Volunteer based media activities as a tool of empowerment at Youth Activity Centre Happi

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The purpose of this study was to research how the active participation in voluntary media activities enables youth empowerment. For the Bachelor's thesis at Laurea University of Applied Sciences, the authors conducted this research in co-operation with Youth Activity Centre Happi, located in Helsinki. The target group involved ten youngsters aged 14-18 years, who partcipate in the media activities of the youth center on voluntary basis.

The thesis topic was decided due to common interests of the authors. These include for instance youth work and Anti-oppressive practice, which are relevant concepts of social work and hence contribute to the significance of the research. As the foundation of the conducted study, theories of Anti-oppressive Practice, Empowering youth work, media work and Identity Development were applied. In the course of the research the conductors interviewed the informants in regards to the individual experiences and perceptions of the attended media activities. The research approach of this thesis was qualitative. The data collection was carried out by methods of semi-structured interviews and observation supported by field notes. The structure of the interviews was based on open ended questioning and an unbiased setting, which promoted our aspiration for an Anti-oppressive research.

The findings of this study indicate that the volunteer based media activities do serve as a tool of empowerment for youth in this particular setting. This conclusion is discussed further through the most prevalent themes, which emerged throughout the conducted interviews; self-expression, skill development, availability and social encounter.

Laurea-ammattikorkeakoulu   **Tiivistelmä**
Otaniemi
Degree Programme in Social Services

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Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli tarkastella, kuinka aktiivinen osallistuminen vapaaehtoiseen media toimintaan mahdollistaa nuorten voimaantumisen. Ammattikorkeakoulu Laurean opinnäytetyönä toteutettu tutkimus tehtiin yhteistyössä Nuorten toimintakeskus Hapen kanssa Helsingissä. Tutkimuksen kohderyhmänä olivat 14–18 -vuotiaat nuoret, jotka osallistuvat toimintakeskuksen media-aktiviteetteihin.

Opinnäytetyön aihe valittiin kirjoittajien yhteisten mielenkiinnon kohteiden tiimoilta. Näihin kuuluvat muun muassa nuorisotyö sekä antioppressiiviset teoriat, jotka ovat ajankohtaisia teemoja sosiaalialalla ja mahdollistavat siten relevantin tutkimuksen. Anti-oppressiivinen praktiikka, voimaannuttava nuorisotyö, mediatyö ja yksilön identiteetin kehitysteoriat ovat olleet tutkimuksen teoreettisena lähtökohtana. Tutkimuksen aikana nuoria haastateltiin heidän henkilökohtaisten kokemustensa ja näkemystensä pohjalta. Näin ollen tutkimusta lähestyttiin kvalitatiivisesti. Tutkimuksessa käytetty haastattelupohja oli puolistrukturoitu ja lisäksi dataa koottiin havainnoimalla ja näitä tukevilla muistiinpanoilla. Kysymykset olivat avoimia ja tutkimuksen ympäristö ennakkoluuloton, mikä edisti antioppressiivisen tutkimuksemme tavoitteita.

Tutkimuksen tulokset tukevat käsitystä siitä, että vapaaehtoiset media aktiviteetit todellisuudessa edistävät nuorten voimaantumista tässä yhteydessä. Näitä tuloksia käsiteltiin edelleen haastatteluissa nousseiden teemojen avulla. Näitä teemoja olivat itseilmaisu, henkilökohtaisten taitojen kehitys, tarjonta ja sosiaalinen kohtaaminen.

Asiasanat: Voimaantuminen, Nuorisotyö, Mediatoiminta, Vapaaehtoisuus

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1   Introduction

The three of us working on this thesis have a particular interest in youth work; we have worked with youngsters both in our practice placements during our studies, as well as in several projects during specific study units, and we are especially enthusiastic to see what kind of future in youth work is waiting for us after our graduation. Therefore, it was clear to us that our thesis research will be targeted at youngsters as well. Based on our experiences we find it important that working methods with a creative touch are developed and used in youth work so that youngsters could have new and various platforms for self-expression.

It is not unusual for youngsters to feel that their voices are not heard in the society. Hence, we see it as important to have opportunities to give a voice to the personal stories of youth. Media usually plays a big role in youth's lives and it is both a well-known and appreciated tool to give recognition to one's ideas. Volunteer based media activities also offer a low threshold gateway for expressing oneself. To develop these opportunities we research what are the factors of media based activities that youngsters feel empowered by. The themes of self-expression, skill development, social encounter and availability are further discussed based on the interviews with the participating youngsters. In the best case, the research offers insight on what youngsters consider important and significant about voluntary media activities.

Ergo, the aim of the thesis is to research how volunteer based media activities might serve as an empowering tool of self-reflection. Empowerment arises from the working methods, as the youngsters are participating in the activities voluntarily and are therefore in charge of their own roles and stories throughout their individual processes. Our research is conducted in a semi-structured way and with the help of chosen questions and open discussion we aim to understand the motivation behind the youngsters' participation in the activities. The thesis research addresses youth who are joining the voluntary media activities at our working life partner Youth Activity Center Happi and is implemented in English.

2   Background

The initial idea of this thesis was to implement an empowering storytelling and video production workshop for youngsters. The aim of the project was to offer the youngsters a way to get their voice to be heard and share their personal stories. Another goal of the project was to develop the well-being of youngsters. During the project, we would have hoped to empower the participating individuals, and with the help of the project and its evaluation to develop the well-being of other youngsters as well, by offering visibility and information. The project was not successful, as the thesis conductors did not find enough participants for the project

to meet the goals. Because of this, a research-based thesis considering the same theme of youth empowerment through volunteer-based media activities was initiated.

It is necessary to clarify the idea of empowerment as our whole research aims towards recognizing empowering effects. There are various contributors to the initial thought of empowerment, pioneers include amongst others Freire, Zimmerman, Gutierrez and Rappaport. Definitions vary according to focus group and context, but they all have in common the component of enabling active involvement and capacity building, which consequently increases the power of an individual or community. According to Zimmerman (2000), "Empowerment is the process by which people take charge of their environment (physical, economic, social, cultural, and psychological) with the resources available to them" (in Fetterman & Wandersman 2005, 10). Hence, empowerment is building upon strengths instead of deficits. "People empower themselves as they become more independent, group problem solvers and decision makers" (Fetterman & Wandersman 2005, 10).

2.1 Significance of the research

In today's society, it is quite easy to drown in the sea of information offered to us by the media. There are various platforms for expressing one's opinion and sharing information such as television, radio, social media, blogging, and so on. However, it is sadly usual amongst youngsters to feel their voice, experiences and opinions are not heard in the society or on a community level. People have the need to express themselves, and it becomes more and more important to share this self-expression to others as well, whether it is art, personal opinion, or need for social change. To gain some understanding of the possibilities of development considering media and youth, it is important to recognize how youth experiences a media based platform for self-expression and its effect to oneself.

The research question of this thesis is 'do volunteer based media activities serve as a tool of empowerment for youth?'. The research is based on the study conductors' experience that it is important for youth to express oneself through media and that there might be a need for development in the existing platforms to do so. Family structures and school bureaucracies might limit individuals' self-expression and even though there is a growing amount of volunteer organizations recruiting youngsters, social media, student governments etc., it might be hard to find the activity that makes one happy. On a community level in Finland, adolescents aged under 18 years are not allowed to vote, which corresponds to the fact that even though 30% of Finland's population is under 24 years old (Fennica 2015), the youngest member in the parliament before the parliamentary election in 2015 was 29 years old and only 25% of the members were under the age of 45 (Statistics Finland 2011). These are the people who have power over youth to make the decisions in a higher structural level, without having

knowledge of what is actually current for the youth. According to the Youth barometer published in 2014, youth is not specifically interested in societal impact and involvement. The research shows that the reason for this is that youth do not feel like their actions for social change have any effect. These kinds of feelings are far from bringing up strong, independent and thriving individuals who would be able to express themselves even on a smaller scale such as within a group of friends. It is important to feel empowered by one's actions; therefore, it was decided that the study researches volunteer based media activities as a tool for youngsters empowerment. Media usually plays a big role in today's youth's lives, and platforms such as blogging, Youtube, and other social media are today's instruments of impact.

Empowerment has a lot to do with other things than merely having the power over one's own decisions. To have the possibility to connect self-expression with social encounter and actual development of personal skills is why the working life partner of this thesis, Youth Activity Center Happi, located in Sörnäinen, Helsinki, is playing a big role in the research of youth empowerment. Happi is a safe space for 14-29-year olds in Helsinki to have hobbies, activities, parties, and else. The four floors of the 3500 m^2 building include various operatives such as Narri Youth Theater, HattuMedia - a media platform for youngsters, Helsinki Freedom Records, an arts and crafts center and much more. Happi has its own official rules specified together with the youth, and these rules are set according to anti-oppressive and anti-bullying values. During this thesis research the authors aimed to establish a trustworthy and reliable partnership with Happi. The partnership ensured that a connection was made with youngsters who offer beneficial research data about their experiences in volunteer-based media activities.

Different forms of research about creative methods are already widely implemented by other youth work operatives in Finland, too, and these methods strive for similar goals as this thesis research does. Self-expression and self-reflection, meaningful experiences and empowerment through all these, are themes that a client-centered approach for youth work is all about. This research of volunteer media activities has a lot of valid previous projects and researches to gain inspiration and knowledge from. For instance Nuorten Ääni -toimitus, an on-going group of youngsters publishing for their own and various other publications about current issues, is a perfect example of how giving a face or a voice to one's personal story can work towards empowerment. Also Verke (2013) mentions digital storytelling as a powerful tool of youth work that can lead to healthy elaboration of an individual's experiences, one's personal identity observation and development, development of communication and communality on top of activation and empowerment of adolescence, and affecting the community on a citizen level.

2.2   Aim of the research

To develop these possibilities of empowering media activities, continuous research is however still needed. Therefore, the conductors of the thesis see that researching the personal stories connected to these themes can lead to individual development as well. The main objective of the thesis research is to evaluate how volunteer based media activities might serve as a tool of empowerment for youth. The hoped outcome of the research is to gather enough valuable and trustworthy information to receive qualitative research results representing the true insight of youngsters. The research addresses youth who are joining the voluntary media activities at Happi. The aim is to seek out the youngsters' motivation to participate and to uncover the open media space's role in offering an empowering surrounding where youngsters have the opportunity to develop new skills and deepen their fields of interest while undergoing positive group experiences. By means of well-chosen questions, personal dialogues and open communication the researchers want to gain insights into the structure, background, motivation and value of the volunteer-based media activities. In order to maximize the opportunity of dialogue with the participants, realistic and simple questions were developed to guarantee a low threshold for the youth to communicate.

3   Theoretical framework

In the following paragraphs we explain the chosen relevant theories for our thesis research and how these theories are connected to our objectives and goals with the youngsters in question. The theories comprise Anti-oppressive practice, Empowering youth work, media education and volunteer-based activities as well as Identity development.

3.1   Anti-oppressive Practice

Shae Pepper (2015) states that an Anti-oppressive work approach with youth simply means working in a way that actively fights oppression that youth may be experiencing through ageism, racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination. Whether in schools, hobbies, or at homes discrimination is often a taboo that is not acknowledged or admitted, and because of that working with anti-oppressive values goes beyond simply "not discriminating"; it includes action (Pepper 2015).

3.1.1   Professional's role in an Anti-oppressive research

In order to work with anti-oppressive values in our thesis, we need to first recognize that we as the facilitators of such a study have to see the forms of discrimination our participants

might be experiencing. Secondly, we have to actually do something to challenge and change the rules that may be causing the discrimination to be ongoing and a genuine barrier to advancement in the lives of our youngsters (Pepper 2015). To set realistic goals and objectives for our undertaking, it is obviously not possible to change for instance Finnish laws with our thesis research. Therefore the action and social change we aim for needs to be in the possible future development of the personal lives of our participants and our community on a closer level. This way the emphasis of the anti-oppressive working methods of our thesis can be in helping youngsters to recognize and reflect on personal tools they use to overcome the oppression or discrimination enabling their personal advancement and development.

Clifford and Burke (2009) state that Anti-oppressive practice was developed for professional workers concerned about the impact of their actions and decisions on vulnerable others, and being aware of their own membership of both dominating and marginal groups. The points that were mentioned above demonstrate the necessity of self-reflection, which we are consciously aware of throughout our research conduct. According to Clifford and Burke (2009, 19), "if a professional's practice is not reflexive, and the worker is unable to assess the impact of power, then it is not an anti-oppressive approach, as we understand it". As Pepper (2015) also agrees, youth workers responsibility is to "help young people participate in this so called 'moral philosophizing' about the world around them". This is achieved through discussion and dialogue with people, therefore, we must be workers of words, action, *and* reflection to truly understand the role of the youngsters in their community. By focusing on an ongoing consideration of self in practice we might be able to understand how our values and our biographies impact on our relationships with the youth (Dalrymple & Burke 2006, 17) and hence also our research. Keeping this in mind, one of the tools for achieving our goals of the thesis is to carefully plan and implement the research to follow the theory of Anti-oppressive practice by also self-reflecting on our work.

Clifford and Burke (2009, 5) moreover remind that on top of the aspects associated with discrimination there are "many inequalities of wealth, status and power, both reflecting and leading to cultural and structural social divisions". It is important to recognize all these levels to understand for example the possible reasons behind racially unequal media coverage. Working with multicultural and diverse youngsters during our research, it is necessary to act in a way that minimizes or overcomes some of the complex effects of discrimination and oppression, rather than adding to them through collusion, neglect or lack of self-awareness. However, many aspects of oppression are so deeply ingrained in everyday life that a lot of people do not notice them at all and they are taken for granted. There are a number of processes that are associated with discrimination and oppression, such as marginalization, group closure, stereotyping, stigmatization, and scapegoating, which means that an individual within a family or group can become the person who takes the blame for the problems of that

family or group (Thompson 2001, 21). These are all aspects that might be current for the participating youth. Our research was planned in a way that it does not support for instance stereotyping based on class, disability, age, sexuality or gender, and instead offers an open platform for the youngster to participate in the interviews.

Since there are various challenges when aiming for this kind of research approach, what matters is the possibility of dialogue between individuals and groups. This means that the attempt to act in an anti-oppressive way is itself an endless search for ethical values, in which we persistently negotiate with and learn from each other – and especially from one who is socially and culturally different (Clifford & Burke 2009, 5). To ingrain some of these values in the lives of the youngsters participating in the research is not one of the main objectives of our thesis. However, to work accordingly is definitely an aspect that will lead us to achieve our goal of offering each individual a meaningful experience of sharing, which is not restraining his or her personal empowerment.

3.1.2 PCS analysis in youth work

It is important to emphasize that oppression does not simply refer to situations where a powerful person or group exerts a tyrannical influence over others – though it does include this. More importantly, it also refers to the structural injustices, which arise from (often) unintentionally oppressive assumptions and interactions that occur as the result of institutional and social customs, economic practices and rules. Oppression, therefore, operates at both structural and personal levels at the same time (Clifford & Burke 2009, 8). Theories of Anti-oppressive practice, such as the 'PCS analysis' advanced by Thompson, also support the thought of various levels of oppression. As a means of identifying oppression, the analysis refers to the personal, cultural, and structural levels at which discrimination can occur (Clifford & Burke 2009, 8).

Figure 1 PCS Analysis (Wood 2001)
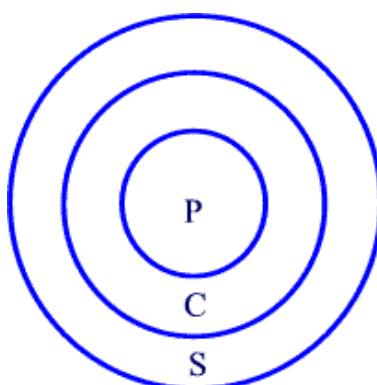
Wood (2001) explains that according to the PCS model, the Personal (P) Level is usually concerned with an individual's views, particularly in the case of a prejudice against a certain group of people. Working with youth on bases of Anti-oppressive practice in a place such as Happi, this could, for instance, relate to a youngster or youth worker who makes racist comments. The 'P' is located in the middle of the diagram because that individual has his/her beliefs and ideas supported through the two other levels (Wood 2001). The analysis of the Cultural (C) Level relates to the commonalities or shared values of individuals, for example shared beliefs about what is good or bad, or right and wrong (Wood 2001). The outer level of the diagram, which is the Structural (S) Level, demonstrates how oppression is a part of the deeper structures of society through institutions that support both cultural norms and personal beliefs. Examples of these kinds of beliefs might include sections of the media, the government, or religion (Wood 2001).

How this analysis could be connected to the experiences of youngsters and therefore to our thesis research, can be explained by a possible example situation; on the personal level, a youth worker in the youth center makes offensive and discriminating comments about sexual minorities in the presence of a gay youngster. On the community level this affects in a way that gay or the youngsters in question start to largely repulse and avoid the community of the youth center because they do not feel welcomed or safe. At the same time, the community of youth workers hold firm views about sexual morals and do not see the situation as a problem. On the structural level, a popular tabloid media berates the 'abnormal' activities of gay people. Religious leaders of all faiths support the instatement of laws to stop giving information about sexual minorities to youngsters and legislation is passed by parliament that compromises the rights of the youngsters (based on the example by Wood 2001).

Analyzing a situation such as this according to the PCS model may be helpful for us during our thesis research, by building an idea of why young people behave in certain ways – or why they carry out such actions (Wood 2001). This way we can achieve our goals such as seeking out the motivation of participating in the media activities. It can also give us as researchers some ground for challenging inequality. By first identifying what drives people to hold 'prejudices', we can be reminded that society enforces a lot of our beliefs. This helps in its own way to understand how something can become a 'norm' and how we can best go about explaining and challenging oppression in our research with the youngsters (Wood 2001). Both working with anti-oppressive values, and handling the experiences of youngsters, is an addition to the change.

3.1.3   Other dimensions of Anti-oppressive Practice

Dalrymple and Burke (2006, 19) state with their study that an Anti-oppressive work with youngsters, such as our thesis, requires an empowering approach which aims to overcome barriers for the youngsters in taking more control of their lives. What this means for our research is that we work in partnership with the participants so that they are in control of what they want to share and express during the interviews. As far as possible the youngsters are included in the decision-making process about their stories and roles in the research, meaning that questions of recording the interviews, revealing the gender and age, or taking notes of the discussion were up to the youngster to decline. One aspect to consider is also that by recognizing the different dimensions of oppression and analyzing these working methods, we are hopefully able to recognize how cultural practices and social structures impact on the lives of the youngsters rather than blame the individuals for their problems (Dalrymple & Burke 2006, 19). This will be especially important when discussing the motives behind expressing oneself through public media, because issues of bullying, racism, rejection and other current topics for youngsters, can usually not be blamed on the youngster.

Something else to take into consideration when implementing our research is, that what matters to individuals and how they see themselves varies enormously depending on their changing lives and circumstances (Clifford & Burke 2009, 20). Nevertheless, it is clear that individuals have commonalities as well as differences. These are certainly a subject to interpretation, and a place for self-reflection as a worker. As the commonalities may be well or poorly understood by any particular individual member of a social group (Clifford & Burke 2009, 20) it is definitely an asset for our thesis that there are three of us working on it. However, a positive attitude and expectations are what we base our research on. No doubt, it is possible to make decisions that are positive and constructive, challenging oppressive situations, and releasing the potential of the youngsters as individuals as well as the community of Happi media activities (Clifford & Burke 2009, 20). This brings us back to the core idea of Anti-oppressive practice mentioned above, which is that working with these values demands not only a mindset, but action. It is necessary to actively question situations where social difference and inequality raise ethical issues (Clifford & Burke 2009, 21). Also, when working with the youngsters in Happi, it is clear that social circumstances change, interacting with varying degrees of personal and collective awareness of change. Hence, it is important for us to realize that what used to be an effective and ethical approach during some stage of the research, might turn out to have various meanings in a new environment for different people.

For us as facilitators of our thesis research these anti-oppressive values might seem clear, since we are basing our study on them. Clifford and Burke (2009, 31) argue that "without an anti-oppressive approach to ethical social work, a critical dimension of ethics is missing".

Therefore, we feel that using some anti-oppressive guidelines in the process of our research will offer a good base for implementing youth work research such as this. Be that as it may, how the youngsters are committed to these Anti-oppressive values is a question of good facilitating. Some anti-oppressive guidelines that Clifford and Burke (2009, 31-39) mention are taking into account social difference, meaning, for example, having respect for individuals. In the abstract this is a fine ethical principle, but respecting concrete individuals who are very different from ourselves is the real test of an Anti-oppressive ethical commitment. Other ideal principles include for instance understanding the specific social histories of individuals and groups involved, evaluating the impact of social systems and relationships, analyzing different kinds of powers, which brings us back to examining reflexively our own social location and the possibility of dialogue. Understanding the position of the other person and being prepared to act in ways that take their humanity and needs into account as well as our own (Clifford & Burke 2009, 28), brings a lot to the table and is also supporting the empowerment of the youngsters.

3.2   Empowering Youth Work

As we are conducting a study among young people and aim to learn how voluntary media activities may empower individual youngsters, we feel that is important for us to understand various dimensions of youth work and how empowerment is present in these activities.

The meaning of the term 'youth work' is difficult to determine, since it can include different concepts depending on the point of view. As Batsleer and Davies (2010) argue, "youth work may not mean the same thing to every volunteer, youth worker, youth work manager or policy maker" (in Wood, Westwood & Davies 2015, 2). Moreover, like all humanistic work, youth work is influenced by the social, political and economic context in which it operates (Bradford 2005, 58). Nevertheless, there are some central concepts, principles and values which are associated with professional youth work such as education, social practice, inequality and social justice. The method of informal education which occurs in voluntary settings, such as youth houses and activity centers is commonly understood as a traditional form of youth work. This approach enables the workers to get involved in young people's lives and establish connections and relationships, which promote personal and social development. By activities and discussions with the workers, young people are enabled to discover new dimensions and aspects of themselves and of the world around them (Wood, Westwood & Thompson 2015).

The Finnish Youth Work Act defines youth work as such: "Youth work means measures for improving young people's living conditions and creating conditions for young people's civic activities" (Finland 1995). Youth work aims to strengthen the voice of young people by empowering them to acknowledge their influence within a social system. Traditionally, youth work en-

courages young people to enter into dialogue with the practitioners in order to build their confidence and self-esteem, which then promotes their ability to make mature decisions. Youth workers engage with youngsters within various settings and use necessary methods and activities to promote self-awareness and self-value. They expand the young people's horizons and confidence concerning their personal skills and abilities. The promotion of social justice for young people is at the core of the work: Anti-oppressive and Anti-discriminatory practices are implemented in order to understand power imbalances and possible oppression in young people's lives (Wood, Westwood & Thompson 2015).

Furthermore, the concept of empowerment in a youth work setting can be approached as how young people are able to participate in society and its functions. Podd (2010) argues that youth participation and empowerment as concepts have been primarily understood as "a means for involving young people in the design, delivery and evaluation of policies and services as a means of addressing the democratic deficit – young people's alienation from conventional politics" (in Batsleer & Davies 2010, 3). However, the concept of participation and involvement within youth work context can be difficult to define; for some, participation stands for young people attending a youth project, while some understand participation as a concept for addressing social justice and empowerment.

According to the "triangle of youth participation model" by Jans and de Backer (2002), young people will actively participate in society or parts of it, when there is a dynamic balance among three dimensions called challenge, capacity and connection. This still relevant model argues that there needs to be a challenge which incites the young people to participate, which can be a personal or social issue that the youngsters feel attracted to. Moreover, young people need to feel that they have the capacity to grasp the challenge and that their efforts can make a difference. Lack of capacity can develop into a feeling of powerlessness and frustration and in addition lack of challenge into feelings of meaninglessness. If the balance can be achieved, and young people feel connected and supported by the people and the society around them, they can effectively work towards the challenge in hand. Therefore, Jans and de Backer (2002) promote the importance of successful experiences, which develop feelings of achievement and acceptance while working towards youth participation and empowerment.

The various approaches and methods connected with youth work in Western countries are mostly attached to these issues of youth empowerment, youth development and youth participation. Additionally, they focus into more specific concepts such as positive youth development, youth engagement, and young people's oppression. As argued by Larson (2006, 5), positive youth development can be defined as such: "The new label *positive youth development*-with its redundant adding of *positive* to *development*-is used to emphasize and champion this

new way of thinking: Youth is producers of their own growth; development involves more than preventing problems; adults are most effective when they support the positive potentials within young people". In other words, young people are seen to be motivated and able to construct their own personal development and adults should simply support this individual growth. By this approach, the perspective is changed from the idea that adults (professionals, policy makers or parents) should try to control and shape youth, into the opposite point of view which concentrates on the appreciation of the youngster's individual characteristics and youth and adults working together as a unit towards common goals (Larson 2006). Furthermore, according to Purjo (2009) the baseline for encountering youth is to acknowledge the youngsters personality and individuality. The concept of personality involves the ethical dimension which emphasizes that when someone is seen as a persona, he or she is given potential and capability by others. However, the persona and personality are different concepts; a human is born with a persona which will then grow into personality, therefore upbringing or education should focus on supporting the individual to reach his or her internal capacity (Purjo 2009).

Numerous studies and researchers have shown that humans have an inherent motivational system which drives development, and under the right conditions where the person is personally engaged by the task, the learning will be most effective (Larson 2006). Moreover, people are most motivated to take on challenges when they feel ownership of what they are doing; when they perceive themselves as agents of their actions (Larson 2006). Therefore, too restrictive control and domination by the adults does not necessary build the most sustainable and effective learning results for the youth. Skinnari (2009, 181) continues with the argument that "both children and youngsters long for a loving presence from their educators and mentors". He addresses that young people look for inspiration and genuine understanding from the adults in their lives, which should be taken into account when training new youth workers. Kuusela (2009) suggests that the way we (adults) act in front of children and young people is a message with a lesson; children learn from example and copy from our actions and reactions. In short, the worldview of the adult represents the truth for the youngster, even if it is twisted and distorted. This thought in mind, the actors within the lives of youth should be aware of their impact and the message they transmit around them while working with young people.

The concepts of "an adult ally" and "youth-adult partnership" are common in the discussion of youth engagement (Khanna & McCart 2007). These approaches build on the idea that young people should be seen as capable agents of their personal development and be acknowledged by their individual personalities and characteristics. The youth-adult partnership may be defined as action and interaction where an adult and a youngster work together as a team, teach and learn from each other and make decisions together. Moreover, the adult ally moves

away from the traditional idea of "adult-as-a-mentor" role into partnership who share power and promote ownership for the youngster. In addition, Khanna and McCart (2007) introduce the youth engagement framework of the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement as a useful tool when addressing this issue; it involves three important concepts which work together in engagement processes which are individual, social and system levels. In short, the engagement occurs on an individual level when a youngster is being involved into decision making by providing challenges, relevancy, and voice. These then lead into the benefits of mastery, increased social awareness and critical thinking skills. The adult allies will benefit from this approach with a better understanding of young people's concerns and change their perceptions and stereotypes of young people by experiencing youth as competent contributors in the society. The youth engagement requires beneficial social level which promotes supportive personal relationships, opportunities to meet and interact with peers and adults, and to learn from positive role-models. On system level organizations benefit from interacting principles of youth involvement, creating more effective youth programs and reaching out to the community in more diverse ways (Khanna & McCart 2007). All of these aspects target towards positive outcomes which increase the process of youth engagement in the society's functions. Therefore, as the authors of the study, we should be aware of these dimensions of youth empowerment and youth engagement in order to produce reliable and trustworthy data and findings.

3.2.1   Young people's oppression

In the context of youth empowerment, one has to take into consideration what challenges young people encounter in their everyday lives and the possible forms of discrimination which they may be faced with repeatedly. The most common terms for discrimination involve words as sexism and racism which also apply when discussing young people. Rather a new concept of young people's oppression or "ageism" is now being used to describe this form of discrimination and segregation. Diversity Hub (2008, 24) defines the topic of young people's oppression as such "…is the mistreatment which targets children and young people. It often comes in the form of adults undermining young people by not trusting them to think, take leadership, make decisions, take action, or correct their own mistakes. It is passed down from generation to generation". Furthermore, the concept of discrimination in the lives of young people is seen as something which adults operate towards the youngsters consciously or even unconsciously. This form of oppression becomes visible by the assumption that children and young people should not have any power or leadership regarding their own lives. In addition, adultism assumes that adults have more value and rights compared to youngsters, and this ideology does not recognize this perspective to be at all problematical. The idea of powerlessness of young people is usually justified by the preconceptions and prejudices which adults have

when they think about common characteristics of teenagers. These stereotypes include the common conceptions that teens are lazy, unreliable and disobedient (Diversity Hub, 2008).

Moreover, the traditional view of the society is that young people should obey adults and be respectful towards their elderly. When a youngster challenges this expectation of behavior, he or she can easily be labeled as a trouble-maker or a problem child. These assumptions can develop into stigmatization of the youngster which may have long term effects. Merriam Webster Dictionary defines the word 'stigmatize' as 'to describe or regard (something, such as a characteristic or group of people) in a way that shows strong disapproval'. Moreover, researchers Corrigan and Watson (2002) argue in their study done concerning people with mental illness that the impact of stigma is two dimensional: public stigma is the reaction that the general population has to people with some sort of 'difference', and self-stigma is the prejudice which people with the 'difference' turn against themselves. Within the context of young people's oppression, the public stigma created by adults, such as parents and teachers, may develop into self-stigma where the young individual gradually begins to believe these expectations of himself and starts to act according to these beliefs. Self-stigma can be as powerful of a negative experience as stigma presented by the general public, in this case by adults. Interesting is, how much public opinion affects the development of self-stigma among adolescents. As studies have shown that adult acceptance and early relationships have an essential effect on a youngster's future social and personal development, one could state that stigmatization and early experiences of social exclusion play a crucial role in this self-stigmatization process.

It could be argued that ongoing social exclusion and marginalization can affect an individual's social and personal development, especially during adolescence. According to Jokelainen (2011, 134) the most essential developmental phases in a youngsters life include the acceptance of changing body and self-image, the growing detachment from parents and the establishment of equal relationships with peers. In youth, different social relationships are in fundamental position: as the process of detachment and independence from guardians begins, the importance of friendships and romantic relationships increases. Friends and peer group acceptance have a great meaning in the youngster's personality and identity development. Early adolescence is a crucial time for the development of close relationships which will later on determine the friendship selection process in future life. Intimate and equal relationships with peers, where private thoughts and emotions are being shared, promote the well-being and social development among young people. Moreover, researchers Wolfe, Vekerle and Scott (1996, 62-63) argue that "adolescents who have had close relationships with parents and friends in the past, are more likely to have a strong base from which to develop future relationship and to resolve disagreements without resorting to violence or the abuse of power". Furthermore they continue "without such a foundation based on previous experiences and

role models, a young person is more vulnerable to the powerful influences provided by the media, peers, and his or her own emotional dysregulation". Even though these quotes are almost two decades old, they are still relevant today.

3.2.2   Empowering methods with youth

Various creative methods and practices with empowering guidelines have been used within youth work settings for some time now. These methods are suitable for the purpose since fundamental creativity is associated with the adolescence period. The ability and the need to feel, to experience and to share inner expression using creative activities (music, video, film, writing, dancing, theater, internet and so forth) are highly present (Tervo 2011, 222). The notion, that creativity is a method of empowerment and support has been acknowledged by professionals who counsel and treat young people with different mental and emotional challenges such as depression. For a youngster with depression, the discovery of creativity may provide new hope and possibility for activity: by experiencing and sharing personal emotions and images he or she is not alone. Moreover, there is no need to put everything in words or to understand the emotions, sometimes it is enough to share them with others who feel and experience in the same way. Joining into a peer group assists the youngster to navigate towards age appropriate development (Tervo 2011, 245). The choice of method is not important as such, rather that it provides the possibility for occurring creativity within the individual, which may help him or her to process the challenging personal experiences and emotions. A youngster's personal expertise and knowledge should not be ignored in rehabilitation. For example, a person with depression needs to learn to practice good feelings, therefore it is necessary to discuss the positive emotions, happiness and satisfaction created by the action (Kýlen & Heikkinen 2011, 205).

From creative action a youngster can experience selfness, and grow a healthy, reliable and autonomous personality (Olamba N'Djeka 2011, 161). With the process of participating in creative action and interaction with peers, the youngster will have a possibility to communicate with a language which is comfortable for that individual. According to Sinkkonen (2010, 258) when youngsters are successful in some creative activity, for example in theatre production, dance performance, concert or art exhibition the outcomes cannot be compared with anything else similar done by adults or professionals. These positive end results enable unique feelings of accomplishment which should be acknowledged by the important people of the youngster's life. Moreover, Sinkkonen (2010, 260) continues that youngsters should be exposed to issues and activities which he or she would not otherwise engage in. The only method to get a teenager to indulge himself into new activities is to connect the action with something personal and meaningful for that individual. For example, many youngsters are willing to participate in music therapy rather than psychotherapy since this method provides the oppor-

tunity for creativity and self-expression without verbal communication (Sinkkonen 2010, 268). As the thesis study aims to learn how volunteer based media activities may serve as a tool of empowerment for youth, the study conductors felt that these previous methods of empowerment should be taken into consideration in the research process.

3.3   Media and voluntary activities

The majority of us are aware of the fact that today's youth is much more into a visual and oral media culture than the print-based culture (Goodman 2003, xi). As Goodman (2003) states, if youngsters are provided opportunities to look at and reflect upon the environments surrounding them and the social relations in which they are involved, they might become critically literate in a way that might enable self-development.

Through the research it is hoped to filter out individual opinions and a value assessment of the media activities in general. The interviewed youngsters have been learning the language of mass media culture for the majority of their lives, growing up "on a steady diet of visual, aural, and print media messages" (Goodman 2003). The media is often competing with the family and school to become their best storytellers and teachers (Goodman 2003, 1). Therefore, it needs to be considered during the research that media can have as well negative influences when unrealistic expectations are not met in real life (Rinne 2013, 2). Especially because of irrational mass media consumption, reliable media education is important. Recreational media activities can have an important role in educating youth about actual media processes and by that help in creating a realistic sense of self and others. Nowadays the boundaries between media production and consumption are fading away (De Block & Buckingham 2007, 134). All of the interviewed adolescents are actively participating in the media activities and it is evident that rather than just passively consume the media, it is more productive to personally take part in making it. As Rinne (2013) states, it is rewarding for the youngster to be an effective part of the making process and to be able to analyze the final product with the help of an adult and reliable critical literacy. However, offering the techniques to implement own media projects is not enough. Youngsters themselves need to be able to make choices among topics and themes important to their lives.

There are certainly a lot of positive themes that are shared on youth produced media. Nonetheless, the expression of experiences also often comes off as results of some kinds of suffering injustices, or deficiencies (Goodman 2003, xi), such as racism, ageism, rejection or bullying - all current issues for a lot of youngsters. These are difficult themes, and many times the youngsters might be lacking a way of saying or showing their true state of mind, but find themselves able to put into words and imagine how they might change their worlds for the first time as they capture it through a scene or narrative, a gesture or dialogue (Goodman

2003, xi). Therefore, in the best case the process of producing a narrative of one's personal experiences can lead to a uniting experience in the middle of feelings of chaos (Rinne 2013, 2).

The idea of empowerment through self-expression also underlines much of the social inclusion work with youth. According to Podkalicka and Campbell (2010), media education in these contexts "takes advantage of the popular appeal of media making and self-narrative content to encourage young people to express themselves". It helps them to develop confidence, media skills and social competencies, and the intention is that personal growth and cooperation needed in the process translates into active engagement for example in education or employment. It is argued that youth workers, educators, and everyone who is interested in the well-being of the youngsters need to develop a deeper understanding of the forces that shape their lives, for instance our media and consumer culture and our systems of schooling and juvenile justice, as well as a genuine respect for the creative problem-solving capacities of youngsters and their communities (Goodman 2003, 3).

After-school programs such as youth workshops are needed to help youngsters to develop skills and habits required for the understanding of critical thinking, which Goodman (2003, 3) amongst others calls "critical literacy". By critical literacy Goodman refers to the ability to analyze, evaluate, and produce print, aural, and visual forms of communication, which hopefully leads to empowerment. This empowerment can be felt by youngsters understanding how media is made to convey particular messages and how they can use electronic technologies themselves to document and publicly voice their ideas and concerns regarding the most important issues in their lives.

Also, having the access to necessary media equipment gives youngsters a critical lens through which they can explore the world around them. It helps them to "defamiliarize the familiar taken-for-granted conditions of life" (Goodman 2003, 3). This point of view about critical literacy links media analysis to production; learning about the world is directly linked to the possibility of changing it (Goodman 2003, 3). Young people draw directly on their immediate life experiences (Podkalicka & Campbell 2010), and one of the most effective strategies for teaching media critically is for youngsters to create their own media (Goodman 2003, 3). This way they can begin to understand through their own experience the multiple layers of data that make up the stories we see on television or magazines, affecting their views of the world. They can see for themselves how words can be deleted or added to sentences and made to seem as if they had originally been spoken that way; how causes and effects can be made into their opposite; and how perceptions of time, space and power can all be altered without seeming to be. And with this critical appreciation, youngsters can "understand how

the media acts as a frame and a filter on the world while appearing to be a clear window" (Goodman 2003, 6).

Besides of the facets of media, we dealt with the concept of voluntariness concerning recreational activities for youth. After Peltola (2010, 6), "youth work concerns young people's leisure time and is thus based on voluntariness, informal learning and practical orientation". All of Happi's provided recreational activities and events for youth are based on principles of voluntary participation, our research area of media activities is no exception. Also within our thesis research the aspect of voluntary participation is fundamental. It is important to acknowledge the difference between a scheduled school activity and an individually chosen leisure time activity. In a voluntary setting, a youngster has to develop an own interest to the activity in question. Self-determination is on this account a central element of voluntariness in leisure activities which is directly linked to the increase of independence during the individuation process of adolescence. Volunteer-based leisure time activities thereby play a role in the identity development process and can help youngsters to reflect upon central aspects of their self-beliefs (Mahoney, Larson & Eccles 2005, 186). "Activity selection involves a reciprocal process between contextual constraints and opportunities for participation, and the individual's motivation and ability to perceive and act on them" (Mahoney et al. 2005, 13).

Volunteer-based activities can have manifold benefits, comprising aspects of self-exploration and –expression, cognitive and physical development, mental well-being, development of own interests and new skills, social integration, feelings of achievement and individual growth, acceptance and guidance. According to Larson (2000, 5), structured voluntary activities have exceptional effects on youth as the immediate experiences demand elevated levels of both concentration and motivation. Youth are more likely to commit to voluntarily chosen leisure activities and the chances of maintaining them for a longer period of time are elevated. It is apparent that "initiative involves intrinsic motivation, the experience of wanting to be doing an activity and being invested in it" (Larson 2000, 172) Participating and committing voluntarily to extra-curricular activities has therefore various benefits on the overall identity development process and contributes to healthy and positive self-esteem. It can also be useful for the future in relation to working life or studies. Further, recreational after-school activities are commonly implemented in a safe setting and under the guidance of professionals which establishes a protective context and decreases involvement in risk environments and unfavorable circles. At the same time, interaction and open dialogue between professionals and youth are promoted through shared interests. Mentoring behavior on behalf of the professionals includes emotional support, guidance or teaching and collaborative learning (DuBois & Karcher 2014, 223).

Regarding the involvement into media activities at Happi, voluntariness can also have a strong link to the availability of services. Hence, active participation might decrease noticeably if the recreational activities in question would stop to be free of charge or if the use of facilities would be more restricted. After Mahoney et al. (2005, 12), "to derive the greatest benefit from organized activities, a youth must participate". This notion of participation through own motivation, which enables self-generated attention and feelings of self-control, gets enforced in the setting of Youth Activity Centre Happi, where low-threshold availability and affordability unite with an extensive provision of activities and professional support, by this means reaching a variety of youth. Overall one can acknowledge the valid evidence that participating in voluntary extracurricular activities shows short as well as long-term indications in connection to an elevated positive development in adolescence (Mahoney et al. 2005, 186).

3.4   Identity Development

We focused our research on both male and female adolescents who are 14 -18 years old. According to their age group, all voluntary participants are in the developmental stage of adolescence. Adolescence represents a time of growth through physiological, cognitive, social and emotional changes (De Anda 2002). It marks thereby an exceptional life period of various simultaneous transformations and possible challenges.

3.4.1   Psychosocial development

There are different theories and approaches towards defining the elements of identity development, one of the most known are Erikson's (1950) psychosocial stages of conflict. Erikson's eight stages of identity development follow a predetermined order and without negotiating the current stage, one is not able to proceed to the following (Abbott 2001, 122). Each of the eight developmental stages entail a specific crisis which can either be dealt with successfully or which most likely will create problems for the further identity development process. After Erikson (Abbott 2001, 124), the youngsters we encountered are in the fifth developmental stage which marks the development and establishment of an own identity versus role confusion. The stage of adolescence commonly involves struggles as it indicates the time of transition between the irresponsible but powerless time of childhood and the responsible and more powerful time of adulthood (Abbott 2001, 124). Meanwhile, social relationships and the wish to 'fit-in' into a group becomes of major significance as youngsters search for recognition and acceptance from their peers. It is proven that adolescents are greatly influenced by their peer group (Abbott 2001, 137). It can have negative consequences on the individual identity development when peer-pressure and strong ideas of conformity become evident in a group formation (Abbott 2001, 137).

In addition, youngsters have to experiment and balance between their own self-perception and expectations imposed on them by others, recognize own strengths and weaknesses, adjust to body changes, sexual orientation, develop own moral visions as well as realistic plans for the future and implement own actions and decisions (Abbott 2001, 124). The goal of this developmental stage is to reach a feeling of own identity. When the balance is achieved in the identity conflict of adolescence, it will affect all further developmental stages throughout adulthood (Kroger 2004, 51). Accordingly, role confusion appears when the stage is unsuccessfully dealt with. Erikson stated further that a once formed identity does not remain fixed during a lifespan but continues to be open for alterations according to experiences and circumstances (Kroger 2004, 22).

According to Erikson (1970), "identity involves conflict and has its own developmental period during adolescence and youth, when biological endowment and intellectual processes must eventually meet societal expectation for a suitable display of adult functioning. Identity depends upon the past and determines the future; rooted in childhood, it serves as a base from which to meet later life tasks" (in Kroger 2004, 19). By this means it is evident that the time of adolescence is decisive for the further life course. Adolescence is moreover a particularly vulnerable and suggestible phase in life. Youngsters tend to be more prone to taking risks, experimenting and getting into unsuitable social circles due to their high desire of fitting into a group. Youth in unstable life situations, with a lacking support system or low self-esteem through social exclusion are exposed to such risk behavior above average.

Inspired by Erikson's work, Marcia (1967) extended the theory of identity development, regarding adolescence as a period of deciding between varieties of choices before eventually committing to a particular life course (Abbott 2001, 130). Thereby identity can take four statuses of psychological identity development which comprise identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium and ultimately identity achievement (Abbott 2001, 130). On the contrary to Erikson's theory, these levels are not stages which have to get accomplished in a set order (Abbott 2001, 131).

3.4.2   Further Identity Development approaches

Besides of the psycho-social approach of determining identity development, there are for instance socio-cultural approaches such as developmental contextualism by Lerner (1993), which considers the mutual interaction between person and context. Baumeister & Muraven (1996) argue that identity is an individual adaption to the social, cultural and historical context, which is neither completely passive nor self-determined (Kroger 2004, 4). More likely, individuals are actively modifying their identities to the most beneficial state within their social and cultural context (Kroger 2004, 4). Blos builds upon the work of Mahler and coin-

cides with the classic psychodynamic theory, regarding adolescence as a second individuation process and period of detachment, which is, when negotiated successfully, followed by a feeling of distinctiveness from others (Kroger 2004, 11).

In Kegan's constructive-developmental approach, forming an identity is seen as a holistic life-long process of meaning-making (Kroger 2004, 13). By this means "at various stages of the lifespan, the self is intrapsychically embedded in particular contexts from which it is unable to gain distance" (Kroger 2004, 13). A young adolescent's self is primarily focused on own needs and interests, only in mid-adolescence the self is developing further and is gaining outside perspectives whereby one's own needs, as well as others, can get coordinated through reflection. The adolescent time is recognizable as a time of constantly creating new balances between self and others (Kroger 2004, 13).

Also according to Havighurst's lifelong developmental tasks, the youngsters we encountered have to deal with the developmental tasks of adolescence. That includes to create mature relationships with both males and females of the same age, attaining a masculine or feminine social role, acceptance of one's own body, reaching emotional independence from parents and other adults and to feel capable of making a living on one's own (Havighurst 1972). In addition, the adolescent should start to think about a future occupation and its required abilities as well as the idea of future marriage and an own family, getting intellectual skills, achieving socially responsible behavior and developing own values and beliefs (Havighurst 1972).

Essentially, all of the mentioned developmental theories demonstrate that there might arise various challenges during the process of identity development. There are several protective factors which support the positive establishment of one's own identity. Significant personal resources are for instance good social relationships which provide support, create trust and enhance self-esteem. If there is a lack of resources through family, social network or environment, adolescents are much more likely to encounter additional challenges in the time of identity development than when they are embedded into a stable surrounding. Another resource is former encouraging life experiences and feelings of appreciation which can be the foundation to the attitude towards life challenges and increases the manifestation of self-esteem.

Hence, youngsters with an inadequate support network and a lack of acceptance from the family and further social environment have an elevated risk to struggle with personality and social development during adolescence (Abbott 2001, 58). In the meantime, identity development gets continuously discovered further and new aspects like the roles of religious and vocational identity in the adolescent identity development process are taken into account

more deeply (Kroger 2004, 45). Realizing a vocational identity is a relevant part of the developmental process as it entails the entry into working life and enables by that independence and self-sufficiency (Kroger 2004, 45).

In conclusion, identity development is the main task of adolescence and its goal is to achieve a sense of an own identity and develop through that an increased state of self-awareness. Our thesis research aims to offer insights to the empowering impact of media activities on adolescents. Especially the component of voluntariness is crucial for its positive influence on involved individuals. The activities can offer an outlet for emotions, creative freedom and self-expression, individual growth, peer support as well as meaningful experiences. We focussed on capturing the components of empowerment during our research period in this particular setting. Dealing with the identity formation processes was inevitable when considering a thesis research including adolescents. The theories and literature are used because of their suitability and relevance towards the topic despite the time gap since publishing.

4   Study Design

The study was based on qualitative research methods and the findings were evaluated with the approaches of microanalysis and thematic analysis. The research methods included semi-structured interviews, observation and field notes. The study period took place in Youth Activity Center Happi in the fall of 2015, and the informants for the research were found from the youngsters who participated voluntarily in open media studio. The purpose of the thesis study was to gain understanding how a voluntary media activity can promote empowerment for a youngster and how these kinds of activities can be used as a tool for empowering self-reflection. The specific research question is: "Do volunteer based media activities serve as a tool of empowerment for youth?".

4.1   Data Collection

As we conducted the study under the guidelines of qualitative research, we collected the data during the research period with semi-structured interviews, observation and field notes. With these methods, we believe it was possible to collect trustworthy and reliable data from the target group. Furthermore, we used microanalysis and thematic analysis as the approach to analyze the collected data.

During the data collection process the study authors looked for patterns of meaning and issues of potential interest, which were recorded from the interviews and written down in the field notes which were sometimes used as reference to support the recordings. By observation the aim was to monitor youngsters and their behavior in the open media studio, as well as the

personal working skills and methods of the study conductors themselves. Observation was conducted when the youngsters worked on their personal videos in the studio and interacted with the workers. The focus was to identify how the atmosphere in the studio promoted empowerment for the youngsters. In addition, continuously as the study proceeded, the study authors were self-reflective of their actions and methods while present in the open media studio and during the interviews. This approach promoted future learning and development as researchers.

However, the emphasis of research methods is with semi-structured interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the youngsters as individual interviews, where questions about their motives to participate in open media activities were asked, and the possible emotions which came forth from the activity were examined. The choice of having individual interviews was made since there was a possibility to end up with only a few participants, which made this approach sensible and easy to conduct. We hope that during the interviews, we were able to gain the youngsters' trust for open discussion and reflection which promoted reliable and trustworthy data. "Research Interviewing, like many other sorts of interviewing, requires special skills to ensure that the data elicted are suitable for the proposed method of analysis, especially since interviews generate large amounts of data" (Memon & Bull 2000, 89).

The interviews were based on appreciative inquiry methods, such as open-ended questioning, effective listening and future focused approach. According to Brown (2008) in an appreciative interview every question has a direction and the choice of question has a moral impact. Furthermore, as Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue, the researchers must listen closely to what the informants are saying and how they are saying it; the focus is to understand how they are interpreting certain events. This prevents the researchers from jumping into conclusions and to consider alternative explanations.

Therefore, we as interviewers had a great responsibility to ask open-ended and positive questions which encouraged the youngsters not only to reflect their motivations to participate in the activity, but to stay sensitive on how these discussions might impact the informants. In short, open-ended questions were asked to promote comfortable dialogue and the study authors really listened to what the youngsters had to say. These meetings also worked as feedback collection sessions, where we aimed to seek honest and truthful opinions about the importance of our study. Other feedback was gathered from professionals in Happi by discussion how the research has presented itself into their eyes.

4.1.1 Qualitative Research

The research method used in the thesis was qualitative research and evaluation. The qualitative method seeks to explore the phenomena in question, rather than to confirm the hypotheses, which is in general a framework in quantitative research method. Whereas quantitative research method uses highly structured methods such as questionnaires and surveys, and is more focused in analytic and numerical data and has stable study design, qualitative research is somewhat opposite.

Qualitative research uses semi-structured methods such as observation and interviews and describes the phenomenon with all the possible affecting variables and has thereby more flexibility in the study design. According to Barbour (2008, 11), "qualitative research can make visible and unpick the mechanisms which link particular variables, by looking at the explanations, or accounts, provided by those involved". Furthermore, qualitative research aims to understand the research topic (phenomena) from the perspectives of the population it impacts on. It provides information of people's personal experience of the topic and is able to connect these personal beliefs with wider social context: "Qualitative research excels at identifying statistically significant relationships between variables, such as social class and health status, and frequently produces diagrams which show the distribution and strength of this association for people located at different points on the social class spectrum"(Barbour 2008, 11).

In addition, qualitative methods are effective in obtaining specific information of behaviors, emotions, values and opinions (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey 2005, 1). This feature present in the method provides an opportunity for efficient in-depth understanding for the underlying aspects which contribute in the phenomenon. As the focus of the study was on the participant's personal experience, we felt that qualitative research was the most suitable method of study. Mack et al. (2005, 4) argue that qualitative methods are usually more flexible in the terms of allowing more spontaneous interaction between the researcher and the study participant, which fits directly into our aim for having a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere among the study participants. By this less formal approach, we hoped to gather more trustworthy and appropriate data and feedback from the youngsters. We felt that it was important for us as study leaders to build trust among the youngsters, and therefore, we promoted an open and appreciative relationship. Moreover, the participants had a chance to communicate in their own words, and use the language which was most comfortable for them.

Qualitative research was a natural choice to conduct the thesis study, since we were focusing both on the social phenomenon (youth engagement) and on personal experience (empower-

ment). By adopting qualitative methods such as open-ended questioning, observation and semi-structured interview we were able to collect reliable data and informative knowledge about the possibilities for using voluntary based media activities as an empowering tool for young people.

4.1.2   Semi-structured Interviews

According to Miles and Gilbert (2005, 66) "semi-structured interviews are simply conversations in which you know what you want to find out - and so have a set of questions to ask and a good idea of what topics will be covered - but the conversation is free to vary, and is likely to change substantially between participants". Furthermore, the semi-structured interview is a flexible method which is able to answer *why* some phenomenon exists and what kind of forces have an influence in it to function.

Therefore, the study was chosen to be based on semi-structured interviews and dialogue since these methods were most suitable for the target group and the purpose of the research. As the study itself is focused on voluntary based activities and the informants participated for open media studio, the authors of the research felt that it was necessary to promote flexibility and easy access for the interviews to be conducted. The interviews were held in a way that the informants did not feel disturbed or distracted from their initial activity, and they were able to continue the activity with ease after the discussion. Furthermore, the method of semi-structured interview has a more relaxed and easygoing atmosphere which assist the informant to engage into the conversation with comfort. We felt that this open dialogue and positive approach allowed the youngsters to give more reliable data since there was no pressure or tense expectations in the interview setting.

After all, the interviews were relaxed and based on mutual dialogue between the study authors and the young informants, there was a set of questions which were hoped to be answered through the discussions. This questionnaire was not visible for the person who was being interviewed, but it served as "a crib sheet" for the interviewers in order to stay focused on the purpose of the dialogue.

4.1.3   Implementation of interviews

The interviews took place in Youth Activity Center Happi during the weeks of 40-41 in the end of September and in the beginning of October 2015. As a result, ten interviews with the individuals from the target group for the study were conducted. We chose to arrange the interviews when Happi had open media studio for youngsters to participate in every Monday and Wednesday. There were no agreed appointments with the youngsters beforehand since the

idea of an open media studio is that people can come and go how they please to. That is why the informants were found as they came to the studio and the study conductors asked for an interview. The interviews were individual and took place in a private corner or room which promoted a trusting atmosphere for the study participant to engage into the discussion. The interviews were recorded by approval of the participant and some of the answers were also written down in field notes.

4.2   Data Analysis

The collected data was examined based on qualitative analysis methods and approaches. Firstly as researchers we familiarized ourselves with these techniques of data analysis in order to achieve more trustworthy results and conclusions from the dataset. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue; data analysis is not a structured, static, or rigid process rather than free-flowing and creative in which analysis move quickly back and forth between types of coding and using various analytic techniques. Moreover, qualitative analysis involves a radically different way of thinking about data compared to more traditional research approaches. The researchers must adopt a more flexible and less controlled approach to data analysis which may be difficult if one has gotten used to strict and limited methods of study. Therefore, we as the study conductors had to learn these definition and concepts of doing qualitative data analysis and examination by heart.

We chose to approach the task of data examination with two specific analysis methods: Microanalysis and thematic analysis. Microanalysis is the detailed line-by-line analysis necessary at the beginning of a study to generate initial categories (with their properties and dimensions) and to suggest relationships among the concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Furthermore, there are three major aspects with this approach to analysis: the data, for example study participants' interviews, or observation, or other materials collected by the researcher; and the researchers' interpretations of those events, actions and gathered information. Within this thesis study, when the data was firstly examined, we approached it line-by-line in detail and then focused to find more specific themes and categories. The task was to find relevant data from the interviews and field notes, and not to get distracted with too extensive conceptions. As the relevant topics were determined, the focus was turned onto the possible relationships and dimensions between these findings.

The third element of qualitative analysis is the interplay that takes place between data and researcher in both the gathering and analyzing data process (Strauss & Corbin 1998). This means that researchers are actively reacting to and working with the data. The challenge is to stay objective and self-reflective, and not let the past experiences and knowledge of previous studies and findings drive the analysis. There is a real danger that the researchers begin

to see alternative explanations and to recognize dimensions of emergent concepts. Moreover, the researchers must consider the range of plausibility, and avoid taking one stand or stance towards the data (Strauss & Corbin 1998). In the process of data analysis, we tried to stay as objective as possible in relation to the findings and tried to avoid any preconceptions. We stayed aware of our personal experiences and actions towards the collected data, and how these emotions and paradigms might affect the findings.

From microanalysis the analysis process moved towards thematic analysis; thematic analysis is a method for identifying themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to a research question, and it is possibly the most widely used qualitative method of data analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, 175). It provides flexibility in terms of theoretical framework and methods of data collection, which was useful for us in the thesis process with youngsters. It is also argued by Braun and Clarke (2006, 180), that thematic analysis is a great 'starter' qualitative method for those who have little research experience. As students we had some previous knowledge about research methods and theory, but we felt that we were not near to be experts to conduct more advanced methods of study. Therefore, we perceived that with thematic analysis we had greater possibility of success with the thesis study and had a chance to develop our research skills further.

In conclusion, the data from semi-structured interviews, observation and field notes were analysed according to the thematic analysis guidelines; we tried to find common themes and patterns from the collected data which had emerged through the first step of microanalysis. We were able to distinguish four different and meaningful themes which occurred from the dataset: social encounters, self-expression, availability and skill development. These were the themes which occurred repeatedly in the interviews and dialogues with the youngsters and, hence, the focus of the analysis rotated into more detailed examination of these aspects.

5   Findings

This section of the thesis represents the main themes of the research findings. The findings are based on semi-structured interviews, observation and field notes with ten youngsters participating in the volunteer media activities in Youth Activity Center Happi. All of the interviewed individuals are participating in the activities voluntarily and not for instance as a part of school work. The attending adolescents were a mixed group in regards to both gender and nationality, all within the age of 14-18. The following table (TABLE 1) represents the regularity of the youths' participation in the media activities.

TABLE 1 Regularity of participation
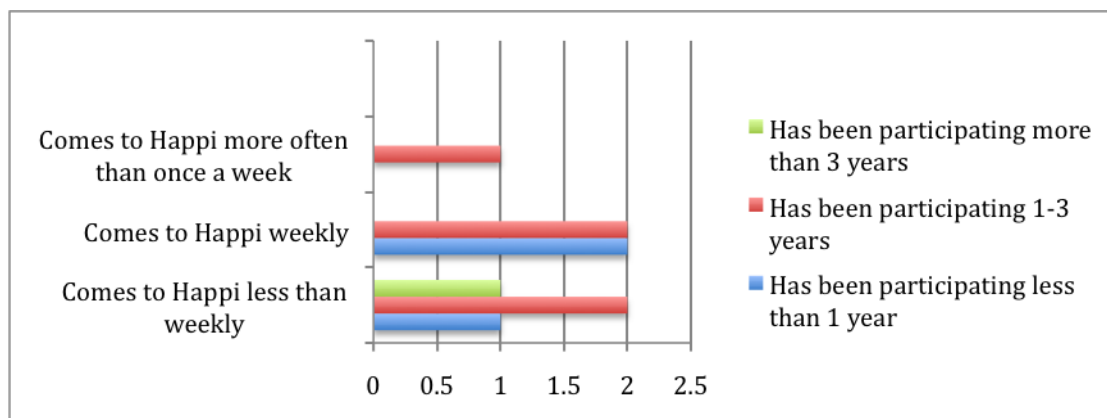
5.1   Social Encounter

All of the interviewed youngsters mentioned getting to know new people as one of the bene-
fits media activities have offered. 60% of the youngsters said they have good friends amongst
the youth center community, some friendships made through the activities and some which
have continued growing because of mutual interests. 20% of the participants told they know
the other people amongst the activities, but usually spend their time concentrating on their
own project instead of making new friends. The final 20% of the interviewed had just found
the community of media activities and were excited and hopeful for making new acquaint-
ances and networks of like minded youth.

Two of the interviewed specifically mentioned the social encounters with the workers of
Happi to be one of the nicest thing about the activities. Support, patience, and professional
knowledge are the key factors that make the youngsters feel welcome in the activities. One
of the interviewed also mentioned feeling part of a special group in Happi and according to
another participant the group atmosphere of the media department is what makes the activi-
ties so great. As mentioned by others as well, Happi is considered a good place to meet
friends and hang out freely.

> *"I'm more reliant on these hobbies than I am to my friends; if my friends do not
> come here, I always have my audio tracks."*

> *"I feel this is a nice place for young people to come together and talk about stuff.
> And be safe of course."*

5.2   Self-expression

As the media activities of Happi offer a wide range of tools of expression, the majority of the youngsters were interested in some specific way of self-expression. The following table (TABLE 2) represents the areas of interest, which youngsters spend their time amongst.

TABLE 2 Areas of interest
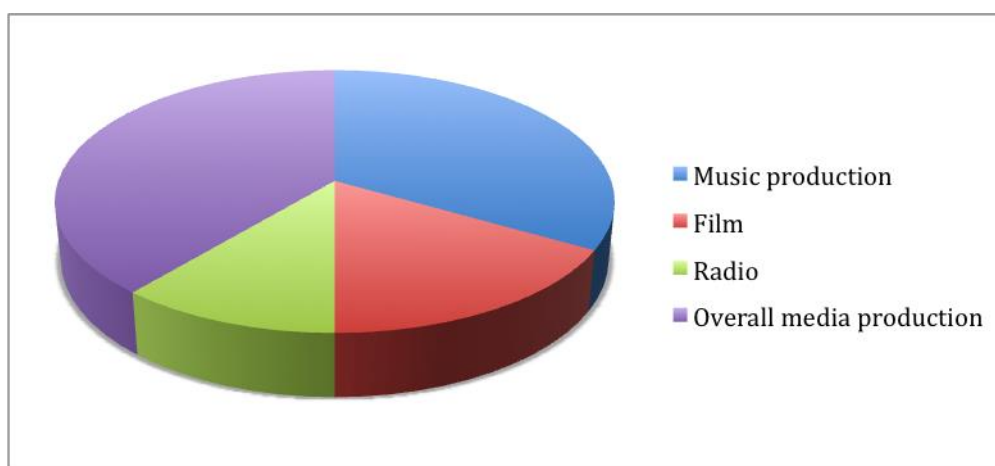
All of the participants of the interviews were interested in media activities because of the possibility of self-expression. One third of the youngsters mentioned first coming to Happi because of the need to make their art. Two of the youngsters said the activities promote their creativity and one mentioned the center being a perfect environment to express oneself, because the safe and open environment does not kill the passion for art. It was also mentioned that it is fulfilling to see the final product of one's art or personal production - the self-expression is concrete and a film production or radio broadcast will be available permanently, which one of the youngsters felt builds up confidence in one's own work. What is also appreciated by the majority (60%) of the youngsters is the open atmosphere, which allows everyone to freely express themselves, without borders.

"*Without these activities I would just be lying somewhere bored.*"

5.3   Skill Development

One of the interviewed youngsters mentioned that the professional and knowledgeable workers of the Youth center offer great guidance in skill development. The youngsters agreed by 100% that participating in the volunteer activities has developed their skills in overall media

production, radio broadcasting, music, filmmaking or photography, depending on what the youngsters' personal interest has been. The development of social skills was also mentioned by 20% of the youngsters. 30% of the youngsters felt they are able to express themselves freely at the moment and mention no further need for special skill development. One of the interviewed referred to themselves as a "multi-talent of media work", who has learnt every-thing in Happi during the 6 years of this hobby. The skills developed amongst the media activi-ties have been crucial for the current job of one of the participants. Yet, the 30% of young-sters who have been participating in the activities for less than a year, wish all to develop their skills amongst specific tools of media.

> *"It is cool to have an opportunity when you haven't got a record deal yet and you want to start from something."*

5.4   Availability

Only one of the interviewed youngsters did not specifically mention the fact that all the me-dia activities of Happi are free of charge for youth. This means that 90% of the youngsters appreciate the availability of the activities and are aware that anyone is allowed to borrow the equipment and use the facilities. One of the youngsters also mentioned that it is good that there are rules that need to be followed, so that no-one needs to be anxious about pos-sible bullying or being left out. Same goes with the amount of activities and professional-like facilities, which allows everyone regardless of their field of interest to participate. About half of the interviewed agreed that without the availability of these open activities their motiva-tion to create would not be the same, because it is impossible for a youngster to have the necessary money for professional equipment such as offered by the center. 40% of the inter-viewed thought that the volunteer based activities should be advertised more. This is because as many people as possible should know about the opportunities offered. This was the only developmental suggestion the participants had about the activities.

> *"It is good that you can get free studio time over here and I appreciate it."*

> *"I am actually very impressed by this place. You can do so many things that are founded by the state."*

6   Evaluation

In the following chapter we look upon an overall assessment of the thesis process, evaluating our choice of methods, communication within the research team and with the working life partner and estimation of significance of the results. As stated already earlier the authors

have started the thesis conduct with the idea of implementing a project, hence many aspects have changed in the course of events. The core elements nevertheless stayed the same and we tried to use as much of our initial idea as possible when changing our project towards a research due to unalterable factors. Throughout the process, flexibility and open communication were essential and all group members recognized from the beginning that one has to deliberately address possible additional challenges in planning and time scheduling due to the group size. We acknowledged meanwhile the pillars of effective group work which are in accordance with Johnson and Johnson (2014, 23) commitment and achievement of goals, maintenance of good working relationships, well-functioning communication, constructive conflict management and the ability to adapt to changing conditions.

We used different models of evaluation in order to promote trustworthy and beneficial research results. Young (2014) states that evaluation takes place in three modes: active evaluation, initial post-study evaluation and final post-study evaluation. Initial post-study evaluation occurred throughout the research period, which we conducted with the ASPIRE model, and final post-study evaluation in combination with other evaluation methods such as observation and the process of data analyzing. In short, the ASPIRE model can be divided as such: AS-Assessment, P-Planning, I-Implementing and RE-Review and Evaluation (Wood, Westwood & Thompson 2015). The authors took into consideration other forces which may have affected the starting point of the research such as the current situation for young people in Finland and theories of identity development, anti-oppressive practice and youth empowerment.

The assessment was ongoing and we recognized that young people are not static: their personal and social world change frequently. The expected outcomes were specific, measurable and realistic. Especially the notion of a realistic conduct due to a specific research question was seen as an important factor by the authors. The final two letters of the ASPIRE refer to review and evaluation, which are two distinct but interrelated processes (Wood et al. 2015, 130). Reviewing, like assessment, was a continuous process throughout the research conduct. Monitoring data was a crucial component in the review process: the collection of evidence during the process promoted more reliable and trustworthy information for the study. Furthermore, "good evaluation enables us to capture and demonstrate our work, which can benefit young people by improving the services we offer" (Hoggarth, 2009). A multi-perspective approach enhanced the quality of the assessment, which also applied during the evaluation. The adolescents perspectives combined with other angles provided more reliable data than a single source of information could. Therefore, the multi-method evaluation design was beneficial to be adopted when evaluating the study.

According to Wood et al. (2015, 132) "it is often hard to determine the long-term impact we might have on the young people we work with and in day-to-day experience of our practice,

evaluating work can pose particular challenges". In the assessment phase as well as during the evaluation, focusing on a multi-perspective approach was important and enhanced the quality of the assessment. During the first steps of evaluation, we went through the collected data from the interviews with the youngsters. We analyzed the answers which the participants gave us and tried to find common themes. Moreover, we discussed our field notes in detail which revealed our observations during the research. Also the discussion with Happi professionals got reflected by all three study conductors in the course of the evaluation. From the answers and other collected data we tried to find common themes and patterns of meaning according to the thematic analysis guidelines (Braun & Clarke 2013). In qualitative research, the direct quotations from the conducted interviews are of great importance as they reflect the raw data behind the authors' interpretation and by this means contribute to increase the overall study validity (Guest & MacQueen 2008, 217). Aligned with this understanding, the authors added valuable quotations which assist in maximising the study's transparency.

In addition, we pondered about meeting the desired goals of the thesis research. It was also important for us to reflect our own performance as interviewers and study conductors. The interviewed youth received our research positively and all asked youngsters cooperated without exception. That alone proves the participants desire to contribute towards promoting the available media activities. All of them were met in their comfort zone and they were eager to get their individual opinions heard. We regard the selection of our methods as efficient and well-chosen and believe they contributed to a qualified research conduct.

Well-working communication has been a leading constituent in perceiving the thesis process as a positive group experience. After Gibb (1961), "members of effective teams have strong feelings of inclusion, commitment, pride and trust in their teams. These feelings are developed by a communication climate that is open, supportive, inclusive and rewarding" (in Levi 2007, 96). Throughout the course, the thesis group persistently kept focus on the goal in an atmosphere which is encouraging cooperation rather than competitiveness. Open and honest communication got promoted and there were no restraints in sharing constructive criticism or differences of opinion. Above all we had a shared vision, hence varying opinions were not taken as personal offense but instead as an enrichment, enabling reflection through multiple perspectives. As mentioned by Levi (2007, 21), good social relations are fundamental to effective teamwork because they enable communication, decrease interpersonal problems and the probability of interference in task performance and facilitate mutual rewarding.

It might have been advantageous that we have been working together in other group assignments in the course of our studies, on this account there was a foundation of reliance between us both on interpersonal and on academic level. During manifold discussions we ulti-

mately always came to an agreement, no matters stayed unresolved. Furthermore all conductors of this thesis shared responsibilities and tasks in planning, implementation and evaluation state of the research as well as on the writing undertaking equally. By this means, at no point, subjective feelings of unfair treatment or experiences of disadvantages were arising within the group.

The study conductors reflected also upon individual expertise and skills as well as weaknesses and strengths and assessed how to combine these to the greatest benefit. When considering communication and group's overall performance, a closely related aspect is conflict management. Working efficiently together while everything is running perfectly according to plan is one matter, working with the same efficiency together while problems appear and unpredictable changes have to be executed, is another sort. It is in this context worth mentioning that the thesis group experienced all challenges more of external than of internal nature. Thereby no dysfunction within the group fueled negative progression but we united even stronger as a team when encountering external challenges and frustrations. That showed for instance when we were faced with the decision of continuing to pursue our initial project idea or adjust it towards a research conduct.

Making useful decisions is a significant component of well-working group accomplishments. In Johnson and Johnson's words (2014, 258), "a group decision implies that some agreement prevails among group members as to which of several courses of action is most desirable for achieving the group's goals". Changing our plan was in this way not an act of surrender but rather a realistic and reasoned judgment of moving forward to a more feasible concept. As pointed out by Levi (2007, 191), "a solution is not a good one unless it is implemented". On a general level, arising conflicts are not necessarily bad for the entire group development, depending how they are dealt with. Conflicts vary through sources and types, healthy team conflicts originate from disagreements concerning task issues whereas unhealthy conflicts emerge from organizational, social or personal sources (Levi 2007, 123). After each of the many team meetings we left with a positive spirit and felt confident to solve any upcoming obstacles. The changes got discussed in depth and thereafter approved by both the working life partner and the thesis supervisor.

The communication with our network partner was not always working in the most favorable way, leaving us particularly in the planning stage with feelings of uncertainty. The reasons for communication difficulties could be diverse, aspects of unsettled distribution of responsibilities might have played their part. That showed for example when our contact person changed unexpectedly and without a notification and delayed active support in finding participants. Perhaps if one would have determined the working life partner's role in our thesis beforehand more precisely, both sides would have had a more concrete idea of the required resources

and expected participation. Nonetheless, after the thesis project got changed towards a research, also the communication with our contact person lightened, as we did not rely anymore on email or phone communication but instead discussed arising themes straight in the youth center setting. Eventually, once the implementation process ended and we had our final conversation with our contact person, we left with feelings of contentment and closure. Further we have come into contact with various other youth organizations in the course of our thesis process, especially in the advertisement phase of our project. We have experienced a great deal of willingness to support us and interest in our ideas along the way which certainly contributed to expand our individual networks in the field of youth work.

When evaluating our thesis process, there are several aspects which we would approach differently if we come to conduct another study in the future. They include regarding the cooperation partner more far-reaching, for instance it has been considered as beneficial to collaborate with an organization with which at least one of the thesis conductors have worked with previously. In this way, a lot of practical matters would have been clearer, a connection to the work community would have been already established and one would have had a better idea of the client group at place. Besides, it would be useful to examine already in the planning stage more deeply what modifications could come into effect if ideas have to be altered. Apart from that, the authors feel content with the working process, the performed choices along the way and the development of a cohesive team. The research conductors are satisfied with the choice of methods which proved as anticipated to be the most effective for the undertaking. The estimated duration for the overall thesis conduct has been realistic and accurate since the thesis will be completed at the expected time. Throughout, we maintained exchange of thoughts with our thesis supervisor and contact person from our cooperating organization. We gained vocal feedback from our working life partner and all participating parties were pleased with the research conduct and its findings. As there were three of us evaluating this research, we had an increased awareness towards possible subjective differences of interpretation. Looking together through the data promoted integrity.

We regard the thesis process truly as a journey in itself, filled with individual learning and group development. The undertaking required extensive team and communication skills, reflexivity, abilities to compromise, adjust and expand professionally as all of us conducted a qualitative research for the first time. Further, writing an academic paper with three authors is an additional challenge as it demands to cooperate, rely on each other's abilities and communicate efficiently in order to produce a reliable and well-written document.

7   Trustworthiness and Ethical considerations

Trustworthiness and ethical considerations are an essential matter in the course of our qualitative research. According to Israel and Hay (2006, 5), research entails boundless possibilities of producing false or manipulated data and by caring and acting on the aspect of ethics, the integrity of the research gets promoted. Our increased awareness towards ethical considerations applied especially due to the vulnerable group of participants. In Banks' (2010, 3) words, "ethical issues are endemic in youth work. As an activity or practice, youth work involves working with participants who have fewer rights than adults, are often vulnerable, lack power and may be suggestible – hence giving scope for their exploitation, harm or manipulation".

In accordance with Clark (2000, 50), ethical practice is respectful of identity, individuality and rights of each person. On this account, our basic attitude when entering an interview consisted of objectivity, honesty and respectfulness. We also considered the balance of care and education, empowerment and control, confidentiality and information sharing, professional boundaries as well as balancing the needs of the individual with those of others (Banks, 2013). There is no certain definition for anti-oppressive ethics, but one can apply an approach which is implemented according to anti-oppressive concepts and values (Clifford & Burke 2009, 16).

"While qualitative researchers may not need to concern themselves with reliability *between* studies, they should be concerned about ensuring reliability *within* a single study" (Guest & MacQueen 2008, 215). Absolute reliability is hard to obtain in qualitative research implemented through interviews because the collected data is automatically dependent on its temporal context (Memon & Bull 2000, 100). The validity and 'truthfulness' of the received material should be considered by the research conductors, just like the available strategies to minimize bias (Memon & Bull 2000, 100). When regarding the aspect of trustworthiness of our research results, each one of us has familiarized themselves with all the acquired data and we have reflected carefully upon our individual judgments, instincts and overall group assessment. We came to the conclusion that the data gives in the context of our research reliable sources and due to the voluntary nature, none of the youngsters would gain any advantage from giving us false information. Hence we believe in the pure intentions of the participants which led to the collection of trustworthy material. The semi-structured interviews were constructed through open-ended questions, giving the participants space to co-direct the course of the interview. All gained material was shared with us because the youth felt comfortable enough to do so and at no point attempts were made to obtain further information.

Additionally, we consider the size of our thesis group as an advantage regarding avoidance of bias. As three individual observers, we have the opportunity to benefit from varying angles and to reflect on our own sense of morality. Each one of us has a different background, including amongst others cultural aspects, attitudes and beliefs, expectations, professional experiences and skills. Trevithick (2006, 120) claims that "we see and hear through our histories". Continuing this thought, it is apparent that each individual has a distinct perspective. We steadily shared our thoughts in various discussions around ethical issues as well as on the overall thesis conduct. Combining all of our observations during the interviewing process as well as during the data analysis is hence increasing the research integrity. The small group study conduct furthermore fostered self-reflexivity, communication skills and created possibly deeper results than an individual could capture.

The limitations we encountered were difficult to anticipate. By careful planning and effective communication, we eliminated most risks beforehand. We tried to obviate possible unpredictable risks such as a lack of participants by meeting the involved youth during their regular media activities. Because of the time-unstructured nature of the media activities it was occasionally a slow process to find available youngsters for interviewing. As a result, each of the four times we visited the youth center in the course of the research implementation, we were prepared to spend there several hours. When creating the questions for the semi-structured interviews we extensively examined that due to their nature no harm would be caused to the interviewed youth. On behalf of our working life partner, changes occurred concerning our contact person. In our planning stage that developed to our disadvantage as we did not always knew for certain who to turn to with arising questions. However, our final contact person, who was also working in the media department, was very supportive and always receptive to give advice. Furthermore, our contact person was available during the media activities and if possible helped to connect us with present youth.

We avoided lack of motivation and unresponsiveness from the youngsters as they joined into our research on a voluntary basis. When reaching the questioning stage, we tried to create an open atmosphere with a climate of trust. As pointed out by Memon & Bull (2000, 90), "the qualitative interviewer aims to establish a relationship with the respondent which allows the individual to feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts and feelings". In this context, we consciously took the time to consider a suitable quiet space for the interviewing process and to introduce ourselves and the idea of our research in depth. Moreover we started with easy 'warm-up' questions at the beginning and created a sense of closure in the end of the interviews, which included thanking each youngster for participating. Because of the utilization of most of the premises at the youth center, partially compromises had to be made as we did not always find space which was entirely isolated from other activities. Nonetheless, we were aware that most of the present youth came with the intention to work on their media

projects, on this account convenience and practical aspects were taken into consideration as well. On occasion, participants wished for an interview together with a friend who was as well involved into the media activities and we were steadily prepared to adjust to the circumstances. Also our involvement in the individual interviewing processes varied, at times we interviewed the youth on a one-to-one basis or alternatively we conducted the interviews with all of us present. The interviews were always carried out on a face-to-face basis, giving the interviewed youth our full attention. For an efficient and continuous interview process and as a foundation for a professional research conduct, all three of us became familiar with the recording equipment prior to usage.

The purpose of this study - to discover how volunteer-based media activities might serve as a tool of empowerment for youth - is in itself a research related to active participation. To be able to transfer the idea of the researched theme into the interview setting was emphasizing our anti-oppressive work approach and enabled the youth by this means to be active contributors instead of mere objects of research. After De Block & Buckingham (2007, 142) the focus on participation "entails an ongoing attempt to construct shared understandings and meanings between the researchers and the researched". Our guiding principle was also here to create the most beneficial environment for our research implementation by taking the participants wishes and requests into account and showing flexibility and improvisation skills when required. Besides, we proceeded according to the youngsters pace, giving them space for reflection and avoided interferences with their answers. Throughout, we did not push them to share more than they are comfortable with. We focused on verbal as well as non-verbal communication and creation of a trustful and positive atmosphere. The authors also stayed mindful of individual circumstances. After Memon & Bull (2000, 95), "the ability to build rapport and trust with a participant is often a key element in successfully acquiring data". During the interviews we moreover paid attention to open body posture, undivided attention, active listening and display of genuine interest and empathy.

As we were aiming to conduct all interviews in English, language barriers could have been a limiting factor in respect to participation. However, that concern was not confirmed as only one of the ten participants needed additional Finnish language use. We were flexible towards partially Finnish communication if a youngster was not feeling confident to express him- or herself solely in English, but that was to a large extent not needful. The interviews were produced on a low threshold level and thus gave the youngsters the power to choose the amount of information they are willing to share with us. Through that, we decreased the risk of limited communication to a great extent. We kept the language level simple and clear, avoiding unnecessary misunderstandings based on the use of complicated vocabulary. In connection to existing limitations the study conductors also realized that the media activities themselves do not automatically foster empowerment, we can only see the aspects through the perspectives

which we obtained by the limited number of interviewed adolescents. After all, we regard it as important to point out, that reflection about these possibilities has occurred and we acknowledge the irrevocable interconnectedness between the benefits of these activities and the individual context in which they are used. As pointed out by De Block & Buckingham (2007), it is naive to believe that youth would use media as medium for self-expression self-evidently. "The media are not neutral tools; and young people will approach media production with a repertoire and a history of past media experiences that inevitably lead them in certain directions" (De Block & Buckingham 2007, 141).

After Gregory (2003, 35), the most urgent aspect of ethics in research involving human beings is fully informed voluntary consent. Consequently, without that explicit requirement, undertaken research lacks of adequate moral foundation (Gregory 2003, 35). "Informed consent implies two related activities: participants need first to comprehend and second to agree voluntarily to the nature of their research and their role within it" (Israel & Hay 2006, 61). The importance of consent combines a large range of morally significant concepts such as autonomy, self-determination, privacy, dignity and respect as well as treating individuals as ends in themselves rather than as means to an end (Gregory 2003, 41).

The principle of confidentiality is closely connected to the principle of consent. "Evidence suggests that, as part of the negotiations for consent, assurances of confidentiality will go a long way to securing consent" (Gregory 2003, 49). That is commonly carried out by anonymizing the collection of data (Gregory 2003, 49). The authors recognize confidentiality aspects and privacy regulations regarding the use of our gained material. We recorded all of the interviews by means of easier data collection and for an uninterrupted communication flow. Meanwhile, we assured anonymization of data and disposal of it once the material is transcripted and analyzed. No one besides our research group had access to the recorded material.

During our thesis research we took the aspects of consent and confidentiality seriously. By this means, we did not start conducting interviews before obtaining consent from each research participant and being certain that the purpose of the study is understood. Due to the given circumstances it was agreed that verbal consent is the most suitable form for our kind of research. Written form might have complicated matters and the youth could have gotten an overly formal impression of the undertaking, which might have reduced their willingness to participate. Throughout our research we ensured a high level of transparency with regard to our intentions as well as the use of the gained data.

On the whole, we were hoping to conduct a meaningful research, with the aim to enable self-reflection in the participating youth. We thoroughly included reflection on potential limita-

tions, trustworthiness and ethical considerations into our planning, implementation and evaluation phases. Furthermore, we were extensively committed and motivated to the undertaking of our research thesis on individual and group level.

8   Discussion

The purpose of this thesis research is to analyze how volunteer based media activities might serve as an empowering tool for youngsters in the Youth Activity center Happi. The ten individuals interviewed for the research are 14-18 year-olds who participate regularly in the open media activities. The research got conducted in Happi over a two week time period from end of September to beginning of October 2015. The discussion on the findings is based on theories of Anti-oppressive practice, Youth empowerment, media work, and Identity development. The nature of the research is qualitative and findings were gathered by semi-structured interviews and field notes associated with observation. The final data is analyzed using thematic analysis with the components of self-expression and skill development, social encounter, and availability.

As the findings of this research indicate, self-expression is extremely important for youth. Self-expression proves to be one of the main reasons why youngsters voluntarily participate in the media activities of Youth activity center Happi. Because of the variety of activities offered by the center it attracts youth with different interests - there is something for everyone. Tools of expression such as radio podcasting and production, film, photography and music allow youngsters to both persue their passion and expand their horizons to activities they have not been specifically interested in before.

An example of this expanding of interest is one of the interviewed youngsters who mentions the first time of coming to Happi. They remark not being specifically interested in media at all, but after meeting the media workers and other youngsters in Happi got introduced to the media department. This lit a sparkle to participate in the activities and today, after six years, these voluntary media activities have provided the youngster the needed knowledge to work as a professional amongst media. As mentioned earlier in the theoretical background of this thesis, youth empowerment is strongly connected to the confidence in one's own abilities and skills. To have such concrete evidence of one's own abilities, as a job in the specific field or opening career opportunities, is highly encouraging and this way empowering. The other participants of this study show the same results; the variety of activities allows the youth in question to find new sides of themselves. This brings us to the development of individual's identity. "Media production is seen as a focus complex 'identity work' (and indeed 'identity play'); yet it also provides a means for young people to share personal concerns, and to generate dialogues, in ways that may be more difficult in other contexts" (De Block & Bucking-

ham 2007, 136). In their everyday lives youngsters tend to experiment and balance between their own self-image and expectations imposed on them by the outside world, recognize own strengths and weaknesses, develop their own morals as well as realistic plans for the future and execute own actions and decisions (Abbott, 2001). This means that youngsters are continuously trying to reach a feeling of own identity, and trying out new things and succeeding supports this endeavor.

> *"We have been doing music videos and other productions and learned how to direct videos and do the whole shooting and seriously, I have learned everything in here."*

What also turns out to be extremely current for youngsters is the lack of opportunities to express oneself openly in the community, meaning that the youngsters' voice is not heard in the society. Only 30% of Finnish youngsters feel their actions on a societal level have an impact (Youth barometer 2014), even though it is clear the majority of youngsters are active in social media, express themselves in smaller groups of school and free time, or else. To have a platform to express oneself is important for both youngsters' emotions and opinions, and are therefore a significant part of feelings of empowerment. Even if the youth's media work does not have a specific effect on social change, it still offers a platform to participate in the society. In the best-case scenario this increases the youngsters' confidence, as well. During the interviews it was pointed out that the youngsters actually feel the activities build up confidence, because it is rewarding to see the final product of one's production. An audio track, radio podcast or short film is concrete and forever and it is easy to go back to one's old work and see the development and improvement of one's skills. Youngsters have a natural interest to try out new things and take risks, and as the interviewed agree, low threshold activities such as these help keeping up the motivation to create.

> *"If the activities are not available, you could hinder the passion or motivation that one could have."*

The majority of the interviewed youngsters also appreciate the atmosphere of the Youth activity center Happi, because it allows the participants to freely express themselves. There are no rules or regulations what the media work should be about. All values and worldviews, faiths, political opinions and criticality are allowed as long as they follow the main rule of Happi - the activities are free of discrimination, racism and bullying. Anti-oppressive working methods go strongly hand in hand with youth empowerment, and to be able to work without the fear of discrimination shows youth a safe environment for self-expression. The lack of restricting rules also represents the general confidence in the youngsters' own abilities and trustworthiness. Therefore there are no narrowing power relations between the youth and for instance the workers of these volunteer media activities.

All in all, the possibilities of skill development are what enables the youngsters' self-expression in the means of new things. Based on the interviews and the observation conducted during this research it is clear that youth have a lot of ideas and willpower to express themselves through media. However, sometimes it is not possible to get these ideas turned into reality without some knowledge of media work. Hence these volunteer based activities play a significant role in both development of useful skills and expression of oneself.

A major part of the informants stated that the motive to participate in the media activities was based on the fact that these services were available and easy to access. In relation to the research question this point of view is a relevant aspect in the examination of empowerment, since the findings of the interviews indicate that without a low threshold establishment like Happi, the informants would not engage themselves in these kind of activities at all.

> *"I think that if they didn't have this place I would have never gotten to know the whole media world."*

Therefore, it could be argued that the opportunities for easy participation for media activities support the development and empowerment of young people simply by allowing a place for creativity and self-expression to occur. As it has been discovered, "one fifth of young people mention lack of money as an obstacle for participation, which can be considered a great challenge in supporting the well-being of young people's everyday life in today's Finland" (Allianssi 2010, 23)

In connection, multiple informants pointed out that the activities were free of charge, which made it possible for everyone to participate and enabled them to become a part of a group regardless of their income or social status. In other words, the findings of the study address that in order for the voluntary based media activities to be a tool of empowerment for youth, these functions should be arranged in such a way that they would include everybody, and try to avoid building any barriers for participation. These barriers might involve prescriptions such as high entrance fees, limited selection for activities, age-limits, requirement of membership or preconceptions about young people and their interests. All of the above could result in possible exclusion from the activities.

Along with the importance of the easily approachable services in relation to youth empowerment, the variety of activities seems to be as crucial aspect in this context. The opportunity to find interesting activities based on individual interests, which promote intentional or even unintentional development for self-expression may play a role in the empowerment process for youth. As the theory stated; from participating in creative activities a youngster can experience a sense of accomplishment and enable them to grow as individuals. Therefore, the se-

lection of different activities for the youngsters to choose from, according to their interests and personal abilities, allows them to engage themselves in meaningful action which may work as an empowering occurrence.

Additionally, many of the interviewed youth were eager to emphasize the significance of the possibility to have professional guidance and support from adults. As mentioned before in the theory background of this thesis, many studies have shown that the youth engagement and empowerment are more successful to occur when youngsters have safe adults present in their lives. The concepts of "adult-as-allies" and "the youth-adult partnership" were demonstrated to be a meaningful base for youth work professionals to build on their interaction with young people. This form of a relationship concentrates on the idea that youngsters should be treated as capable agents of their own lives and that the adults' task is mainly to support the development. A voluntary based media activity may function as an important channel for an experience of supportive and safe adult relationship, which might otherwise be non-present in some of the participants' everyday life.

Another considerable finding in the research is the component of social encounter both in between participating youth and between youth and present professionals. The opportunity of real social interaction is directly connected with the empowering effects of the researched activities. In this context, the authors recognize particularly the coherence to the theoretical foundation of this research, both concerning professionals working according to Anti-oppressive practice and in regard to Identity development. Cotterell (2007, 5) states, that "through social interactions in various group contexts, adolescents grow in their understanding of the nature of their relationships with others as well as in their understanding of themselves". Throughout the research conduct, all with exception of one interviewed youth mentioned the aspect of meeting other adolescents as prevalent and of major importance. The youngster, who did not value the aspect of interaction as greatly as the rest of the interviewed, reasoned his attitude with a clear focus on pursuing his creative projects.

Social encounter comprises in that context various elements, it implies the establishment of new connections and friendships, arising through shared interests while already existing friendships get possibly developed further and foster mutual learning. One of the interviewed youngsters stated that one friend would even come once a week from Turku to join the media activities which indicates both the subjectively high value that this youngster attributes to the offered activities and how they enable continuous social encounter between the two friends. Social exclusion is a significant subject in this context, as it has negative effects on the overall identity development and well-being. Enabling social encounter leads to an increase of social integration which in turn fosters feelings of acceptance, inspiration and mutual learning between the adolescents. As the media activities take place in the common

ground of the youth center, they might also serve as a meeting point for individuals which otherwise would not get to know each other due to their environment or circumstances. Thereby the activities promote encounter, perhaps even confrontation with own misperceptions. Correspondingly they might help in decreasing prejudices towards for instance multiculturality or disability in this specific establishment and hence support diversity.

Some of the interviewed youth noted the wish for their existing friends to become more involved into the activities as well and even stated attempts of raising motivation but not all of them have been successful. In respects to social encounter also the professional constituent is of significance. Youth have the chance to establish trustful connections to professionals who are able to facilitate guidance, exchange and open dialogue both on skill level and mutual interests as well as in other areas. The youngsters gain thereby possibilities of valuable support and establishment of a social network. Furthermore connections in the professional domain might arise and youth can gain access to future working opportunities.

> *"I was worried if I will ask the wrong questions and how will I learn without making a fool out of myself. The workers are so patient, I have never felt left out."*

At the same time, communication skills get promoted both on individual and group level. Realizing own strengths and weaknesses as an individual as well as in a group setting is essential in the course of identity development. In addition, being able to share meaningful experiences or common interests in a solid social network enhances the quality of life.

> *"I like the group atmosphere. When you're doing a TV-show you don't just do it alone; you do it together and you need to communicate."*

That quote explains clearly how interpersonal communication skills increase through involvement in the activities in question. Besides, youth might expand their negotiation skills as well as skills of conflict management since they possibly encounter challenges within the group, competitiveness concerning skill development or contesting of leadership. Reflecting upon one's own communication skills and position within a group is a continuous process which will reappear in various areas of life. Hence it can be regarded as advantageous that the majority of the interviewed youth have already a sense for group dynamics and importance of well-working communication because it certainly will come into effect in future studies and working life. In addition, the findings suggest that the social encounters within the media activities promote a sense of belonging. The research conductors are aware that this is specific for the research place, in this case Youth Activity Centre Happi, and might not be applicable on a general level, still in the spectrum of our research it is profound. Having a sense of belonging is of fundamental value in the course of identity development, may it be through the certain

setting or by the surrounding people, in this case the other participants of the media activities. Overall, a social network supports the sense of belonging, provides group security and promotes self-confidence.

What this discussion illustrates is that media offers a lot of information for youngsters to base their picture of the world upon and reflect their own identity. This means that youth as well have various platforms for self-expression through media. Despite of this, adolescents might feel that their voice is not heard when it comes to societal issues, social change, or even everyday opinions about life in general. To gain some understanding of the possibilities of development considering youth and media work, the conductors of this thesis agree that it is important to analyze how youth experiences their participation in volunteer media activities. By doing this, it is possible to research how these volunteer media activities empower youth.

There are manifold opportunities to continue from the conducted research both related to other research or towards a project level. Further research could investigate for instance the youth connection to professionals and the emerging chances of mentoring more in depth as well as the youth involvement with other youth centers. As already stated in the findings, the only area of improvement the interviewed youth suggested, was enhancing the advertisement of the various activities within Happi in order to spread the word and increase youth participation. Another closely connected research idea would be in this context to examine, through which channels promotion would be most efficient and youth most likely to be reached. Project opportunities are as well plentiful, one could conduct a video-making process or develop a youth media-workshop where skills are both shared and expanded. The opportunities for further studies are as broad as the field of youth work itself.

Concluding, the authors of the thesis argue that this study is able to draw some general conclusions of various functions which affect on the empowerment of youth in voluntary media activities. The findings of the study period seem to be trustworthy and reliable. Furthermore, they support the premonition that these activities indeed may be used as a tool for youth empowerment in various youth work settings. Although empowerment may be hard to measure and detect, the discussions conducted with the informants do suggest that participating in actions, which have a meaning for the individuals, does promote self-expression and personal development. This has shown to be related to the empowerment process within various studies. The research conduct and its findings are seen as a meaningful and valuable addition to already existing studies concerning youth empowerment. Even if the research has been implemented on the small scale of one youth center's available media activities, it has shown the significance in that specific setting and for these specific youngsters. It is not in our power to draw far-reaching conclusions but it is apparent that these empowering effects are not

bound to one particular facility but imply a generally valid idea for activating youth practice which should be encouraged and utilized.

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Figures

Figure 1 PCS Analysis

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Tables

Table 1 Regularity of Participation

Table 2 Areas of Interest

Appendices

Appendix 1 Interview Questions

1) Are these activities voluntary for you?
2) What brought you to Happi's media activities in the first place and when?
3) What kind of new skills have you developed in your time here?
4) Are your friends coming here as well or do you know the others who are joining the media activities?
5) What do you like most in these activities?
6) How do you think the lack of these activities would affect you?