



# Employability as Self-branding in Job Search Games: A Case of Finnish Business Graduates

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## INTRODUCTION

In the complex and competitive graduate labour market, personal qualities, social skills and other specific virtues such as appearance and behaviours and even personal values have become increasingly important in making oneself appealing to potential employers (Brown et al., 2011; Siivonen et al., 2019). Something “extra”, an “edge” and “standing out of the crowd” are needed to convince the employers of a “good bargain” (McCracken et al., 2016; see also Burke et al., 2017). As a consequence, self-branding (Hearn, 2008; Vallas & Cummins, 2015) has become salient for performing one’s employability for potential employers.

By the concept of self-branding (Hearn, 2008; Whitmer, 2018), we refer to a “pervasive discourse” (Vallas & Cummins, 2015, p. 293) as a framework for negotiating employability in order to be able to stand out

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in the labour market (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Whitmer, 2021). In this chapter, we suggest that graduates need to perform their employability by adopting practices of self-branding, which has become a key means to enhance one's employability, especially at the time of labour market entry.

Prior research on branding from students' or graduates' perspective has focused mostly on the benefits of branding when graduates seek to enter the labour market (see, e.g., Manai & Holmlund, 2015; Kushal & Nargundkar, 2021; Minor-Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2020). However, critical research that focuses on self-branding of higher education graduates entering the labour market is quite rare (see Nicholas, 2018), and in Finland, virtually non-existing. Even less attention has been paid to self-branding as identity performance to enhance employability.

To fill this gap, we approach self-branding from the graduate identity point of view and use the discourse of self-branding as a lens to the construction of employable identity. More specifically, we focus on discursive and narrative practices (Bamberg, 2011) by which graduates construct their identities in relation to the ideals and demands of self-branding discourse. We adopt an interaction-oriented narrative approach in which identities are seen as situational performances—made in real or imagined audiences in mind (De Fina, 2015). The analytical focus is on the positioning strategies used by narrators to accomplish, reaffirm or contest specific versions of selves performatively in contextualized interactions (De Fina, 2015).

To investigate graduates' self-branding as identity performances around employability, we analysed interviews of 27 newly graduated or soon to be graduated Finnish business masters and focused especially on narratives of job search. We asked the following questions: (1) How business students/graduates perform their identities in the framework of self-branding and hence aim to enhance their employability potential in the context of early job search? (2) What kinds of identity dilemmas as well as dilemmas of self-branding arise, and how graduates aim to solve these dilemmas? The chapter contributes to both critical research on self-branding and employability literature by introducing an interactionally oriented approach (De Fina, 2015) and a novel identity dilemma theory approach (Bamberg, 2011) to self-branding and employability literature.

## SELF-BRANDING AS PERFORMANCES OF EMPLOYABLE GRADUATE IDENTITIES

There is a widening understanding that employability should be viewed as a processual phenomenon across time and multiple contexts referring to graduate identity (Holmes, 2001, 2013; Tomlinson, 2007; Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021). In this chapter, we approach self-branding as a lens to employable graduate identity in the context of job search.

Previous research on branding focusing on higher education students has examined business students' self-marketing brand skills as a new employability skill type (Manai & Holmlund, 2015). Prior research has also addressed employer-oriented personal branding techniques, which benefit graduates in job search (Kushal & Nargundkar, 2021) and early career job seekers' perceptions of the importance of branding on employability (Minor-Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2020). Some prior research has compared the brands of the university and of the students (Holmberg & Strannegård, 2015). We take a different, critical approach and understand self-branding as a commodifying discourse associated with goal-oriented practices to promote oneself to gain superiority and "stand out" in the job market (Pagis & Ailon, 2017; Vallas & Cummins, 2015; Whitmer, 2021, p. 143). Furthermore, we understand self-branding as a framework for graduate identity construction, which is negotiated interactionally in narrative contexts where business graduates need to perform employability to themselves and to an audience consisting of other graduates, recruiters and employers.

We suggest that job search forms a particularly interesting narrative context to scrutinize identity construction around employability. Studies on employers' expectations of graduate employability have shown that especially in recruiting situations and job interviews, recruiters often pay attention to applicants' behaviours, appearance and overall performance as "impression management"—or as self-branding—instead of formal, baseline requirements such as education and work experience (Lepistö & Ihantola, 2018, p. 112). Accordingly, if the employers are open to the applicants' "impression management"—that is self-branding—graduates seeking a job are incited to market themselves and, in other words, brand themselves to signal both their uniqueness and authenticity and also difference from other candidates in the eyes of the employers.

In the discourse of self-branding, uniqueness and authenticity are the core concepts which constitute a special brand value (Banet-Weiser, 2012;

Gershon, 2016; also Whitmer, 2021). The uniqueness and authenticity of the brand are associated with one's "true self", which supersedes skills, experiences, assets and alliances. Paradoxically, however, in the neoliberal logic, the true self must be constantly enhanced and cultivated (Gershon, 2016). Besides uniqueness and authenticity, for personal brands, it is, thus, equally important to focus on "differentiation" and "parity", which stem from practices that allow a person to "stand out" from competitors and "fit in" with the expectations of the field and the occupation being pursued (Parmentier et al., 2013, p. 375; Keller et al., 2002). To "stand out" and to "fit in" entails a certain kind of "curation of the self" (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy & Pooley, 2017), which highlights the performative nature of self-branding that incites the actors to "tune" their brand always in accordance to the audience. Furthermore, signalling "stand out" graduate employability includes narrating a personal brand (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021, p. 688).

Narratives are sites where business graduates perform and negotiate graduate identities in relation to employability interactionally with an "audience" in mind. In job search situations, employers constitute the principal audience for self-branding (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2021) and graduates' employability performances. Following de Fina's (2015) view of an interactionally oriented approach, we analyse identities as performances and view identities as situational accomplishments (De Fina, 2015). Thus, identities are intentional projects and meaning making of how individuals want to be understood in the eyes of others (Bamberg, 2011; Georgakopoulou, 2007). Identities as interactional performances can be seen—and studied—as constant acts of positioning (Bamberg, 2011; Davies & Harré, 1990), where individuals aim to construct, affirm and contest specific versions of the self (De Fina, 2015).

Our theoretical approach is novel in the field of recent graduates' employability and graduates' self-branding studies. We approach interactional graduate identity performances through the theory of identity dilemmas introduced by Michael Bamberg (2011). The dilemmas revolve around (a) constancy and change in time and place, (b) difference and sameness regarding others and (c) agency and control concerning whether "I" is a subject in control versus "I" as an undergoer to the situation and world. In this chapter, we aim to focus on the dilemma of difference and sameness, which has proved to be central to self-branding, both in terms of difference (a conceptual analogue to differentiation and "standing

out”) and sameness (a conceptual analogue to parity and “fitting in”) (Keller et al., 2002; Parmentier et al., 2013).

By scrutinizing the identity dilemma of difference and sameness, we are able to analyse graduates’ identity navigation within job search by exploring how they deal with the question, “Who do I think I am and who should I be vis-à-vis the other graduates and employers’ expectations, the occupation pursued and the business labor market in general?”. The dilemma is particularly pertinent in the consideration of new graduates’ negotiation of employable identities as they aim to present themselves as employable graduates for potential employers.

## METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

### *Participants*

The data set of this study consists of 27 interviews conducted in 2019 as a part of a larger research project on graduate employability and social positioning in the labour market (HighEmploy, 2018–2022<sup>1</sup>). The field of business was selected as an exemplary case, partly because it is a generalist field that does not prepare graduates for any specific professions and enables many kinds of career options and partly because it is one of the high-status fields, typically leading to well-paid positions (Isopahkala-Bouret & Nori, 2021). The interviewees of this data set were aged between 24 and 30. Fourteen of them were men and 13 women. Twenty-four of the interviewees had graduated in 2018–2019 and three were about to graduate in 2019–2020 from the university with a master’s degree. They represent a relatively privileged group of young adults in terms of their social background: most of them come from middle-class but not necessarily academic families.

The interviewees were selected on the basis that they were relatively young, finishing their first university degree and were entering their early career positions as newly or soon to be graduated. They all had been recently searching for their first jobs in their professional field and therefore had recent experience of looking for a job. Almost all the interviewees had a job which corresponded with their field and level of education at the

<sup>1</sup>In the project’s qualitative sub-study, altogether 76 HE graduates with degrees in business and administration were interviewed in 2019 for the first time, and 44 of them in 2020 for the second time. The interviewees were recruited from 4 universities.

time of graduation. Business administration and economics, the study field that we focus on in this study, is an example of a field where students enter the labour market before graduation. At the time of the interviews, the interviewees worked in business organizations with titles such as assistant controller, HR specialist/coordinator, business consultant, project manager, IT advisor, data engineer and campaign specialist.

The duration of the interviews varied from around 1 to 3 hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were conducted and analysed in Finnish. The interview quotes presented in this article were translated into English by a professional. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Eastern Finland Committee on Research Ethics. The names of the interviewees are pseudonyms.

### *Method and Analysis*

As described above, our method of analysis is narrative, and we investigate the ways by which the interviewees perform themselves in narrative interaction. In the first phase of analysis, we read through the transcripts to identify the episodes/narratives, where dilemmatic meanings related to constellations of employable identity were negotiated. The episodes intertwined around open questions presented by interviewer like: “Could you tell about applying for early career job positions?” or “How have you promoted yourself in job search and interview situations?” or “How is it possible to gain a ‘competitive edge’ over other graduates, if possible?” The episodes were plotted narratives or fragments of talk, that is “small stories” (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). Following the interactional approach to narratives (De Fina, 2015), we paid attention to the real or imagined audience, that is, other higher education graduates, recruiters, and other gatekeepers of the early career institutions and business labour market.

Second, the analysis was organized around the interviewees’ navigation of the identity dilemma of difference and sameness (Bamberg, 2011). In practice, we focused on the variety of identity related dilemmas constructed via self-branding (what I am, what I am not and what I should be in terms of constructing employable graduate identity), keeping in mind the concepts of “authenticity”, “fabrication”, “parity” (fitting-in) and “differentiation” (stand-out) as well. We also examined the ways of the interviewees’ positioning and how the related identity performances resonated with the discourse of self-branding.

## RESULTS

In the following sections, we conduct detailed narrative analysis of the various ways by which business graduates performed their identities in the framework of self-branding discourse. Our analysis revealed that the identity dilemma of difference and sameness, in particular, actualized when the graduates reflected on themselves in the context of job search. Business graduates aimed to solve this dilemma, first, by performing difference to other highly educated and more traditional modest job seekers in terms of their personal attributes and qualities. They presented themselves as tactical and unique job seekers compared to average highly educated job seekers. Second, the business graduates strived to solve the identity dilemma of difference and sameness by negotiating their lack of work experience. In doing so, they dealt with the demands and expectations of the occupational field and performed themselves as “same enough” compared to more experienced job seekers and the actual or imagined employees in organizations. They performed themselves as credible young applicants who fit in the organization and can bring equal value to it despite their lack of work experience. Solving the identity dilemma of difference and sameness also produced a specific dilemma of self-branding, that is, the dilemma of authenticity versus fabrication to be negotiated. Next, we present our results according to the ways by which graduates aimed to solve the identity dilemma of difference and sameness and, through this, also characterize the dilemmas of self-branding.

### *Performing Difference to Other Job Seekers*

The interviewees aimed to solve the identity dilemma of difference and sameness, firstly, by performing their positive uniqueness compared to other job seekers. They seek to “stand out” from other job seekers and stressed their personal “skills”, characteristics and attributes, appearance and behaviours, tastes and even personal values, which were harnessed as one’s own unique competitive unique selling point in job seeking.

### *The Tactical and Unique Job Seeker Versus the Average Highly Educated Job Seeker*

All the interviewees had some experience in job search and preparing themselves for the related practices and situations, such as job applications and interviews. In their narratives, they performed themselves as different

from—and superior to—other job seekers by highlighting their personal attributes and qualities “beyond degrees”. In the following example, Miika positions himself as both different and same compared to others. He performs himself as a tactical and unique job seeker—an interpersonally skilful actor who has the ability to convince employers and tolerate stress and pressure (“grilling”) in job interview situations. In his interpretation, these skills enable him to stand out from the competitors who are “at the same level” in terms of formal competence and degree.

Miika: When I get to a job interview, I’m in a position of strength. If I get a chance to influence something face-to-face, I know I’m good at it and I like it. I’d say I enjoy job interviews. They’re not only exciting situations, but I find it fun to be interviewed, grilled. (...) It’s one of my advantages. But whether I stand out on paper, my certificates from the first three years of study, for example, are identical to those of 99 per cent of others.

Miika’s example illustrates how the similarity with other job seekers—the average highly educated—in terms of formal qualifications did not add value to one’s employability. Instead, academic qualifications were perceived as the foundation from which to begin to build a respectful and competitive brand, and the difference in the sense of positive uniqueness was performed by relying on one’s individual uniqueness and its successful, situation-relevant representation.

Business graduates also reflected the demands of real and imagined employers in their meaning making and aimed to answer to these demands with their identity performances. In the following quotation, Sara positions herself and other graduates in her field as agile and “keeping one’s finger on the pulse” labour market actors who are aware of the changing wishes and requirements of employers. However, she also aims to construct difference from traditional, old-fashioned job seekers.

Sara: In my trade, people are pretty well aware of the criteria. And that’s surely why I stood out in the interview or also in the application phase. I had an individual kind of CV rather than a white piece of paper with some text on it. I have kept my finger on the pulse about what the requirements of a CV are these days. I knew which questions were likely to be asked.

Business graduates also performed themselves as different from other job seekers by positioning them as “true selves” and by harnessing their



own personal values as a brand. For example, Sara—like many other interviewees—positioned herself towards the negatively associated stereotypical image of a business graduate. She performed herself as an atypical business graduate by referring to her personal life values, which emphasize soft and ethical values instead of business values. Thus, the interviewees aimed to differentiate not only from other (highly educated) job seekers or traditional job seekers, but also from other business students and graduates.

Sara: Maybe in a way I think about being my true self and that being genuine is a factor. I want to believe that it makes me stand out.—Then again, I don't think I'm the most typical business graduate. Maybe having a wide range of environmental values is another factor that makes me stand out.—It's maybe a separating factor. (...) I believe it might be an emerging trend.

### *Performing Sameness Enough*

The interviewees also aimed to solve the identity dilemma of difference and sameness, by performing “sameness enough” to the demands of the job being pursued as well as the actual or imagined expectations of employers, business organizations and the graduate labour market in general.

#### *Good Novice Employee “on paper” Versus Credible by Experience*

The interviewees also negotiated the identity dilemma of difference and sameness in terms of work-related experience. They reflected on whether they are good novice employees “on paper” or credible by experience. Business graduates dealt with their lack of work experience due to young age, which forced them to perform themselves as good and competent in relation to more experienced job seekers and the actual or imagined employees in the targeted organization. Business graduates justified why they “fit in” as credible young applicants and candidates to the organizations to which they apply for a job, while performing “sameness enough”.

As we have illustrated before, in job search games, sameness with other job seekers—just as being “on the same line” in terms of formal qualification and degree—appeared to be avoidable. However, when looking at employers' expectations about work experience, “sameness enough” in terms of “fitting in” within the organization became a virtue with which young novices were able to compensate for a lack of work experience and, thus, build their brand.

The interviewees performed “sameness enough” by addressing the equal value (parity) they can bring to the organizations they were targeting—albeit through different means and virtues than through occupation and field-related work experience. They differentiated themselves positively from more experienced applicants and professionals by emphasizing their personal qualities and capacities related to youthfulness (Farrugia, 2018), such as passion and drive, problem-solving skills and the ability to learn quickly (see also Korhonen et al., 2023, also Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

In the following examples, Joakim and Otso perform “sameness enough”, aiming to convince that they are just as good “fits” for the organization as more experienced candidates and professionals in future early career organizations:

- Joakim: Well, it probably depends a little on which position I’m applying to. If you think about it, I don’t have that much work experience yet. It’s a factor that does not make me stand out if I’m applying to a position where more extensive experience is required. At that point, I think there must be another way for me to prove that I’m highly capable, that I’m a very quick learner, or that my persona is well-suitable. Things such as these.
- Otso: It’s a bit fifty-fifty whether it’s worthwhile to employ a relatively young candidate with a shorter career as they may not have sufficient skills or capacity. On the other hand, I’ve heard that (...) young people fresh from the oven or school. They are driven, full of ideas and inspired to bring something new especially to teams with more senior employees.

In their meaning making, Joakim and Otso address the problem of employability (“am I capable, good enough, do I manage”)—and the problem of differentiation from other job seekers—posed by a lack of work experience due to young age. Both perform themselves as intellectually curious and creative employees, thereby highlighting elements of the graduate identity that have been recognized as being valued by organizations (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011, p. 577).

The interviewees also aimed to perform themselves as same enough in terms of work experience gained during university studies. For example, Rebecca (soon to be graduated) talks about the compulsion to gain work experience at the end of the bachelor’s phase. In her interpretation,

“sameness enough” means that in terms of acquired work experience, you are on the “same line” as other graduates when there is competition for jobs. Rebecca, however, unlike Joakim and Otso, does not emphasize the competitive edge of her persona. Rather, she positions herself as a job seeker who, in a way, has to accept “lower”-level jobs in order to acquire sufficient experience to succeed in postgraduation job search.

Rebecca: When applying [for work], it’s quite certain (...) that your offset is different to that of other graduates if you have no work experience. I knowingly made such choices. (...) I think I’ve also been aware that the competition can be very tough in marketing, for example, and that I have to learn something new and start from a lower position. (Rebecca)

Birgitta also accounts for the lack of work experience, however, in a very different manner. Due to the lack of work experience—other or field specific—Birgitta positions herself as an inferior job-applicant. Lack of “learning about the job” (Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011, p. 577) downplays the worth of knowledge acquired during studies and prefers knowledge and skills acquired through work experience resulting in knowledge or skills not necessarily being of required standard in the eyes of employers.

Birgitta: I was a bit scared that it might weaken my chances to be employed in the future. I pondered whether I’m an inferior job applicant as I didn’t work while studying.

### *The Self-branding Dilemma of Authenticity Versus Fabrication*

#### *Boundaries of Authenticity Versus Fabrication*

Difference and sameness actualized the self-branding dilemma of authenticity versus fabrication in business graduates’ narrative practices. When the graduates performed themselves as tactical and unique job seekers (vs. average highly educated) and aimed to stand out from others, they had to respond to the demand for authenticity associated with a good employable brand (see Gershon, 2016). Moreover, they had to negotiate the right kind of authenticity, that is, how to distinguish from the “mass” and be unique enough without falling into fabrication associated with self-serving competitiveness, for example. In doing so, they thus reflected on the limits of socially and morally acceptable versus unacceptable forms and practices of self-branding. Authenticity within the discourse of self-branding

involved the performing of the authentic self, which was perceived as honest, genuine and true to oneself but also true to the expectations of the occupation/work being pursued.

In the following examples, Tea and Katriina negotiate the discrepancy between their true self and the ideal of self-branding.

Tea: How hard it is to highlight your skills, and what this certain kind of modesty means. (...) It has been really difficult to market yourself like “Hey, I really am a competent and sociable person with good problem solving skills.” In a way I’m afraid that it might feel artificial and fake (...), and on one other hand I’m limited in that I can’t be good in everything. On the other hand, as everyone is part of the same great mass, I should consider my skills and capabilities and remind myself of them. I have completed the same degree as others, but they make me stand out.

Katriina: When you sit at a job interview for an hour, your skills become obvious without having to fabricate or exaggerate things. I don’t know (...) whether people exaggerate things, but I’m an honest person, so I couldn’t even do it.

Tea and Katriina position themselves as an inherently modest person, which has historically been a central virtue of work among Finns and confront authenticity with fabrication. Although Tea encourages herself to be rightly and courageously proud of her abilities and understands the obvious necessity of branding by means of “bringing out personal talents”, the demand for self-promotion appears potentially pretentious and leading to false expression and, therefore, poor job search success.

On the other hand, reflecting on the claim of authenticity also fuelled self-doubt, especially in the sense of weighing up one’s true competence and value, as the following quotation illustrates:

Tea: Being assessed or scrutinised gives rise to this certain kind of uncertainty in me. (...) I recognise the concept of impostor syndrome. Am I fooling myself or am I really as good as I say?

The right kind of authenticity in job search was strictly regulated also because it was associated with the virtues of both relaxed spontaneity as well as careful and tactical preparation. In the following extract, Sara

positions herself as an honest person and employee, and honesty refers to a sustainable professional identity and acting in accordance with the profession. However, honesty is reflected also vis-à-vis the obvious requirement to “do your homework” in order to prepare oneself for a job interview and, at the same time, stay true/perform spontaneity and “true self”.

Sara: Of course being prepared to the questions—(...) Even though you prepare yourself for the interview, your responses should be authentic rather than similar to something written on a paper. They shouldn't be too thoroughly considered. (...) In my opinion, it's important to be honest rather than try to pretend something more than you are because you'll be in trouble if you can't deliver the things you promised. Or people may get an incorrect idea about who you really are.

The self-branding dilemma of authenticity versus fabrication also occurred when the business graduates performed themselves as same enough compared to other employees. In this case, the dilemma of authenticity versus fabrication was dealt in terms of bodily appearance, and a comparison was made with other business graduates, in particular. The interviewees constructed stereotypical images of business students and graduates as self-confident professionals with the right kind of (middle-class) “tastes” and dress codes. In the following quotation, Sara positions herself as a “generally neat” business graduate who inspires confidence with her appearance but is, however, not inauthentic or fabricated:

Sara: Of course, being altogether presentable but still yourself. Authenticity. ... being a genuine person instils trust in others.

Secondly, business graduates dealt with the self-branding dilemma of authenticity versus fabrication when they aimed to prove their credibility as young novices and their equal value in early-career business organizations. Some interviewees, like Sakari in the extract below, performed themselves as being older than their age, which was considered as a sort of learned tactic or practice of self-branding—a way to act according to the expectations of occupation pursued.

Sakari: Maybe it does not play such an important role at this stage as I'm getting closer to my 30s. But earlier it did. Getting used to being a bit older has clearly had its advantages, too. It adds to my credibility. (...) If you put

on a suit as a 25-year-old who knows nothing about anything, the suit just covers the fact that you have no skills.

As Sakari's example shows, the presentation of age had to be skilful and authentic enough and stay within the proper limits, although Sakari is testing and stretching the boundaries of fabrication. Fabricating age (and experience) to "fit in" with the expectations of the employers, for example, by performing a certain style outwards and dressing like a "businessman" was seen to reveal a young employee's incompetence in the eyes of others.

Finally, Julia positions herself as a well-known actor in job search games and speaks in a guiding tone to other job seekers when she argues that eligibility for successful job search requires in-depth knowledge of yourself, which is a key resource for both the job seeker and the companies themselves.

Julia: I don't think you should excessively polish your image. (...) Certain kind of self-confidence shows without having to highlight it. (...) I'd say to people that you should explore your inner self and only then apply for work. (...) If you don't know yourself, you can't help the company nor yourself.

According to Julia's interpretation, "self-confidence" as a job seeker's virtue and competitive asset is visible to the employer as if by nature without having to emphasize it. In this way, Julia's interpretation builds a certain virtue of modesty.

### *Boundaries of the "curated self"*

In addition to performing themselves as authentic selves and drawing boundaries for the right kind of authenticity, business graduates negotiated the boundaries of fabrication. In doing so, they aimed to justify fabrication within acceptable limits, as fabrication is defined culturally undesirable—especially in relation to Finnish work values which emphasize modesty and honesty as employee virtues (Rintamäki, 2016). In branding literature, the "curated self", that is, "tuning" your own brand for different audiences (Duffy & Pooley, 2017), refers to "a minor self-polishing" from the point of view of the job you are looking for. The "curated self" can be interpreted as stretching the boundaries of the dilemma of authenticity and fabrication. Honesty and being yourself are once again the subject of negotiations. On the other hand, the need to

appear in the right light is recognized, which is probably culturally accepted, as long as you stay close to the truth.

Emil and Miro, for example, position themselves as conscious of the logic of job-seeking games, aware of the need for “sane” fabrication and the necessity/“probability” of finding a job in job-seeking situations. Emil justifies suitable fabrication by being able, if necessary, to use the skills advertised in the job application. However, he interprets that it is not appropriate to write “anything” in the application, that is, to invoke the limits of permissible fabrication. Miro also argues that it is necessary to present the “most affordable version” of himself when looking for a job, although in his interpretation he hints that recruiters do note excessive “lying”. Both Emil and Miro also, in a way, normalize and justify the “tuning” of the self.

Emil: In my opinion a job application (...) is about bolstering yourself one way or another. It’s never easy for Finns, but when you do it reasonably with solid grounds (...) and you can argue why you are capable of something, I’m fine with it. I won’t write just anything there.

## DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we have explored how newly or soon to be graduated young people with a business degree perform themselves as employable labour market actors in terms of self-branding in the context of early career job search. We have utilized self-branding discourse as a lens to identity construction around employability and adopted an interaction-oriented narrative approach to identities where identities are seen as situational performances—made with real or imagined audiences in mind (De Fina, 2015). Furthermore, the analytical focus has been on the positioning strategies used by the narrators to accomplish, reaffirm or contest specific versions of themselves in relation to self-branding.

Our results show that the business graduates aimed to solve the identity dilemma of difference and sameness by performing their positive uniqueness and superiority (standing out)—beyond degrees—compared to other job seekers. They did it by stressing their personal characteristics and attributes, appearance and behaviours and even personal values, which were harnessed as one’s own unique competitive advantage in job seeking. In sum, the business graduates performed themselves as tactical and unique actors in job search games compared to the average highly educated.

Second, they solved the identity dilemma of difference and sameness by negotiating their lack of work experience and performing themselves “same enough” than more experienced job seekers and other employees. They reflected on whether they were good novice employees “on paper”, credible by experience or fit in the organization due to their other potential and valuable personal qualities. In their meaning making, the business graduates aimed to respond to the demands of the job being pursued as well as the expectations of employers, business organizations and the graduate labour market.

Finally, the dilemma of difference and sameness actualized the self-branding dilemma of authenticity versus fabrication. The graduates had to respond to the demand for authenticity associated with a good employable brand (see Gershon, 2016). Moreover, they had to negotiate the right kind of authenticity, that is, how to distinguish from the “mass” and be unique enough without falling into fabrication. In doing so, they thus reflected on the limits of socially and morally acceptable versus unacceptable forms and practices of self-branding and negotiated the boundaries of “curating self”.

In sum, self-branding, when analysed in terms of graduate employable identity performances, seems to emphasize the cultivation of the person on the one hand, and the importance of work experience on the other. In contrast, academic degrees acquired through higher education and skills and competences associated with a business degree are not seen as things that bring value to oneself in the entry to the labour market.

The article contributes to the prominent literature on graduate employability and self-branding, first, by conceptualizing self-branding as a central manifestation of the discourse of employability and, second, by adding a narrative practice approach and identity dilemma perspective (Bamberg, 2011) to analyse how self-branding is displayed in narrative identity performances. This perspective addresses employable graduate identities as socially and culturally mediated. From the sociocultural point of view, the study shows that the various ways the interviewees position themselves embody both the labour market ideals of employability and the discourse of self-branding. However, although the ideal of self-branding, that is engaging in purposeful marketization of the self to gain success in the labour market, is strongly echoed in the business graduates’ interpretations, their identity performances invoke also different kinds of ideals, such as honesty and modesty that are attached to Finnish work values (Rintamäki, 2016). Overall, the chosen methodology is a particularly



fruitful tool to analyse how graduates aim to achieve, contest or reaffirm specific employable identities in terms of self-branding. To conclude, although the graduates embrace the topical language of self-branding and rely on it to present themselves as credible labour market actors, they also strive to solve the moral dilemmas associated with self-branding in the context of Finnish working life.

On a more local level of social surroundings, the interaction-oriented narrative analysis enables to show that self-branding as a narrative practice has situational and contextual functions, and certain kinds of contexts and environments encourage, nourish or even prohibit certain kinds of narratives (see De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012, p. 124). Graduates' identity performances can be understood as purposeful responses to the demands and expectations of job search games, employers and organizations. However, newly graduated young people do not embrace and repeat blindly the ideals around them: they are actively making moral judgements about what is presented as desirable and what is rejected in terms of self-branding. Engaging in self-branding entails looking at oneself as well as others from many different perspectives that might be contradictory. The demand to solve a wide range of (moral) dilemmas and negotiate the virtues and demands of both academic degrees and the labour market that are in tension with each other speaks interestingly about the demands of the self-branding phenomenon. There seem to be very personal issues to be tackled and, therefore, the sense that if you don't live up to the ideals you are a potential loser.

On the basis of the results and drawing on Vallas and Cummins' (2015, p. 309) study, we argue that the larger share of the criticisms should be pointed at the principled concerns (moral obligation to engage oneself in self-branding) of branding instead of the practical considerations (how to be trained to brand effectively). If we reflect upon the results in terms of what has been argued above, the main concern should be that graduates seem to have a (moral) duty to engage themselves in the dilemmatic discourse of self-branding in the entry to the labour market. If employability is viewed as branding the "self" beyond degrees, it is worth asking in line with Handley (2018, p. 252): "what higher education can possibly do to enhance the job prospects of their graduating students, if degrees are as a mere signal of eligibility for graduate jobs".

The findings of this study are subject to some limitations. First, the research focuses on the perspective of a unique (perhaps elite) group of business graduates, which offers a purposeful sample and a lens through

which we can increase our understanding of the generalist degrees and challenges in entering a business labour market where degrees are not enough (Tomlinson, 2008). Second, the narrative approach and a purposeful sample do not afford generalization to other professional disciplines, such as medicine or law, but rather aim to elicit deep insights to personal and shared experiences and to larger cultural narratives and discourses. Finally, future research could assess whether graduates' identity performances in terms of self-branding change when they proceed in early career organizations. Therefore, follow-up data with the same participants could provide a longitudinal perspective and the possibility to study identity construction around self-branding within early career organizations and beyond. In addition, questions of social class and gender in terms of self-branding need further investigation.

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