with diverse people, approach problem-solving, and similar. Similarly, looking at the learning outcomes of the IDBM major courses, the focus seems to be on soft skills such as collaboration, teamwork, communication, problem-solving, etc. (MyCourses, n.d.-a; n.d.-b; n.d.-c). This is consistent with
the research conducted by Vogler et al. (2018), emphasizing that interdisciplinary project-based learning indeed provides a unique opportunity to foster soft skills.

However, while the literature suggests that soft skills should be the key to employability, the study highlighted that possessing mainly soft skills has made it challenging to construct and communicate their personal branding message, as these skills are hard to convey. Presenting soft skills can be challenging as they are intangible and harder to quantify, in contrast to the more demonstrable and measurable hard skills (Laker & Powell, 2011).

Herein, it is worth mentioning that the only three participants that did not bring up personal branding challenges caused by possessing mostly intangible or soft skills were all graduates from the IDBM TECH track. In addition to IDBM major studies, the TECH track students are required to complete compulsory TECH minor from their home school (from the School of Chemical Engineering, School of Electrical Engineering, School of Engineering or School of Science), which is traditionally more focused on hard skills (Aalto University n.d.-b).

This raises the question of whether a balance between hard and soft skills is required for effective personal branding, and consequently, whether interdisciplinary programs such as IDBM should consider re-evaluating the current emphasis on soft skills and re-adjust the curriculum to equip graduates with the right combination of skills to meet the demands of the job market. Alternatively, more support for students might be needed to help them choose the minor or elective courses that would complement the soft skills learned at the IDBM courses with relevant hard skills.

**Being Knowledgeable in a Variety of Areas**

Researchers have argued that to face the wicked challenges of today’s world, higher education institutions should take the initiative to develop T-shaped professionals who would have expertise in a specific discipline as well as a breadth of knowledge in a variety of areas (Bierema, 2019; Demirkan & Spohrer, 2018). According to Karjalainen et al. (2009), interdisciplinary programs, such as the IDBM master program, are meeting this demand with attempts to educate T-shaped professionals.
However, the results of this study somewhat challenge the attempt described by Karjalainen et al. (2009), since only three of the participants described themselves as T-shaped professionals. While some of those participants acknowledged the growing importance of T-shaped professionals, none of them used it in communicating their skills.

Instead, the results of this study indicate that despite the efforts to educate T-shaped professionals, the participants consider themselves rather generalists or so-called dash-shaped professionals, with three of the participants mentioning it explicitly. The participants explained that instead of having specialization in one discipline, they rather gain little depth in a wide range of subjects.

The advocates of T-shaped, inter-, and transdisciplinarity approaches caution that the goal should not be decreasing the significance of disciplinarity, but merely developing collaboration across disciplines (Bierema, 2019; Kruusmaa, 2015). Thus, the findings of this study call into question whether the IDBM program's focus on developing T-shaped professionals is truly succeeding, as the participants claim to lack disciplinary depth, making them so-called horizontal experts with high boundary-spanning capacity but low discipline depth (Bierema, 2019).

Furthermore, from the perspective of personal branding, cultivating generalists is problematic, as the literature on personal branding warns that being a generalist is not advisable since it can cause confusion or lead to brand dilution (Montoya, 2005; Stanton & Stanton, 2013). The results of this study support this notion, as the participants admitted being a generalist makes it difficult to create a clear and concise personal branding message, since including various strengths and skills in cover letters or job applications can dilute the branding message.

While one might think that being knowledgeable in a variety of areas is beneficial, challenges arise from the fact that we currently live in a hyper-specialized world, where it is more burdensome for generalist graduates to find their place in the job market (Kivinen et al., 2000; Puhakka et al., 2010; Saviano et al., 2016). The data collected in this study is consistent with previous research, as the participants found the job market to be focused on specialist roles, making it difficult for them to position their generalist brand in the job market. Both the findings of this study as well as literature indicate that this might be especially true for entry-level roles,
as Schelfhautd and Crittenden (2005) discussed that entry-level employees rather get employed for specialist skills, while they advance in their careers thanks to the generalist skills.

The challenges faced by interdisciplinary graduates in formulating a clear and concise personal branding message due to their breadth of knowledge rather than depth of specialization may suggest that interdisciplinary programs such as IDBM might need to reevaluate their approach to cultivating T-shaped professionals. If the goal is indeed to educate T-shaped professionals, the program needs to ensure that they are striking the right balance between specialist and generalist knowledge.

**Figure 9**
*From “Garden Rake” Professionals to T-Shaped Professionals*

**Transitioning Between Fields**

The findings of this study validate the earlier observations made by Koria et al. (2009) that interdisciplinary programs expose individuals to other disciplines and sometimes lead to transitions between disciplinary identities. According to the results of this study, these transitions can be major or more subtle, such as working in-between disciplines. However, as the participants in this study noted, transitioning between disciplinary identities can be challenging from the personal branding perspective.

More precisely, the participants indicated that disciplinary transitions during a 2-year master’s program are challenging, as they only provide a limited time frame to re-invent one's
professional identity. Rebranding requires time to develop new skills as well as to build trust in the new brand (Clark, 2011). Thus, such partial transitions can create confusion in brand positioning.

Moreover, the participants of this study found it challenging to create a branding message to communicate their new professional identity. On the one hand, Clark (2011) suggests that when transitioning between fields, individuals should build upon their previous brand and use it to differentiate themselves. However, this approach can result in multiple identities, which Shepherd (2005) cautions against. Therefore, individuals need to tie together their previous and new identities to create a narrative that would result in a clear, simple, and concise branding message.

5.1.2. Lack of General Awareness of the Benefits of Interdisciplinary Education

Only during recent decades, the number of inter-, cross-, and multidisciplinary degree courses has been on the rise (Koria et al., 2009). However, despite the heightened attention from academia, as well as the increase in the number of such degrees, we live still in a hyper-specialized world, where the awareness of the benefits of such degrees is comparatively low (Saviano et al., 2016; Karjalainen & Salimäki, 2004).

Although not explicitly mentioned by participants, the study unveiled various challenges faced which can be attributed to the insufficient awareness of the benefits of interdisciplinary education. These challenges include the need to promote interdisciplinary education in addition to personal branding; reducing the value of an interdisciplinary degree to make it more understandable; and the lack of job opportunities that employ interdisciplinary competencies.

Each of these challenges is further discussed.

**The Need to Promote Interdisciplinary Education**

Besides communicating their own skills, the participants needed to also advocate for the value of having interdisciplinary education, since one of the challenges of interdisciplinary educational programs is demonstrating the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach for external stakeholders (Karjalainen and Salimäki, 2004).
However, as noted by the participants, showcasing the value of interdisciplinary education might be difficult as a graduate, as employees search for tangible impact in real-world settings (Bear & Skorton, 2019). This raises the question of whether interdisciplinary programs should support graduates by teaching them how to effectively promote interdisciplinary education. Furthermore, this might call for more research on the impact of interdisciplinary education on graduates' career trajectories and on the organizations and industries they work in, as this could help to provide more concrete evidence of the value of interdisciplinary education.

The participants noted that the need to promote interdisciplinarity continues throughout their careers but gets easier over time, as they get more confident in the validity of the approach. This implies that the challenge of promoting interdisciplinarity might also stem from the lack of understanding and confidence in its value.

**Simplifying the Value of Interdisciplinary Education**

The findings of the study suggest that while the participants believe that the benefits of the interdisciplinary master’s program are extensive, they struggle to articulate them in a simple and concise manner. As a result, some of the participants admitted simplifying the value of their degree or even reducing it to a singular aspect (e.g. multidisciplinary teamwork), in order to make it more understandable. Successful personal branding requires simplicity and clarity for optimal audience recall, and therefore, might necessitate suppressing some stories (Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque, et al., 2011).

However, this approach raises questions about the authenticity of personal branding, as it has been argued that a successful personal brand should reflect the true self (Shepherd, 2005; Labrecque, et al., 2011; Rampersad, 2009). Oversimplifying or reducing the value of the interdisciplinary degree could potentially limit opportunities by not fully representing the graduate's unique skill set. It is important to strike a balance between simplicity and authenticity to ensure that the personal brand accurately represents the individual and their capabilities.
Finding Jobs that Utilize Interdisciplinary Education

Although academia has been emphasizing the importance of educating interdisciplinary professionals to tackle wicked problems, the findings of this study indicate that it has been challenging for some participants to find a job that would utilize their interdisciplinary degree (Brown et al., 2010). As the current job market has been accused of being hyper-specialized, this leads to the question of whether the present labor market is lagging behind academia's efforts, leaving the graduates of interdisciplinary degrees with limited job possibilities (Saviano et al., 2016).

Despite the increasing number of interdisciplinary degrees, there appears to be limited research on the job prospects and career trajectories of graduates with such qualifications (Koria et al., 2009; McCune et al., 2021). Therefore, more research is necessary to understand the demand for the skills acquired through interdisciplinary degrees and to evaluate whether the challenges in securing a fitting job are genuine or merely perceived.

5.2. How Do Interdisciplinary Graduates, Explicitly or Implicitly, Construct their Personal Brand?

Personal branding is “a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself” (Gorbatov et al. 2018, p.6). Therefore, the definition suggests that personal branding is a directed effort of managing one’s personal brand. At the same time, it has been argued that a personal brand exists whether we intentionally work on it or not (Peters, 1997).

Scheidt et al. (2020) highlighted that the individuals' awareness of their own personal brand and the process of building it remains uncertain. This study suggests that while most participants do not have a strategic approach to personal branding, they admit to having a personal brand. This implies that even if the graduates have not consciously engaged in personal branding efforts nor explicitly gone through a personal branding process, they have implicitly constructed their personal brand.
5.2.1. Similarities with Traditional Personal Branding

The study found that the key elements that interdisciplinary graduates deemed helpful for creating, positioning, and maintaining a favorable impression of themselves, especially in the context of employment, fell into four main categories: understanding oneself, the program and the job market; contextualizing knowledge; leveraging existing awareness; and adopting an iterative approach.

Comparing the findings of this study with the literature on personal branding, many similarities arise. Even though the participants did not consciously adopt any personal branding techniques, the elements they considered helpful for creating, positioning, and maintaining a favorable impression of themselves closely correspond to the fundamental components addressed by various personal branding frameworks.

Rather than evaluating the elements against individual personal branding frameworks, the comprehensive review conducted by Gorbatov et al. (2018) is used as a basis, as it identified the five core elements that different personal branding frameworks focus on: raising self-awareness, needs analysis and positioning, constructing brand architecture, self-reflection and feedback-seeking, and sense-making (Gorbatov et al., 2018). As explored in the following discussion, interestingly, the participants seem to have unconsciously adopted all these elements except for constructing brand architecture. This can be attributed to the fact that constructing brand architecture would require explicit branding efforts.
Raising Self-Awareness; Needs Analysis and Positioning → Understanding Oneself, the Program and the Job Market

The participants recognized that self-discovery for raising self-awareness is crucial for having a clear branding message. This is aligned with both academic, as well as popular science, which emphasizes that exploring one’s self-identity, personal values and beliefs, self-image, and personal aims is often the first step in constructing a personal brand (Lorgnier and O’Rourke, 2011; Kucharska, 2017). While the participants of the study acknowledged that this is a process that they need to go through individually, offering guided reflection could support the students in creating the time and space needed for self-discovery.

In addition to gaining self-awareness, the participants found it helpful to gain insight into the job market and the skills that employers desire in order to position themselves effectively. Similarly, scholars have identified needs analysis and positioning as key aspects of the personal branding process (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Khedher, 2015; Shepherd, 2005). However, while it is essential to understand the job market to meet the expectations of a specific field, it is equally important to differentiate oneself in the job market (Gander, 2014; Parmentier et al., 2013). Therefore, while interdisciplinary programs can offer support in helping students comprehend the realities of
career prospects and hiring, they should also emphasize the need for personalization and individuality in the personal branding process.

**Sensemaking → Contextualizing Knowledge**

Reciprocal sensemaking is another key element in the process of personal branding, which involves the attachment of meanings to oneself by both the individual and others (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). This study found that for interdisciplinary graduates, such sensemaking is essential for effective communication of their skills and value. In particular, as the skills possessed by the participants are often intangible, they found it helpful to use concrete projects, examples, and stories to make sense of their abilities. This further suggests that project-based courses are not only important for the development of soft skills but also for providing evidence of their existence to potential employers.

**Self-Reflection; Feedback-Seeking → Adopting an Iterative Approach**

The results of this study confirmed that personal branding is an ongoing process, requiring an iterative approach and re-evaluating the brand (Gorbatov et al., 2018). However, while academic literature emphasizes the importance of adapting the brand based on feedback, the results of this study indicate that the participants only moderately include feedback in their personal brand (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Labrecque et al., 2011). Therefore, to ensure that the desired self also reflects the perceived self, interdisciplinary graduates should utilize more opportunities to seek feedback on their personal brand.

5.2.2. Nuances Specific to Interdisciplinary Graduates’ Personal Brands

The previous subchapter demonstrated that even if interdisciplinary graduates may not intentionally practice personal branding, the elements they find useful for communicating their skills largely align with those of personal branding. By consciously utilizing traditional personal branding strategies to promote themselves in the job market and showcase their distinctive skills and competencies, interdisciplinary graduates could further enhance their personal brands. However, following the aim of this study, the nuances specific to interdisciplinary graduates’ personal brands are further discussed.
Firstly, although personal branding literature promotes the idea of utilizing one's existing qualities and focusing on self-packaging rather than changing oneself, the results of this study imply that having a more intentional degree design could help interdisciplinary graduates to construct a stronger personal brand upon graduation (Shepherd, 2005; Lair et al., 2005). Combined with the students' individual efforts, the program could support the students by reminding them to be more conscious of their degree design in regard to their future career aspirations.

Second, despite the fact that personal branding literature recognizes personal branding as an ongoing process that requires adjustments over time, it simultaneously stresses the importance of avoiding multiple simultaneous brands (Gorbatov et al., 2018; Shepherd, 2005). This seems to conflict with the study's results, as the participants believed that adapting one's personal brand based on the situation was beneficial, implying that the interdisciplinary graduates have multiple brands at once. However, it is important to note that although this approach was deemed beneficial by the participants, it may also be connected to the challenge of creating a clear and concise branding message. Furthermore, if the different brand identities are not effectively segmented, it can pose a risk on the coherency and authenticity of the brand, particularly if these identities clash or contradict each other (Labrecque et al., 2010).

Finally, the study's findings suggest that the lack of awareness about interdisciplinary programs can create challenges for personal branding among interdisciplinary graduates. Therefore, it is even more essential for these graduates to take advantage of any existing awareness. Creating their unique brand while highlighting the popularized aspects such as design thinking, creative problem solving, etc., could potentially allow the graduates to follow the personal branding advice of “fitting in while standing out” (Parmentier et al., 2012). Furthermore, the study participants identified utilizing networks as a particularly useful approach, as this allowed them to sidestep the need to explain the value of interdisciplinary education and focus solely on conveying their personal brand.
5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Similar to most research, the present study is bound to some limitations, suggesting several avenues for future research. Firstly, as the concept of interdisciplinary higher education programs and thus, interdisciplinary graduates is still relatively fresh, the prior research on personal branding focuses rather on celebrities or well-established professions, such as politicians, business leaders, or journalists. The lack of research on the personal branding and employability of interdisciplinary graduates, T-shaped professionals, or generalists made it challenging to compare and contrast the findings of this study with others in the field. This indicates that the existing research does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic, and therefore, further research is necessary to fill this gap.

Secondly, as the goal of this study was to explore the phenomenon of personal branding of interdisciplinary graduates in context, a single case study of IDBM graduates was conducted. However, to ensure the generalizability of the results to other interdisciplinary programs, further studies with more interdisciplinary programs should be conducted. Furthermore, a comparative study could be conducted to investigate personal branding challenges faced by interdisciplinary graduates compared to those faced by graduates from traditional, single-discipline programs. This would provide a broader understanding of the differences in personal branding practices between the two groups.

Thirdly, this research only investigated the participants' self-reported personal branding practices, without including the perspective of employers. However, as personal brand emerges as a combination of the desired self and perceived self, future studies should include the employer's perspective to provide a more accurate picture of successful and unsuccessful personal branding practices of interdisciplinary graduates (Gorbatov et al., 2018). Furthermore, an analysis of the participants’ online profiles, CVs, and cover letters could provide a more in-depth analysis of the personal branding practices and challenges of the participants.

Fourthly, this research did not take into account the geographic location, age, gender, or year of graduation of the participants. However, some studies have pointed out the problematic gender
differences in personal branding (Lair et al., 2005). Therefore, future studies could explore how these factors influence personal branding practices and employability.

Finally, a study where participants are guided through personal branding processes could reveal whether the challenges identified in this study could be mitigated by approaching personal branding consciously. This could help researchers and practitioners to develop more effective personal branding strategies for graduates in interdisciplinary programs.

5.4. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The results of the thesis provide both theoretical and practical implications.

Firstly, this study makes theoretical contributions by addressing gaps in the current research. Although research on personal branding is becoming more widespread, it is currently mainly focused on well-established professional identities and roles such as politicians, business leaders, journalists, etc. However, the rise of interdisciplinary programs has led to unconventional graduate identities, making it necessary to expand the research on personal branding to emerging and less-defined professions. By focusing on interdisciplinary graduates, this study provides new insights into personal branding practices, highlighting the challenges and opportunities they face. Therefore, this research extends the theoretical understanding of personal branding practices and emphasizes the importance of studying personal branding in emerging professions.

Second, the findings of the thesis offer practical and actionable insights for interdisciplinary programs, their students, and graduates - in particular for IDBM students, graduates as well as the program. The study helps interdisciplinary students and graduates to better understand the challenges they may face in the personal branding process, potentially helping to mitigate them. For example, they can use the insights to make more informed decisions about their study plan design. Additionally, the students and graduates can utilize the helpful elements identified in this thesis to build their personal brands. Finally, the research can serve as inspiration for students and graduates to approach personal branding more consciously and strategically, thus enhancing their chances to stand out in the competitive job market.
Moreover, the findings of the study can also help interdisciplinary programs to better support their students. As the research indicated that personal branding poses several challenges for the graduates, the programs could consider placing more emphasis on the importance of personal branding to improve the graduates’ employability. For example, the programs could facilitate the self-reflection of students by offering a course or a module on personal branding. Alternatively, the programs could consider incorporating some or all of the nine opportunities for enhancing employability, identified by Donald et al. (2018):

- providing tailored support,
- helping in narrowing down options,
- lecturers sharing their industry contacts,
- increasing awareness of the university career services,
- offering a compulsory career support session,
- building connections to career services so that they could be more proactive in engaging students,
- presence of career services across campus,
- ensuring a more versatile selection of partner companies,
- providing support after rejected applications.

Additionally, the programs could support the students in how to communicate the value of their interdisciplinary knowledge and skills to potential employers effectively. Finally, the study suggests that the program should continue its branding efforts and company connections, as it helps the students in their personal branding efforts.
6. CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to explore nuances of how interdisciplinary graduates, explicitly or implicitly, construct their personal brand. Furthermore, the study aimed to identify the challenges that interdisciplinary graduates face when constructing their personal brands. To answer that, a case study of International Design Business Management (IDBM) graduates was conducted, involving 10 semi-structured interviews with IDBM graduates from all the tracks and various graduation years.

The results of the study indicate that while the graduates do not have an explicit personal branding strategy, they acknowledge the existence of their personal brand. This indicates that even without consciously engaging in personal branding activities or undergoing a formal personal branding process, they have implicitly constructed their personal brand.

Furthermore, while the interdisciplinary graduates have not intentionally adopted any personal branding methodologies, the aspects they identified as being useful in building, positioning, and maintaining a positive image of themselves closely align with the core principles addressed by various personal branding frameworks. This implies that interdisciplinary graduates could further utilize the personal branding literature to enhance their personal brands.

However, the results revealed some nuances of personal branding specific to interdisciplinary graduates. Firstly, the results indicate that in order to construct a strong personal brand upon graduation, interdisciplinary degree students need to pay attention to having an intentional degree design. For example, this could mean balancing the soft skills taught in the major courses with courses that are focused on teaching hard skills, or ensuring having specialist knowledge in addition to generalist knowledge. Secondly, the research implies that contradictory to general advice on personal branding, interdisciplinary graduates have found it helpful to have multiple brands to adapt to based on the situation. Finally, the study suggests that due to generally low brand awareness, it is particularly important for interdisciplinary graduates to leverage any existing awareness of interdisciplinary education and its popularized aspects.

Finally, the study revealed that interdisciplinary graduates struggle to construct and communicate a simple, clear, and/or concise personal branding message. Moreover, they encounter challenges
in personal branding due to the employers' limited understanding of the advantages of the benefits of interdisciplinary education.

While the research was undertaken with rigorous attention to research methodologies and best practices in qualitative research, the results should still be interpreted in light of the inherent limitations. As the research was conducted as a single-case study, the findings display only a contextual truth. Future will have to determine how the understanding of personal branding of interdisciplinary graduates can be utilized to enhance the employability of interdisciplinary graduates and to advance the research on personal branding.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Discussion Guide

1. Introduction/ Socio-demographics
   ● Tell me briefly about yourself: name, age, gender, nationality, profession
   ● Can you please describe what you do in your work? / What does a regular day look like?

2. IDBM journey
   ● Setting the context: Which year started, graduated IDBM? Which track?
   ● What were your motivations for studying IDBM?
   ● Reflecting back, what do you consider the biggest/most valuable learnings from the program?
   ● How much would you say you incorporate the learnings from IDBM in your daily work today?

3. Transitioning into work-life
   ● When did you start thinking about what to do after your master's?
   ● Tell me about your transition into the work-life after graduation
     ○ Did you already have a job while studying?
     ○ What were some of the ideas/criteria or options you had in mind for a future job?
     ○ Which efforts did you take to find a job; which channels did you use, etc?
     ○ What was the best support? What were the biggest challenges?

4. Introduction to personal branding
   ● Are you familiar with the term personal branding?
   ● If yes: Could you describe in your own words what it is?
     ○ Would you consider that you have a personal brand?
     ○ Have you intentionally worked on building your personal brand?

5. Personal branding
   ● What were the biggest challenges when building your personal brand? (When framing and communicating your skills/value, what have been the biggest challenges?)
   ● What did you find helpful when building a personal brand? (What have you found particularly helpful when framing and communicating your value/skills in practice?)
     ○ Which channels do you use to communicate your personal brand?
   ● How much do you incorporate learnings/skills from IDBM into your personal brand? (When framing and communicating your value/skillset, how much do you incorporate learnings/skills from IDBM?)
• How do you think an interdisciplinary degree in practice influences the way you’re perceived in a professional context compared to your peers from non-interdisciplinary programs?
• How has the way you present your personal brand (/yourself) changed over time?
• How much have you incorporated feedback in how you present yourself?
• How often do you think about self-presentation and -promotion today? In the past? (How important is personal branding for you?)

6. Advice - from IDBM alumni to soon-to-be-graduates
• What do you think - what would make IDBM graduates more appealing in the job market?
• What are the pitfalls of communicating one’s value that graduates should be aware of?
• What advice do you wish you had been given upon graduation that would have supported you in your job search?
Appendix B: Participation Confirmation

Participation confirmation: Navigating the Personal Brand of Interdisciplinary Graduates
– A case study of IDBM Alumni

I understand that all data will be kept confidential, and the identity of the subjects will remain anonymous. If I wish, I can check and comment on the materials intended for publication based on my participation upon request, before their publication. In case I have any questions, I can contact the interviewer using the below information. Participation is voluntary and at any point in the research study, I am at liberty to notify that I no longer wish to participate in the study by contacting: Helena Eharand, helena.eharand@aalto.fi, +372 56 204 740. All the information gathered up until that point will be handled as described in the privacy notice of the research study.

I have received sufficient information about the research study, I have had the possibility to have my questions answered, I have understood the information and I wish to participate in the research study.

I agree to participate in the above study by replying to this mail with a message “I agree” - or equivalent.
Appendix C: Research Data Privacy Notice

Date xx.xx.xxxx

Information for Research Participants in the Master’s Thesis “Navigating the Personal Brand of Interdisciplinary Graduates – A case study of IDBM Alumni”

You have been invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this study is voluntary. You can discontinue your participation in the study at any time. Should you discontinue your participation, you will not be subject to any negative consequences, and the information gathered from you up until the point of cessation of your participation will be handled according to this Privacy Notice and the applicable data protection legislation.

1. **The aim of the study** is to explore how interdisciplinary graduates construct their personal brand, based on the case of International Design Business Management (IDBM) alumni. The study is conducted under the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) Higher Education Institution (HEI) Initiative C-ACCELERATE that is supported by EIT Digital, Coordinated by EIT Raw Materials, and funded by the European Union.

2. **The data is collected by** recording interviews, as well as from participants’ private documentation in the form of cover letters and/or portfolios. The data will be collected in the Helsinki Capital Region/online. Approximately an hour of participants’ time is required for the interview.

3. **What personal data is processed?**

Personal data categories that are processed can include the following: name, an email address that contains a real name, facial data, voice data, a traditional signature, an address, a phone number, gender, age, home municipality, profession, place of study, specific dates.

4. **Personal data has been collected from the following sources:**

The personal data is collected from the research participants directly.

5. a) **How is personal data processed in the study?**
The personal data collected in the study will be pseudonymised and/or anonymised during the analysis process and will only be accessible to the researcher. Personal data will not be included in the final paper.

b) What is the purpose of the processing?

The purpose of the study is to explore how International Design Business Management (IDBM) alumni construct their personal brands.

c) Legal basis for processing personal data

The lawful basis for processing is consent. You can withdraw your consent at any time. The processing of personal data is required for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest, namely scientific research and for academic expression.

6. Transfer of Personal Data to Non-EU/EEA countries

The university’s policy is to take special care when transferring personal data to countries outside of the European Union and the European Economic Area, particularly where those countries do not provide data protection regulation according to the standards set by the GDPR. These transfers of personal data are conducted according to the GDPR utilizing for instance standard contractual clauses or other appropriate safeguards.

7. Storage period of your data and anonymisation

Data will be stored to be used for the Master’s thesis. After the thesis has been accepted, the personal data will be destroyed. Personal data will not be included in the final thesis. The personal data collected in the study will be pseudonymised and/or anonymised during the analysis process. Anonymised data is no longer personal data.

8. The rights of the study participant in a scientific study

According to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), data subjects have the right

- to obtain information on the processing of their personal data
- to access to their data
- to request rectification of their data
- to request restrict the processing of their data
- to object to the processing of their data
- right to erasure, if research data have been unlawfully processed and processing is no longer necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific research purposes, or statistical purposes and erasure of research data will not render impossible or seriously impair objectives of scientific research.

In the event that the research study does not require, or no longer requires, the identification of a data subject, Aalto University shall not be obliged to acquire additional information in order to identify the data or the data subject for the sole purpose of fulfilling the rights of the data subject. If Aalto University cannot identify the data related to a data subject, the rights of access, rectification, objection, and erasure shall not apply. However, if the data subject provides additional information enabling his or her identification and the identification of the research data, the rights are not affected.

**9. More information on the study and the exercising of your rights**

The controller in this study is Aalto University.

The contact person in matters related to the research study: Helena Eharand, +372 56 204 740, helena.eharand@aalto.fi

The research participant must contact Aalto University’s data protection officer if they have questions or demands related to the processing of personal data.

Data Protection Officer, Phone number: 0947001, Email: tietosuojavastaava@aalto.fi

If the research participant sees that their data has been processed in violation of the General Data Protection Regulation or data protection legislation, the participant has the right to lodge a complaint with the supervisory authority, the Data Protection Ombudsman (see more: tietosuoja.fi).