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The CEO's personal brand: Differences in creation between women and men¹

Introduction

The deterministic perception of persons through the prism of gender and discrimination based on the attribution of socially and culturally formed traits to the genders continues to be one of society's main problems in the 21st century [Bohnet 2018; Slatton and Brailey 2019]. Differences among the economic [Adamska *et al.* 2014] and social [Vogel *et al.* 2003] roles of women and men are still based on entrenched stereotypes. The schematic perception of women and men is manifested in daily social interactions, being expressed in opinions, critical remarks and assessments demonstrating the different treatment of women and men [Bohnet 2018].

The stereotypical perception of women in positions of power continues to pose a significant obstacle on their paths to success and advancement [Baskiewicz 2013; Heilman and Parks-Stamm 2007; Tabassum and Nayak 2021]. Studies show that women are believed to be less assertive and less competent [Górska 2017] and are less often seen as leaders [Koenig *et al.* 2011; Powell and Butterfield 1984, 1989; Schein 2007]. The congruity model [Eagly and Karau 2002] and the lack-of-fit model [Heilman, Block, Martell 1995; Heilman 2001] point out the divergences between the stereotypical perception of a leader and the stereotypical perception of women. Studies suggest that even though men and women in high positions act very similarly, men are usually viewed as the better leaders [Schein 1973; Schein *et al.* 1996]. The consequence of these barriers is the persistence of a clear disproportion between the number of women

and men in top management positions [Grant Thornton 2018]. Insufficient representation of women in leadership positions [Carli and Eagly 2016; Karau and Eagly 1999], serving as CEOs, sitting on corporate management boards [Kirsch 2018], occupying high positions in academia [Carli *et al.* 2016] and in politics [Teele *et al.* 2018], combined with the slow pace of career progression, makes the problem of equality of men and women in organizational structures an unresolved issue [McKinsey 2020].

The media, as tools of mass communication, have become the main instrument for disseminating information that influences public awareness, including our perceptions of men and women [Wood 1994]. Studies carried out since the 1980s confirm that the media images of men and women have evolved over time, adapting the message to the economic and socio-political situations prevailing at the time [Massé and Rosenblum 1988]. Today's analyses show that the media stereotyping of women shows a connection with their social activity [Doris, Summers, Carter 2013] and in consequence affects the way women in high positions are perceived in their roles as leaders [Celia and Gabaldon 2014; Bligh *et al.* 2012; Simon and Hoyt 2012].

In recent years, studies into the media presentation of women have attracted much scholarly analysis [Bligh *et al.* 2012; Byerly and Ross 2008; Gauntlett 2008; Gill and Gill 2007]. According to that, the constant development and availability of the media places a special challenge before women in top management positions. Suffice to recall examples of women who have been dubbed 'iron ladies'

or criticized by the media for being ‘too aggressive’. In line with prevailing social gender norms, women ought to be kind, warm and caring [Eisenclas 2013; Prentice and Carranza 2002]; when these norms are transgressed and not followed, women are criticized for their disobedience [Rudman and Glick 2001]. One of the methods of overcoming barriers relating to stereotyped perceptions of women is to create a strong and authentic personal brand that allows them to differentiate themselves in the market and highlight their assets — not necessarily those linked to their sex but rather to education, experience, and competence, which should be the key drivers of success and opportunities for career advancement.

The majority of works about personal branding belong to popular science. The authors are usually practitioners dispensing advice and tips to put the reader (often a current job seeker) in a better position to create a strong personal brand (see Peters, McNally and Speak; Montoya, Arruda, Nicolino, Spillane). At the same time, academic literature so far has not taken up analytical studies into the elements differentiating the processes of personal brand creation by women and men [Gorbatov *et al.* 2021; Thompson-Whiteside *et al.* 2018]. Although gender is perceived as a key differentiator, both in the private and in the personal life, authors of scholarly works do not distinguish between the women’s and men’s methods of brand creation. As a result, in academic papers men are frequently the default objects of study into personal branding.

In the following chapter we will attempt to prove that men and women are perceived differently and thus their personal brands can be created and presented differently. The question of the existence of any differences in personal brand creation by male and female leaders remains unanswered [Górska 2021]. In reference to this research gap, the purpose of the present study is an attempt to find answers to the following research questions: What differences are there in the personal brand creation processes of female and male CEOs? How do women and men in CEO positions use the media to build their personal brands?

This article is intended as an exploratory study to identify the differences in CEO’s personal branding between women and men. We will begin with a discussion of the subject literature and differences in how women and men are perceived in professional and private situations, focusing primarily on the per-

sonal brands of male and female leaders and CEOs. Next, we will present the preliminary results of a pilot study and will discuss the results in the context of prior findings. In the last section we will make recommendations for future studies and discuss the limitations.

Literature overview

Importance of personal branding

The importance of a personal brand in the context of personal development and recruitment increased near the end of the 20th century [Hearn 2008]. The pressure coming from globalization and the growing importance of social media translated into the weight we attach to having a recognizable personal brand [Górska *et al.* 2020; Johnson 2017; Labrecque, Markos, Milne 2011; Mazurek *et al.* 2020]. Indeed, today we expect individuals to take responsibility for their employment status and their attractiveness and value in the labour market [Vosloban 2014]. Shepherd [2005] believes that differentiation is a strategy to gain a competitive advantage in the market. And, according to McCorkle, Joe, and Memo [1992], the main purpose of personal branding is to achieve professional goals by highlighting one’s skills and attitudes.

Heightened competition among employees has resulted in dynamic changes to recruitment processes. Together with the employees, the recruiters have moved on to a digital environment because the latter imposes fewer limitations and provides greater effectiveness in bringing interest groups together, compared to traditional methods [Gale 2013; Labrecque, Markos, Milne 2011; Kucharska 2018]. Nowadays social media are also an informal source of information about the candidates for recruiters [Berkelaar and Buzzanell 2015; Shaker and Hafiz 2014], supplementing the data submitted by the candidates through official channels.

Creating one’s own brand, especially via social media and dedicated job brokering platforms, is an increasingly universal phenomenon: according to practitioners and experts, active personal branding has become a necessity, and those who fail to embrace it lose an opportunity to develop their careers [Gorbatov, Khapova, Lysova 2019; Schawbel 2009]. Employees are encouraged and persuaded to think of themselves as entrepreneurs, even in the context of hired labour [Peters 1997; Vosloban 2014]. This approach leads to a high level of indi-

vidualization among corporate employees [Vallas and Cummins 2015]. At the same time, a career has become an asset owned by the employee, which he or she builds up while moving from one position to the next and one organization to the next; it is subject to interpretation in the light of the prevailing norms and is an object of social pressure [Dumont and Ots 2020; Lair, Sullivan, Cheney 2005]. The work invested in the creation of one's own personal brand is seen as proof of being in control of one's identity and a sort of response to the uncertainties of the employment situation.

Understanding of personal branding

Often, definitions of a personal brand are vague and fail to reflect its 'managerial' nature [Wojtaszczyk and Maszewski 2014]. For this reason, the authors will attempt to define it in reference to the classical definition of a brand in management studies. If we accept the understanding of a brand as a set of associations evoked by specified goods or services [Keller 1993], a personal brand ought to be defined as the set of associations evoked by a given person [Parmentier, Fischer, Reuber 2013:375]. As noted, brands are supposed to attract customer attention by differentiating the products or services from the competition [Keller 2008]; by analogy, the principal goal of personal brand would be to differentiate a person among others [Peters 1997]. The purpose of creating a personal brand is to enable the encapsulation and promotion of the undertakings, opinions, and strong sides of a person, such as may be exceptional from the perspective of a given target group [Labrecque, Markos, Milne 2011:39] and thereby provide the individual and the stakeholders with a certain added value [Shepherd 2005].

Similarly, to product brands, the identity associated with a personal brand has multiple dimensions but must remain consistent and clear if it is to be credible [Bendisch 2011]. As noted by Kapferer [1997:17], brand identity imbues a product with meaning in time and space. For products, the authors of a brand create and define its desired identity [Aaker 2003]; in the case of personal brands, the identity cannot be defined solely by the brand creator [Parmentier, Fischer, Reuber 2013] but must also include the brand owner. And this means that a personal brand may be created by someone else than the person it represents [Jacobson 2020]. Many personal brand creation strategies designed by specialists are addressed to professionals who

desire to develop and project their desired identity. Over time, however, these practices have been passed down the professional and hierarchical ladder to include young adepts and students [Górska 2016; Johnson 2017] searching for more entry-level positions.

Another aspect to consider is the stability of personal brands. The brand identity of products and services tends to be regarded as relatively stable in time. Human beings are much more complex than products, and thus the identity of a personal brand can change depending on the environment, the role to play, and the mood. As a result, a conflict may ensue between one's own identity and the identity arising from the role.

According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler [2000], brand identity could be regarded as a composite of brand essence and extended identity. The former is the very essence of the brand, i.e., what it stands for. What we have in mind here is bringing out the differences, attracting the audience's attention and winning them over to the brand. The extended identity contains current temporary associations supplementing the essential identity. For personal brands, the essential identity are the core values, while the extended identity comprises characteristics that, by contrast, can change over time. However, one must be emphasised that this sort of brand conceptualization refers solely to the internal understanding of a brand, i.e., the perspective of building it rather than perception.

Oyserman [2009] and Davis [2015] stress the importance of distinguishing between how we perceive ourselves and how we want to be perceived by others. That is a distinctive feature of personal brands. Based on previous studies, Aaker and Joachimsthaler [2000] defined the core and the extended identity of a CEO's personal brand. The former includes the country of origin, education, skills and values, and the latter covers physical appearance, communication style, success, assets owned, place of employment, and lifestyle. Here, it begs to be emphasized that the manner of perception of these elements depends on the audience and may differ depending on the sex [Górska 2017]; for example, women are more frequently perceived through the prism of their non-professional roles (mother, grandmother, wife, etc.) than men are. In the following section we will attempt to demonstrate that female leaders, too, are perceived in the light of their gender and, accordingly, that gender is not irrelevant in the process of creating a personal brand of a leader.

Perception of women in leadership roles

The world of leadership, politics and business abounds with harmful negative stereotypes about women, which is manifested in several currents of research. In principle, women are seen as inferior leaders [Górska 2017], which is a consequence of centuries of male domination having defined the leadership styles we are used to [Eagly and Karau 2002]. It is for this reason that the traits we associate with a good leader are typically masculine [Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt 2001; Schein and Davidson 1993]. This conviction is conducive to leadership roles being entrusted to men [Eagly and Carli 2001], who are perceived as the ‘default’ leaders. The ‘think leader — think male’ paradigm [Schein and Davidson 1993] entrenches stereotyped perceptions of women reflected in the selection of candidates for leadership positions, promotions, and decisions concerning education [Schein 2007].

In a 2011 survey, the stereotypical characteristics of a leader correlated more strongly with masculine traits (correlation=0.62) than with feminine traits (correlation=0.25) [Koenig *et al.* 2011]. Studies by Powell and Butterfield [1984; 1989] yielded similar results. They provided leadership stereotypes were perceived as reflecting characteristics closer to agentic (masculine) than social (feminine) traits. In other words, leaders are stereotypically perceived as more like men than to women. Similar conclusions could be drawn from a study conducted in Poland in 2017. It turned out that women continued to be perceived as less qualified, less liked, and less frequently chosen for employment and evaluated less favourably than men with the same competences, skills, and experience [Górska 2017].

The negative perception of female leaders compounds the ‘lack-of-fit’ syndrome arising from the convergence between the stereotypical perceptions of typical leadership traits and masculine traits and divergence between stereotypical leadership traits and women’s traits [Eagly 2007]. There is also a dichotomy in approaches taken to female and male authoritarian managers because that management style is more accepted in men than it is in women [Eagly 2007]. A woman with an authoritarian management style is regarded as being aggressive, and her behaviour meets with resistance, because women are stereotypically perceived as benevolent. An autocratic management style conflicts with that stereotype and results in the unfavourable perception of a female manager.

Another example of differences in the acceptance of women’s and men’s behaviours in leadership positions is the assertiveness dilemma. On the one hand, ‘too assertive’ behaviour coming from a female leader is viewed in a negative light and associated with aggression; on the other hand, ‘excessive’ willingness to co-operate is regarded as incompatible with a leader’s role, and a woman showing that willingness is often criticized for not being ‘tough enough’. In this way, we are dealing with an inconsistent portrayal of a female manager — when her behaviour confirms expectations and stereotypes of women, she is perceived as not being competent enough (‘too soft’), but when she acts the opposite, then she is criticized for being ‘unfeminine’ and ‘too tough’ [Kellerman and Rhode 2009].

Women are traditionally perceived as caring, seeking to build relationships with others, warm and kind, whereas leaders are expected to show assertiveness, perseverance, confidence and to focus on results. Thus, the problem of ‘lack of fit’ occurs because of the inconsistency of expectations placed before female leaders who, on the one hand, should act out the feminine role and, on the other hand, pursue the masculine role on account of the position they hold.

Looking from a different perspective, women can also meet with a different type of discrimination, one involving physical attractiveness. In principle, women perceived as unattractive, as well as those perceived as highly attractive are both in a disadvantageous situation as candidates for leadership roles [Bartol 1980]. Studies have shown a potential positive correlation between physical attractiveness and political success in men [Little *et al.* 2007], whereas a negative correlation appeared in women [Berggren, Jordahl, Poutvaara 2010]. Hence, physical attractiveness is an advantage for men but not necessarily for women [Lee *et al.* 2015]. To sum up, social expectations of female leaders are contradictory [Heilman, Block and Martell 1995], which leads to negative assessments, attitudes and outcomes and translates into biased judgements [Eagly and Carli 2007; Eagly 2007; Górska 2017].

The results of the above-cited studies highlight the difficulties faced by women aspiring to leadership. Society has double standards for female and male leaders, which manifest in prejudices, assumptions, and inconsistent judgements. The consequence of prejudices against women is that the value of female managers’ work is deprecated and when it is undeniable, then success is attributed to external

factors rather than personal skill; when even that is not possible, the female manager becomes unpopular and scorned, and she begins to be viewed in a negative light [Heilman 1994]. In conclusion, the above analysis reveals a potential threat to women who aspire to be leaders, for feminine traits are not leadership traits [Schein and Davidson 1993], which may cause them to be perceived negatively as leaders [Heilman, Block, Martell 1995].

The female leader's personal brand

Because women and men in leadership positions are viewed differently, their personal brands can also be perceived and judged differently; accordingly, the creation and presentation of their personal brands may also differ.

One of the key elements in leaders' personal-branding strategies is media presentation [Bendisch, Larsen, Trueman 2007; Fetscherin 2015; Jin and Yeo 2011; Milbourn 2003; Nguyen-Dang 2005]. A study by Porter *et al.* [Porter, Anderson, Nhotsavang 2015] shows that leaders are increasingly present in traditional and Internet media. Getchell and Beitel-spacher [2020] analysed how women and men were described by *Forbes*. They discovered that its description of female marketing directors accentuated their gender, referencing traits regarded as feminine, with relatively infrequent references customarily associated with descriptions of leadership. Moreover, female marketing directors received only 1050 mentions in the news compared to 1959 mentions of men in the same role. This means less visibility and representation for women, and with that less opportunity for recognition and successful personal branding.

Researchers also point toward leaders' increasing activity across various social-media platforms [Alghawi, Yan, Wel 2014; Malhotra and Malhotra 2016], including in Poland [Korzyński 2018]. The results of Brandfog's survey (2016) show that the CEOs who engage in social media are considered to be 'better equipped than their peers to lead companies in a Web 2.0 world' [Brandfog 2016:7]. It must be noted that each platform has a different audience and serves different purposes. LinkedIn is the most popular tool with which to create one's personal brand and gain recognition in the community [McCorkle and McCorkle 2012]. It turns out that in LinkedIn women fill in personal details, provide and receive recommendations less often and describe their professional interests less eagerly than men do [Zide, Elman, Shahani-Denning 2014]. Similar research conducted in Poland has shown that, com-

pared to men, young women had less presence and activity on LinkedIn, more often choosing to build their personal brand on Instagram [Górska 2016], which is not a professional tool.

Research into the media representation of women and men in high management positions has been the subject of much scholarly analysis in recent years [Getchell and Beitel-spacher 2020; Williams *et al.* 2016; Yue *et al.* 2020]. Presentation of women in the media may affect public perceptions of women in each professional and social role [Cheryan *et al.* 2013; Doris, Summers, Carter 2013; Simon and Hoyt 2012]; at the same time the media can shape the perception of female leaders by the public [Cukier *et al.* 2016; Walsh 2015] and by themselves [Geis *et al.* 1984; Simon and Hoyt 2012].

Many of the studies conducted to date demonstrate that the media often present women through the prism of their gender, with emphasis being put on stereotypically feminine traits [Doris, Summers, Carter 2013; Cukier *et al.* 2016; Davis 2003; Lämsä and Tiensuu 2002; Sung 2013; Walsh 2015]. Simultaneously, they are less often depicted as leaders [Cukier *et al.* 2016]. When a woman achieves professional success, interviewers ask her how she manages to combine her career with parenthood. Similar questions are less often posed to men [Simon and Hoyt 2012], as the sources of their achievements — skill, qualifications, and experience — are emphasized more frequently instead [Bligh *et al.* 2012; Collins 2011; Prime, Carter, Welbourne 2009; Robinson and Saint-Jean 1995].

At the same time, studies reflect those women in high positions are underrepresented in the digital media [Humprecht and Esser 2017; Jia *et al.* 2016], in radio [Cukier *et al.* 2016], television [Vos 2013] and the press [Shor *et al.* 2015]. In the context of the studies being analysed, women are more rarely presented positively in the role of leaders or in high positions, and sometimes they are written about as victims [Cukier *et al.* 2016]. They are sporadically featured as experts and are more often paraphrased and quoted than invited to speak for themselves [Cukier *et al.* 2016].

The above-identified differences in the presentation of both genders in the media may influence the methods of creation and presentation of personal brands in the media and the perception of men and women as leaders. However, the literature on the subject, has not yet provided an answer to the question of differences in the process of personal brand creation by women and men in CEO positions.

The research method

The purpose of this study is exploration with a view to gaining a better understanding of the differences in personal brand creation by women and men in high leadership positions, as well as their media representation. The qualitative study was based on twelve partially structured interviews with male and female CEOs representing Poland's strongest brands as ranked by *Rzeczpospolita* in 2018 (based on research by Kantar Millward Brown)².

Due to the small size of the sample, this study does not warrant generalized conclusions. At the same time, it must be emphasized that this study constitutes the beginning of a broader research cycle intended to provide more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of potential differences in the creation of personal brands by women and men; hence, it is a form of a pilot study. A pilot study supplies data for a preliminary analysis of a phenomenon [Baker 1994]. Its characteristic feature is that it is done on a smaller scale than the main study. Researchers draw attention to the merits of conducting a pilot study prior to the main study — the former enables the discovery of irregularities at an early stage thanks to the identification of problems and areas that may require the application of a suitable research instrument in the future [Teijlingen and Hundley 2001]. The researcher gains the opportunity to formulate new research questions or narrow down existing ones, select the optimal tools with which to carry out the study, and to estimate how much time and what resources will be needed to complete it.

Participants

The authors' method was targeted sampling. The sample was composed of the male and female CEOs of the strongest Polish brands according to *Rzeczpospolita*'s ranking (2018). The respondents were leaders placed at the helm of large and recognizable Polish brands and equipped with similar opportunities for personal brand creation. The selection of respondents for interviews was not random but targeted, using the method of snowball sampling.

In total, twelve interviews were conducted — eight with men and four with women. A gender-balanced sample could not be sourced for the study, owing to the lack of numerical proportion between male and female CEOs on the list. The authors attempted to ensure diversity by age (from 35 to 75 years of age) and sector (telecommunications, services, food products and more).

It should be noted that because of difficulties in arranging appointments with the CEOs of Poland's strongest brands, the authors began the interviews in September 2018 and continued the qualitative part of the study till February 2019. In most cases the interviews were held in the CEO's office. Where not possible due to location constraints, they were conducted by telephone. The table 1 collates detailed information about the respondents, including position, gender, and business sector.

Table 1. Information about the respondents

Code	Position	Sex	Sector
W1	CEO	W	Telecommunications
M2	CEO, Founder	M	Services
M3	CEO, Founder	M	Services
M4	CEO	M	Non-food products
M5	CEO, Founder	M	Non-food products
M6	CEO, Founder	M	Food products
M7	CEO	M	Media
M8	CEO	M	Fashion
M9	CEO, Founder	M	Beauty and hygiene
W10	CEO, Founder	W	Beauty and hygiene
W11	CEO, Founder	W	Services
W12	CEO, Founder	W	Food products

Source: Original study.

Interview structure

A semi-structured interview scenario was used; the topics had been taken from literature review and adapted to the objectives of the study. The interviews were done in Polish and took between 30 and 80 minutes each. The first part of the conversation focused on the CEO's understanding of a personal brand, followed by questions about the process of brand creation and the role of the media in it. Though each interview was based on a script, the questions were adapted flexibly to encourage the participants to express their own narration [Riessman 1993].

The choice of the method is a consequence of the purpose of this study. The needs of data comparison for differences justify the use of semi-structured interviews because during non-structured in-depth interviews the researcher can lose control of the conversation and in effect fail to cover the main topics of the study. By contrast, strictly scripted interviews would not have allowed such flexibility due to preventing the

free expression of the respondents' opinions. Thus, on the one hand, semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to make sure that the research questions and desired topics are covered. On the other hand, they allow a degree of flexibility while retaining control of the conversation [Adams *et al.* 2015].

Analysis

The study was conducted in the second half of 2018. Each interview was recorded and, after obtaining responses from all respondents, the interviews were transcribed. Following a systematic and thorough reading of the transcribed interviews, the authors encoded the material with MAXQDA software, which made it possible for the main topics to emerge. The coding was done at an open, axial, and selective level [Strauss & Corbin 1998]. At the open-coding stage the authors created initial codes, followed by general codes, e.g.: *personal-brand-creation process*. The purpose of open coding is to analyse raw data to give them sense and enable broader topics to emerge. The general codes led to the discovery of further subcategories. Axial coding was then employed to bring out the dependencies and relationships, as well as the common and differentiating elements among the codes, with the consequence of enabling codes to be combined into main categories. In the end, selective encoding was used for the purpose of creating a hierarchy of differences and problems and generating a history by combining the categories. Having completed the coding, the authors identified the common threads and patterns, and the conclusions are presented in detail in the *Results* section. Detailed information contained in the responses, such as might identify the respondents, was intentionally altered to protect their privacy.

Results

The results section was divided into two subsections. The first one refers to the shaping and perception of a personal brand by women and men, and the second one to its creation in the media. In the following subchapter we will present the results of the interviews and selected threads highlighted during the study in connection with the following research questions: What differences are there in the personal brand creation processes of female and male CEOs and how do women and men in CEO positions use the media to build their personal brands?

Differences in CEO personal brand creation by women and men

The results of the interviews prove that men and women understand the concept of a personal brand differently. According to women a personal brand should be consistent, irrespective of where its presentation is taking place and hence irrespective of the target audience. Simultaneously, women emphasized the importance of the authenticity of the personal brand understood by reference to its consistency. As one of the female CEOs explained:

'A personal brand must be consistent; the person cannot be perceived differently depending on the place (...) it must be authentic, otherwise it will not be consistent, because it must not be that strange creation, then that will not be real. A personal brand reflects the true product, the true person.' — W11.

To men, by contrast, consistency manifested through coherence between the personal brand and the company brand, as a feedback loop. It was a value and at the same time a priority for the male CEOs to be true to themselves and create the company's brand on that foundation as a relationship based on mutual synergy. One of the managing directors put it this way:

The [company's] brand is I; I am the company's brand — M6

In most cases I appear as the company's representative, as its founder; I am never separated from it. — M6

Men clearly emphasized the inseparable link between the function of a CEO and the reputation of an expert in the field, linking them precisely to the company's brand. Accordingly, the respondents linked their own personal brand to the context in which the company's brand appeared:

I think I am often invited as a CEO and as an expert (...) even when I speak as an expert that is always connected with my position in the company. — M2

Women's statements about personal brand creation made more frequent references to elements of the extended identity. The women attributed more importance to those factors than the men. One of the female CEOs explained that the professionalization of the personal brand also involves the woman's look and presentation.

One also builds the personal brand through the packaging, the way of dressing, that is when I

see a woman in a short skirt that barely covers anything and in high heels then, sorry, but that is not professional, I don't think of her as a good businesswoman (...). It must all be consistent; if I want to give a professional impression, I must look and dress professionally. — W11

In reference to the previous statement, only the women among the respondents highlighted the importance of dress and appearance as an element of personal branding. They perceived the personal appearance as an important element of who they were and the position they held:

I always must look good, well-dressed, well-rested, cannot have bags under my eyes, because people will say: 'look, she has so much money and she looks so bad,' but – on the other hand – if a woman looks too good, they say that is unprofessional and she is trying too hard. This means I must try to find something between those two things, whereas men do not have such problems. — W1

It turns out that consistency between one's position and one's appearance is an important aspect of personal branding for women. The female CEOs emphasised how it was up to them to take care of how they were perceived, for example, by selecting what they were wearing. They also paid more attention to their appearance and how it would be judged by others.

To men, an important factor relating to the understanding of a personal brand was its recognizability in the eyes of the audience. As one of the male CEOs put it:

Once I was strolling with my father around our hometown and some woman greeted him; she was rather young, and father is quite old (...) I asked him who she was, and he replied: 'I don't know, but what is important is that she knows who I am.' That is a personal brand. — M2

CEO personal brand creation in the media by women and men

The next part of the interview dealt with media appearances. In this case the authors were intent on getting the information about in what media the male and the female CEOs were inclined to appear in, about their preparations for public appearances, and about the goals of their communication and active presence in the media sphere.

Each of the female respondents emphasized the importance of perfect preparation; men paid attention to this less often:

I must try twice harder than my colleagues only because I am a woman. — W11

The double standards had been visible also in the above-discussed examples of a need for consistency in the personal brand regardless of the place of presentation. From the conversations it follows clearly that the women must be more conscious of how they present themselves in the media.

One of the interlocutors argued that despite having a private profile on social media she did not use it for the purposes of creating her personal brand; she only followed others. From her statements one can infer that the separation of the private sphere from the professional sphere constitutes an important value to her:

Of course, I have a private profile, I have even thought about creating a professional one; we have talked a lot with my PR person, and if I had been CEO for a longer time, perhaps I would have one for the company's purposes (...) but that would be a problem for me somewhat, I do not like to expose myself there. — W1

Differently to the women, the men did not put much emphasis on the distinction between private and professional communication in social media. Those who are present there at all, use their accounts for both private and professional communication:

The social media are both for my friends and the public; sometimes they include professional information about our successes, what we are proud of, and sometimes I publish a funny photo, too. — M3

That is, my profile is both private and professional (...) from time to time I publish some information about my garden (...) but in general it contains more professional information (...). I keep it specifically to promote the company. — M2

At the same time, one of the male CEOs emphasized that his use of social media was with the intention to professionalizing his personal brand in the context of presenting it in the expert role:

I use my LinkedIn account to promote my personal brand (...). I use it to promote ideas linked to my professional life; I am very careful about what I publish there; I diligently curate the content — M4

The male CEOs perceive their personal social media accounts as a tool for the creation of not only their own personal brand but also that of the company, as emphasized already in the previous section:

I often write articles on Facebook and LinkedIn about new technologies, company news, the economy too, right? I try to keep people informed of what's going on (...) but I also present myself as an authority on the subject (...). I publish at least once weekly. — M2

Male CEOs present in the media focus on their knowledge, experience, and skills, which form the core of their personal brands. To men, differentiating oneself from the others clearly was important.

[The personal brand] is not only something that makes you recognizable, right? It is also to differentiate yourself from the others. — M3

The female respondents took a more conservative approach to differentiation, once again citing examples connected with their own way of dressing:

My brand differentiates me, but I still cannot differ excessively, as the external layer, from the other CEOs; what I have in mind is certain rules of the game that we stick to, so I cannot be too extravagant, for example in the way I dress, that is what I am. — W1

Discussion and conclusions

The presented results of the pilot study provide the basis for further analysis to fill the gap in the subject literature by analysing the differences between women and men in the personal branding process. The qualitative study in the form of the interviews served an exploratory role, supplying preliminary reflection on the studied phenomenon. The research question concerned the differences in the process of CEOs' personal brand creation between women and men. The nature of the results of the study is thus that of pilot comparative analysis.

Firstly, only the female CEOs in the study emphasized the importance of solid preparation and paid special attention to extended identity, such as choice of dress [Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000], in the context of the professionalization of the personal brand; the men expressed this belief less often. Historically speaking, women have traditionally been valued for beauty, as opposed to men, of whom intelligence and physical strength was expected [Wolf 1990]. Studies confirm that appearance has a decisive impact on how candidates for leadership positions are perceived [Bartol 1980]. Detailed studies demonstrate that the attractiveness of a candidate for a managerial post is consistently advantageous to male candidates competing for such positions;

simultaneously, attractiveness is advantageous to female candidates only when applying for non-leadership positions [Heilman and Saruwatari 1979; Lee et al. 2015].

Secondly, the female respondents clearly identified the need for separation between the professional and the private spheres in the context of personal-brand creation in the media. To men, the interlacing of the two images in the media did not pose a problem. It is worth noting that the 'think leader — think male' stereotype, which manifests in a less favourable view of female managers, can at the same time discourage women from actively creating their personal brands in the media. Studies show that women are more frequently presented in the media in the context of their private lives [Rockefeller Foundation 2016; Van der Pas and Aaldering 2020]. Simultaneously, the answer to the question of whether women truly want to be presented in the media through the perspective of their roles from outside the professional life remains outstanding. Our study showed that women strive to separate the two spheres of life in the context of the presentation of their personal brands in social media. Similar conclusions come from the studies demonstrating that female CEOs and managing directors encountered more difficulties with media presence than men [Rockefeller Foundation 2016; Roffler 2002], which may be explained by the lack of social acceptance of women in high positions, confirmed by research [Górska 2017].

Thirdly, interviews have shown the male CEOs to be more conscious of the need to adapt their personal brands to the requirements of the various media, which is consistent with the recommendations of researchers and experts [Arruda 2003; Karaduman 2013; Peters 1997; 1999; Rein, Kotler, Stoller 2006; Shepherd 2005]. The men, furthermore, emphasized the importance of appearing in the position of a professional and expert in the relevant field. This was similarly presented by Goffman [1956], who argued that the CEOs attempted to distinguish the different target groups, harmoniously adapting the content of the message to the audience. A similar approach was not noted among the women, which does not however, mean that the women are not conscious of this mechanism; it only means they do not concentrate their activity around it. This may be the outcome of the fact that when informing on women's professional lives the media more often emphasize the appearance, number of children and marital status, whereas men are more

often described through the prism of their achievements and careers [Collins 2011; Robinson and Saint-Jean 1995].

Additionally, women repeatedly paid attention to how they were perceived by others, while paying less attention to internal values (core identity) [Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000]. In the theoretical chapter the distinction was drawn between the core identity and the extended identity [Aaker 1996]. The core identity comprises values, skills, and education, while the extended identity relates to presentation and communication style [Bendisch 2011]. Thus, the foundation of a personal brand is the consistency of the values represented by a person based on the core identity and the extended identity. To the men, it appears to be less important how they will be perceived by others; instead, they pay attention to emphasize the skills they have and the values they adhere to.

The male CEOs more frequently emphasized the mutual relationship between the personal brand and the company brand. At the same time, to the women, fitting in by adopting a suitable choice of dress or presentation and behaviour and thereby remaining consistent with the values of the company they represented played an important role. From other studies we know that women adapt to social expectations in appearance, and they do not want to differentiate themselves from others [Bartol 1980]. At the same time, media presentations usually contain 'distorted cultural norms concerning appearance', deforming and disorientating social expectations of the average woman [Rumsey and Harcourt 2012], which may also apply to the expectations of the appearance of a woman holding a high managerial position.

Limitations and future directions of studies

Although the exploratory nature of this study does not permit the generalization of the results and their projection on society, it has revealed a few important implications for theory and practice. First, the differences in the ways of personal brand creation of CEOs by women and by men were accentuated, highlighting the complex challenges facing female CEOs in their presentation of themselves and their companies in the media.

The preliminary interpretation of the studied phenomenon concerning the creation and presentation of one's personal brand in the media by men and by women holding CEO positions was based on qualitative interviews. This study could be supple-

mented by monitoring the media presence of male and female CEOs. Such a type of study could contribute to expanding the knowledge of differences between women and men in CEO personal brand creation by including quantitative results (e.g., the number of media mentions) and qualitative results (e.g., content bias).

Limitations to this study arise from the small number of respondents and the disproportion between the number of men and women. It would be expedient for future studies to analyse a larger sample, while aiming for a balanced gender proportion of respondents.

Another direction for future studies could be the analytical search for relationships and differences between the creation of men's and women's personal brands and the accumulation of social capital. The analysis of the existing differences in the building and use of the various forms of social capital in the process of personal-brand creation could highlight the barriers faced by women engaged in the development of their careers.

This study was limited to the Polish context, though it would appear to be appropriate to check whether the results are consistent with those achieved by similar studies in other countries. That would allow a comparison to be drawn to identify the similarities and differences in the creation and presentation of women's personal brands in the media in different countries.

In the authors' opinion, apart from studies undertaken with a view to gaining more in-depth knowledge of the analysed phenomenon, it would be advisable to implement targeted, dedicated training for women in organizations. Nowadays, being educated about professional media presentation is a requirement expected both by recruiters and by business partners and other stakeholders. This study accentuated women are more likely to encounter problems emphasizing their strengths, which in turn affects the development of their careers and the process of creation of both their personal brand and social capital.

Concerning managerial implications, both male and female CEOs should be conscious of the importance of actively building a presence in traditional and social media and aware of the growing trend of transparency and values rooted in a strong and authentic image in the media. Those in high positions ought to share valuable, substantive insights and emphasize the links between their personal brands and the brands of the companies they represent.

Such activities also improve the educational opportunities available to the younger generations and facilitate the awakening of a healthy ambition among young women, who are more exposed to entrenched stereotypes concerning their career paths. To this end, it would once again be expedient to emphasize the value of training, coaching, and mentoring in the professional creation one's own media image.

In conclusion, this study identifies potential causes of the persistence of the disproportion between women and men occupying the highest leadership positions in Poland. The effect of the digitization and progressing importance of social media is that having a recognizable personal brand can be the source of important benefits, both professional and personal. Scholars and practitioners emphasize its importance in the context of achieving success in business and differentiation in the labour market. There is no doubt that the media have an enormous impact on public opinion and can promote the idea of gender equality, facilitating the improvement of women's situation and social status.

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² *Rzeczpospolita* has evaluated and compared the strength of Polish brands on a representative sample annually since 2004. The study is based on a random sample of 1500 respondents. The data are collected using the CAWI method (Computer Assisted Web Interview). Companies from many sectors are ranked — oil and gas, food, services and more. The respondents answer questions relating to brand awareness, brand reference and the various dimensions of brand evaluation. The dimensions are weighted, and brands can be rated from 0 to 100 based on the results of the survey, where 100 means the 'ideal brand' in Polish circumstances.

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