



Personal Branding in Tattoo Industry

How to Stand Out from the Competition

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Tässä opinnäytetyössä tarkasteltiin tatuointiartistien henkilöbrändäystä Suomessa. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli selvittää, miten tatuointiartisti voi rakentaa henkilöbrändiään ja millaisia strategioita artistit hyödyntävät sen vahvistamisessa. Lisäksi työssä tutkittiin digitaalisten kanavien ja asiakaskokemuksen vaikutusta brändin muodostumiseen. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli myös perustella henkilöbrändäyksen merkitys ja tarjota konkreettisia keinoja artisteille brändinsä kehittämiseen. Henkilöbrändäys on keskeinen osa nykypäivän luovien alojen liiketoimintaa ja tatuointialan kilpailua, sillä artistin maine ja näkyvyys vaikuttavat suoraan asiakashankintaan ja -pysyvyyteen, liiketoiminnan menestykseen ja uran kestävyYTEEN.

Opinnäytetyön teoriaosuudessa käsiteltiin brändin ja henkilöbrändäyksen käsitteitä, tatuointiartistin brändäystä sekä sosiaalisen median ja autenttisuuden roolia henkilöbrändissä. Teoriaosuudessa hyödynnettiin aiempaa tutkimusta muiden alojen henkilöbrändäyksestä ja sovellettiin sitä tatuointialaan, sillä tatuointialan henkilöbrändäyksestä on olemassa tutkimuksellinen aukko. Tutkimusmenetelmänä käytettiin laadullisia haastatteluita, joissa haastateltiin täysipäiväisiä tatuointiartisteja, joilla on kokemusta ja käsitystä henkilöbrändäyksestä.

Tutkimustulokset osoittivat, että vahva henkilöbrändi rakentuu aitoudesta, omien rajojen tunnistamisesta ja sosiaalisen median strategisesta hyödyntämisestä. Nämä tekijät esimerkiksi lisäävät asiakkaiden luottamusta artistiin, kasvattavat kysyntää ja tukevat kestäväää uraa. Lisäksi tutkimus tarjosi erilaisia lähestymistapoja henkilöbrändäykseen, jotka mahdollistavat artistin persoonaan ja tavoitteisiin sopivan brändin rakentamisen.

Johtopäätöksenä voidaan todeta, että jokaisella tatuointiartistilla on henkilöbrändi, ja uran kannalta on merkityksellistä pyrkiä sen vahvistamiseen. Menestyksekkäs henkilöbrändi on tunnistettava, mieleenpainuva ja aito – se ei pyri miellyttämään kaikkia, vaan puhuttelee artistin kohderyhmää.

Avainsanat tatuointiartisti, henkilöbrändäys, henkilöbrändi, tatuointi, asiakaskokemus, sosiaalinen media, taide, yrittäjä

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This thesis examines the personal branding of tattoo artists in Finland. The aim of the study was to explore how tattoo artists can build their personal brand and what strategies they use in brand strengthening. Additionally, the study investigated the impact of digital channels and customer experience on brand formation. The purpose of this research was also to justify the importance of personal branding and provide concrete methods for artists to develop their brand. Personal branding is an important aspect of today's creative industries and the competitive tattoo industry, as an artist's reputation and visibility directly influence customer acquisition and retention, business success, and career sustainability.

The theoretical section of the thesis discusses the concepts of branding and personal branding, the branding of tattoo artists, and the role of social media and authenticity in personal branding. Previous research on personal branding in other industries was utilized and applied to the tattoo industry, as there is a research gap in this specific field. A qualitative research method was used, consisting of semi-structured interviews with full-time tattoo artists who have experience and an understanding of personal branding. The interviews aimed to provide in-depth insights into the ways tattoo artists build and grow their brand, as well as the challenges they face in the process.

The results indicated that a strong personal brand is built on authenticity, self-awareness, and strategic use of social media. These factors enhance customer trust, increase demand, and contribute to a sustainable career. The study also introduced various approaches to personal branding, allowing artists to develop a brand that aligns with their personality and goals.

The findings suggest that every tattoo artist has a personal brand, and strengthening it is essential for career development. A successful personal brand is recognizable, memorable, and authentic—it does not aim to appeal to everyone but is targeted at the artist's ideal audience. By focusing on their brand, artists can attract their dream clients and enhance their industry presence.

Keywords tattoo artist, personal branding, self-brand, tattoo, customer experience, social media, art, entrepreneur

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1 Introduction

Personal branding has become increasingly important in creative industries where professionals rely on their unique identity and reputation to attract clients. (Kucharska & Mikołajczak, 2018, p. 255) Personal Branding is a process, where an individual builds and is in control of their professional image, to stand out from the competition and to increase their value in the market. (Montoya & Vandehey, 2002, p.5)

The tattoo industry is a particularly interesting case, as it combines art, craftsmanship, permanency and customer service in a way that differs from other creative fields. Unlike many other art forms, tattooing is both a service and a physical product. Clients are not only purchasing a tattoo but also the artist's expertise, designing process, and overall customer experience. (Steckdaub-Muller, 2018, p. 51) This makes tattooing a unique profession that cannot be directly compared to traditional product or service industries. A tattoo is permanent, making the decision to get one more complex and emotionally charged. The artist's reputation and the personal connection with them play an important role in customers' decisions, as trust and alignment with the artist's style and vision are essential in such a lasting commitment. (Gustavo Morello SJ & Paula, 2024, p. 7)

There is a lack of academic research on personal branding specifically within the tattoo industry, so existing studies on personal branding in creative industries, small businesses, and leadership have been used as a foundation for this study. These fields share similarities with the tattoo industry in terms of personal reputation, client relationships, and brand differentiation. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how tattoo artists can build and strengthen their personal brands.

1.1 Background and Context

Personal branding is an essential aspect of the creative industries, including the tattoo business. In tattoo industry, artists rely on their reputation and style; hence a strong personal brand can differentiate an artist from competitors and attract desired clientele. (Kucharska & Mikołajczak, 2018, p. 253) With the rise of social media, personal branding has become more accessible but at the same time increasingly competitive, making it difficult for tattoo artists to understand how to position themselves in the market. (Rangarajan, 2017, p. 659)

One factor influencing the personal brand of tattoo artist is the customer journey, defined as the process of getting a tattoo involves multiple stages, from the initial inspiration and research, to booking an appointment, getting the tattoo to aftercare and possible check-up. Customers often choose an artist based on their online presence, portfolio, reputation and location and pricing. (Vela, 2025) Personal branding helps tattoo artists shape how they are perceived and familiarize themselves with potential clients. This can increase sales, as clients who are familiar with an artist's brand are more likely to form personal connections, making it easier to schedule appointments and commit to getting a tattoo. (Venciute et al., 2023, p. 49) While personal branding alone doesn't guarantee high sales, when executed successfully, it can certainly contribute to the artist's overall success. (Post, 2005, p. 56)

The interviewees for this study are full-time tattoo artists from Finland and this study reflects the context of Finnish culture, competitive dynamics and industry standards. Therefore, the findings and insights gathered from interviews may not be fully applicable to the global market, as cultural differences, local competition, and industry practices and regulations vary across countries. However, the author believes that the insights gained from this study could still be valuable, particularly in Finland but also other Nordic countries, as Nordic countries share similar cultural and industry dynamics.

1.2 Research Question and Goals

The research question of this thesis is "How can a tattoo artist build their personal brand in the tattoo industry?". This study explores the strategies Finnish tattoo artists use to create and develop their personal brands. The goal is to identify key elements and provide recommendations for tattoo artists seeking to strengthen their branding. While personal branding has been well researched in many other industries, the tattoo field remains underexplored, at least in academic research. This research aims to fill this gap by investigating the branding strategies of tattoo artists in Finland.

1.3 Purpose and Structure

The author has worked as an entrepreneur for eight years and as a tattoo artist for two years. This experience has shown that finding the suitable clientele and trying to serve the needs and demands of all reachable clients can be overwhelming for an entrepreneur. In

Finland, the tattoo industry has experienced significant growth in recent years. As a result, the tattoo market has become more competitive, and personal branding plays an important role in helping artists stand out. Additionally, the industry's high liquidity presents a challenge—many artists enter the field quickly but struggle to sustain their business in the long term. This highlights the importance of branding, which according to Kucharska and Mikołajczak (2018, p. 251) helps artists establish a strong, recognizable presence that advances the professional career.

This thesis aims to establish the importance of personal branding for tattoo artists, providing concrete advice and strategies with the tools and resources available. As a result, the reader can expect to learn the guidelines of personal branding in the tattoo industry.

This study is divided into six chapters, each chapter covers different parts of the research. In the beginning the introduction provides information of the background, the research question, and purpose and structure of the study. The introduction explains why personal branding is important in the tattoo industry, briefly presenting the competition and changes in the field. It presents the research question and goals, clarifying what the study aims to achieve. The chapter outlines what the reader can expect and highlights the practical benefits of the research.

Chapter two covers the theoretical background, starting with the definition of personal branding and its importance, outlines the connections to the tattoo industry and how it might influence artists' careers. This chapter also introduces different strategies that tattoo artists can use to build and strengthen their personal brand. Chapter three explains the research methodology, familiarizing the reader with the chosen approach, data collection, and analysis methods. The goal is to justify these choices and ensure the study's reliability and validity. Chapter four presents the findings, organizing the collected data to highlight key insights. Chapter five analyses the results, comparing them to the theoretical framework and discussing how they align with or differ from previous research. Based on this analysis, the chapter also offers practical recommendations for tattoo artists on improving their personal branding. Finally, chapter six summarizes the key observations of the study and reflects on the research process. It discusses possible limitations, challenges faced, and suggestions for future research.

2 Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework for this study, which explores how personal branding is constructed in the tattoo industry. The review includes the concepts of traditional brand, personal brand and personal branding, strategies for building a personal brand, and the role of authenticity in personal branding. The sources for this study were collected mainly through HAMK Finna and Google Scholar. The focus was on peerreviewed articles, books and previous studies related to personal branding, branding, social media and the tattoo industry.

2.1 Brand and Branding

When asking people to explain the term brand, they might first image logo, catchphrase, theme or ad. Brand is all of that, but it is also much more. (Post, 2005, p. XVI) Branding was originally a way to distinguish mass-market products from each other. It served as a mark of quality and provided a product with a unique identity, setting it apart from competitors. (Whitmer, 2019, p.2) A commercial brand is the reputation and image that customers have, it can be good or bad emotions, trust or lack of trust, depending on what the branding company has done and what kind of affect it had in the mind of a customer. (Post, 2005, p. 1—2) Over time, the concept of branding has evolved, now branding is not only utilized on products and services but also the image, experience, and reputation associated with individuals. (Keller & Lehmann, 2006)

The Oxford English Dictionary gives the following as one of the definitions for the term 'brand': *"The application of a trademark or brand to a product; the promotion of consumer awareness of a particular brand of goods or services. Also: distinctive wording or design used to identify a particular brand."* (OED, 2024) This definition highlights the traditional elements of branding; recognizability and marketing. However, modern branding strategies emphasize also emotional connections and storytelling as key factors in brand differentiation. (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010, p. 21)

In today's highly competitive market, businesses seek to create emotional bonds with customers to ensure loyalty and long-term success. When a brand is well-established, it stands out and people trust it. The way brand is perceived can determine its success, whether it is a new business, nonprofit organization or a commercial product. Once a

consumer forms a strong attachment to a brand, they love, admire, trust and believe in it. (Wheeler, 2017, p.2)

2.2 Personal Brand and Personal Branding

2.2.1 Personal Brand

Personal brand as a concept is variable. People can understand it in many ways. (Deckers & Lacy, 2018, p. 4) Some consider personal brand to be like a reputation. (Kuehn, 2016) According to Deva Rangarajan (2017, p. 659), personal brand is not created based on demand, like company brands; rather, it is an identity that develops within an individual. Therefore, we all already have a personal brand. Company brands are shaped by factors such as the product or service, consumer demand, and the nature of shareholders and employees. Rangarajan claims that personal brand can be changed and developed throughout life and career. (Rangarajan, 2017, p. 659)

A strong brand is essentially a compelling narrative, as storytelling has the power to captivate and engage audiences. Consumers are often drawn to brands that communicate a meaningful story, making them more likely to connect and invest in the brand. (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010, p. 21) Personal brand is not just about what we do but also how we do it, shaping how others perceive us. (Waller, 2020, pp. 20–21) In the tattoo industry, this concept is important, as artists must balance between personal expression and marketability, promoting themselves not only through their art but through their unique personality.

Personal brand does not always involve active branding; it is the identity we project to others, whether it is done consciously or not. (Jacobson, 2020) Once we meet someone for the first time, they may start making assumptions about us within seconds. This process can be influenced by consciously shaping the reputation one wants to give to others. (Kucharska & Mikołajczak, 2018)

2.2.2 Personal Branding

Personal branding is a process where an individual builds and controls their professional image to stand out from the competition and increase their value in the market. (Montoya &

Vandehey, 2002, p. 5) Tom Peters introduced the idea of personal branding in his Fast Company article *The Brand Called You*. He argued that everyone is a brand that should be marketed to succeed, just like commercial brands such as Nike or Pepsi. (Peters, 1997, p. 2)

The purpose of personal branding is to be visible and stand out in the competition. It benefits both job seekers and entrepreneurs, who, by branding themselves, highlight their unique skills, values, and personality to attract the right opportunities. (Post, 2005, pp. 33–34) A strong personal brand helps establish credibility, build trust, and differentiate oneself from others in the industry. For entrepreneurs, it creates a recognizable identity that resonates with their target audience, while for job seekers, it enhances employability by showcasing their expertise and professional image. (Montoya & Vandehey, 2002, pp. 6–7)

By consistently communicating their brand through different platforms, networking, and high-quality work, individuals can establish themselves as experts in their industry and increase their chances of success. (Deckers & Lacy, 2018, p. 16)

2.3 Personal Branding in Tattoo Industry

Tattoos are a form of personal and artistic expression. Within the tattoo industry, artists range from those who create unique, custom designs to those who offer more standard services based on customer demand. (Morello & Paula, 2024) As the popularity of tattoos has grown globally, the industry has become increasingly competitive. Tattoo businesses are no longer limited to traditional studios; today's industry requires adaptability to emerging trends and styles. (Steckdaub-Muller, 2018, pp. 43–44)

In a saturated market, personal branding has become essential for tattoo artists to stand out. Social media plays a significant role in showcasing work, but as everyone has access to these platforms, technical skill alone is no longer enough. (Stecko-Żukowska, 2022, p. 58) Clients tend to choose an artist not only based on their art but also on their personality and reputation. (Campbell-Meier & Krtalić, 2022, p. 4) A well-established personal brand helps artists attract the right clientele, build recognition, and create long-term success.

A strong artist-client connection is crucial throughout the entire tattooing process. The client must feel comfortable, not only with the artist's skills but also in terms of communication, environment, and hygiene standards. (Morello & Paula, 2024) Montoya & Vandehey (2002, p. 25) highlight the importance of standing out: "*Be different or be invisible.*" Without a distinct and clear personal brand, attracting clients and establishing a career in the industry can be challenging.

The theme of a tattoo artist's brand could often be described as "creative." It is important not only to display the art but also to convince potential clients that the artist is skilled and capable (Deckers & Lacy, 2018). A personal brand communicates an artist's style, values, and personality, making it easier for clients to find an artist whose work aligns with their preferences. Unlike many other creative professionals, tattoo artists work closely with their clients, which makes personal branding even more significant. Trust and connection play a key role, as tattooing is both a personal and permanent process. (Kasienette, 2024)

Even though personal branding is widely researched in the business world and other creative industries, research on branding in the tattoo industry remains limited or even nonexistent. Tattoo artists market themselves through a combination of their artistic vision and personality. While some branding strategies from other artistic fields can be applied, the unique nature of tattooing, where the artist directly interacts with clients, sets it apart. (Stecko-Żukowska, 2022, p. 58)

2.3.1 Social Media

Nowadays, social media is one of the most important channels for personal branding. It allows tattoo artists to be visible on their own terms, interact with potential clients, and showcase their work beyond face-to-face appointments. Social media not only provides a platform for connecting but also for building a long-term brand identity. (Kongsri & Jaroenwanit, 2024, p. 2670) A clear and well-maintained personal brand helps artists attract the right clientele and remain relevant in a constantly evolving industry (Rangarajan, 2017, pp. 658–659). According to Kongsri & Jaroenwanit, (2024, p. 2670), the use of social media positively influences personal brand identity.

2.4 Strategies for Building a Personal Brand

Personal branding is often described as a process, where person knowingly creates and is in control of the process of their professional image (Deckers & Lacy, 2018) In some research authenticity is presented to be the key element, in which case personal branding would not be creating a brand from zero but rather strengthening and clarifying existing identity. (Gorbatov et. Al., 2018) According to Montoya and Vandehey (2002, p.7), many people have unintentionally brand themselves and therefore often lost the control over it, and successful brand should be thought of and built.

To begin building a personal brand, it is essential to identify one's core values, strengths, and weaknesses. This process involves self-reflection and drawing insights from personal experiences to establish a solid foundation for the brand. (Rangarajan, 2017, p. 659) Alternatively, the self-reflection process can start from listing the qualities one wishes to be known for. (Deckers & Lacy, 2018) Marketing and advertising is only small part of branding, and more than 70% is everything else that is done or said. (Wheeler, 2017, p.8)

Like organizational or product branding, when creating personal brand, the environment and target groups should be considered. Some characteristics will appeal to others and not to some, the personal brand should not satisfy everyone. In other words, personal brand that tries to serve everyone, does not serve anyone well. (Rangarajan, 2017, p. 659—660) Considering every idea to be good and trying to lead the brand to every direction will only make the audience confused, causing the death of a personal brand. (Post, 2005, p. 56)

According to Rangarajan (2017), consistency is the key in personal branding. Once individual brands themselves into something, creates a core product, they should deliver what is promised. A personal brand that constantly changes based on demand and request, like a dynamic pricing, is not consistent. One should understand the difference between adjusting during personal development and changing with trends or each demand. (Rangarajan, 2017, pp. 659, 663). Personal brand is a continuous process of small and consistent actions rather than one-time efforts (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010, p. 24)

“Branding yourself” by Deckers & Lacy, 2018, offers a five-step plan for personal branding. First, discovering passion. Personal brand needs the mission and vision. Secondly it is suggested to be bold, because being invisible does not serve a strong personal brand if the aim is to success in any field. Third, telling story without telling it, “This is something I

believe in, and I want you to know it”, it could be likes or dislikes, values or interests. Fourth step is creating relationships. Every social interaction we make could be a future resource. Last step is to act, starting to work for the mission and vision.

Altogether successful personal branding with a goal needs work and consideration. (Deckers & Lacy, 2018)

Regularly reviewing, brightening and adapting individual’s brand might be necessary, even without significant gaps as skills, environment and target audiences might change over time, or merely if the current personal brand is not delivering the results wished. (Rangarajan, 2017, p. 663) The understanding of marketing principles can be a great benefit in personal branding process, and utilized in creating a unique identity, building long-term customer relationships and differentiating oneself from the competition. However, it is important to note that these concepts — marketing and personal branding — should not be confused with one another. (Resnick et al., 2016, pp. 168—169)

2.5 Branding Strategies Through Positioning Framework

Personal brand positioning is a strategic process that aims to build a clear and distinct place in the audience’s mind. According to Shafiee et al. (2020), this process involves identifying and combining various internal and external elements that shape how a person is perceived by others (p. 46). To systematize this process, the authors propose a five-dimensional framework that includes: strategy-based, capability-based, performance-based, audience-based, and differentiation-based positioning (p. 50).

Each of these dimensions includes specific factors. The strategy-based dimension relates to having clear goals, personal vision, daily plans, and methods for self-presentation. The capability-based dimension covers professional skills, talents, and mastery of communication tools. The performance-based dimension includes consistent behavior, alignment between actions and goals, and balance in communication. The audience-based dimension refers to understanding the audience, building trust, and maintaining emotional connection through interaction. Finally, the differentiation-based dimension highlights uniqueness, competitive advantage, and clear contrast to others (Shafiee et al., 2020, pp. 50–51).

In this thesis, the interview findings suggest several personal branding strategies used by Finnish tattoo artists. These strategies can be interpreted through the lens of Shafiee's framework:

Authenticity-focused branding relates closely to the performance-based dimension, which includes harmony between one's speech, behavior, and values. Artists who follow this path want to show who they really are and avoid artificial marketing. As Shafiee et al. note, consistent and value-driven performance increases brand credibility (p. 51).

Art-focused branding aligns with the capability-based dimension, which emphasizes talent, technical expertise, and professionalism. Tattoo artists who focus on artistic quality rather than visibility reflect this category. While Shafiee et al. point out that capabilities alone may not guarantee a strong brand, they are still essential for those who use skill-based positioning (p. 51).

Personality-driven and social media-centered branding connect to the audience-based dimension, where interaction, accessibility, and emotional ties with the audience are key. Artists who share their personality online and engage with followers create deeper connections, which supports strong positioning in the minds of clients (p. 51).

Niche branding fits naturally within the differentiation-based dimension. This approach focuses on uniqueness and specialization — for example, working within a specific style, subculture, or client group. Shafiee et al. emphasize that standing out through clear positioning and matching audience expectations helps to build a memorable and loyal brand. (pp. 50—51). Wide audience appeal, in contrast, can be linked to a broader application of the strategy-based dimension. It involves reaching many kinds of clients through flexibility, visibility, and approachable branding.

Reputation-based branding combines elements of both the strategy-based and performance-based dimensions. Artists who consistently deliver quality, build client trust, and let their reputation grow organically over time follow this type of strategy. Word-of-mouth and long-term reliability are central here. (p.51)

In summary, although Shafiee's framework was developed in a general branding context, it provides a useful structure for analyzing how tattoo artists position their personal brands. Each artist's strategy reflects different dimensions of this model and shows how theoretical positioning approaches are adapted in a creative and personal field.

2.6 The Authenticity of Personal Brands

Authenticity refers to being true to oneself, it is sincerity, truthfulness and originality. It is both self-reflective and emotional experience — one feels authentic when actions align with true self. To understand authenticity, it is essential to consider individuals' emotional experiences of being true (or untrue) to themselves and their perceptions of their true identity. (Vaninni & Franzese, 2008, p. 1621) In discussing artist authenticity, Moulard et al. define authenticity as artist being motivated by their true passions rather than external factors, such as prestige or profit. (Moulard et al., 2014, p. 577)

Authenticity is a core element of personal branding. (Hillgren & O'Connor, 2011, p. 25) A strong personal brand is built on genuine passion and commitment, as without real enthusiasm, there is no foundation for branding. This passion does not need to be constantly broadcasted, but authentic brand should have a solid base that aligns with the values and interests of an individual. (Deckers & Lacy, 2018, p. 9)

Moulard et al. (2014) emphasize that artists' authenticity is rooted in their passion and commitment, which in turn influences consumer perceptions and behaviours. (p.586). The quality of art — and tattoos — is difficult to assess objectively, so clients often rely on their perception of the artist authenticity when evaluating their work. This supports the idea that a tattoo artist's personal brand serves as a measure of quality and influences client's purchasing decisions. A positive and transparent impression of the artist can also transfer to the tattoo itself, highlighting the importance of branding. (Moulard et al., 2014, pp. 586—587)

3 Methodology

This thesis uses a qualitative research method to gain a deeper understanding of how tattoo artists reflect and develop their personal brands. Since personal branding in the tattoo industry is very individual and based on unique experiences, a qualitative approach allows more in-depth insights than a survey or other quantitative methods would. (Denny & Weckesser, 2022)

The research follows an interpretivist philosophy, which focuses on understanding the subjective opinions and views that tattoo artists have considering their personal brand creating and development. Interpretivism allows for deeper insights into personal branding within the tattoo industry, where the perspectives and experiences of tattoo artists are the center of attention. The approach of this research is inductive, starting from individual observations and insights gathered from interviews to develop a broader understanding of personal branding strategies in tattoo industry. The strategy for this study is case study, using qualitative method interviews. The time horizon is cross-sectional, as the data is being collected in relatively short period. (Melnikovas, 2019)

Interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method because they give opportunity to explore tattoo artists' thoughts, experiences, and strategies in detail related to personal branding. While surveying clients could have provided an external perspective, customers may not always be able to clearly reflect what makes a tattoo artist's brand appealing to them. The responses of clients' might be more general, rather than deeper reflections on branding strategies. Tattoo artists themselves, however, are closer to the topic, actively work on their career and issuance and can therefore explain and identify their choices and strategies more clearly.

By conducting semi-structured interviews, this research ensures that key themes are addressed while allowing natural flow and flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences (Galletta, 2013, p. 75). This method also aligns with previous studies done on personal branding.

3.1 Data collection

The data for this study was collected through interviews with four tattoo artists. The participants for this study were selected based on their status as full-time tattoo artist and all artists chosen to have successfully branded themselves and the author feels that they all have valuable insights to give for this study. In this research, full-time status was defined as working exclusively as a tattoo artist without additional employment in another field and earning a primary income from tattooing. The goal was to include artists with different styles and branding approaches, to get different perspectives on the topic.

Potential interviewees were searched through social media channels, specifically Instagram, in January 2025. Four tattoo artists expressed interest in participating, all four were selected for the study. The interviews were conducted in February 2025, with two taking place in person and two remotely. Two interviews were conducted in English and two in Finnish. In two interviews done in Finnish, it was agreed with the participant that conducting the interview in their native language would ensure the quality of their responses, allowing them to express their thoughts more freely, and therefore improving the reliability of the study. The interviews were semi-structured, key questions were prepared but the interviewer had a chance to ask for clarifying questions, rephrase and follow the flow of the interview to gain deeper understanding of the strategies and personal experiences (Galletta, 2013, p. 75).

Participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary. Each participant was given a chance to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. Their rights as interviewees were respected, including confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to review or withdraw their responses. All personal data was handled securely. Each participant received an interview invitation and an information sheet with privacy notice, including how long and in what manner the recordings would be stored. These procedures were carried out in accordance with HAMK guidelines.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted in tattoo studios to ensure a neutral, private and comfortable environment. Two of the interviews were conducted remotely with a phone call. All interviews were recorded using an iPad voice recorder. A total of four interviews were conducted with durations ranging between 16-35 minutes. After the interviews, participants were also contacted via messages to clarify some of their responses and to ask a few additional questions.

Table 1. Interviewees

INTERVIEWEE	DURATION	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	GEOGRAPHICS
IW1	16min	5	Janakkala, Finland
IW2	22min	5	Tampere, Finland
IW3	35min	4	Tampere, Finland
IW4	29 min	3	Helsinki, Finland

3.2 Data Analysis

The data collected through interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. This is a flexible method for identifying and analysing patterns and themes within qualitative data, which then can be used to understand the different aspects of personal branding as tattoo artists. This approach allows researcher to systematically organize and interpret data while capturing key themes that emerge from the responses of a participant. (Willig & Rogers, 2017, p. 17) Thematic analysis is commonly used in previous studies related to personal branding.

As first step all the recordings were listened through to get an overall understanding of the content. The interviews were transcribed in summarized manner, excluding filler words, hesitation sounds, and other elements that the author felt unnecessary for the study. The goal was to capture the relevant content for the research topic. During the second listening process, additional notes were taken, and direct quotations, that could be used in the study, were transcribed detailed from word to word. All Finnish-language quotations were translated into English.

As the analysis progressed, recordings were listened through again and themes were refined to ensure accurate understanding and categorizing of each participants perspective. Based on recordings and notes, six key themes were identified. These themes were further developed and eventually four the most relevant themes were selected for the final analysis: authenticity, meaning and definition of personal brand, differentiation and artistic identity, social media and visibility.

3.3 Reliability and Validity

The reliability of the study refers to the repeatability of the study. For a study to be reliable, results should be the similar if the research repeated. (Thyer, 2010, p. 356) The validity of the research refers to whether the research successfully measures what is planned and intended. (*APA PsycNet*, n.d.)

To ensure the reliability of the study, the interview questions were designed to be neutral. The formed questions were same and in same order for each participant. Follow-up questions varied depending on the need. During the interviews, the interviewer aimed to remain objective and not influence the participants' responses with unnecessary follow-up questions or comments. This helped to ensure that the answers reflected the participants' own views and not the interviewer's expectations. All interviews were recorded to minimize the risk of misinterpretation. In the beginning of interviews, the author explained the meaning of personal brand as a concept. Regardless of this during the interview process, it became apparent that in some cases, the distinction between personal branding and business marketing became blurred. This occasionally influenced the participants' responses, as some artists interpreted questions about branding in the context of marketing their business more than focusing on their personal artistic identity. This did not significantly affect the overall insights, as the interviewee had a chance to ask clarifying questions.

In qualitative approach, the primary goal is to gain in-depth understanding of the phenomena rather than a broad representativeness. The sample size of four is justified, as the goal is not to establish the absolute truth, but rather understand experiences, interprets and social phenomenon. The aim of the research is to gain a deeper understanding of the topic, not statistical generalization, therefore it can be reasonably argued that a small sample size still equals as relevant and meaningful insights. (Boddy, 2016, pp. 430—431)

The geographical location of the participants did not significantly influence the results; therefore, the findings of this study could be generalized to the entire Finnish tattoo industry. This study does not specifically compare regional differences, it focuses on broader themes in personal branding within Finland. Since all participants were based in Finland, the findings may not be directly applicable to other countries, where the tattoo industry operates under different cultural, economic, and legal conditions.

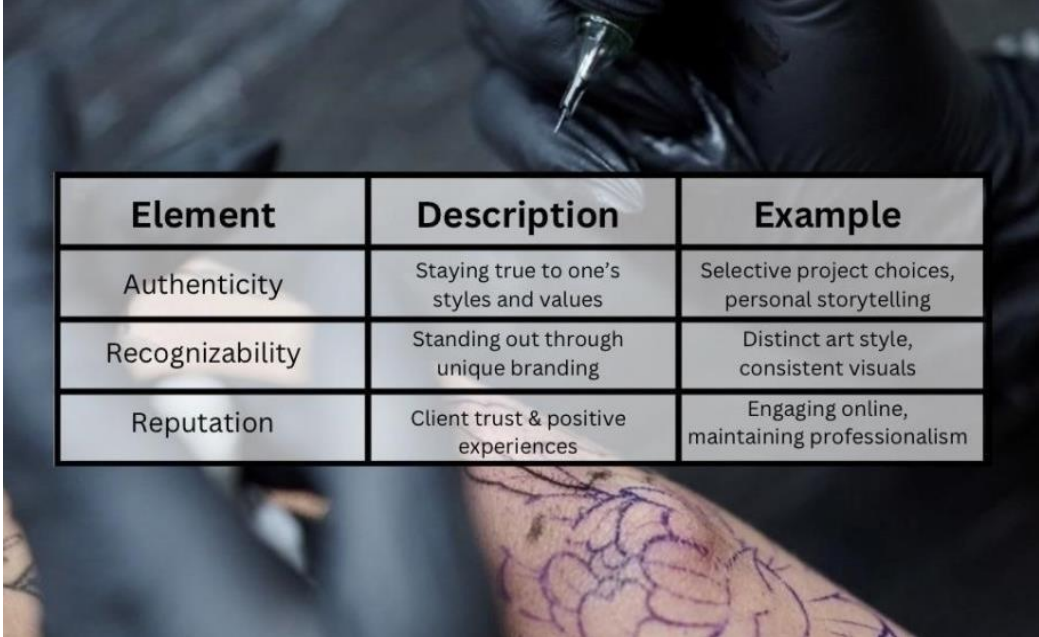
All participants were relatively young tattoo artists, meaning their views and opinions likely reflect current trends and practices more than those of older generations. However, this does not weaken the research findings, as the goal was to examine modern and successful personal branding strategies that are relevant in today's environment, rather than to compare branding approaches across different generations.

This study was conducted in Spring 2025, and its findings reflect the personal branding strategies and trends relevant at the time. As the tattoo industry, social media, and digital marketing evolve, some of the insights may change over time, along with shifts in societal norms, consumer behaviours, and industry standards.

4 Results

This section presents results from interviews with tattoo artists regarding personal branding in the tattoo industry. Each artist had their own approach, but common themes were authenticity, differentiation, visibility and engagement. Overall, the results emphasize that a well-crafted personal brand is an essential tool for professional growth and client retention.

Table 2. Results



Element	Description	Example
Authenticity	Staying true to one's styles and values	Selective project choices, personal storytelling
Recognizability	Standing out through unique branding	Distinct art style, consistent visuals
Reputation	Client trust & positive experiences	Engaging online, maintaining professionalism

4.1 Personal Branding Definition

The of the interviewed artists had somewhat similar understanding of the definition of personal brand. It was compared to reputation and viewed as a combination of professional and personal identity combined that affects how artists are perceived and who they attract as clients. The responses however suggest that personal branding in the tattoo industry is more about clarification more than outright creation, meaning that all of us already have a personal brand, it just requires updating and maintaining. This implies that artists do not necessarily “create” a personal brand from scratch but instead clarify, maintain and updating what is already existing. One interviewee described the process as “revealing and reinforcing what is already there”, suggesting that personal branding is less about invention and more about identification.

A question that arises from this perspective is whether personal branding in the tattoo industry can be built from the ground up or whether it is more about uncovering and emphasizing different qualities of artists. If personal branding is a matter of “revealing”, this shifts the focus from constructing an artificial persona to understanding and communicating a genuine identity. Therefore, an artist should be able to know themselves, their characteristics, strengths and weaknesses, and be able to do self-evaluation. This aligns

with the statement of one interviewee, who described their brand as “a continuous process”, which would make it a journey rather than a finished product.

The role of authenticity in this process is significant. Several interviewees said that personal branding is linked to how artists present themselves—not only through their artwork but through all aspects of their professional behaviour, including their online presence, communication style and interactions with clients or colleagues. For example, one artist explained that personal branding is “how I integrate my personal identity into my business”, which highlights the close relationship between one’s identity and their professional persona. This perspective reveals a demand of clientele, not only technical skills but also some level of personal connection. Another interviewee supported this idea by stating that their brand is an extension of their personality and values rather than just a marketing strategy.

Moreover, the importance of authenticity is emphasized by the idea that clients can understand when an artist is playing a role versus one who is being genuine. This suggests that a personal brand built (or grown) on authenticity is more likely to resonate with clients, creating a deeper, more lasting connection. Such insights support the argument that a personal brand must be consistent and true to the artist’s identity for it to be effective. This brings us to the concept of brand consistency — artists in the interviews frequently referred to the need for their clients to “know what they are getting every time”. Therefore, it is important for artists to maintain a clear and recognizable brand image that aligns with their values and expertise and does not radically change in short time periods.

Additionally, it is essential to consider the broader implications of personal branding in a highly competitive field like tattooing. The industry is saturated with numerous artists offering many different styles, so having a personal brand can differentiate one artist from another. Whether the focus is on artistic style, personality, or professionalism, each artist’s unique brand contributes to their ability to stand out in the crowded market. In this sense, personal branding acts as both a marketing tool and a filter, allowing artists to attract clients who resonate with their approach, style and values.

By reflecting on these interview responses, this study suggests that personal branding is not only about attracting clients but also about fostering loyalty and encouraging wordofmouth referrals. A successful personal brand can also give opportunities beyond

clients and sales, it can open doors to new tattoo studios or other new opportunities such as traveling around world to guest in different tattoo studios.

As Whitmer (2019, p.7) argues, “Although not universal, understanding self-branding can help us to understand the experience of living and working in a time when the boundaries between public and private have eroded, and workers are economically unmoored.” This concept holds true for tattoo artists, whose personal and professional identities are often blurred through their online presence and social media profiles. The integration of personal identity into their professional brand reflects a bigger trend in today’s digital age, where personal branding is not just a tool for marketing but a way of navigating the crossroads between private lives and public personas.

4.2 Authenticity and Self-Presentation

Authenticity stood out as a key factor in successful personal branding, with all interviewees emphasizing its role. The interviews revealed that an artist’s personality, way to communicate and the style of their art are factors that influence what type of clientele they attract. This reflects a trend where the clients do not merely seek tattoos; they also seek a connection with the artist behind the work. One participant emphasized that clients often want to understand who the artist is before committing to an appointment. This desire for connection means that it is important for artists to make themselves visible and accessible to their audience.

One interviewee stated, “Hmm, I think my personality and a way to communicate with people differs from others, because I am just myself and there is only one me. So again, authenticity goes a long way.” However, while authenticity is important, it does not always require full personal exposure. Some artists manage to build a strong personal brand without revealing much about themselves. One artist shared an example of a client who mentioned having forgotten what the artist looked like. This could be because they did not make their personal presence known online, or the artist simply lacked a connection with the client. Visibility is important in the modern tattoo industry, especially in the digital age where online presence plays a large part in how clients perceive and choose artists. Still, this does not imply that all successful personal brands must rely on full exposure. For certain artists, their skills alone can define the brand, reducing the need for extensive personal visibility. As one artist noted, “Skills stand out when there is nothing else. It

creates a feeling that they don't need to do anything else because they do this so well." In some cases, artist's work can speak louder than their personal identity, especially when the quality of the art itself serves as a unique differentiator.

A notable example of a skilled artist without much personal visibility is Alex Sorsa, a tattoo artist with significant social media following (282,000 on Instagram) who rarely shows his face in social media. Instead, his brand is primarily built around the quality of his work. This example suggests that it is possible for highly skilled artists to craft a powerful personal brand that centralizes solely around their art, bypassing the need for personal exposure. However, it is important to note that this approach requires consistency and well-thoughtout strategy. None of the interviewees had direct experience with this specific approach, implying that it might be more a niche strategy in the tattoo industry.

The author is both a tattoo enthusiast and a tattoo artist, and can support both approaches, showing persona and focusing on art. As a tattoo client the author has used the services of artists that are more art oriented as well as those who are more visible with their personas as well. It has not significantly influenced the decision making so far, but the author has always returned to those artists that had the personal touch and visibility in their online presence. The attracting factors were not just the art but also the artist's persona, and the connection between artist and client felt more natural and comfortable during the tattoo session as well. As a tattoo artist, the author acknowledges that it is easy to forget colleagues whose work does not stand out—whether it is standard art, forgettable content, or a lack of personal touch. Hiring a new tattoo artist in the studio, inviting guest artists, or making collaborations would require something unique, memorable, or strategic to be appealing and trustworthy.

The balance between authenticity and self-presentation is crucial in personal branding. Overexposure can sometimes reduce an artist's appeal, perhaps even blur the lines of professionalism, while excessive distance can cause them to be forgotten. Finding the balance involves finding ways to be visible and memorable without compromising professionalism. For some artists, showing their face and personality may help building a deeper connection with the clients. For others, focusing on the artwork and maintaining a more private persona may be more effective, if there is something else that people can grab on. The key takeaway from the interviews is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach,

and each artist must navigate their personal boundaries to determine what approach works best for themselves.

There are also challenges maintaining approachable and authentic personal brand in a professional context. One artist explained that there are clear boundaries when it comes to sharing personal life details: "There are boundaries for what I want to share from my personal life, things that aren't related to work, just home matters. But I feel like I give quite a lot, maybe sometimes even too much, and then clients might feel like we're friends and start following my personal Instagram or asking for discounts." This highlights the delicate balance between being approachable and professional. While being friendly and authentic can help clients feel more comfortable and connect with the artist, it can also blur the lines between professional and personal relationship and put the artist in possibly awkward situations where clients may expect more familiarity or perks, like discounts. The author as a tattoo artist has also experienced situations, where clients have invited to spend time outside tattooing time, requesting personal phone number or special treatment when it comes to appointments and pricing. The interviews suggest, that while it is important to be true self and friendly behavior is beneficial to brand, an artist must learn their own boundaries to avoid misunderstandings and uncomfortable situations with clients.

"I don't want to share everything about my personal life. I share small things that I feel connected to, like tattoos, but there are boundaries. I won't post about my partner, or share too many pictures of my home, where I live, or where I am. My private life stays separate. If I'm struggling with mental health, I feel comfortable sharing a bit, but not too much—it's something I prefer to keep to myself. I show parts of my personality, but not everything. People don't need to know it all."

Authenticity as a branding tool offers significant benefits. It allows artists to operate within their comfort zone, eliminating the need to play a role. This can lead to a more sustainable personal brand, as artists are not burdened by the need to constantly perform to their audience. However, authenticity should not be understood as a mission accomplished. Tattoo artists must still actively manage their brands and review the need for developing, to remain relevant and appealing to their target audiences. Trying to appeal to everyone can weaken an artist's brand — much like how a general store rarely satisfies all customers exceptionally well. Instead, artists should focus on attracting their core clientele, who value their authenticity and what they uniquely offer.

"I stand out with my style, at least in my own living area, stands out from other young women. It differs in social media behavior, I have quite loose boundaries on what I can say, and I approach all clients in a friendly way. I guess there could be discussion why this approach might not be advisable."

Imitating another artist's branding strategy may also dilute originality and make it difficult for the artist to find their place in the industry. While imitation and copying are common in many industries, it rarely works out well, and in personal branding authenticity is the factor that sets one artist apart from another. Just as the original is always more valuable than a copy in a commercial world, so too is the personal brand of the tattoo artist. The brand is not just about what they create, but about who they are and how they connect with their clients and colleagues.

4.3 Promotion

In today's digital age, social media plays an important role in modern tattoo artist branding, by allowing artists to reach wider audiences and establish their presence beyond local or existing audience. Instagram remains the primary platform for most tattoo artists, with TikTok emerging as a space where artists can engage with audiences through short-form video content. According to the interviews, Instagram is widely considered the most popular platform for promoting an artist's personal brand, with three out of four interviewees mentioning it as their primary tool for exposure. This does not necessarily mean that Instagram is the absolute best platform, but the author felt that the artists had not yet found the interest towards other platforms since they already have strong presence in Instagram. Using several platforms reaches wider audience but requires effort in understanding how to use them properly and efficiently. "You don't need to show active tattooing to be visible, just be visible, it is important. My reels with myself talking support my brand the best, tattoo content does not work as well", one interviewee stated.

Despite its clear importance, social media promotion presents several challenges for tattoo artists. Maintaining a consistent and engaging online presence is often difficult, time consuming and one can sometimes feel frustrated mastering the algorithm and creating interesting content. One artist explained "My content is spontaneous, but I acknowledge that I should invest more into repetition, because of algorithms. However, I can't afford 100% spontaneosy, if you want to be successful you need to plan". The need to balance

content creation with a heavy workload means that some artists struggle to engage as frequently as they would like, potentially missing out on opportunities. This strategy involves showcasing behind-the-scenes content, engaging with followers through stories or comments, and sometimes even sharing personal moments or insights into their creative process. As one interviewee mentioned, "It's not just about the tattoos—it's about the person behind them. I want people to feel like they know me when they come for a session." This type of promotion fosters a sense of familiarity, making the artist more relatable and accessible to potential clients.

In contrast, other artists prefer a more professional, portfolio-focused approach. They use social media primarily to showcase their best work, with minimal personal engagement. This strategy can attract clients who are looking for high-quality artist or someone with unique or rare style, without necessarily wanting a deeper personal connection. It shows that some tattoo artists can successfully brand themselves in different ways depending on their personality, brand identity, and client base.

Beyond online platforms, offline promotion remains a crucial part of a tattoo artist's visibility. Several interviewees mentioned attending events, conventions, or guest spots as a valuable way to expand their network and reputation within the tattoo industry. One artist shared, "I try to participate in conventions and collaborations; it's an excellent way to connect with both clients and other artists face-to-face." These events allow artists to meet potential clients in person, build relationships, and gain recognition from other professionals. This aspect of offline visibility is often underappreciated in an era where digital promotion dominates, yet it remains powerful.

While Instagram remains the primary tool for brand visibility, the growing importance of platforms like TikTok shows how the digital landscape continues to evolve. Tattoo artists could benefit from choosing promotion strategies that align with their identity, goals, and available time, ultimately creating a presence that resonates with their target audience while remaining sustainable in the long run. The interviewees felt most engagement and popularity in social media, when sharing parts of their daily life in TikTok or Instagram Reels. As one interviewee mentioned "It's not just about the tattoos, it's also about the person behind them. I want people to feel like they know me when they come for a session." This style of promotion fosters a sense of familiarity, making the artist more relatable and accessible. Artists suggested also finding a balance between social media

trends and personal style. Trends were seen as a way to support an artist's unique style, and each should find their own way to interpret them, not copy paste. However, one artist said that if the only goal is to gain visibility, one should go all in with the trends, if it feels in any way natural and comfortable, not against one's own nature.

Based on the interviews, in today's tattoo industry, building and promoting a personal brand is nearly impossible without the use of social media. While offline promotion through events and conventions still holds value, the reach and visibility offered by platforms like Instagram and TikTok are crucial in creating a lasting and recognizable brand. The key takeaway is that tattoo artists need to find ways to balance social media trends with their own identity while making content that resonates with both them and their audience. Although social media comes with challenges, it offers opportunities for growth, engagement, and the establishment of a personal brand that can go beyond the tattoo studio.

4.4 Shaping Personal Brand

A strong and consistent brand helped build trust and credibility, making clients feel more confident in their choice. Some interviewees shared experiences where clients explicitly mentioned following their work on social media for months or years before booking an appointment. The interviewees revealed the small and big actions they take to maintain, develop, or shape their personal brand. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, personal branding is everything you do or don't do—both conscious and unconscious choices.

For the interviewees, one significant factor was deciding how much of themselves, their personal lifestyle and private life, they want to share. As one artist mentioned "I want my clients to see my work firsts, but I also share a bit of my daily life so they feel like they know me." This balance between professionalism and personal insights helps create a sense of connection with potential clients. For the artists interviewed, personal brand development was often a process that evolved from feedback, experiences and strategic efforts. Some artists mentioned essential moments, such as client feedback or mentorship, that refined their branding, while others described natural development throughout careers.

Another key element was how artists communicate and behave, both online and in person. Some prefer a relaxed and humorous approach, while others maintain a more distant and

professional tone. One interviewee said 'I want to be easily approachable. Like treat them like they are my friends and also acknowledge the privilege that the client wants my art, not another way around. No ego.' Within the interviewees of this study, there was a noticeable respect towards clients, appreciating that someone wants permanent art of theirs and buys their services. In comparison, the author feels it is common that some tattoo artists want to maintain a very strict distance to client to reinforce their brand's exclusivity or professionalism. These different communication styles shape how potential clients perceive the artist and influence their decision to book an appointment. Ultimately, whether an artist chooses a friendly or formal approach, consistency in their behavior helps maintaining the personal brand.

In social media, some artists felt that interacting with clients and colleagues outside their own page was also an important part of personal brand promotion. While some artists chose to foster exclusive image by limiting the number of accounts they followed, others emphasized the value of showing interest in their audience by engaging with posts, leaving comments and following clients or fellow artists in return. This kind of interaction was seen not only as a way to strengthen professional relationships, but also as a method to enhance visibility and approachability, both of which contribute to a more relatable and accessible personal brand. Active engagement outside one's own profile may positively influence social media algorithms, potentially increasing the reach of the artist's content. In this sense, interaction was not only a social strategy, but also a practical tool for expanding one's online presence and reinforcing brand recognition within the community.

Personal brand was also shaped by artistic choices. Most artists specialized in a particular style and had turned down projects that did not align with their artistic identity, even if they were technically capable of doing them. In these cases, artists felt that the project would not benefit either the artist or the client. Many believed that maintaining a consistent style strengthened their brand, whereas some valued versatility but emphasized staying authentic and avoiding tattoos that went against their personal values. However, most artists mentioned that they had sometimes accepted projects outside their regular style due to quiet sales periods, interest in trying something new, or simply because the requested tattoo felt easy and stress-free and could create a happy client. One of the interviewees noted that most clients contacting her already understood her style, but when she was requested to do something different, she politely declined and always tried to recommend an artist whose style would be more suitable. One of the artists did not have a specific

tattooing style but instead created a distinct presence through their interaction and overall brand persona, both in social media and beyond.

As one interviewee stated, “you can’t be everything to everyone, and trying to do that just waters down what makes you special.” This suggests that artists could benefit from defining their niche rather than offering a generalized service. Trying to please a broad audience may result in a brand that lacks identity and appeal.

Maintaining clear boundaries is an important aspect of personal branding. One artist emphasized, “Be yourself, and make clear boundaries that you don’t overstep! We tend to think that we need to make the content for our clients, but in the end we are the ones who are making the content, make it first for yourself so you can be true to yourself. If you think too much what other people think of your post, or whether you can post at all because someone will not like it, but then... do you want that kind of person as a client? Just do it, otherwise you get bored and you don’t wanna do anything, it will be forced content.”

Another interviewee mentioned what the clients prefer in their brand and personality, “My clients are drawn to the sense of safety I create, for example those who have social anxiety. If people can connect with you, they are more likely to book.” The author, as a tattoo artist, supports the idea that getting a tattoo can be a stressful experience, especially for those dealing with social anxiety or self-doubt. Falsely promoting a safe space benefit no one—but if an artist is genuinely approachable, creates a secure environment, and upholds DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging) values, the interviewees suggest making this a clear part of their brand and communication. The tattoo industry is no longer defined by the early 2000s hardcore studio mentality—the world has changed, and so should the industry.

One interviewee emphasized the importance of paying attention to the people around you: “Think about what style people you work with. Do they share same values with you? Everyone can say “safe space, all bodies welcomed” but do they actually mean it?”. This highlights how every aspect of an artist’s environment contributes to their personal brand, including the people they choose to work or collaborate with. They are part of the atmosphere offline, an essential factor, as the in-person experience either reinforces or contradicts the brand identity an artist has built online.

The internet is flooded with online courses aimed at helping people build a personal brand. However, none of the artists interviewed mentioned having taken such courses, nor did they recommend doing so. One artist shared, “I tried searching online for personal branding advice when I first started my career. There are some useful tips, which I’ve tried to incorporate into this interview as well, but in the end, there’s no one-size-fits-all formula for building a personal brand.” Instead of structured courses, one of the artists had sought professional one-on-one guidance to shape their career, refining aspects such as social media content strategies and pricing models. This suggests that while general branding advice is widely available, tattoo artists may benefit more from personalized coaching that considers their unique artistic style, values, and business goals. The personal brand of a tattoo artist is deeply connected to their individual approach, making tailored strategies more valuable than broad, generic guidelines.

4.5 Measuring Successful Personal Brand

In the interviews, a strong personal brand was described as authentic, recognizable and memorable. The artists emphasized the importance of being real and standing out with own personality and characteristics, fostering positive client experiences and encouraging customer loyalty and recommendations. Approachability and making clients feel comfortable, safe and valued were also seen as key factors.

One interviewee pointed out that personal brand success in tattoo industry cannot be measured solely by social media followers or even sales, but rather by demand and recognizability. What they meant by this is that if someone sees a tattoo, they immediately know who created it—without any context. Similarly, if people ask for recommendations for a specific tattoo style, this artist’s name comes up. Demand does not always correlate with sales numbers, as an artist might have strong sales without a clear personal brand if the studio is popular, well-located or simply good at marketing or sales. Instead, demand is evident when an artist’s cancellation spots are quickly taken, when clients are eager to book with them regardless of the price, or when appointments are scheduled far in advance. For tattoo artists, another sign of successful brand is receiving project requests that align with their style, eliminating the need to decline work or refer clients to other artists. The ability to switch studios or collaborate with others could also indicate brand strength—whether it would be easy or challenging.

As a tattoo artist, the author also considers other factors that may indicate a strong or successful personal brand, even though they were not explicitly mentioned in the interviews. Client feedback and repeat customers can provide valuable insights into how well a brand resonates with its audience. Invitations to industry events, such as guest spots or judging at tattoo conventions may also reflect an artist's reputation and recognition within the field. However, it is important to note that, given Finland's small size, opportunities for such opportunities might be very limited. Additionally, a strong brand might create opportunities beyond tattooing—if there is demand for the artist's other work as well, such as prints, merchandise, educational content, it could indicate that their brand extends beyond tattooing.

While social media metrics provide some insights, it is not the only way to measure personal brand success. Social media followers can also be misleading for two reasons: followers can be bought with money, and especially in TikTok one post can easily go viral and bring thousands of followers, without having anything to do with the personal brand. When looking at social media followers, one should also consider the level of engagement in posts. However, one artist mentioned that if social media content feels authentic, trustworthy and keeps followers engaged and following, it is a sign of success. Overall, measuring the success of a tattoo artist's personal brand is less about numbers and more about how well their work is recognized and how clients respond to their brand.

4.6 Strategy Comparison

There are different approaches to tattoo artist personal branding, all artists interviewed were using combinations of these approaches, not only one of them. These suggested strategies offer various ways tattoo artists can differentiate themselves and build a sustainable career, whereas literature review gave more traditional strategies that are not directly applicable to tattoo industry. Each of these strategies have both advantages and challenges.

4.6.1 Authenticity-Focused branding

Authenticity-focused branding emphasizes the unique personality, individuality, values and artistic approach of the tattoo artist. This approach can build deep client trust and loyalty

that quite naturally attracts the right clientele for each artist, and hopefully with long-term consistency. This approach requires that a tattoo artist is aware of self — knows weaknesses and strengths, knows own style and is confident about their own job. This approach will not attract every client candidate but helps to find the clients that find the authentic brand appealing. This approach suits best for artists that are comfortable sharing much from themselves and creating possibly strong personal connections with clients.

4.6.2 Art-Focused Branding

In art-focused branding the main brand element is the work itself, with very minimal personal exposure. This approach appeals to clients who prioritize quality tattoos and do not mind creating personal connection with the artist. More professional image suits this style, and the work should speak for itself. As a downside, less personal engagement might make it more difficult to create a long-lasting impression on clients. For this approach, one should have exceptionally high-quality work. This approach suits for artists who prefer to focus on the tattoos and let the work define their reputation and wish to maintain a low personal visibility.

4.6.3 Wide-Audience Appeal

This approach attempts to attract a broad clientele by offering multiple styles and somewhat flexible branding. The strength of this approach is increased client reach and the chances of business versatility, rather than strict patterns and style. However, targeting wide audience may dilute the brand identity and possibly reduce client loyalty. The author would not recommend using this approach if the tattoo industry is crowded in the operating area, as this approach does not fill any niche. This suits for artists who enjoy versatility and don't want to limit themselves to a specific clientele and preferably do not have much competition.

4.6.4 Niche Branding

Niche Branding focuses on a very specific tattooing style, aesthetic, or theme that attract a dedicated audience. Being very focused on one thing builds strong brand recognition, attracts clients who specifically seek that style, and most likely gives freedom for pricing. Clientele might be very limited, depending on the niche, and this approach requires

dedication to consistency. The author would recommend this approach to artists that are passionate about specific genre and willing to specialize and stick to it.

4.6.5 Personality-Driven Branding

The artist's personal life, humour or interests are key part of the personal brand (most likely maintained in social media). This style enhances engagement, fosters a strong personal following and creates more diverse content opportunities. However, this requires a constant content creation, and the artist should be comfortable with sharing their own personal life and engaging with followers.

4.6.6 Social Media-Centered Branding

In this personal branding approach, the focus is on social media, maintaining platforms and visibility to attract clients. Like this, an artist can reach high amount of potential clientele and other followers and has a chance to do quite creative marketing with direct client interaction. Social media-centered branding requires consistent content production and investing time, understanding algorithm rules and changes. If an artist enjoys content creation, digital engagement and popularity over own clientele, this approach might be good. As authenticity is key in all personal branding, this too should be authentic and not merely a social media role.

4.6.7 Reputation-Based Branding

Building a reputation through client referrals and visibility also outside social media (convention appearances, events, collaborations, maybe podcasts), can develop a strong and credible brand. This fosters long-term client relationships and reduces relying on constantly changing social media. This approach might take longer to build and requires outstanding service and quality of work. The author would recommend this approach to artists who prioritize in-person connections and building a classic long-term reputation.

5 Conclusion

This study explored the role of personal branding for tattoo artists, focusing on how they differentiate themselves and attract clients. The findings show that personal branding is important in establishing a sustainable career, and each artist should find balance between visibility, authenticity and artistic identity to create a compelling brand. Additionally, the study highlights that personal branding is an evolving process, often refined as artists gain more experience and confidence in their work.

One of the key takeaways from the interviews was the importance of authenticity and staying true to oneself. Instead of attempting to appeal to everyone, successful artists focus on their strengths and unique characteristics, attracting clients who genuinely appreciate their work and approach. While writing this thesis, the author attended a tattoo convention.

Observing hundreds of different artists provided some insight into the dynamics of the tattoo industry and individual branding strategies. Tattoo conventions bring together artists from around the world, offering not only networking opportunities but also visibility through various competitions, which allow artists to gain recognition for their work and potentially strengthen their professional reputation. One artist stood out due to their exceptional talent and unique style. Despite the evident quality of their work, the artist chose not to participate in any competitions. A closer look at their Instagram profile revealed posts such as “more freedom in design = better price.” While for some artists, winning awards can be highly valuable, for others the focus is in creating high-quality, meaningful art that satisfies both the client and the artist, rather than appealing to a larger audience through trend-driven designs.

Another significant aspect is visibility and engagement, which can take different forms depending on the artist’s comfort level and strategy. Some artists choose to be highly presented on social media, showcasing their personality alongside their work, while others primarily rely on their artistic output to gain recognition. Both approaches can be effective, but demand consistency. Whether an artist builds a strong personal connection with their audience or lets their work speak for itself, maintaining a clear and recognizable brand will open doors to long-term success.

Additionally, the study suggests that differentiation is not only based on artistic style but also on how artists communicate and present themselves. Some interviewees emphasized their ability to connect with clients on a personal level, like a friend, as a key branding element, while others focused purely on the artistic merit for the work. The core idea remains the same: standing out requires an artist to embrace what makes themselves unique. Many artists also noted that their brand evolved over time, with experience and self-reflection playing a role in refining their image and approach.

The findings on this study can also be connected to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, particularly in the context of how tattoo artists build their personal brands. The base level of hierarchy — physiological needs — relates to securing a stable income through client bookings, which is often achieved through consistent personal branding and loyal clientele.

Safety needs integrate to financial stability, workplace safety and sustainable career. Moving up to belongingness and social needs, which are particularly relevant in the tattoo industry that is all about personal connections (colleagues, clients). Several interviewees noted that clients are drawn to artists they feel a connection with. Engaging with audience and creating sense of community can be done through social media. Additionally, the author suggests collaborating and networking with other artists and participating in events and conventions to create a sense of belonging while being visible. Esteem needs, including recognition and respect, are achieved through differentiation and well-established brand identity, possible awards and professional growth. Some interviewees expressed that their branding choices helped them feel more confident in their work and reinforcing sense of professional identity. Finally, self-actualization represents the goal of personal branding: the ability to fully express artistic identity and have freedom to choose the projects, making a full-time job as a tattoo artist feel enjoyable and meaningful, rather than simply attracting clients for financial stability. (Maslow, 1943)

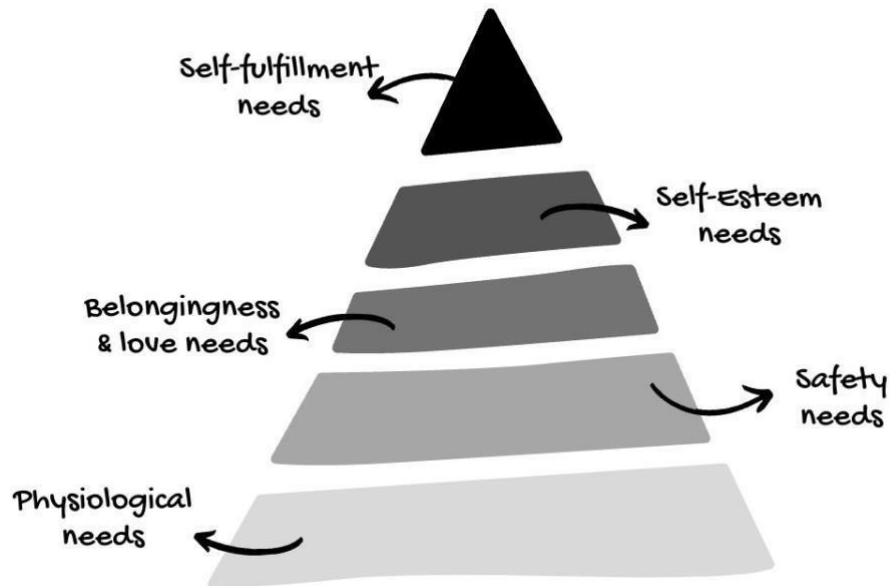


Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Personal branding in the tattoo industry is more than just a marketing tool. It is an essential part of professional and personal development. From securing financial stability to achieving artistic self-actualization, an effective and functional personal brand supports the artist at their career. The most effective branding strategies are those that allow artists to work within their comfort zones while maintaining visibility and differentiation. Whether an artist chooses to be highly present online, focus solely on their art, or build strong client relationships, the key takeaways from this study suggest that consistency, self-awareness, and adaptability are fundamental to long-term success.

5.1 Own Learnings

Personal brand is something we all have. Some maintain and develop it; some might not even know they have one. Unlike a company brand, it is not a separate entity but rather an extension of who we are. Through this study, it became clear that successful personal branding is not about perfection or highly strategic public persona, but about embracing one's identity and highlighting what makes you *you*. Following the ways others have branded themselves might give some motivation and tips but directly copying someone goes against the authenticity principle.

Interviewing different artists with same questions and exploring their brand identities reinforced one key takeaway — not mandatory, but beneficial: embracing individuality is beneficial, unique characteristics should not be hidden. Whether it is dialect or accent, something in physical appearance, personal interests, that differentiate one from others, these unique elements contribute to a distinct and recognizable personal brand. Instead of trying to fit into an idea of what a personal brand should be, focusing on what feels right and natural strengthens the brand's foundation. After all, it is not about what is good for the brand, but what feels right for you. The more genuinely values and personality are expressed, the stronger and more sustainable the personal brand will be.

Personal branding is not a static concept but an evolving process. Recognizing that branding is dynamic allows a natural growth and adaptation. Perhaps the most important first step is learning to know yourself and reflecting how others perceive you. Tattoo artists should focus on what feels authentic and sustainable in the long run. This helps build client relationships based on trust and shared values, ultimately making the work more meaningful and profitable. This study can help tattoo artists, including the author, understand why and how personal branding affects their careers. It provides insights into how self-presentation across different channels can attract the right clients and strengthen professional identity.

5.2 Further Research

The existing research on the tattoo industry remains limited, with most studies on tattoo industry concentrating on customer behaviours, health impacts, or the history of tattoos. There is a significant gap in studies exploring the professional and business aspects of tattoo artists, particularly regarding personal branding and its long-term effects on career sustainability and development.

This study provides initial insights into personal branding in the tattoo industry, but several areas would require further exploration. Future research could investigate personal branding of tattoo artists in broader context, or its effects on brand loyalty among clients, and how this loyalty translates into repeat business and referrals. Additionally, similar research as this done from client's point of view with quantitative surveys, could give different perspective on personal branding in the tattoo industry. Also, finding out how much clients base their decision on personal brand and reputation, compared to merely technical

skills, pricing or availability. This could help the tattoo artists understanding what areas they need to invest in.

In the future, studying how different marketing-areas influence the branding of tattoo artist. Based on this study, the author has presupposition that the smaller population, the looser requirements and different strategies. Also, comparing cultural differences: how Finnish or Nordic tattoo culture or personal branding differs from the rest of the world? Moreover, a comparative study between tattoo artists and other creative industry entrepreneurs, could offer insights into how independent artists navigate branding challenges.

While digital platforms are widely used across industries for marketing purposes and platforms to connect with clients, in the tattoo industry, social media serves not only as a promotional tool but also as an extension of the artist's personal brand and artistic identity. Unlike in many other fields, where branding often revolves around a company or a product, tattoo artists rely heavily on their individuality and personal reputation. This could be a relevant aspect for further research—how much of a tattoo artist's success is dependent on their social media presence versus their real-world reputation and artistic credibility.

Given the increasing influence of digital marketing and social media in personal branding, research on the effectiveness of various content strategies, audience engagement methods, and algorithmic impacts on visibility could further support tattoo artists in building sustainable brands. Additionally, exploring ethical considerations in personal branding—such as authenticity versus curated self-presentation—would contribute to a deeper understanding of branding's role in artistic identity and professional success.

Overall, while this study exposes the importance of personal branding in the tattoo industry, further research is necessary to explore its full implications and evolving trends.

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Appendix 1. Interview Questions

Interview Questions, Thesis Pennala Viivi

1. How long have you worked in the tattoo industry?
2. Do you specialize in some style? If yes, do you sometimes turn down projects that don't fit your style even if you are capable of technically doing them? Why or why not?
3. How would you define "personal brand"? What does it mean to you?
4. What do you consider a successful personal brand in tattoo industry?
5. How do you differentiate yourself from other tattoo artists?
6. How did you discover your own brand? Have you developed it?
7. What role does your personality hold in your personal brand? How much do you give from yourself to clients? Do you set some boundaries?
8. Do you think it is more important to follow trends or to stay true to your own style? Has your brand evolved during your career?
9. Where is your brand visible, online and non-online? What platforms do you use?
10. Do you have a clear strategy for maintaining and developing your brand, or is it more spontaneous? Are there some challenges?
11. What aspects of a personal brand do you think attract tattoo clients the most?
12. What advice would you give to other tattoo artists about personal branding?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add to this topic?

Appendix 2. Data Management Plan



Thesis Data Management Plan

Thesis title: Personal Branding in Tattoo Industry

Thesis author: Viivi Pennala

1 Description of thesis research data

The research data consists of semi-structured interviews with full-time tattoo artists. The aim of the interviews is to learn personal branding strategies of tattoo artists and how branding guides their job.

The data is collected through interviews which are conducted primarily in English. If needed, interviewees can use Finnish to explain themselves more correctly or detailed. The interviews are recorded using iPhone voice recorder. The recordings will only be used for mentioned thesis purposes. The recordings will not be published.

The research participants are full-time tattoo artists from Finland. Full-time status is defined as working exclusively as a tattoo artist without additional employment in another field and earning a primary income from tattooing. The number of interviewees will be 3-5. The final thesis will include no personal information or identifiers. The collected data will be analysed as audio files. If necessary for the analysing progress, transcripts will be done.

In addition to the primary data collected through interviews, this thesis utilizes secondary sources such as published research, articles, and publicly available online content related to thesis topic. All secondary sources will be properly cited according to HAMK's citation guidelines, and copyright regulations will be followed.

2 Management and storage of the research data

Audio recordings and possible transcriptions will be transferred from iPhone to thesis author's own password-protected computer, where they will be stored. After securely transferred, audios will be deleted from iPhone. As a backup, data is stored in HAMK OneDrive. Only thesis author and, if necessary, the thesis supervisor will have access to collected data.

3 Processing of personal data and sensitive data

No personal data will be published in the thesis, such as names, phone number, email, address, or other identifiers. The interview data will be anonymized, meaning that any identifying details will be removed before analysis and reporting. Each file will be named "Interviewee" and numerated from 1 to 5 (=Interviewee 1., Interviewee 2., Interviewee 3., Interviewee 4., Interviewee 5.).

All interviewees are full-time tattoo artists based in Finland. The final thesis may mention their geographic location and profession, but no other identifying information will be included.

The research does not involve the collection of sensitive personal data, such as politics, health related topics or ethnicity. The interviewees will be informed about data processing through a privacy notice, which will outline how the data is handled.

4 Ownership of research data

The thesis author owns the collected interview data. The results of the thesis research belong to the thesis author. The research is conducted independently for the author's own entrepreneurship, no external organizations or commissioners have ownership over the data. Secondary sources are used and cited according to HAMK's citation guidelines. The author does not hold any ownership for secondary sources.

5 Further use of research data after the completion of the thesis

The research data will not be reused after the completion of the thesis. The author will store data securely for one year after thesis approval to ensure possible verification. After this, all data (audio recordings and possible transcriptions) will be securely deleted.