



**UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG**  
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## **Dressing Up for Social Media**

A study on how consumers' virtual identities are perceived by others

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### Abstract

*This study aims to provide a description of how significant others interpret and comprehend female Instagram identities that is signalling through expressive brand consumption. It contributes to several areas of research within social media, branding and identity. To analyse how branded possessions are used as an interpretation of identity in social media, a three parts model for understanding virtual identities is suggested. The three parts includes other people, objects and real self and its relation to the social self. Through the use of focus groups with young female Instagram users, an understanding of how virtual identity can be perceived is developed. Findings were discovered about identity perception on Instagram through impression management, possession and grooming rituals, stereotypes and brand personality's ability to "rub off".*

**Keywords:** Identity, Social media marketing, Consumer culture, User-generated content, Branding

### Introduction

The rise of Internet and social media has given new means of communication for both consumers and companies. The transformation may have been more tremendous for consumers since most people now can use social media to easily communicate towards a mass audience without extraordinary economic or social resources (McQuarrie et al. 2013). Even if the Internet has provided us with new tools and platforms for self-presentation, it still has not changed the underlying motivations behind it (Gonzalez & Hancock 2011). In an offline setting among other things, consumers use brands to signal association to groups (Han et al. 2010), use them as symbols in identity creation (Levy 1959) and to give meaning in their lives in the absence of religion (Schachar et al. 2011). The introduction of social media may have broadened these ideas of brand usage to multiple ways in an online setting. This allows for a much bigger audience, now potentially everyone can see your home or your newly purchased handbag.

Social media networking can today be described as having a self-evident part in people's daily lives (Hudson et al. 2015). With an increased smartphone usage among Europeans from 22,7% in 2011 to projected 64,7% in 2017 (Statista 2015) there has followed an increase in the amount of time spent on and share of people using social media (.SE 2014). As early as 2010, (Barkhuus & Tashiro 2010) contended that social media platforms was bigger than ever and were used on a daily basis by most young adults. However, the notion of sharing with others is not a new phenomenon (Belk 2010) and the internet has only taken this behaviour to a new scene extending the number of possible recipients massively (Belk 2013). Since social media plays a more evident role in people's lives today, understanding this old phenomenon on a new platform might be of relevant scientific interest.

What makes social media special is that it allows for user-generated content which involves the seemingly common phenomenon of making associations with brands. The proliferation of this type of content and media has broken down the cultural domination of mass media communication (Pink 2012). This

type of user-generated content can be valuable advertising for companies since its consumers relies more on content from consumers than directly from companies (Pornpitakpan 2004). Since this reliable type of advertising is something that companies cannot create themselves, there might be high incentives to understand this online behaviour also for brand managers. Especially since consumers behaviour on social media seems to be of direct financial importance for companies when 4 out of 10 Facebook users have purchased a product they once liked, shared or commented on in social media (Barnes 2014).

When it comes to primarily photo sharing among Swedes, the second largest social media platforms is Instagram (.SE 2014) which has been described as *“a way to snap photos, tweak their appearance, and share them on various social networks with friends, family and complete strangers”* (Hochman & Schwartz 2012 p. 6). The main purpose of Instagram is to connect people by individuals sharing what they are doing at the moment. Over 60 million pictures are shared each day on the platform (Instagram, 2015). What is special with Instagram is also the use of “hashtags” (#) in front of words to categorize pictures and make them searchable. Instagram users are represented to a high extent of young females (.SE 2014).

Instagram could also be seen as resting on the old saying “one photo is worth a thousand words” (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008 p. 91). This also shows why visual material is an important aspect of our culture (Pink 2012), since its ability to convey a lot of cultural meaning. Pink (2012) claimed that digital cameras can be used to gain power over one's image or creating alternative representations of oneself. Furthermore the practices of photographing in social network sites have developed as a collective sense of belongingness and socialisation (Pink 2012). It could be seen as social media platforms being nothing else than a new platform of constructing social identities. With the

increased use of social media based on user-generated visual material such as Instagram, this type of material could be seen as having a more important role in identity creation today. Hence, the impression management going on at Instagram and similar platforms becomes more important to understand for both researchers and brand managers.

Social media is explained as having an important role in young people's identity creation (Pempek et al. 2009). Due to what people post, the picture might be evaluated by other Instagram users to make sense of the person posting the picture. Pictures posted of certain brands or branded products on personal Instagram accounts are an evident phenomenon. McCracken (1986) explains this importance of possessions in people's identity by stating: *“Consumers spend a good deal of time cleaning, discussing, comparing, reflecting, showing off, and even photographing many of their possessions”* (P. 79). This confirms the statement that Instagram is a relevant and current source of information regarding usage of brands and identity.

Earlier research on social media seems to have been focused mainly on its effect on life satisfaction (Gonzalez & Hancock 2011; Chou & Edge 2012; Krasnova et al 2013; Sagioglou & Greitemeyer 2014), as well as identity projection (Back et al. 2010; Shau & Gilly 2003), prestige (Heivadi and Khajeheian 2013) and on consumption patterns (Barnes, 2014). Some social media has been researched more than others when it comes to branding, among them Pinterest (McQuarrie et al. 2014) and blogs (Kretz & Valck 2010; Cresti 2015). User-generated content as marketing communication source has been researched as a mean for ordinary consumers to communicate (McQuarrie et al. 2013) and the motivations behind it (Poch & Martin 2014). Consumers' identity creation through objects (Belk 1988) and clothing (Bannister & Hogg 2004) has also been a target for research. However there seems to be a research gap concerning brand centred user-

generated content and identity perception on the social media platform Instagram.

The aim of this paper is to provide a description of how significant others interpret and comprehend female Instagram identities that is signalling with expressive brand consumption. This study is based on a hermeneutics tradition which aims to provide an answer that is a product of our own interpretation. In order to fulfill this aim we formulated the research question: How is identity understood through the display of branded possessions on social media? This research does not aim to provide a comprehensive nor generalizable description of how people perceive online Instagram identities. This qualitative study does instead intend to analyse and understand patterns in the perception of an Instagram identity through focus groups interpretation of Instagram pictures. Visual material is used to provide answers to what this means in a social setting to similar individuals. The real individual behind the user accounts is left out; the focus is instead to look at Instagram pictures as a culture on its own, judged as a correct interpretation of reality and not an extension of the real world.

## **Theoretical background**

To understand the perception of individuals identities in an online context, three research areas were found to be of main interest: social media, brands as symbols and identity. Since the social media platform is the main focus of this study, relevant literature concerning social media and its effect on the individuals is discussed. However to provide for the content aspect of social media we provide research in the area of brand as symbols. This since expressive brands is the vehicle to understand identity in this study. Further to get to the root of the phenomenon, identity relevant research is discussed and described.

### **Social media and the individual**

The introduction of MMS and the cell phone camera opened up new way of doing identity construction for the owner. Scifo (2005) claims that this created means to share the moment and provide extension of one's memories and experiences through sending symbolic based messages which members of the group understand. This idea evolved later on into the notion of social media.

Research concerning consumer behaviour on social media is getting more attention since the link between consumer behaviour and social media has been detected. Barnes (2014) claims that consumers behaviour on social media is of direct financial importance for companies. He found that as people share their opinions online regarding product or brands, seen as consumer-generated content, this result in increased opportunity for sales of that product or brand.

The emotional effect on the individual is extensively researched. Gonzales and Hancock (2011) state that when individuals are exposed to selectively self-presented information on their Facebook page, self-esteem is increased compared to when they are presented to their "true" self. However, Chou and Edge (2012) claim that viewing others Facebook pages, with their favourable selected photos makes people think their life is worse than others. Wilcox and Stephen (2013) argues that usage of social network positively affects self-esteem however negatively affects self-control. Hence, using social networks (Facebook) might be harmful for individuals since a lower self-control leads to decreased well-being. Furthermore they found that no emphasis on being modest around strong-ties is existent in an online setting. Back et al. (2010) came to the conclusion in their research that people are not using online social networks to portray an ideal virtual identity but rather use it as a medium to communicate real personality. Another study by McQuarrie et al. (2014) argues that the social media platform Pinterest is being used by some consumers as a way of

daydreaming out loud and discover taste through products and brands.

Using social media have impact in many ways, Krasnova et al. (2013) found that passive use of the social media platform Facebook reduced people's life satisfaction through the upward comparison of others and feelings of envy. A similar relationship was found between increased feelings of envy and decreased self-esteem and life-satisfaction by Cresti (2015). Feelings of envy in this case increased with spending more time on reading women's blogs per day. Sagioglou and Greitemeyer (2014) argue that increased Facebook usage can decrease a person's mood. It is explained that people make a "forecasting error" since they predict that they will feel better after Facebook use, when in reality it has the opposite effect. Another aspect that Heivadi and Khajeheian (2013) address is that consumers perceive that the content they share on social media may damage their prestige and image against others.

### **Brands as symbols**

Consumer culture and brands as symbols are not a new topic of conversation. For a long time researchers connected consumption with status signalling, wealth and identity. Veblen (1899) explained that conspicuous consumption through the purchase of luxury goods was used by the leisure class to show their social status. Levy (1959) also was early to state that consumers use brands as symbols to send messages to a recipient.

The connection between objects and individuals has been researched. Arnould and Thompson (2005) address the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption as "consumer culture theory", this to understand how consumers make meaning out the world through the use of brands as cultural symbols. McCracken (1986) describe goods as a way to materialize culture and contend that consumers are being involved in many levels regarding their possessions. In his theory he creates a

framework to explain how cultural meaning is transferred from the material world to the consumer. Belk (1988) explains that a person's possessions can work as an extension of self, both literally and symbolically. E.g. a person wearing a doctor's outfit would convey who this person is to its immediate surroundings. Belk (2013) studied this phenomenon in an online setting as well. Solomon (1986) contends that the importance of clothing is evident and may help individuals to define a sense of self; it may even function as a "second skin" when presenting ourselves to others. Belk et al. (1982) as well discusses the phenomena of decoding consumption and the interpretation of consumption. This seems to be an evident phenomenon in social media.

The importance of brands in individuals' life has been researched among others by Schachar et al. (2011) who showed that brands can work as a substitute for religion; this relationship is stronger when it comes to expressive brands as opposed to functional brands. One reason for this may be found in Aaker (1997) who described brands as having personality traits similar to humans' big-5 in psychology. As well, Fournier (1998) argued that consumers form humanlike relationships with brands to aid in living but also to give meaning to their lives.

This phenomenon has been approached and discussed in many areas. Han et al. (2010) argues that the use of conspicuous and inconspicuous branded luxury goods is used by members of different social groups to signal association and disassociation with social groups. Luxury goods also play a role in maintaining relationships. Wang and Griskevicius (2014) contend that conspicuous branded products are used among women to signal their mate's devotion to them to guard against other women. The use of subtle signals for signalling among groups with high cultural capital has been researched. Berger and Ward (2010) claim that the use of subtle signal becomes increasingly important with

identity-relevant products and when consumption is more public.

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) introduce the concept of brand communities and described it as a bound community which is not attached anywhere geographically, but instead bound on a set of social relations amongst admirers of the brand. Furthermore, Muniz and Schau (2007) researched how consumers of a brand community engaged in vigilante marketing through skilful creation of commercial relevant content for the brand.

Research concerning user-generated content is moving forward, Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014) claim that social media communication created by firms does not directly affect brand equity contrary to user-created communication. However in their research both firm-created and user-generated social media communication was found to affect consumers’ attitudes towards the brands. In general, Pornpitakpan (2004) argues that consumers seem to perceive information from other individuals as trustworthy and this effect is even stronger when the individual is high in similarity to the consumer. Because of this, user-generated communication in social media such as Instagram could be perceived as more trustworthy than similar communication from firms. McQuarrie et al. (2013) claims that Internet creates new means for ordinary non-institutional consumers to advertise towards a mass audience. This phenomenon refers to the megaphone effect that helps the sender to accumulate cultural, social and economic capital. Further research by Kretz and Valck (2010) claim that bloggers reversed the advertisement through staging brands to appeal to both brands and consumers compared to traditional advertising where consumers are staged to appeal to other consumers. Poch and Martin (2014) contend that extrinsic motivations (social and economic) results in more positive intentions to create user-generated content than intrinsic motivations (altruism). However, high

altruism consumers create to a higher extent positive user-generated content.

### **Identity and Self-presentation**

Identity and consumption are widely researched concepts. The idea of possessions part in identity creation and concept of self is not new. That we call ourselves the sum of our possessions and everything that one can call his was expressed by William James (1890). Fromm (1976) continues by summarizing the core essence of the importance of possessions in our lives by stating “If I am what I have and if what I have is lost, who then am I?” (1976, p. 76).

Sartre (1943) claimed that through observing what possessions we have is the only way we can know who we are and the only reason we want something is to enlarge ourselves. On this note Belk (1988) argued that our possessions mainly help us learn and remind ourselves about whom we are. This extension of our sense of self through our possessions is fundamental to understand modern consumption.

Self-representation is an important factor when it comes to identity. Goffman (1959) stated that in social interactions individuals will try to control the impression others make of them through changing or fixing his or her setting, appearance and manner. Kaplan and Heanlein (2010) claim that the objectives of this can be viewed as influencing others to gain rewards and is driven by a wish to create an image consistent with one’s identity. Tice et al. (1995) describe in their study that how one deal with self-presentation differs depending on if you know the person or not. They argue that when giving a first impression to a stranger it seems to be more important to give a positive self-representation compared to presenting yourself favourably to friend or family. In an online setting, Shau and Gilly (2003) describe that Internet creates new ways of conspicuous self-presentation with distant external observers. They detect that the difference between Internet use and earlier use of distant

identity-projecting is the ability to use visual, textual, audio and animated at the same time. This allows for individuals to present multiple selves simultaneously and allows for the associations to brands even when the financial means are lacking.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that individuals have a need to maintain existing bonds and a fundamental need of belongingness. Bannister and Hogg (2004) discuss the importance of belonging and how it manifests itself through the purchase of clothing. They claim that the two drivers behind are that either individuals want to make a statement and show who they are or they want to fit in and make sure they do not stand out for the wrong choice of clothing. Lee and Schum (2012) argue that being ignored or rejected can produce different social behaviour. Being ignored increases conspicuous consumption through threatening the need for a meaningful existence and produced more self-focused and attention-getting responses.

### Definitions

The person posting the pictures on Instagram is hereafter referred to as the poster.

The persons reviewing the poster's picture are referred to as the recipients.

Instagram identity refers to the identity an individual creates on Instagram.

## Towards an understanding of Virtual Identities

To adapt earlier research to the online reality we propose a three part model for understanding what we refer to as virtual identities or in this case Instagram identities. We suggest that a virtual identity can be evaluated compared to how it relate to other people, objects as well as the real self. Other people because it can be seen as the basis for understanding a social front. Objects since they are often a way for observers to draw conclusions of who the person is, we argue that this is also true in an online environment. Since we argue that the virtual identity is a form of social front, how it relates to the real

self or so called impression management will be the third part of this model.

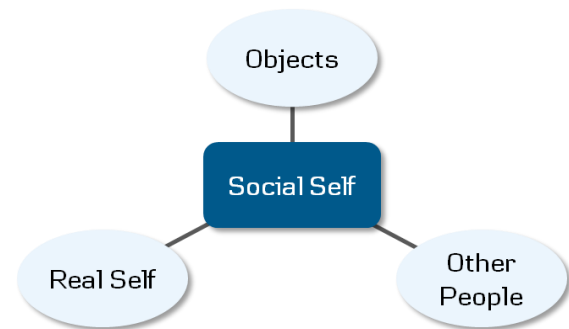


Figure 1. Model for understanding virtual identities

### Social self and Other people

Berger (1963) explained that all actions that an individual takes referring to the creation and definition of a person's self and whom that self is, is created in the interaction of others. Cultural meaning in objects and rituals could also be seen as shared among members of a group (Shibutani 1955). This study will be grounded in the socially created self, what Goffman (1959) refers to the front region. As we see it, without the audience that Goffman (1959) describes, the front person however would not even exist. The self exist, but the social front does not exist before there is an interaction with others (Charon 1995) and others are the mirror of the individual (Belk 1978). To apprehend an Instagram identity there must therefore be a reference group that can describe and interpret this social front. In this study the focus groups work as the reference group.

### Stereotyping

Douglas and Isherwood (1979) claims that it is the same thing to say that one possession will explain to others who we are as much as saying that one word from a poem can explain the whole meaning of the context of the poem. Despite this logical fallacy, scholars contend that our tendency to make inferences about others based on what they consume is one of the most universal cultural phenomena (Belk et al. 1982; Belk 1978). This can be described as the social interpretation of

consumption symbolism (Belk et al. 1982). It often includes drawing conclusions based on the usage of particular clothes, houses, cars etc. which contribute to other people interpreting these consumption patterns typically into different stereotypes and status categories (Belk et al. 1982). Also the features of the possession such as style, singularity and brand name are important, not only the possession itself (Belk 1978). All this contributes to how people think about the person in question which may lead to prejudicial stereotyping but also aid for consumers need for self-expression through consumption (Belk et al. 1982). Others may judge traits of the possessions from the person or traits of the person from the possessions, depending on which is known best (Belk 1978). Belk (1988) also claim that possessions enables people to be perceived in a way that otherwise would not be possible, as well as it allows for feedback from others that would not otherwise be given if the self was not extended by possessions.

## **Social self and objects**

### **Possession and Grooming Rituals**

McCracken (1986) explains how consumer rituals can be used to transfer cultural meaning from goods to individuals. Out of McCracken's four rituals we will look into the rituals of possession and grooming. When consumers obtain an object they do certain actions to make the object theirs. McCracken (1986) refers to this notion as possession rituals which include claiming ownership of a possession. Apart from claiming territorial ownership, the process also serves the function of helping the consumer draw cultural meanings from the object.

However it may also happen that the consumer fails to claim the symbolic properties even if she owns the object, owning without possessing it. (McCracken 1986) The core essence of Instagram is the notion of photographic moments, moments that often involve different consumption objects. The mere act of displaying and associating with these objects on Instagram

could be seen as a possession ritual. However Instagram also allow for consumers to easily associate with brands and objects even if it is not even theirs, possessing without owning it. As Pink (2012) contend, individuals may in an online environment lie about their real identity. Because of this and the Internet notion referred to as "trolling"<sup>1</sup>, there might be reasons to believe that the recipient of these messages not always perceive the claim of possessions on Instagram as believable.

In some cases the cultural meaning inherent in consumer goods has to be drawn out from the possessions on a repeated basis. The grooming ritual means that the consumers take certain actions to ensure that they can claim the meaningful properties connected to their best consumer goods. These actions may give the consumer new powers of for example confidence. In other cases the object itself has to be groomed to bring its inherent characteristics to life (McCracken 1986). On Instagram this ritual takes yet another form. When taking snapshots of ones' life, the photograph itself can be seen as the object receiving grooming attention. The attributes injected in the photograph through the grooming is thereafter used to communicate about the poster, passing on the attributes to her. Passing on one's identity through photos might not be a new phenomenon; selecting photos for an album could also be seen as selectively presenting oneself. However what is new is that this process of grooming, posting and getting feedback can be done as an ongoing history through the use of Instagram or other social networks.

### **Do brands "rub off"?**

When branding towards consumers, one key element of creating a brand image is the brand personality. It is often positioned according to human attributes such as excitement, competence, sincerity, sophistication and ruggedness (Aaker 1997). When consumers want to express their sense of self, it can be

<sup>1</sup> Trolling is in contemporary Internet slang described as the act of deceiving others about who you are or what your "real" characteristics and opinions are



appealing to use these personalities inherent in the brand. In Park and John (2010) work they test to what extent these inherent brand characteristics “rub off” or move on to the person who use it, in their own perception. They conclude that brand personalities “rub off” to a different extent depending on the consumer’s belief about identity creation (Park & John 2010). However as we see it, in a social context there is also a recipient that judges this individual’s characteristics and determine it to be believable or not. If a brand personality “rubs off” to the person who uses it, is this change in personality caught by the recipient. Instagram offer new ways to make associating with brands when a person takes snapshots of their every-day life. Ownership of the possession is not a necessity to make associations in a photo; a person could have borrowed it from someone else. Interesting is therefore to look at if the recipient of the message also transfer meanings of the brand personality to the poster.

### **Social self and Real self**

One way to understand how others interpret Instagram identities through pictures is by the dramaturgical approach where Goffmann (1959) study social interaction and impression management. Goffman observed that when individuals meet others they often wish to attain information of the other person. In order to interpret an individual Goffman use the terms front region and back region. When an individual, referred to as actor, performs to an audience (the society), he takes his role in front region, and the performance are evaluated by the observer. On the other hand, in back region there is no audience who can evaluate. The assessing components of the front region consist of the individual’s appearance and manner, as well as the setting where those meet to establish the situation (Goffmann 1959). The impression one individual gives can be managed with a certain appearance or manner and what kind of “front” the person tries to project. Instagram can be explained as the setting where the Instagram person (actor) performs. Appearance is the equipment from the

personal front that would help the recipients (audience) to interpret and understand the actor. Appearance in this case is mainly the consumption objects they bought and displayed on Instagram and the focus group is considered to be the audience.

## **Methodology**

To answer the research question and fulfill the aim, focus groups will be used to provide interpretation of online identities through Instagram pictures. Since identity is not created in vacuum but rather in a social context among the individual and the group (Berger 1963), focus groups is suitable to research this shared perception and cultural understanding of identity where the analysis is conducted at the level of the group and not at the individual level (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008; Wibeck 2010). A main drawback with focus groups is that the outcome of a focus group cannot be predetermined and the discussion develops in an unexpected way (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). With this in mind we prepared as much as possible with careful planning and a clear idea of what we wanted to research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008).

In contrast with group interviews, in focus groups the fundamental part is the interaction between participants concerning a specific topic (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). One advantage with using focus groups is that new ideas may emerge as a result of the discussion that may never have arisen in personal interviews (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). The role of the facilitator is less prominent in the focus group compared to the individual interview (Wibeck 2010).

### **Picture material**

To provoke a discussion stimulus material in the form of pictures and photographs from Instagram were used (Wibeck 2010; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). It should be selected with the purpose to evoke questions and discussion rather than present facts (Wibeck 2010) and should have the ability to profile a

diverse set of interpretations (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Also, photographic display is often used by individuals and groups to imply relationships and establish identities (Pink 2012). Instagram pictures could be seen as a form of photographic display and is therefore a relevant source of information about identity in today's digital world.

The choice of pictures was done following the brand Acne studios. Acne studios as a brand was selected because it was a suitable choice since it can be classified as an expressive brand that sells clothes and accessories with a price range in between luxury (e.g. Gucci) and generic (e.g. H&M). It is also known to most young Swedish female and was because of these reasons assumed to have relevant signalling value.

The researchers scanned the Instagram stream following the hashtag #Acnestudios independently at first to create an idea of what type of pictures that is often posted under the hashtag. In 24th of March 2015 there were over 131 000 pictures available under the

Acnestudios hashtag. 1000 pictures was scanned and categorized starting from the most recently posted pictures and going backwards chronologically. One selection criteria were that the post had to be user-generated; in this way we excluded posts commercial by nature such as those from companies or freelancing bloggers that aimed for selling something. Only pictures from female accounts were categorized to create a homogenous material and to fit the focus group composition. The results were thereafter compared and discussed to find similarities and differing patterns in the material. Four frequently occurring categories of pictures were found to represent some typical posts without claiming to be comprehensive:

Table 1. Description of selected pictures, (see appendix B for pictures)

<b>Selfie 1</b>	The motive is a girl sitting on a bus, the clothes and accessories are in focus. Picture taken from the posters own perspective, the person is wearing a grey Acne scarf with the Acne label visible.
<b>Selfie 2</b>	The photo is taken on the mirror reflection, portraying a girl standing in front of the mirror taking a picture of her wearing t-shirt, blazer, baggy jeans, ankleboots and a hat. The picture is taken in the bedroom which is slightly messy, with clothes thrown on the bed. No Acne label is visible.
<b>Display 1</b>	Here is a picture on a grey Acne scarf folded together and placed on a dark undefined background. The price tag is still left on the scarf and is clearly visible in the picture.
<b>Display 2</b>	The picture shows a pair of light grey Acne jeans with the price label still on. It is laying on the top of a white bed with a cat next to it.
<b>Unknown 1</b>	Here the motive is a zoomed in picture of the Acne label on an Acne garment. The garment is made of wool and is grey, it is unknown whether it is a knitted scarf, cardigan or something else. The label and the content of the label is in focus of the picture.
<b>Contextual 1</b>	In this picture there is a grey Acne scarf lying on a bench, together with a newspaper (the Times), a takeout coffee mug and a pair of sunglasses. The Acne label is slightly visible.
<b>Contextual 2</b>	Picture of white tulips, home decoration magazines and a cup of coffee on the top of a table. An Acne cardigan is visible in the bottom of the picture. The label is visible.

1. Selfies, pictures taken on the person wearing Acne clothes.
2. Display of possessions, pictures taken on an Acne product where it is visible what kind of product it is. The person is absent in the picture.
3. Unknown object, Acnes presence is apparent but the product is unknown. In this category it seems like the focus of the picture is the brand primarily.
4. Contextual, where Acne object is part of a context with objects differing from accessories and clothes. The person is absent in the picture.

In these four categories seven pictures were selected to represent each category to be used in the focus group discussion, see table 1.

To ensure confidentiality we removed names and other key features as well as distorted characteristics in the pictures that could reveal the true identity of the person posting it.

### Process and Data collection

Concerning the recruitment there were three qualification criteria, the participants should be female, between 20-29 years old and active users of Instagram. An active user of Instagram was defined as following at least 50 other users. This choice was made to ensure that they had been exposed to a large enough stream of Instagram posts so that they had a pre-understanding of the subject. The age group was based on the finding that this is the age range that predominantly figures on Instagram, as well as women are a more frequent Instagram user (.SE 2014).

Regarding recruitment of people gathered around a specific interest key informant or contact persons can be used, this is a form of convenience sampling (Wibeck 2010; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). All participants were Swedish citizens and residents of Gothenburg. In our case, we recruited participants who fitted the criteria through contact persons and created groups

which were internal homogenous (Wibeck 2010). One issue which will affect the answers is the choice of group in terms of if they are complete strangers or know each other (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). With the use of contact persons it could be ensured that all participants in one group knew each other to create a social climate closer to a real discussion environment among known people.

Two focus groups were conducted with 4 and 5 participants that are within the recommended range of 4-8 participants (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). They took 1h 45min and 1h 00 min to carry out respectively. To create the relaxed environment in a small and intimate room suitable for consumer groups (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008), the focus groups were conducted in one of the researcher's living room. Refreshment was offered as compensation (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008).

Table 2. Focus group participants (all names are fictional)

Name	Focus group	Age
Ebba	1	25
Michelle	1	27
Louise	1	29
Erica	1	27
Anna	2	22
Sara	2	22
Nadja	2	22
Jenny	2	22
Ida	2	21

The facilitator introduced the topic, let the participant introduce themselves and asked warm-up questions to start the discussion and make them feel relaxed (Wibeck 2010). The groups were shown 7 pictures and discussed one at a time. The order the pictures were brought out were as follows: selfies, display, unknown and contextual. The themes discussed were “the message”, “the receiver”, “the role of the brand”, “posters identity” and “the poster's identity in compliance with

brand values”, all derived from theories used in our model for understanding virtual identities (figure 1). The facilitator kept his role to a minimum to increase the reliability (Krueger 1993; Wibeck 2010) and instead promoted discussion among the participants and encouraged differing opinions (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008; Wibeck 2010). The facilitator was not a frequent Instagram user nor a friend to the participants; this to reduce the threat that he was too close to the subject and the participants therefore perceive him as already taking a particular standing (Krueger 1993). Unstructured focus groups were used to let the participants bring up their own ideas and ask questions among each other to provide new angles to the subject (Wibeck 2010). The same facilitator was used across all focus groups which also enhance reliability (Albrecht et al. 1993).

To deal with quiet participants, the facilitator encouraged them to speak by asking direct questions (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). Sensitive opinions may never arise in the focus groups (Wibeck 2010) however in this study only socially acceptable opinions are of interest. This because identity is considered to be something that is created in the interaction with others. What are researched are also only symbols and signs which are socially acceptable.

The focus groups were recorded using camera and voice memo to facilitate the transcription and analyse the interaction. One person was taking notes during the focus group, this to simplify the transcription process. The group discussions were transcribed from the video recording to easier see patterns in the spoken material. For ethical considerations the participants were given information of the purpose of the study and informed that they should not give away information of other participants (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). All participants were ensured confidentiality during the introduction and reinforced when needed (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008). For the presentation of the results the participants were given fictional names in the report. After

two focus groups were conducted with similar answers among them, a certain theoretical saturation was experienced by the researchers.

### **Analysis**

To make the analysis of the material as comprehensive as possible we categorized the information into different segments since the method of focus groups often generates a large amount of text in form of transcriptions (Knodel 1993). Through content analysis collected information was systematically categorized and coded. The codes used were derived from our theoretical framework. We read it through several times to detect as many possible tracks as possible (Knodel 1993). To increase the studies reliability, the researchers analysed the focus group material independently looking for patterns which was afterwards compared and discussed (Wibeck 2010). Validity in focus groups is ensured through transferability, the presentation of results in a way that allow for other researchers to evaluate the findings (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008).

From the material, patterns of how the participants interpreted the pictures were found. The themes we used in the analysis were derived from theories constituting our model for understanding virtual identities (figure 1). Those were: impression management, stereotyping, possession, grooming and brands ability to “rub off”. Quotations from the focus groups were used to illustrate the results and conduct the analysis.

## **Results**

### **Stereotyping**

One evident theme from the focus groups was stereotyping. This process of making far-reaching inferences about others based on a single picture and the objects displayed (Belk et al. 1982) was present in the discussion. Often the participants could paint a very specific picture of what type the person was based often on the composition, brand and objects in the picture. In some cases the

stereotype of the picture evolved as a mutual construct during the group discussion, ending with a conclusion of a specific stereotype. One example of this mutual construction came up during the discussion of Display 2. The participants reached a fairly similar description of the poster as someone who works on a PR- or advertising bureau, maybe as an art director. She was perceived as being around 30 years old and has a more mature account. She knows what she likes and usually posts graphical pictures, drinks a lot of coffee and lives at St. Eriksplan in Stockholm where all the well-aware people lives.

In some cases the stereotype described was mainly coming from one person in a focus group, for example during the discussion of Contextual 1. The participants in general had many thoughts of who this Instagram person was. Word such as status, career, luxury, travelling and carpe diem was frequently mentioned. However Michelle (F1) could in specific illustrate what stereotype she perceived this person as: *“I believe status is very important to this person, she wants to detect a good sense of living. If you think of the typical finance girl at Handels. I mean she want to show that she has a good life. Wakes up 5 am every morning to fix hair and makeup before the 8 am class.”* This can be connected to what Belk et al. (1982) refer to as social interpretation of consumption symbolism. By only taking the different consumption objects in the picture (Acne scarf, takeout coffee mug, sunglasses, The Times newspaper) into consideration, she formed a hypothetical description in her mind of who this person was. Interesting is that even if the poster herself was absent in the picture, the recipient could still draw far-fetched conclusions about who she thought this person was.

In other cases, there were very different opinions on what stereotype the poster would fit into. The participants had very different perceptions and argued about who the poster of Unknown 1 was. Louise (F1) said: *“She is young, wants to become an artist and enters*

*that role. I think that she wants to sit and drink red wine while she’s listening to some weird underground music”.* Ebba (F1) did not agree on this description and immediately responded: *“I don’t think she’s artistic at all. I think she’s a hillbilly living in northern part of Sweden somewhere, who orders online and has no overall sense of style, who only orders random pieces of clothes”.* To further add a third stereotype Michelle (F1) felt the urge to enter the discussion with her perception: *“But then I could turn it around and say that she’s a fashion slave. Like now it’s trendy with an Aqualimone sweater so she has to have it. That’s a fashion slave”.* Specific for Unknown 1 could be that it contained few objects or clues that had clear cultural signal value for the recipients. Therefore it might have opened up for a more diverse set of social interpretations compared to the other pictures which provided more apparent signals or a clear context.

### Possessions rituals

Posting pictures of one's objects on Instagram can be connected to McCrackens (1986) possession rituals. The act of posting the scarf in Display 1 on Instagram was perceived as a calculated move by the recipients. Erica (F1) said that the poster would not have done it if it was a hairbrush for example, meaning that the poster would find it more important to make associations and thus claim ownership to some objects compared to others. Most participants perceived that the scarf in Display 1 was indeed belonging to the poster, and therefore the recipients perceived it as she was successful in claiming territorial ownership. Interesting is that this idea seems to be apparent also in a virtual context, claiming ownership was perceived to work although the environment is intangible.

Another way of claiming ownership that was present in the material was the notion of adding personal objects to the picture. Objects that are already strongly connected to the poster might subtly suggest that the new object now also is the poster's possession. Ebba (F1) concluded that they

put emphasize on the cat in Display 2, she said: *“Maybe she wants to say like, even my cat loves Acne. She tries to connect them in a way”*. This can be explained as a possession ritual meaning that adding the cat makes the jeans more her’s since the cat is hers.

Another extension of the possession ritual was when the object transcendent some of the brand values to the poster. Michelle (F1) mentioned that when the poster in Selfie 1 was wearing the Acne scarf she perceived her in a particular way: *“I perceive her as minimalistic, chic and trendy, however if it were another scarf/brand I would probably have answered a little bit different”*. This might indicate that the brand’s identity described as minimalistic and fashionable, helped the participant to form her opinion about the person. This can be an example of claiming qualities, that Acnes qualities are transferred to the person, meaning that the symbolism of owning an Acne scarf was transcended in the participants’ identity perception.

In line with this the participants brought up in both focus groups that because they saw that it was an Acne product they directly thought that it has good quality and is stylish. They mentioned that in these cases they therefore tend to think that the rest of the clothes and products in the picture also are stylish and of good quality. Louise (F1) exemplified this by saying: *“Because I see that she has an Acne scarf I just automatically think that the jeans are from Acne too”*.

The failure of claiming the symbolic properties of Acne was discussed during several occasions in both focus groups. The participants discussed the fact that in certain cases it did not seem as the person were consistent with the band image of Acne. A frequent response was that the participants did not see the identity as correlating with the values of Acne; even apparent scepticism took form in some cases. Sara (F2) mentioned in one case: *“Yes she owns a product from Acne but I do not see her as an Acne person”*.

Worth therefore could be that the participant seems to have a clear image of who could or could not claim the symbolic properties.

Contrary to this, the focus group were hesitant whether the posters actually owned the product they made associations with on Instagram. McCracken (1986) contend that consumers sometimes own without possessing, in the focus groups we also found material that flipped the concept into possessing without owning. The participants discussed whether the poster tried to claim the symbolic properties of the Acne brand, but they did not always find it believable that the poster actually owned it. In an Internet world it might be much easier to claim symbolic ownership of a brand than in the real world but may at the same time raise more questions from the recipients.

### **Grooming rituals**

Instagram is a way to perpetuate the temporary and to show who you are but in a more “fixed” way. One often discussed theme was to what degree the pictures was consciously photographed, internally structured and selectively chosen. This could be a type of grooming ritual (McCracken 1986) to ensure that they can claim the meaningful properties connected to their best consumer goods. One example of this was brought up by Jenny (F2) considering Unknown 1: *“No I really don’t think it (Acne scarf) was just laying there. That she just took that one picture. No, she has taken at least 50 pictures to get that one; she has even put a vignette on the photo. It must have taken a really long time.”* Anna (F2) discussed the same phenomenon concerning Selfie 1: *“She choose to include those details she wants to emphasize in the picture, those that she thinks looks good”*

Actions such as adding nice interior decoration, flowers and coffee may give the poster more confidence (McCracken 1986). The respondents discussed the fact that the poster was perceived with many positive attributes thanks to the many objects, which

all represented positive things for the recipients. It is clear that the respondents are influenced by the groomed picture when trying to interpret the posters Instagram identity. Erica (F1) mentioned concerning Contextual 2 *“All the things in the photo helps me put together a picture of who she is, the tulips, the magazines, the coffee in the fancy cup.”* This quote explains that from the final product of the posters grooming ritual the respondent has formed a perception of who this person is.

A specific case was found regarding Unknown 1 where the participants perceived the picture as being a sole expression of artistry. In this case they perceived the brand as having no specific role in the picture. Michelle (F1) summarized it as: *“I think that if she had another brand she would have posted a similar picture but with that brand. Right now it’s Acne she’s photographing but it could actually be any brand”*. In this case it seems to be that grooming the photo was the overall purpose and that grooming ritual was used to convey identity, the characteristics of the brand were not used as a part of this grooming as in other cases.

Another grooming ritual that was discussed was that the participants perceived it as many persons were choosing their best consumer goods to put on their Instagram account. Ida (F2) mentioned concerning Display 1: *“If she would have bought a H&M scarf instead I do not think she would have posted it on Instagram”*. Anna (F2) continued: *“Yeah, it is more people that want to see that than an H&M scarf”*. This indicates that even if the recipients perceived the poster as having groomed the picture they did not mind. They even described it as a socially acceptable way of presenting an interesting garment.

One specific case of grooming was shown during the discussion of Display 2. One participant concluded: (Louise, F1): *“Her point is to show the brand since it is so apparent. But because there is a cat in the picture maybe she felt something like “it can’t*

*just post a picture on my new jeans”*. *It feels a bit geeky and boring and something like “god now I’m going to flash that I bought a new pair of jeans”*. *But if I add the cat then...”*. As concluded earlier the poster was perceived to use the cat as a possession ritual. However they also perceived the poster as using the cat to make the display of the Acne jeans more socially acceptable by making it a part of a grooming ritual.

#### **“Rub off “**

Consumers may feel like and perceive themselves as more in line with Acnes brand personality when using one of their products (Park & John 2010). The question is to what extent a brand and its brand personality may “rub off” on the person using it according to the recipients. This was a subject of conversation that kept coming up during the focus groups, Acnes brand personality’s effect on the perception of the person. Louise (F1) noted concerning Contextual 1: *“I think this demonstrates a particular lifestyle where Acne is a part of the lifestyle”*. Erica (F1) then filled in: *“She wants to convey the Nordic and simple style”*. Since Acne was described as Nordic, minimalistic, fashionable, stylish and well-aware it looks very much as the presence of the Acne product did affect the participant’s formation of the posters Instagram identity.

If other attributes in the picture were consistent with the Acne profile then the participants could see the connection between the Instagram-identity and brand personality clearer. Nadja (F2) concluded concerning Selfie 2: *“This person feels more representative for the brand”* and Jenny (F2) said: *“This one is really an Acne person”*. Other participants explained why this was (Anna, F2): *“It feels like she is conscious about her style but she has a niched style. She is more certain in her style compared to the earlier person”* as well as the explanation by Jenny (F2): *“In that case (Selfie 1) it didn’t feel like it fit her. This one is more thought behind the clothes, everything fits in a way”*. In this example the participants could see a

connection between the brand personality and the person posting the picture. This would show that the “rubbed off” brand personality also could be perceived by the recipient which might be derived from Park and John (2010).

Contrary to this discussion about cases when the participants thought the person were in line with Acne brand personality, there were also a recurring discussion concerning when they perceive the use of the brand as not believable. This can as well be connected to what McCracken (1986) say about possession rituals, sometimes the consumer fails to make it hers even if she owns it. In some cases the focus groups thought that the person posting the picture wanted to be an “Acne person” but she actually was not. Concerning Contextual 2, Ebba (F1) said: *“The Acne cardigan says she has style, but three years ago, she had an Odd Molly jacket in the picture when shabby chick was trendy.”*

In most cases the brand personality was perceived the same way in the pictures. However, this did not always apply to the identity-perception of the poster. Meaning that even if the brand was positively described the posters Instagram identity could be described as not a match to the brand. Some examples were concerning Display 1 where the person were perceived as lacking money and had saved for a long time to afford a product from Acne, hence not belonging to the “Acne-people”. Jenny (F2) stated: *“With this picture she really wants to show that she can afford an Acne scarf. I don’t think she feels like a real Acne person, not the type I think about.”* Anna (F2) further added to this discussion by filling in: *“Because Acne persons feels like they want to be cool, to care about brands is not cool. One should just have a good-looking scarf, not care about it. I think she feels like a person whom thinks it’s important to show her branded clothes”*. This inclines that the brand characteristics in this case seems to be untouchable, and is not necessarily influenced by its user. However the poster could be both positively or negatively perceived by the usage of the

brand, due to if they were considered believable or not.

### Impression management

Impression management is one theme that was discussed when interpreting the posters identity. Not all pictures were described as having the same mission or reaching the same audience. One example of this discussion could look like following: Louise (F1) on Selfie 1: *“I think it is a special type of girls that likes this picture, I think those who are searching for Acne jeans. I mean she has a style that she thinks is nice. Then she adds the hashtags to reach all those that have the similar style and want them to like her photo. I think that she thinks that they will “like” her photo”*. Ebba (F1) filled in: *“And a “like” from her standpoint is more worth if it comes from someone with similar style”*. Here the respondents made a connection that the Instagram identity was performing in some sort of way towards her Instagram followers. Furthermore, about Selfie 2 Ebba (F1) says: *“She dresses up for other people and each day had perhaps not been as stylish if it was not for Instagram”* Erica (F1) adds *“I agree”*. Ebba (F1) continues *“Otherwise there is nothing that pushes her to dress up so it simply becomes like an audience”*. This can be connected to Goffmann’s (1959) dramaturgical analysis where the poster’s account is used as a stage where the actor performs, by dressing up. In this case with the help of the appearance of a fashion outfit. The idea is that they perceived the poster as performing through dressing up particularly nice only because of her audience on Instagram, could be described as a performance in the front region. It was clear that the participants thought that the poster in some cases would not have given the same amount of effort if she did not have an Instagram account, hence in what Goffman (1959) would describe as the back region.

In both focus groups the discussion about the poster’s real self versus social self was a pervading subject. Every participant did aim at some point during the discussion that the



poster was acting or was trying to enhance or project a certain image that was not coherent with the real person. Meaning that the way the Instagram identity is portrayed is composed and performed to shape a certain opinion amongst the audience. And the participants claim that this performance on Instagram is just an act to make people think the poster is a person with for example high status. We refer again to what Michelle (F1) said concerning Contextual 1: *“I believe status is very important to this person, she wants to detect a good sense of living. If you think of the typical finance girl at Handels. I mean she want to show that she has a good life. Wakes up 5 am every morning to fix hair and makeup before the 8 am class.”* The respondent mention that the person “wants to” instead of that the person “is”, this might lean towards an assumption that the person is “role playing”. It seems like the respondents are well aware that there is difference between the posters front region (social self) compared to her back region (real self).

Another scenario regarding identity perception from a dramaturgical perspective came up during the discussing of Contextual 2, Michelle (F1) stated: *“Here is the interior decorating girl, like eeh, a girl who writes “ohh morning coffee”. She wants it to always be nice and clean at home. But, this might as well be a girl who works at a supermarket; this can for example be my cousin.”* She continued with saying: *“This could be anyone really, no career person though. She is not single and I think she has just bought a Volvo.”* Louise (F1) filled in: *“Yes I think she want to show all of her childhood friends how well off she is by posting such picture, it does not mean she actually has it that good”*. The discussion evolved later into a discussion of who the person really was. This reasoning could also be explained by front region/back region, meaning that Instagram is the setting where the poster act in the front region, but this is just an act. The poster’s “real” person is therefore not the same in the back region. The respondents argued that the poster tries to

give an image of her that is refined compared to her real self.

## Discussion

This study covers a broad spectrum of theories when creating a model for virtual identities. Because of this we can see that our research can contribute with small pieces to several fields of study. Contributions are made concerning: content shared on social media, stereotypes based on pictures as an extension of self, social media as a way to possess without owning, groomed pictures as marketing communication in everyday snapshots, social media as a way to present a social front and the believability of brands ability to “rub off”.

Previous research concerning social media have to a high extent looked at a general level in what way the user is emotionally affected by it (Gonzalez & Hancock 2011; Chou & Edge 2012; Wilcox & Stephen 2013; Krasnova et al. 2013; Cresti 2015), as well as financial impact for companies (Barnes 2014). The present study builds further on this research by providing more specific content analysis in a similar way as McQuarrie et al. (2014) did on Pinterest, but on the platform Instagram. We provide a framework to understand the user-generated content of the phenomenon of identity perception in online settings. Since there is an evident ongoing consumer culture on Instagram, it seems relevant to address the qualitative aspects of this content. The use of the three different entry angles to this phenomenon enables to display how this perception formation can be interpreted.

Earlier has been discussed the extensions of the self through objects (Belk 1988) and clothing (Solomon 1986) as well in recent year in an online setting (Belk 2013). We have adopted this thinking and brought it into Instagram, where explicitly pictures are considered. The takeaway from this is that the recipients formed identity perceptions not only from objects (Belk 1988) but also from

pictures the posters created themselves. This further adds to Solomon (1986), but instead of clothing the picture works as a “second skin” when presenting the posters Instagram identity. The tendency for the recipients to make specific stereotypes based on the pictures were prominent in the study and further adds to Belk’s (1978) work by putting it in an online context.

From this research it can also be argued that in a virtual world an Internet person can be connected to a brand with little effort. This is in line with what Schau and Gilly (2003) addressed in their research. In this research, by hashtagging and emphasizing the brand in the picture the recipients did in many cases connect the characteristics of the Instagram identity as in line with what Acne studios brand personality stands for. The takeaway from this is that the recipient can connect themselves to other elements than the physical object, when associating with brands. Furthermore, McCracken (1986) contend that sometimes the individual fails to claim the symbolic properties through owning without possessing. We argue that an extension of this can be found by flipping the concepts, sometimes the poster is perceived to be possessing without owning. The poster may create associations with branded goods and thus creating an extension of the self but the object may not even be hers. The recipient may be hesitant about the truth in this connection but they cannot be sure whether the object is actually borrowed, thus the poster is successful to some extent in possessing the object and creating an extension of the self.

The idea that consumers make arranged associations with branded goods through what McCracken (1986) referred to as grooming rituals is extended in this study. The finding that the act of selectively choosing what to present in the picture in association with the brand, could be seen as a subtle version of what Muniz and Schau (2007) refer to as vigilante marketing. We argue that even if it is not conscious from the posters perspective

it is still a version of user-generated marketing, which in some cases but not in others are relevant for the brand personality. The finding further adds to Muniz and Schau (2007) since it broadens the concept what to be considered vigilante marketing; it does not have to be a consciously created communication in the form of an ad, it is so much more on a subtle level. This also further add to McQuarrie et al. (2013), this megaphone effect they refer to is also applicable to this type of grooming type of user-generated marketing communication through giving ordinary people the means to communicate towards a mass audience. The main difference is that in both Muniz and Schau (2007) and McQuarrie et al. (2013) studies they look at material that was created explicit as ads or as a part of blog, but we argue that these processes also goes on in everyday snapshots such as those of Instagram.

From this study we may draw the conclusion that Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analogy seems highly relevant even in a digital world. It may even be that it is more relevant than ever before, since the Internet allows for a higher degree of tweaking the appearance in the front stage. In a real world situation, one is always bound to their physical body and its limitations. One may therefore only change appearance to some extent but in an online context the possibility of creating an optimal identity is almost endless with sophisticated means of manipulating both text and pictures. However as shown in this study, the beholder of these online identities may also show scepticism towards the authenticity of this online personality.

This study also addresses the importance of brand personality and whether or not it “rubs off” on the person using it (Park & John 2010). This study addresses this phenomenon and has expanded the question further. The key difference in this research is that the focus is not on if the user of the brand perceive oneself as more in line with the brand after usage, but instead the recipients

perception is researched. A main finding was that the recipient experience that the brand personality indeed “rub off” characteristics on its user to some extent. As well it seemed as the brands characteristics did not change notably depending on who the user was. In a way, the Acne brand was perceived as “untouchable” by the recipients. However concerning the poster, what seems to be important was if the association with the brand was believable or not and if it was consistent with the brand personality. This also further adds to Shau and Gilly (2003) idea that the Internet create new means for distant self-presentation by adding that this projection of personality is not always believed by the recipients.

### **Managerial Implications**

The phenomenon of communicating and interpreting identities has taken a new form on social media. In order for companies to develop the next social media strategy it is important to also look at user-generated parts of the brand-personality. User-generated content in social media contributes with something that companies cannot do on their own and is often perceived as more genuine and trustworthy. We see that companies can draw benefits from user-generated content on social media since it creates brand awareness, which hopefully result in higher top-of-mind awareness. One recommendation is to encourage consumers to use their brand when communicating on their personal social media accounts. Positive incentives such as goodwill or other gains could be used to encourage this behaviour.

Consumers run the user-generated process by themselves without obvious incentives. From this study we argue that with strong brand personalities such as Acne Studios, the creation of user-generated content involving the brand on personal social media accounts did not change the image of the brand in a general sense. The brand could be seen as working as a cultural signifier since the recipients retained the same opinion about the brand and who were and who was not an

“Acne person”. What changed however were the perception of the poster, who was found in some cases to be hurt by the usage. This also means that managers may not be too afraid about consumers using their brands in the “wrong” way. If a brand has a clear brand personality, it may even be strengthened by “wrong” people using it since it allows to make a benchmark about who is clearly not a person that uses that brand. We therefore stress that it is of higher priority for companies to have a strong brand personality, rather than control who should not use it. People will use brands whether companies like it or not. The objective for companies should therefore be to create something that consumers want to do something with, hence create a strong brand personality. This with the intention to help as many consumers as possible to find a reason to use the brand when communicating in social media.

However many companies might face the situation that they yet do not have such a strong brand. A finding from this study was that in the picture which was solely focused on the Acne brand, there were a diverse set of interpretations. Therefore we see a tendency that when a brand appears in context where there is not clear cultural signifiers, the consumer might have a hard time to draw conclusion about what this brand stands for. We can give the recommendation that when a company develops their brand personality, they could include objects in the picture that has a cultural signalling value that is in line with their wanted brand personality. These cultural signifiers should be adapted to the culture it is used in since different objects have different cultural value in different cultures.

### **Limitations**

In our research we limit ourselves to only the age group 20-29, older or younger individuals may have differing opinions. Male recipients might differ from female in perception of Instagram identity. Pictures posted by male accounts might also yield different responses. Hence, in our study we can only express an

opinion from the female perception about other female. All the respondents were Swedes and residents in Gothenburg, the results can therefore not claim to be representative for all Instagram users.

We have excluded users own texts under the pictures as well as additional information such as hashtags, likes and comments. However in real life all elements are included and this might affect the respondent's answers. Hence in this study the main focus is visual culture. We argue therefore that the other aspects of the post could have deviated the discussion from this focus.

Due to technical reasons only pictures from open Instagram accounts could be evaluated, if closed accounts were included this could yield other results. However, this is a limitation most online researchers' face.

To provoke questions and discussions with stimulus material we made a strategic selection of pictures among the categories. It might be that this could have an impact the results if different pictures were used. However decision making is also something all researchers face.

### **Future research**

To further add to the discovered research gap, future studies could look at other demographical areas when it comes to the respondents. This involves looking at different age groups as well as both male recipients and posters but also comparing different groups among each other. Also other nationalities and countries could be researched to find cultural differences in Instagram perception.

In this research only the pictures is included in the discussion. However when individuals check their Instagram they see all elements outlined in limitations above and a future study could be to research how all those aspects influence.

This study is conducted on Instagram; however there are multiple of social media platforms that are relevant for virtual identities such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Flickr among others. Future research could be concerning other social platform but also comparing platforms among each other.

As one part of the model used for analysis was Goffman's dramaturgical analogy the difference between real and social self were discussed. However one recurring aspect related to the believability of the poster was authenticity. Since social media allows for multiple ways of self-presentation this seems highly relevant and a future study could dig deeper into how respondents perceive aspects of authenticity on social media.

## **Conclusions**

This study's aim was to provide a description of how significant others interpret and comprehend female Instagram identities that is signalling with expressive brand consumption. This research has shown how the three parts of the model for understanding virtual identities can be used to understand how branded possessions are used in interpretation of identity in social media. Other people are prominent in the act of stereotyping on the basis of not only objects but also the composition and overall impression of the picture. The importance of the social self and relation to the real self is pervading when understanding all types of identity constructions. Also objects were found to work as a basis for understanding how recipients comprehend how posters use grooming of pictures and claiming possessions without necessarily owning them. Lastly the believability of the connection between the brand personality and the poster was important for determining characteristics of the social self by the recipients.

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## Appendix

### A. Interview guide

#### Introduction:

- Presentation of the participants, the subject and focus groups
- Ensure confidentiality and anonymity
- Encourage differing opinions, no answers are more wrong than anything else
- Encourage discussion among them rather than answering the facilitator
- Mention that all photos are taken from "private accounts", female accounts and that no commercial images occur.
- Mention that there are also related comments but they were removed

#### Warm-up questions:

- What are you doing on Instagram?
- What are you looking at?
- What are you searching for?
- It there something in particular that catch your attention?

#### Main questions:

1. What is the message of this picture?
2. Who is the recipient? Who do they want to address?
3. How big is the role of Acne in this picture?
4. How do you perceive this person? Who is it?
5. How well do you think this person is in line with Acnes brand?

#### Ending questions:

- Is there something you want to add?
- Do you have any general reflections?
- Thank the participants for their participation and contributions

## B. Pictures

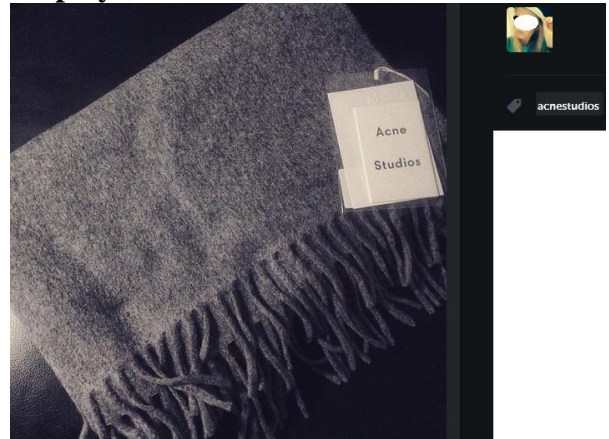
Selfie 1



Selfie 2

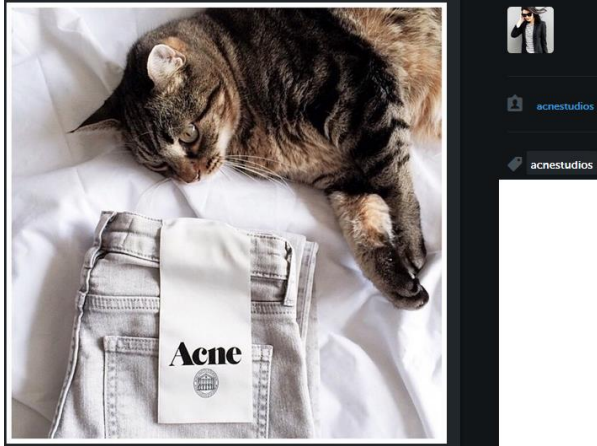


Display 1

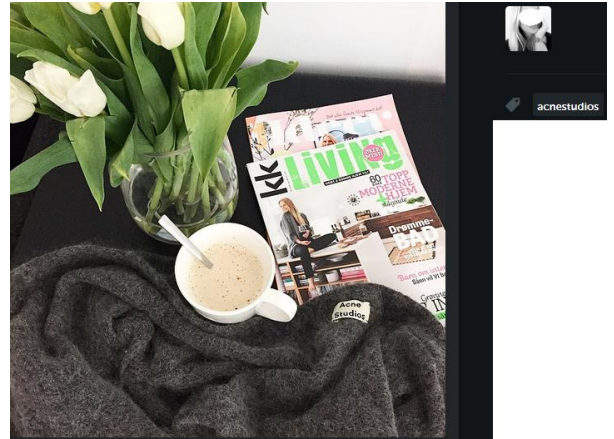




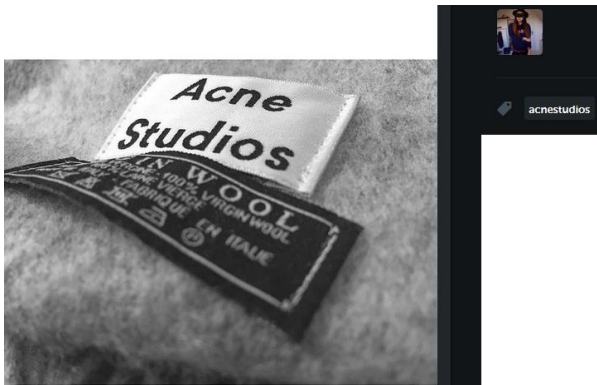
Display 2



Contextual 2



Unknown 1



Contextual 1

