



## **Artist Branding: from a local event to international television format**

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**Abstract**

The objective of this thesis was to explore the basics of branding an artist against the artistic journey and real-life experiences of an emerging Vietnamese-born artist. The thesis explored the building of the artist brand of the author over a period of several years. The knowledge on branding was studied and tested from a personal perspective. Finally, the findings of the study were used for creating a video toolkit for artist branding.

The theoretical framework consists of theories on branding in general followed by a more detailed discussion on personal branding and branding an artist. Three events relevant for the author's artist brand development are presented: October Beatz concert, the Karaoke World Championship in Finland and The Voice of Finland.

The methodological approach of the study is qualitative. Ethnographic methods are used as basis for the study: auto-ethnography and netnography. Additionally, Hofstede's cultural dimensions are used as foundation for the discussion. The author's personal voice and performance coach was also interviewed for gaining further insights on artist branding in practice.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that attentive and careful planning based on professional knowledges is utterly important in positioning and branding an artist in the industry. The thesis also proposes some possible strategies and important elements to be considered in branding an artist. The thesis is aimed to help emerging artists who want to position themselves in the entertaining industry.

**Keywords**

Artist branding, branding, autoethnography, music industry, October #Beatz, Karaoke World Championship, The Voice of Finland

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## 1 Introduction

An emerging artist faces many challenges when developing the musician brand. Some young artists do not acknowledge the impact and importance of artist branding in their musical path. This product-based thesis presents a tool pack for self-branding in the music industry which based on the brand journey of an emerging Vietnamese-born artist. The study examines three different types of events and their role for the artist's brand development over a period of five years, from spring 2016 to 2021.

As a point of departure, I position myself in the study as a young Vietnamese singer in a Finnish music context. The approach of the study is autoethnographic, since the author is strongly present throughout the thesis. I believe that my journey as an emerging Vietnamese artist living in Finland is quite unique and could help other foreign young musicians navigate in the Finnish music scene.

The reason for choosing this topic is to explore the value of branding in the development of an emerging artist. The branding challenge is to get recognition and it demands a lot of determination, courage and hard work. One way of getting visibility is to participate in events; for a beginner artist, any small event would be a start. In this thesis, I present a local Helsinki-based event, October #Beatz 2016, which was the first major concert that I performed in after moving to Finland. Secondly, I took part in the Finnish qualification of the Karaoke World championship, where I had the possibility to encounter and receive training from professional coaches from the industry. The third event examined is the international TV-format, The Voice of Finland season 10 (2021), in which I took part as a competitor.

The participation in these three events mentioned above contributed to my brand development. The purpose of this study is to use my own brand development experience as well as interviews with experts from the music industry as foundation for a video where I present a tool kit for how to enter the Finnish music scene.

My own subjective experience is reflected against findings from interviews with an expert in the field, artist coach Christa Renwall.

Branding a company, an organization, or a product, is fundamental to the success of a company. Additionally, as modern time came by with its nonstop development in socialization, human interaction and the media, branding people is a rising subject that if one is able to hold the key to, he will stand out and easily succeed in his field.

Defining myself as a part-time artist, I instinctively felt the need to build my own brand, or more simply speaking, be aware of my personality, which music genre I follow, what direction I choose to go and the image in which I want people to see me in the music world.

Within the theoretical framework, the Vietnamese culture will also be investigated because of the effects it had on how I and the Vietnamese organizers in Music For Friends perceived brands, branding and self-branding. There will be comparisons between Vietnamese collective mindset and the western world's individualistic mindset, therefore explains the conflict between different branding approaches which I and the organizing team carried out. Finally, in this part I will also study traditional branding, branding in the show industry and how it can be applied to my case.

After the basic introduction, the introduction for the events used as background for the branding journey will follow. The theoretical framework presents branding theories from artist branding perspective, and research methodology will be introduced, and cultural study will be demonstrated. This will be followed by the explanation of my artist branding journey through the three main events during the years. This autobiographical account paves the way for a professional discussion about artist branding. The outcome of the study is a tool kit for artist branding.

Finally, this thesis process helps me reviewing my brand, how I have done my self-branding, how I can apply branding theory to develop my own brand in the future. The findings from my branding journey serve as basis for the tool kit in the thesis, which provides helpful guidelines for young and emerging artist who are interested in finding their path in music.

## **2 Events in the Artist Branding Journey**

Participating in music events has always been the fundamental activities for serious artists who wish to enhance popularity and develop performing skills. Physical events offer a unique interactive experience where people can establish new connections and networks. Moreover, there has not been any experience comparable to listening to live music with other audiences who share common interests. Live music events also serve as an excellent opportunity for artists to gain practical experience in the industry.

This chapter introduces the three main events organized during the years 2016-2021, in which my artist branding were executed and tested. The events were presented in timely order, reflecting my development in artist branding over time.

### **2.1 October #Beatz 2016**

#### **2.1.1 Music For Friends Helsinki**

MUSIC FOR FRIENDS HELSINKI (MFF as abbreviation) is a music club founded in 2012 by Nguyen Cao Cuong, a Vietnamese student living in Finland, as a small community for music loving Vietnamese students living in Finland. Every year, the music club welcomed new generations of new-coming Vietnamese students. So far, the number of new and old members might be as many as one hundred. (Music For Friends 2022.)

#### **2.1.2 October #Beatz 2016 by Music For Friends**

MFF organized a series of annual event from 2014 to 2017: October #Beatz. In October #Beatz, members of MFF performed live music which are mostly cover songs. In these annual concerts, members of MFF club took part in both the event planning process and the performances themselves. I participated as member of the planning committee as well as performing artist in October #Beatz 2016.

The concert was held on the 8th of October 2016 at Gloria Cultural Arena, Helsinki, with the theme "New Dawn". Gloria Area is a venue where events such as music, art performance, dance and theater acts take place. The venue offered professional, modern equipment for high quality audio and lighting system. The concert hall can seat 350 audiences, and maximum capacity is 500 people.

Music For Friends was able to receive a grant of 1100 euros from the Youth Affairs Center for organizing #OctoberBeat 2016. The organizer applied for a grant of 2985 euros in May 2016 and submitted an expense report in December 2016 (Päätökset 2016.)

The event had a distinctive characteristic of being organized by students voluntarily, there was no salary or tangible reward presented. This led to several complications regarding consistent motivations, common guidelines and leadership, and finally, the professionalism and expertise in performing arts.

The event organizers divided into teams: management, artistic committee, marketing, logistics, and performers. Management team organized rehearsals and human resources; the artistic committee is responsible for the music quality and artistic decisions; marketing team oversaw ticket sales, planning and execution in marketing. Logistics took responsibility in recruiting volunteers, makeup and hair artists, logistic matters on the event day. The first half of the concerts included music from Pop, Rock, and Pop/Rock genre, while the second half performed Jazz and Indie music.

In chapter 5, I will discuss my brand as an artist within the scope of October Beatz 2016, the brand of the concert, how they conflicted; they also present the process of my self-branding until the concert D-day and therefore stated the lessons I have learned on personal branding as an artist.

## **2.2 Karaoke World Championship**

While October Beatz 2016 was a great opportunity to execute my artistic ability and branding concept, its scope was humble as the event planners and participants were amateurs, i.e Vietnamese students, and Vietnamese living in Helsinki area. A wider scoped event was expected as a next step for artist branding examination. That came with the decision of participating in Karaoke World Championship competition.

The Karaoke World championship is believed to be the world's biggest and most prestigious global talent competition and karaoke event. It was organized annually since it was founded in 2003 in Finland. The aim is to embrace a passion for music, and friendship through singing. Every year, the event starts with national level competitions to choose the best two or three representative talents to participate in the international round afterwards. The national level is held in early autumn and the international Finals are held in November. The restaurant Tulisuu delma in Tikkurila, Vantaa, Finland has been used as the event venue for several years (Karaoke World Championship 2022.)



In the Finnish national level, the elimination round is organised in Spring and early summer. Depending on the competition's circumstances, a semi-final round might or might not take place before the list of finalists is published. There are a few main category, primarily solo category, following by the possibility of Duets or Seniors category depends on the year. Each competitor would come on stage, perform their songs, points would be given and decide the positions and results.

Even though Karaoke World Championship is a very interesting competition which promotes passion and joy in singing, it is not yet a professional singing competition. That leaves space for The Voice of Finland to be introduced as a further level production.

## **2.3 The Voice of Finland**

### **2.3.1 Introduction**

The Voice of Finland is an annual Finnish reality singing competition show, which is a branch of the franchise reality show format The Voice, originated as The Voice of Holland from The Netherlands. Its popularity since then has raised exponentially and was adapted into many versions in 145 countries' networks. In 2021, The Voice of Finland celebrated its tenth-year anniversary, as the tenth season is broadcasted nationally on Nelonen television channel.

"Reality television is a genre of television programming that documents purportedly unscripted real-life situations. Competition-based reality shows typically feature gradual elimination of participants, either by a panel of judges, by the viewership of the show, or by the contestants themselves." (Wikipedia, 2022)

Despite providing great entertainment and exposure for participants, many reality television formats received criticism such as misleading editing, unauthentic storylines, manipulating contestant behaviors and outcomes etc. (Wikipedia, 2022). Participants need to be aware of their rights and in controlled behaviors when joining the shows.

### **2.3.2 Rules**

The factor that set this show apart from others is the focus on the singing talent. The show starts with several preliminary rounds, then Blind Audition round is the first being aired on Television. In Blind Audition round, the four judges' chair turn their back towards the

stage, so that the judge would only hear the competitors' singing voice without seeing the performance. If the judges like what they hear, they would push the choosing button to turn around and see that competitor, indicate a wish to invite him/her to their team for coaching. If there are more than one chair turning around, the right to choose team belongs to the singer. When Blind Audition round finishes, all the judges' team (four) would be filled and proceed to the next round: Battle Round.

In the Battle Round, each judge needs to pair up members from their own team, to perform a competing performance. The winner from the pairs moves on to the following round: The Knockouts. In this round, each singer performs a full performance by themselves, and result is decided by their coach. The remaining singers, supposedly the strongest contenders from each team, then proceed to the final stage, namely Live shows.

Different countries have some variations on how these Live shows occur and how many are being held. In Finland, after several Live show's episodes, each coach has one remaining competitor, and in the Finale, they will compete for the 1<sup>st</sup> place, named "The Voice". The results combined both from televoting and the coaches' decision.

#### **2.4 Learning outcomes from artist branding perspective**

These three events which I participated had expanded scope, size and professionalism. October #Beatz 2016 was amateur and lacked in leadership as well as professional art skills; Karaoke World Championship was more professionally organized and an established event, while participants were still somewhat local and belong to limited demographic groups; and The Voice of Finland was a branded professional Television show which is a part of a worldwide franchise.

The upgraded levels from the event witnessed my development and maturity in artistic ability, self-awareness and branding strategy. The experience from previous events fuelled skills and knowledge for the following ones, which will be demonstrated more vividly in chapter 5

### **3 Brand, personal brand and artist brand**

Some empirical studies were carried out in order to ensure the effectiveness in practical branding and academic value of the thesis.

Introduce the chapter

#### **3.1 Brand definition**

Brand is either a name, term, design, symbol or a set of features that identifies on seller's good or service as distinct from other sellers, as it is defined by American Marketing Association (AMA) (American Marketing Association, 2012) (Hietajärvi 2012). A brand can be given from a company to a product they have, a service they offer, or a whole organisation themselves. Businesses have been using branding as a fundamental principle in their process of designing a new product, as well as developing new services; be it used well, branding can become an essential force which bring success to a company's marketing path (Hietajärvi 2012).

Establishing the name of a product alone is just a part of branding. Branding is setting and building a ground for a product and then maintaining and developing it so that the brand's value can increase. In business, a sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) can be obtained by mastering the branding concepts such as brand equity, brand identity and brand strategy for a company's product or service. Branding process considers and figures carefully all the factors and components that could potentially harm or benefit the company. Therefore, a strong brand would help a company grow in finance, at the same time give the company a clue to find out possible upcoming expansions of a brand family (Hietajärvi 2012).

#### **3.2 Branding people**

Branding people is a relatively new phenomena, and less research has been conducted in this field. However, the rise of self-help books and social media gave a sign to more awareness about this subject. The United States of America stood out as a ground-breaking country to standardise personal branding. (Hietajärvi 2012). The rising trend of media platform like YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn has been giving ordinary people a dreamland to show their personalities to the public, therefore self-branding has become essential in recent years.

To demonstrate the concept of people branding in the digital age, a few practical examples can be mentioned. Lily Singh, a Canadian YouTube personality, started her YouTube channel *ILSuperwomanII* in 2010. With her relatable sense of humour, she attracted 14 million subscribers on her channel, and she got her own late-night show on the NBC television network, reported in March 2019. Her videos are comedic, relating closely to young people's aspects and situations in life, which brings her closer to the majority of YouTube audiences: young people. Coming from Indian, she turned her origin into a strong point in her comedies very elegantly. Besides, she also played "Lilly's family members" roles all by herself, describing a family life which most people, not only of Indian origin, but also from other roots, experienced and related. Comfortably expressing own opinions and personality, she shined through the platform to which millions of videos are upload every day.

Another outstanding name from the YouTube society is Tyler Oakley, an American activist and author, who started his YouTube journey since 2007. He used his charisma and natural light-hearted aura to create influences on social issues such as health care, education, and create awareness about suicidal in LGBTQ+ youth. Having 7.5 million subscribers on his YouTube channel, he inspired many people in the LGBT community to have a positive mindset, especially for those who faced homophobia against them.

In conclusion, as every person is unique and has their own personalities and mindset, they are giving own brand at birth. It is meaningful and essential to define and build our own brand, and as the new wind of social media is embracing the modern life, branding people start to familiarise itself with the people who needs.

### **3.3 Branding artist**

#### **3.3.1 Brand identity in branding artist**

Brand identity is an array of brand associations and salience that the brand strategist aspires to build and preserve. Brand identity plays an importance role in providing the brand with direction, purpose, and meaning (Aaker 1996, 68.) According to this theory, an artist's identity is the set of perceived points that public has towards the artist, which that artist plans and wishes to create or maintain.

According to Aaker's model, brand as a person and other branding scopes have in common the brand essence, core identity and extended identity. Aaker's brand identity scopes

system is a great template on which one can rely to analyse the potential to build and complete their brand's identity.

According to David A. Aaker, there are four brand scoping aspects/ points of view we can use to look at a brand: as a product, as an organization, as a person or as a symbol (Aaker 1996, 79.) Brand as a person is somewhat different than other type of brands in business, because it's always changing according to preference and is intangible. However, it holds the same key elements as, for example, branding a product: it consists of who the brand is, the target audiences (of which feedback can bring benefits to the brand), and lastly, the brand's perceived quality values (Hietajärvi, 2012).



Figure 1. Brand identity perspectives (Aaker, 1996:79)

In the case of branding an artist, the core identity is the core values, visions and competencies of the person. The extended identities include additional attributes that helps complete the core identity of the brand, such as the extra services coming with the product, the symbols and slogans connecting to the brand, the marketing strategies etc. All these attributes take part in completing the brand's identity and enhance the core values (Hietajärvi, 2012).

Identifying an artist brand has its challenges. Strategically, an artist shall be aware of "the brand image trap", which happens when brand image becomes brand identity, rather than an aspect of it. The problem is, it lets the customers (audiences) dictate what you are (Aaker 1996, 70.). Beside listening to customers' voice saying what they want, brand identity also needs to reflect the soul and vision of the brand (Aaker 1996, 70.)

What is the difference between brand image and brand identity? “While brand image is usually passive and looks to the past, brand identity should be active and look to the future, reflecting the associations that are aspired for the brand. While brand image tends to be tactical, brand identity should be strategic” (Aaker 1996, 70.)

An important component of artist brand identity is brand personality. (Aaker 1996, 150-151.) introduced a few ways how brand personality helps constructing brand’s identity: enriching understanding, contributing to a differentiating identity, guiding the communication effort, and creating brand equity. The last-mentioned role was the most relevant to branding an artist.

People use music to express themselves. An artist brand can choose to build and develop a personality which is appealing to the audiences as a tool to express themselves. It is necessary to understand how the brand helps express a personality. Creating a set of feelings or emotions attached to the brand (i.e happy, fierce, quirky etc), construct the brand as audiences’ personality badge, and lastly, infusing the brand into part of the audiences’ selves. (Aaker 1996, 156.)

### **3.3.2 Brand equity in branding artist**

Brand-related attributes which make up a brand’s value is brand equity, such as awareness, brand’s perceived value and loyalty. Branding a person has brand quality create a background for a person to base his or her value on.

Personal branding’s equity can be summarised as followed (Aaker 1996,8.), modified by Hietajärvi:

1. Brand awareness
2. Brand loyalty – reputation, recommendation
3. Perceived quality – perceived value, quality
4. Brand associations
5. Other brand assets: competitive advantage

Following are how these equities can be adapted in branding an artist.

Brand awareness:

This equity indicates how a brand is presented in the customer’s (in this case, audiences) mind. There are three levels of awareness measured: recognition, recalling, and dominance (Aaker 1996, 10.). Artists shall aim, as the beginning level, for audiences to recognize them (name, voice, face, performing style), following by recalling their name when a

certain genre/ musical category was mentioned, then the ultimate level of awareness is dominance: their name is almost the only one in audiences mind in certain categories. Research shows that customers instinctively prefer a brand that they have seen before to a totally new one (Aaker 1996, 10.). However, show business requires an artist to always freshen up his/her image. Therefore, an effective approach would be continually maintaining and improving the core values (vocals, performing skills, etc), while freshen up the image every now and then. (Montoya 2003.) suggested one principle in creating brand awareness: differentiate yourself, focus on the highlights that set you apart.

#### Brand loyalty:

It is much cheaper to maintain existing customers than attracting new ones; seeking growth by reaching out to new customers while neglecting existing ones is a common and costly mistake (Aaker 1996, 21). How can an artist maintain and enhance audiences' loyalty? (Ashraf, Ilyas, Imtiaz, & Ahmad 2018) considered these following key factors in managing customers loyalty: Service quality, corporate image, perceived values.

An adaptation to branding artist can be presented as followed: to maintain audiences' loyalty, an artist is advised to deliver consistent quality performances and behaviors, at least not far below from audiences' expectation; develop the artist image according to plan; and deliver good values for the price charged. Being consistent and persistent in promotion; repetition is key, suggested by (Montoya 2003).

#### Perceived quality:

Many businesses consider perceived quality to be the most important equity, and a prominent aspect in their brand identity, because it is often the center of customers' purchase. (Aaker 1996, 19.) Creating good perceptions of quality almost always requires substance. Generating high quality products and service requires a thorough understanding of what quality means from customers' perspective.

In branding artist, it means that the artists first need to develop his/her own expertise on the field of art that they perform, when simultaneously understand what is relatable to their target audiences. Adele, a famous singer from the UK, became such a huge star because her songs wrote about emotions that every person experience: heart breaks, self-doubt, self-finding, with small details in the lyrics that catch both attention and spark interest from audiences, accompanied by her rich, soulful, and powerful vocals.

#### Brand associations:

Customers' mind often link a brand with some images, attributes or symbols, which are driven by the brand identity (Aaker 1996, 25.). In branding artist, audiences can associate

an artist with a product that he/she promotes, a certain lifestyle, fashion brands, an object made iconic by them etc. It's important make a mindful branding plan to steer the set of associations to help enhance the brand identity.

### **3.3.3 Case study: Lady Gaga – bizarreness in the music industry**

This chapter presents analysis on a special example from the United State's music industry, Lady Gaga, and how she used bizarreness as a strong force in her artist branding. Lady Gaga was chosen because the case study is a perfect example of artist branding done right with a distinctive set of brand equity, established brand identity and long termed brand strategy.

Lady Gaga's real name is Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, she was born in March 1986. Before her professional career in music, she participated Colaborative Arts Project 21, through New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

She rose to fame with her infectious debut album "The Fame", with mega hit singles like "Just Dance" and "Poker Face". Until 2022, after only five solo studio albums, she has brought home twelve Grammy Awards, an Academy Awards and other numerous prestigious Awards. Firstly, these musical achievements proved her vocal and musical ability. Gaga has a lyric Mezzo-Soprano voice, with dark timbre yet dynamic quality which helps with her successful delivery in various genres of music. She received vocal training early on in life with Broadway-style teaching (Pop Smarts 2021).

Gaga took a great deal of aspiration from legendary artists such as Michael Jackson, The Beatles, Stevie Wonder, Queen, Led Zeppelin etc. Her idols range is wide, ranging from dance-pop singers (i.e Madonna, Michael Jackson) to glam rock artists (i.e David Bowie), as well as visual artists with a flamboyant style (i.e. Andy Warhol).

Lady Gaga stands out with remarkably from the rest of the industry, using bizarreness/quirkiness in musical material and fashion sense as her asset in branding. In her early career, these attributes were so prominent that they distracted the public's attention to her core value as a singer, the vocal. Following are a few examples of her controversial actions:

- Wearing a dress made from raw beef to the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards.



- Had a brief meeting with then-president Barack Obama wearing 16-inch heels.
- She took numerous “quirky”, “campy” fashion concepts to major events such as the VMAs, the Met Galas etc.



Image 1 Lady Gaga at the 2010 MTV Video Music Award. Source: Getty images

Besides, she is known for her contribution to assist and support LGBT community, which is a considerable attribute to her brand. She is lovingly called “a gay icon” by worldwide fans. Moreover, she did plenty of campaigns to gather donation and raise awareness to HIV-funds and communities, human right activist centres etc. One of the prominent themes that lasted through her music career is spreading the message of being true to oneself and self-love, erasing the border amongst races and religions.

What could explain the success in Gaga’s branding implementation? (Koku 1995) noted that artists’ tendency to use the bizarreness or outrageous became a permanent part of the industry, “the bizarre sells in the field of entertainment”. Lady Gaga surely has an impressive vocal talent, well-developed vocal techniques (as suggested by her twelve Grammy Awards). Yet why did she implement the out-of-the-norms branding strategy? An artist must add something special to his/her skills and talent to attract a noteworthy number of fans, whether it be attractive appearances, luck, or charisma (Hamlin 1994). Naturally, bizarreness and outrageous activities are unique and make artists to be more easily visible, seen differently from everyone else (Koku 1995.) To further discuss, bizarreness makes the artist more effortlessly become a conversation piece. Therefore, it can become

a brand's trademark and helps reducing transaction costs in a homogeneous market (Barzel 1977).

To summarize, Lady Gaga successfully implemented the above theories into her branding:

1. Brand identity

While successfully creating forgettable styles and impressive brand image, Gaga always accompany them with meaningful messages in her songs, quality vocals, and well-rehearse performances with impeccable stage presence. With every public appearance, she always can answer clearly why she became an artist and her artistic missions.

2. Brand equity

- Brand awareness: she achieved the highest level in her generation, as she was amongst the most mentioned name when it comes to dance-pop genre, or self-love, self-accepting song repertoire.
- Brand loyalty: she successfully created and develop a strong fan base world-wide. Her fan club is called "Little Monsters", attracting people from many ages and ethnic group. Because she was being consistent and strategic with her image, while constantly freshen up, changing her images with surprises, she reassured the loyalty from her audiences.
- Perceived quality: since 2015 when she remarkably drew attention to her impressive vocal ability in the OSCAR Ceremony with "Sound of Music" (Julie Andrews), she has change public's perception on her brand's value, from being mostly outrageous to being bizarre with excellent vocals.
- Brand association: there are a few ways that Gaga used to create associations to her brand: song writing style and lyrics, to her activism, therefore she was able to catch audiences from different "boxes": people of colours, people of different sexual orientations, people who struggle with their identity. In her early days, she created an unreal, outrageous image, but in recent years, when she was very well recognized, she simplified her looks yet maintaining her core artistry, paving the way to an event more relatable brand.

### 3.3.4 Case study: Adam Lambert

This chapter examine another branded Pop/Rock artist, who has been and will always be my idol in the singing realm: Adam Lambert. As a talented LGBT superstar, his art is worth looking up to. The following analysis explains why he became my idol.

Adam Lambert is an American singer and songwriter. Since his ascendent to fame from the reality Television contest American Idol 2008, he has successfully developed his own artist brand, image and music with over 3 million albums and 5 million singles sold world-wide (Wikipedia 2022).

Even though he was a runner-up in American Idols 2008, Lambert became one of the most popular and iconic artists who came out from the competition. His artist assets include dynamic vocal performance with an impeccable tenor technique and a blend of theatrical elements in his performances.

Lambert's artist brand can be analyzed in the above format of brand identity and brand equity:

#### 1. Brand identity

Lambert uses his theatrical education background as an artistic compass for his stage appearances and performances. His most prevalent music genres include Pop, synthetic Pop, and Rock. In public eyes, he received an association to Lady Gaga, in terms of boundary breaking styles and undeniable individuality. "Just as now Lady Gaga is bringing back real glam rock for women, Adam is opening that door up for men" (Odell 2009). Audiences can easily realize that Lambert and Gaga had significant share of common idols such as Michael Jackson, Madonna, Led Zeppelin, Queen, David Bowie etc.

#### 2. Brand equity

- Brand awareness: Not being afraid of crossing gender-border, most of Lambert's look demonstrated a very flamboyant, Glam-rock style and energy. The most important factor is his unique tenor vocal, with a range of 3 octaves and 6 semitones (Wikipedia 2022). Queen's guitarist Brian May complimented Adam's voice: "I have to say I was completely blown away ... It's truly sensational." (Reiher 2009). His collaboration with the remaining active members from Queen for live-tours around the world also brought him closer to audiences since Queen was a legendary name.

- Brand loyalty: over the years, Adam won the hearts of many audiences, especially from the LGBT community because he was a LGBT advocacy and has done many social activism. Being concrete with his 'outrageous' music style and image and perfecting it over the years, Lambert's fans were ensured of the music and artistry quality. Taking heavy influences from creative legends in the industry (as mentioned above), Lambert bravely implemented the extravagant, aggressive embodiment of art into his music and it keeps the audiences excited and waiting for more.
- Perceived quality: as discussed, Lambert's theatrical performing style received his meticulous attention to detail (Wikipedia 2022). His unique fashion sense accompanied his immaculate vocal to create an all-round respectable and talented artist.
- Brand association: Adam Lambert's brand always associated with the flamboyant, sexy energy, often played with gender border. He is also a pride of LGBT community.



Image 2. Adam Lambert at the O2 stadium, Tuesday 12th December 2017. Queen. Author: Raph\_PH on flickr

## 4 Ethnography as a research method

This chapter presents theoretical findings on the main research method used in the thesis: ethnography, from which stemmed autoethnography and netnography. Following is Hofstede's academic theories on cultural models, including comparison between Vietnamese, the USA and Finland's cultures and their effects on my branding journey.

### 4.1 Ethnography as a research method

A major part of this thesis represents experiences and findings from the author's own personal perspective, so the use of first-person narration as "I" is more natural. Therefore, autoethnography, in combination with qualitative methodology (interviews) are the most appropriate research approaches.

Before autoethnography is being studied, the more general term, ethnography, shall be studied. According to (Coffey 2018, 2.), ethnography is one of the social research methods, which combines different qualitative research methods to study and understand cultural and social settings; the translation of "ethnography" comprises of "ethno" which means 'people' and "graphy" which means 'writing'. Using this method, the researcher submerges him/herself in the cultural settings subjected for study, using skills such as observation, listening, conversing, collecting documents and logging in information. Observation was said to be the critical approach in ethnography, because other methods such as interviewing or sending questionnaires would not suffice to reach the purpose of deeply understanding the needed cultural and social knowledge (Gobo 2008, 4.)

Ethnography as a research method is a branch of anthropology, the origin can be traced back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Coffey 2018, 3.). The initial need for ethnography was to study about distant non-Western cultures which were challenging using traditional research methods (Gobo 2008, 4.). In modern time, this research methods application has been extended, for example as a research method executed in organizations and study in details their cultural operations and suggest development. The benefits of ethnography method come from the flexibility in qualitative techniques used. (Neyland 2008, 9.)

Even though ethnography has become more and more popular as a research method for providing in-depth insights into specific culture and social settings, readers of this method are advised to be cautious, because ethnography is not a straightforward methodology. Due to the requirement of extensive researchers' involvement in the field being studied,

questions of objectivity, disproportionate researcher engagement, influence in outcomes from participants could be introduced as unwanted issues. (Neyland 2008, 9.)

#### **4.1.1 Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is a research approach with the aim of describing and analyze in a systemic manner the personal experience with leads to findings about cultural experience (Ellis 2004). (Poulos 2021, 4.) defined autoethnography as an academic writing genre that studies the author's lived experience, afterwards establish connection between the researcher's insight and self-identity, and different cultural aspects. "Performative autoethnography is a critically reflexive methodology resulting in a narrative of the researcher's engagement with others in particular sociocultural contexts" (Denzin & Lincoln 2013, 215). Regarding the purpose of autoethnography as a method, (Ellis, Adams & Jones 2017) mentioned a focus on personal experience, where everyday experience is impossible to be demonstrated through traditional research methods. In addition, another goal worth mentioning is to create written contents which could be accessed by larger audiences, mainly who are not in such academic settings (Ellis, Adams & Jones 2017).

The above definitions and purposes are perfectly suitable for the aim of this study. Furthermore, autoethnography uses a combination of various data gathering methods, including qualitative social research, such as observation, interviews, narrative observation etc ( Hill and Knox 2021), which allowed the author to gain the most accurate knowledge from cultural settings.

#### **4.1.2 Netnography**

Another research method that stemmed from ethnographic used in this thesis is netnography. Netnography is a qualitative method which consists of collecting and analyzing data shared freely on the Internet, including mobile application. The significant proportion of data collected from the Internet differentiates netnography from other anthropology approaches. (Kozinets 2015, 79.)

A similar definition was five: Netnography is the online research method which adapt to the communities and cultures created by computer mediated social interaction (Bowler G. M. 2010).

Netnography, through engaging activities such as online hanging-out, reflecting and connecting, is considered a participant-observational research approach. Similar to ethnography, netnography is a combination of many related methods: interviews, discourse analysis, semiotics, literally analysis, even videography. A successful netnographic research demands participation from the researcher, as described in (Kozinets 2015, 67.) “a human voice trying to find another human voice amidst the technology, and then write about the experience.”

Even though netnography methodology provides access to information and opinions which cannot be achieved by other means of research, combining information from online and offline are nonsensical. There are several factors contributing, such as: the semiotics of indexicality are noticeable in online settings; the deep and wide data collected in interpreted through human intelligence; in the Internet, messages are encoded within another messages. (Kozinets 2015, 69-70.)

Netnography as a research method is required in this thesis, because the thesis topic is dominantly in entertainment industry, in which the Internet and media plays a significant role in defining a brand. With effective use of netnography method, the author, as an artist, is able to collect and analyze useful information from the market for future branding.

## **4.2 Hofstede’s cultural model**

Geert Hofstede (born 1928 in the Netherlands) is a highly credited professor in anthropology worldwide. In 1991, after many years of researching and teaching cultures and social sciences, he published the first edition of the book “Cultures and Organizations: Software of the mind”, where he introduced Hofstede’s cultural model using ethnography research methodology. The model categorizes cultural differences into six dimensions: Power distance, Individualism vs Collectivism, Masculinity vs Femininity, Long-term or Short-term orientation, Uncertainty avoidance, and Indulgence vs Restraint.

In this chapter, Hofstede’s cultural model is used to compare the culture differences between Vietnam, the USA and Finland, because even though I come from Vietnam, trying to build my brand in Finland, my artist branding was heavily inspired by the North American way. Building brand in different countries requires knowledge of the differences between those countries’ cultures. (Taylor 1889) defined culture as “That complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law and customs and any other capabilities

and habits acquires by man as a part of society”. Geert H Hofstede conducted a widely respected study on the cultures dimensions which helps dissecting and comparing cultures from different countries. Out of six dimensions presented by Hofstede, the two most relevant to this study will be presented:

- Collectivism versus individualism
- Uncertainty avoidance

Below is cultural dimension index from Finland, Vietnam and the USA based on Hofstede’s model.

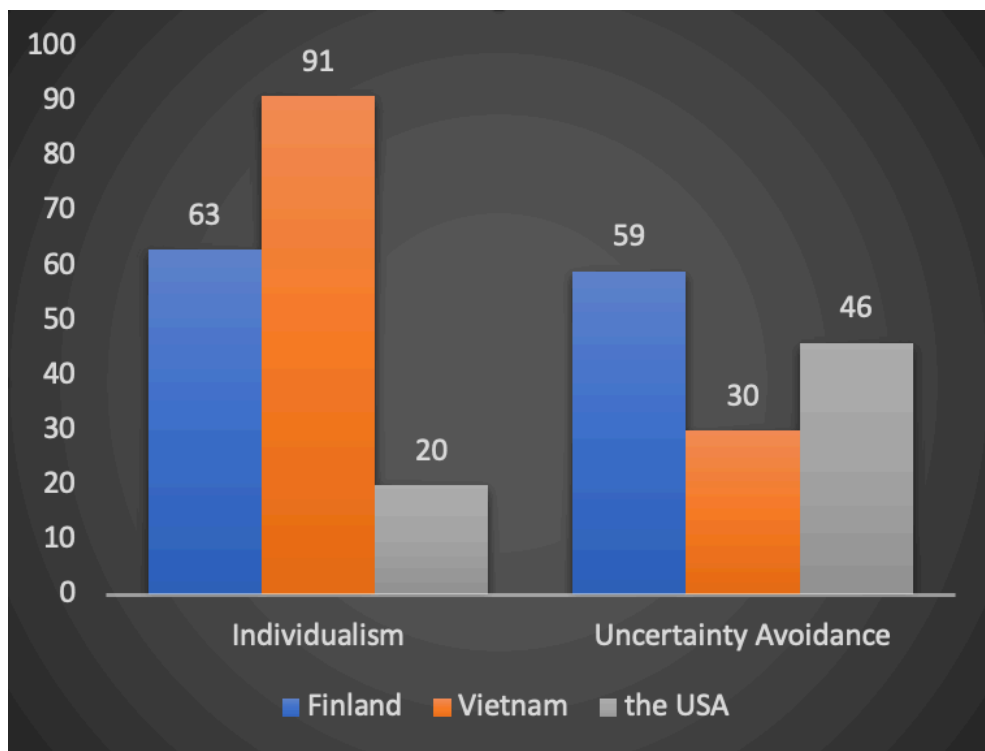


Figure 2. Hofstede index on the cultural dimensions (Pekkala after Hofstede)

#### 4.2.1 Collectivism versus individualism

To understand the dimension of individualism easily, we can look at modern societies as constructed by either “I”, “We”, or “They”. Realo (2008, in Nguyen 2013, 29) explained that in collectivism, the primary unit of society is a group (for example family, tribe, or state) and therefore, individuals are required to sacrifice themselves for the common interests; whereas individualism believes the values in which each human being think and judge independently and prioritize individuals’ sovereignty over their own interests and goals. Ramamoorthy (1998, in Nguyen 2013, 30) stated that the difference between collectivist and individualist stemmed from differences of orientation goals: individualism emphasizes self-interest, personal goals and personal achievement, competition is a key factor to



achieve one's goals. When individuals' rights and goals conflict with the group's rights and goals, the former always are put head of the latter

According to Hofstede (2010, 95-97.), Finland had individualism index of 63, the United States had a soaring index of 91, whereas Vietnam scored only 20. This indicated that Vietnam formed a typical collectivist culture, while Western cultures such as Finland and the USA belong to the individualist side of the spectrum. People coming from the opposite side of the spectrum might experience friction when working together (Nguyen 2013, 29.) These findings explain how an artist who was strongly inspired by the USA's individualistic culture would have difficulty cooperating with a collectivist culture such as Vietnam.

This dimension is relevant to branding artist because artistry is a product, which should be placed and strategized in appropriated cultures with suitable Individualism index to be appreciated.

#### **4.2.2 Uncertainty avoidance**

Uncertainty avoidance was described by (Hofstede 2010, 191.) as "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations". People with low "Uncertainty avoidance" level would feel more relax about future unknown events and have a "go with the flow" mindset, while people with high level of "uncertainty avoidance" would work hard trying to control the future outcomes, or they would not want to take risks and have more rigid mindset.

According to Hofstede (2010, 192-94.), Finland had the highest index amongst the three countries with 59, the United States followed with 46 and Vietnam with 30. This probably explained why Finland is a difficult market for foreign artists (presented in chapter 6 Discussion) because welcoming a foreign and new entertainment force might strike a feeling of uncertainty and ambiguity.

Finally, it might be interesting to mention Sweden, a neighbouring country to Finland, has an "Uncertainty avoidance" index of only 29 seems to express a more open attitude forward foreign entertainment.

This dimension is relevant because it is vital to strategizing the product's position in different markets.

### 4.3 Vietnamese culture as a background

This chapter provides a cultural background for discussion about October Beatz 2016 in chapter 5. Vietnam is geographically located in the Southeast Asia region of the world, sharing the same borders with People's Republic of China, Laos, and Cambodia. During the first millennial AD, Vietnam was under the heavy influence and dominance of Chinese dynasties, from which many modern cultural values were formed. A few popular Chinese based philosophies are Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (He et al 2011, in Nguyen 2016). Amongst those, Confucianism remarkably contributed and defined the collectivism in Vietnamese cultures with these key principles (Hofstede 2003, in Nguyen 2005):

- The stability of society is based on unequal relationships between people.
- The family is the primary unit of an organized social. A person is not a primary unit, but a member of a family.
- Virtuous behaviors towards others: treat others the same way you want to be treated.
- A person is highly respected if they work hard to acquire skills and education, be patient and persevering.

The above points explain some of the challenges when I worked in the Vietnamese community, as well as my cultural logics when stepping out to larger cultural settings.

### 4.4 Experience as a Vietnamese singer in the west

"The core identity – the central, timeless essence of the brand – is most likely to remain constant as the brand travels to new markets and products." (Aaker 1996, 68.)

Individualism is usually a prominent characteristic in an artist, therefore I adapt better in western cultures, where individualism is embraced. However, Finland seemed to be a difficult market for foreign artists (chapter 6 Discussion). Furthermore, working in a Vietnamese community, regardless of location, still followed the collectivism and cultural set mentioned above as it rooted deep in people's mind.

My experience and own interpretation evolved over time during branding for the three events with three different backgrounds, presented in the next chapter.

## 5 My artist branding journey through the years

In this chapter, I will examine my development in branding my own artist brand throughout the three main events: October Beatz 2016, KWC, and The Voice of Finland season 10 (2021)

### 5.1 Bibliography

To start off, I create a written form consisting of my basic facts as an artist

Name: Vy Pekkala

Year of birth: 1994

Country of origin: Vietnam

Language: Vietnamese, English,

Competence: singing, dancing, playing piano

Music genre: R&B, Pop, Pop Ballad, Rock Ballad

Favourite artists: Adam Lambert, Beyonce, Christina Aguilera, Jennifer Hudson, Whitney Houston, Celine Dion, Mariah Carey, Queen ...

I come from Ho Chi Minh city (Saigon), Vietnam, where I was raised by an East Asian education and cultural background. Growing up in a family with a humble financial status, my parents embraced a typical East Asian expectation from their children by wanting them to be as similar to others as possible (Collectivism – as mentioned in chapter 4.2.1) and grow up to do academic/classical jobs with high prestige (medical doctor, lawyer, engineer etc.). Working in the entertainment industry is highly undesirable because of its instability and lack of job security. I received piano lessons since I was 5, however it was expected to be nothing more than an added asset and hobby.

However, I was very different, and it happened to take almost 9 years after high school, living in a Western country for me to discover and accept who I am. Growing up, I had trouble accepting myself, because my mother's raising method made me feel like I was never enough. I often looked in the mirror, thinking I was too short, I was too fat; and my academic performance in school utterly defined the value of my existence. I went to one of the most prestigious high school in Vietnam and got admitted to the school's music club, one of the most prestigious hobby clubs in many high schools. Understandably, music club members were all proud students who went to a proud school, and that mindset did not accept difference and flaws. I had trouble fitting in and being accepted and my artistic self was an animal getting buried alive, gasping for air.

Having a chance to study abroad in Finland was life changing. For the first time after 19 years, I felt free and finally was able to make decisions for myself, including how I express myself and how I work with singing as a hobby. Haaga-Helia Porvoo campus offered a relatively relaxing and encouraging environment for students with no restrictions and difficult school rules, so I finally have a chance to get in touch with my musical activities. After two years living in Porvoo, I moved to Helsinki, the capital city where Music For Friends mainly located, and October Beatz 2016 was the first main musical event which I joined.

## **5.2 October Beatz 2016**

### **5.2.1 Branding plan and execution**

Being aware of artist branding's benefits coming into the concert, I built for myself a distinctive set of brand equity: appearance, singing voice, song choice and energy, using Adam Lambert, my pop idol, as a role model.

**Appearance:** It was decided that stage appearance is an important tool to show the audience who my artistic self is, as it can be perceived with the human's basic sense: the eyes. I used black leather top and gloves, to promote the rock aesthetic from the chosen song, which belonged to the Pop-Rock genre. I decided that there should be only one factor in the whole look that is out-standing and eye-drawing. That factor is a pair of beige ankle-boot stilettos. There were many reasons why a pair of high heels was chosen: art and music are non-binary; they should not be put into boxes, and that characteristic is worth embracing. It also showed my point of view on music's roles: to express feelings and stories as is - happiness is happiness, sadness is sadness, red is red, and blue is blue - regardless of the gender expression. Furthermore, it fit the edgy side of the song's lyrics, which boosted the performance's coherence.

**Singing voice:** larynx was positioned relatively higher for a more edgy, rock sound. At this time my singing was not trained by professional coaches, so I could only go by the feelings intended to be expressed as a guideline.

**Song choice:** After careful consideration, I chose a Vietnamese song written about thoughts on life, love, independence, and self-assurance in a relationship. The author was Vu Cat Tuong, a talented singer/ songwriter, who also played with gender borders often and artistically with her song writing.

**Energy:** There should always be a defined vibe, energy that is planned to be illustrated on stage, with purpose of carrying the performance's message across in an interesting,

creative and memorable way. The vibe planned for my performance was energetic, confident with strong delivery.



Image 2. Vy Pekkala performing at October Beatz 2016

## 5.2.2 Challenges and feedback

### Challenges

During the planning stage, there were a few challenges encountered, a few risks calculated, and some potential foreseen.

- From the event committee, and event participants

Challenges: the event manager, and the artistic committee's job is to maintain the coherence of the whole concert, and my ideology seemed to step too far out of their expected box. So naturally they challenged my performing idea and artistic vision, arguing that it would not fit to the concert's concept. On the other hand, event participants' opinions were divided: some were really interested in my idea due to its genuineness, while others criticized it for being too quirky and different to the norms.

Moreover, this plan for my performance required highly dedicated rehearsals, endurance, ability to sing and move in high heels, all of which had to be performed under pressure. At the time, I was not trained by any professionals, neither were anyone from the artistic committee, so ensuring quality for this demanding idea was understandably difficult. Therefore, the idea was marked as unsafe artistically.

I faced some tension atmosphere during the performance building stage, because the organizers want to take a conservative, safe approach, while I wanted to experiment and not being afraid of expressing bizarre ideas.

Risks: When decided to carry the performing plan forward, I risk the disapproval from the event planning committee and support from my fellow event participants, which inevitably played a role in an artist's success. I could feel some tension at certain points in time, most of which rooted from the lack of trust in my ability and performing idea. It was expected to receive opinion indicating that I was planning this idea purely to seek attention and to respond to my own desperate need of showing up.

Potentials: If the execution would reach the required level (in other words: the singing quality, movements on stage were ensured, atmosphere and spirit sufficiently transcended), a successful performance can ensure audiences' satisfaction and gain respects from the internal staffs.

- From the audiences

Challenges and risks: In a ticket-selling concert, quality is always highly expected. People expect either high-technique vocals, deeply soul-touching singing, or highly energetic, well-rehearsed dance routines. It was such a demanding idea that if some elements were executed inadequately, it could remarkably be detrimental to the perception of the performance and the artist particularly, as well as bring bad reputation to the concert.

Besides, the majority of audiences were expected to be Vietnamese, who might presumably share the same ideology mentioned in chapter 4.1 'Vietnamese culture as a background', which potentially lead to strongly opposing opinions. Viewers might not want to see such a strong and unusual image, which also challenges the social norms. East-Asian cultured people are not used to separating and artist's image on stage from who he is as a normal person. As an artist and part of the event committee, I would not want to bring discomfort to the audiences by bringing them such a bizarre image, as it goes against the initial purpose.

Potentials: younger generation from Vietnam had more opportunities to be in close contact with modern art, Western cultural points of view, so it is safe to assume that they would like the idea of the performance and even take interest in the bravery behind it. Nevertheless, being memorable is an ensured characteristic of this performance.

## Feedback

Fortunately, most feedbacks received was positive. A few honourable positive pieces of feedback:

- It was a very brave performance; it was unusual to see such a character on a Vietnamese stage
- It was highly inspirational to see an artist not being afraid of showing up and putting on a show, very entertaining.
- The talent to walk on heel and holding up singing voice at the same time was impressive and exciting. The singing was surprisingly well for such energy-requiring number.
- The atmosphere and spirit brought to stage was amazing, breath-taking performance.

However, some expected criticism was received, as mentioned in the risk above. A few older generation people felt that the idea and image were unnecessary, and they expected to see a man who portraits as a manly-looking man and crossing gender-border is not something they are comfortable with. Some minor opinions criticised the singing. Afterwards, in order to prepare for my next event” Karaoke World Championship 2019” I started taking singing lessons and it was one of the most critical decision in my artistic journey.

There was one particular feedback from the event manager which did not sit right with me. When she remarked how I challenged the coherence of the show by being too different, I brought up a fellow performer’s song choices and style for a point that the show did not have coherence my performance was not the factor. “But she already had a brand and she had supporters” – she explained. That explanation was irrelevant in my own interpretation, sparking questions: “Does more popular artists have more right to be different and creative?” and “How can one artist engage more audiences and become more popular without being different and creative?”. Through this opinion, the collectivism presented in chapter 4 was prominent. However, this did not stop me from yearning to build a specific and out-of-the-box artist image for myself, which I continued to do in the following foot-steps.

### 5.2.3 Branding lesson learned

After the show, the artistic committee finally could breathe easier from the positive feedback. However, there were a few aspects that I could have done better. Starting from the base, some professional vocal lessons would have been a crucial attribute to my brand

equity (perceived quality). Moreover, a more effective and thorough communication between me and the other organizers could have made the experience more smooth and easier.

### **5.3 Karaoke World Championship**

After October Beatz 2016, I went on the way to look for new challenges, an event with a larger scope, perspective and exposure. That was when I came across “Karaoke World Championship”.

#### **5.3.1 Karaoke World Championship 2018 (KWC 2018)**

I came into the year 2018 without any confidence. Receiving a few unkind and negative opinions from unexpected people a year prior had taken a toll on my confidence. Therefore, when Karaoke World Championship’s elimination round came about, I did not have hope. The rule required competitors to upload singing videos to their website, and after a few months, an email came to my mailbox informing that I got to the Final rounds of the competition. It was a total shocking pleasant to me, and at that moment it was such a big deal. Without any prior knowledge of the competition, I started preparing for the performances.

The fact that I was the only foreigner in a competition in Finland, surrounded by Finnish people did not help my confidence. I could see that many competitors were not first-time participants, and they established quite close friendship, and the sub-cultural scene was karaoke bar goers. Being once more an outsider, my mind was ready for negative outcome, as I have experienced being an outsider my whole life.

My song choices were “All I Ask” by Adele to be performed in the first competition evening, and “I (Who Have Nothing)” by Sir Tom Jones to be performed in the second evening. The result of the 1<sup>st</sup> round was announced immediately at the same night. Sadly, my score came second to last, which was somewhat unexpected. I humbly expected that I would have placed somewhere in the middle of the result list. Consequently, I felt disappointed and unmotivated. However, I was able to regain confidence and perform in the 2<sup>nd</sup> evening. The second performance’s point got double in the overall result, and my second perform was much better so I ended up at the 30/40 position after 2 rounds. The 3<sup>rd</sup> round was for top 10 singers so understandably I did not participate.



I did not place an emphasize on artist branding in KWC 2018, as I was more concerned about the singing ability in this big competition. Moreover, as mentioned, my artist esteem was at all-time low due to a few external and internal happenings. However, I did not forget to prepare a few factors for my stage presence as a habit. Interestingly, one of my good friends whom I made with in the competition two years later in 2020 remarked that she remembered me very vividly as she sensed a distinctive artistic energy, an unforgettable color that I always carried with me.

Probably my most prominent practice on branding for KWC 2018 was my appearance. I purposefully did my makeup a little feminine, and wore gender-neutral style clothing, which placed middle in the feminine - masculine spectrum. I could say this style was enough to enable me to stand out from other male competitors, but it was also a double-edged sword, at least from my own personal interpretation. Because this was the first time I participated in the competition, I did not know the crowd, the judges and their preference. Being unconfident and nervous, I easily interpreted the surroundings more negatively. I did not see any welcoming energy at the performing venue, probably stemming from my unfamiliarity to the people. In addition to my nervousness, the low result embraced the thought that the organizers and judges had their arranged preference. Another intrusive thought was that Finnish culture does not appreciate peculiar, unusual factors, even in entertainment. However, these were all personal thoughts and perspectives.

It was a disappointing August for me, but I did not give up. The “failure” only lit up the fire to prove my ability in the next year. And that was exactly what I did in Karaoke World Championship 2019.



Image 3. Vy Pekkala's look for the second night at Karaoke World Championship 2018

### 5.3.2 Karaoke World Championship 2019

Based on 2018's result, I thought pretty low of my singing, as least in the scope of this competition. KWC organized the qualification rounds at the bars. When the result came that I once again got admitted to the finals, I busted into tears. This year, with enough financial ability, I decided it was time for professional vocal trainings. With introduction from a friend, I started training with Christa Renwall, a professional singing and performing coach. Between the qualification round and the finals, I had only three weeks training time and three training sessions.

Christa primarily worked with me on emotional blocks, as her expertise was training singing from a person's core. It fit me perfectly as I had plenty of mental blocks between myself and the way I sounded. I was made to find out the answer to question "Why you become an artist, why do you sing?". She then taught me a few basic techniques that would come as primary in the judges scoring systems: intonation, space and shape of the mouth, breathing and support.

I chose one of the previous year's songs "I (Who Have Nothing)" by Sir Tom Jones because I received a fairly good points for it, this time I placed it on the first evening. The

second song was “Ashes” by Celine Dion, and the third song was “Lay Me Down” by Sam Smith.

Based on my own assumption on last year’s judges and organizer’s opinion on my gender-neutral appearance, this year I decided to play safer appearance-wise, wearing minimal makeup, and masculine clothing. Regardless of the less impressive appearance, I still left a mark for being able to get into the top 12 of the competition, to my own’s utmost surprise. I placed 10<sup>th</sup> overall in the KWC that year.



Image 1. Vy Pekkala at Karaoke World Championship 2019

The most valuable prize which I obtained in Karaoke World Championship 2019 was not the prize, despite its positive role in boosting and rebuilding my self-esteem, but the connections that I made. The event enabled me to make new friends who had experiences in singing and performing, make connections with professional coaches and professionals within the industry.

### **5.3.3 Branding lesson learned**

The branding lesson that I learned in 2019 and particularly through this competition, is to find my inner self, to know and accept my values, and my voice. According to chapter 3.3.1 Artist Brand Identity, I was centring and finding my essence as a brand, in other way, focusing on understanding my own identity and reconstruct my artist brand identity. More in-depth findings will be presented in the chapter 6 Discussion. Prior to meeting a professional coach, I had fell into the “brand image trap” where I focus too much on the appearance without getting in touch with my esteem and artist soul. 2019 marked an

important turn in my artistry and branding, as my understanding about brand identity and brand equity was noticeably and academically improved. This was a crucial step to my successful appearance in the next major event: The Voice of Finland 2021.

## **5.4 The voice of Finland**

Being fuelled by the little success from Karaoke World Championship 2019, I am looking for a larger 'playground' where I can test my branding vision and artistic ability. The Voice of Finland, a show which I had loved for a long time, was a perfect choice. In this chapter, my journey at The Voice of Finland was proudly presented, as my branding closely approach the presented theories on artist branding. During the beginning of 2020, I studied singing and worked hard on my artistry, while improving the broken relationship that I had with myself, improving artist brand identity.

### **5.4.1 Implementation**

My branding implentation can be presented into two parts, corresponding to the theory in chapter 3: Brand identity and brand equity.

Brand identity:

As a result from the trainings with Christa Renwall, I was able to define my artist self, going into the competition. As mentioned above, defining brand identity means defining the brand's direction, purpose and meaning. Following are a few questions to help finding brand identity: (Q stands for question, and A stands for answer)

- Q: Why am I here? What is my mission?  
A: I am here to prove my singing talent to myself and people who did not trust me. My mission is to spread the message of self-love and embracing one's true self.
- Q: Which is my target audiences?  
A: I target younger people (15-30 years old) who are also on their journey to find and love themselves, including people who belong to LGBT community and minor community, people who feel they do not belong.
- Q: What are the values which I bring to the competition?  
A: I bring respect, honesty, vulnerability, and above all, professional vocal and performance.
- Q: How can I describe my brand personality?  
A: soft yet fierce, colorful, relatable, also funny



Image 2. Vy Pekkala performing at The Voice of Finland 2021

#### Brand equity:

These are several attributes to my artist brand in The Voice Finland 2021:

- Brand awareness:

I chose a very distinctive appearance. I circled back to the unisex look idea that I have always had, this time with more research and investment. With the singer Adam Lambert still at the base, I started searching for his roots of inspiration, which was glam rock, with legendary artists like Led Zeppelin, David Bowie, Elton John etc. and read about their core value. It was an easy decision to use once again the beige stilettos pair that I dearly loved, paired with skinny pants of the same color. I opted for the golden-black color palette thorough, so a glittered golden and black sweatshirt was chosen for my top. I used one photo taken of Adam Lambert with his heavy, smoky eyeshadow as a reference for my makeup artist. I also chose an Adam Lambert's song "There I Said It". The message and appearance were ensured a coherence for a complete package.

With the chosen distinctive look, and the flamboyant energy I brought to the stage, the brand was easily recognizable and recalled whenever mentioned. It was an honor that I was pick amongst a few other contestants to be written about in the show's official announcement article on one of the Finnish newspapers Ilta-Sanomat (Ilta-Sanomat 2021).

- Brand loyalty

This section was the weakest of my brand development. The best achievement I made regarding brand loyalty was gaining new audiences who were interested in

my voice, talent and personality, there was not enough experiments yet to test out this equity. There were also many audiences who had not pay interest in me, starting to like my art, because they admired the perseverance and endurance I have with music over the year. They saw my seriousness, patience, and respect for music and that was the quality that they valued.

- Perceived quality

After my artistry took a turn when I started taking professional artist coaching sessions, my quality of art improved immensely. The development played an important role in improving my self esteem and help me connect in a deeper level with my inner self.

The result of the performance was negative, as I received no chair turned from the judges. Regardless, my performance was perceived as worthy to go forward, with good pitch and power, good vocal implementation, confident performance, focused and emotional delivery. It sparked a long conversation on the internet about the controversial result going for me, which will be presented in the next sub chapter.

- Brand association

I succeeded in delivering my message: be confident, be true to and love who you are. Moreover, my energy and overall presentation were consistent and distinctive. Therefore, my mission was completed, and people could start associate me with certain message, some particular personality: unisex, positive, soft but fierce, theatrical and expressive, glamour etc.

#### **5.4.2 Self-assessment**

After the minor success in Karaoke World Championship 2019 and many coaching sessions, I slowly regained the relationship with myself, rebuilt my self-esteem. Yet The Voice of Finland, as a national Television show, was a tremendous challenge on my artistic journey. During the eight weeks leading to the filming for the show, I worked two hundred percent as hard as I had ever worked in my entire life with the performance. I understood this kind of opportunity does not come around so often. I researched artist images, inspiration, singing methods etc.

On the filming day, my friend was surprised “You look very calm, this is not the nervous Vy I saw in competitions!”. I replied: “I have done everything that my little brain can think of, and some more, my time was used to its best, I’m looking good, I rehearsed a thousand times, I was panic the whole time leading to today, so I have nothing left to concern

about, besides putting on a show". I was proud, I was proud of what I did. On that day, I knew I had what it takes to be a great artist.

However, when the result came that I was not picked by the coaches, some worries emerged. Negative self-assessment had its opportunity to attack my vulnerable state of mind after a failure. Another practical fear occurred: since I technically failed, the show editors can use the material (audio and video) which I provided to fabricate a negatively false image about myself, as their job when making reality television is to raise public's rating and attention, regardless of the method used (as witnessed many times in reality shows, especially from the USA). Fortunately, it did not happen, as they gracefully picked the best storyline which I provided (about self-love) to air, therefore helped my image in the public's eyes.

A notable observation was that despite the looks successful effect in engaging audiences' attention, it might have overpowered the vocal in the perceived value brand equity. When working with coaches for the performance, we work primarily with the vocal techniques and expression of the story and the soul, which would have been nice if it was emphasized more.

A year later, when my singing ability developed further, I did find out some places in the song that I can do better, or the lesson about song choices. Choosing songs, for an artist, is also a component of branding. I was glad, because we were supposed to be able to see what could be improved, to be better.

### **5.4.3 Public reception? Netnography**

A brief conduction of netnography research method is expected to deliver the public opinion (which can be considered as customers' feedback), on which can be used as reference for future brand building. It is understandable that in 2021, people would discuss their favourite Television show online, whether it be social medias, forums, websites etc. This subchapter represents some findings from the website [vauva.fi](http://vauva.fi), a casual discussing forum, using the basics of netnography method.

The following comments are found on "THE VOICE OF FINLAND 2021 OFFICIAL" thread:

- "Vy Pekkala oli todella hyvä. Miksei kukaan kääntynyt?"  
(Vy Pekkala was really good. Why didn't anyone turn around?)

- ”Tää oli hyvä. Olisi ollut mielenkiintoinen hahmo.”  
(This was good. It would have been an interesting character.)
  
- ”Ja kyllä aika paljon huonompia meni läpi”  
(And yes, pretty much worse went through.)
  
- ”Samoja mietteitä, oli hyvä laulamaan ja näyttävä artistin olemus. Mutta tietääkö joku hänet tarkemmin että olisiko tosiaan transnainen? Kun puhui tuosta opettelusta rakastamaan itseään...Eikä sillä että asialla olisi mitään väliä, kunhan nyt vaan kiinnostaa”  
(The same thoughts, it was good to sing and show the essence of the artist. But does anyone know more about her if she was really a transgender? When you talked about learning to love yourself ... And it doesn't matter, as long as you're interested)

Following the conversation was comments and speculations from the public around who I am and my gender identity. In sum, it was good that some attention and interest had been raised about my presence in the episode.

## 5.5 Review the branding journey

The evolving scope and size of the three events corresponded with my evolving artistry and artist branding. The audience groups from the events were different and expanded in demographic, requiring more ensured branding strategy. However, regardless of events' scope and size an artist's core value is the most important thing to protect, and improve, as it acts as a compass for future branding (as mentioned in chapter 6 Discussion).

Without knowledge of the future, my love for music and responsibility of an artist has led me through improvement by practical actions. Every event after another witness me stepping out of my comfort zone and pushed my limit to become better. Even though bigger events hold higher risks (because exposure is a two-sided sword), they are necessary for an artist's development.



## 6 Branding discussion

In order to ensure the quality of my findings, they should be reflected against opinions from an expert. Therefore, the next step is to review my brand development by interviewing an expert from the industry. It brought me to organize an interview with Christa Renwall – singer/songwriter, professional artist coach. She was my first and closest coach who had accompany my artistic journey since 2019. I received in 2019 a lesson from Christa on artist branding, so I connected with her again for a more in-depth conversation on a few subjects within branding an artist.

The purpose of this interview is to clarify the importance of branding for an artist, the elements that construct an artist brand, and how to develop it effectively. Additionally, the interview's second aim is to review my branding path in the past and talk possible future plan.

### 6.1 Interview with Voice Coach Christa Renwall

Firstly, Renwall delivered her understanding on the Finnish music industry. In Finland, the bigger recording labels play a monopoly role in popular music, when looking at music festivals in Finland, it was often the same labels and artists were being recruited. A challenge in the popular Finnish entertainment scene is the lack of diversity and explosive innovation, and music and performers of similar colors are abundant. Additionally, there is not much space for English as a signing language in the industry. This lack of variety and openness in the business can be related to Finnish's small population of approximately five and a half millions, and the common characteristics of Finnish people: shy, closed, nostalgic. Finland is geographically located between Sweden and Russia, interestingly taking on the same situation with Russia but opposite to Sweden, a much more International and open land for entertainments.

However, a total opposite observation happened to the underground scenes. Underground and indie artists have much more freedom to work with their creativity, same are many sub-cultures, such as gaming world etc. In Renwall's opinion, the indie music scenes deserve more support, because they are innovative, creative, and artistically inspiring. Unfortunately, a practical situation happens in Finland musical scenes is that it is hard to make a living unless artists go mainstream.

Secondly, we discussed how an artist can build his/her brand. Renwall remarked that it was fundamental to build a concrete image of who you are as an artist, and the image shall be maintained thorough different areas in artistry, including the uniform in visual

photos/videos and marketing material. It is more optimal and organic for an artist to write his/her own material, or in cover songs situations, it is important to align and adapt the materials to the artist's own brand.

In this topic, Renwall emphasized the artist's brand identity. It is extremely important to ask and answer the question "WHY?" In order to define the artist's mission in music. Without a sense of purpose, the artist easily gets lost or demotivated.

Following the fundamental question "WHY?", we went deeper into developing brand's identity. In our branding training session back in 2020, she implemented an interesting activity: asking me to write down these questions and answers on a paper and save that paper: "What color would you be?", "Which piece of furniture would you be?", "Which tree would you be?", "Which kind/brand of car are you?" (a full version will be presented in the Appendix). The main purpose of this activity is to trigger and remind the artist of the aspects and components that makes them who they are (brand identity, brand personality), moreover, acting as a guideline for building brand image, and branding strategy.

It was also indicated by Renwall that the self as a person can be different to the self as an artist, because on stage, some aspects are covered, and some aspects are heightened and accentuated, depending on the art's requirements. Nonetheless, it is preferable that they are as close to each other as possible to reduce complication. "Developing artistry is the same as developing who you are in the core" – Renwall noted. She suggested that emotional blocks within a person should be found an unlock for that person to be present in life and become a good artist on stage.

Lastly on the topic, Renwall indicated that a brand is naturally required to change and evolve, same movement applies for artist self and person's self. It is totally expectable for a person, an artist to change. Consequently, an essential step to take is often circling back to check up on yourself, re-assessing the artist brand to update self-knowledge, and enabling refinement in artistry. "BE HONEST with yourself, listen to your calling" – she emphasized.

Lastly in the interview, I asked Renwall to assess my branding implementation in the competition. She repeated that The Voice of Finland was not a singing competition, it was an entertaining program, the result does not indicate an artist's singing ability. In the competition, I succeeded in differentiating myself from everybody else. Even though in some situations, being different is a double-edge sword, she would recommend me against hiding or diminishing who I am for the competition. Regarding my image building in the competition, Renwall commented: "It was authentic, professional, a whole lot of respect was seen for yourself, for the audiences, and the whole Television concept; an image which was flamboyant but never came across as arrogant, ignorant or rude. You were able to center yourself, calm and focus, which were a huge development from where you were."

For future possibly better comeback to the show, Renwall suggested that I can consider carefully what to compromise on to get closer to the show's preference, anything but the artist's true self and core.

## **6.2 Lesson learnt from my whole branding journey**

According to Christa Renwall's lessons and my own experience, there were a few lessons that I could summarize to help other emerging artists:

- Find your artist brand identity: On the surface, it's as simple as finding genre/genres of music which fit your vocal ability, and topic to sing about. But on a deeper level, it's finding what your artistry is about, what matters move you, what is your mission singing for people: is it to show yourself, to heal souls, to entertain, to tell story, to teach and educate?
- Build your brand equity: based on brand identity, the equity can start to develop, including: brand awareness (how you want people to recognize or remember you), brand loyalty (ways to build your fan base), perceived quality (always improving vocal quality and performing skills), and brand association (define a few keyword that people associate you with)
- Find your crowd: people are different, they come from different background, do different things, therefore they are attracted to different form of entertainment. A skilled singer does not ensure popularity in a wrong community. It's essential to find groups of audiences who want to hear you, who benefit from your acts.

## **6.3 Own assessment on my singing development**

In this chapter, I am illuminating the development of my artist brand through three examples from my singing career at different stages. Apart from the vocal quality, one can also follow the changes in production and maturity. This chapter uses my Youtube channel (Pekkala 2022) as a reference to assess my development in singing through the years. Youtube channel link:

The assessment starts with a cover song video "Idontwannabeyouanymore - Billie Eilish (Male Cover)". Even though the vocal performance fit the overall vibe intended for the song, the breathing and support could be better; the intonation was not clear enough, at some points, the pronunciation was forced and was not optimal for vocal's clarity and

endurance. This video was made before I took any professional singing lesson. However, my strength has always been the ability to put my heart into expressing the feelings of the songs, which showed in this video.

Following is the assessment of a video posted in 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020, four months into my vocal training with Christa Renwall, with the name “Anyone (Demi Lovato – male cover)”, link at. The intonation is clearer than the previous video, with still a few ‘dull pronunciations’, and a usage of twang as a technique was introduced into the singing. Even though the power was raw, the high notes lacked beauty and included some overuse of force from the breathing. A proud self-assessment placed at the consistent in feelings delivery through every song.

The final video being assessed is “Hopelessly Devoted To You - Olivia Newton-John (male cover by Vy Pekkala)”, posted on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2021, 17 months into vocal training. Link at. A better breathing technique enabled me to release a more relaxed and soft sound when needed, and intonation sounded much more native and professional, enabling the sound to be made in a more relaxed way, which also helped the vocal cord’s endurance. One more time, as ballads are my strength, combining with good song choice, the feelings were delivered well.

Self-assessment is an excellent tool to review my journey, defining flaws to improve, and strength to develop. Next chapter will introduce my future plan for artist branding.

#### **6.4 Future steps for myself**

Following Christa Renwall’s pieces of advice, I will often update and check with myself on artist’s identity. Regarding perceived quality as an equity, beside practicing singing on a regular basis, I recently have been working with a classical vocal coach, looking to further enhance my set of singing skills. Classical singing provides me with advanced breathing techniques as well as resonance manipulating skills. Moreover, a few original songs are in the making process, as they are the tools for an artist to introduce himself to the world.

## 7 Tool Kit for Artist Branding

Having looked into theories of branding and explored my own artist journey through three different types of events, it is time to present the product of this thesis: Toolkit for Artist Branding, a video (Appendix 2).

This chapter is accompanied by a short video attached to the thesis. In the video, I present a tool kit for artist branding using findings from this thesis, and my own experience. The target audience group for the video is young emerging artists who are looking for a way to build an artist brand and put themselves out in the industry. The aim is to bring my study to practical usage in real life and help other artists.

### 7.1 Video content and planning

In the video, I will be talking to the camera to create a close and warm atmosphere, as if I was talking straight to the audiences. Moreover, this method demonstrates my energy and characteristic effectively, which fit the topic referring to artist branding. A visual demonstration is made with texts and memes in the post-production, and the main attraction intended is the way I deliver the content. The video content can be found in Appendix 1.

There are 3 planned camera angles changing simultaneously during the video to enhance audiences' attention. The content summarizes the lessons that I have learnt from experiences and findings from the thesis writing process, which will be conveyed in an easy-to-understand speech and visuals.

### 7.2 Advice for my younger self

The video process as well as thesis process helped me understand and review the whole journey better, therefore, pieces of advice were given from myself at the moment to my younger self:

- To myself in #October Beatz 2016, I needed to be more confident in my plan, but at the same time be more meticulous and sensible in communication to the event organizing members. Engaging bonding and understanding from co-workers can help generate more support and good reputation from the community, no matter how small it is. At that time, some vocal trainings would have been marvellous, but my financial condition and networking did not allow.
- To myself in Karaoke World Championship, I should not have let previous mean opinions get a hold on my spirit and steer my thoughts towards negativity. I did that in the first year of competing and it restricted the opportunity to enhance

networking and friendships, as well as affected my ability on stage. Finnish people are often close and shy, but they appreciate honesty and effort.

- To myself in The Voice of Finland, I would in the future create an image that even though is strong, it would not take away the attention to my voice and art from my core. Furthermore, I shall choose songs that fits the scope of the show, which is older, more classic songs from the 1960s to 1990s.

### **7.3 Feedback**

The video was shown to a few audiences, and they were asked to give some pieces of feedback.

Positive:

- The energy demonstrated was positive and bringing good vibe, the voice has emphasized tones, which engaged audiences to the content.
- The theory was helpful but interesting, accompanied with effective visuals

Negative:

- Better quality of video could be achieved with better gear, and separate microphone could have been used for a better audio quality
- Video's color tone could be more even.

## 8 Conclusion

### 8.1 Reflection

Writing this thesis has given me an interesting chance to review my six years long branding journey. Beside pointing out my weaknesses, the writing also reminds me of how far I have come and remind me to be proud of myself. I might not be where I wanted to be ultimately, but I am not where I used to be neither. The discussion with Christa Renwall reminded me to revisit my inner artistic self more regularly to consolidate self-confident and polishing the artistry. Moreover, it is crucial to re-assess the branding execution and strategy to update it to my changes and development as a person and as an artist.

Regarding the thesis process, having a thesis writing process lasting for six years even though was horrendously long, had its benefits. I was able to examine my writing ability after a certain period of time and improve. Not only the writing skill has improved, but the maturity in understanding the world has also elevated. A vital improvement was reflected upon the thesis is the ability to accept myself. I was finally able to be my own friend, brother, teacher, and partner and make peace with myself. That leap made it easier for me to lead myself through problems, troubles in life, as well as fix my mistakes faster. Furthermore, a few years of work experience also helped me be humbler yet more confident at the same time, as I learned my strength and weaknesses and developed observation skills.

The thesis writing period lasting for many years observed a noticeable transition and transformation in my maturity. Pia Piviaho-Kallio, my beloved teacher/instructor/thesis supervisor during all these six years, made a remark when examining my writings: "As your singing blocks were removed, your writing blocks were lifted". This meticulous observation vibrates on many levels. When I started vocal training, I finally received professional antidotes to the struggled relationship with my own voice, and inevitably myself. Additionally, the branding process required me to find out my brand identity, sharpened my ability to understand who I am, both as a person and as an artist. I no longer having the fear which I had when I was in my early 20s, therefore the 'blocks' in my writings were lifted. I used to fear what I learn and write down will not be received well by people.

### 8.2 Wrap up the events: October #Beatz 2016, Karaoke World Championship, and The Voice of Finland

October Beatz 2016 was the first major event that I decided to execute artist branding, and the scope of the show was limited, so the basic theories about branding was not

exclusively studied prior to the event. Therefore, there were plenty of rooms for improvement. However, every experience is valuable. This first major event introduced me to artist branding which I had the liberty to plan and execute.

A few years later, KWC 2019 has opened a professional path for development and introduced a totally different group of audiences. My branding and artist image was tested in a more diverse environment. After the event, my artist confidence was boosted and got ready for a bigger stage.

The Voice of Finland 2021 observed a somewhat maturity in artistry and branding. Yet bigger ocean posed bigger waves. My artistry needed to be more refined and adjusted to fit the target audiences that I was performing for. Theories on brand position will be needed to be studied.

Having been studying to write this thesis, I have come across plenty of valuable academic knowledge on branding, and artist branding, which will act as a solid ground for my future steps.

### **8.3 Recommendation for further development**

There was a lack in research on the Finnish entertaining market. Therefore, as recommendation for future development, a study on Finnish market and audiences' interest is necessary. Besides, brand position might be a beneficial factor to further develop the artistry and branding strategy. Balancing the brand's value is also important, as the experience from The Voice of Finland demonstrated. Each equity needs to be planned more carefully to ensure its effects.

I am currently working on my own music and experience different materials of music to find out which works best for me in the Finnish music industry.



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## Appendix

### Appendix 1. Video script

(Looking at camera, smile)

- (introducing) Hi everyone, as you clicked this video, you are probably wondering “Artist Branding? What is this about?”. Yes, this video summarizes the *lessons that I learned* throughout the years about how to *build and develop* your brand as an artist. If you’re *a young, emerging artist*, this video is absolutely for you. Or if you are simply interested on the lessons that I have learned, stay tuned!

(Looking at another camera angle - angle number 2)

- Firstly, let me define *artist branding*. What is it? An artist brand consists of name, music and fashion style, array of values that differentiate an artist from others. Why is it important? Because it provides an artist with direction, purpose and meaning, and a strong brand will help an artist stand out from others and have more chance to succeed.
- Looking further into a brand, we need to know about the brand identity, as well as elements that construct a brand, a.k.a brand equity

(Looking at another camera angle - angle number 3)

Now, what is brand identity? It is who you are as an artist. Don’t confuse it with who you are as a person. Even though they shall be closely connected, yourself and your artistic self are two entities. The person that is you cooking in your own kitchen is not the same as the person who stands on stage or behind the microphone. The latter is blessed with the magical power of art and does different things than life activities.

(Looking at another camera angle - angle number 1)

With that being said, how do we define our artist identity? We must ask ourselves: “Why are we singing, why are we doing art, why do we want to perform?” The answers to those questions help identify who we are as artist. An additional method is to write down to a piece of paper the following questions and their answers underneath: “What color do I like?”, “Which flower I would be?”, “Which tree I would be?”, “Which music I would be”, “Which car brand I would be?”, “What car color I would be?”, “Which household appliance I would be?”, “Which furniture I would be?” etc. Believe me, looking at all those answers would give a very interesting overview of your artist image. The answers act as a compass for you on your artist journey.

(Looking at another camera angle - angle number 3)

- The second part of a brand is brand equity. After understanding what they are, it is very easy for you to develop and make it stronger. We can understand artist branding equity as the components which create your brand. They are brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand association. Brand awareness is how people are aware of you. You need to find some factor that makes you unique, it can be a different quality in your voice, the consistent message that you deliver, or it can be your look and personality.

(Looking at another camera angle - angle number 1)

Brand loyalty can be developed by some values which you give that vibrates with your audiences that keep them coming back for more, or you can develop the unpredictable element in your art that engages the curiosity from your audiences, avoid being boring and predictable.

Perceived value is one of the most important equity. In order to enhance the perceived value, you simply must train, I recommend, with a professional. Training the singing and performing skills is not easy, just like any other trainings, it requires hard work and consistency.

(Looking at another camera angle - angle number 2)

The last equity mentioned is brand association. To simplify this, I recommend creating 3 to 5 hashtag that could express your art. For example, I would take #selflove #extravaganza #theatrical #ironic for my artist brand. By doing hashtag, you're connecting life's element into your brand that help distinguish it from others.

(Looking at another camera angle - angle number 1)

- So that was how we develop an artist brand according to my findings and experience. I hope this video would be helpful to you who need it. Thank you and goodbye!

**Appendix 2 Tool Kit Video link**

The video is upload to Youtube.

The video URL is:

<https://youtu.be/wgPr0exMUDs>

**Appendix 3 Questions asked in interview with Christa Renwall**

1. How would you look at the Finnish music industry?
2. We have had a lesson in the past on artist branding. Would you mind circling back to the important elements/factors that helps create an artist brand?
3. How can an artist begin to build his/her brand? What kind of questions needed to be asked and answered? Why asking those questions?
4. What is your assessment on my branding journey, especially on The Voice of Finland 2021? Is there any recommendation for future development?