Navigating the identity market to find brand resonance

A phenomenological study of the marketing work of personal branding

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Declaration

This is to certify that:

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD;

(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;

(iii) the thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit length of 100,000 words, exclusive of tables, figures, and bibliographies.

........................................

Trent Hennessey
Abstract

This thesis introduces the missing voice of personal branders to describe how the marketing work of personal branding is undertaken in the identity market. To do this, it adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to situate the phenomenon of personal branding in relation to macro-level trends in consumer culture, including the commodification and marketisation of personhood and the anthropomorphication (or humanisation) of brands. From this socio-historic perspective, it examines the lived experiences of ten participants with established brands in diverse occupations and organisational fields for a period of seven years. Using Bourdieun theory as an overarching framework, this research found that: (1) the field of the identity market was a contested space structured by six major intersections that the personal branders navigated relating to their marketisation, commodification, locus of work, brand authorship, visibility, and marketing ethics; (2) personal brand capital was comprised of economic, social, and cultural dimensions that were volatile, unpredictable, and difficult to convert; (3) personal branders drew on multidimensional, but fragmented sources of knowledge and learning to become habituated to the identity market; (4) personal brand demise/death was an ever-present threat associated with the alienating experiences of selling out, fading out, and burning out; and (5) the marketing work of personal branding was constituted by practices such as engaging in identity compartmentalisation, interdependent status games with other actors, discursive identity negotiation, and multiple market exchange modalities of selling versus gifting and sharing personal brands.

The empirical, practice-based account of personal branding this thesis advances fundamentally challenges the knowledge claims underlying the influential popular press literature on the subject that has emerged since the late 1990s. In contrast to the personal branding movement’s assurances of efficacy, graduated and prescriptive processes, and codified marketing plans, this thesis supports that the marketing work of personal branding is more accurately described as tacit, ambiguous, informal, uncertain, and creative. The lived experience of being a brand is replete with conflict, failure, symbolic domination, and multiple forms of alienation. These findings not only revise the knowledge claims about personal branding for practitioners, but contribute to the literature on cultural branding and marketing work by re-examining theories about self-commodification, the role and function of personal brands in postmodern consumer culture, and the value of humanistic accounts of marketing work to address theory-practice gaps in the marketing literature.
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Like many first-generation university students, the value of education was impressed on me from a young age. My parents scrimped and saved their way through life to ensure their children had access to educational opportunities that were not open to them. ‘Grateful’ is not a word that sufficiently represents the depth of feeling I have for the sacrifices they made. My hope is they see my work as an extension of theirs, because it is. Thank you, Dale and Kay.

When asked to reflect on their education, most people can readily identify the special teachers who changed their lives for the better. My supervisor Etty is one such person for me. Her expansive intellect and deep love of scholarship steered me to completion. It was validating and inspiring to be Etty’s student – the privilege of working closely with a brilliant mind was never lost on me, and will long remain as an experience I treasure.

While the process of completing a doctoral thesis can be a lonely experience, an island I was not. I would like to thank my academic advisors and PhD colleagues for their ideas, thoughtful feedback, and encouragement. To list their names would fill several pages, so instead I will thank them collectively. If they were ever to read these acknowledgements, please know I hold your commitment to learning, teaching, and research in the highest regard. I would also like to express my profound thanks to the participants in my study for so generously sharing their experiences with me.

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However sentimental it sounds, this librarian could not conclude these acknowledgements without celebrating the various libraries in which I found solace, community, and inspiration. From undertaking my doctorate, the importance of libraries as vital public institutions came alive for me, orienting me to do what I can in the future to advance their mission.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale
This thesis takes up the challenge of examining the human dimension of how marketing work is practiced in the domain of person marketing and within consumer culture. It focuses specifically on the phenomenon of personal branding – a research context in which the complex interplay of personhood, marketing, and brands can be described first-hand by ‘personal branders’, or people engaged in the cultural production of marketing themselves as brands. This focus responds to marketing and consumer culture researchers’ calls for studies to empirically examine the actual practice of personal branding (Bendisch, Larsen, & Trueman, 2013; Hearn, 2006, 2008; Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005; Parmentier & Fischer, 2011; Parmentier, Fischer, & Reuber, 2013; Shepherd, 2005). Consistent across this literature is the recognition that while the phenomenon of personal branding is growing in significance as a major commercial industry in the 21st century, it remains under-researched and inadequately theorised.

In terms of its significance, several strands of evidence support the pervasiveness of personal branding practice and the considerable economy it generates. First, the legal systems of most advanced Western countries have come to protect the commercial interests of personal brands as a property right or under trademark law (Radin, 1996). Second, since being popularised by the management consultant Tom Peters in the late 1990s, personal branding has become a lucrative consulting industry and major publishing genre in the popular press (Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005). Third, Forbes annual rankings of celebrity incomes (the ‘Celebrity 100’ list) attests to the multi-billion dollar value of human brands at the apex of the person marketing industry, such as Ellen DeGeneres, David Beckham, Kim Kardashian, and Justin Bieber (Forbes, 2017). Together, these developments support Rein, Kotler, Hamlin and Stoller’s (2006, p. 27) claims that personal branding is “well entrenched in the sports and political sectors, and it is growing rapidly in the business, religion, science, academic, and art sectors.” Recognising that personal branding is legally, commercially, and culturally entrenched as a phenomenon in consumer culture, this thesis sets out to understand the
experiences of personal branders as they navigate identity markets related to their occupations.

Compounding the need for empirical research is the specious nature of knowledge claims about personal branding that are widely replicated in the corpus of popular press literature on the topic. Multiple researchers have reviewed this discourse authored by consultants in the personal branding movement, and similarly concluded that it is non-empirical, atheoretical, and highly contradictory (Davis, 2003; Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005; Wee & Brooks, 2010; Zarkada, 2012). Worryingly, the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims have been uncritically replicated in the academic literature. Possibly as a product of the discourse’s popularity, voluminosity, or intuitive appeal, researchers have applied the discourse to a diverse range of occupations and organisational fields (e.g., Gall, 2012; Gander, 2014; Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015; Rampersad, 2008; Schneider, 2012; Shirey, 2010; Trepanier & Gooch, 2014; Vitberg, 2010). The cross-over of knowledge claims that is occurring from the popular press to academic journals has the potential to not only legitimise the personal branding movement’s discourse, but obfuscate knowledge about personal branding and future research efforts to advance it. Reflecting these concerns, Shepherd (2005, p. 602) poses a salient question to the market academy:

Can the discipline of marketing reclaim self marketing and personal branding from the enthusiasts? For the budding professional marketer, the authors of self-help books, career advisors and Web pundits appear to be the primary sources of advice currently available on the subject.

This thesis recognises the significance of Shepherd’s (2005) question and responds to it with a program of research to advance a practice-based account of personal branding. In doing so, it builds on the few empirical studies of personal branding that are emerging which show the marketing work involved is difficult and does not necessarily produce a sustainable identity project or high visibility status (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011; Parmentier & Fischer, 2011; Parmentier et al., 2013; Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, & Howe-Walsh, 2018). These findings support that there is substantial scope and considerable need to improve current knowledge surrounding personal branding.
1.2 Purpose and contribution

This thesis responds to the need for empirical research on personal branding by examining the lived experiences of people engaged in the practice. Three key purposes and contributions orient its inquiry and are discussed in turn:

(1) **To capture first-hand descriptions of the phenomenon from a diverse sample of personal branders to derive a robust conceptualisation of the phenomenon that contributes to the growing body of literature on personal branding.** This thesis uses an inductive approach to examine ten divergent cases of the phenomenon, purposively recruiting participants with personal brands established in diverse occupations and organisational fields. Exploring participants’ significant experiences of marketing work for a period of seven years, this research is designed to reveal the contours of personal branders’ various experiences in the identity market, including the challenges and contestations they confront. Documenting this darker-side to personal branding – a perspective largely absent in the popular press literature and under-represented in academic studies – will contribute a more complete account of the phenomenon to build on the existing body of fragmented literature.

(2) **To understand what personal branders’ experiences in the identity market reveal about broader debates in the marketing and consumer culture literature concerning: the role and function of cultural brands; the experience and outcomes of self-commodification and the marketisation of personhood; and the actual practice of marketing work.** This thesis recognises that personal branders have a unique perspective in being able to voice the experience of actually being a brand. By describing how personal branders culturally produce their brands, negotiate their commodification and marketisation, and undertake marketing work, this thesis captures the insider perspective on personal branding which constitutes a novel research context to re-examine broader human-brand phenomena in marketing and consumer culture.

(3) **To empirically examine the experience of undertaking the marketing work of personal branding to inform knowledge claims about its practice.** This thesis aims to contribute to the formation of an academic response to the non-empirical knowledge claims about the phenomenon contained in the considerable body of popular press literature on personal branding. The need to reconcile the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims with empirical evidence collected first-hand from personal branders becomes more apparent after
Chapter 3’s close examination of the discourse. This thesis realises the potential for significant myth-busting of the knowledge claims permeating the popular press literature – a pertinent contribution considering the influence the discourse has acquired in consumer culture and the marketing academy.

The research questions guiding this thesis were not pre-formulated, but were iteratively refined throughout the research process. This inductive approach is consistent with the interpretive research paradigm this thesis is situated in and the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology that guides its inquiry (Thompson, 1997; Van Manen, 1990). Having acknowledged the emergent nature of research questions in this thesis, the three research questions that it aims to address include:

1) **What challenges and contestations do personal branders experience in the identity market?**

2) **What practices constitute the marketing work of personal branding?**

3) **How do the lived experiences of personal branders reconcile with the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims?**

Together, these questions orient this thesis’s inquiry to gaining a deep understanding of how personal branders undertake the marketing work of personal branding in the identity market. The empirical, practice-based, experience-focused insights generated have the potential to improve the current state of knowledge about personal branding in both the academic and popular press literature.

**1.3 Clarification of terms and issues of terminology**

Literature on personal branding is fragmented across multiple academic domains and a significant body of popular press literature. As such, multiple and overlapping terms co-exist within these bodies of literature to describe personal branding concepts. Consequently, this section puts forward working definitions of key terms to improve the conceptual clarity of this thesis from the outset. These working definitions provide background context which may facilitate subsequent understanding of personal branders’ experiences. To this end, Figure 1.1 provides a visual overview of the main concepts discussed in this section.
At the time of writing this thesis, the American Marketing Association’s (2018) dictionary reflects the under-developed state of academic research on the phenomenon, containing no definitions for terms such as ‘personal branding’, ‘self-marketing’, or ‘human brands’. A definition of the broader concept of ‘person marketing’ can be traced back to Kotler and Levy’s (1969) classic article that advocated for the extension of the marketing concept to domains beyond traditional products and services. Kotler and Levy (1969, p. 12) conceptualised person marketing as “an endemic human activity, from the employee trying to impress his boss to the statesman trying to win the support of the public.” Importantly, this definition of person marketing conceptualised personhood as a domain to which the marketing concept can be applied, with personal branding similarly reliant on this presupposition. As such, this thesis situates personal branding as a phenomenon within the broader domain of person marketing.

1.3.1 Working definition of personal branding

While there are various definitions of personal branding in the popular press literature (which are further discussed in Chapter 3), this thesis’ working definition of the term is the marketing practices associated with a person creating, performing, promoting, and managing their branded self in the identity market. This definition is broadly consistent with other marketing academics who have reviewed the personal branding literature (such as Lair...
et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005; Zarkada, 2012) and the leading authors in the personal branding movement (Montoya & Vandehey, 2003; Peters, 1999). Provided to orient this thesis’s inquiry, this working definition of personal branding seeks not to challenge the AMA’s (2018) producer-focused definition of a brand (which is, "a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers"), but explore its extension and application to the context of personhood in the domain of person marketing.

Further explicating the terminology this thesis employs, ‘personal brand’ will be used to describe the branded self/brand object produced and the term ‘personal branders’ will be used to refer to the people engaged in branding themselves. The attempt to be clear and consistent with personal branding nomenclature at the outset of this thesis is in contradistinction to the current state of the academic and popular press literature on the subject. Accordingly, this thesis acknowledges that variations of each of these terms presently co-exist, with synonyms for personal branding in the academic literature including: ‘people branding’ (Bendisch et al., 2013), ‘self-branding’ (Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013; Hearn, 2008), and ‘employee branding’ (Edwards, 2005; Miles, 2004). Personal brands have also been referred to as ‘human brands’ (Close, Moulard, & Monroe, 2011; Thomson, 2006), ‘person brands’ (Parmentier et al., 2013), ‘celebrity brands’ (Kerrigan, Brownlie, Hewer, & Daza-LeTouze, 2011; Luo, Chen, Han, & Park, 2010), and ‘celebrity person-brands’ (Fournier, 2010). Cultural branding terms used to describe personal branders include: ‘brand creators’ (Bendisch et al., 2013), ‘brand owners’ (Holt, 2004), and ‘brand authors’ (Allen, Fournier, & Miller, 2008), with more general terms in the cultural studies literature including ‘cultural producers’, ‘cultural intermediaries’, and ‘cultural entrepreneurs’ (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1991). From a marketing management perspective, personal branders are marketing practitioners that are referred to as both ‘brand managers’ (Keller, 2013) and ‘marketing managers’ (Kotler & Keller, 2012). While an even greater profusion of terms exist in the popular press literature – from ‘micro-branding’ (Gross, 2002) to ‘life branding’ (Michail, 2002) – the most common term in both the popular press and academic literature is ‘personal branding’ and this will be the base of the family of terms (‘personal branding’, ‘personal brand’, ‘personal branders’) used in the main throughout this thesis.
1.3.2 Understanding personal branding as a marketing practice

With respect to personal branders’ marketing of their branded selves, an encompassing definition of ‘marketing’ is the processes and practices that “actively bring objects [personal brands] into the realm of exchangeability [the identity market for personal brands] so that they may be bought and sold” (Applbaum, 2004, p. 48). In referring to personal branding as a ‘marketing practice’, this thesis draws on theories of social practice developed by social and cultural theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler among others (Reckwitz, 2002). Broadly, these theories seek to account for the cultural conditions surrounding an activity in social life (Halkier, Katz-Gerro, & Martens, 2011), understanding that practices are not constituted simply as human action (termed ‘praxis’), but also include theory and thinking about action (Reckwitz, 2002). As such, interpretive theorists within marketing and consumer culture understand practices are complex, interconnected performances (Warde, 2005) that are comprised of understandings, procedures, and engagements (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Accordingly, this thesis seeks to examine the personal branding practices of personal branders, capturing their explicit and tacit knowledge about it (understandings); the skills, abilities, and processes required to enact it (procedures); and the purposes, beliefs and emotions related to their experiences of being a brand (engagements).

1.3.3 Understanding the identity market for personal brands

The construct of an identity market for personal brands is analogous to conceptualisations of the ‘brandscape’ in the consumer culture literature (Goldman & Papson, 2006; Murakami Wood & Ball, 2013; Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2007; Sherry, 1998; Thompson & Arsel, 2004). Unpacking this term, a brandscape is the “social, economic and cultural landscape where brands are infused with meaning and ideology” (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2007, p. 421). Within the brandscape, brands are symbolic resources imbued with personal and cultural meanings that are produced and consumed by a network of market actors (Sherry, 1998). This thesis uses ‘identity markets’ as a synonymous term for ‘brandscape’, with the construct referring to the spaces and places in which personal brands circulate as symbolic resources in consumer culture. Acknowledging that brandscapes are structured by contestations among brands and consumers competing for symbolic and economic capital (Goldman & Papson, 2006; Murakami Wood & Ball, 2013; Thompson & Arsel, 2004), this thesis prefers the nomenclature of a ‘market’ to reinforce the competitive nature of personal brands vying for high visibility status. In this way, a personal brand’s need for visibility in the
identity market mirrors conceptions of consumer culture as an attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001) or an experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). This conceptualisation harks back to Deighton’s (1992) seminal article in the consumer culture literature elucidating the performative metaphor that markets are theatrical stages on which market actors perform their desired impressions to consumer audiences. Accordingly, the concept of an identity market provides a useful starting point to examine how personal branders navigate contestations with other actors in the marketplace as they enact the marketing work of performing their brand.

1.3.4 The relationship between personal branding and self-marketing

In clarifying the relationship between personal branding and self-marketing, this thesis understands the terms to be distinct, but highly related forms of person marketing. Self-marketing “consists of those varied activities undertaken by individuals to make themselves known in the marketplace, usually, (though not exclusively) for the purpose of obtaining gainful employment” (Shepherd, 2005: 590). Preparing a resume or refining one’s social media presence are common self-marketing activities undertaken at large by people to enter or improve their position in the labour market (Van Dijck, 2013). While personal branding and self-marketing are both concerned with self-production, self-marketing tends to be a more episodic activity concerned with “creating professional projections of an ideal self” (Shuker, 2014, p. 228) to gain employment in the labour market. Personal branding, in contrast, involves self-marketing as an ongoing form of marketing work – what authors have variously referred to ‘phantasmagoric labour’ (Sternberg, 2005), ‘aesthetic labour’ (Pettinger, 2004), and ‘reputational labour’ (Dumont, 2017) – to create, perform, manage, and promote their branded self in the identity market. A personal brander’s experiences of marketing work as they navigate the identity market is the phenomenon this thesis aims to describe.

1.3.5 The relationship between personal branding and human branding

On the contradistinction of personal branding with human branding, this thesis understands that a personal brand can be described more generally as a human brand, but also recognises that a human brand is a more encompassing concept (Dion & Arnould, 2016). A ‘human brand’ has been defined as “any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts” (Thomson, 2006, p. 104). Parmentier et al. (2013, p. 374) provide a more consumer-centric definition of human brands as “the set of associations that a group of people identify with a particular person.” In contrast, a personal brand adds the qualification
of self-production to a human brand, requiring that a person’s branding practice be largely self-enacted and personally managed. Consistent with Dion and Arnould (2016), this thesis acknowledges, therefore, that personal branding is not the only form of human branding, with other forms of human branding including when other entities produce or manage a human brand (for example, entertainment companies and public relations firms) and/or a human brand is based on a fictitious person (for example, a marketer-created brand character such as Betty Crocker or Aunt Jemima; see Callcott & Lee, 1994). Thus, in summarising this section, this thesis’s exploration of personal branding is situated in the domain of person marketing and examines a particular type of human brand – one that is self-produced and circulates in the identity market as a manifestation of the marketing work of a personal brander.

1.4 Scope

As personal branding is potentially a very broad phenomenon to investigate, this section outlines the scope of this thesis’s inquiry in some detail. Eight statements define the parameters of this thesis’s exploration of personal branding in contradistinction to the existing literature. Table 1.1 summarises these eight scoping statements, which will be discussed in turn throughout this section.

Table 1.1 Summary of scoping statements for the phenomenon of study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scoping dimension</th>
<th>Scoping statement</th>
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<tr>
<td>Time-space of phenomenon</td>
<td>(1) An examination of personal branding in postmodernity, not a postmodern examination of personal branding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of the phenomenon (meaning)</td>
<td>(2) An examination of self as brand, not brands as self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of the phenomenon (agency of actors)</td>
<td>(3) An examination of personal branding as self-enacted, not forced, commodification and marketisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit of analysis to examine phenomenon</td>
<td>(4) An examination of personal branders’ production of their personal brands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of the phenomenon (extent of practice)</td>
<td>(5) An examination of the marketing work of personal branding, not just personal branding discourse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain of phenomenon’s practice</td>
<td>(6) An examination of personal branding in occupational contexts, not other domains of life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of analysis to examine phenomenon</td>
<td>(7) An examination of personal branding practices in the identity market, not the impact of individual differences on personal branding practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field of study to examine phenomenon</td>
<td>(8) An examination of personal branders, not necessarily celebrities.</td>
</tr>
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(1) An examination of personal branding in postmodernity, not a postmodern examination of personal branding.

An important clarification to make from the outset is that this thesis examines personal branding as a phenomenon occurring in the time-space of consumer culture in postmodernity rather than from a postmodern perspective. Recognising that postmodern analysis has major methodological implications for marketing researchers (Brown, 1995; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992), this thesis adopts a more traditional mode of interpretive inquiry to explore how the phenomenon of personal branding is experienced in postmodernity. As such, this thesis contributes to scholarship on the sociology of branding in consumer culture (Arvidsson, 2005; Holt, 2006). As consumer culture is present in most capitalist societies in postmodernity (Bocock, 1993; Brown, 1995; Fine & Leopold, 1993; Smart, 1993), this thesis will examine personal branding within this time-space. Importantly, this thesis does not contend that personal branding is a phenomenon that began in postmodernity. Instead, it recognises that people marketing themselves could be “an endemic human activity” (Kotler & Levy, 1969, p. 12), one that has been practiced throughout history by individuals seeking high visibility status or to manage their image in the public sphere (Greenblatt, 1980). The particular notion of people marketing themselves as ‘brands’ is more recent though, with personal branding discourse and scholarship emerging after the term ‘personal brand’ was introduced and popularised in the late 1990s by Tom Peters (see Peters, 1997). This thesis’s examination of personal branding in postmodern consumer culture is, thus, consistent with the locus of the phenomenon.

(2) An examination of self as brand, not brands as self.

Davis (2003) proposed that there were two meanings of self-commodification with brands in his conceptual article on the topic. One meaning centred on a person’s self-definition being understood through the consumption of products and brands; the other involved the reconstitution of a person’s life and relationships on the model of market relations (Davis, 2003). The first meaning – brands as self – has been studied extensively in the field of consumer culture theory (for a review, see Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The symbolic qualities of brands (Levy, 1959) and consumers use of them to construct their identities (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998) is well established in the marketing literature. Much less is known about Davis’s (2003) latter meaning – self as brand – which involves human identities being marketised and produced as brands. This thesis seeks to understand this under-researched form of self-commodification.
(3) An examination of personal branding as self-enacted, not forced, commodification and marketisation.

This thesis examines personal branding as a form of self-enacted commodification and marketisation, with ‘commodification’ understood as a process and practice that involves the exchange of things in the world for money in the social context of markets, according to leading commodification theorist, Margaret Radin (1996). While commodification is “deceptively complex and difficult to elucidate” (Desmond, 1995, p. 722), Radin’s (1996) broad definition of the term is echoed throughout the social science literature and provides a useful foundation to explore the notion of self-commodification. Consistent with Radin (1996), Holbrook (1995b, p. 641) provides a more marketing-centric definition of the term as “the process or custom of treating some object (a person, place, thing, event, idea or whatever) as a commodity to be shaped, packaged, distributed and marketed.” This definition encompasses the highly related concept of ‘marketisation’, which is often invoked as a synonymous term for commodification, and refers to the process and practice of applying market rhetoric, logic, and practices to conceptualise a thing-entity/subject as a market object propertied with exchangeable value (Lair et al., 2005). What is crucial to understand is that forces of commodification and marketisation, at their broadest level, can be conceived as a historical process tied to the expansion of markets and marketing, with these forces accelerating within the capitalist, neoliberal consumer cultures that have emerged in postmodernity (Bauman, 2007; Featherstone, 1991; Radin, 1996; Strasser, 2003). In his expansive account of ‘the marketing era’, Applbaum (2000, p. 73) clarifies that the macro-level forces of commodification and marketisation are “not a self-propelled economic, historical, or evolutionary tendency. Commoditization is a process managed by marketers and others with a marketing orientation who act upon their stake in reproducing particular dispositions toward manufactured objects, ideas, or experiences for the purpose of ensuring repeat sales.” From this vantage point, personal branding is an interesting marketing phenomenon to examine as a practiced involving self-enacted commodification (treating personhood, or aspects of it, as an object for exchange in the market) and marketisation (applying market rhetoric, logic, or practices to construct a person as a marketing object).

In terms of the existing literature, studies of human commodification have tended to examine more extreme, absolute, and literal contexts, such as slavery (Hirschman & Hill, 1999), sex work (Hirschman & Stern, 1994; Phua & Caras, 2008), and concentration camps (Hirschman & Hill, 2000; Klein & Hill, 2008), or the productisation of people’s bodies in markets for
human blood (Archard, 2002) and body organs (Hansmann, 1989; Parry & Gere, 2006; Seale, Cavers, & Dixon-Woods, 2006). In these contexts, commodification entails stripping a person of “free will, self-determination, and selfhood” (Hirschman & Hill, 2000, p. 470) to transform them into the property of another person. In contrast, personal branding is a context in which commodification is self-enacted, and is likely to be undertaken by people with considerable agency as highly visible, socially networked, and economically liberated workers. As such, personal branding represents a unique context to re-examine human commodification as a phenomenon in marketing systems. Accordingly, this thesis seeks to understand the lived experience of participants who have engaged in self-enacted commodification by consciously and willingly marketing themselves as brands. Elaborating on this consciousness further, this thesis acknowledges that commodification can be “an attribution by another” rather than an internally manifested state or status (Desmond, 1995, p. 724). However, as an examination of self-enacted personal branding, this thesis will not assume the branded status of a person based on another person’s perception of them being a brand. Rather, this thesis will be restricted to participants who self-identify as brands and for whom there is evidence of the market exchange of their brand in the identity market.

(4) An examination of personal branders’ production of their personal brands.

This thesis examines the elusive ‘inside-out perspective’ of how personal brands are self-produced by personal branders rather than the ‘outside-in perspective’ of how consumers experience and co-create personal brands (Burmann, Hegner, & Riley, 2009, p. 114). As an interpretive study, this thesis is informed by the emerging perspective of cultural branding in consumer culture theory which understands brands “as dynamic and actively co-created entities that evolve with consumers and cultures in kind” (Allen et al., 2008, p. 787). Accordingly, this thesis acknowledges the cultural branding perspective that brand meaning is co-created by a network of actors in consumer culture, including marketers, consumers, the media, and organisations (Allen et al., 2008; Bengtsson & Ostberg, 2006; Holt, 2004; McCracken, 2005). Accepting there are multiple producers of personal brands in consumer culture, this thesis focuses on personal branders – the cultural producers whose perspective is most under-represented in the extent literature on personal branding (with notable exceptions such as Parmentier et al., 2013; Erz & Christensen, 2018). Capturing this voice is especially theoretically interesting as personal branders can articulate their experiences as both cultural producers and a cultural product. This dualism allows first-person descriptions to be collected on how personal branders negotiate the identity market as brands vying for visibility. As
such, this examination of personal branders provides novel access to understanding the phenomenon of personal branding from a first-person, ‘insider’ perspective.

(5) An examination of the marketing work of personal branding, not just personal branding discourse.

This thesis acknowledges the popularity of the personal branding movement and the intuitive appeal of being a ‘brand’ may lead to some people appropriating elements of personal branding discourse and applying the vernacular in their everyday lives. For example, a person may self-identify as a brand, discursively using the term as a metaphor for their reputation or as a metonym for their professional identity (Wee & Brooks, 2010). Radin (1996, p. 13) refers to the use of market rhetoric to reframe everyday life and interactions as ‘metaphorical commodification’, with Murphy (2000, p. 16) confirming that people highly indoctrinated in consumer ideology are more likely “to see themselves and others in material terms and also to consider personal characteristics to have market values”. There is conceptual support for the discursive practice of metaphorical commodification being considered a form of branding. For example, Stern’s (2006) study of the semantics of branding confirms that a brand’s nature can be more metaphoric than literal, with a brand’s locus existing more as a mental representation than a physical entity. Thus, while this thesis accepts that the phenomenon of personal branding can include a person simply applying elements of personal branding discourse to their self-concept, the focus of inquiry is to more fully examine the actual ‘marketing work’ (Svensson, 2007) of producing a personal brand.

Given the stated focus of this thesis, the recruitment of participants is restricted to those who have lived experience creating, performing, managing, and promoting their brands in the identity market. This requirement aligns with both schools of thought (the emerging perspective of cultural branding versus the more traditional brand management perspective) concerning what constitutes a brand in the marketing literature. Discussing these perspectives in turn, cultural branding theorists contend that a brand must be ‘enacted’ in consumers’ minds to exist (Arvidsson, 2005; Lury, 2004), while brand management scholars argue that a brand must have “actually created a certain amount of awareness, reputation, prominence, and so on in the marketplace” (Keller, 2013, p. 30). Fulfilling these definitional requirements in the literature concerning ‘branded’ status, the participants in this thesis have established brands and rich experiences of marketing work to draw upon. Accordingly, the practice-based
focus on marketing work that frames this research aims to generate deep theoretical insights about the phenomenon of personal branding.

(6) **An examination of personal branding in occupational contexts, not other domains of life.**

This thesis recognises that people can market and brand themselves in the context of their occupations and careers as well as in other domains of life. For example, a series of studies have examined self-marketing and personal branding practices in the context of personal relationships by analysing dating advertisements (Coupland, 1996; Hirschman, 1987; Jagger, 1998). Further studies have focused on dating participants’ use of market rhetoric (Heino, Ellison, & Gibbs, 2010) and marketing strategies (Patterson & Hodgson, 2006), or have examined the applicability of marketing theory in the personal relationships market (Murgolo-Poore, Pitt, & Berthon, 2003). This stream of research is relevant to this thesis in highlighting how people perform marketing practices to negotiate their self-commodification. However, consistent with the majority of popular press and academic literature on personal branding, this thesis will focus on personal branding in the context of people’s occupations. As such, the thesis will describe the experiences of participants who have marketed themselves as brands as a central and ongoing concern of their career.

(7) **An examination of personal branding practices in the identity market, not the impact of individual differences on personal branding practices.**

Focusing on the impact of individual differences (such as age or nationality) on personal branding practice is not possible given the traceability of this information to this thesis’s highly visible participants. As this thesis will potentially cover a range of sensitive personal and organisational issues, more stringent efforts to maintain participants’ anonymity and confidentiality are required to ensure participants can fully express themselves while protecting their own commercial interests (Jehn & Jonsen, 2010). In relation to how occupational context shapes personal branding practice, studies have examined the
organisational fields\(^1\) of fashion (Parmentier et al., 2013; Delisle & Parmentier, 2016; Erz & Christensen, 2018) and academia (Close et al., 2011), with related studies of personal branding and self-marketing practices examining occupation-specific contexts such as politicians (Motion, 2000), artists (Rentschler, 2007; Schroeder, 2005, 2006), entrepreneurs (Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018), chefs (Dion & Arnould, 2016) and sex workers (Hirschman & Stern, 1994; Phua & Caras, 2008). To build on this literature, this thesis is positioned at a higher level of abstraction to understand the experience of being a brand, particularly focusing on how personal branders navigate the identity market. By recruiting a diverse sample of personal branders (varying in the level of their brand visibility, length of experience, occupations, and organisational fields), it seeks to contribute to theory development by addressing more fundamental questions about the nature of personal branding and the marketing work it entails.

\(8\) An examination of personal branders, not necessarily celebrities.

This thesis understands that a ‘personal brander’ and a ‘celebrity’ are interrelated, but not necessarily interchangeable, concepts. While a celebrity is someone widely known who commands a high degree of attention from the media and public (Gamson, 1994; Turner, 2010), Parmentier (2009, p. 69) explains that a personal brander does not need to be a celebrity as their visibility may relate to a smaller audience or be restricted to a particular organisational field. Other researchers view the celebrity/personal brander distinction as one that is increasingly blurred. For example, Kerrigan et al. (2011, p. 1509) highlight that celebrity has become not just about a person’s high visibility, but about “commodity images and identities [that are] capable of being monetised, in a logic which mirrors that which frames processes of branding.” In this vein, brands are seen as ‘media objects’ (Lury, 2004) circulating in the ‘aesthetic economy’ (Entwhiste, 2002). The mediatisation of human personalities that celebrity culture entails thus accommodates celebrities being conceptualised as personal brands (Hackley, Hackley, & Bassiouni, 2018). Rein et al. (2006, p. 17) reiterate that ‘brand’ has become a more encompassing term as “traditional definitions of celebrity and

\(^1\) The concept of an ‘organisational field’ derives from Bourdieu’s (1984, 1993) work on fields, and is defined as, “those organisations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognised area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organisations that produce similar services or products” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Organisational fields contain a variety of occupational roles (for example, within the field of health, key categories of occupations include doctors, nurses, surgeons, and health researchers).
other visibility terms [stars, superstars, icons, business gurus] fail to illuminate the core essence of high visibility in the twenty-first century: its growing commercial value.” Understanding the conceptual overlap between a personal brander and a celebrity, this thesis frames the phenomenon of personal branding as a marketing practice in consumer culture rather than primarily as a study of celebrities ground in theories of celebrity. While it explores personal branding by drawing on literature from across the social sciences, including celebrity studies, its inquiry centres on understanding the experience of being marketed as a brand, not how fame is produced (a topic examined by Rein et al., 2006; Turner, 2010). Accordingly, while this thesis’s participants have an element of celebrity status within their organisational field/s or more generally in the public domain, they also have commerciality to their visibility, with their brand being a source of capital produced for market exchange.

1.5 Thesis structure

This introductory chapter has outlined the background, purpose, and scope of this thesis. In doing so, it has clarified the phenomenon of the study as an examination of the lived experiences of personal branders as they undertake the marketing work of personal branding in identity markets related to their occupations. Two chapters of literature review follow this introductory chapter. First, Chapter 2 provides a more expansive review of the marketing and consumer culture literature to situate personal branding in relation to: (1) the cultural branding paradigm; (2) its broader socio-historic patterning in consumer culture; (3) literatures advocating the study of marketing work, practitioners, and practice; and (4) the gaps and debates in the existing body of fragmented academic literature on personal branding. From this foundation, Chapter 3 narrows to critically review the personal branding movement’s popular press literature. This review identifies five underlying knowledge claims permeating the discourse, and goes on to problematise these claims in relation to broader debates in the marketing and consumer culture literature. With the debates and research gaps this thesis aims to address outlined, the next three chapters address issues of methodology. Specifically, Chapter 4 overviews the interpretive research paradigm this thesis is situated in before discussing the tenets of the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology this thesis adopts. Chapter 5 extends the discussion of methodology to document the data collection methods of interviewing, observations, and document collection that were employed in the research encounter. The researcher’s reflections concerning the research encounter and the subsequent knowledge produced from it follows in Chapter 6.
The findings of this thesis are then presented across the ensuing three chapters. Chapter 7 begins by introducing Bourdieu’s theories of cultural production (specifically, fields, capital, habitus, and practice) as an overarching framework to conceptualise the field of the identity market, the capital of personal brands, and the habitus personal branders develop to navigate the identity market. Chapter 8 takes a more critical turn, focusing in on the challenges confronting personal branders as they attempt to achieve brand resonance in the identity market. These challenges centre on the instability of personal brand capital, the difficulty of becoming habituated to the identity market, and the struggle to find and sustain a position of brand resonance. A focus on personal branding practices concludes these findings chapters, with Chapter 9 examining the identity negotiations, discursive positioning, and market exchange practices structuring the marketing work of personal branders. An overall discussion and conclusion chapter (Chapter 10) synthesises the findings of this thesis in relation to the research questions guiding the inquiry. To directly address the final research question of this thesis, this chapter reconciles the knowledge claims of the personal branding movement with the empirical findings of participants’ lived experience to improve the current state of knowledge on the topic.
Chapter 2
Literature review on personal branding

2.1 Introduction
This chapter is the first of two chapters of literature review. It reviews the academic literature on personal branding to understand the research gaps that this thesis aims to address. From this basis, Chapter 3 undertakes a critical review of the popular press literature on personal branding, problematising the knowledge claims underlying this discourse. To preface this detailed examination of the personal branding movement’s discourse, this chapter first outlines the cultural branding perspective that orients this thesis. Next, it adopts a broader socio-historic position to contextualise how the phenomenon of personal branding is influenced by, and situated within, a nexus of macro-level phenomena in postmodern consumer culture. These phenomena evidence the changing relationships between people and brands over time, accounting for how people become brands (the commodification and marketisation of personhood) and brands become human (the ascendancy and anthropomorphication of brands). Third, it reviews the literature on marketing practitioners, marketing work, and marketing practices to reveal the value of practice-based, producer-focused research to advance marketing theory. Finally, it overviews the fragmented body of academic literature on personal branding, highlighting the need for empirical research to address important questions about the marketing work of personal branding, including the challenges and contestations that personal branders confront in the identity market.

2.2 Consumer culture theory and the cultural branding perspective
This thesis is informed by literature from the cultural branding perspective, one of the two major schools of thought about branding in the field of marketing. Cultural branding is regarded as the emergent perspective compared to the more established brand management perspective which developed in concert with the ascendancy of global brands in the 1980s (King, 1991). Regarding the latter, brand management research tends to use deductive, quantitative approaches reflecting the theory and methods of the perspective’s parent disciplines of economics and psychology (Levy, 2006). In contrast, the cultural branding perspective emerged within ‘consumer culture theory’ – a moniker given to a methodologically diffuse body of interpretive, critical, and postmodernist scholarship that has
flourished within marketing since the 1980s (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Drawing more from the anthropological and sociological research traditions, consumer culture theory explores the experiential, symbolic, and sociocultural aspects of consumption (Levy, 2006). Importantly, consumer culture theory does not singularly focus on consumers (Arnould & Thompson, 2007). Key theorists within the field affirm that consumer culture studies have “extensively addressed the institutional, historical, ideological, and sociological shaping of consumption and the broader market and social systems, which situate consumers’ identity projects and consumption practices” (Thompson, Arnould, & Giesler, 2013, p. 152).

Reflecting its encompassing nature, the next section of this chapter reviews consumer culture literature to situate the phenomenon of personal branding in relation to its broader socio-historic patterning (Arnould & Thompson, 2007), unpacking the marketplace conditions and consumer identity work that support the constructs of people as brands and brands as people. Studies from a cultural branding perspective have provided unique insights on the sociology of brands (Arvidsson, 2005; Holt, 2004), with this thesis aiming to contribute to this sub-area of research. Consistent with this perspective, brands are conceptualised as symbolic resources that circulate in consumer culture as “a bundle or container of meanings” (McCracken, 1993, p. 125). In contrast to the brand management literature, this viewpoint ontologically supports that brands are “dynamic, co-created entities…[not]…static, pre-formulated management construals” (Allen et al., 2008, p. 787). Seminal cultural branding studies describe how brand meanings are crafted through culturally-embedded narratives (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry Jr, 2003) and emotions (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006), yet remain polysemous across consumers, consumption contexts, and over time (Brown, 2014). Ethnographic studies of brands reveal the dualism of their power to both create social relationships among consumers (Cayla & Eckhardt, 2008; Cova & Pace, 2006; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Muñiz & Schau, 2005), but also to cause conflict and drama in the marketplace (Giesler, 2012; Luedicke & Giesler, 2007). Diamond et al. (2009) speak to this power when conceptualising a brand as a ‘cultural cynosure’ or “an object of focal fascination and contemplation by virtue of its resonance with norms, values, and mores” (p. 133). The power, complexity, dynamism, and polymorphic nature of brands captured in the cultural branding literature sensitises this thesis to understand how personal branders culturally produce their brands in the identity market. With a focus on understanding the sociocultural dimensions of marketing practices and brand phenomena, consumer culture theory and the cultural branding perspective provide a useful theoretical lens to orient this thesis’s inquiry.
2.3 Socio-historic perspective on the phenomenon of personal branding
To develop a socio-historic perspective on personal branding, this section examines macro-level phenomena in consumer culture. This broader cultural perspective orients the interpretation of participants’ lived experiences in the findings chapters of this thesis. Two major developments are the focus of discussion: (1) the commodification and marketisation of personhood, which has encouraged people to construct themselves as brands; and (2) the ascendancy and anthropomorphification of brands, which supports the construction of brands as people. These macro-level phenomena represent two major socio-historic trends which have both shaped the emergence and popularisation of personal branding theory and practice in postmodernity. As such, they will be discussed in turn to situate the contemporary phenomenon of personal branding (that this thesis examines) in relation to broader phenomena concerned with the evolution of brands, marketing, and consumer culture.

2.3.1 The commodification and marketisation of personhood
This section of review concentrates on how people came to be understood as brands by examining personhood’s commodification (treating personhood, or aspects of it, as an object for exchange in the market) and marketisation (applying market rhetoric, logic, or practices to construct a person as a marketing object) in postmodernity. It begins by broadly overviewsing these trends before narrowing to examine the production and consumption of identity in postmodern consumer culture.

2.3.1.1 Personhood in the age of marketing
Post-World War II, the production ethic that defined modern society in the West was superseded by a consumption ethic, with this change driven by capitalist ideologies favouring economic growth, markets, and consumption (Bocock, 1993; Fine & Leopold, 1993; Smart, 1993). The rise of capitalism and consumer culture in postmodernity rapidly expanded the boundaries of the realm of commodities into all domains of social life (Bauman, 2007; Featherstone, 1991; Radin, 1996). Put more simply, in the consumer culture of our marketised world, everything is for sale (Kuttner, 1996) and everything is commodified (Strasser, 2003). As a central, enabling arm of capitalism and consumer culture, systems of marketing have also expanded in postmodernity, functioning to actively bring “objects into the realm of exchangeability so they may be bought and sold” (Applbaum, 2004, p. 48). Market rhetoric, logic, and practice has become so pervasive that researchers have variously described postmodernity as ‘the age of marketing’ (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993) and ‘the
marketing era’ (Applbaum, 2004).

Reflecting how these macro-level forces are restructuring contemporary Western culture, streams of literature have examined how increasing aspects of personhood have been commodified and marketised in postmodernity, including people’s: cultural identities (Castile, 1996; Peñaloza, 2000); life stages such as childhood (Cook, 2004; Shor, 2004) and adolescence (McCreanor, Barnes, Gregory, Kaiwai, & Borell, 2005); life events such as births (Taylor, Layne, & Wozniak, 2004), deaths (Bonsu & Belk, 2003; Suzuki, 2000) and marriages (Blakely, 2008); and life itself in terms of our DNA (Fitzgerald, 1998) and body parts (Parry & Gere, 2006; Radin, 1987, 1996; Seale et al., 2006). Unsurprisingly, people’s identities are no exception to this list, with the omnipresence of marketing and forces of commodification in consumer culture changing the way people think about themselves. In his seminal 1951 text, *White Collar*, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills was among the first to describe the emergence of a ‘personality market’ and ‘marketing mentality’ within the new class of professional workers needing to sell themselves in the developing service economy. Around this time, the German social psychologist Eric Fromm (1947) similarly observes that a ‘marketing orientation’ was spreading in which ‘marketing characters’ produced their personalities like commodities for sale in the marketplace. Fromm (1947, p. 40) writes that “success depends largely on how well a person sells himself on the market, how well he gets his personality across, how nice a ‘package’ he is. ... The principle of evaluation is the same on both the personality and commodity market: on the one, personalities are offered for sale; on the other, commodities.”

Fifty years later, the highly influential sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2007, p. 57) argues that the marketisation of personhood has become so entrenched in postmodern consumer culture that “becoming and remaining a sellable commodity is the most potent motive of consumer concerns, even if it is usually latent and seldom conscious, let alone explicitly declared.” An empirical study by Murphy (2000) affirms that consumers who are highly indoctrinated in the ideology of consumerism are more likely to see their personal characteristics as having market values. Murphy (2000, p. 637) introduces the term ‘commodified self-concept’ arguing that “commercialized culture has stressed the material self to such a degree that individuals often see themselves, or conceive of themselves, as objects or commodities.” Taken together, the work of these social and cultural researchers elucidates how the commodification and marketisation of personhood has structured the development of identity.
markets, which in turn, has created the pre-conditions to support people conceptualising themselves as brands.

Macro-level changes within the labour market are an additional factor supporting the commodification and marketisation of personhood in postmodernity. Since the 1970s, neoliberalism has been the predominant politico-economic paradigm adopted in the West, which advocates for deregulation and privatisation, competition, entrepreneurialism, and individual responsibility (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism has significantly increased inequality in the distribution of economic capital (Piketty, 2013), with labour markets becoming more volatile and defined by short-term, increasingly casualised or contract-based work (Harvey, 2005). These changes have seen the emergence of ‘enterprising selves’ in organisational cultures (Du Gay, 1996). That is, employees are assuming a more individualistic orientation to manage their careers, engaging in self-promotion and impression management practices to ensure their employability in competitive, volatile work environments (Du Gay, 1996).

Within large organisations, Edwards (2005) notes that employees have come to be regarded as either an aesthetic element of an organisational brand or as an animate, branded entity delivering the experience of an organisational brand to customers. This latter construct of ‘employee branding’ is particularly prevalent in the service sector (Pettinger, 2004), with multiple studies revealing employees both resist and accommodate this form of branding as part of their everyday experience of work (see Brannan, Parsons, & Priola, 2011). The profound changes evident in the labour market reveal the continuing expansion of markets, marketing, and branding in postmodernity. Within this time-space, the phenomenon of personal branding can be situated as part of the broader commodification and marketisation of personhood.

2.3.1.2 The production and consumption of identity in postmodernity
The transition from a producer to consumer society has reconfigured how people produce and consume identity, with these changes warranting special attention to understand how they foreground the concept of people as brands. A useful starting point is Anthony Giddens’ (1990) overarching conclusion that identity has become a more reflexive process in postmodernity. That is, rather than being strictly ascribed by social institutions (such as school, church, or family), identity is more actively constructed by consumers through narratives about the self that integrate meanings and events from the outside world (Giddens, 1990). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the eminent sociologist Erving Goffman
(1959) similarly observes this production orientation around identity which he describes as a continual performance in his classic text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. For Goffman (1959), people are like actors, performing the role of their public self to manage impressions in their interactions with audiences. Affirming Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphor is more recent work by the sociologist Mike Featherstone (1991) who argues that a new conception of self – ‘the performing self’ – has emerged in consumer culture which places greater emphasis on “appearance, display and the management of impressions” (p. 187). The conscious forms of self-presentation and identity performance these theorists allude to relate closely to the premise of personal branding.

The centrality of consumption to identity production is well-established in consumer culture theory, with consumers appropriating the symbolic meanings of marketplace resources (such as products, brands, and advertising) to produce their identity projects (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This recognition of symbolic consumption draws on the pioneering work of French sociologist, philosopher, and cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard. In postmodernity, Baudrillard (1981) argues that consumer objects are signs circulating in culture that are consumed for the significations they provide consumers in terms of differentiation and hierarchy. The French philosopher Guy Debord (1967/1977) theorises that the fetishisation of symbolic consumption in consumer culture creates a ‘society of the spectacle’ in which social relations are mediated by images. This theme is also reflected in the earlier work of American historian, Daniel Boorstin. For Boorstin (1964) the marketing system’s endless reproduction of images and narratives constitutes a hyperreality of ‘pseudo-events’ that privileges image and simulation over reality and substance. Cumulatively, Boorstin, Baudrillard, and Debord’s work speaks to the power of images for symbolic consumption in postmodernity. These trends both historicise and explain the impetus for people to construct personal brand identities for symbolic consumption in the identity market.

More recently, spaces and stages for identity production and consumption have grown in the 21st century with the advent of web 2.0 technologies, social media, and the ubiquity of internet-enabled, image-producing portable devices such as smartphones and laptops (Marwick, 2013). Multiple studies reveal that consumers are actively engaging in self-presentation and impression management practices online to produce and manage their identities on social media, blogs, and personal websites (Labrecque et al., 2011; Marwick, 2013; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Van Dijck, 2013; Hackley et al., 2018). Consumer culture
researcher Russell Belk (2013) explains that consumers’ ‘digital selves’ are important identities to manage and also self-concepts to explore, play with, and share in virtual contexts. The accessibility of these visibility-creating technologies has not only entrenched a culture of visual consumption (Schroeder, 2002) and consumer image production (Eager & Dann, 2018; Hackley et al., 2018), but also democratised the mass-production of celebrity as a form of personal marketing work (Turner, 2004) – or what Kerrigan et al. (2011) refer to as the ‘celebratisation’ of selves. That is, unlike previous times, the ‘megaphone effect’ of these new web technologies allows ordinary people to generate a mass audience without institutional mediation (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013). These more recent developments reinforce the proliferation of sites for identity construction and production in postmodernity. It is no coincidence that personal branding rose in popularity during this time as a form of marketing work made possible by these image producing technologies, an expanded marketing system, and a consumer culture encouraging the commodification and marketisation of personhood.

2.3.2 The ascendency and anthropomorphication of brands

In continuing to trace the genealogy of human-brand relationships, the following sub-sections focus on how brands have evolved over time to support the concept of brands as people. This review acknowledges the cultural perspective that humans have a complex relationship with brands that has existed for millennia (Bastos & Levy, 2012; Eckhard & Bengtsson, 2010; Moore & Reid, 2008; Wengrow, 2008). The central theme running through this review concerns the ascendency of brands and their anthropomorphication, the latter term referring to the process of attributing human characteristics to brands (Bengtsson, 2003; Fournier, 1998). This review begins with the pre-history of branding practices before examining the massification and animation of brands in modern times. Understanding the history of branding requires tracing major developments not only in marketplace practice, but also in theory and research (Bastos & Levy, 2012). Accordingly, the final section homes in on developments in brand theory that accommodate the brand as person construct.

2.3.2.1 Cultural pre-histories of brands

Etymologically, the term ‘brand’ derives from the Old Norse word brandr, which means ‘to burn’ (Keller, 2003). This fiery association hints at the ancient origins or pre-histories of branding. Landais (2001) traces the earliest known evidence of branding back to the late Neolithic period (approximately 3000 BC) with a series of rock paintings depicting branded
cattle found in the mountains of the eastern Sahara. Several historical studies document how animal branding was used extensively in antiquity (Blancou, 2001; Jones, 1987; Landais, 2001) and throughout the middle ages and early modern times (MacGregor, 1996; Pattie, 2002). Accounting for why the practice emerged, Redford (2001) explains that in the Old Kingdom of Ancient Egypt (approximately 2700 BC) advances in animal husbandry allowed farmers to maintain larger herds of free-ranging cattle, hence a means of identification became necessary.

To suggest these early incarnations of branding were purely functional or informational in nature is incorrect, with a series of anthropological studies revealing the complex social functions brands fulfil in cultures. From the horse brands of nomadic Mongolian tribes (Waddington, 1974) to the branding of swans in the royal estates of England more than 800 years ago (MacGregor, 1996), the literature highlights brands were not simply literal marks of ownership or figurative indicators of quality, but complex cultural symbols denoting family identity, affiliation and differentiation, and status and hierarchy. Consumer culture studies on the history of branding in Imperial China (Eckhard & Bengtsson, 2010) and broader historical accounts of branding practices across cultures (Wengrow, 2008) confirm that brands have emerged within cultures for the social reasons discussed. Synthesising this evidence, Hirschman (2010) advances an ‘evolutionary branding’ perspective that conceptualises brands as an inevitable, innate expression of the human capacity for symbolic reasoning and the need for socially visible, meaningful markers to differentiate or unite groups of people.

A darker side to the pre-histories of branding must also be acknowledged, and concerns the practice of human branding whereby brands were burned or tattooed into the flesh of slaves as marks of ownership in Ancient Greece and Rome (Jones, 1987). Thompson (2003, p. 242) explains that in the Greco-Roman world, “the practice was not confined to slaves – it was also used, with different legends or symbols, for prisoners-of-war and criminals and even, in late antiquity, for soldiers and workers in military factories.” This form of human branding persisted to the very end of the Atlantic slave trade in the 1870s, with African slaves typically branded on their shoulder, upper chest or thigh with the name or initials of their owner or the company trading them (Oldfield, 2003; Rediker, 2007; Thomas, 2006). In this manifestation of branding, brands functioned as marks of ownership signalling the commodity-status of a person (Hirschman & Hill, 1999). A dualism can be found here, with brands literally applied
to dehumanise a person while figuratively constructing their dehumanised personhood as a product. In comparison, while personal branding similarly constructs personhood as a product, it represents a different form of human branding – one that is undertaken willingly, and one commodifying the identity production of a personal brander rather than their agency, freewill, and labour. Together, the branding practices in this period evidence the long history that brands have as both signs and symbols that serve manifold social functions in markets and cultures. This expansive perspective sensitises this thesis to examine both the light and dark of personal branding to understand the complex roles that personal brands fulfil in personal branders’ lives.

2.3.2.2 The massification and animation of brands in post-/modernity

Modernity and postmodernity represent transformative periods in the genealogy of human-brand relationships, with branding practices continuing to evolve in concert with the rapid macroenvironmental changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of postmodern consumer culture. The first (late eighteenth century to early nineteenth century) and second (1865-1900) phases of the Industrial Revolution created a series of macroenvironmental changes that favoured the “development of consistent-quality consumer products that, through large-scale advertising, could be made known to consumers and would be clearly identifiable by consumers – branded products, in other words” (Low & Fullerton, 1994, p. 175). Low and Fullerton (1994) summarise the changes facilitating the development of branded, mass-produced consumer goods in the U.S. (seen in Table 2.1), with this synopsis consistent with the detailed account provided in Susan Strasser’s (1989) book, Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Makings of the American Mass Market. With the massification of consumer goods came growth in marketing systems (technologies, infrastructures, and methodologies), with these changes spreading throughout the West from the industrial leaders of the time: the U.S, Britain, and Germany (Fullerton, 1988). In combination, the advent of mass-produced consumer goods and the possibility to enact mass marketing ensured that brands became increasingly important as figurative, demand-creating symbols of a commodity’s quality and manufacturer.

The period from 1870 to 1900 was particularly significant in the history of branding, with nationally recognised brands emerging from the sustained efforts of pioneers at the helm of the largest companies, such as King C. Gillette, H. J. Heinz, and the management teams at Quaker Oats and the National Biscuit Co. (Low & Fullerton, 1994; Strasser, 1989). These
manufacturers offered consumers standardised quality and consistently branded products at a national level for the first time, creating “clear and distinct identities” to differentiate their companies (Low & Fullerton, 1994, p. 176). Manufacturers such as Libby, Swift, and Armour used their company name to brand the many products they made, while Proctor and Gamble (P&G) further developed this strategy, creating individual brand names such as P&G ‘Naphtha’, ‘Ivory’ and ‘Star’ to differentiate their competing soaps while building the P&G umbrella brand (Strasser, 1989). By 1915, national manufacturer brands had achieved market leadership in their product categories (Low & Fullerton, 1994), evidenced by two empirical studies of U.S consumers from this period (Geissler, 1917; Hotchkiss & Franken, 1923).

Table 2.1 Developments facilitating branded, mass-produced consumer goods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Nature of development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distribution</td>
<td>Railroad expansion, improvements to the telegraph and postal service, and the telephone’s emergence made regional and national transportation and communication much easier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production capabilities</td>
<td>Improvements in production processes made it possible to produce large quantities of goods inexpensively with consistently good quality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packaging</td>
<td>Advances in packaging materials and printing technologies made it possible to individually package goods and apply distinctive labels to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trademark protection</td>
<td>Protecting trademarks became easier with developments in U.S. trademark law in 1870, the 1880s, and 1906.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>Advertising – previously the domain of patent medicine vendors and other somewhat disreputable entrepreneurs – became a legitimate practice among the business community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication channels</td>
<td>Magazines and newspapers became reliant on advertising revenue, ensuring the availability of media channels and page space to transmit brand advertising.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailing</td>
<td>Department and variety stores and national mail order houses emerged as institutions to support the development of a consumer culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption</td>
<td>Industrialisation and urbanisation increased Americans’ incomes, removed customs associated with self-production and normalised buying most of the ‘things of life’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from Low and Fullerton (1994).
Brands not only grew in prominence during modernity, but were increasingly personified through the creation of brand characters to humanise manufacturer’s identities. Brand characters (sometimes referred to as ‘advertising spokes-characters’ or ‘live trademarks’) are fictional, animate beings or animated objects with human-like qualities created to promote a product, service, company, or idea (Phillips, 1996). From the late 1800s onwards, many brand characters were created (see Callcott & Lee, 1994; Callcott & Phillips, 1996). Table 2.2 highlights the variety of human traits that marketers appropriated when creating and modifying brand characters, with this compendium of brand characters also revealing the marketability of aspects of personhood. In terms of utility, brand characters not only created product identification for companies in the early twentieth century (Callcott & Lee, 1995), but gave them a personality that consumers could connect with, acting as a substitute for the familiar faces of local merchants (Marchand, 1985; Phillips, 1996). Shapiro (2004, p. 88) explains:

Unfamiliar new products were arriving every day on supermarket shelves; somehow, homemakers had to be persuaded that a box of powder really would produce mashed potatoes. The kind female faces appearing in the advertising were there to forge a crucial link between old habits and modern foods.

By forming relationships with brand characters, consumers also formed a relationship with the represented company. As the latter relationship developed, brand characters became more of a “symbolic representation of tradition and continuity” rather than a literal entity (Callcott & Lee, 1995, p. 149). For example, as the Betty Crocker brand (the image of Betty’s name, signature, and image) became sufficiently established as an ‘icon’ (Callcott & Lee, 1995) actors playing the role of Betty Crocker were retired from the mediums of radio and television in the mid-1960s (Shapiro, 2004). In summary, it is apparent that brand characters animated brands in the marketplace, acting as anthropomorphic facilitators of human-brand relationships from modernity through to postmodernity. Brand characters not only evidence the emergence of brands as cultural icons in the 20th century (Holt, 2004), but the requisite development in consumers’ ‘brand literacy’ (Bengtsson & Firat, 2006) in being able to interpret and appropriate a brand’s human-like identity to construct their own identity projects in postmodernity (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). In this way, both the ascendancy and anthropomorphication of brands in modern times foreshadow the rise of personal branding in the late 1990s.
Table 2.2 Examples of brand characters’ appropriation of human traits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human trait</th>
<th>Brand character</th>
<th>Example of appropriation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Campbell kids</td>
<td>The Campbell kids played children’s games in advertisements, associating novelty and humour with Campbell’s soup (Callcott &amp; Phillips, 1996).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Betty Crocker</td>
<td>Fictional home economists such as Betty Crocker were created by several food manufacturers to advise and build relationships with female shoppers, playing the role of ‘expert homemakers’ (Marks, 2005; Shapiro, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Aunt Jemima</td>
<td>Aunt Jemima was based on the racial stereotype of a ‘mammy’ – a black plantation slave of the south (Davis, 2007) – skilled, graceful and abundant in the kitchen (Kern-Foxworth, 1994; Roberts, 1994).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicality</td>
<td>Jolly Green Giant</td>
<td>The Jolly Green Giant was created to personify the large ‘Green Giant’ variety of peas sold by the Minnesota Canning Company (Fox, 1984).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Betty Crocker</td>
<td>Betty Crocker acquired a voice in 1924 with the radio debut of her cooking show, ‘The Betty Crocker School of the Air’ (Marks, 2005).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Uncle Ben</td>
<td>Uncle Ben’s Converted Rice was named after a rice farmer in Houston, reputed for producing high quality rice crops. The character of Uncle Ben was launched in 1946, several years after his death (Kern-Foxworth, 1994).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>Jolly Green Giant</td>
<td>To ensure the giant’s ‘joviality’, his image on packaging was altered to appear happier in 1935 (Noel, 1995). His early television advertisements were also revised after he was perceived as a “lumbering monster” (Fox, 1984, p. 222).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>Betty Crocker</td>
<td>Reinforcing that Betty Crocker was ‘real’, a portrait of the character was painted in 1936 by blending the facial features of female employees at the company’s Home Service Department (Shapiro, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialect</td>
<td>Aunt Jemima</td>
<td>Aunt Jemima’s dialect was that of a black plantation slave from the south. Phrases such as “Seems like I’se needed ‘roun’ heah” appeared on packages and in advertising from 1918 (Kern-Foxworth, 1994, p. 95).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>Quaker Oats man</td>
<td>The Quaker Oats man appearing in the company’s logo was dressed in Quaker garb, chosen because the Quaker faith projected the values of honesty and integrity that the company sought (The Quaker Oats Company, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature</td>
<td>Betty Crocker</td>
<td>Appearing on all packaging, Betty Crocker’s signature was initially developed to create a more personal tone to letters responding to consumers’ baking questions (Marks, 2005; Shapiro, 2004).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.3.2.3 Anthropomorphic brand theory

Several researchers have commented on the increasingly anthropomorphic nature of brands in postmodern consumer culture (e.g., Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Bengtsson, 2003; Fournier, 1998; Freling & Forbes, 2005). This section further unpacks this trend in the marketing literature, understanding it as both a driver and reflection of the emergence of personal branding concepts and practice. Early recognition of brands having human-like qualities can be found more than 50 years ago in seminar articles discussing the “symbolic character” (Levy, 1959, p. 119) or “psychological values” (Dolich, 1969, p. 84) of brands. It was in the 1990s, however, that a major step forward occurred in the anthropomorphication of brand theory with the introduction of the concept of brand personality. Pivotal to this development was leading brand management researcher David Aaker’s (1996) multi-layered conceptualisation of brands as: (1) a product; (2) an organisation; (3) a person; and (4) a symbol. Jennifer Aaker’s (1997) subsequent article on the dimensions of brand personality further established the construct, entrenching the idea that brands are person-like in possessing a unique identity modelled similarly to human personality. Marketing researchers note the construct of brand personality is dependent on consumers accepting the metaphor of brands as people (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Csaba & Bengtsson, 2006; Davies & Chun, 2003; Hanby, 1999). Evidence of this acceptance comes from both practitioner (Biel, 1993; Plummer, 1985) and academic (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007) research showing that consumers have little difficulty describing the personality of brands or imagining the type of person who would use a brand based on the alignment or fit of their personalities.

The next major extension to the metaphor of brands as people comes from Susan Fournier’s (1998) highly influential article on consumer-brand relationships. The key premise of Fournier’s (1998) phenomenological research is that consumers’ relationships with brands are based on “reciprocal exchange” (p. 368) with brands conceptualised as relationship partners for consumers. While acknowledging that a brand “is not a vital entity”, Fournier (1998, p. 345) maintains that “the everyday execution of marketing mix decisions constitutes a set of behaviors enacted on behalf of the brand.” Consumers observe this ‘behaviour’ over time, assessing the suitability of a brand as a relationship partner in terms of the “perceived ego significance” it offers to a consumer’s identity project (Fournier, 1998, p. 366). Blackston (2000, p. 102) describes this process as the “analogue between brand and consumer”: a relationship based on what a consumer thinks about a brand’s personality and what a consumer thinks the brand thinks about them. Empirically, two longitudinal studies confirm
that consumers’ perceptions of brand personality are dynamic, changing in response to their relationship with a brand (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Phau & Lau, 2001).

Building on Fournier’s (1998) study, a stream of literature has conceptually expanded the brand as person metaphor. Within this literature, terms traditionally reserved for human-to-human relationships – for example, love (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006), trust (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman, 2001; Elliott & Yannopoulou, 2007; Hess & Story, 2005) and loyalty (Fournier & Yao, 1997) – are applied to human-to-brand relationships. Biological metaphors, such as the births and deaths of brands (Ewing, Jevons, & Khalil, 2009), further reinforce that brands are animate, people-like entities. When considering the incremental trajectory in brand theory towards greater anthropomorphication, the popularisation of personal branding concepts in the late 1990s appears more as a continuance of this historical trend, rather than a disjuncture or anomaly.

Table 2.3 Comparison of human personality and brand personality dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Saucier’s (1994) markers of human personality</strong></th>
<th><strong>Aaker’s (1997) model of brand personality</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dimensions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Items</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness to experience</td>
<td>Creative, imaginative, intellectual, philosophical, deep, complex, uncreative, unintellectual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>Efficient, organised, systematic, practical, disorganised, inefficient, sloppy careless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>Bold, extraverted, talkative, bashful, quiet, shy, withdrawn, energetic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>Kind, sympathetic, warm, cooperative, cold, unsympathetic, harsh, rude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism (emotional stability)</td>
<td>Unenvious, relaxed, fretful, envious, jealous, moody, touchy, temperamental.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Importantly, the anthropomorphication of brand theory discussed so far has not occurred without debate and criticism. For example, measures of brand personality derived from human personality and values frameworks in the psychology literature have been problematised with only a minority of studies purporting that both human- and brand-personalities can be similarly measured on the same scale (Huang, Mitchell, & Rosenaum-Elliott, 2012; Malhotra, 1981). Instead, most studies find that the dimensionality of human-based measures of personality don’t neatly transfer (quantitatively or qualitatively) to brands (Aaker, 1997; Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003; Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Guido, 2001; Milas & Mlačić, 2007; Okazaki, 2006; Sweeney & Brandon, 2006; Torelli, Özsomer, Carvalho, Keh, & Maehle, 2012). To illustrate these differences, Table 2.3 compares Aaker’s (1997) model of brand personality to Saucier’s (1994) markers of human personality, a model based on Goldberg’s (1990, 1992) ‘Big Five Model’ of human personality. On the adequacy of brand personality measures, Azoulay and Kapferer (2003, p. 152) argue that a more critical assessment is needed of what human personality traits are “applicable to and relevant for brands”. To the debate about the conceptual differences between human personalities and brand personalities, the context of personal branding adds a new avenue of inquiry by introducing the concept of ‘human brand personality’ (Bendisch et al., 2013). Put simply, the emerging evidence suggests consumers tend to perceive brand personality differently to human personality, which further problematises the concept of what ‘human brand personality’ is and how it may be perceived. By examining the identity production of personal branders, this thesis explores this area of theoretical uncertainty regarding the personality of anthropomorphic brands.

2.3.3 Summarising the socio-historic perspective informing this thesis

In summary, the trends discussed within this section are provided in an attempt to situate the phenomenon of personal branding in relation to its broader socio-historic context within consumer culture. Forces of commodification and marketisation have strengthened in postmodernity, with marketing and branding discourses, practices, and theory expanding in their application to the category of personhood. In the 21st century, brands have become increasingly important as cultural icons that permeate, appropriate, and co-constitute our spaces, places, attention, and identities. Together, these phenomena help to explain how personhood came to be a marketing category and brands became animate, ubiquitous entities in consumer culture. From this vantage point, attention now turns to the literature advocating
the need to study marketing practices, practitioners, and work to more deeply understand complex human-brand phenomena such as personal branding.

2.4 Studies of marketing practitioners, marketing work, and marketing practices

In seeking to understand the experiences of personal branders, this thesis builds on literature streams advocating for the study of marketing practitioners, marketing work, and marketing practices. Several researchers have highlighted the need to understand how marketing is produced in consumer culture, calling for interpretive studies to inductively examine the life world of marketing practitioners and the work they engage in (Alvesson, 1994; Applbaum, 2004; Cook, 2006; Hackley, 2001; Hackley & Kover, 2007; Kates, 2006; Svensson, 2007).

On the need for research on marketing practitioners, Zwick and Cayla (2011, p. 5) explain:

In comparison to the impressive amount of resources, time, and energy funnelled into researching the inner life of consumers, a rather minor effort has been made to study the growing army of economic actors whose work it is to define markets and give shape to the consumer culture as we know it.

Developing an understanding of personal branders is important as the lack of research on marketing practitioners in general has resulted in “a reified representation of marketing work, one wherein the practice of marketing work is cleansed from marketing practitioners’ active sense-making of their own practice” (Svensson, 2007, p. 273). Examining personal branders addresses this need for an understanding of the ‘production’ side of marketing. The inside view of marketing that personal branders can provide is important for theory development as it captures the human dimension of how marketing work is practiced – a perspective that highlights marketing practitioners “not as ‘cultural dupes’ within their fields, but as meaning-making agents who are members of the larger culture who occupy distinct and strategic positions in powerful professions” (Cook, 2006, p. 544).

From a critical marketing perspective, Shankar (2009) observes that a disjuncture has emerged between knowledges for marketing academics and non-academics, with the academic literature failing to adequately incorporate or represent the instrumental and reflexive knowledges that marketing practitioners employ in their enactment of marketing work. Critical studies affirm that marketing management texts contain socially constructed knowledge claims (Hackley, 2001; Skålén, Fougère, & Fellesson, 2008), with the resulting
discourse imposing a narrow, universal, and formulaic understanding of what marketing practice involves (Hackley, 2003). This understanding of marketing work is especially problematic given the few inductive studies of marketing practitioners (marketing managers, brand managers, advertising executives) have shown the contrary: marketing work is tacit (Hackley, 1999; Kaptan, 2013; Kover, 1995), ambiguous and uncertain (Lien, 1997), locally contextual (Ardley, 2005), and its production is highly reliant on creativity and cultural sources of knowledge (Brownlie, 1998; Nyilasy, Canniford, & Kreshel, 2013). With marketing texts recursively effecting how marketers understand their work (Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Hackley, 2003; Mason, Kjellberg, & Hagberg, 2015; Svensson, 2007), it is important that knowledge claims about marketing phenomena are sufficiently informed by marketing practitioners and their inside view of marketing work. To this end, this thesis builds on this stream of studies by examining the marketing work of personal branders and comparing their marketing practices with the knowledge claims about personal branding emanating from the leading managerial texts on the subject authored by the personal branding movement.

As marketing is an inductive discipline that is informed by practice, and “theory and practice have throughout marketing history operated in a beneficial feedback with each other” (Applbaum, 2004, p. 183), there is significant potential to develop personal branding theory by examining the marketing practices of personal branders. Recognising that ‘marketing practices’ is a polysemous term in the literature, it is important to clarify this thesis uses the term as a concept deriving from theories of social practice advanced by social and cultural theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler among others (Reckwitz, 2002). These theories of social practice have been interpreted through a consumer culture lens to understand practices as complex, interconnected performances enacted by market actors within social life (Warde, 2005). As such, practices are constituted not simply by actions or activities, but understandings (both explicit and tacit knowledges), procedures (skills, abilities, embedded knowledge), and engagements (purposes, beliefs, and emotions) (Schau et al., 2009).

On the value of understanding marketing as a practice, Skålén and Hackley (2011, p. 190) explain that “a focus on practice draws attention to implicit and shared rules and routines but also acknowledges differentiation within and across boundaries, reflecting the dynamic and fluid character of practice.” Evidence of the increasing attention devoted to understanding
marketing and branding phenomena from a practice theory perspective can be found in three special issues of journals. For example, the *Scandinavian Journal of Management* collated research examining marketing as a practice (see Skålén & Hackley, 2011); the *Journal of Consumer Culture* devoted an issue to understanding the application of practice theory to the sociology of consumption (see Halkier et al., 2011); and the *Journal of Marketing Management* more recently explored the performativity of marketing (or the recursive interaction and co-constitution of marketing theory and marketing practice; see Mason et al., 2015). Building on earlier studies using practice theory to unpack complex brand phenomena, such as the processes of value creation within brand communities (Schau et al., 2009), this thesis aims to understand the practices that constitute the marketing work of personal branding in the identity market.

2.5 Academic studies of personal branding

In overviewing the academic literature on personal branding, this section discusses key research gaps concerning the lack of research on personal branders and the need to examine the challenges and contestations they experience in the identity market. To date, the majority of extant literature on personal branding, or the more encompassing subject of human brands, falls into three categories: (1) studies from a consumer perspective; (2) studies discursively appropriating the term 'personal branding', but conceptually examining other phenomena; and (3) case studies examining the management of personal brands as objects in consumer culture. Each of these literature streams will be discussed in turn to understand how they orient the inquiry undertaken in this thesis.

2.5.1 Studies of personal branding from a consumer perspective

Literature examining the consumption of personal brands has developed since the publication of Thomson’s (2006) article which first examined consumer-brand relationships within the context of human brands. Thomson’s (2006) study found that consumers: (a) form satisfying, trusting, and committed relationships with human brands to which they have strong attachments; and (b) form stronger attachments with human brands that create feelings of autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Since then, a stream of literature has emerged that further examines the nature of consumer-human brand relationships. These studies affirm that consumers appropriate human brand symbolism to construct their own identity projects, particularly when human brands have strong appeal (favourability, originality, and clarity) (Loroz & Braig, 2015) and when consumers have higher needs for belonging (Escalas &
Bettman, 2017). Russell and Schau (2010) conceptualise consumers’ appropriation of human brand meanings as a process of identification, engagement, and transference, with Banister and Cocker (2014) confirming that consumers are both active and purposeful in co-creating celebrity brand meanings to support their own identity production. For younger consumers, the influence of human brands has been shown to extend to their moral development (Wicks, Nairn, & Griffin, 2007). Reflecting these findings, consumer-human brand relationships have recently been described as ‘parasocial’ relationships (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). Given the personal and cultural significance of human brands to consumers, empirical studies support that human brands must be perceived as authentic in their motivation, performance, and interactions with consumers (Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2015; Moulard, Rice, Garrity, & Mangus, 2014). Recognising the increasingly rich body of literature emerging on the consumption of human brands, this thesis seeks to complement these studies by focusing on how personal branders produce their brand in the identity market. By examining how personal branders negotiate the construction of brand meanings and authenticity with consumers, this thesis will extend the literature on consumer-human brand relationships by capturing the under-represented ‘producer’ perspective of personal branders.

2.5.2 Studies appropriating personal branding terminology to examine other phenomena

Despite the limited understanding of personal branding as a marketing theory and practice, academic researchers have discursively appropriated the term and applied it to examine a diffuse range of contexts and phenomena. To illustrate this appropriation, within the context of the higher education employment market, studies have applied personal branding concepts to PhD candidates (Close et al., 2011; Zamudio, Wang, & Haruvy, 2013) and professors (Jillapalli & Wilcox, 2010). To support the construction of these actors as personal brands, these studies cite the brand management and popular press literature on personal branding. For example, Close et al. (2011) draw on Thomson’s (2006) definition of human brands as any emerging or well-known persona that is subject to marketing communications to argue that “doctoral candidates may be considered as human brands because they: (1) can be managed and (2) have additional associations and features of a brand” (p. 923). Jillapalli and Wilcox (2010) offer similar circular arguments to support their conceptualisation of professors as human brands. While these studies discursively appropriate personal branding terms, the appropriation is peripheral to the actual research agenda pursued in each study. For example, Close et al.’s (2011) and Zamudio et al.’s (2013) studies aim to uncover the factors
determining a doctoral candidate’s initial academic placement. Jillapalli and Wilcox’s (2010) research attempts to understand students’ attachments to professors, linking students’ trust and satisfaction with a professor to their willingness to advocate for a professor in student evaluations. While addressing important research questions within the marketing literature, these studies are not primarily oriented to understanding the phenomenon of personal branding, nor advancing conceptualisations about the experience of engaging in it.

This pattern continues across a range of contexts, with studies purportedly examining the personal brands of sex workers (Phua & Caras, 2008) and tennis players (O'Reilly & Braedley, 2008) actually examining appeal factors in escort advertisements and the relationship between celebrity athletes and athletic clothing design respectively. Cumulatively, the discursive appropriation of personal branding terms in studies examining diffuse phenomena is creating a fragmented body of literature that is not addressing central questions related to the experience of branding oneself or, more critically, the challenges and contestations associated with personal branding. This thesis, in contrast, is focused particularly on the lived experiences of personal branders. As such, it is positioned to address fundamental questions about the marketing work of personal branding and examine how personal branders’ experiences reconcile with the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims. The limited attention that academic researchers have devoted to these questions to date ensures there is significant scope for theory development about personal branding.

2.5.3 Case studies of personal brand objects in consumer culture
The majority of the extent literature on personal branding examines personal brands as objects in consumer culture. As such, this stream of literature tends to draw on publicly available brand artefacts (social media content, media articles, personal website content) to case study how a particular personal brand is marketed, managed, and/or consumed. This literature stream covers a diverse range of occupational contexts, with case studies of personal brands including:

- artists such as Thomas Kinkade (Fillis, 2015; Schroeder, 2006), Andy Warhol (Hewer, Brownlie, & Kerrigan, 2013; Kerrigan et al., 2011), Pablo Picasso (Muñiz, Norris, & Fine, 2014) and Ai Wei Wei (Preece, 2015);
- athletes such as Andy Murray (Davies & Slater, 2015) and David Beckham (Milligan, 2004; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012);
• musicians such as Kylie Minogue (Hewer & Hamilton, 2012), David Bowie (Eager & Lindridge, 2015), Cheryl Cole and Katie Price (Cocker, Banister, & Piacentini, 2015);
• comedians such as Russell Brand (Mills, Patterson, & Quinn, 2015);
• politicians such as David Cameron (Seawright, 2013);
• lifestyle experts such as Nigella Lawson (Hewer & Brownlie, 2013; Stevens, Cappellini, & Smith, 2015) and Martha Stewart (Fournier, 2010; Lewis, 2010);
• reality television celebrities such as the Kardashians (Scheiner McClain, 2014).

While evidencing the diverse occupational contexts that personal branding is practiced in, a deeper analysis of the findings of this literature reveals three promising themes relating to challenges and contestations in the identity market that this thesis aims to explore. The first theme concerns the contested authorship of personal brands, with multiple studies from this literature stream highlighting that personal brand meanings are co-produced by a complex network of actors in the marketing system, including consumers, the media, companies, and other brands (Davies & Slater, 2015; Eager & Lindridge, 2015; Fillis, 2015; Hackley & Hackley, 2015). How a personal brander experiences this contestation in the identity market is a pertinent question arising from this research. Adding to this importance is recent evidence from the management literature which highlights the feeling of being misidentified at work is salient to a person’s self-identity, and as such, is negotiated through a range of discursive and behavioural strategies in the workplace (Meister, Jehn, & Thatcher, 2014; Meister, Sinclair, & Jehn, 2017). By focusing on personal branders, this thesis is positioned to understand how subjects negotiate the co-production of their personal brand identities within the network of actors in the identity market.

A second theme within the existing literature centres on a tension between a personal brand object’s constructed nature, yet need for brand authenticity in the market. Unpacking this tension, case studies of diffuse brands such as Nigella Lawson, Russell Brand, and Ai Wei

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2 This thesis recognises that while brand authenticity is a contested, multi-dimensional term in the marketing literature, it is anchored in shared meanings among consumers about truth, genuineness, and reality (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). Moulard, Garrity and Rice (2015) offer a context-specific definition of ‘human brand authenticity’ as the perception that a personal brander/celebrity “behaves according to his or her true self” (p. 173). This thesis acknowledges the utility of these definitions of brand authenticity as a starting point to explore personal branders’ conceptualisations, contestations, and practice of marketing work associated with negotiating authenticity in the identity market.
Wei reveal these personas are carefully constructed around identity myths (such as Nigella’s glamour) and archetypes (Russell Brand as dissident), which are then embodied, performed, and reproduced in images and narratives to develop brand meanings that create value (Mills et al., 2015; Preece, 2015; Stevens et al., 2015). Personal brand authenticity is similarly constructed through marketplace performances, such as displays of vulnerability (Stevens et al., 2015) or artistic vision (Preece, 2015). Consumer culture theorists have variously characterised the ‘performed authenticity’ of brands and personas as a paradox (Stern, 1994) and a hyperreal condition of postmodern consumer culture (Holt, 2002). However, little is known about how subjects such as personal branders experience this tension and negotiate authenticity in their marketplace performances. Recognising that consumers both value (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010) and contest (Corciolani, 2014) brand authenticity, this study is oriented to understanding the producer-centric perspective of how personal branders negotiate brand authenticity in their marketing work.

The third theme within the literature relates to darker-side aspects of how person brand objects are produced and consumed in consumer culture. Cocker et al. (2015) note that the valences of personal branding identity myths and archetypes extend to negative territories. As such, personal brand objects can be constructed by various actors around qualities such as vulgarity, repulsion, and ordinariness (Cocker et al., 2015). Personal brand objects are also routinely scandalised in the identity market as both a strategy to build (e.g. Russell Brand) and damage (e.g. Nigella Lawson) brand meanings (Mills et al., 2015). Public celebration, shaming, derision, and redemption are narratives, meanings, and performances loaded onto personal brand objects, leading marketing theorists to describe personal brands as “social technologies exciting the imagery and its theater of possibility” (Hewer et al., 2013, p. 184) and mediated spectacles that “operate as ‘map-making’ devices which situate consumers within networks of symbolic resources” (Kerrigan et al., 2011, p. 1504). Imbued in these conceptualisations of personal brands is a sense of the identity market’s volatility. Consumer culture literature supports that consumer-brand relationships are dynamic over time (Aaker et al., 2004) and brands circulate in contested moral terrains within the market (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010; Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2007). The potential for a personal brand to experience moral ‘trouble’ (Holt, 2002) in consumer culture is apparent, but closer examinations of these darker-side experiences are needed to build on the existing academic literature on personal branding. As sentient beings, personal branders are uniquely
able to voice the experience of traversing moral contestations in the marketplace, providing a fuller account of the dialectics structuring the experience of being a brand.

The challenges and contestations emerging in studies of personal brand objects are echoed in the few studies examining the first-hand experience of the subjects engaging in personal branding. For example, both Motion (1999) and Sanghvi and Hodges (2015) undertook in-depth studies of female politicians and their experiences of marketing and branding themselves, while Thompson-Whiteside et al. (2018) examined the personal branding experiences of female entrepreneurs. Participants in all of these studies describe experiences of subordination, objectification, and commodification within the identity market (Motion, 1999; Sanghvi & Hodges, 2015; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018). Studies of fashion models (Parmentier & Fischer, 2011; Parmentier et al., 2013) and fashion bloggers (Delisle & Parmentier, 2016) also reveal the limited identity spaces and performance possibilities for a personal brander, with identity production constrained by a range of factors such as a person’s gender, age, physical appearance, and occupational field. Erz and Christensen’s (2018) study of the development of female fashion bloggers’ personal branders revealed the emergence of tensions as their brand identities became established, including balancing their personal and professional lives and commercial and personal content. These important studies sensitise this thesis to the need to examine the challenges and contestations of personal branding to more fully understand the lived experience of the phenomenon.

Reflecting on the single occupational contexts previously studied, Parmentier et al. (2013) encourage researchers to further develop personal branding theory by complementing their data set with a more diverse sample of personal brands. This thesis responds by recruiting a diverse sample of participants with diffuse marketing practices in identity markets related to a broad range of occupations. While the lack of research about personal branding from a subject-driven perspective is understandable given the difficulty of gaining access to this elite population of busy, mobile, and highly visible people, this inside view is especially important to represent. As Cook (2006, p. 544) explains, with the continued ascendancy of marketing and branding in consumer culture, there is a need “to understand, penetrate and criticize the brokers of a dominant public order of images and commercial meaning... to see the world through their eyes to the extent possible assists in demystifying, and hopefully de-deifying, advertisers and marketers.” Accordingly, this research seeks to record the difficult-to-access voice of personal branders who have established, highly visible personal brands in identity
markets related to their occupation. In doing so, this thesis develops a deeper understanding of personal branding subjects to build on the existing literature that case studies personal brand objects.

2.6 Summary
This first chapter of literature review has traversed four major areas of research related to various framings of personal branding. It first highlighted the utility of the cultural branding perspective and consumer culture theory to examine the experiential, symbolic, and sociocultural dimensions of human-brand phenomena such as personal branding. Second, it situated the phenomenon of study in relation to macro-level trends in consumer culture that structure its socio-historic patterning. Tracing the commodification and marketisation of personhood and the ascendancy and anthropomorphication of brands and revealed personal branding is not an ahistorical, anomalous apparition in postmodernity, but a complex human-brand phenomenon warranting research to better understand its practice and contours. Third, the more recent literature on marketing practitioners, practices, and work revealed the need for practitioner-focused, practice-based research on the marketing work of personal branding. Finally, this chapter reviewed the fragmented body of academic literature on personal branding. This review found that more fundamental research was needed on personal branding to capture the missing voice of personal branders and more holistically capture the darker-side experiences they confront in the identity market. Cumulatively, the themes and gaps emerging from these literatures sensitise this thesis to examine two of the three research questions it attempts to address: (1) What practices constitute the marketing work of personal branding?; and (2) What challenges and contestations do personal branders experience in the identity market?

From this foundation, the next chapter adopts a more critical approach to review the considerable body of popular press literature on personal branding. By unpacking the knowledge claims structuring this discourse, Chapter 3 supports the need for research to empirically reconcile the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims about personal branding with the lived experiences of personal branders. As the next chapter explains, the third and final research question of this thesis responds to this research need.
Chapter 3
Literature review problematising the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims

3.1 Introduction
This chapter builds on the previous chapter’s review of academic literature about personal branding by adopting a more critical approach to review the popular press literature surrounding the subject. Through a detailed review of the genre’s leading texts published in the past 25 years, five core knowledge claims are identified that underlie the discourse. After documenting how each knowledge claim manifests within the discourse, this chapter examines how the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims have been replicated within the academic literature on personal branding. Establishing the enduring influence of the personal branding movement’s discourse, this chapter moves on to problematising the knowledge claims in relation to critical literature and debates about self-commodification and the marketisation of personhood. Identifying four conceptual problems that pervade the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims, this chapter concludes by discussing how these problems orient this thesis’s inquiry.

3.2 Popular press literature on personal branding
The concept of personal branding was popularised by the management consultant Tom Peters in a 1997 article that appeared in Fast Company magazine. In this article and a subsequent book, Peters’ (1997, 1999) explains that the confluence of globalisation and new information communication technologies has created hyper-competitive labour markets for professionals in the late 20th century. In turn, the social contract between workers and organisations has declined: organisations no longer provide ‘cradle to grave’ jobs for life and white collar professionals no longer exhibit high levels of organisational loyalty (Peters, 1997, 1999). Understanding that contemporary labour markets are defined by insecure, volatile, and short-term project work, Peters (1997, 1999) constructs personal branding as a strategic response to this structural revolution in the nature of work, arguing that professionals need to think of themselves as a company, marketing themselves as branded ‘mini-corporations’ to gain the work of their choice. Generating high levels of public interest, Peters’ (1997) original article precipitated the emergence of a global publishing genre and consulting industry dedicated to
personal branding (the personal branding movement’). Since then, the discourse generated by the personal branding movement has continued to grow and is now constituted by a corpus of more than one hundred popular press books on the subject, as well as thousands of newspaper and magazine articles, websites, blogs, and seminars.

Over time, the authors of the popular press texts have attempted to expand the audience they target, with Table 3.1 illustrating the range of more specialised additions to this literature which target niche segments relating to consumers’ genders and their various occupations, career stages, personality types, personal values, and aspirations. Authoring this discourse – which is styled on the self-help genre of popular press literature – is a group of personal branding consultants who advocate for, claim expertise about, and offer products and services related to personal branding. Close scrutiny of the practitioner-authored, popular press literature is warranted as the discourse is not only voluminous in size, but influential in nature as the leading knowledge source about personal branding (Parmentier et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2005). Influential marketing theorist Stephen Brown (1999) supports that marketing texts are key artefacts of the marketing discipline. Critically examining the discourses within these popular texts reveals the ideological assumptions and contradictions structuring contemporary notions of what marketing is and how it is practiced (Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Hackley, 2003).

3.2.1 Knowledge claims of the personal branding movement

While Table 3.1 reveals the expansionary breadth of the discourse, a detailed review of the leading texts published between 1997 and 2016 uncovers its limited depth in continuing to replicate five core knowledge claims about personal branding. To this end, examples from twenty of the highest-selling and most cited texts will be used to elucidate how the personal branding movement discursively produces these knowledge claims. Figure 3.1 chronologically lists the bibliographic details of these exemplar texts.
Table 3.1 Specialisation of the popular press literature on personal branding

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<th>Segmentation variable</th>
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<td>• Borgeson, G. (2010). <em>Brand yourself! for college students: How to use personal branding to get the job you want!</em>. Pinnacle Publications.</td>
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<td>Job seekers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Bence, B. (2009). <em>How YOU are like shampoo for job seekers: The proven personal branding system to help you succeed in any interview and secure the job of your dreams</em>. Las Vegas, NV: Global Insight Communications.</td>
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$^3$ These texts are provided as examples to illustrate the discursive specialisation of the popular press literature and do not otherwise appear in the reference list of this thesis.
**Figure 3.1 List of exemplar texts from the personal branding movement**


12. Bence, B. (2008). *How you are like shampoo: The breakthrough personal branding system based on proven big-brand marketing methods to help you earn more, do more, and be more at work.* Las Vegas, NV: Global Insight Communications.


3.2.1.1 Knowledge claim 1: Personal branding is universal, natural, and inevitable

The foundational knowledge claim creating the logical imperative for people to market themselves as brands appears in Peters (1997, p. 83) original article: “It’s this simple: You are a brand.” Authors support this claim by constructing personal branding as a metonym or metaphor for a person’s identity and reputation. For example, Montoya and Vandehey (2003, p. 11) define personal branding as a composite of a person’s “personality, reputation and past performance”. Paprocki and Paprocki (2009, p. 4) argue that a personal brand is “your reputation. It’s the way people think of you.” Gross (2002, p. 6) confers branded status based on the criterion, “If they know your name, you have a brand.” More recently, Linne and Sitkins (2014, p. ix) describe the online content that can be found about a person as a “digital resume” that constitutes a personal brand. By constructing personal brands as innate aspects of personhood, the discourse reinforces the universal applicability of personal branding to people.

Peters (1997, p. 83) was explicit in framing the conceptual relevance of personal branding to a wide audience of white collar professionals: “Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding.” The discourse has expanded Peters’ (1997, 1999) occupational focus to encompass other domains and roles in a person’s life, with personal branding claimed to have universal applicability when “making a sale, finding a mate, getting into the college or training program of your dreams, earning a promotion, getting your novel published, [and] raising a family in accordance with your values and priorities” (Linne & Sitkins, 2014, p. 21).

In qualifying this universality, the discourse establishes personal branding as an incontrovertible status that precedes a person’s: (a) consciousness of their personal brand: “You have a personal brand whether you know it or not” (Chritton, 2012, p. 10); (b) willingness to identify as a brand: “Everyone has a personal brand, whether some skeptics want to admit it or not: there’s no such thing as opting out” (Clark, 2013, p. 13); and (c) knowledge and skills to manage their personal brand: “You already have a personal brand. You may just not know how to manage it yet” (Bence, 2008, p. 23).

In addition to universality, the popular press literature constructs personal branding as “a natural, organic part of human society” (Montoya & Vandehey, 2003, p. 14). For example, while acknowledging that personal branding is a ‘modern invention’, Montoya and Vandehey (2003, p. 14) explain that “people instantly labeling [sic] each other based on reputation and
behavior is as old as human interaction. Even with primitive societies, individuals judged each other based on quick impressions, and decided whom to trust based on unreliable emotional contexts.” By naturalising personal branding as a heuristic form of social perception and an innate expression of human behaviour, the discourse emphasises that personal brands are “an essential part of how we relate to each other, allowing us to make fast judgments of others based on a few clues” (Montoya & Vandehey, 2003, p. 19).

Consistent with its universal and natural qualities, authors frame personal branding as inevitable: “If you don’t brand yourself, someone else will” (Fisher Roffer, 2002, p. 2). Being branded, as Linne and Sitkins (2014, p. 21) argue, begins in childhood: “When we were kids, we couldn’t always influence or even understand the ways we were being ‘branded’.” In adulthood, Montoya and Vandehey (2003, p. 15) caution that the majority of people create their “personal brand passively, without any awareness of the process or the consequences.” Following this logic, the inevitability of being branded supports the imperative for people to consciously engage in personal branding to define themselves “before the vagaries of a search engine algorithm or another person do it for you” (Linne & Sitkins, 2014, p. ix). Framed as a ubiquitous and inescapable phenomenon, the foundational knowledge claim establishes the relevance of the personal branding movement to the widest possible audience.

3.2.1.2 Knowledge claim 2: Personal branding is liberatory

The liberatory nature of personal branding is a dominant narrative in the personal branding movement’s discourse. This knowledge claim surfaces in Peters’ (1999, p. 80) core argument that a personal brand liberates a worker from the subordination of the labour market: “The whole damn idea of this book… is taking our lives back from ‘them’… Faceless Big Corp.’s.” Personal branding is constructed as an alternative to being an employee working for an organisation, a status that Peters (1997, p. 83) equates with “making yourself a slave to the concept of a career ladder.” The theme of being liberated to control and manage one’s brand pervades the discourse. Consciously adopting personal branding as a mindset, identity, and behavior “means taking active control of the process – defining how prospective customers, colleagues and members of the media perceive you” (Montoya & Vandehey, 2003, p. 15). To develop this narrative, authors frame personal branding as a ‘proactive behaviour’ that liberates a person from the passive and unconscious production of their brand (Mobray, 2009, p. 114). For example, Clark (2013, p. 5) describes personal branding as a process centred on “taking control of your life and living strategically. Who do you want to be? And what do
you need to do to get there?” Bence (2008, p. 23) provides a more extended example of this rhetoric, highlighting the liberatory potential of personal branding and the opportunity cost of not engaging in it as a process and practice:

The question is whether you have the personal brand you want. Are you living up to the potential that YOU could achieve if you created your personal brand consciously rather than leaving it to chance? The truth is that if you don’t take control of your personal brand and make a conscious decision about how you want to be known, you may be leaving an impression that undermines your success.

Consciously engaging in personal branding is heralded as a strategy that decommodifies a person from being an ‘ordinary worker’ – a status synonymous with that of a replaceable commodity whose employment in the labour market is dependent on organisations (see Peters, 1997, 1999). The discourse emphasises this decommodification by reiterating that (a) personal brands are “a powerful identity that lifts you above the crowd of anonymous competitors” (Montoya & Vandehey, 2003, p. 2), and (b) personal branding must be consciously enacted to realise the elevation in status it provides: “The fact is, when you view yourself as a brand you are more capable of managing specific behaviors and actions that drive how people perceive you” (Mobray, 2009, p. xxii).

The liberatory potential of personal branding is also framed as a form of self-actualisation. Along with career success, authors routinely claim that personal branding has a transformative impact on a person’s self-awareness and self-development: “The process of branding allows you to become the person you are meant to be. Branding makes you an active partner in fulfilling your destiny in business and in life” (Fisher Roffer, 2002, p. 8). This narrative constructs personal branding as a liberatory process that equips a participant with the knowledge and learning to not only discover their ‘authentic self’, but integrate this self – it’s ‘personality’, ‘passions’, and ‘destiny’ – with their personal brand such that “those who are able to find it end up living a more complete life and may reach greater levels of success” (Mobray, 2009, p. 35). Evidently, this knowledge claim reinforces personal branding as a form of decommodification in the labour market that enables participants to achieve self-actualisation in their personal and professional lives.
3.2.1.3 Knowledge claims 3: Personal branding is an appropriable and transferable knowledge

A third knowledge claim concerns the representation of personal branding as an appropriable knowledge that ‘ordinary’ people can acquire by purchasing the personal branding movement’s various products and services (consultants’ popular press books and their ancillary conferences, workshops, and individual coaching services). The discourse is replete with terms such as ‘secrets’, ‘tips’, and ‘tricks’ to reinforce the texts as valorised sources of knowledge about personal branding. Examples of this rhetorical framing can be found in Peters (1999, p. 46) assertion that “the trick for Brand You is making sure you control your package and the message it sends” and Montoya and Vandehey’s (2003, p. 14) claim to have “learned the secrets that let you determine how others perceive you.” The texts consistently nominate two sources from which the personal branding knowledge they contain derives: celebrities who have achieved high visibility status and organisations with successful corporate and product branding strategies. Vignettes, case studies, and descriptive profiles of these corporate and celebrity brand exemplars feature prominently throughout the texts and are used to illustrate the transferability of branding principles, processes, strategies, and tactics to ordinary people.

With respect to celebrities, the literature argues that celebrities have engaged in personal branding “to turn their names into industries and themselves into moguls” (Montoya & Vandehey, 2003, p. 19). Using circular arguments, branded status is attributed to celebrities: “Each of these individuals has a very specific personal brand that is absolutely unique and ownable as compared to the others” (Bence, 2008, p. 30). Following this logic, the discourse constructs being famous as a status synonymous with being a highly visibility personal brand. For example, when defining one’s brand, Peters (1997, p. 83) explicitly references fame, encouraging participants to question: “What do I want to be famous for? That's right -- famous for!” Montoya and Vandehey (2003, p. 3) further justify this transference by constructing personal branding as a form of self-produced celebrity, arguing “the strategies and ideas are exactly the same… minus the paid staffs and huge advertising agencies.” The transferability of branding knowledge extends not only from celebrities to ordinary people, but from products and corporations too. For example, Fisher Roffer’s (2002, p. 2) introduction acknowledges: “This book shares many of the branding strategies that work successfully for big corporate entities in establishing or promoting their particular brand, whether it’s Coca-Cola, Nike, or MTV.” The transferability of knowledge is supported by
constructing personhood as a marketing category that is conceptually equivalent to products and organisations, or as Peters’ (1997, p. 83) expresses, “You're every bit as much a brand as Nike, Coke, Pepsi, or the Body Shop.” The propensity to construct personal branding as a transferable knowledge is potentially related to the majority of authors having previous careers in marketing, sales, and brand management roles. For example, Brenda Bence’s (2008, p. 30) background in fast moving consumer goods marketing appears to support her advocacy of this knowledge claim: “I firmly believe that people – just like shampoo and other products – are brands, too.” By referencing iconic celebrity and product brands, the discourse works to elevate not only the status of being ‘branded’, but its own value as an appropriable source of this capital-producing knowledge.

3.2.1.4 Knowledge claim 4: Personal branding is structured and enacted by graduated branding processes and codified marketing plans

To support the construction of the popular press literature as an expert source of knowledge about personal branding, the discourse frames personal branding as an activity structured and enacted by graduated branding processes and codified marketing plans. In turn, the discourse encourages participants to adhere to the processes prescribed in each text by framing the various tasks and exercises as the ‘tools’ and ‘work’ of personal branding, affirming that “to make the most of your brand, you need to develop it and manage it” (Paprocki & Paprocki, 2009, p. 4). Proportionally, this content occupies the majority of the texts and is prefaced by arguments such as: “If you’re serious about developing your personal brand, a very clear road map can get you there” (Chritton, 2012, p. 10).

Authors support this knowledge claim by emphasising the formal learning their texts facilitate. For example, Montoya and Vandehey (2003, p. 2) describe their text as a ‘training manual’ and ‘sourcebook’ while Bence (2008, p. 23) refers to her text as a guided “step by step process which utilizes exercises and worksheets”. Each text’s personal branding process varies in terms of the number of steps and time commitment recommended, but all processes are framed as graduated and sequential in nature. For example, Fisher Roffer (2002) outlines an eight-step, six-week process while Montoya and Vandehey (2003, pp. 233-234) delineate a three-part, ten-step process that can be completed “in a day if you dedicate the time, or in a week if you take it piecemeal.” A comparative analysis of the texts reveals the underlying similarities of the processes, which can be distilled to the production of two codified
First, the personal branding movement’s concept of ‘personal brand positioning’ derives from the brand management literature’s concept of ‘brand positioning’. Paprocki and Paprocki (2009, p. 5) articulate this link: “Brand position is how companies distinguish themselves from their competition. In personal branding, this is how you make yourself stand out, say, from other job candidates.” The discourse constructs personal brand positioning as a process involving a phase of introspection and/or external market research (with friends, family, colleagues, and associates) whereby participants identify how their current self is perceived. Following this, participants reflect on their desired self to develop a ‘personal brand positioning statement’, which “tells what you want the market to think, but it’s not necessarily a reflection of reality, the real position that you own” (Gross, 2002, p. 83). As Mobray (2009, p. 15) attests, this process frames positioning as an exercise dependent on self-awareness and self-reflexivity: “The first and primary element in developing your personal brand is having an intimate knowledge of yourself.” Authors agree on the need to codify a personal brand positioning statement, explaining that it is “a way of setting in stone the identity you want to communicate to your target market. Once it’s written, you’ve got a constant reminder of the professional niche you’ve chosen and how you offer value to your market” (Montoya & Vandehey, 2003, p. 96). The discourse further constructs personal brand positioning as a structured, analytic process by specifying the quantitative and qualitative properties of positioning statements. For example, Peters (1999, p. 33) advises that a positioning statement should be eight words in length while Bence (2008, pp. 39-41) outlines an elaborate six-part positioning framework that requires participants to define their brand’s: audience characteristics, audience needs, comparative qualities, unique strengths, audience beliefs, and personality.

The second codified element the texts recommend is the development of marketing plans consisting of strategies and tactics, as well as timing and budgetary considerations. The strategy and tactics sections typically focus most heavily on segmenting and targeting the market, developing brand elements (a person’s name, appearance, voice, movement, and behaviour), and promoting the brand. These marketing plans are framed as documents that enact a participant’s personal brand positioning statement to bring their current and desired personal brand into ‘alignment’ (Chritton, 2012, p. 8). The texts also recommend periodic
monitoring, evaluation, and revision of the marketing plan, arguing that personal branding success is dependent on careful implementation of the plan: “Of course, like any good marketer with a strong strategy, it isn’t enough to simply have a plan. You have to follow through, sticking to that plan consistently, day in and day out” (Bence, 2008, p. 254). Together, a personal brand positioning statement and marketing plan are the codified documents culminating from the discourse’s ‘personal branding-as-process’ knowledge claim.

3.2.1.5 Knowledge claim 5: Personal branding outcomes are determined by marketing knowledge, skills, and work

The fifth and final knowledge claim to discuss relates to the discourse attributing personal branding outcomes to a personal brander’s marketing knowledge, skills, and work. A central narrative in the discourse concerns the transformational outcomes that participants can achieve by engaging in personal branding: “When managed well, your personal brand will help you to create more favorable outcomes for your life and will have a dramatic effect on your career success” (Mobray, 2009, p. xxv). At times, the literature uses hyperbolic rhetoric to persuade readers of its transformative potential: “Personal Branding is the most powerful success and business-building tool ever devised” (Montoya & Vandehey, 2003, p. 2). In turn, the transformative outcomes of personal branding are framed as realisable and accessible for participants: “Because Personal Branding is a natural aspect of how people evaluate one another, you don’t need a master’s degree in marketing to put it to work” (Montoya & Vandehey, 2003, p. 2).

While the benefits of personal branding are framed as realisable and accessible, the literature constructs success as less assured and unequally distributed. For example, Gross (2002, p. 10) characterises personal branding as “simple, not easy. […] If it was easy, everybody would be doing it.” Extending this argument, the discourse offers highly agentic explanations of personal branding success, attributing outcomes to a personal brander’s marketing knowledge and skills and the execution of their marketing work. For example, Peters (1999, p. 83) constructs the identity market as meritorious, with personal branding success being an individual responsibility: “You don’t need a silver (corporate or personal) spoon to sally forth. You do need passion, commitment, a few pals…and a consuming desire to take the next, usually wee step.” Peters (1999) further elaborates that successful personal branders first need to acquire the knowledge to manage their brands (by purchasing the personal
branding movement’s texts), before developing their marketing skills to: determine their saleable distinction, cultivate a network, accumulate a portfolio of projects, and engage in continuous growth.

This knowledge claim is used to not only account for personal branding success, but explain failure too. The majority of the texts include sections describing ‘mistakes to avoid’ or ‘personal branding derailers’. This content focuses exclusively on the personal brander, attributing failure to inadequacies in their marketing knowledge, skills, and work. For example, Chritton (2012) provides a detailed overview of ten ways to fail at personal branding (including: letting it go stale, neglecting consistency, speaking before you think, exhibiting bad behaviour, being unresponsive, ignoring the politics, having an unprofessional online image, not telling the truth, being inauthentic, and losing focus). All ten of these failures centre on the personal brander – a theme replicated across the texts. The literature’s discussion of the broader structural forces that impact on a personal brander’s success or failure in the identity market remains scant and under-developed.

3.3 The interaction of the personal branding movement and academic literature

The personal branding movement’s knowledge claims do not sit as a discrete, contained body of knowledge within the popular press literature. Instead, the following sub-sections trace their precedent, replication, and criticism in the academic literature. These interactions not only reveal the influence of the personal branding movement, but the need for empirical studies to verify its problematic knowledge claims.

3.3.1 Precedent to the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims in the marketing literature

That marketing concepts can be applied to people is not a new idea in the field of marketing, with a host of early marketing texts arguing that people can sell (Girard & Casemore, 1981; Leeper, 1962; Mangan, 1961; Wheeler, 1955), market (Grace, 1977; McCaffrey & Derloshon, 1983; Pleninger, 1977; Rein, Kotler, & Stoller, 1987; Twedt, 1964), position (Ries & Trout, 1981), promote (Sackheim, 1978; Schwarz, 1976), and publicise (Chestara, 1988; Cooper, 1987; Gould, 1983) themselves to achieve wealth and career success. This literature is replete with earlier incarnations of the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims. For example, the claim that product marketing principles and processes are
transferrable to people is apparent in this excerpt from Twedt’s (1964) article in the *Journal of Marketing* titled, ‘How Can the Marketing Man Market Himself?’:

Remember that your skills, your experience, and your enthusiasm make up a product that can be marketed with the same principles that apply to ice cream, shoe polish, automobiles, or deodorants. Analyze the product, create an effective sales message, determine your best prospects, and then reach as many as possible in the most efficient way. That is sound marketing, and sound career planning. (p. 74)

These texts draw on, and develop in concert with, the emerging genre of ‘personal success’ self-help literature in the mid-20th century – particularly in the United States (McGee, 2005). American writer and salesperson Napoleon Hill’s (1937) book, *Think and Grow Rich* provides an early example of this literature’s influence. Hallmarks of the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims are evident when Hill (1937) constructs: (a) the need to engage in self-marketing as inevitable: “The real employer of the future will be the public. This should be kept uppermost in mind by every person seeking to market personal services effectively.” (p. 104); (b) the transferability of marketing principles from products to people: “The person whose income is derived entirely from the sale of personal services is no less a merchant than the man who sells commodities, and it might well be added, such a person is subject to EXACTLY THE SAME RULES of conduct as the merchant who sells merchandise.” (p. 108); and (c) the use of graduated processes to produce a marketable self: “Annual self-analysis is an essential in the effective marketing of personal services, as is annual inventory in merchandising. Moreover, the yearly analysis should disclose a DECREASE IN FAULTS, and an increase in VIRTUES.” (p. 114).

Another development in the marketing literature that foreshadows the personal branding movement is the conceptual development of ‘person marketing’. In a classic *Journal of Marketing* article, Kotler and Levy (1969) argued marketing was a “pervasive social activity” (p. 10) applying not just to products, but services, places, organisations, ideas and – of particular relevance to this thesis – people. As the broader domain of marketing that relates to personal branding, ‘person marketing’ was described as “an endemic human activity, from the employee trying to impress his boss to the statesman trying to win the support of the public” (Kotler and Levy 1969, p. 12). Almost two decades later, Kotler (1987) further developed the concept in an essay on the ‘Semiotics of Person and Nation Marketing’,
defining person marketing as “a disciplined approach to helping ambitious persons achieve their visibility and image goals in a cost-effective manner” (p. 4). Kotler (1987) contended that person marketing originated in the 1950s with Hollywood film studios such as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and 20th Century Fox using marketing research and public relations to transform unknown people into bankable stars.

Kotler’s major works on person marketing followed in the form of three editions of a co-authored popular press book, *High Visibility*, with a highly visibility person defined as someone “whose name has attention-getting, interest-drawing, and profit-generating value” (Rein et al., 2006, p. 17). With each edition, the concept of person marketing widened, being first applied to politicians and celebrities (Rein et al., 1987), then professionals (Rein, Kotler, & Stoller, 1997), then anyone seeking visibility (Rein et al., 2006). With the rise of the personal branding movement in the late 1990s, the third edition of *High Visibility* incorporates the concept of personal branding, with three reasons offered to support this evolution:

First, it is a more encompassing and acceptable term for people in sectors such as business and the professions who are uncomfortable with terms such as celebrity, star, or icon. Second, the concept of brand has more marketing theory, tools, and applications from the commercial world in contrast to prior visibility terms, which had been developed with historical figures and entertainers. Third, as high visibility became more of a profit-generating and managed institution and the relationship between products and people became more apparent, branding has become a defining term that signals a successful aspirant’s quest for visibility in his or her sector. (Rein et al., 2006, pp. 17-18)

As a key text in the personal branding movement, Kotler’s (2006) *High Visibility* evidences the intersection of the marketing academy and personal branding movement. By attempting to enmesh the concept of personal branding in the domain of person marketing, Philip Kotler – as the most influential scholar within the marketing academy – has added legitimacy to the personal branding movement. From Napoleon Hill’s (1937) *Think and Grow Rich* to Kotler’s (2006) *High Visibility*, there is considerable precedent to the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims in the marketing literature. Together, these marketing texts highlight that the personal branding movement is not an anomaly, but part of a broader discourse in marketing that supports the marketisation of people.
3.3.2 Replication of the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims in the academic literature

The personal branding movement’s knowledge claims have been replicated in a fragmented body of academic literature that has sought to apply the discourse to a diverse range of occupations and organisational fields. For example, the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims have been repeated in journal articles appearing in disciplinary journals for librarians (Gall, 2012; Philbrick & Cleveland, 2015; Schneider, 2012), educators (Gander, 2014), nurses (Shirey, 2010; Trepanier & Gooch, 2014), performance management professionals (Rampersad, 2008), and accountants (Vitberg, 2010). Within the marketing academic literature, further examples of this replication can be found in personal branding articles targeting business students (Manai & Holmlund, 2015) and marketing academics (Noble, Bentley, Campbell, & Singh, 2010).

Common to this disparate body of literature is a lack of critical distance by researchers in questioning the theoretical and empirical support for the precepts of personal branding. For example, in the Journal of Marketing Research, Luo, Chen, Han and Park (2010) studied ‘celebrity brands’ and their dilution or enhancement through movie releases. To justify the construction of their sample of celebrities as brands, the authors cited texts produced by the personal branding movement; in this case, a media article from Fox News and an article from the trade publication, BT Marketing + Media. That the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims have been so readily reproduced within the academic literature – and in no less than the discipline’s top tier journals – potentially reflects the influence and intuitive appeal of the discourse (Bendisch et al., 2013; Conley, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Zarkada, 2012). This non-critical replication of knowledge claims in the academic literature is particularly problematic as it perpetuates and adds credibility to the discourse. This thesis aims to address this problem by reconciling the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims with empirical accounts of personal branders’ actual experiences in the identity market. In this way, this thesis seeks to advance a more balanced, practice-based conceptualisation of personal branding.

3.3.3 Criticism of the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims in the academic literature

A stream of academic studies has critically reviewed the popular press literature on personal branding (Davis, 2003; Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005; Wee & Brooks, 2010;
Synthesising the findings of this literature with the review undertaken in this thesis and broader debates within marketing they touch upon, four conceptual problems have been identified that pervade the discourse. These criticisms will now be discussed with a focus on how they orient the research inquiry undertaken in this thesis.

### 3.3.2.1 Non-empirical, atheoretical, and socially constructed knowledge claims

This study’s review of the popular press literature concurs with the existing literature reviews which found that the personal branding movement’s discourse is: non-empirical; replete with contradictions; styled on the self-help and self-improvement genres of popular press literature; and reliant on anecdotes, common-sense, and catch-phrases (Davis, 2003; Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005; Wee & Brooks, 2010; Zarkada, 2012). A key conclusion of these reviews is that concepts of personal branding “are not yet satisfactorily embedded in a suitable theoretical marketing framework” (Shepherd, 2005, p. 601).

Commentators in the popular press, albeit few in number, have also been critical of the personal branding movement. For example, Fast Company magazine’s deputy editor, David Lidsky (2005) wrote a review article responding to Tom Peters (1997) original article the magazine published. Lidsky (2005) dismisses the movement as a “*wannabe guru class of experts and consultants peddling commonsense bromides in ever more execrable books*” (p. 16). He goes on to contest the foundational knowledge claim of the discourse, arguing that personal branding is not applicable to the majority of people who work as employees for organisations, because “corporations don’t want Lord of the Flies playing out in their cubicles, with an army of personal brands battling the corporate one” (Lidsky, 2005, p. 16). A second example comes from the journalist Luke Conley who devoted a chapter to the personal branding movement in his popular press book, *OBD: Obsessive Branding Disorder*. Conley (2008) concurs with Lidsky (2005), characterising the discourse as ‘low quality’, containing specious knowledge claims authored by consultants with dubious credentials. These examples highlight the shared concerns of academics and commentators about the lack of research informing the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims.

In addition to being non-empirical and atheoretical, there is evidence to suggest the discourse’s knowledge claims are socially constructed. Hackley (2003) identifies three rhetorical strategies commonly used in marketing texts to socially construct pseudo-knowledge claims as expert marketing knowledge. These strategies include:
‘universalisation’ (framing marketing as an activity practised by all, regardless of their consciousness of this); ‘instrumentalisation’ (framing marketing exchange value as preceding all other forms of value and defining human happiness in material terms); and ‘normalisation’ (framing marketing as benign and beyond question) (Hackley, 2003, p. 1326). These rhetorical strategies are evident in the personal branding movement’s discourse, particularly the first two knowledge claims constructing personal branding as universal, natural, innate, and liberatory.

With respect to the third strategy of normalisation, the discourse’s ongoing use of persuasion to positively frame personal branding is apparent in the textual examples previously cited. A further example of normalisation is neatly captured in the claim by Montoya and Vandehey (2003, p. 19) that: “personal branding is already everywhere. […] It’s accepted by our culture”. Lair et al. (2005) advise that a more aggressive form of normalisation is also present in the texts, explaining that authors use potential criticisms about personal branding as a rhetorical basis to dismiss them. For example, early in their text, Linne and Sitkins’ (2014) admonish readers to reject criticisms they may have heard about personal branding. Using a combination of circular arguments, anecdotes, and unsubstantiated facts, the authors systematically ‘debunk’ common criticisms, such that personal branding is selfish, results in image over substance, and is for celebrities not professionals (Linne & Sitkins, 2014, p. xv). This aggressive rhetorical strategy works to close “the discursive space necessary to resist the encroachment of branding discourse into deeper issues of personal and professional identity” (Lair et al., 2005, p. 324). Indeed, the socially constructed knowledge claims of the personal branding movement are not inconsequential, with researchers highlighting that marketing texts structure and influence the practice of marketing practitioners, which iteratively inform subsequent conceptions of marketing (Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Hackley, 2001; Mason et al., 2015; Skålen et al., 2008; Skålen & Hackley, 2011). Hence, unchallenged knowledge claims about personal branding have the potential to persist as myths that distort and obfuscate both academic and practitioner understandings of marketing phenomena.

Given the non-empirical, atheoretical, and socially constructed qualities of the popular press literature, several researchers have called for empirical research to address how people apply the discourse of personal branding to their lives and practice it in their careers (Davis, 2003; Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005; Wee & Brooks, 2010; Zarkada, 2012). This thesis responds to this conceptual problem by empirically examining the marketing work of
personal branders, aiming to ensure knowledge claims about the phenomenon are sufficiently supported by academic theory and informed by actual marketing practice. This reconciliation of marketing theory and practice about personal branding is especially important as “theory and practice have throughout marketing history operated in a beneficial feedback with each other” (Appelbaum, 2004, p. 183). As marketing is an inductive discipline, the actual work of marketing practitioners should inform the concept of practice that marketing academics produce (Mason et al., 2015; Svensson, 2007). Accordingly, studying personal branders provides an opportunity for this thesis to advance marketing theory about personal branding that is sufficiently grounded in the actual practice of the phenomenon.

3.3.2.2 A/morality and the paradox of authentically branded selves

A second conceptual problem centres on the ethicality of the personal branding movement’s advice. Hearn (2008, p. 213) characterises the discourse as morally problematic as it advocates “a form of self-presentation singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value.” Lair et al. (2005, p. 336) concur, arguing that “an exceedingly narrow form of instrumentality” underlies the discourse. By encouraging participants to reframe their everyday interactions and relationships with other people as exchanges between a brand and consumers, the discourse privileges self-interest and distorts social relations (Hearn, 2008; Shepherd, 2005; Zarkada, 2012). The amorality of market logic which informs the discourse works to displace social values such as trust, commitment, and friendship, and instead, promotes social relations based on “competition, political maneuvering, and cynicism” (Lair et al., 2005, p. 335). To varying degrees, the movement’s authors reference these ethical concerns, highlighting that personal branding may be perceived as ‘calculating’, ‘sleazy’, ‘manufactured’, and ‘inauthentic’ (see Clark, 2013, p. 5; Paprocki & Paprocki, 2009, p. 6). Rather than deeply engaging with the morality of its precepts, the discourse dismisses these concerns, countering with vague statements affirming that a moral dimension undergirds the movement. For example, Peters (1999, p. 132) claims that “to operate effectively as Brand You we must be … absolutely … Trustworthy. And … Credible.” Montoya and Vandehey (2003, p. 19) assuage participants that “while the concept may seem sinister and akin to mind control, it’s simply part of who we are.” As the first conceptual problem noted, however, contradictory messages abound in the discourse, with guidance about morality proving to be no exception: “Personal Branding lets you control how other people perceive you. […] You’re telling them what you stand for – but in a way that’s
so organic and unobtrusive, they think they’ve developed that perception all by themselves” (Montoya & Vandehey, 2003, p. 2).

As part of the discourse’s defence against its suspect ethicality, it continually urges participants to construct an ‘authentic’ personal brand. For example, Chritton (2012, p. 8) defines personal branding as “an ongoing, conscientious effort to show the world your best authentic self (not an inflated version of yourself that can’t be maintained).” Paprocki and Paprocki (2009, p. 12) provide further guidance on what constitutes an authentic brand: “An authentic brand is an honest brand. It makes true claims about its products, services, or whatever it represents. Similarly, an authentic personal brand is an honest portrayal of you, your talents, and your skills.” Should the truthfulness requirement be violated by producing a ‘fake’ persona, Paprocki and Paprocki (2009, p. 205) warn that “your competition will notice, and they will be more than happy to expose your weaknesses, your failings, and your inauthenticity.” Montoya and Vandehey (2003, p. 12) confirm the market’s reward for brand authenticity and its punishment of dishonesty, proclaiming: “Great Personal Brands are spin-free zones. Your brand must be built on the truth of who you are. […] Today’s savvy consumer can smell shallow hype like a hound smells a fox.”

The requirement for brand authenticity is problematic given the discourse directs participants to ‘extract, express, and exude’ (Arruda & Dixson, 2007) the saleable aspects of their identity while discarding aspects of themselves that would otherwise damage or dilute the brand. Shepherd (2005) identifies the authentic yet engineered contradiction as an enduring problem in the literature, explaining that “on the one hand, individuals are expected to respond to consumers in line with the marketing principle, but on the other hand they are advised to construct a ‘truthful’ brand image rooted in their unique set of attributes and attitudes” (p. 593). The movement attempts to resolve the paradox of producing a market-mediated ‘authentic’ brand by presenting it as a challenge: “Your challenge is twofold: to make your exterior appealing to your target audience, and to make sure your exterior is as much a genuine reflection of your interior as possible” (Fisher Roffer, 2002, p. 134). Several researchers further problematise the discourse’s insistence that personal brand positions are simple, consistent, and unique (Hearn, 2008; Shepherd, 2005; Wee & Brooks, 2010). As Shepherd (2005, p. 596) explains, “this raises the obvious question as to whether individuals who are used to constructing and living with multiple personas in their personal and social lives can readily construct a brand statement for business purposes that is centred on one
‘real’ or ‘authentic’ self.” Evidently, the conceptual problems contained in the popular press literature about morality and authenticity are significant, and sensitise this thesis’s inquiry to exploring how participants negotiate these issues in the identity market.

3.3.2.3 Uncertainty about the efficacy, experience, and outcomes of personal branding
Related to the first conceptual problem concerning the veracity of the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims is the problem of uncertainty surrounding the efficacy, experience, and outcomes of personal branding. Discussing each aspect in turn, researchers highlight that the discourse’s singular focus on personal branders as the determinant of their personal branding success is problematic as it ignores structural inequalities within society related to gender, race, and class (Lair et al., 2005). An empirical study on the rise and fall of athletes’ personal brands reveals the considerable volatility of personal brand trajectories over time, with success not singularly – or at times, even closely – related to an athlete’s individual performance, but a multiplex of factors such as the popularity of an athlete’s team and teammates (Yang & Shi, 2011). When considering the significant failure rates of brands across all marketing categories and domains, Shepherd (2005) concludes the discourse grossly overstates the efficacy of personal branding. He explains that the “guarantee of visibility and therefore business success is deceptive, because there are simply too many people competing even within specific business niches to permit more than a few of them to share high-level success” (Shepherd, 2005, p. 598).

In terms of the experience and outcomes of personal branding, there is a disagreement about whether the phenomenon involves self-commodification or decommodification and results in liberation or subordination. The personal branding movement adopts the position that personal branding entails decommodification, liberating ordinary workers from their experience of brandlessness. The movement argues this by adopting the viewpoint that employees are commodities in the labour market, claiming that “without a personal brand, you are simply a commodity” (Flemings, 2006, p. 29). This viewpoint is based on an epistemological position which assumes the labour market is defined by universal commodification (Radin, 1996). To support this viewpoint, the discourse uses hyper-individualising statements emphasising the alienation of ordinary workers. For example, Gross (2002, p. 8) asserts that “no one cares about your career until you care about your career” while Montoya and Vandehey’s (2003, p. 2) ‘number one personal branding rule’ is: “Always assume the world is utterly indifferent to your business, no matter how good you
are.” In this way, the discourse constructs personal branding as ‘the answer’ (Montoya & Vandehey, 2003, p. 2) as it decommodifies a person, creating a unique and highly visible image that differentiates and elevates them from the status of ordinary workers in the market. As such, a person is liberated from a career ladder’s “standard rungs of progression” (Peters, 1997, p. 83), and is free to construct a saleable identity that accumulates value in and of itself.

Supporting the emancipatory message of the discourse are consumer culture researchers such as Firat and Venkatesh (1995) who understand that in postmodernity, the market is a liberatory space of identity play and self-construction for people. This viewpoint acknowledges that in postmodern consumer culture, the market is inescapable (Kozinets, 2002a) and marketing is ubiquitous (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993; Kuttner, 1996; Strasser, 2003). Bandinelli and Arvidsson (2013) argue that personal branding is an understandable response to the commodification of everything in consumer culture, which involves those “who consciously manage their inner features in productive ways, oriented toward a future monetization, which, in turn, is the only way to enable the much glorified actualization of the self to effectively take place” (p. 68).

Several researchers have adopted the counter-position to the discourse, arguing that personal branding involves self-commodification (Davis, 2003; Wee & Brooks, 2010), with a person’s identity marketised as a product (Lair et al., 2005) and treated as “a commodity for sale in the labour market” (Hearn, 2008, p. 201). This viewpoint rejects the discourse’s assumption of universal commodification, arguing instead that ordinary workers are complex human beings that perform multiple roles in both the social and commercial worlds. From this perspective, critical media theorist Alison Hearn (2008) is highly critical of personal branding, describing it as a “process of self-exploitation, performed in the interests of material gain or cultural status” (p. 204). Hearn (2008, p. 206) problematises the discourse’s promise of liberation, highlighting the subordination of self it requires to produce and be a brand reduces “the self to a set of purely instrumental behaviours and circumscribing its meanings within market discourse.”

Arguments against self-commodification have considerable precedent in the literature. More than 150 years ago, Karl Marx discussed the commodification of self in volume one of Das Kapital, his critique of capitalist political economy. Recognising the expansionary nature of the market, Marx (1867/1954) forewarned that self-commodification in labour systems would
result in people being ‘reified’ (made into a thing; objectified) and ‘alienated’ (having their work controlled by capital owners; being limited to repetitive, trivial work; being estranged from their complete humanity; and being dehumanised as a saleable object). According to Marx (1867/1954), self-commodification diminishes a person’s inherent self-worth to an external monetary value that can be realised only through market exchange. The social system this creates is one defined by ‘commodity fetishism’, where humans relate to each other as commodities and social relations between these human commodities are diminished to reductive, dehumanised exchanges (Marx, 1867/1954). A range of subsequent neo-Marxist theorists, particularly from the Frankfurt School (e.g., Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/1973; Lukács, 1923/1971) have continued to emphasise that the alienation and commodity fetishism arising from self-commodification are antithetical to human flourishing.

The tradition of critique about self-commodification has continued to evolve to incorporate the marketisation of personhood (treating people as a marketable object) from the 1950s. This timing coincides with the emergence of person marketing literature and reflects the expansion of market logic, practice, and discourse within postmodern consumer culture (Applbaum, 2004). For example, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1951) undertook extensive fieldwork with professional workers who were increasingly engaging in self-marketing. Mills (1951) concludes that this form of self-commodification leads to alienation, whereby “men are estranged from one another as each secretly tries to make an instrument of the other, and in time a full circle is made: one makes an instrument of himself and is estranged from it also” (p. 189). Writing at a similar time to Mills, the German social psychologist Eric Fromm (1947, p. 140) argues that workers engaging in marketing themselves were destined to experience alienation, as a person constructed as a marketing object could not “experience himself as an active agent, as the bearer of human powers.” French theorist Guy Debord (1967/1977) further expanded Marx’s critique of self-commodification, arguing that the marketisation of personhood creates a ‘society of the spectacle’ which privileges image production and consumption over meaning and substance. This system results in the ultimate form of human alienation – when a person’s conceives of their whole being as a marketable product and all human interactions as potential transactions (Debord, 1967/1977).

Contemporary researchers continue to echo the concerns voiced in these classic texts when considering the experience and outcomes of personal branding (e.g., Hearn, 2006, 2008). In summary, this critical perspective holds that the self-commodification and marketisation of personhood that personal branding entails does not lead to self-actualisation, but personal
alienation from one’s humanity and the displacement of social relations in a totalising system of markets and marketing logic.

Between the self-actualising versus alienating perspectives covered, Lair et al. (2005) offer a dialectical perspective on the outcomes of personal branding, surmising that “the position of the individual within the discursive universe of personal branding is both elevated and highly constrained” (p. 335). They caution that “participants are not cultural dupes, but neither are they as free as the rhetoric of the genre in which they indulge would assume” (Lair et al., 2005, p. 321). The lack of empirical studies about personal branding prevent the clarification of what the experience entails and what outcomes it produces. To this end, this thesis seeks to understand personal branders’ experiences of commodification in the identity market, and hence inform debate about contemporary self-commodification in postmodern consumer culture.

3.3.2.4 Assumed conceptual equivalence of products and people as marketing categories

The final conceptual problem concerns an assumption that pervades the personal branding discourse: that the marketing category of personhood is conceptually equivalent to products. This assumption manifests in the movement’s texts, with authors directly reframing product branding concepts as personal branding concepts. For example, Mobray (2009, p. 150) relabels ‘product branding attributes’ as ‘personal branding attributes’, and explicitly maps out the transference of concepts that constitute his particular version of personal branding (‘packaging’ becomes ‘personal appearance’, ‘logo’ becomes ‘style’, ‘durability’ becomes ‘consistency’). To persuade readers to conceive of themselves as products, the discourse frames this conceptual equivalence as an opportunity to emulate the status of iconic brands: “Most of us – save Martha Steward and a handful of others – don’t think of ourselves as ‘a package’. Mistake! Everybody is a package” (Peters, 1999, p. 46).

Several researchers have problematised this assumption that branding concepts developed in relation to products and organisations can be applied without significant modification to people (Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Parmentier et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2005; Zarkada, 2012). Basing personal branding on product logic relies on a radical construction of a person as “an autonomously existing entity in possession of particular characteristics that ‘define’ him/her” (Wee & Brooks, 2010, p. 52). Zarkada (2011, p. 4) unpacks the fallacies of this autonomous construction of personhood in more detail:
In the context of ketchup and automobiles a purely contrived signification process is perfectly achievable. The complete product experience package can be conjured up from scratch and then formed into an autonomous value set and staged-managed as a consumable experience. In the case of human beings this is simply not possible. When the brand consultant or self-help manual starts work on the brand the complete attribute and value set is already fully formed: a grown person with a face and body, a history, a personality, some affiliations and a reputation already established.

Studies continue to show person marketing is likely to be a more complex domain than product marketing due to the personalities, personal values, and social norms that orient and inform a person’s cultural production as a marketing object (Bendisch et al., 2013; Hirschman, 1983; Tregear, 2003). Multiple studies also reveal the marketisation of personhood in labour markets is contested, with employees both resisting and accommodating their branding as animate elements of a corporate brand (see Brannan et al., 2011).

This complex, contested, and limited applicability of product marketing concepts is not unique to person marketing, but continues to surface in studies of non-traditional marketing domains such as health (Anker, Sandøe, Kamin, & Kappel, 2011; Applbaum, 2011), education (Natale & Doran, 2012), and religion (Shepherd, 2004). To provide a more detailed example of how contexts alter and obfuscate how marketing is practiced in them, politics is a field that has become increasingly marketised (Dean & Croft, 2001), with elections becoming “quasi-commercial events, wherein the competition for votes is similarly conducted as a positioning and counterpositioning game of promotional image making between rival company brands” (Wernick, 1991, p. 129). While researchers observe that marketing and branding concepts can be applied to understand politicians as brands (Guzmán & Sierra, 2009; Hughes, Dann, & Neale, 2008), empirical studies have found that politicians have perceptual barriers to framing their interactions in marketing rhetoric (O’Cass, 1996) and have limited aesthetic possibilities for identity positioning (Motion, 2000). The emerging evidence suggests that politicians (Lock & Harris, 1996; Peng & Hackley, 2009), and the organisational field of politics itself (Dean & Croft, 2001; Dean, Croft, & Pich, 2015), have unique characteristics that prevent the whole scale applicability of marketing and branding concepts to them. Together, these studies evidence the need to inductively examine marketing.
contexts to understand the revisions and modifications to marketing theory that are required to account for these differences. To advance theoretical debate, O’Cass (1996, p. 37) pithily observes the need to “move beyond theoretical arguments based on unsupported propositions of marketing’s domain and application to empirical investigations which detail the true domain and extent of the application of marketing.” Recognising the conceptual problems inherent with the assumption of conceptual equivalence between products and people, this thesis does not use product branding concepts as a conceptual frame to deductively understand personal branders experiences. Instead, it inductively examines the lived experiences of personal branders to understand how their actual practice of marketing work may require modifications to the product-based knowledge claims of the personal branding movement.

3.4 Summary
This chapter has critically reviewed the personal branding movement’s discourse, identifying five core knowledge claims in the popular press literature on the subject. Despite its voluminous nature, the discourse is highly repetitious, with these knowledge claims constituting the philosophical, processual, and logical essence of the movement’s message. Far from being benign, isolated, or faddish, it was revealed that the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims not only have considerable precedent in the field of marketing but have been uncritically replicated in a fragmented body of academic studies advocating personal branding practices for their various disciplinary audiences. A closer examination of the discourse’s knowledge claims reveals pervasive problems concerning their lack of theoretical support; paradoxical treatment of authenticity; epistemological assumption of university commodification; and the claimed conceptual equivalence between products and people as marketing categories. Recognising that significant uncertainty exists about the efficacy, experience, and outcomes of personal branding, this chapter affirms the need for empirical study of the phenomenon to produce a practice-based understanding of personal branding. In this way, a more balanced perspective can emerge to revise and improve the current state of knowledge about personal branding.
Chapter 4
Methodology

4.1 Introduction
With the conceptual frame and literature gaps that orient this thesis outlined in the previous chapters, attention now turns to describing issues of research methodology. Reiterating the analytic focus of this thesis, the research questions guiding this inquiry are:

(1) What challenges and contestations do personal branders experience in the identity market?
(2) What practices constitute the marketing work of personal branding?
(3) How do the lived experiences of personal branders reconcile with the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims?

Structurally, this chapter begins with an overview of the interpretive research paradigm to establish the epistemological and ontological positions informing this thesis. Next, the relevance, history, and features of hermeneutic phenomenological methodology are discussed. In this way, this chapter prefaces the two proceeding chapters which document data collection and analysis methods (Chapter 5) and the researcher’s reflexivity concerning the knowledge produced in this thesis (Chapter 6).

4.2 Interpretive research paradigm
A research paradigm is a worldview or common “set of beliefs” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107) comprised of three elements: (1) ‘ontology’, or the form and nature of reality that a researcher investigates; (2) ‘epistemology’, or the relationship between that reality and the researcher; and (3) ‘methodology’, or the technique/s a researcher uses to investigate that reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Four major research paradigms predominate social science: positivism, post-positivism/realism, critical theory, and constructivism/interpretivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Research framed in each of the major paradigms has and continues to be undertaken within the marketing academy. Aiming to understand the lived experience of being a brand, this study is situated in the interpretive research paradigm. Table 4.1 outlines the key assumptions of the interpretive paradigm in relation to the other major research paradigms.
Table 4.1 Description of research paradigms and assumptions

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<tr>
<th>Assumptions</th>
<th>Paradigms</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positivism</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ontology</strong></td>
<td>Naïve realism – reality is real and apprehensible</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Epistemology</strong></td>
<td>Objectivist – findings are true</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methodology</strong></td>
<td>Experimental/ manipulative – verification of hypotheses, mostly quantitative methods</td>
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*Note.* Adapted from Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 109).

Historically, interpretivists challenged the dominance of positivist approaches to marketing research in the mid to late 1980s, with the ensuing paradigm wars being charted by Brown (1996) and Tadajewski (2004). Despite its complex history in marketing (Tadajewski, 2006), interpretivism has become an accepted tradition with a large body of scholarship (Levy, 2006), particularly in the interdisciplinary area of consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). As Brown (2003, p. 195) observes, “Every mode of representation you can possibly imagine – poetry, photography, videography, netnography, performance, painting, autobiography, fiction, faction, installation art, music, dance – has been embraced or attempted.” Thus, while recognising the paradigmatic differences Table 4.1 highlights, this thesis understands the complementarity of the paradigms in advancing diffuse forms of marketing knowledge.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) and Schwandt (1994) provide detailed overviews of the tenets of the interpretive research paradigm, which has been variously referred to in the marketing and consumer culture literature by terms such as ‘naturalistic’ (Belk, Sherry Jr, & Wallendorf, 1988), ‘humanistic’ (Hirschman, 1986), and ‘postmodern’ (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1992).
As Hudson and Ozanne (1988, p. 511) explain, the emphasis of interpretive research is generating a deep understanding of a phenomenon in its natural context:

Interpretivists take a more historical, particularistic approach to research; that is, they study a specific phenomenon in a particular place and time. Rather than seeking to determine law-like regularities, the interpretivists seek to determine motives, meanings, reasons, and other subjective experiences that are time- and context-bound.

To capture rich detail about a context being studied, interpretive researchers generally, but not exclusively, use qualitative methods and inductive approaches that derive thematic categories from the data rather than testing a priori hypotheses (Tadajewski, 2004). The goal of interpretive research is to understand “the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). This goal is predicated on the assumption that knowledge can be created by interacting with participants to understand their lived experience and that meanings about the phenomenon can be derived from these descriptions (Hirschman, 1986; Tadajewski, 2004). Schwandt (1994, p. 118) explains that an “interpretivist believes that to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it. The inquirer must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors.” Accordingly, the nature of this thesis’ inquiry is both qualitative and inductive: it seeks to capture personal branders’ first-person descriptions of their lived experience to advance a conceptualisation of the phenomenon.

4.2.1 Ontological and epistemological assumptions
Interpretivists adopt a relativist ontological stance, assuming that people socially and symbolically construct their own reality (Crotty, 1998). Hence, multiple lived realities that are local and situation-specific are understood to exist, with these realities apprehensible to people as “intangible mental constructions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). In essence, “particular actors, in particular places, at particular times, fashion meaning out of events and phenomena through prolonged, complex processes of social interaction involving history, language, and action” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). The implication of this ontological viewpoint is that interpretive researchers investigate the social world at the level of subjective experience with social reality seen as inter-subjectively composed (Tadajewski, 2004). Epistemologically, interpretive research recognises the subjectivities of both the researcher
and participants (Moustakas, 1994): to understand participants’ multiple realities, a researcher must interact with them in the research encounter (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It further acknowledges that a researcher’s participation in the research encounter shapes the interpretation reached, with research findings being understood as “the inquirer’s construction of the constructions of the actors one studies” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). This subjectivity allows for multiple ‘knowledges’ to coexist “when equally competent (or trusted) interpreters disagree” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 113).

The ontological and epistemological assumptions of interpretivism differ from those in the positivist paradigm. Ontologically, positivists assume that an external, concrete reality exists that is independent of an observers’ perception (Crotty, 1998). Epistemologically, positivists support that this reality can be “empirically measured by independent observers using objective methods” and that it can be “explained and predicted through the identification of universal laws or law-like generalizations” (Brown, 2003, p. 247). In contrast, researchers from post-positivist paradigms such as realism and interpretivism understand that reality is subjectively re-created, “thereby denying the possibility for objective (free of subjective influence) research” (Tadajewski 2004, p. 318). As a result, interpretivists seek immersion in a research phenomenon, the goal being not to generate scientific explanation, but a deep understanding of the phenomenon’s meanings, practices, and history (Schwandt, 1994). The complex and nuanced account of a research context that interpretive research can contribute advances knowledge by producing new insights about marketing phenomena. In this thesis, the interpretive approach adopted orients the inquiry to uncover the human dimension that enacts and experiences the marketing work of personal branding.

Similar to the interpretive paradigm, critical theory adopts the epistemological stance that reality is subjectively re-created. However, critical theory’s historical realist ontology asserts that a person’s subjective reality “is dominated and subservient to ideological superstructures…. [which] …imprison the individual” (Tadajewski, 2004, p. 319). Hence, the role of critical inquiry “is to describe the alienating forces and societal arrangements that impinge on individual agency and consciousness in society” (Tadajewski, 2004, p. 319). Taking an interpretive rather than critical approach to examine personal branders is warranted in this thesis because the perspective advances “an understanding of practitioners as astute cultural observers who, like interpretive researchers themselves, read the culture for pattern and meaning” (Cook, 2006, p. 544). Presciently, Cook (2006, p. 544) adds that an interpretive
stance does not “excuse or exonerate their activities as benign simply because they are not outright vilified.” Rather, an interpretive approach allows for the under-represented voices of personal branders to be recorded, with their experiences ensuring personal branding theory is sufficiently informed by the human dimension of how it is practiced. The possibility for subsequent critical inquiry is recognised, however, as an avenue for future research to explore.

4.2.2 Methodological assumptions
Having discussed matters of ontology and epistemology, the third element of the interpretive research paradigm to outline relates to methodological assumptions. The interpretive paradigm understands that the researcher is a passionate participant within the world being investigated, with the researcher’s interpretation shaped by their own personal history and immersion in a phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1994). A range of methodological considerations extend from this ‘researcher-as-instrument’ (Thompson, 1997) position that are specific to the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology used in this research. As such, these detailed methodological features will be explicated in the next section’s description of this specific methodology.

More broadly, it is important to note that the interpretive paradigm in marketing and consumer culture research is constituted by studies that advocate for and use a diverse range of methodologies and methods\(^4\), including: ethnography (Diamond et al., 2009; Kozinets, 2002a; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), netnography (Kozinets, 2002b) and video-ethnography (Jayasinghe & Ritson, 2013); historical analysis (Stern, 2006); critical theory (Murray & Ozanne, 1991; Murray, Ozanne, & Shapiro, 1994); discourse analysis (Hackley, 2001); personal introspection (Gould, 1991; Holbrook, 1995a); and semiotics (Holbrook & Grayson, 1986; Mick, 1986), visual analysis (Schroeder, 2002), literary criticism (Stern, 1989) and textual analysis (Brown, 2005). This methodological diversity evidences the acceptance of approaches drawn from various strands of social science (such as anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, and history) to inform marketing research, knowledge, and theory (Tadajewski, 2004). Arnould and Thompson (2005, p. 870) confirm that the interpretive research paradigm supports “methodological pluralism”, with the choice

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\(^4\) With respect to terminology, this thesis understands that ‘methodology’ refers to the research strategy that provides the theoretical underpinning for the choice and use of particular methods while ‘methods’ are the actual techniques used to collect data (Crotty, 1998).
of methodology for a particular study being guided by the nature of the inquiry’s questions and objectives. The next section follows from this discussion by outlining the rationale for and details of the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology employed in this thesis.

4.3 Hermeneutic phenomenological methodology

This thesis adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to understand the experiences of personal branders in relation to their broader personal histories and contemporary marketing practices in consumer culture. In terms of methods, it primarily uses phenomenological (Moustakas, 1994; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989; Van Manen, 1990) and life story (Atkinson, 1998; Denzin, 1989; McAdams, 1993) interviews, with documents and observations further informing the researcher’s interpretation. The following sections outline the rationale for the use of phenomenological methodology before the history and features of hermeneutic phenomenology are discussed.

4.3.1 Rationale for use of phenomenology

Of the three qualitative methodologies most associated with interpretive research in marketing – phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory (Goulding, 2005) – phenomenology was deemed the most appropriate given the aims of this thesis. Phenomenology is concerned with understanding human experience (Van Manen, 1990). It uses in-depth, qualitative methods (such as phenomenological interviews) to capture first-person descriptions of a phenomenon from participants who have lived experience of it (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997; Thompson et al., 1989). As such, it generates thick descriptions of the experiential structures of a phenomenon – its meanings, processes, practices, and outcomes – with this understanding of human behaviour based on how it is lived and embedded in a context (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological inquiry is empirical: a researcher’s interpretation of participants’ lived experiences must be supported by evidence from textual data collected in the research encounter (Thompson et al., 1989). The empirical nature of phenomenological methodology aligns with the recognised need for empirical research on personal branding to understand how the phenomenon is practiced and can be conceptualised (Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Parmentier et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2005; Zarkada, 2012). As the previous chapter established, the voice of personal branders is underrepresented in the existing academic literature. The first-person narratives that phenomenology generates are particularly well suited to uncovering the elusive insider-experience of how personal branders undertake the marketing work of personal branding.
While both phenomenology and ethnography focus on individual and shared meanings and generate thick description about phenomena (Geertz, 1973; Thompson, 1997), this thesis seeks to capture ‘perspectives of action’ (participants’ explanations of their actions to the researcher), rather than ‘perspectives in action’ (the researcher’s explanations of participants’ actions based on observing their actual behaviours) (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Ethnographic inquiry aims to capture both perspectives to “explicate patterns of action that are cultural and/or social rather than cognitive” (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994, p. 485). In contrast, this thesis’ inquiry aligns with phenomenology’s focus on understanding participants’ lived experience (Thompson et al., 1989), particularly their experiences as they undertake the marketing work of personal branding and navigate the identity market. Grounded theory methodology – as a more purely inductive form of theory development (Goulding, 2005) – was also considered not germane to this inquiry’s focus on comparing participants’ experiences to the knowledge claims about personal branding in the popular press literature.

Methodologically, there is considerable precedent to the use of phenomenology in marketing and consumer culture research. For example, phenomenological studies of consumers have examined compulsive shopping (O’Guinn & Faber, 1989); the everyday consumption experiences of married women (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1990); self-gift giving (Mick & Demoss, 1990); addictive consumption (Hirschman, 1992); experiences of time (Cotte, Ratneshwar, & Mick, 2004); self-concepts, body image, and self-care practices (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995); gendered consumption meanings and lifestyle juggling (Thompson, 1996); how fashion discourses are appropriated (Thompson & Haytko, 1997); identity fragmentation (Goulding, Shankar, & Elliott, 2002); ethical consumption (Cherrier, 2006); voluntary dispossession and identity negotiation (Cherrier & Murray, 2007); elderly consumers in care homes (Stone, 2009); and tattoos and their role in identity construction (Velliquette, Murray, & Evers, 2011). Phenomenological studies have also examined aspects of marketing practice; in particular, the experiences of being a marketing manager (Ardley, 2005), undertaking marketing work (Svensson, 2007), negotiating identity in the marketplace (Parmentier & Fischer, 2011), and negotiating interpersonal relationships in professional exchanges (Haytko, 2004). This thesis adds to these bodies of scholarship by focusing on the marketing work of personal branders and their experiences in the identity market. Having justified the use of phenomenological methodology, attention now turns to the history and particular form of phenomenology (hermeneutic phenomenology) employed in this thesis.
4.3.2 Development and forms of phenomenology in marketing

This section traces the development of phenomenology. It compares the two forms of methodology the marketing academy has embraced (existential phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology) and provides justification for this thesis’s adoption of hermeneutic phenomenology.

Phenomenology has a long and complex history within social science. The first well-defined meaning of the term is thought to have been offered by Georg Hegel (1770-1831) in *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1807). Hegel (1807/1967) understands phenomenology as the science of describing what a person perceives, senses, and knows in their immediate awareness and experience. Etymologically, phenomenology derives from two Greek words: *phainómenon* (‘appearance’) and *lógos* (‘reason’ or ‘word’) (Zahavi, 2003). The term literally means ‘the study or description of phenomena’, with a phenomenon defined as “what appears in consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26) to the person who has the experience. It was Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) who developed phenomenology into a research philosophy, with his key works highlighting the importance of perception and context when interpreting human behaviour. Husserl (1913/1962 1954/1970) supports that studying people’s subjective experience is key to understanding what motivates them as what a person perceives as ‘real’ is what guides their behaviour.

On the basis of Husserl’s scholarship, diverse schools of thought and research traditions have emerged in the continually evolving ‘phenomenological movement’ (Cope, 2005, p. 164). For example, the Duquesne School (based in the Psychology Department of Duquesne University in the United States) and its leading proponent, Amadeo Giorgi (1992; 1997, 2009), have continued to develop Husserlian phenomenology into a descriptive methodology in psychology that adopts a more scientifically rigorous approach to research. In contrast, the Utrecht School (an interdisciplinary group of phenomenologists based at Utrecht University, Netherlands) advances a more reflexive version of phenomenology as an interpretive methodology, which has influenced the work of contemporary hermeneutic (or interpretive) phenomenologists such as Max Van Manen (1990, 2007).

Within the marketing and consumer culture literature, two forms of phenomenology have been introduced. First, existential phenomenology has been championed by Craig Thompson and his co-authors (e.g., Pollio et al., 1997; Thompson et al., 1989, 1990). Existential
phenomenology combines the philosophy of existentialists such as Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) with Husserlian approaches to descriptive phenomenology (Thompson et al., 1989). The resulting methodology focuses on lived experience, including personal meanings, goals, and motivations, and seeks to describe “the structure of experiences and the organizing principles that give form and meaning to the life world” (Laverty, 2003, p. 27). Second, a greater emphasis on the use of hermeneutic methodology within marketing research (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994) has seen hermeneutic phenomenology (Thompson, 1996, 1997) introduced to the field. Thompson (1996, p. 390) notes that hermeneutic phenomenology has evolved from the ‘cross-fertilisation’ of Husserlian and descriptive phenomenology with hermeneutic philosophy, particularly the works of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), and Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005).

Originally developed as an academic practice related to the interpretation of biblical texts in theology (Gadamer, 1976), contemporary hermeneutics has evolved to study human experience as a text it seeks to interpret and understand (Ricoeur, 1976, 1981). This premise is based on the understanding that linguisticality and historicality are constitutive of being human, or as Schwandt (1994, p. 120) explains, that “language and history are both the condition and limit of understanding.” The origins of this hermeneutic philosophy lie with Heidegger (1927/1962) who recognised that language, thinking, and being are one, and Gadamer (1960/1993) who saw language as the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Put more simply, hermeneutic philosophy understands that “lived experience is soaked through with language. We are able to recall and reflect on experiences thanks to language. Human experience is only possible because we have language” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 38). With respect to historicality, as people live in a world of pre-existing cultural meanings and social conditions, Heidegger (1927/1962) contends language embodies cultural history: “to speak a language is to have one's life experiences fundamentally contextualized in a socio-historical field” (Thompson, 1996, p. 392). Thus, hermeneutics understands that a personal narratives reflect broad, underlying cultural values, meanings, and beliefs (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994).

When combined with phenomenology, hermeneutic inquiry focuses on uncovering the intended meanings and socio-historic context that underlie and structure participants’ descriptions of their experience (Thompson, 1997). Thompson (1996, p. 392) describes the
interpretive span of hermeneutic phenomenology as a ‘theoretical interplay’ between “cultural analysis of socio-historical structures that transcend the exigencies of individual lives and phenomenological descriptions of the meanings that events and experiences assume in the life worlds of particular individuals.” In contrast, existential phenomenology focuses on the personal meanings that experiences assume in participants’ lifeworlds while neglecting the socio-historic forces that shape not only these meanings, “but also the frame of reference from which the socially situated person understands his/her experiences” (Thompson, 1996, p. 391). Critics have observed the ahistoric perspective that existential phenomenology cultivates has the potential to over-emphasise human agency by not accounting for the limitations imposed by broader socio-historic structures (Brown, 1995). Ignoring the influence of consumer culture and the considerable public discourse that constitutes the personal branding movement would limit this thesis’ understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, for the inquiry it seeks to undertake, this thesis recognises the benefits of hermeneutic phenomenology over existential phenomenology.

On the complementarity of hermeneutics and phenomenology, Gadamer (1960/1993) highlights that hermeneutic inquiry is phenomenological in method as it seeks to collect data about human phenomena, while Thompson (1997) notes the narrative, experience-focused textual data gathered from phenomenological interviews are “particularly well suited to hermeneutic analysis” (p. 442). However, incorporating hermeneutics – as a research philosophy, methodology, and analytic framework (Schwandt, 1994) – into phenomenological research does have methodological implications for this thesis’s research design that will be overviewed next.

4.3.3 Features of hermeneutic phenomenology
This methodological overview begins with the general features of phenomenology this thesis employs, including examining lifeworlds, generating thick description from a purposive sample, and using an emergent and inductive research design. A description of the specific hermeneutic phenomenological features of the inquiry undertaken follows. These features include assumptions about the autonomy of texts and the evaluation of a textual interpretation, the hermeneutic circle, and the fusion of horizons. This overview is a synthesis of methodological literature providing guidance about phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Pollio et al., 1997; Thompson et al., 1989), hermeneutics (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994), and hermeneutic phenomenology in particular (Thompson, 1996,
1997; Van Manen, 1990, 2007). More detailed comparisons of the ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions particular to hermeneutic (interpretive) versus descriptive phenomenology can be found in the literature (see Anosike, Ehrich, & Ahmed, 2012; Finlay, 2009; Giorgi, 1992; Laverty, 2003).

4.3.3.1 Lived experience and lifeworlds
To gain access to phenomena, researchers interpret people’s lived experiences (Heidegger, 1927/1962). This involves interacting with participants – talking with them, listening to their narratives, observing them – to understand and share in their lifeworld (Berndtsson, Claesson, Friberg, & Öhlén, 2007). The ‘lifeworld’ concept was introduced by Husserl (1913/1962) as what a person pre-reflectively experiences. Heidegger (1927/1962) built on Husserl’s concept, highlighting that a person and the world are in a co-constituting relationship: people cannot understand themselves without knowing the world; the world cannot be understood without human understanding. As such, our lifeworlds cannot be transcended: the mode of being human is to be situated within the world (termed, ‘Dasein’ or ‘being-in-the-world’) (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Berndtsson et al. (2007, p. 259) capture the totality of the lifeworld concept in their explanations of the terms as: (1) “an integrative complexity of where we live, act and have experiences”; (2) an integration of “life and world, object and subject, inner and outer, mind and body, individual and society”; and (3) as “a complex and ambiguous conscious-and-unconscious basis of our experiences and actions.” Accordingly, the analytic focus of this thesis is the lived experiences of personal branders, with the diverse nature of participants’ personal branding experiences outlined in section 5.3.2.

Lifeworlds are characterised by the existential reality of facing choices from a position of ‘situated freedom’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962; Sartre, 1943/1957). That is, people make choices within situations “that have constraints not totally of our choosing” (Thompson et al., 1990, p. 360). Thus, hermeneutic phenomenologists focus on describing “the various conflicts, paradoxes, and symbolic relations that emerge” within participants’ lifeworlds (Thompson, 1996, p. 392), including how external forces (social, cultural, historical) shape their experiences (Laverty, 2003). This focus aligns with this thesis’ aim to elucidate the challenges and contestations that personal branders face, with these areas of experience absent from the personal branding movement’s construction of the phenomenon.
To ensure detailed descriptions of lived experiences are obtained, Ashworth (2003, p. 148-150) eviscerates the lifeworld concept into seven ‘fractions’ or constructs that can be explored in the research encounter, including: (1) selfhood (What does the situation mean for social identity; the person’s sense of agency, and their feeling of their own presence and voice in the situation?); (2) sociality (How does the situation affect relations with others?); (3) embodiment (How does the situation relate to feelings about their own body?); (4) temporality (How is the sense of time, duration, biography affected?); (5) spatiality (How is their picture of the geography of the places they need to go to and act within affected by the situation?); (6) project (How does the situation relate to their ability to carry out the activities they are committed to and which they regard as central to their life?); and (7) discourse (What sort of terms – educational, social, commercial, ethical – are employed to describe, and hence, live, the situation?). Ashworth’s (2003) lifeworld fractions serve as an orienting framework for this thesis’ data collection.

4.3.3.2 Thick description and purposive sampling

Phenomenology aims to generate thick description (Geertz, 1973) or “deep, dense, detailed accounts” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83) of participants’ lifeworlds in textual form (Moustakas, 1994). A hallmark of thick description is that it creates ‘verisimilitude’ or “statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129). In this thesis, thick descriptions were obtained by conducting multiple interviews with participants that examined the meanings, process, practices, and outcomes of personal branding within the broader context of their careers, life projects, and personal histories. A more detailed breakdown of the topics explored in the interviews is included in section 5.4.3.

To collect thick description, phenomenological research tends to use relatively small samples of participants who: (1) have lived experience of the phenomenon; (2) are willing to talk about their experiences; and (3) represent information rich cases whose unique experiences are important to account for to understand the phenomenon (Laverty, 2003; Van Manen, 1990). Purposive sampling is not concerned with the statistical requirements of selecting a random or representative sample as the purpose of the research “is not to discover how many, and what kinds of people, share a certain characteristic. It is to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world” (McCracken, 1988, p. 17). Patton (2002) outlines six bases for selecting a purposive sample, including:
extreme or deviant cases; typical or archetypal cases; cases that represent maximum variation; critical cases of extreme urgency or seriousness; politically important cases; and cases based on the convenience of particular informants. These bases can be combined and altered (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and cases added or removed to reach a point of theoretical saturation where no new insights emerge from additional cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Details of this thesis’ purposive sampling strategy are provided in section 5.3.

4.3.3.3 Emergent design, inductive inquiry, and emergent dialogue

Phenomenological inquiry is discovery-oriented (Cope, 2005), and as such, is characterised by methodological openness, flexibility, and creativity when researching participants’ lifeworlds (Berndtsson et al., 2007; Van Manen, 1990). Accordingly, emergent research designs are employed that respond to the nature of inquiry and context of study: with hermeneutic phenomenology in particular, sample recruitment, data collection, and data analysis are undertaken iteratively (Moustakas, 1994; Thompson, 1997; Van Manen, 1990). As theoretical propositions emerge from participants’ descriptions of experience (Moustakas, 1994), the nature of phenomenological inquiry is inductive rather than deductive. Accordingly, this thesis does not assume that socially constructed marketing concepts can be applied, a priori, as a framework to make sense of participants’ experiences (Hackley, 2001). Instead, this thesis’ interpretive lens is focused on inductively examining how participants’ market themselves as brands. As such, it focuses on how participants’ lived experiences can inform theory about personal branding rather than the converse.

Consistent with the inductive and emergent research design, phenomenological inquiry uses emergent dialogue during the research encounter, or dialogue set largely by participants that proceeds using their emic terms rather than a structured set of questions and the researcher’s etic terms (Thompson et al., 1989). Here, ‘emic’ refers to participants’ worldviews which are more closely related to everyday, concrete experiences while ‘etic’ reflects more theoretically abstract conceptualisations of emic meanings (Geertz, 1979). Section 5.4.3 further outlines how emergent dialogue was used in the interviews.

4.3.3.4 Autonomy of texts and evaluation of a textual interpretation

Hermeneutic phenomenology has a broad conception of what constitutes a text that can inform an interpretation. As a relatively enduring expression of lived experience (Gadamer, 1960/1993), a text must be able to be returned to over time for iterative analysis, but can
include interview transcripts, photographs, artefacts, and audio-visual records (Van Manen, 1990). A summary of the texts generated in the data collection phase of this thesis can be found in Table 5.3 in the next chapter. Rather than verifying the ‘truth’ of participants’ claims, phenomenological researchers treat texts as an autonomous body of data to interpret and understand (Thompson et al., 1989). Thus, researchers, particularly from the hermeneutic tradition, acknowledge the possibilities that new meanings and insights can be generated from a text once it has been authored or recorded (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994), that multiple and conflicting interpretations of textual data are possible (Ricoeur, 1981), and that a definitive interpretation of a text is unlikely given understanding and interpretation continue to evolve over time (Gadamer, 1976). Accordingly, this thesis acknowledges the potential for alternative interpretations of the textual data presented in its findings chapters.

The multiplicity of possible interpretations problematises the use of more objective measures to evaluate the quality of a hermeneutic phenomenological research (Laverty, 2003). Instead, credibility is established by providing rich, vivid descriptions of participants’ lived experience with sufficient references to the original textual data to enable readers to determine if the account is trustworthy and potentially applicable to other contexts and populations (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As evaluative criteria, the persuasiveness of rhetoric and readers’ response to it emphasise the importance of writing in hermeneutic inquiry (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Laverty, 2003; Van Manen, 1990). Pragmatically, a more general set of evaluative guidelines to review a hermeneutic interpretation have been provided by Arnold and Fischer (1994), with these guidelines further discussed in terms of their application in this thesis in section 5.7.

4.3.3.5 Hermeneutic circle
A key feature of hermeneutic phenomenology is the hermeneutic circle, which is a multidimensional concept that refers to: (1) a methodological process for interpreting a text; (2) a philosophical view of the research process; and (3) a general model of understanding (Thompson et al., 1994). These three meanings of the hermeneutic circle have relevance to this thesis and will be discussed in turn.

(1) The hermeneutic circle as a methodological process for interpreting a text
The first meaning relates to the interpretive process, which involves ‘hermeneutic circling’ or
an iterative reading strategy between the parts and whole of a text so that a researcher develops a holistic understanding of each case and the similarities and differences across cases (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994). A more integrated and comprehensive interpretation of the data emerges over time through ‘dialectical tacking’ back and forth between participants’ concrete, experience-embedded concepts and the researcher’s theoretically abstract concepts (Geertz, 1973). As the hermeneutic circle turns, a researcher’s interpretation continues to self-correct “in the direction of increasing validity” (Holbrook & O’Shaughnessy, 1988, p. 400) until a point at which sensible meanings are reached that are free of inner contradictions (Kvale 1996). Hermeneutic circling and dialectical tacking were adopted as interpretive techniques in this thesis and are further elaborated on in section 5.6.

(2) The hermeneutic circle as a philosophical view of the research process
The hermeneutic circle’s second meaning corresponds with the notion that scientific research processes necessarily involve aspects of interpretation, and interpretation is unavoidably based on a researcher’s preconceptions (Gadamer, 1960/1993; Heidegger, 1927/1962). Heidegger (1927/1962) argued that every form of human awareness is interpretive and every encounter involves an interpretation influenced by a person’s background or ‘historicality’ (what a culture has given them from birth). Heidegger (1927/1962) explains that a person’s historicality includes their pre-understanding, which is a forestructure that guides their way of understanding the world and determines what is real. Gadamer (1960/1993) termed these background influences ‘prejudices’, referring to them not in a negative sense as unfounded biases that hinder interpretation, but positively as presuppositions or expert knowledge that contain inextricable historical, cultural, and contextual elements that act as meaningful guides to inquiry. According to Gadamer (1960/1993), prejudices are legitimate – they are the pre-experience and pre-knowledge that become the conditions of a person’s future experiences and knowledge. Thus, both Heidegger (1927/1962) and Gadamer (1960/1993) affirm that because of the situated nature of our being-in-the-world, there cannot be interpretation without presuppositions. As a result, hermeneutic philosophy assumes a non-objectivist stance which understands that research methods are not totally objective, separate, or value free from a researcher (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994).

From this philosophical position, the hermeneutic circle represents the interpretive process as an evolution of a researcher’s pre-understanding to their understanding of a phenomenon (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994). That is, hermeneutic phenomenological
inquiry begins with a researcher’s preconceptions and review of relevant literature which serve as an initial frame of reference to understand the research texts (Thompson, 1997). As hermeneutic circling progresses, a researcher’s provisional interpretation evolves by remaining open to new meanings that are apprehended from the text while being informed by additional sources offering insights about the cultural and historical background of a phenomenon (Ricoeur, 1976). Two important methodological implications concerning data sources and reflexivity stem from this meaning of the hermeneutic circle.

First, the quality of findings depends on the extensiveness of a researcher’s background knowledge of the research domain and their ability to use this background knowledge to link the research texts with literature (Thompson, 1997). To cultivate this perspective, hermeneutic phenomenologists can draw on a wide array of data sources to inform their interpretation, including: experiential descriptions contained in art and literature (poetry, novels, plays, biographies, diaries); their own personal experience; and etymological, historical, and phenomenological literature related to the topic (Berndtsson et al., 2007; Van Manen, 1990). The researcher’s use of these sources to understand the culture of personal branding is described in section 5.4.1.

Second, with respect to reflexivity, a researcher’s experience of, and co-creation of meaning within, the research encounter is “inextricably part of the research outcome” (Bettany & Woodruffe-Burton, 2009, p. 669). As a result, Heidegger (1927/1962) emphasises the need for researchers to become aware of, and account for, the interpretive influence of their pre-understanding (to the extent that it is possible to do so). Put more pithily, “hermeneutic understanding is in part self-understanding, self-reflection, and self-development” (Arnold & Fischer, 1994, p. 59). Explicating how a researcher’s reflections shape an inquiry – which is generally facilitated by a researcher keeping a reflective diary to record their preconceptions, observations, and reflections – is an important practice for hermeneutic phenomenologists (Laverty, 2003; Van Manen, 2007). Notably, hermeneutic phenomenology’s reflexive practice is starkly different to the methodological practice of bracketing advocated by descriptive and existential phenomenologists (Giorgi, 1992; Laverty, 2003; Thompson et al., 1989). Within these forms of phenomenology, researchers are encouraged to write down their biases, assumptions, personal knowledge, and theoretical conjectures about a phenomenon to bracket them (or set them aside). Bracketing enables a researcher to achieve what Husserl (1954/1970) terms ‘transcendental subjectivity’, or where a researcher’s biases and
preconceptions are constantly assessed to neutralise their influence on the object of study. Heidegger (1927/1962) and Gadamer (1960/1993) regard bracketing as theoretically impossible as a researcher cannot stand outside their own background of understanding. Contemporary phenomenologists (e.g., Stone, 2009; Thompson et al., 1989) who have attempted bracketing acknowledge the practical difficulty of undertaking the task.

In summary, this thesis accepts the precepts of hermeneutic philosophy and recognises the value of transcending the subject-object dichotomy of researcher and participants that underlies descriptive approaches to phenomenology (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). To this end, the researcher maintained a research diary throughout the research process, with Chapter 6 presenting the researcher’s reflexivity concerning methodological issues prescient to this thesis’ knowledge creation process.

(3) The hermeneutic circle as a general model of understanding
The third meaning overarches the previous two meanings and pertains to the hermeneutic circle being a general model of understanding that guides this thesis’ research approach (Thompson et al., 1994). This model contends that participants’ personal narratives reflect a background of historically established and culturally shared knowledge, beliefs, ideals, and assumptions that have been interpreted and selectively adapted by a person to fit their own life goals and projects (Thompson et al., 1994). In this sense, the circle refers to the iterative process of understanding participants’ personal experiences within the cultural and historical contexts in which they are intertwined and embedded (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994). Heidegger (1927/1962), Gadamer (1960/1993), and Ricouer (1981) understood that a person acquires this background through processes of cultural learning and socialisation, including sources such as their family, social groups, educational institutions, science, religion, media, organisations, politics, the arts, and ethnic traditions. On the role of cultural background in a person’s lifeworld, Thompson (1997, p. 440) elaborates that it “provides the social categories, common sense beliefs, folk knowledge, and interpretive frames of reference from which personalized meanings and conceptions of self-identity are constructed.” Thus, hermeneutic phenomenology understands that a participant is not expressing a purely subjective viewpoint; instead, it seeks to examine a participant’s “personalised cultural frame of reference” (Thompson, 1997, pp. 440-441). Accordingly, the analytic focus of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry centres on explicating how culture, history, practice, and language are embedded in participants’ narratives (Laverty, 2003).
Methodologically, this hermeneutic model of understanding requires a researcher to undertake a broader semiotic or structural analysis of the social, cultural, and historical forces that relate to participants’ personal meanings (Arnold & Fischer, 1994). An outline of the interpretive procedures related to this structural stage of analysis is provided in section 5.6.

Theory development within this hermeneutic mode of understanding is a dialectical process “in which a researcher's developing knowledge of the cultural and historical background provides an orienting frame of reference from which to interpret the narratives, and conversely, the engagement with the textual data enables these initial conceptions to be modified and extended” (Thompson, 1997, p. 449). As Arnold and Fischer (1994, p. 64) note, the theoretical generalisations produced are not “causal explanations” of human behaviour, but “reflective insights…about a collective human community.” This thesis abides by this precept concerning the nature of theory produced from hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry.

4.3.3.6 Fusion of horizons

A hermeneutic phenomenological interpretation is the result of a fusion of horizons between the interpreter's frame of reference and the texts being interpreted (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994). Gadamer (1960/1993) introduced the ‘fusion of horizons’ metaphor, explaining that a horizon “is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (p. 302). A researcher begins the process of understanding and interpretation from their initial horizon of pre-understanding, which is shaped by their lifeworld and historicality, and includes the various assumptions, ideas, meanings, and experiences they have about a phenomenon (Thompson, 1997). By remaining open to new meanings and revising provisional understandings of a text through progressive iterations of the hermeneutic circle, a researcher is able to extend their initial horizon (Gadamer, 1976). A fusion of horizons occurs when an interpreter’s horizon encompasses that of the text, a point at which the researcher’s “[pre-]understanding becomes understanding” (Arnold & Fischer, 1994, p. 64). Thus, the fusion of horizons transcends the subject-object dichotomy between a researcher and participants (Arnold and Fischer 1994), conceptualising interpretation and understanding as an intersubjective process that constitutes a ‘communion’, ‘dialogue’ and ‘gradual convergence of insight’ between the researcher and the text (Gadamer, 1960/1993, 1976). In this thesis, the researcher achieved a fusion of horizon with the textual data by engaging in hermeneutic circling and reflexivity (which are described in detail in the next chapter).
4.4 Summary

This chapter outlined issues of ontology, epistemology, and methodology relating to the interpretive research paradigm this thesis is situated in. With the rationale for the use of hermeneutic phenomenology clarified, the key features of this methodology were outlined to establish the overarching principles guiding the research encounter. From this chapter’s broader description of methodology, the next chapter narrows in to more pragmatically concentrate on the methods this thesis employed to collect and analyse data.
Chapter 5
Method

5.1 Introduction
This chapter discusses the data collection and analysis methods used to understand the personal branders’ lived experiences in the identity market. It begins with an overview of the unit of analysis and the purposive sampling process that recruited the ten personal branders examined in this thesis. A description of the data collection methods (interviews, documents, and observations) follows before discussion moves to the ethical considerations pertinent to data collection. Next, this chapter outlines the data analysis and interpretive procedures used for this thesis’s hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. An overview of measures and techniques to ensure the trustworthiness of this interpretive research concludes this chapter.

5.2 Unit of analysis
This thesis’s unit of analysis, as the level of investigation for data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), is individuals, specifically personal branders. As marketing practitioners, personal branders can inform marketing theory about personal branding by accounting for the human dimension of how marketing work is practiced – a perspective that several researchers have called for inductive studies to examine (Applbaum, 2004; Cook, 2006; Hackley, 2001; Kates, 2006; Svensson, 2007). Highly visible personal branders are a rich source of data because they have extensive experience marketing themselves as brands. As such, they are uniquely qualified to articulate the experience of being a brand, including the challenges, contestations, and outcomes associated with the phenomenon. Finally, as Table 5.1 details, participants’ requirements for anonymity and confidentiality further shaped this thesis’s unit of analysis. Specifically, these requirements directed inquiry to understanding the experiences of personal branders rather than analysing the brand objects they produced. A focus on the latter could not be the focus of this thesis given the traceability of data about the personal brands in the public domain could be used to identify participants.
5.3 Sampling process
To document the purposive sampling process this thesis employed, this section will first discuss the special issues related to the elite sample to explain how they shaped this thesis’s research design. The selection and description of participants follows this discussion.

5.3.1 Special issues with the elite sample
The elite nature of the sample population ensured that accessing participants and maintaining their anonymity and confidentiality were prescient issues to manage. To this end, the methodological literature on elite interviewing (particularly Conti & O’Neil, 2007; Gilding, 2010; Harvey, 2011; Nader, 1972) was instructive in guiding this thesis’ research design.

**Issue 1: Accessing elite participants.** Gatekeepers such as personal managers, assistants, and agents were generally obstructive when attempting to access a personal brander, tending to vet and reject the researcher’s request for participation in the study. Whenever possible, social media and personal website channels were used to gain direct access to participants. Of the four rejections received from potential participants, the minimum time requirement of undertaking the requested two to three two-hour interviews was the most cited reason for non-participation. The use of multiple long interviews was, however, pivotal to this study’s research design, as section 6.4.3 in Chapter 6 discusses. To potentially overcome participants’ perceived ‘cost’ of being part of the research, Chapter 6 reflects on the sample’s motives for participating in the study. An understanding of these motives may inform future sample recruitment strategies and, hence, improve researchers’ access to elite personal branders.

A second access issue concerned participants’ geographic mobility, which necessitated the researcher to undertake domestic and international travel to complete data collection. Funds for these travel expenses were provided by Melbourne Business School, the University of Melbourne. In an attempt to compensate participants for the expenses they incurred by being

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5 This thesis contends personal branders with established, highly visible brands are elites because of the high levels of symbolic capital they possess relative to: (a) ordinary workers in their occupation; and (b) personal branders in their occupation with nascent (or unestablished) personal brands (see Parmentier et al., 2013). The attribution of elite status based on these qualities is consistent with the elite literature (e.g., Conti & O’Neil, 2007; Gilding, 2010; Harvey, 2011; McDowell, 1998; Nader, 1972). However, this thesis acknowledges that definitional ambiguity exists concerning what constitutes ‘elite’ status, most likely due to its dynamic, relative, and time- and space-bound nature (see Harvey, 2011). ‘Symbolic capital’ refers to the social recognition, prestige, authority, respect, and legitimacy a person has within a field (Bourdieu, 1986).
part of the study (for example, taxi fares to an interview location), a $500 payment was paid to each participant after completing the interviews. This practice is consistent with other studies which similarly compensated participants when the time and energy commitments required were more onerous than single interview requests (e.g., Fournier, 1998).

**Issue 2: Maintaining participants’ anonymity and confidentiality.** The potential for brand damage and the sensitive nature of the personal information disclosed ensured that maintaining participants’ anonymity and confidentiality were important pre-conditions for their agreement to be part of the research. Consistent with the elite interviewing literature, guaranteeing participants’ anonymity and confidentiality was essential to gaining their trust and overcoming their tendencies to be guarded, scripted, or secretive (Gilding, 2010; Harvey, 2011; Nader, 1972). Table 5.1 documents the impacts and implications this requirement had on this thesis’s research design. Evidently, the volume of brand artefacts (for example, marketing communications and social media content) circulating in the public domain about participants ensured their traceability and subsequent identification unless careful measures were employed to protect their anonymity.

**Table 5.1 Impacts and implications of participant anonymity and confidentiality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impacts</th>
<th>Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Documents and observational data contain traceable data and are not publishable.</td>
<td>Data analysis and the subsequent presentation of findings are restricted to the interview data. Documents and observational data are used to inform the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon and stimulate participant reflexivity during the interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptions of personal brands contain traceable data and are not publishable.</td>
<td>The thesis’s unit of analysis is oriented to personal branders, not personal brands. As such, the research aims to understand the experiences of personal branders as opposed to describing their personal brands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth demographic profiles of personal branders contain traceable data and are not publishable.</td>
<td>Table 5.2 provides limited demographic information that balances the need to describe the sample while ensuring participants’ anonymity. Analytic focus is directed at a higher level of abstraction to understand the experience of undertaking the marketing work of personal branding, rather than the impact of individual differences (e.g. age or gender) on personal branding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure maintenance of data and administrative records is required.</td>
<td>As per university ethical guidelines, administrative records, interview transcripts, documents, and research diaries are stored in a locked filing cabinet. Electronic correspondence and files have been encrypted and transferred to secure online storage services provided by the University of Melbourne.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.3.2 Selection and description of participants

A purposive sample of ten participants (overviewed in Table 5.2) was drawn using two of Patton’s (2002) selection bases: archetypal cases of the phenomenon and cases of maximum variation. Specifically, the first five participants were selected as archetypal cases of the phenomenon, while the latter five participants were selected more theoretically for their potential to extend or disconfirm emerging themes. By recruiting participants with personal brands established in diverse occupations and organisational fields, this research aims to empirically build on personal branding studies based on single occupations or a particular organisational field (e.g., Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013; Close et al., 2011; Motion, 1999; Parmentier et al., 2013; Sanghvi & Hodges, 2015; Erz & Christensen, 2018; Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018). The sample’s diversity ensures the contours of the phenomenon were captured to advance a robust conceptualisation of personal branding and reconcile this understanding with the knowledge claims emanating from the popular press literature.

Table 5.2 Overview of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Brand visibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Blogger</td>
<td>International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suki</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hostess</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madeline</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Psychic</td>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Producer</td>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Comedian</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public intellectual</td>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Media personality</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>International</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 Hostessing is a contemporary occupation that has developed from the geisha tradition in Japan. Hostess clubs cater predominantly to men who select female hostesses for bookings to provide conversation and hospitality services. Success for a hostess working in a premium club is dependent on developing a strong brand identity sufficiently differentiated from other hostesses that attracts long-term, repeat clients. Further information about the occupation can be found in Allinson’s (1994) ethnography of a hostess club. The hostess participant complemented the data set as an example of a personal brand having a strong element of physicality and being promoted primarily through personal communication and visual consumption (Schroeder, 2002).
The number of participants was guided by reaching ‘theoretical saturation’, the point at which no new insights emerged in the research encounter (Belk, 1988, p. 454). The sample size of ten participants is broadly consistent with other interpretive studies using hermeneutic and phenomenological methodologies (Ahuvia, 2005; Cherrier, 2006; Cherrier & Murray, 2007; Thompson, 1996; Thompson et al., 1990; Thompson & Tambyah, 1999) and exceeds the typical sample size of eight that McCracken (1988) regards as sufficient when conducting in-depth interviews. Restricting the sample size to ten participants ensured the depth of coverage necessary to generate thick description of the phenomenon (Geertz, 1973).

The selection of participants was first guided by the conceptual frame of the study outlined in Chapter 1 (see section 1.4). Accordingly, four screening criteria were used to determine a personal brander’s eligibility to participate in the study. These criteria were that:

(i) a participant had lived experience of engaging in personal branding activities in the context of their career pursuits;

(ii) a participant self-identified as a brand, referring to marketing or branding themselves or using related terms such as self-promotion, persona, or public image;

(iii) there was evidence of a participant’s marketing work in the identity market related to their occupation, such as the existence of marketing communications, media content, or social media content;

(iv) there was evidence of a participant’s brand visibility in the identity market, including consumer recognition of the personal brand and/or consumption of a participant’s branded products and services.

These criteria ensured the sample had extensive experience of engaging in personal branding practices and thus provided rich cases of the phenomenon to inform theory development. Participant selection was further guided by the extent literature on personal branding which supports that the phenomenon is present in diverse occupations and organisational fields (Rein et al., 2006). Accordingly, participants were recruited with occupations spanning the fields of media, politics, education, fashion, health, entertainment, and hospitality. Participants’ occupations varied from established job categories (such as a politician) to those more emergent in nature (such as a blogger). Sample selection was also guided by Rein et
al.’s (2006) conceptual work explicating the dimensions and types of personal brands (represented in Figure 5.1). Accordingly, the sample drawn contains personal branders with various levels, durations, and lifecycles of visibility whose brands represent diverse social types.

**Figure 5.1 Dimensions and types of personal brands**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(a) Levels in the visibility hierarchy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visibility Reach</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visibility Duration</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(b) Visibility reach pyramid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International visibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National visibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional visibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local visibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invisibles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(c) Visibility life cycles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Steady-Rise-to-the-Top Pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Overnight Pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Two-Step Pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Meteor Pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Phoenix Pattern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Wave Pattern</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(d) Social types of personal brands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Heroes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Winners, independent spirits, charmers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Villains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Rebels, rogues, sneaks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Incompetents, boasters, weaklings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from: (a) Rein et al. (2006, p. 77); (b) Rein et al. (2006, p. 78); (c), Rein et al. (2006, p. 311); (d) Klapp as cited in Rein et al. (2006, p. 208).

Finally, the emergent design of the research allowed sample recruitment, data collection, and data analysis to be iterative (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002; Thompson, 1997). This approach assisted the researcher to understand emerging themes in the data and subsequently recruit participants based on maximum differences to challenge these early
conceptualisations. The diffuse nature of the sample contains a sufficient breadth of cases to re-examine the knowledge claims underpinning the popular press literature on personal branding.

5.4 Data collection methods and research process

Figure 5.2 overviews the five-phased research process that was undertaken over a seven-year period from June 2009 to December 2016. This prolonged engagement with participants allowed the researcher to record personal branders’ experiences over time, learning what changed in their lives and using this knowledge to develop a robust conceptualisation of the phenomenon (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). The data generated consists of approximately: 40 hours of recorded in-depth interviews; 600 single-spaced pages of interview transcripts; 500 single-spaced pages of textual documents and more than 500 images related to participants’ brands; 50 single-spaced pages of member check written responses and interview transcripts; and a research diary containing observational notes and the researcher’s reflections recorded throughout the research encounter. At the end of the data collection period (31 December 2016), the participants had a cumulative total of approximately 145 years of experience in the identity market.

Table 5.3 provides an overview of the data collected from each participant in terms of interviews, documents, observations, and member checks. Within this table, there are two absences to explain in the data set. First, Ben was the only participant who did not complete a member check (written response or interview) due to work commitments during the nominated period. Despite the omission of Ben’s member check response, substantial member checking activities were undertaken with other participants and the feedback generated was used to further refine themes and findings (section 5.4.5 elaborates further on the member checks). Second, no observations and limited documents were collected from Suki. Observations were inappropriate given the private nature of her work with clients. Brand artefacts were not collected from Suki as her brand was promoted through personal communication and was based on experiential services and visual consumption (Schroeder, 2002). As such, Suki was a rich addition to the sample that sensitised inquiry to explore the ephemeral, experiential, and visual nature of her personal brand production.

The sections that follow further describe the interviews, documents, and observations that constitute the data collected for this thesis. There is considerable precedent for interpretive
researchers using mixed-method strategies that combine these qualitative methods (for a pioneering example, see Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry Jr, 1989), particularly when examining personal branders (Parmentier et al., 2013) and other complex brand phenomena in consumer culture (Diamond et al., 2009; Fournier, 1998; Schau et al., 2009; Thompson et al., 2006). In their review of mixed-methods research in marketing, Davis, Golicic, and Boerstler (2011) summarised the benefits of this research design. These benefits included: providing stronger results through triangulation of findings; answering broader research questions; compensating for the various weaknesses of single research methods; telling a more convincing story; and providing a holistic understanding of phenomena (Davis et al., 2011). Triangulation of data collection methods has also been shown to help ensure the veracity of data when researching sensitive topics, giving the researcher greater access to the more difficult to reveal information that participants are predisposed to withhold, edit, avoid, or alter (Jehn & Jonsen, 2010; Jonsen & Jehn, 2009).

**Figure 5.2 Overview of the five-phased research process**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Number of in-depth interviews</th>
<th>Total length of in-depth interviews</th>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Documents</th>
<th>Member checks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben (Blogger)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4:03.42</td>
<td>Public appearances (pre, during, post), media appearances</td>
<td>Personal websites, blog entries, social media content, media interviews, media commentary</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suki (Hostess)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3:09.40</td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal reflective writing, social media content</td>
<td>Written response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madeline (Psychic)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3:40.16</td>
<td>Performance (pre, post), media appearances</td>
<td>Personal website, media interviews, media writing, print advertisements</td>
<td>Written response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom (Producer)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3:19.21</td>
<td>Public appearance (during, post), media appearances</td>
<td>Work portfolio, corporate website, media interviews, media commentary</td>
<td>Written response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue (Entrepreneur)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4:17.08</td>
<td>Media appearances</td>
<td>Personal websites, blog entries, media writing, media commentary, social media content, personal reflective writing</td>
<td>Written response, interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine (Comedian)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3:23:08</td>
<td>Performances (during, post), public appearance (during), media appearances</td>
<td>Personal website, media writing, published books, social media content, media commentary</td>
<td>Written response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane (Public intellectual)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3:49:58</td>
<td>Media appearances</td>
<td>Published books, personal website, media writing, social media content</td>
<td>Written response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin (Politician)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3:46:15</td>
<td>Media appearances</td>
<td>Personal website, political campaign material, media interviews, social media content</td>
<td>Written response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne (Media personality)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5:00:19</td>
<td>Media appearances</td>
<td>Personal website, media writing, social media content, media commentary</td>
<td>Written response, interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose (Writer)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4:15:53</td>
<td>Public appearance (pre, during, post), media appearances</td>
<td>Published books, blog entries, media interviews, media commentary, social media content</td>
<td>Written response, interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.4.1 Researcher acculturation and training

To understand the lived experiences of personal branders, a range of activities were undertaken to immerse the researcher in the culture of personal branding before conducting the interviews with participants. Creswell (1998) and Van Manen (1990) advocate the use of immersive activities for researchers to more fully investigate human experience. Attempting to understand the broader, underlying cultural influences related to participants’ lived experience of a phenomenon is also consistent with a hermeneutic approach to research (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997). This understanding helps to ensure a researcher’s interpretation of participants’ descriptive experiences is understood in the appropriate socio-historic context (Moustakas, 1994). For example, Cotte and Kistruck (2006, p. 467) advise that participants may use the interviews as an opportunity to reproduce ‘cultural scripts’ about a subject (in this thesis, personal branding). Thus, understanding the accepted/acceptable cultural scripts about a subject is important for researchers to reflect on whether participants are distorting their narratives based on their perception of what the researcher may want to hear (Cotte & Kistruck, 2006).

Popular press and academic literature about personal branding was reviewed to understand the cultural scripts this discourse had created about the topic (see Chapter 3 for this discussion). This review included the books, articles, and websites authored by the movement’s leading proponents, such as Tom Peters (1997, 1999), Peter Montoya (2002; 2003), Dorie Clark (2011), Dan Schwabel (2009), William Arruda and Kirsten Dixon (2007), Catherine Kaputa (2006, 2009), Brenda Bence (2008, 2009), Robin Fisher Roffer (2002), Hajj E. Flemings (2006) and Susan Hodgkinson (2005). In addition, the researcher read all 20 editions of the trade publication, Personal Branding Magazine (from volume 1, issue 1 of August 2007 to the final volume 5, issue 4 of May 2012). The researcher sought further insight on the experiences of personal branders by reading the autobiographies of highly visible personal and viewing television programs with long format media interviews with personal branders, including Parkinson (UK), Enough Rope (Australia), Talking Heads (Australia), Shrink Rap (UK), The Oprah Winfrey Show (USA), and 60 Minutes (USA, Australia).

In terms of the immersive activities undertaken throughout the data collection period, the researcher participated in a one-day workshop on personal branding and attended a festival event featuring a panel of writers reflecting about their personal brands (titled, The Author as
Brand, Melbourne Writers Festival, 29 July 2010, Melbourne, Australia). Similar immersive activities have been undertaken by other interpretive researchers, particularly when examining complex phenomena involving more esoteric communities of practice; for example, Hirschman’s (1992) study of addiction, Shelton and Peters’ (2006) study of tattoo removal, and Parmentier et al.’s (2013) study of fashion model’s personal brands. Together, the academic and popular press literature reviews and immersive activities were effective in sensitising the researcher to the culture of the phenomenon, including the language, behaviours, norms, and practices that permeate and constitute it.

In terms of methodological training, the researcher reviewed methodological literature related to hermeneutic phenomenology and the various data collection methods that will be discussed in the following sections. Ongoing methodological guidance was also received from the researcher’s academic advisors and presentations at doctoral colloquia in Australia/New Zealand (ANZMAC, Sydney and Dunedin) and internationally (Consumer Culture Theory Workshops, Bilkent University, Turkey).

5.4.2 Observations and documents
Table 5.3 summarises the observations and documents gathered for each participant. While observations and documents form part of the data collected, they could not be published due to their traceability in the public realm to the highly visible participants (as section 5.3.1 discusses). Observations and documents were incorporated into the research design of this thesis in phase two (undertaking initial brand audits), phase three (conducting participant observations and using documents to autodrive in interviews), and phase five (monitoring and opportunistic data collection).

In phase two, the researcher undertook brand audits of potential participants to assess their suitability in relation to the eligibility criteria. Documents that constituted artefacts of the personal brands were gathered from the public domain and collated in a file for each potential participant. These documents included: a potential participant’s marketing communications (e.g. personal website content, advertisements, merchandise); media content about the potential participant (e.g. interviews, commentary); and a potential participant’s social media content (e.g. Facebook posts). Documents tended to exist for the duration of a personal brander’s visibility, providing an archive of material evidencing the development and evolution of their brand over time. The researcher also engaged in non-participant
observation of a potential participant’s publicly available media performances and social media management (content creation, public comments), with written observation notes about this content added to each potential participant’s file. These personal brand audits enabled the researcher to personalise initial communications with potential participants, demonstrating the researcher’s familiarity with their biography, career, and personal brand. This tactic resulted in a high acceptance rate, with ten out of the fourteen potential participants approached agreeing to be part of the research. Citing specific events and challenges that personal branders had experienced assisted the potential participants to perceive the research as a self-reflexive exercise, a motive that held considerable appeal for them (and which is further discussed in the next chapter). Methodologically, other researchers studying personal brands have also used brand audits; for example, Labrecque et al. (2011) examined the Facebook profile content of social media users in their study of online personal brands. A more comprehensive form of brand auditing (observational and document sources, online and offline content, text and image artefacts) was employed in this thesis to gain a holistic understanding of participants’ personal brands.

In phase three of the research process, participant observations and documents were used as reflexive stimulus within the interviews undertaken. During the interviews, participants introduced documents to exemplify or elaborate on their lived experiences of personal branding. For example, participants scrolled through their personal websites with the researcher, discussing the meanings and intentions behind their choice of images, layout, and text. Documents such as Tom the producer’s work portfolio and Kevin the politician’s campaign materials were specialised brand artefacts that acted as reference points and memory triggers for these participants during the interviews. Heisley and Levy (1991) referred to this technique as ‘autodriving’, noting that photographs and recordings of participants drawn directly from their lives can be used as stimulus to enrich interviews. Several interpretive researchers have similarly used autodriving in their interviews when exploring complex human-brand phenomena (Bengtsson, Bardhi, & Venkatraman, 2010; Epp & Price, 2010; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Tian & Belk, 2005). Similar to these studies, this research found that autodriving with participants’ personal brand artefacts was effective in invoking participant self-reflexivity, which in turn, elicited more descriptive detail from participants and provided the researcher with greater insight into their experiences.
During this interview phase, the researcher also opportunistically engaged in participant observation, or where the researcher is involved in events as they unfold (Creswell, 1998). Participant observation was limited to when the researcher was invited to attend performances and public appearances with the personal branders, but did provide the researcher with access to observe and conduct short interviews with some participants before, during, and after events. These observations allowed the researcher to examine how participants interacted with consumers and understand the liminality of personal branding as participants transitioned from their ‘frontstage’ branded selves to their ‘backstage’ private selves (Goffman, 1959). Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) note that participant observation is useful to understand an experience when a high level of emic, or insider, expertise is required. The foreignness of high visibility status to the researcher coupled with the relatively unknown perspective of personal branders ensured that the observation notes recorded in the researcher’s diary were instructive in informing the researcher’s interpretation of the interview data. Similar to Takhar and Chitakunye (2012) and Riach (2009), this thesis found that encouraging participants to take an active role in the research encounter was empowering for them as it positioned participants as experts about their own personal brands. As co-researchers, participants initiated sharing their personal brand artefacts and performances with the researcher, providing more privileged access to what was meaningful to their personal branding practices. The tactile act of viewing documents and the opportunity to observe participants at performances and events also created immersive experiences that the researcher and participant could reflect on during the interviews (Van Manen, 1990). In this way, triangulation of data methods was achieved while creating textual data in the interviews that circumvented the restrictions placed on the publishability of the document and observational data sources.

After the completion of all the in-depth interviews, documents and non-participant observations continued to be collected until December 2016 to monitor the personal branders over time. During this final phase of the research process, documents and non-participant observation allowed the researcher to record the marketplace performances of the personal branders over time, providing valuable insights on how their brands were co-created and evolved in the market. In concert with this form of data collection, updates were received from participants following major developments and events with their brands. Updates were received via telephone calls, email, and short text messages, with the textual data created from these interactions added to the interview transcripts for each participant. Multi-year
studies are common in consumer culture research, particularly when attempting to understand the processual aspects of complex phenomena. For example, Kozinets’ (2002a) collected data for five years at the Burning Man festival to understand whether consumers can escape the market while Geisler’s (2008) seven-year study of music downloading practices enabled him to trace the dynamics of market evolution through marketplace drama. In this research, the final phase of monitoring participants was justified given the turbulence of participants’ brand visibility trajectories and their ever-changing experiences as they navigated the volatility of the identity market.

5.4.3 Phenomenological interviews
Data collection followed the approach of phenomenological interviewing (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Pollio et al., 1997; Thompson et al., 1989), with further guidance provided by the more specialised literature on elite interviewing (Conti & O’Neil, 2007; Dexter, 1970; Gilding, 2010; Harvey, 2011; McDowell, 1998). Thompson et al. (1989, p. 138) describe phenomenological interviews as “the most powerful means of attaining an in-depth understanding of another person’s experience.” They further explain that “the goal of a phenomenological interview is to attain a first-person description of some specified domain of experience” (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 138), which in this thesis, is the experience of marketing yourself as a brand. To capture detailed descriptions of an experience as it is lived, phenomenological interviews focus on specific events ground in the emic terms of participants (Moustakas, 1994; Pollio et al., 1997). The task for interviewers is to create “a setting conducive to entry into a descriptively focused, nonjudgmental dialogue” (Thompson et al., 1990, p. 347).

There is considerable precedent in the use of phenomenological interviews to examine aspects of consumer culture related to the interactions between people, brands, and marketing (Cherrier & Murray, 2007; Fournier, 1998; Goulding et al., 2002; Thompson & Arsel, 2004; Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Thompson et al., 2006). Similar types of unstructured and semi-structured in-depth interviews have also been used extensively in studies of participants engaged in the production of marketing work (Ardley, 2005; Cotte & Kistruck, 2006; Haytko, 2004; Kover, 1995; Motion, 2000; Nyilasy et al., 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2011; Parmentier et al., 2013). This research adds to these literatures, using phenomenological interviews to generate detailed descriptions of personal branders’ experiences navigating the identity market.
Two to three phenomenological interviews of approximately 90 to 120 minutes in length were conducted with each participant. The number and length of the interviews with each participant was guided by the objective of collecting thick descriptions about the phenomenon (Geertz, 1973) and following up with participants to elicit greater depth to address gaps in the emerging analysis (Morse et al., 2002; Moustakas, 1994; Thompson et al., 1989). The decision of where to conduct the interviews was negotiated with each participant, with the majority of interviews being conducted at the homes and offices of participants or the researcher. A quiet and private setting was sought for the participant to feel comfortable expressing themselves. A digital recorder was used to audiotape the interviews to create verbatim transcripts for analysis. Short interviews were also conducted before the first long interview, between long interviews with a participant, and after the completion of the final long interview. Short interviews were mostly conducted via telephone, email, instant message, and Skype to accommodate participants’ travel and work commitments while opportunistically allowing the researcher to receive updates from participants. The researcher either recorded the conversations or wrote field notes about them to add this content to the data set for each participant. Participants’ verbatim quotes included in the findings chapters of this thesis have not been reworded or grammatically corrected to retain their original flavour and avoid unintentional misinterpretation.

The phenomenological interviews tended to be circular and iterative in structure. Topics were not covered in a particular order as the interviews were based on emergent dialogue (Thompson et al., 1990). As data collection progressed, the researcher introduced more grand tour questions in the second or third interview with a participant to fully develop the emerging theoretical categories (McCracken, 1988). For example, if the topic of knowledge sources and learning about personal branding remained unexplored with a participant, a grand tour question was used, such as, “How did you learn about personal branding?” Ashworth’s (2003) seven fractions of the lifeworld (selfhood, sociality, embodiment, temporality, spatiality, project, and discourse) further guided questioning to ensure the description of a participant’s lifeworld obtained was both detailed and thorough. As such, the topics covered with each participant included the participant’s: (1) general perceptions of their occupation and organisational field; (2) understanding of personal branding within their occupation, organisational field, and the identity market; (3) perceptions of marketing, branding and consumer culture; (4) descriptions of their personal brand; (5) descriptions of their market, competitors, and consumers; (6) descriptions of processes and practices related to personal
branding; (7) sources of knowledge and learning about personal branding; (8) experiences of success and failure as well as the challenges and difficulties associated with personal branding; (9) experiences of work and their understanding of their career before and after commencing personal branding; and (10) descriptions of the impact of personal branding on their lives.

Throughout the interviews, the researcher’s questions were kept short and open-ended to minimise the researcher’s obtrusion on participants as they shared their experiences – an interview style that elites tend to prefer (Harvey, 2011). Within the research encounter, Van Manen (1997) encourages researchers to be sensitive to silence, what is not said, or is unspeakable to access the full gamut of participants’ experiences. Accordingly, clarification was sought when participants statements were ambiguous (Moustakas, 1994). Probes (“Can you tell me more about…?”) and floating prompts (repeating terms in a participant’s last remark with an interrogative tone) were also used to elicit more detail or request examples (McCracken, 1988). ‘Why?’ questions were avoided to keep participant’s focused on describing their experiences rather than constructing rationalisations to justify their past behaviour (Thompson et al., 1989).

According to Cotte and Kistruck (2006, p. 470), a particular advantage of interviewing marketers is the openness the method can achieve: “If an interviewer can gain rapport and break down some of the barriers to communication that exist between researcher and informant, this form of data gathering can result in insights simply not possible (we argue) with any other method.” A high level of dialogic openness was achieved with participants, with this openness attributed to the trust the participants developed with the researcher throughout the extended research encounter (consisting of multiple interviews, meetings, and observations). In terms of how to build rapport with participants, McCracken (1988) advises researchers to balance formality and informality according to each interview context: the goal is to be perceived as professionally attentive and understanding. Harvey (2011) echoes the need to dress ‘appropriately’ when conducting an elite interview, with the researcher’s interpretation of what is appropriate informed by their background research about the elite. The researcher adopted this approach in dressing professionally, but not overly corporate in attire. This balance sought to reinforce that the interviews were a ‘research interview’ and as such, were distinct from formats that participants were more familiar with, such as a media or business interview (Gilding, 2010).
In terms of disadvantages, the tendency for marketing executives to engage in impression management during interviews has been noted as an issue for researchers to monitor and attempt to mitigate (Cotte & Kistruck, 2006). Cotte and Kistruck (2006, p. 473) explain there is a “potential clash between the acceptable norms for a person in their position, as reproduced in countless popular press business books and put forth by the informant, and their potentially different sense of self.” Skilled interviewers are generally able to elicit participants’ multiple selves, including their harder-to-access ‘real’ self (Riach, 2009). The researcher attempted to lower participants’ propensity to engage (or perceive the need to engage) in impression management by: (1) adopting a non-judgemental approach when interacting with participants; (2) probing for clarification when statements were unclear or ambiguous; (3) triangulating data collection over time; (4) and encouraging participant self-reflexivity by using documents and observations as stimulus during the interviews. The accounts of personal branding obtained from participants evidence that impression management did not demonstrably limit the veracity of the interview data, as the transcripts: (1) contained negative experiences that revealed participants’ failings and vulnerabilities; (2) captured participants’ negatively valenced meanings about marketing and branding; and (3) varied considerably from the accounts of the phenomenon contained in the popular press literature on personal branding. Finally, to build trust with participants and gain a holistic perspective of the phenomenon as it emerged, all interviews were conducted by the researcher.

5.4.4 Life story interviews

In addition to phenomenological interviews, life story interviews were also incorporated into the interview phase of data collection. Life story interviews record the personal narratives of participants’ own lives (Denzin, 1989). Personal narratives reveal the gradual development of the self in context, including participants’ past-, perceived-, and desired-selves (McAdams, 1993). To understand identity, McAdams (1993) emphasises that a researcher must have access to participants’ contemplations on their journey through life. Examining a person’s history, to the extent it can be made explicit, provides insight on how participants understand themselves within the context of the world (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Thus, life story
interviews were undertaken with participants to understand the life themes and life projects\textsuperscript{7} that orient and inform their personal brands. Consistent with the methodological literature on life story interviewing (Atkinson, 1998; Denzin, 1989; Douglas, Roberts, & Thompson, 1988; McAdams, 1993), the interviews covered important events and memories spanning participants’ childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, including their experiences of family, education, personal relationships, and career. Structurally, the interviews tended to trace participant’s lives chronologically, but departed when prescient memories and examples surfaced for participants to describe.

Mick and Buhl (1992, p. 335) advise that as life stories “are intrinsically indefinite and open to multiple interpretations”, it is advantageous to pre-specify how the collected data will be accommodated within the framework of inquiry. In this research, life stories were undertaken to access the lifeworld of personal branders as distinct from the more scripted, publicly available brand stories that participants constructed as elements of their brands. This distinction is important as this thesis seeks to understand personal branders’ experiences undertaking the marketing work of producing their brand – an inquiry that requires access to both the personal and professional territories of participants’ lives. To this end, the life story interviews revealed the broader contexts that shaped participants’ personal brands, including their early experiences of work and the personal and familial relationships that framed and impacted on their personal branding practice. While Mick and Buhl (1992, p. 334) understand that “the telling of life stories is relatively natural and often emotionally releasing for informants”, the contrary was found in this thesis, with participants’ personal lives representing a private territory they were practiced in protecting from the media and public. Section 6.5.2 in Chapter 6 further reflects on the difficulties of conducting the life story interviews, including how the researcher negotiated access to participants’ personal narratives during the research encounter.

\textsuperscript{7} Mick and Buhl (1992) understand life themes as the more profound goals, means, and existential concerns that structure, anticipate, and motivate a person’s experience and behaviour. Life projects, in contrast, are more dynamic self concepts that change with a person’s circumstances and lifecycle. For example, a person’s expression of their ambivalent patriotism (life project) may fit more broadly to their understanding of themselves as contrarians (life theme).
5.4.5 Member checks

Member check activities were undertaken as a continuous process throughout data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), with the researcher using probes, requests for examples, and the clarification of participants’ ambiguous statements during the phenomenological interviews to ensure accurate and detailed accounts of the phenomenon were captured. After completing the phenomenological and life story interviews, member check interviews and participants’ written reflections to the overall research findings were used to triangulate data collection, verify the researcher’s interpretation of participants’ experiences, and further capture any additional insights from participants (Creswell, 1998; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989).

To facilitate the member checks, participants were provided with a summary of the research findings written in plain language. Participants elected to respond to the findings by completing written reflections, citing their desire for time to think deeply and formulate their responses (compared to the more immediate nature of their dialogic responses captured in the interviews). Five questions were provided to participants as a form of ‘guided introspection’ (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993). These questions were: (1) did the findings make sense?; (2) has the researcher left anything important out?; (3) has the researcher not quite understood something?; (4) do the findings trigger any memories or examples you want to add?; (5) and finally, since the interviews, has anything changed that you want to share? Van Manen (1990) advocates the use of ‘protocol writing’, or having participants’ write about their experiences, when conducting phenomenological research, while several researchers attest to the value of using mixed-methods to encourage participant self-reflexivity and more fully access participants’ multiple realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Hudson & Ozanne, 1988; Jehn & Jonsen, 2010; Takhar & Chitakunye, 2012).

Further to the written response member checks, three participants (Sue, Wayne, and Rose) elected to complete an additional interview (ranging from 30-90 minutes in length) to provide their more extensive reflections. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) note that self-presentation and social desirability may result in participants rejecting the researcher’s interpretations in the member checks. The opposite scenario was experienced in this research, with participants expressing that the challenge of maintaining brand visibility could be further emphasised. In particular, Sue, Wayne, and Rose explained that the ephemeral nature of visibility made personal branding laborious and ‘brand death’ (invisibility in the identity market) an ever-present possibility. They cautioned that visibility generating activities often did not gain
traction in the market and that their experiences of personal branding contained many more ‘misses’ and ‘failures’ than ‘hits’ and ‘successes’. Over time, this led to feelings of exhaustion, despondency, and exasperation. This revelatory and self-effacing feedback was instructive in more fully elaborating on the challenges and negative experiences associated with personal branding. As such, this feedback was subsequently used to refine the emerging themes, affirming the value of completing the member checks.

5.5 Ethical considerations

Throughout the research process, the ethical guidelines of the University of Melbourne were adhered to. These guidelines encompassed the ethical issues pertinent to this research and that are commonly encountered when conducting interpretive research, including: attaining informed consent and disclosing the purpose of the research to participants; protecting participants’ privacy and confidentiality; and advising participants of the voluntary nature of their involvement and freedom to withdraw from the research (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Moustakas, 1994). These issues were addressed in the information sheet provided to participants, both electronically when making initial contact and as a hardcopy before the first interviews were conducted. The information sheet contained the researcher’s contact details to ensure participants could access the researcher to ask questions and provide feedback throughout the data collection period. Each condition of participation was reiterated with participants before they signed the consent form. As such, participants explicitly agreed to the audio-taping and transcription of the interviews, were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation, and were made aware of their right to terminate the interviews and withdraw from the project.

The researcher’s observations of participants’ performing their brands at public events was based on their prior agreement, with the extent of access (for example, backstage access before and after an event) controlled by participants. Documents that constituted textual artefacts of the personal brands (for example, social media content) were collected from the public domain or were provided by participants to the researcher. The extended research encounter with personal branders traversed a broad range of issues that included their personal relationships, identity, ethics, saleability and monetary earnings, marketing plans and strategies, and their experiences of media attack and public criticism. The sensitive nature of these personal and professional issues ensured that a high level of vigilance was required to maintain participants’ anonymity and confidentiality, and hence enable them to
express themselves openly while having their commercial interests protected (Jehn & Jonsen, 2010). As such, measures to ensure anonymity were implemented (and are outlined in section 5.3.1). Participants also confirmed that the assurance of anonymity was important (see section 6.5.1).

5.6 Data analysis and interpretation

Hermeneutic phenomenology does not prescribe a specific set of analytic procedures, but does recognise the need for thematic analysis, or determining the experiential structures (themes) that constitute the essence of a phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). Thus, data analysis was guided by a hermeneutic interpretive framework that consisted of: (1) part to whole analysis of the texts; (2) holistic understanding of participants, the context of study, and the texts generated; and (3) a fusion of horizons between the interpretive perspective of the researcher and the texts being interpreted (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997; Thompson et al., 1994). Consistent with an emergent research design, data analysis was not undertaken as a discrete phase, but in concert with sample recruitment and data collection (Morse et al., 2002; Thompson, 1997). Accordingly, the verbatim phenomenological and life story interview transcripts, as well as the textual data generated from participants’ updates to the researcher during the monitoring phase of data collection, were the primary texts for analysis. These data were iteratively read and reflected on after completing each interview, each set of interviews with a participant, and across the dataset after all the interviews had been conducted and updates received. The additional data sources (participants’ written reflections, as well as the documents and observational field notes) were used as secondary texts to inform and refine the researcher’s interpretation. As such, the secondary texts provided the researcher with cultural and background knowledge that acted as an orienting frame of reference from which to engage with the textual data and interpret participants’ experiences (Thompson, 1997).

Part to whole analysis, as an iterative procedure, was undertaken in two stages. First, an intratexual cycle involved treating the interview transcripts (texts) as separate idiographic cases to understand how the experiential structures were organised for each participant (Thompson, 1997). This stage involved repeatedly reading a text – first in its entirety to discern its holistic meaning, and then in finer graduations – noting thematic patterns and their linkages and the significant statements or meaning units that pertained to them. Emergent themes were documented and systemised from each transcript via processes of ‘narrative
framing’, or selecting and highlighting certain details out of the field of experience (Polkinghorne, 1988), and ‘narrative movement’, or organising experiences temporally and in relation to the nexus of personal history and future goals and desires underlying the experience (Thompson, 1997). Narrative framing and movement focused on participants’ experiences of personal branding, particularly the meanings, processes, practices, and outcomes associated with it. Second, an intertextual cycle was undertaken which involved identifying patterns and differences across cases (Thompson, 1997). As this iterative process continued, a larger pattern of thematic relationships was derived that encompassed the experiential structures of all participants. There were also interactive movements between the intratextual and intertextual interpretive cycles through a process of dialectical tacking in which emerging themes were challenged, revised, and expanded by iterative movement between individual transcripts and the entire set of textual data (Thompson, 1997). In this way, the iterative reading strategy for each case and across cases mirrored Van Manen’s (1990) three-way approach of undertaking holistic analysis (reading the text as a whole to discern its meanings), selective analysis (identifying statements/phrases that seem essential to the experience under study), and then detailed analysis (analysing every sentence).

The part to whole analysis that hermeneutic circle entails further required the researcher to situate participants’ emic perceptions in a broader etic framework of sociocultural meanings (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997). Accordingly, the interpretive frame was broadened to consider additional sources of knowledge about the phenomenon, including the secondary texts (participants’ written reflections, documents, and observational field notes), academic literature on marketing and consumer culture, and immersive experiences the researcher undertook to understand the culture of personal branding (described in section 5.4.1). This broader perspective situated the phenomenon in relation to macro-level socio-historic forces in postmodern consumer culture, such as the commodification and marketisation of personhood (as discussed in section 2.3 of Chapter 2). Dialectical tacking between participants’ experiences and the broader socio-historic context continued until sensible meanings of the experience were reached that were free from contradictions (Kvale, 1996). At this point, a fusion of horizons was achieved between the interpreter’s frame of reference and the texts being interpreted (Thompson, 1997). This iterative approach ensured that each description of experience was interpreted within the context of the text as a whole, the text was interpreted in relation to the conceptual framework of personal branding, and the conceptual framework was interpreted from the more encompassing socio-historic
perspective of postmodern consumer culture. To address the final research question, participants’ descriptions of lived experience were compared with the knowledge claims of the popular press literature to identify similarities and differences.

Throughout the interpretive process, the emerging thematic structure was refined not only by continuously referring back to the original transcripts (Thompson, 1997), but through the use of free imaginative variation, an interpretive group, and peer debriefing. Free imaginative variation is an analytic process that attempts to “discover aspects of or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 107). It involves imagining alternative possible meanings of the data using techniques such as varying the themes and frame of reference, employing reversals and polarities, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). By employing these techniques, the experiential structures related to undertaking the marketing work of personal branding and navigating the identity market were clarified.

Similar to previous research using a hermeneutical interpretive process (e.g., Hirschman, 1994; Parmentier et al., 2013), the emergent themes were also refined through comments received from the interpretive group and peer debriefing. The interpretive group consisted of the lead researcher (doctoral student) and two doctoral supervisors whose combined expertise spans marketing, brand management, cultural anthropology, social psychology, and organisational behaviour. The interpretive group reviewed the lead researcher’s interpretations throughout the data collection and analysis period to ensure the interpretation contained sufficient reference to the data and a holistic understanding of the context. As a bi-gender, multi-disciplinary research team, the interpretive group also provided a broader perspective to identify patterns in the data, preventing insights being constrained by a single researcher’s ‘sedimented’ perspective, or where “the researcher may become focused on certain aspects of the transcript while failing to see others” (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 141). Peer debriefing was undertaken with two external consumer culture researchers who validated the emerging themes and sensitised the researcher to concepts and literature to further develop the interpretation. Additional feedback was received from presentations at the researcher’s doctoral confirmation and completion seminar, PhD colloquiums, and consumer culture research methodology workshops.
5.7 Trustworthiness

On how phenomenological research should be evaluated, Thompson et al. (1990) advise that quality assessments pertain to “whether the interpretation is consistent with the aims motivating the study, can be directly supported by reference to participant descriptions, and provides insight into the phenomenon being investigated” (p. 347). In addition, a hermeneutic approach to phenomenological research should examine how aspects of culture, history, practice, and language are embedded in participants’ narratives (Laverty, 2003), with the resulting analysis revealing the phenomenon in a “fuller and deeper manner” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10).

Within the interpretive research paradigm this thesis is located in, research quality has been expressed in terms of ‘trustworthiness’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Measures of trustworthiness are an alternative to the positivist paradigm’s measures of reliability (the extent to which results are consistent over time and accurately represent the total population under study) and validity (the extent to which the research truly measures what it intends to measure) (Zikmund, 2003). The different operationalisations of research quality are necessary given the nature of knowledge is different in the positivist versus interpretive paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1994; Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). From the outset, however, it is important to note that despite different ontological and methodological assumptions, both phenomenological and positivist approaches “share a common commitment to conducting rigorous, empirical research that is open to careful scrutiny” (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 142).

The seminal work, Naturalistic Inquiry, by Lincoln and Guba (1985) advances four measures of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) that continue to be widely used today. However, two major criticisms concerning these evaluative criteria prevent their wholesale adoption as sufficient measures to evaluate the research quality of this thesis. The first criticism centers on the appropriateness of these trustworthiness measures for phenomenological research. The second criticism concerns the

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8 The notion that evaluative criteria can specify what good qualitative work is has been contested by naturalistic researchers, with Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 277) observing that “the battles in this domain have been extensive, and they continue.” On the persistence of these discordant views, Seale (2003) explains “the project of criteriology experiences particular contradictions because of the difficulty in regulating and constraining an endeavor whose guiding philosophy often stresses creativity, exploration, conceptual flexibility, and a freedom of spirit” (p. 171).
inability of post-hoc trustworthiness measures to ensure rigor throughout the research process.

With regard to the first criticism, hermeneutic phenomenology ontologically supports that reality is subjective and dynamic (Laverty, 2003). At the methodological level, this translates to a recognition that texts are open to multiple interpretations (Ricoeur, 1976, 1981). The requirement for researchers, therefore, is not that their themes are the only possible interpretation of transcripts, but that within the themes presented, the “interpretive patterns should be visible and comprehensible to other readers” (Thompson et al., 1990, p. 347). The theoretical position that orients phenomenological work is, thus, somewhat inconsistent with the trustworthiness measure of ‘dependability’, defined as the extent to which “findings of an inquiry would be repeated if the inquiry were replicated with the same (or similar) subjects (respondents) in the same (or similar) context” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). Accepting that truth is relative, Lincoln and Guba’s (1985, p. 290) understanding of ‘credibility’ (“How can one establish confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings of a particular inquiry for the subjects (respondents) and the context in which the inquiry was carried out?”) becomes less problematic. As such, for this thesis, an appropriate measure of credibility is whether the research findings capture adequate and believable representations of participants’ realities (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989) and use sound methods to do so (Erlandson et al., 1993).

The criterion of ‘confirmability’ – as the extent to which “the findings of an inquiry are determined by the subjects (respondents) and conditions of the inquiry and not by the biases, motivations, interests, or perspectives of the inquirer” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290) – has partial applicability to this thesis’s inquiry. The first aspect of confirmability is not problematic as phenomenological researchers must provide sufficient references to transcripts so that readers can corroborate the validity of a theme by following the analytic translation of participants’ emic descriptions to the researcher’s etic interpretation (Erlandson et al., 1993; Thompson et al., 1990). However, the latter requirement that an interpretation is divorced from the perspective and influence of a researcher is not germane to a hermeneutic approach to conducting phenomenological research which necessitates that an “investigator’s experience becomes part of data” (Morse et al., 2002, p. 14).

Finally, ‘transferability’, or the extent to which the findings can be generalised to other participants or contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), is an assessment readers may seek to make
when judging “whether the themes are viable, useful, and meaningful” (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 143). The purpose of phenomenological inquiry, however, is not to create generalisable theory (Erlandson et al., 1993), but to uncover the universal meanings that represent the essence of an experience while revealing “the primacy of the subjective experience” (Goulding, 2005, p. 303).

Recognising the need to carefully consider the applicability of trustworthiness measures, this thesis supports the pragmatic conclusion Seale (2003) advances, which is that although measures to achieve trustworthiness cannot be pre-specified as methodological rules, “their reconstitution as ‘guidelines,’ to be followed with intelligence and knowledge of the particular research context, may assist us in moving toward good quality work” (p. 176). Importantly, detailed expositions of the techniques to ensure trustworthiness have been provided by several authors to guide researchers more practically on issues of methodology (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1989, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999). This thesis adopts the position that a judicious use of methodologically appropriate trustworthiness techniques has merit in improving qualitative research quality. To this end, Table 5.4 summarises the trustworthiness techniques employed in this thesis.

A second criticism is raised by Morse et al. (2002) who argue that while strategies to ensure trustworthiness may be useful to evaluate rigor at the completion of a project, they do not ensure rigor throughout it. For example, while maintaining an audit trail documents the decisions made during the research process, it does not guide, justify, or enhance the quality of those decisions (Morse et al., 2002). To correct and identify errors before they are built into a study, Morse et al. (2002) advocate the use of verification strategies, or “mechanisms used during the process of research to incrementally contribute to ensuring reliability and validity and, thus, the rigor of a study” (p. 9). Importantly, in relation to the first criticism discussed about trustworthiness measures, they add: “Verification takes into account the varying philosophical perspectives inherent in qualitative inquiry, thus, the strategies used will be specific to, and inherent in, each methodological approach” (Morse et al., 2002, p. 14). Verification strategies include that: research questions and methods are congruent; a purposive sample is drawn of participants who best represent or have knowledge of the topic; sampling, data collection, and data analysis are iterative and continue until saturation is reached; and theory development is inductive (Morse et al., 2002). These verification strategies are consistent with the guidelines of conducting good phenomenological research
(Moustakas, 1994; Thompson et al., 1989) and were factored into this thesis’s research design. In summary, the verification strategies and trustworthiness techniques outlined in Table 5.4 have been used in concert to ensure the research quality of this thesis’s inquiry.

Characteristics of the researcher are also pivotal to ensuring trustworthiness, with several authors agreeing that researchers must be holistic in perspective, responsive and adaptable to change, and sensitive and open to experience in the research encounter (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Morse et al., 2002; Van Manen, 1990). The integrity of a study further relies on a researcher having a good interviewing technique, as well as the ability to build rapport and trust with participants, safeguard participants’ identities, and engage in self-analysis and introspection (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Addressing these requirements, the researcher: undertook methodological training on phenomenological interviewing; opportunistically collected data using an emergent design, purposive sampling, and emergent dialogue to maximise the breadth and depth of data collected; implemented a range of more stringent measures to preserve participants’ anonymity (see section 5.3.1); and maintained a research diary recording reflections throughout the research process (which are presented in detail in Chapter 6).

Finally, continuing with a pragmatic approach, this thesis recognises that Arnold and Fischer’s (1994) more general evaluative guidelines to review the quality of a hermeneutic interpretation have relevance and applicability to the inquiry undertaken. Arnold and Fischer’s (1994, p. 64) five guidelines include: (1) the interpretation must be coherent and free of contradiction with themes documented and observations supported with examples; (2) a command of the relevant literature must be evident; (3) the interpretation should be comprehensible to the reading audience, given their pre-understanding of the phenomenon; (4) the interpretation should be enlightening, revealing new insights about the phenomenon; (5) the prose should be persuasive, engaging, interesting, stimulating, and appealing, with the cultural literacy of the authors being apparent. These guidelines serve as a workable evaluative framework to assess this thesis’s research quality.
Table 5.4 Techniques employed to ensure trustworthiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Application</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>Multiple, different sources are used to search for convergence and corroborate evidence, improving the credibility and confirmability of themes (Wallendorf &amp; Belk, 1989).</td>
<td>Data collection triangulated sources (multiple participants) and methods (documents, observations, interviews). Additional sources (research diary, participants' written reflections, previous literature) also informed interpretation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member checks</td>
<td>Findings are provided to participants to validate accuracy and adequacy (Creswell &amp; Miller, 2000). Seen as most crucial technique to establish credibility (Lincoln &amp; Guba, 1985).</td>
<td>Undertaken using written reflections and interviews with participants. Findings validated with additional insights generated. Detailed description of procedures provided in section 5.4.5.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Close collaboration with participants positions then as active co-researchers in the research process, improving trust and the credibility of the data collected (Creswell &amp; Miller, 2000).</td>
<td>Autodriving and emergent dialogue involved participants as co-researchers in the interviews. Reflexive experiences (observations, written reflections) ensured close collaboration, built trust, and resulted in dialogic openness with participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative case analysis and seeking limiting exceptions</td>
<td>Purposive sampling allows researchers to progressively seek (a) negative instances likely to disconfirm emerging findings (improving credibility), and (b) different contexts to understand limits to transferability of findings (Wallendorf &amp; Belk, 1989).</td>
<td>Sample recruited with diversity on a range of characteristics identified as relevant to the phenomenon in the emergent findings. Broad coverage of the contours of the phenomenon achieved with progressive case recruitment based on maximum divergence. Negative cases were used to refine themes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thick, rich description</td>
<td>Providing thick descriptions containing vivid detail of participants experiences helps readers establish the credibility of an account (Creswell &amp; Miller, 2000).</td>
<td>Multiple interviews were conducted with participants to obtain thick descriptions of personal branding. Verbatim quotes and contextual descriptions about participants’ experiences are provided in detail in this thesis’s findings chapters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prolonged engagement</td>
<td>Longer engagement in the field enables researchers to capture more pluralistic perspectives from participants, better understand the research context, and learn how a phenomenon changes over time, all of which improve the credibility of findings (Creswell &amp; Miller, 2000; Wallendorf &amp; Belk, 1989).</td>
<td>Data collection proceeded over seven years, with multiple interviews conducted with each participant, followed by short interviews and monitoring through document collection and observations. Prolonged engagement allowed the researcher to understand participants’ experiences over time. Documents collected also provided historical insights on participants’ brands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher reflexivity</td>
<td>Researchers use a diary to reflect on the research encounter, self-disclosing beliefs and biases to understand their influence, improving the interpretation (Wallendorf &amp; Belk, 1989).</td>
<td>Reflexivity undertaken throughout the research process. Issues identified relate to power-relations, identity negotiation, participants’ motives, and methodological techniques employed. Chapter 5 discusses the researcher’s reflexivity in detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer debriefing</td>
<td>Someone familiar with the research/phenomenon critically reviews the data/research process to improve credibility (Lincoln &amp; Guba, 1985).</td>
<td>Data and findings extensively reviewed by two thesis supervisors (expert in marketing, brand management, cultural anthropology, social psychology, organisational behaviour). Two external consumer culture researchers validated themes and sensitised the researcher to concepts and literature to develop the interpretation. Feedback received from presentations at doctoral confirmation and colloquium, and research seminars.</td>
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</table>
5.8 Summary
This chapter provided a detailed exposition of the data collection and analysis methods used in this thesis. It outlined the value of selecting personal branders as the unit of analysis before describing the purposive sampling strategy it employs and the specific issues encountered with the elite participants. An overview of the data collection methods followed, including the use of phenomenological and life story interviews, documents, observations, and member checks. The ethical considerations relevant to this research were then highlighted with procedures of the hermeneutic approach to data analysis and interpretation following. Finally, the complexities of assessing interpretive research quality were discussed, with the techniques and verification strategies this thesis uses to ensure trustworthiness concluding this chapter. Chapter 6 builds on this chapter’s discussion of research methodology by focusing on the researcher’s reflections about the research encounter and subsequent knowledge produced.
Chapter 6
Reflections on the research

6.1 Introduction
This chapter contains the researcher’s reflections concerning the knowledge produced in this thesis. To do this, it adopts a first-person perspective to present the researcher’s account of issues and insights emerging from the research encounter. It begins by discussing the importance of reflexivity in hermeneutic phenomenological research before outlining the reflexive process undertaken by the researcher. Following this, issues and insights are discussed that focus, in turn, on the researcher’s and participants’ role in the research.

6.2 The need for reflexivity in hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry
The call for greater researcher reflexivity has been echoed in the marketing literature for some time now (e.g., Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Hirschman, 1986; Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993). Researcher reflexivity is important for phenomenological researchers (Goulding, 2005), particularly when adopting a hermeneutic approach as this research tradition positions the researcher as a subject in the research encounter (Moustakas, 1994; Thompson et al., 1994; Van Manen, 1990). As such, hermeneutic phenomenology “demands self-reflexivity” (Laverty, 2003, p. 30) so that researchers can question how their interpretations came about, and hence, assist to verify the trustworthiness of their research findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Seale, 2003). Elaborating on the value of reflexivity, Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton (2009, p. 663) explain:

Researcher reflexivity has been identified in the social sciences as a way to challenge the unspoken ideologies of objective, scientific research; to address power and control in the research encounter; to understand ourselves and our practice as researchers and, as such, to produce better accounts.

In providing my reflections, I follow the precedent of other phenomenological researchers who have presented their reflections concerning their studies of marketing and consumer culture (e.g., Cope, 2005; Stone, 2009).
6.3 Reflexive process and overview of reflexive findings

My reflections are informed by a research diary I maintained throughout the research encounter. I typically wrote notes before and after interviews, when transcribing interviews, and after each complete reading of interview transcripts. These notes recorded observations, future probes, and unresolved questions, and assisted me to identify emergent themes and evaluate the interview process. Reflexive writing has similarly been undertaken by interpretive researchers when studying the complex relationships between people and brands (Diamond et al., 2009; Fournier, 1998; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Thompson et al., 2006). For researchers considering future studies with similar participants, Table 6.1 summarises this chapter’s key insights and methodological implications.

Table 6.1 Summary of researcher reflections and methodological implications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher reflections</th>
<th>Methodological implications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants had reflexive motives for participating in the study.</td>
<td>Emphasise the reflexive potential of a study when recruiting personal branders. Encourage participant self-reflexivity (e.g. use autodriving techniques, collect participants’ written reflections).</td>
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<td>Power-relations with participants were dynamic.</td>
<td>Do not assume static or hierarchical power-relations with participants. Monitor and reflect on power-relations throughout the research encounter (e.g. use a research diary).</td>
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<td>Life stories were a private territory for participants.</td>
<td>Gain the trust of participants with high visibility status before attempting to conduct life story interviews.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Immersive experiences improved the depth and breadth of data collected.</td>
<td>Demonstrate interest in participants’ experiences and adopt an opportunistic approach to data collection to maximise access to potential data sources about the phenomenon.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The researcher experienced attacks from participants.</td>
<td>Prepare to sustain attacks. Personal disclosure is a possible response to affirm the researcher’s intent and shared vulnerable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants tended to construct the researcher as a marketing expert.</td>
<td>Monitor participants’ attributions of marketing expert status to the researcher to ensure participants are empowered to represent their lived experience in their own terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The researcher’s prior knowledge about participants was useful in the research encounter.</td>
<td>Conduct brand audits to personalise communications with potential participants and inform the approach with each participant (e.g. what constitutes appropriate dress, level of formality expected).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants’ previous interview experiences impacted their approach to the interviews.</td>
<td>Understand the interview templates (media and business interviews) a participant may draw upon. Reinforce the ‘research interview’ template by clarifying consent conditions and knowledge development goals of the research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The research encounter was a transformational experience for the researcher.</td>
<td>Reflect on the impacts the research encounter has on the researcher’s identity and the interpretation reached, particularly if the researcher has a personal interest in the phenomenon.</td>
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6.4 Reflections on the researcher’s role in the research process

The most salient impact I can discern from my role in the research process, other than researcher-participant gender effects (discussed as a limitation in the final chapter), relates to two researcher identities participants constructed for me and that I, in retrospect, performed: that of ‘innocuous researcher’ and ‘branding expert’. With respect to aspects of the research encounter to reflect upon, the negotiation of researcher identities remains an important, but under-developed area of inquiry (Hamilton, Dunnett, & Downey, 2012). To this end, discussion will first centre on my two researcher identities and their impact on the research process before attention turns to the value of using documents and observations to immerse myself in the phenomenon.

6.4.1 The innocuous researcher identity

I was in my late twenties when I commenced data collection, but my age was often perceived to be in my early 20s. Three participants joked that I looked too young to be doing a PhD in our first meetings. Being perceived as young and bookish by the participants was equated with being non-threatening as Ben the blogger revealed:

Ben: I was like searching for you on Facebook and I was like, ‘Oh my god, he’s 23 or 22. He’s harmless.’ [Both laugh] No, no. I really thought you were, like, so young! I’m like, ‘Oh my god, it’s good.’ Doing the interviews is not, like, you know, going to be awkward or anything.

Ben’s construction of me as young and, therefore, ‘harmless’ assuaged his concerns about participating in the interviews. It follows that my framing as ‘innocuous researcher’ likely affected the recruitment of participants: positively, in being seen as non-threatening, and possibly negatively, in being seen as inexperienced.

Unsurprisingly, the identity of innocuous researcher created different dynamics with each participant, but the most common feedback from participants was that they felt comfortable talking with me during what hostess Suki described as our ‘relaxed chats’. Perceived as a non-threatening, young researcher, my innocuousness tended to engender support from participants. For example, offering me compliments such as, “Good question” during the interviews and providing me with feedback about the research process. This feedback was highly instructive and proved to be a rich addition to the interview texts. For example, while talking casually with Jasmine the comedian after an interview, she had an epiphany about the
covert nature of personal branding and an ego-defensive way of asking about it. Jasmine felt comfortable asking for my smartphone and used the voice memo application to record the following memo to me:

**Jasmine:** A tip for Trent. So you shouldn’t be asking people about how you branded yourself, but how your brand occurred, because people never want to look like they are pushing themselves to the front of the queue. They don’t want to look like a queue jumper. They want to look like the person selected because they are gifted, perfect, lovely, famous. I know that I’m a brand and I wasn’t taken aback when you asked how did I create my brand. But I think you’d be more likely to get people to do this if you ask, ‘How was your brand created?’ so they can be, like, ‘Oh, this brand has just been bestowed upon me.’

The identity of innocuous researcher also positioned me as an outsider to the specific norms, practices, and insider knowledge of each participant’s occupation. My outsider status allowed me to assume the role of a naïve observer at times, extracting more detailed descriptions about processes and practices than I might not otherwise have obtained. This technique was similarly employed by McDowell (1998) when interviewing elites from the commercial world, and is evident below in creating the need for Tom the producer to give me a lengthy description of the grooming rituals involved in preparing to perform his brand.

**Tom:** Like, sometimes I think I have a split personality. Sometimes on weekends, I just wear shorts and a cap and runners and a t-shirt and people won’t recognise me on the street. They are use to seeing that other side of me that is fully dressed up, hair is done.

**Interviewer:** What gets done?

**Tom:** Everything. Everything.

**Interviewer:** Can you break it down for a complete amateur like me?

**Tom:** Absolutely. So, you really want to see inside now?

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

My innocuous researcher identity afforded me an apolitical stance when interacting with participants. I intentionally encouraged this sense of personal neutrality by dressing in a smart casual way and stating my openness to free expression. Not being seen as too corporate or conservative despite researching in a business school, and being perceived to be neither pro-nor anti-marketing and personal branding, was pivotal in eliciting both the positive and negative meanings and experiences participants shared about the phenomenon. That intensely negative understandings of branding and marketing were captured in the interviews confirms to me that a more holistic description of the phenomenon’s contours – both the light and the dark, tensions and challenges – was attained.
6.4.2 The branding expert identity

A second researcher identity participants tended to construct for me was that of a ‘branding expert’. This identity was likely the result of participants’ being aware of my career background in marketing (described in my webpage’s professional profile) and their knowledge that I was completing a PhD at Melbourne Business School. Participants such as Wayne the journalist, Jasmine the comedian, and Sue the entrepreneur openly sought my advice on their personal brands, suggesting that this identity also contributed to some participants’ agreement to partake in the research. When asked to comment on the layout of a participant’s website or my perception of their brand, I generally highlighted that the rules of personal branding had not yet been written and that their experience ensured they were the current experts on the topic. When my deflection or non-response to these questions created a disjuncture in the interviews, I would offer statements – generally more vague than definitive, open rather than closed – that created space for participants to refocus on their lived experience. For example, when Wayne persistently sought my opinion about his website images, my response of, “I’m noticing a consistency in these images. Was that planned?” was enough to segue to the topic of consistency and evolution in representing his brand over time.

Often though, my construction as a branding expert was more subtle, as the following examples from Jane, Rose, and Jasmine reveal. In each example, the participants included phrases (underlined for emphasis) that evidence their perception that I possessed a specialised marketing knowledge that they were deficit in.

**Interviewer:** What is a persona?

**Jane:** Um, well, that… the persona is that you’d have like a kind of image out there that you’re… as you’d say, you’re selling your brand, you know?

**Interviewer:** What’s a brand?

**Rose:** Okay, a brand, in my lack of media and marketing skills… um, a brand I guess is a product or an ideal that people will buy or buy into. Do you know what I mean?

**Interviewer:** So have you been pigeonholed?

**Jasmine:** No, I think what’s interesting is, um, because I’ve scanned… you’ll probably be able to have all the right names for this. I started as a young, you know… I got up on stage and clearly I could talk and tell jokes.
Participants’ concern about using the correct marketing or branding terminology when describing their experiences positioned me as an expert who had specialised knowledge of the topic and its vocabulary. Adding to this perceived knowledge asymmetry was the participants’ lack of marketing qualifications. Sue the entrepreneur and Kevin the politician were the participants most familiar with the personal branding movement’s discourse. Both had previously read some of the popular press literature and participated in personal branding exercises, but they too expressed that their knowledge was limited. My perceived ‘expert’ status in the domain of experience I was examining was problematic as the “interviewer does not want to be seen as more powerful or knowledgeable because the respondent must be the expert on his or her own experiences” (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 138). I attempted to diffuse this identity when it surfaced in the research encounter. For example, when I detected a participant’s concern about using appropriate marketing terminology, I would explain that there were no correct terms and that my interest was in their story expressed without limitations. Statements of this nature were my attempt to empower participants to express themselves using the emic terms they would naturally use rather than recapitulating their experience in etic or theoretical terms (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). By establishing this understanding about language I was able to explore the definitions of terms such as ‘brand’ and ‘marketing’ with participants, capturing important descriptions of the pejorative meanings loaded onto these terms. Offering stilted, contradictory, incomplete, and emergent understandings of words was, however, a vulnerable territory for participants.

The personal branders’ need to be empowered to represent the limitations of their experience – a reversal of the imagined hierarchical power-relations between a young interviewer and an elite – and the ongoing negotiation of power and identities experienced in the interviews is consistent with the experience of Conti and O’Neil (2007). Reflexively examining their experience of interviewing elites from the World Trade Organisation, Conti and O’Neil (2007) similarly rejected the notion of static, hierarchical power relations in the research encounter. Their experience is particularly resonant with my own and highlights that “by assuming a hierarchy of power of up or down, the researcher can lose sight of their own role in the research process including the ability to intervene in the power dynamic of the interview” (Conti & O’Neil, 2007, pp. 79-80).

The identities of innocuous researcher and branding expert provided me with sufficient agency and perceived legitimacy to gain participants’ trust and interact with them openly in
the research encounter. One of the more challenging aspects of the interviews, however, was sustaining attacks, which is a common experience described in the elite interviewing literature (Conti & O’Neil, 2007; Dexter, 1970; Harvey, 2011). While I encountered few instances of being attacked, I include one extended example to acknowledge it occurred and took the form of being personally criticised and treated rudely. The chosen example supports Conti and O’Neil’s (2007) proposition that researchers have agency to renegotiate their authority in the ongoing negotiation of power-relations that is the research encounter. In the following exchange with Ben, I used honesty and humour and demonstrated a willingness to be vulnerable that disarmed his attack and resulted in him reciprocating with empathy and a rather humbling admission.

Ben: For example, you and I, why did you fly all the way here when we could have just Skyped this interview?

Interviewer: Well, I think I can get a better understanding of your experiences by actually talking to you.

Ben: Do you even know how to use online technologies such as instant messenger, Skype?

Interviewer: I do.

Ben: Do you use any social media at all?

Interviewer: I have a poorly maintained Facebook profile.

Ben: Which you don’t update! You don’t have MySpace? What else?

Interviewer: That’s it.

Ben: You need to…I don’t know. You need to network more!

Interviewer: I have a personal website through Melbourne Business School.

Ben: I saw that. [Both laugh]

Interviewer: That’s it.

Ben: Whatever.

Interviewer: I feel like…my technophobia is being exposed.

Ben: Don’t you think it would be to your advantage to set up… You’re not taking part in what’s out there.

Interviewer: Yeah, but I have close contact with my friends. I don’t feel like I’m missing out.

Ben: Actually, it’s kind of awesome. Everyone is so online now. For me, it’s part of my world, it’s all out there. I think with all the tools and technologies out there, it is just so easy to put yourself out there, you know? For example, with social media, I’m on Facebook, I’m on Twitter, I’m on whatever. It’s really making it easy for me to make a mark with people and to increase my readership or have more followers. Anybody can do the same thing.

Drawing on this example with Ben, an important realisation for me was that I approached the earlier interviews I undertook attempting to retain a certain objectiveness and sense of control
as the interviewer. The inescapability of the interviewer being a subject in a phenomenological interview was, however, explained in the methodological literature I read (e.g., Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Pollio et al., 1997; Van Manen, 1990). This issue has been reflected on by other phenomenological researchers, with the same conclusion reached: “the researcher has to relinquish control in order to open himself/herself to the phenomenon in its own right” (Cope, 2005, p. 180). My lived experience of being a subject in the research affirmed the need for me to approach the interviews with a sense of reciprocity; namely, being willing to share my lifeworld with participants and similarly experience the uncomfortableness, vulnerability, validation, learning, uncertainty, support, empathy, and conflict they experienced. The dynamic this reciprocity creates is one that preserves the personhood of both researcher and participant, allowing a closeness to form that Toma (2000) suggests can facilitate participants sharing deeper and more detailed narratives with a researcher.

6.4.3 Immersion in the phenomenon with participants
The prolonged research encounter of interviewing, observing, and collecting documents about each participant over a seven-year period gave me sufficient opportunity to immerse myself in the phenomenon of personal branding. While the value of these documents and observations in stimulating participant self-reflexivity in the interviews has been described in section 5.4.2, it is important to acknowledge the ‘researcher transformation’ that occurred from sharing these experiences with participants (Hamilton et al., 2012). Notably, the potential for researcher identity transformations tends to be greater when researchers are immersed in topics that are sensitive (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liampittong, 2007), confronting (Stone, 2009), or that they are personally interested in (Toma, 2000). The personal revelations of participants and my own interest in marketing and branding potentially explain the transformational power of the research encounter for me.

The nature of my transformation concerns the valence of my attitude towards personal branding. An example relates to observing Rose the writer interacting with customers at a book signing event. One week after the event, we reflected on the experience at the beginning of an interview. I remembered seeing a woman return and purchase a second book for Rose to sign and that Rose inscribed a lengthy message on the inside cover of the book before hugging the customer goodbye. When I asked Rose if she remembered this ‘woman’, her response was the following:
Rose: Oh, you’re talking about Lisa. Yeah, her mother has some pretty significant health issues. She came back to pick up another copy for her mother. Lisa was such a lovely lady and she was so worried about the women in her life that I wanted to do my bit and send a message to inspire them. It’s the least I could do and hey, this is the stuff I live for. Nothing is more satisfying.

The genuineness of Rose’s act of sharing and gifting in a commercial exchange with Lisa while performing as her brand made a strong impression on me. This experience challenged my own buy-in to the cultural trope of personal branders being shameless in their self-promotion. On reflection, I approached the topic of personal branding with this prejudice, which was likely a manifestation of my own: (a) introversion, desire for privacy, and subsequent personal reticence towards high visibility status; and (b) ambivalent feelings towards marketing and branding I developed as a former social marketing practitioner working in the government and not-for-profit sector. The intersection of these factors contributed to me loading a range of negative associations about marketing onto personal branding, such as social justice concerns about the inequalities created by market hegemony, and the inadequate incorporation of sustainability and human wellbeing into marketing theory and practice.

My immersion in the phenomenon and reflexivity throughout the research encounter challenged my pre-understanding of personal branding being a morally questionable practice. This transformation provided me with a deeper understanding of Rose’s lived experience and opened new avenues of dialogue in our subsequent interviews, which improved the depth, breadth, and contextual detail of the descriptions I obtained about the phenomenon. In this way, my experience affirms Toma’s (2000) position that getting close to participants can improve the quality of qualitative data. My experience also supports Van Manen’s (1990) advocacy for interpretive researchers to deeply immerse themselves in a phenomenon, using reflexive insights to inform knowledge production throughout the research process.

6.5 Reflections about participants in the research process
This section focuses on my reflections about participants, particularly their motives for being involved in the research and the impact that their extensive interview experience had on the research encounter.
6.5.1 Participants’ reflexive motivations

For researchers, the difficulty of recruiting elites can be reduced by understanding their motivations for participating in an interview (Gilding, 2010; Harvey, 2011; McDowell, 1998). The following sub-section contains my understanding of participants’ motives and is provided with the intention of assisting other researchers similarly tasked with recruiting personal branders or human brands more generally. Gilding (2010) is one of the only researchers to have examined the motives of elites to participate in interviews with social scientists. His study of super rich elites found they were “motivated by contradictory considerations: on the one hand, wanting to promote their concerns to a wider audience and, on the other, wanting to reflect upon their predicaments in confidence” (Gilding, 2010, p. 755). With respect to the first motive, when reviewing the plain language information sheet and consent form conditions with participants, I was conscious to explain the potential for their experiences to provide a more truthful understanding of personal branding compared to the popular press literature that had been written to date. The representational argument for participating in the research did not hold much gravitas with participants. They were largely unaware of the popular press literature and indifferent to the advancement of marketing scholarship.

Gilding’s (2010) second motive concerning reflexivity was more salient for participants. While some participants had colleagues and managers involved in managing their brand, the actual experience of being the brand – and the tensions and challenges associated with that – was considered private. The opportunity to reflect on their experiences, anonymously, and with guidance from a researcher, provided participants with a safe, emotionally-supportive space to explore an almost unspoken about aspect of their lives. It follows that the assurance of anonymity was an important pre-condition for all participants. In the interviews, anonymity seemed to free the participants from the usual constraints of self-presentation that performing their brands entailed. Throughout the interviews, participants sometimes referred to this freedom before making personal disclosures, using phrases such as, “I’m so glad this is confidential”.

My interpretation that participants had reflexive motives is based on five additional observations. First, participants willingly engaged in personal reflection between interviews, often beginning latter interviews with their reflections from our previous interview. Second, some participants discussed topics from our interviews with their family and friends,
demonstrating their sense-making about the topic continued beyond the research encounter. Third, participants often expressed curiosity about the other participants in the research, asking whether they shared similar experiences and/or had strategies to resolve the challenges they were experiencing. Fourth, some participants explicitly stated their reflexive motives during the interviews, such as Jasmine proclaiming, “I love doing these things. That’s why I responded immediately because you learn a lot about what you do and it also filters out to that understanding of how things occur.” Finally, nine of the ten participants provided written reflections in response to the research findings. While these written reflections varied in length and depth, an excerpt from two participants is provided to illustrate the sometimes profound impact the interviews had on their lives. As Dickson-Smith et al. (2007, p. 10) affirm, “If participants in sensitive research open themselves to this type of research they are also opening themselves to the possibility that they may be somehow changed by the process.”

**Tom:** Reading your findings has opened my eyes to some of my own traits! I remember having a massive realisation that I was very much like my father in personality, drive and strategy and that was a very intense realisation since we were never close.

**Madeline:** I do relate to the findings and feel them to be accurate. To explain the depth to which I find it accurate, I am in the process of moving to a new area where I can be ‘mum’, just ordinary 'mum', to my children who don’t bring friends home because they don’t want them to know. I can go on being ‘Psychic Madeline’ who occasionally appears on tv and radio and on magazine covers, who suddenly disappears as soon as the lights shut down and the camera stops rolling, and at home I can bake cakes and no one will be able to make ridiculous demands of my energy and the local kids won’t be able to hassle mine at school on behalf of their mums who are incapable of looking me up in the phone book. Privacy at last. So I find these findings very accurate, and a timely reminder of why I am making the choice for my family's lifestyle that I now am. Hooray. Thank you for inviting me to be part of this, it has been a worthy project.

Participants’ reflexive motives to share their experience of personal branding can be used by researchers in the sample recruitment process. As I sequentially recruited participants, I became better at communicating the reflexive nature of the interviews, explaining that I understood they had experienced specific issues that we could explore in more detail in the interviews. This personalisation was reliant on conducting brand audits of potential participants before contacting them to identify from the public domain any challenges, achievements, or other life events that could be referred to, to demonstrate my understanding of their brand and lived experience. In lieu of using personal networks to access the elite population of interest, my experience was that recruitment success could be enhanced by using personalised communications to appeal to the reflexive motives of participants.
6.5.2 Participants’ previous experiences of interviews

Participants’ preconceptions of what participating in an ‘interview’ entailed was an obstacle we negotiated in the research encounter. As Cope (2005) explains, unlike interviews based on standard question and answer formats, phenomenological interviews are largely unstructured and require participants “to play a very active role” (p. 181) setting the course of the dialogue. When preparing to participate in an academic interview, Gilding (2010) notes that elites’ media training and business interview experience tends to be a familiar point of reference they draw upon as a template to guide their expectations and interactions. In this research, participants’ tended to enact these business and media interview templates, which impacted most on the life story interviews. Specifically, eliciting participants’ broader life stories was the most difficult part of the research process as these narratives featured their private selves, friends, and family – a territory that participants had learned to protect during their previous interviews.

Having given several hundred media interviews, Ben was perhaps the most ‘interview-experienced’ participant in the sample. The following excerpt from Ben is a more confrontational example of the defensiveness I encountered when attempting to conduct the life story interviews with participants.

**Interviewer:** Did you grow up here?
**Ben:** Yeah. Yeah. Always.

**Interviewer:** Your parents grew up here, too?
**Ben:** Yep. Yep.

**Interviewer:** So what was school and early life like here?
**Ben:** Oh my god! Do we really have to? Is it really relevant?

Ben’s defensiveness is understandable, particularly in light of Harvey’s (2011, p. 433) observation that while elites often receive extensive media training, “they are often scrutinized by television and radio journalists and therefore can also feel threatened in an interview, particularly in contexts that are less straightforward to prepare for such as academic interviews.” A participant’s protectiveness of their life story was not correlated with the extent of their media interview experience, but was more idiosyncratically triggered by sensitivities they had. From the awkward exchange quoted with Ben, who was the first participant I interviewed, I learned two important lessons about conducting the life story interviews. First, it was generally preferable to conduct the life story interviews towards the
end of the second interview after sufficient trust and rapport had been established. Second, I
needed to signal the transition from phenomenological interviewing to life story interviewing
for participants, reiterating the value of understanding their broader life themes.
‘Understanding the bigger picture of your life and career’ tended to be an effective expression
in emic terms that participants understood.

The sometimes short and hesitant responses in the life story interviews were in contrast to the
detailed allegories (Sternberg, 2005) or brand stories (Allen et al., 2008; Holt, 2004;
Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008) that participants tended to provide early in our first meeting
or interview. These brand stories were often delivered as a monologue and were highly
consistent with the published versions of the narrative circulating in the public domain. In
these early stages of the interviews, some participants were in performance mode, animated
as their brand, or to borrow Goffman’s (1959) term, were presenting the ‘front stage’ of their
branded self. Access to the ‘back stage’ (Goffman, 1959) of their personhood was granted as
the phenomenological interviews progressed, with the life story interviews fulfilling the
additional purpose of checking that I had this access and was indeed recording participants’
lived experience of being a brand rather than a performance of their brand. For this benefit
alone, I attest the value of the life story interviews as a useful inclusion in the research
process.

Riach (2009) advises that using a multiple-method approach to interact with participants
produces multiple realities as it allows participants to see themselves through multiple lenses
and question their ‘real’ identities. Using documents and observations to auto-drive during
the interviews gave participants the chance to reflect deeply on their experiences, which in
turn, helped to surface the harder-to-access challenges, disappointments, failures, and
tensions related to personal branding. This affirms Riach’s (2009, p. 358) statement that “if
the research interview is to continue being a widely used research tool, we must acknowledge
the value of the participant as a reflexive subject.” As participants’ identity negotiation
between their private selves and their public, branded selves emerged as a key theme in this
thesis, I advocate the use of multiple methods to reveal and explore these multiple selves
when researching personal branders.
6.6 Summary

This chapter has provided my reflections on the research process that produced this thesis’ knowledge claims. These reflexive insights were included in my thesis to provide readers with a more holistic understanding of the research process, participants, and the actual methodological techniques I employed in situ. Within this chapter, I described the negotiation of power and identity with participants, noting the similarities between my experiences and those of other researchers who have interviewed elites. More pragmatically, in a critical appraisal of the research process that I employed, I highlighted the value of completing brand audits, understanding participants’ motives, conducting life story interviews, and being immersed in participants’ lifeworlds. On the personal impacts of conducting the research, I revealed the transformational potential of the research for both participants and myself.
Chapter 7
Conceptualising personal branding within the field of the identity market

7.1 Introduction
As the first of three findings chapters, this chapter focuses on establishing the overarching conceptual framework that structures this thesis’s findings. To conceptualise the practice of personal branding in the identity market, it introduces the central organising framework of Bourdieu’s theories of cultural production, including the concepts of a field, capital, habitus, and practice. After a brief overview of Bourdieu’s work, attention turns to using Bourdieun theory to elucidate personal branders’ experiences. This discussion begins with a description of six major intersections that personal branders navigate in the field of the identity market. Central to this discussion is personal branders’ experience of achieving brand resonance – a productive position of alignment between their personal integrity and brand authenticity. Next, it explores the capital created from the marketing work of personal branding, delineating the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of this capital in juxtaposition to personal branders’ earlier experiences of brandlessness. This chapter then moves onto examining how personal branders are habituated (or socialised) to the field of the identity market, including the cultural capital they draw upon as marketing practitioners to culturally produce their brands. With these core concepts established, the following two chapters more deeply explore the challenges and contestations that personal branders confront in the identity market, including the practices they employ to navigate their way through its various obstacles and intersections.

7.2 Applicability of Bourdieu’s theories of cultural production: Fields, capital, habitus, and practices
To preface the remainder of this chapter’s conceptualisation of personal branding, this section introduces the key elements of Bourdieun theory that are most relevant to this thesis. Notably, an array of theoretical lenses have previously been suggested to advance conceptualisations of personal branding, including corporate branding theory (Bendisch et al., 2013; Zarkada, 2012), neo-Marxist theory (Hearn, 2008), identity theory (Shepherd, 2005), celebrity theory (Kerrigan et al., 2011), public relations theory (Motion, 1999, 2000; Nessmann, 2010), and
organisational theory (Brannan et al., 2011). From sociology, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977, 1984, 1986, 1990, 1993) theories of cultural production – specifically the concepts of fields, habitus, capital, and practice – are particularly insightful as a theoretical framework to structure the themes emerging from the iterative analysis of participants’ personal branding experiences.

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a highly influential French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher who is best known for advancing social theories of practice. Together with other key social and cultural theorists such as Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, Bourdieu’s work is considered foundational to the ‘practice turn’ in social sciences (Reckwitz, 2002). Broadly, these theories seek to account for the cultural conditions surrounding an activity in social life, and have been applied extensively to understand systems of production and consumption in marketing and consumer culture (Halkier et al., 2011; Warde, 2014). Within the existing literature, a greater focus on consumer phenomena is apparent, with studies using Bourdieun theory to examine key topics such as consumer taste (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Holt, 1997) and status consumption (Allen, 2002; Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013; Holt, 1998; Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013; Üstüner & Holt, 2010). However, a stream of producer-focused studies is emerging, with researchers examining: how habitus and capital structure practitioners’ marketing work in advertising agencies (Alvesson, 1994; Kaptan, 2013); the capital created from the cultural production of fashion bloggers (McQuarrie et al., 2013; Delisle & Parmentier, 2016); and the habitus, capital, and practices of models building personal brands in the field of fashion (Parmentier et al., 2013). Together, these studies not only evidence the ongoing appeal of Bourdieu’s work, but support its application to understanding the cultural production of marketing work in consumer culture.

Further unpacking the applicability of Bourdieun theory, a key concept of particular relevance to this thesis is the concept of a field, which Bourdieu defines as “the structure of the social setting in which habitus operates” (Swartz, 1997, p. 117). That is, fields are social spaces organised by underlying rules of conduct which require specific skills to navigate (Holt, 1997). According to Bourdieu (1986, 1993), society is comprised of a series of overlapping fields in which actors compete for status based on their understanding of the rules structuring a field and by using various forms of capital (symbolic, economic, social, cultural) they accumulate within it. Importantly, fields are not fixed or strictly bounded spaces (Üstüner & Thompson, 2012), but are dynamic and flexible structures defined by
actors’ positions with a field’s distribution of capital and the relations between these positions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Field analysis thus focuses on mapping the network of relations that position actors within a field, including the historically-shaped dynamics of power and status competitions that account for actors’ positions (Swartz, 1997).

A further element of Bourdieun theory to elaborate on is habitus which refers to enduring, transposable dispositions or “schemes of perception, thought and action, [which] tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54). Swartz (1997, p. 108) explains that “the dispositions of habitus represent master patterns of behavioural style that cut across cognitive, normative, and corporeal dimensions of human action. They find expression in language, nonverbal communication, tastes, values, perceptions, and modes of reasoning.” Conceptualised as enduring habits, embodied predispositions, and naturalised styles of thought and action, habitus provides an actor with a tacit sense of how a field works and their place within that field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu (1984, p. 101) brings together the theoretical elements discussed so far in the formula “(Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice”, understanding that social practices are the product of the interaction between an actor’s accumulated habitus and capital within a specific field. The analysis of personal branders’ experiences navigating the identity market fits strongly with Bourdieun theory, with their marketing work fundamentally shaped by their individual resources (capital and habitus) and field-level dynamics. The remainder of this chapter reveals the utility of Bourdieun theory to elucidate personal branders’ position as actors within a network of other actors in the identity market; the field-specific capital their brands acquire; their socialisation to the tacit ‘rules of the game’ in the identity market; and more holistically, the deeply cultural nature of their production of personal brands.

At this point, it is important to clarify that this thesis recognises the criticisms that Bourdieu’s work has attracted, with two issues warranting special attention in light of this thesis’s findings. First, the major criticism levelled at Bourdieu’s work is that it produces overly structuralist explanations of social practices and cultural production, with the unreflexive nature of ‘habitus’ problematised as deterministic in not sufficiently accounting for individual agency (Gronow, 1997). While Bourdieu contested this criticism, an evolution in his conception of habitus is apparent. For example, in earlier works, he defines habitus “as an acquired system of generative schemes…[that] engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions,
and all the actions consistent with those conditions, *and no others*” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 95). Later, he introduces greater agency to an actor’s practice through the concept of consciously formed, actively evaluated ‘strategy’ (Swartz, 1997). The co-existence of habitus and strategy is clear when Bourdieu (1990, p. 53) explains that “the responses of the habitus may be accompanied by a strategic calculation tending to perform in a conscious mode the operation that the habitus performs quite differently, namely an estimation of chances presupposing transformation of the past effect into an expected objective”. This more nuanced, less totalising conception of habitus is important to acknowledge as it better fits with the reflexive-unreflexive dualism structuring the personal branders’ marketing work, with their personal branding practices informed by both tacit understanding and strategic decision-making.

Related to this first criticism is a second criticism that Bourdieu’s theory presumes a static model of social relations based on habitus being unconsciously internalised early in life through primary forms of socialisation (such as an actor’s family, friends, and school) and an actor’s cultural capital being endowed from this socialisation (Gronow, 1997). More recent studies in the consumer culture literature reveal the need to revise this conception of habitus, revealing it can be reflexively developed in adulthood as actors enter and seek to apprehend new fields (Üstüner & Holt, 2010) and has strong emotional (Arsel & Bean, 2013) and moral (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013) dimensions that orient an actor’s accumulation of capital and practices. These revisions strongly correspond with the personal branders’ experiences of being socialised to the identity market as adults, and the diffuse sources of knowledge and learning they draw upon in their sense-making of the experience of navigating the field as a brand.

In terms of the ‘endowment’ quality of cultural capital, this static conceptualisation harks back to Bourdieu’s original intention of explaining how cultural capital reproduces existing social hierarchies in a field by naturalising the maintenance of an actor’s social position while denying upward mobility to newcomers (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). An evolution in Bourdieu’s thinking can also be observed in response to this criticism, with Bourdieu’s later works (e.g., Bourdieu, 1998, 2007) shifting emphasis away from habitus and cultural capital to focus more on field dynamics and an actor’s field-specific capital. With this evolution, Bourdieu sought to reframe analytic attention to the question of how an actor maintains or advances their position in a specific field (Swartz, 1997). This conceptual
dynamism is particularly pertinent to recognise as the personal branders’ marketing work described in this study actively disrupted the reproduction of capital in the identity market, revealing the volatility of this field and the instability of capital accumulated within it. As such, the evolution of Bourdiean theory, and subsequent revisions to it, are important to acknowledge as they collectively serve as a theoretical framework germane to this inquiry and resonant with the themes emerging in its data.

7.3 Navigating the intersections within the field of the identity market
A key construct this thesis introduces is the field of the identity market, or the spaces and places in which personal brands circulate as symbolic resources in consumer culture. This framing of the field construct is at a higher level of abstraction compared to previous studies which have examined personal branding practices within specific organisational fields, such as fashion (Parmentier et al., 2013; Delisle & Parmentier, 2016; Erz & Christensen, 2018), academia (Close et al., 2011), and politics (Motion, 1999; Sanghvi & Hodges, 2015). The more encompassing perspective afforded by the identity market construct enables this inquiry to concentrate analysis on mapping the field dynamics of personal branding as a form of cultural production occurring across organisational fields within consumer culture. Notably, Bourdieu’s field theory is conceptually flexible, enabling it to be applied to different levels of social aggregation (Swartz, 1997). For example, in the consumer culture literature, field analysis has been undertaken at levels “ranging from macro-level systems of sociocultural practice (e.g., the economic field, the field of cultural production, the field of consumption); specific organisational domains (e.g., the journalistic field, the academic field, the nursing field, and the field of medical education); and still more contextually circumscribed institutional spaces” (Üstüner & Thompson, 2012, p. 799). The field of the identity market that this thesis advances is framed towards the macro-level of this range.

Importantly, the field of the identity market is not conceived as a singular, static, or objective construct, but an intersubjective, multiplex, and ever-changing manifestation in the lifeworlds of personal branders. As such, participants’ experiences of the identity market were defined by their position within it, the position of other actors circulating in the space, and the identity market’s overlap with other fields in their lives, particularly the organisational fields structuring the practice of their occupational roles. Indeed, the parameters of each participant’s conception of the identity market varied considerably, with this variance largely reflecting the different identity spaces available to them given their occupation roles and
organisational fields. As such, the identity market was geographically-localised in Suki’s “secret bar world of hostesses” while Wayne’s conception of the identity market was more expansively defined as the mediatised spaces of “tv land” and “radio land” in which his media personality brand was established. Of all participants, the broadest scale came from Jane who understood the public domain constituted the identity market she circulated within as a public intellectual:

For me, the public domain is the space in which I’m able to intersect with people and share with them what I know and depending on the context, perhaps try to persuade them to think about things in a certain way and possibly even to take action based on those thoughts. … So I’m willing to make myself the terrain on which that theorising can happen, because nobody else was willing to do it. (Jane)

Despite these differences in scale, the personal branders were united in constructing the identity market as distinct and other from ordinary domains of life, referring to it as a ‘territory’, ‘world’, ‘land’, or ‘parallel universe’. While acknowledging the identity market is both dynamic and heterogeneous in nature, a further commonality for participants was the need to navigate six major intersections9 within its terrain to find and maintain a position of brand resonance. To this end, the following sub-sections describe these intersections before focusing on the qualities of personal integrity and brand authenticity that align in the productive position of brand resonance.

7.3.1 Mapping the intersections of the identity market

Through detailed analysis of participants’ experiences in the identity market, six major intersections were identified and are expressed as a series of dualisms relating to an underlying organising principle. This series of intersections is not exhaustive, but represents the most common and significant contestations that structured participants’ personal branding practices in the identity market. For ease of reference, Figure 7.1 maps the terrain of the identity market that will be discussed in the following sub-sections.

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9 The term ‘intersections’ is used to refer to the composite space in which at least two elements meet. This usage mirrors other consumer culture researchers who have similarly invoked the term to examine marketplace performances at the intersection of the market and moral economies (Brace-Govan & Binay, 2010; Weinberger & Wallendorf, 2012). This use is distinct from the concept of ‘intersectionality’ which focuses on how social identity structures (race, class, gender) interact with power-structures to produce life experiences (see Gopoldas, 2013).
That the identity market is revealed as a deeply contested space fits with the consumer culture literature documenting how brandscapes (a synonymous construct with the identity market) are similarly structured by contestations among brands and consumers competing for capital (Goldman & Papson, 2006; Murakami Wood & Ball, 2013; Thompson & Arsel, 2004). Previous studies of marketing work have also identified the difficulty that marketing practitioners have when navigating intersections relating to the commercial versus cultural logic of their work (Cronin, 2004; Svensson, 2007) and their personal versus professional identities (Alvesson, 1994; Hackley & Kover, 2007). Within the context of personal branding, this research significantly extends the existing literature by systematically describing the multiple contestations structuring this particular form of marketing work. In doing so, the active role that personal branders play in navigating the identity market becomes apparent. This finding mirrors Svensson’s (2007, p. 284) conclusion that marketing practitioners need “sharp attention as well as careful map reading and subtle manoeuvring” to avoid running aground in his analogous concept of the ‘narrative archipelago’, or the contested terrain in which marketing is practiced.
7.3.1.1 Identity market intersection 1: Marketisation (between the public branded self and private self)

Participants’ marketisation was a key intersection for them to navigate and concerns the intrapersonal identity negotiation they undertook to fragment and compartmentalise their private self from the marketing object they created and produced in the identity market – their public, branded self. Previous studies have shown how marketisation (applying market rhetoric, logic, or practices to construct a marketing object) is a process involving the negotiation of agency, meanings, and identity as objects enter (Drummond, 2006) and are removed (Epp & Price, 2010) from circulation in the market. Erz and Christensen (2018) identified the need for a personal brander to balance their personal and professional lives as a marker that signified the establishment of their personal brand identity. This study complements this literature by revealing how these negotiations occur within the market, with marketisation representing an ongoing tension for personal branders to navigate. Common to all participants was the understanding that their personal brands were a public self that they marketed, with the most frequently used synonyms for participants’ branded selves being ‘persona’, followed by public ‘identity’, ‘personality’, and ‘profile’. Jane elaborates on the compartmentalised and reductive nature of her personal brand as a public intellectual, describing it as a consciously-created, ‘partial’, ‘heightened’, and ‘refined’ public self:

Jane: The media personality is partial. […] People wouldn’t be interested in the 360 of me and my life. […] Yeah, it’s partial, because of course, it’s the bits that you choose to put out there which are the bits that you feel are worth displaying and have value for other people, and will be of interest to and for them. So in my real life, I am not partial. I’m full and therefore my less salutary sides are also available which I have no compunction… certain sides of me just do not need to be known. They’re private or they’re uninteresting or they’re less favourable. […] When you are in the public domain in that way, I’m conscious of what I want seen and not seen, absolutely. But the ‘I’m Jane’ now thing is not so far from really who I am anyway. It’s just a little bit partial, but it’s not not me. It is me. So it’s just a bit of a heightened me and refined me and partial me.

The identity compartmentalisation that Jane describes was similarly undertaken by all participants and was reminiscent of Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical conception of the public ‘front’ that a person performs in social roles versus the ‘backstage’ whole of their private self/selves. A key difference, however, is that Goffman (1959) sought to explain everyday self-presentation in social roles, viewing identity from a symbolic interactionist perspective as a performance emerging from an interaction with an audience. In contrast, the personal branders – while shaped by audience needs and desires – were more conscious, strategic, reflexive, and self-directed in iteratively developing, performing, and evolving their persona.
This active constructionism was necessary for participants to clarify the boundaries of their marketisation and, hence, preserve the inalienability of their private selves. As Jasmine the comedian evidences in the following passage, participants understood that their brands were public objects whose symbolic capital would be consumed, co-created, and appropriated by other market actors (consumers, the media, organisations, other personal brands) in the identity market:

**Jasmine:** A person is an entirety, a human being with a soul, whereas a persona is a caricature of the person, an edited version of what they want to present or what is seen. [...] I’m not Jasmine the brand to myself. I’m only Jasmine the brand to the people who are purchasing me.

**Interviewer:** Okay. That’s not all the time?

**Jasmine:** I’m aware of the brand. I maintain, preserve, protect, fertilise the brand. But I see what they see and I give them what they want. [...] It’s like I put on… it’s part of me, but it’s like I put on a suit of myself and I just give them the suit. The inside is for myself – looks the same, but it’s actually… they’re not getting it.

**Interviewer:** So when you do offer a part of yourself up…

**Jasmine:** They can have it. [...] Yep, it’s all yours.

While Jasmine clearly describes the objectification – or to use Marxian terms, ‘reification’ (see Marx, 1867/1954) – of her branded self, it is inaccurate to characterise this marketisation as a manifestation of how “corporate capital has subsumed all areas of human life, including the very concept of a private self”, as critical theorists such as Hearn (2008, p. 214) have argued. To the contrary, participants invoked metaphors of their brands being a ‘suit’, ‘mask’, ‘shield’, or ‘character’ to express the protective function their brand served as an external layer of identity that preserved their underlying personhood. In tracing the etymology of ‘persona’, Stern (1994, p. 390) notes the term derives from the Latin word for ‘mask’, understanding that it “embodies a dualism opposing the inner self (the human essence) to the outer self (the social shell).” As part of this dualism, it is important to understand the performative dimension of ‘being’ a brand in the market, a modality which participants described as switching on or into, as Suki the hostess reveals:

**Suki:** You will be like an actress. You will act the role, because the Suki in the bar and the Suki in real life, we have to divide that. There is a border we make up. It’s not a strong border, but we have it to turn on and off.

**Interviewer:** How do you create that border?
**Suki**: When I’m in the bar, I always think that I’m doing this service for the money, so I have to be professional and I have to be the Suki that customers like, so I have to make a little world within the bar.

**Interviewer**: Okay. How do you get into that little world?

**Suki**: As soon as the sun sets, I’m Suki in the bar.

**Interviewer**: And Suki in normal life is not like this?

**Suki**: Not really compared to bar Suki. But my personality at its heart is really the same, even if I try to not be me, it can come out.

Like all participants, Suki’s description of identity compartmentalisation reveals the applicability of dramaturgical theory to understand this form of marketisation, including Deighton’s (1992) construction of markets as theatrical stages, Featherstone’s (1991) notion of the ‘performing self’, and the anthropologist Victor Turner’s (1974) concept of ‘liminality’ as the transitional borderland segueing between states of being. Importantly, at the end of this exchange, Suki acknowledged the inseparability of her private self from her branded self, with this emerging as a strong theme among participants:

It’s not entirely like putting on a disguise. I don’t feel like I’m putting on a disguise or costume as such. I’m just enhancing certain things. You know, it’s not a complete distortion of what I am. It’s just a bit of a change and a few little improvements here and there. […] My persona is still just a slightly, you know, bigger version of myself. It’s still a lot of elements of myself, probably not as calm and stuff as I am now, just a bit more energised and out there. [Tom, producer]

I think my personality still comes out in my persona. You know, I’m still warm and still energetic when I’m out in public. […] I think they only see the serious side. And obviously that’s deliberate. That’s what they get to see, because that’s what I want to project. […] ‘Private Kevin’ is a lot more laid back and likes to joke a lot and is a normal person. [Kevin, politician]

You can’t be someone you are not. I was not playing a part. I wasn’t being a 15th century aristocrat. I was being me, but I was just really thinking about what I was doing and saying. […] I did censor myself a lot. […] I think it was just about augmenting and performing that. Rehearsing it. Scripting it. […] Beefing it up. So, if I’m talking to you here, I’m just talking to you the way I would be. If we were doing a radio interview and we were on air, [Wayne changes to his radio voice], I’d be talking to you differently. I’d be bringing my voice out more, you know. Projecting a bit more and acting more energy and light to what I’m saying. More emphasis because we’re on air and that’s what we do. [Wayne, media personality]

Taken together, these examples illustrate that participants’ marketisation of their brands was constrained not only by the limited identity spaces and performance possibilities available to them based on their physicality (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, attractiveness) and occupational fields (as previously discussed by Parmentier & Fischer, 2011; Parmentier et al., 2013), but
their private selves. Regardless of the extent to which participants’ branded selves differed from their private selves, their private selves were an inseparable anchoring point for the production and performance of their brands. Drawing on Jungian theories from analytical psychology, Rozuel (2011, p. 689) explains that personas are more diversely constructed from a person’s interpretation of cultural archetypes and social expectations in combination with their unconscious ego, and as such, personas derive from, and are different to, the ‘true self’ or “whole psyche [that] prefigures the ego”. The repertoire of possible identity projects that a person has potentially explains why the variance between participants’ public/private selves did not appear to problematise their sense of having a coherent ‘true identity’, recognising that ‘true identities’ are multiple, complex, and sometimes contradictory (Belk, 1988; Gould, 2001; Schouten, 1991). In this way, this study affirms previous research that supports consumers can maintain multiple, diffuse, and fragmented identities across their work and social roles as they pursue a collage of identity projects (Goulding et al., 2002).

Finally, while there were marked differences in the privacy levels that participants’ desired, all expressed the need to actively protect the inalienable territory of their private lives when navigating this intersection, including the entwined privacy of their partners, families, and friends. While the identity compartmentalisation that marketisation required was essential in protecting their brands from damage or dilution, the constancy of performance it required in potentially public spaces was onerous and difficult to manage, with Sue the entrepreneur describing how she experiences this tension:

**Sue:** I’m a very, very private person. I like to be a bit mischievous. I like to get in trouble. I like to have some fun. I’m not doing so much of that anymore because I have this public presentation that I have to uphold. When I’m with my friends and we’re in private rooms in restaurants, we can get crazy drunk and let loose and I can say whatever I want and I’m not judged. I can swear my little lolly lips off and go absolutely crazy because I have the freedom to do it. […] It’s the clash between privacy and publicity. It’s the clash being the entrepreneur who’s in the public eye who has to be presentable 110% of the time to sometimes just wanting to lay it all out there and just be an idiot. Be my private, silly, profanity-filled, excessively-drinking, drugged up, fucked up, little self. […] To be honest, I still have some imbalance there and I think that only with time and experience is that going to iron out naturally.

Evidently, marketisation was an intersection structured by the dialectical function of participants’ brands, which simultaneously enabled them to perform a marketable identity and accumulate capital in the identity market while constraining them through public- and
self-surveillance and the limited performance possibilities from the reductive nature of their branded selves.

### 7.3.1.2 Identity market intersection 2: Commodification (between the social and commercial spheres)

The identity market spans a blurred, hybridised social-commercial territory, with self-commodification representing an omnipresent intersection for personal branders to navigate. While Marwick’s (2013) conception of personal branding as ‘strategic self-commodification’ captures the conscious, entrepreneurial nature of participants’ commodification, the dominant experiential structure in participants’ lived experience at this intersection was contestation and dynamism. Erz and Christensen (2018) identify the need to balance commercial versus personal content as a marker of an established personal brand, but do not further explore this tension in relation to theories of self-commodification. The fluidity of objects moving between the commercial and social spheres has long been established in classic studies of commodification (e.g., Kopytoff, 1986), however, conceptualisations of the subject/object dichotomy that reflects personal branders’ duality as person and brand are more difficult to locate. The French philosopher and sociologist, Bruno Latour’s (1993) conception of subject-object hybrids certainly has relevance, with personal branders conceptualised as quasi-subjects and their personal brands operating as quasi-objects circulating in the social-commercial terrain of the identity market. However, in focusing more distinctly on representing the personal branders self-commodification, this thesis draws on the concept of ‘contested commodities’ advanced by prominent legal scholar, Margaret Radin (1996).

From her earlier scholarship on market inalienability (see Radin, 1987), Radin’s focus broadened to produce her seminal work on contested commodities, which advances an alternative, more dynamic theory of commodification which is conceptualised along a continuum bounded by the poles of ‘universal commodification’ and ‘universal non-commodification’. The vast majority of ‘things’ can be classified as contested commodities, defined by their incomplete commodification, and the dynamic property of becoming more or less commodified/non-commodified (Radin, 1996). While Radin’s conceptualisation of contested and incomplete commodification has not been widely applied in the marketing literature, it is particularly resonant in explaining the personal branders’ marketisation of their publicly branded self and navigation of the social-commercial territory at this intersection of the identity market. That is, it captures Latour’s (1993) notion of subject-object hybridity and
Kopytoff’s (1986) conception of fluidity between the social-commercial spheres while representing the flux of these conditions as a contestation structured by forces encouraging more or less commodification/non-commodification. To understand how this contestation manifested for the personal branders, it is important to first acknowledge that participants were positioned differently along the commodification/non-commodification continuum, and had significantly different levels of commerciality (as a motivation, orientation, and market exchange modality). In this study, Ben the blogger and Rose the writer represent the poles of this range. Starting with Ben, it was apparent that he was conscious of his increasingly commercial orientation, understanding it had become a more dominant imperative that had infiltrated and altered his social life:

**Ben:** I’m very business oriented now. Every time I go out, for example, I have to care about my bottom line. If I’m going to go out, am I going to get something out of it or not?

**Interviewer:** What do you mean?

**Ben:** Like, for example, if people are calling me and they want to advertise with my blog. If you get a deal or something, I would go out. … Yeah, so like, I would go out if I can get something out of it. Like, if I get to make a new contact. If I go to network with somebody or meet a new person or make a deal out of something, yeah, I would go out. But if it’s not really worth my time, I’d just rather stay in, you know? Because, you know, again, you’re just going to spend money and you’re just going to, you know, all your efforts – you’re not really getting anything out of it. There has to be a purpose to going out.

Ben expressed the least dissonance of all participants in framing his experiences in market rhetoric. He was comfortable referring to himself as a brand and expressed that his blog was about selling this brand. However, to characterise the relational quality of Ben’s interactions with viewers as strictly ‘consumer-brand relationships’ was problematic for him. In this excerpt, he reveals his surprise and anger at being dehumanised as a consumption object, hinting at an underlying element of subjective humanity and sociality that were a component of his marketplace performances and audience relationships:

**Ben:** Every time I write a not-so-happy [blog] entry, people will email me and say it’s nice to see you are human too. I’m like, ‘What the fuck do you mean?’ A lot of people really think you are one-dimensional. What they see on the screen is you. That’s it. They don’t treat you as human. If they treated me as human, they wouldn’t write surprised comments. ‘Oh, I can’t believe you are human.’ ‘Oh, you are human too.’ ‘Oh, Ben has feelings too.’ I really think they look at you from their perspective as a one-dimensional thing. They think they know Ben.

In contrast to Ben, Rose was far less commercially oriented, but had extensively engaged in marketing work to establish her personal brand as a writer at an international level of
visibility. Rose valued sociality over commerciality, framing her brand as an apparatus for her to reach, share, and connect with ‘people’ in the social world. However, even in her explanations of this sociality, the presence of market rhetoric is apparent:

**Rose:** I’m actually really grateful that people connect with me and genuinely… I love meeting people. I just love connecting with the people. Like, people who come up to me. That is more my currency than anything else. You know, and it’s funny because like I’ve run all these activities for years and I don’t charge any money. I guess my brand… my currency is not really financial. My currency is the stories I get from people. For me, connecting with the people whose lives I can change is so much more valuable to me, because I remember how fucked up my life was.

**Interviewer:** Yeah?

**Rose:** And how worthless I really felt. And how I was really going nowhere. And I just… that connection, that real moment. I just love it.

**Interviewer:** Yeah?

**Rose:** That’s what I’m about. … So when I have human contact with real people that I can make a real difference with or who have come to me and gone, ‘Oh my god, you’ve changed my life or my mum’s life’ or whatever, I am genuinely really excited and genuinely touched.

Both Rose and Ben’s experiences support a key theme that consumer culture researchers have observed in postmodernity, which is that social and commercial boundaries have blurred to such an extent that the concepts of ‘marketing’ and ‘business’ are changing “from a distinct form of activity […] to everyday practices” (Firat & Dholakia, 2006, p. 148). This blurring surfaces repeatedly in studies of marketing practitioners and the creative-commercial tension structuring their work (Alvesson, 1994; Brownlie, 1998; Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Hackley & Kover, 2007; Kover & Goldberg, 1995). Consistent with the findings of this previous literature, the participants described their navigation of this contested territory as ‘awkward’, ‘disorienting’, ‘confusing’, ‘uneasy’, ‘uncomfortable’, and ‘unresolved’. For example, Wayne the media personality expresses his unease at the layered, somewhat covert, combination of commercial and cultural content on his personal website:

**Wayne:** So I suppose there’s an uneasy tension on the website that I’m trying to be irreverent and ‘This is my website. This is me, Wayne’, but at the same time, I’m trying to drive business. […] I suppose in some ways I’m trying to disguise my true intentions. I’m trying to have fun with it. I’m trying to make it irreverent and silly and jokey and playing around, but really, there are photos on there that you can take off and use in promotional material. There are, sort of, you know… invitations to take me up on services and to contact me for work.
Situated somewhere between Rose and Ben in the commerciality of his personal branding practices, Wayne’s unease extended to the relational quality of his interactions with consumers. While Wayne expressed a deep love of people similar to Rose, he understood that the consumer-brand relationships he had with fans were categorically different to human-to-human relationships, which problematised his interactions with fans in social spaces not strictly defined as a performance stage for his brand:

**Wayne:** I always try to acknowledge [fans], but it can be really difficult because you’ve suddenly got to interact with someone who I have no interest in interacting with or who is interacting with you in a way that you are not particularly happy with or in a situation where you are just not comfortable. […] It can be very awkward at times because I think they can almost feel almost patronised if you try and be too friendly to them or too sort of… it’s a very tense, you know? They can get to the point where they are almost giving you shit because you’ve kind of given them… you haven’t kept… just said ‘Hello’ and said, ‘Good on you’ and moved on. You’ve actually tried to interact with them like you are old friends. It can be quite tense. […] They feel like they know who I am. I will often get the comment, ‘Oh, you are exactly the same as on tv’ because it was me. They know me. So it’s a very intimate. When I see people, it’s very intimate because they do know who I am. I don’t know them, but they know me.

The form and characterisation of relationships with consumers was a tension that each participant navigated in the identity market’s amalgam of socialised commerce and commercialised culture. In this way, this study echoes the findings of other researchers who have examined the relational forms between producers and consumers in marketing contexts, describing these relationships as ‘parasocial’ (Escalas & Bettman, 2017), ‘commercial friendships’ (Price & Arnould, 1999), and varying in type from ‘strictly business’ to ‘business friends’ to ‘highly personal’ (Haytko, 2004).

As contested commodities, the participants understood the capital they generated from commodifying marketable elements of their identity. As Kevin and Rose reveal, images and narratives were the key constituent parts of this identity production that functioned to animate, personify, and imbue their brands with meanings for consumers:

**Kevin:** Personal stories work. Those personal stories work because people remember that and they also are able to relate to it.

**Rose:** If you show a photo of yourself, the instant… when you expose yourself to people, they are instantly attracted to you, right? They connect with you. And, and as soon as they connect to you, they can’t put it down because they’ve seen the picture…. Heart…. They have to take it out of the shop. I can absolutely bet my life on it.
The participants’ experience-based understanding of the capital-creating elements of their marketing work mirrors the findings of cultural branding studies that reveal the power of personification (Brown, 2014) and emotion (Thompson et al., 2006) for brands. To successfully navigate the social-commercial tension structuring marketing work, Hackley and Kover (2007, p. 71) surmise that marketing practitioners must be “astute enough to exploit the contradictory values of creative and business cultures to forge a professional presence in a ruthless and competitive game.” This study finds that this dual appropriation of commercial-cultural values was pivotal to sustaining participants’ established brands, but challenges the negative valence of Hackley and Kover’s (2007) framing of the practice as ‘exploitive’. That is, exploitive appropriation does not sufficiently describe all the experiences of participants whose branded selves were sometimes informed by their aspirational selves, role models in their lives, or more broadly established cultural archetypes. For some participants, the commodification of these appropriated elements of identity were produced and performed as acts of homage, idolatr May, and representation, as Sue exemplifies when discussing the influence of her mother on the brand persona she created as an entrepreneur:

Sue: When I say that personal branding has made me a better person, I am far more aware of the qualities that I want to highlight and those that I want to push to the bottom of the barrel. […] I want to be that person that… okay, I’m going to use my mum again as a scenario. She is the sort of person that you meet that you feel enriched having spent just two minutes in her company, because she makes you feel good about yourself. She teaches you something and imparts care and warmth and attention and love and generosity and kindness – all the beautiful adjectives I can possibly think of right now – that’s how she makes every single person she meets feel. That is what she does. I want to be like that. People have mentors and people that they look up to. Muses. Mine is my mum. She is one in a million. […] I want people to say of me exactly what I just said about my mother. That would be my ultimate goal.

The complex mix of social and commercial motivations, influences, and relationships on participants’ self-commodification supports the utility of Radin’s (1996) concept of ‘contested commodities’ to describe personal branders. This dynamic theory of partial, incomplete commodification represents the subject-object dichotomy and hybridity of the personal branders’ public and private selves which, together, conjointly produced, managed, and performed their brands in the identity market. As such, this study’s findings problematise the application of neo-Marxist theories of commodification to understand the self-commodification of personal branders. In relation to this study, the central problem of this theoretical position is its totalising conception of self-commodification, understanding that the ‘whole being’ of a person is colonised as a marketable product and all their interactions.
are instrumentalised as transactions (Bauman, 2007; Debord, 1967/1977; Fromm, 1947). Commodification was a difficult and ongoing challenge, but it was not absolute as a process, practice, or status structuring the lived experiences of participants in the identity market.

7.3.1.3 Identity market intersection 3: Locus of work (between substantive work and marketing work)

A starting point in exploring this intersection is to recognise that previous researchers have noted the onerous nature of the identity work of producing and performing a personal brand (Hearn, 2008; Parmentier & Fischer, 2011; Shepherd, 2005), with this marketing work referred to as ‘phantasmagoric labour’ (Sternberg, 2005), ‘reputational labour’ (Dumont, 2017), and ‘aesthetic labour’ (Pettinger, 2004). While Chapter 9 describes this marketing work in detail, it is important to understand the broader ‘image versus substance’ dialectic structuring its practice. In the following excerpts, Kevin, Madeline, and Tom invoke a range of metaphors to emphasise how essential it is for personal brand objects to have substance to complement the veneer of image and generate value in the identity market:

You have to give them some substance. So I can be Pepsi, but if I didn’t have any products such as, like soda, then I really don’t have anything to offer. So in terms of the case of politicians, we have policy ideas, we have a platform that people can subscribe to. [Kevin, politician]

It’s like the cake in the middle of the cake decorating window. You think, ‘Oh that looks beautiful’. But it’s actually full of cardboard. There’s nothing inside. Just looks great on the outside. So I’m always looking for what’s on the inside. [Madeline, psychic]

You have to have the goods to back up what your brand is. You can’t sort of go out there empty. […] Sometimes I feel a bit…it’s a fine line between promoting myself and the work. […] I’ve just got to make sure it’s not all about me and the work does get to speak as well. [Tom, producer]

While this intersection was easier to navigate for participants working in occupations with clear and established material outputs (such as Kevin’s policy work), it was far more problematic for Wayne and his more incorporeal work as a media personality:

Wayne: I’m trying to be a media personality, without being a comedian or a singer… you know what I mean?… How do you…? […] And you’re selling yourself, you know? You’re selling yourself. You’re not saying I spent three years doing accounting. I’ve had some experience doing some actuarial studies. I’ve also studied business, so give me the job as your business analyst.

Interviewer: Yeah? It’s difficult?
Wayne: Well, there is an illegitimacy to being a media personality. So, you’re suddenly artificially famous, so you’ve then got to think, ‘How do I attach some skills and some legitimate things?’ […] I think you’re much smarter if you actually do projects that you have control over that you blend with the fame. So it’s not just, ‘Oh Wayne’s now on radio because he is famous from tv.’ You’ve actually got to find a slightly smarter way to blend that so it’s 20-25% you being famous and the rest of it a legitimate business.

Evidently, participants understood the recursive, co-constituting relationship between their brand’s substance and image, and the need to find balance in the locus of their work, with the alignment of these elements being central to their brand being perceived as credible and legitimate in the marketplace. This co-constituting relationship was similarly found in Dumont’s (2017) study of high profile rock climbers and Dion and Arnould’s (2016) study of chef personas, with these distinctive occupational roles providing an identity anchor that oriented the range of their marketplace performances to specific aesthetics, artefacts, norms, and meanings. This concern for the dual production of image and substance is discordant with Debord’s (1967/1977) critique of self-commodification that argued the marketisation of personhood would create a ‘society of the spectacle’ which privileges image production and consumption over meaning and substance. Instead, the greatest challenge for participants at this intersection was the heavy workloads they experienced which transcended the stability, routine, and pace of ordinary ‘9-5’ work. The self-enacted, self-managed nature of their personal branding practices often exacerbated their workloads, which expressed itself as a tension in their lives:

Jasmine: You are a fucking factory. You really are. […] Just going like a conveyor belt. There’s something coming towards you that you have to deal with and you have to put down with a little sticker saying, ‘I have dealt with you’, whether it is doing an interview, performing on the radio, doing stand-up… whether it’s writing a piece, whether it’s turning up and doing a talk show somewhere.

Jasmine’s analogy of being a factory highlights the continuous, intensive, and sometimes overwhelming nature of bimodal ‘image-substance’ work that personal branders needed to produce to navigate this intersection.

7.3.1.4 Identity market intersection 4: Brand authorship (between self and other actors in the identity market)

All participants experienced the contested authorship of their personal brands, with complex networks of actors (predominantly comprised of consumers, the media, organisations, and other personal branders) appropriating their brand as a symbolic resource for their own
identity production. The co-production of brand meanings has been understood for some time as a tenet of the cultural branding perspective (Allen et al., 2008; Holt, 2004), with several studies empirically confirming the multi-vocal authorship of human brands (Davies & Slater, 2015; Eager & Lindridge, 2015; Fillis, 2015; Hackley & Hackley, 2015). Adding to this stream of literature, this study reveals the range of relationship dynamics that contested brand authorship created for personal branders in the identity market. Exemplifying the positive end of this range, Kevin explains the collaborative support and guidance he receives from his team of political advisors to produce his brand:

**Kevin:** Well, usually I would not go against what the team would advise me. So up to this point, I’ve taken everybody’s feedback and accepted it. So it’s worked so far, so it’s been very effective for me. So yeah, I think it’s more of a team decision. I mean, deep down in my gut if I think that something needs to be better or go in a particular order, I would listen to that first before I listened to everybody else.

**Interviewer:** So you are being promoted and your team work on how to present you? What has that experience been like?

**Kevin:** Well, I think it’s been strategic for me to do it that way, because I feel like they have a vested interest in my political success, and so if they feel like that their feedback is being taken into account and taken seriously, they’re more likely to feel part of let’s say the brand… feel like they are part of the team. And I think as a result, they’re more willing to give more, because the other thing to remember is that we’re not paying any of these people to advise me. They’re doing it out of the goodness of their own heart and they really believe in my political vision, so I feel like they have a stake in the branding.

At the other end of this spectrum were combative, tumultuous, and oppositional relationships between actors co-authoring a brand. A conflict between Rose and her publisher illustrates this dynamic, and affirms the findings of recent literature that the experience of having one’s professional identity misidentified can be a powerful source of dissonance (Meister et al., 2014; Meister et al., 2017):

**Rose:** I’ve had massive fights all week with a publisher because they didn’t give me final approvals [on a book]. As soon as you let your brand out, you know?

**Interviewer:** What can happen?

**Rose:** Well, it becomes a source of ridicule. The good thing is that legally I can sue them because they never gave me… and it’s my brand! And the one that they’ve learnt really quickly is they are not going to fuck with my brand because they have to fuck with me. […] I met with my manager and went, ‘This is it. If they don’t fix the things that I did not approve, then we’re done. And I’ll sue them for mismanagement of my brand and blah, blah, blah.’ Now, I won’t because they’ll make the changes, but it’s like, knowing your fights and picking your fights. And this is a fight I had to pick because they fucked with my brand and thought that they could just do whatever. And intrinsically, I was right, they were wrong.
**Interviewer:** So you just looked at the cover of your book and have gone, ‘It’s wrong’?

**Rose:** The first time I saw my book cover, I knew. I knew they fucked me over. I knew it. And you know what? They have to make those changes because they never got approval for me.

**Interviewer:** So what happened?

**Rose:** I really felt angry. I was in tears. I was yelling. […] For me, I can get them on sabotage. So it’s a fight that they don’t really want to have to have. And, if I have to have it, I’ll come out looking better because I’ll be right. You fucked with my brand. You made it about ‘x’, but I’m not about ‘x’.

Within these examples, Kevin and Rose, like all participants, prioritised their own voice, understanding their pre-eminent role as chief author within the network of actors co-authoring their brands. In a landmark study of the cultural production of the iconic American Girl brand, Diamond et al. (2009, p. 131) similarly conclude that “if brands represent symphonies of meaning, managers must be viewed as orchestrators and conductors, as well as composers, whose role is to coordinate and synchronize as well as to create.”

With greater experience at this intersection of the identity market, participants became more vigilant and adept at protecting their authorial role, learning to negotiate clauses and conditions to give them final editing rights in their interactions with various meaning-makers, particularly with organisations and the media. This issue of marketer’s struggle for control over their marketing work has been highlighted in previous studies (Kover & Goldberg, 1995; Phillips, McQuarrie, & Griffin, 2014), with participants’ experiences corroborating Dean and Croft’s (2001) conceptualisation that relationships among market actors in complex fields are defined by heterogeneous levels of controllability-uncontrollability. Shepherd (2005) argues this tension must be especially acute for personal branders given their dual role as brand manager and brand entity, leading him to question how personal branders negotiate their desire for self-direction versus the need to be market-mediated. An extended example from Ben the blogger addresses this question, revealing the permeable, and sometimes conflicting, positions that participants adopted to navigate this intersection. On several occasions, Ben described a production orientation consistent with self-directed brand authorship, claiming “I don’t give people what they want. It’s not like I go out there and give people what I want. I really don’t want to be seen as someone that pleases people.” At other times, he described personal branding practices consistent with market-mediated authorship: “It’s really important you know who your audience is and… you know, you want to target
your content towards that audience, you know what I mean? If my numbers showed that a lot of people from a particular country started visiting my site, than I would adjust to cater to them.” Ben’s sense of agency regulated this switch in modalities. Closely monitoring website traffic to his blog, he played what he referred to as a ‘game of numbers’:

**Ben:** When my numbers are up, I just sit pretty and do nothing. I’ll post something half-baked – whatever. Yeah. But when my numbers go down, oh my god, that’s when I have to think of something scandalous. I have to take pictures of myself again. People love it when I talk about me. People don’t really care about other stuff. [...] That’s what sells. That’s where the money is. Blogging is like prostitution. You are selling yourself.

Ben’s monitoring and appraisal of his situated agency in the identity market was common to the other participants who modulated the authorial orientation of their brands in concert with the shifting boundaries of their commodification and marketisation. The interrelated nature of these intersections support the conceptualisation of the identity market as a deeply contested field – a construct that parallels Van Dijck’s (2013) description of online spaces for identity production as ‘sites of struggle’ and Cronin’s” (2004, p. 349) conclusion that practitioners engaging in marketing work must navigate through “multiple regimes of mediation”.

Maintaining authorial control of their market-mediated brands represented one such ‘regime of mediation’ for the personal branders – an intersection that necessitated both asserting their agency as chief meaning-makers and relinquishing control to the multiplex meanings created by other actors in the identity market.

### 7.3.1.5 Identity market intersection 5: Visibility (between the offline and online world)

The prominence of this intersection increased markedly for participants during the seven years of data collection, with the rapid expansion of social and digital media coupled with significant increases in consumers’ screen time serving as macro-level trends scaffolding its importance. In addition to the various offline stages that participants used to maintain their visibility, all participants (with the exception of Suki the hostess) had online presences established across multiple platforms, such as personal websites, blogs, and social media (most commonly Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube). Recent studies examining personal branders such as bloggers (Erz & Christensen, 2018) and entrepreneurs (Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018) similarly identify the online-offline intersection as a key intersection for these actors to navigate. The ever-changing digital landscape, and the subsequent proliferation of sites for image production, both enabled and constrained their personal
branding practices. In terms of the latter, a key tension at this intersection concerns the division of their time and attention to building their brand’s visibility online versus offline:

I wish I had more time to do more Wayne.com content or actual site-specific content for this website. […] I actually really worry that the thing I should have done was actually concentrated on this as a primary project, rather than as a secondary one. [Wayne, media personality]

To be perfectly honest, I have not done a lot of work on ‘Online Sue’ because I’ve been focusing on other projects. I know I need to do more and that’s going to change. [Sue, entrepreneur]

These concerns support the findings of a previous study revealing the failure of most nascent (or emerging) personal brands online was due to the personal branders’ lack of purposive, curatorial focus and inadequate content creation (Labrecque et al., 2011). While consumers who tentatively engage in personal branding online have been shown to struggle with the requirements for publicness and narrative uniformity on social media (Van Dijck, 2013; Eager & Dann, 2016; Erz & Christensen, 2018), this was far less problematic for the experienced personal branders in this study who were practiced in identity compartmentalisation and the public performance of their brands.

Similar to the bloggers in McQuarrie et al.’s (2013) study of how online technologies produce a ‘megaphone effect’, participants understood the potential to exponentially increase their audience reach from integrating and amplifying their voices online. The following excerpt from Kevin the politician captures this recognition:

Kevin: [My] website really legitimises the brand because I think if you have your own website, obviously you’ve gone to great lengths in terms of really thinking it through so it really brings the whole brand together and strengthens the credibility behind it. […] I did a campaign event with a community group and there was about 200 people in the room. With Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and my website, I’m able to share that experience and what happened there and the key messages that took place and the people that were there to everybody else who wasn’t at that event so if they weren’t able to attend or they wanted to see what I was up to. And they can forward, you know, all those things to their friends, so there’s a multiplier effect by being involved and having all these mediums to get the message out so we’re able to capitalise on the things that we are doing.

In contradistinction to the other participants, Suki the hostess understood that ‘mystery’ was one of her brand’s core meanings, with her marketplace performances designed to “build curiosity”. As such, she framed online accessibility as a violation of the scarcity of her image that would dilute the cultural and economic capital of her brand. Recognising the importance
of luxury and exclusivity to her brand’s visual, experiential consumption, Suki’s absence from the online world mirrors the efforts of some artists/curators/managers attempting to avoid the commodification of aesthetic work through its mass replication, decontextualisation, and profane consumption (Hirschman, 1983; Muñiz et al., 2014). Suki’s consciousness in managing both her absence and presence across online/offline performance stages was shared by the other participants who sought to regulate their visibility to navigate this intersection of the identity market. The following exchange with Jasmine the comedian evidences this consciousness about scarcity and visibility management:

**Interviewer:** What if you did put it all out there?

**Jasmine:** God [Deep sigh]. The danger is I would be…there would be an over-supply.

**Interviewer:** Over-supply?

**Jasmine:** You’ve got to be…there’s got to be an element of scarcity in it. A part of you that is a bit of a riddle or a conundrum that people kind of go, ‘God love her’. It’s like, people wonder, ‘What is she really like?’ I can’t put my finger on it. […] I want scarcity again. As soon as the show is over or as soon as it is sold out, I will not be twittering or doing anything on Facebook for as many months as I can get away with. To go out so you can become scarce and they can go, ‘Jasmine is twittering again!’ You don’t want too much stuff.

Jasmine’s experience reveals that the over-production of visibility at this intersection has the potential to diminish a personal brand’s aura and resolve its sense of antimony (or paradox), which consumer culture researchers have shown to be key drivers of cultural brand capital (Brown et al., 2003). As such, managing brand visibility at this intersection entailed deep consideration of the capital-creating/destroying implications of a personal branders’ presence versus absence across online and offline sites of image production.

**7.3.1.6 Identity market intersection 6: Marketing ethics (between the moral and market economy)**

The amorality of market logic which informs the personal branding movement’s discourse has been identified as ethically problematic by previous researchers (Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005). For these researchers, a key issue of concern in the popular press literature is the instrumental mode of production it encourages, with social roles and human-to-human relationships subjugated to self-interest, transactions, and capital accumulation. While some participants were more commercially motivated than others, no personal brander had a singular focus on profit maximisation, nor perceived the identity market as an amoral space, as the following excerpts from Jane and Rose affirm:
Jane: I just need to feel at the end of the day that I’m the kind of person that I want to be. […] For me, there’s certain boundaries and rules that I think need to be observed when I’m engaging in the public domain and I expect others to respect those rules, too.

Rose: I don’t ride the boat to make as much money as I can. […] It was never about that for me. It always has been about the principles and the ideals and not the selling out.

All participants had experiences of refusing lucrative commercial opportunities because they violated the ethical frameworks structuring their marketing work. These frameworks were comprised of a participant’s personal values layered with a consciousness of the public’s ethical evaluation of their brand’s marketplace performances. It is pertinent to note that participants’ ethical frameworks were not static nor puritanically divorced from the commercial imperative to ‘earn a living’. Instead, their marketing ethics were dynamically negotiated in concert with their agency, learning from past experiences, and accumulated capital within the identity market. Symptomatic of this dynamic framing of personal branders’ marketing ethics is the fact that participants could recall various ethical dilemmas they had confronted in the identity market, including admissions they had, at times, violated their ethical frameworks. Wayne provides an example of how visceral the tension between the moral and market economy can be, and how the dual perspective of his personal values and brand authenticity informed the resolution he reached:

Wayne: I was paid to MC an event. I felt very odd about being there. I’ll never forget one of the organiser guys asking me to be photographed putting a dollar bill in the garter of one of these strippers and I refused to do it. Because he was paying me to be there, I remember… he didn’t force it, but it was like, ‘Well, fuck off if you are not going to be photographed’. There was definitely that tension. Maybe if he pushed me, I would have, but I was very concerned that my brand would be damaged. The idea of this photo could have gone anywhere, of me being… doing something which I consider to be sexist… publicly endorsing something. It was okay to be there and be paid to just be in the crowd, but the photo was too much.

As Wayne’s experience highlights, high visibility status was accompanied with intense moral scrutiny, with personal branders’ marketplace performances being interpreted through the heterologous moral lenses of market actors. As such, being involved in a public scandal was an ever-present possibility, with several participants enduring this experience during the seven years of fieldwork. All participants were conscious of being ‘in the spotlight’ or ‘on a pedestal’ as a symbolic resource traversing moral-immoral territories in the identity market. Figure 7.2 captures the range of negative meanings related to the immoral production of their brands at each intersection of the identity market.
Figure 7.2 Immoral production and negative meanings of personal branding at the intersections of the identity market

**Intersection 1:** Marketisation (between public branded self and private self)

Participants’ negative meanings for immoral production at this intersection: fake, artificial, inauthentic, manipulative, deceptive, untruthful, instrumental, exploitive, coercive, ruthless.

Examples:
- “I learned how to manipulate the system. You can turn anything negative about you into a positive or something that’s favourable to you. I feel like I’m being such a manipulative cunning bitch!” [Ben]
- “It’s like I want to pretend that really I want to have a meaningful connection with you, a mutual connection with you, when really I’m just trying to use you instrumentally. I’m trying to use you as a means to my fiscal or other kinds of mercenary ends and I’m just not comfortable with that.” [Jane]

**Intersection 2:** Commodification (between the commercial sphere and social sphere)

Participants’ negative meanings for immoral production at this intersection: prostitute, gigolo, hustler, whore, corporate cocksucker, slut, sellout, huckster, shill, soulless, crass, vulgar, dirty, cheesy.

Examples:
- “It’s prostituting yourself almost. It’s allowing yourself to be degraded.” [Madeline]
- “I’ve turned into this attention seeking whore.” [Ben]
- “I don’t want to come across as being a cheesy salesperson.” [Kevin]

**Intersection 3:** Locus of work (between marketing work and substantive work)

Participants’ negative meanings for immoral production at this intersection: illegitimate, queue jumper, superficial, desperate, wannabe.

Examples:
- “It’s all about profile and who’s that person…[It] is all very superficial.” [Tom]
- “If you try too hard, then you don’t get anywhere. You don’t want to appear desperate.” [Wayne]
- “So you shouldn’t be asking people about how you branded yourself, but how your brand occurred, because people never want to look like they are pushing themselves to the front of the queue. They don’t want to look like a queue jumper.” [Jasmine]

**Intersection 4:** Brand authorship (between self-authorship and other authors in the identity market)

Participants’ negative meanings for immoral production at this intersection: shameless, boastful, narcissistic, egotistical, self-obsessed.

Examples:
- “And at times you can feel incredibly egotistical and self-obsessed because by virtue of the fact that I suppose you are.” [Wayne]
- “I’m more comfortable telling a story instead of just boasting about all the great things I do.” [Kevin]

**Intersection 5:** Visibility (between the online and offline world)

Participants’ negative meanings for immoral production at this intersection: attention seeker, fame chaser, red carpet licker.

Examples:
- “They can’t accuse me of being a fame seeker or a red carpet licker.” [Rose]
- “There was this guy going, ‘You’re an attention seeker.’ No, I’m an attention getter.” [Jasmine]
- “It’s not about ego. You’ve just got to take the attention-seeking out of it.” [Sue]
The multiplicity of descriptors included in Figure 7.2, and their familiarity as widely-shared cultural tropes, attests to how deeply embedded ethical concerns were in the marketing work of personal branders. As Figure 7.2 highlights, the ethical dilemmas, negative meanings, and immoral production practices of personal branding spanned the intersections of the identity market, revealing a considerable dark side to the phenomenon. Using a similar methodology to this thesis, Drumwright and Murphy (2004) examined how practitioners negotiate the ethics of their marketing work in an advertising agency. Drumwright and Murphy (2004) found that most participants’ experienced moral myopia and moral muteness, characterising this lack of ethical consciousness as a reflection of these marketers’ vested interests in remaining employed. In contrast, this research finds that the personal branders had a vested interest in remaining sensitive to the ethical tensions surrounding their marketing work in the identity market, with all participants aware of the heightened ethical scrutiny focused on their brands. For example, Jane the public intellectual explains the relationship between visibility and personal brands becoming objects of cynosure for the public’s moral attention:

Jane: The public decides who are the role models. The public decides the standards by which those role models need to live up to. I’m conscious of the terror of the higher you get in terms of visibility, the more people load on to you ‘stuff’, fairly or unfairly, which you then, through your behaviour, can violate what they think you should be doing and disappoint and anger, and all really through no fault of your own.

Rozuel’s (2011) conceptual article on the moral hazard of identity compartmentalisation argues that professional selves are a ‘role’ or ‘mask’ that fractures a person’s holistic sense of self, obfuscating their identity and value system, which in turn, diminishes their moral integrity and responsibility. Personal branding is a unique context that problematises Rozuel’s (2011) assertion that identity compartmentalisation necessarily leads to diminished moral responsibility. While the personal branders’ marketing work involved identity compartmentalisation, the dualism of their role as brand manager and brand entity, the heightened moral surveillance their brands were subjected to, and their acute understanding of the immoral territories surrounding personal brand production, all reinforced the prescience of marketing ethics and the requirement for ongoing vigilance to navigate this intersection. That is, the ethically problematic aspects of personal branding sensitised participants to issues of marketing ethics, with the identity market constructed not as an amoral space, but one loaded with moral-immoral tensions and meanings to traverse.
7.3.2 Brand resonance: Personal integrity and brand authenticity

Participants navigated the six major intersections of the identity market to find and sustain a position of brand resonance. Brand resonance has previously been conceptualised in the brand management literature as the strongest, most enduring quality of a consumer-brand relationship that exists at the apex of models of consumer-based brand equity (Keller, 2013). In the context of personal branding, this study reimagines the concept from a producer’s perspective, understanding brand resonance as a productive position of alignment between a personal brander’s personal integrity and brand authenticity, which creates personal brand capital in the identity market. Participants experienced brand resonance as an embodied feeling or tacit knowledge, describing it as the sense that their brand was ‘working’, ‘connecting’, ‘singing’, ‘cutting through’, ‘successful’, ‘right’, ‘healthy’, and most commonly, ‘resonating’. Importantly, finding and sustaining brand resonance was persistently difficult for all participants, with a series of challenges discussed in the next chapter further exacerbating personal branders’ navigation of the identity market’s intersections.

To first explore this notion of brand resonance, however, this section will focus on two participants (Rose and Kevin) who provide representative, but particularly lucid accounts of how integrity and authenticity were an orienting dialectic guiding their personal branding practices. Beginning with Rose, the following passage elucidates how important maintaining her personal integrity was to producing her brand as a high-profile writer from a resonant position:

*Rose:* The more you stand up for your beliefs, for the right thing, the more you stay on that path, the more people believe you. That’s just the way it is. It’s like a cult. The cult of Rose. [Rose and the interviewer laugh] I guess this is more personal for me, because for some people, their brands don’t mean so much to them, but for me, having integrity is so incredibly valuable because when the shit hits the fan, I can lie in bed at night and have the integrity of me and my brand and my path and know that I have never sold out. And that, forget business, but from a personal, spiritual point of view, on the bad days, it’s gold, you know? And because I’m a very spiritual kind of person, that means a lot to me. It’s really important that when I finish my time on this Earth that I stayed true and did the best I could possibly do at any given time and keep building and growing and evolving and sharing.

Rose’s commitment to protecting her personal integrity and brand’s authenticity is unequivocal in this passage, and was associated with broader life themes concerning her spirituality and legacy. In this next example, she recounts how this dialectic shaped her
decisions to turn down lucrative commercial opportunities and endorsements that she perceived were inconsistent with sustaining a position of brand resonance:

**Rose:** I’d be bullshitting. If you are bullshitting, people know. People know. Even when they don’t know, they know. And bullshit has a shelf life. And where you go from there? It’s really hard.

**Interviewer:** Yeah?

**Rose:** It’s not being able to be bought. [...] I value that really highly. And when you’ve got nothing, you can’t lose anything. And so, if you only have your values, then they are priceless. Do you know what I mean? My integrity is all I have, so you can’t buy that. People try when they know that you don’t have money. They try to get you to do the most outrageous things. And it’s just like, ‘No’, you know? And there’s this kind of amazing power in being able to say that and just trust when the time is right and everything falls into place, you know, it happens […] And that’s all I base most of my decisions on, which are not necessarily great business decisions, you know? I probably shouldn’t have turned down endorsements, but for me, the $10,000 or the $50,000 or the $100,000 at the time when I needed it most, didn’t translate as being who I am. And, see, that’s where if money doesn’t drive you, it doesn’t really mean anything. It’s kind of a weird thing. I guess it’s kind of having power, knowing… it’s funny, I don’t know how to describe it.

**Interviewer:** It’s a tough one.

**Rose:** For me, it’s about not selling out my ideals. And I mean, that’s I guess why I call my brand my ideals.

Together, these passages illustrate how personal integrity and brand authenticity oriented Rose’s marketisation, commodification, visibility, locus of work, brand authorship, and marketing ethics. The internal/external focus of personal integrity and brand authenticity equipped Rose with a long-term perspective and a sense of agency to manoeuvre her brand and traverse the market’s intersections. In the following exchange with Kevin, this dialectic emerges again as he reflects on the most important drivers of his personal branding success as a politician:

**Kevin:** I think you need to first of all, be true to it. You really have to first of all believe in yourself before other people will believe in you or to be able to connect with you. So you have to be genuine. That’s number one. I think the other thing is that it needs to be credible and approachable. So first it needs to be approachable. That people need to be able to connect with somehow.

**Interviewer:** So, it seems to be a pretty honest approach?

**Kevin:** Yeah. I think that’s really key and actually that came out a lot in the consultations, and market research from my political advisors. The great thing that came across was that they felt that I was authentic in everything I was doing. That I actually cared about the community. That every single initiative that I launched is something I truly believed in. So yeah, I think a lot of people get turned off by politics and politicians when they feel politicians are just putting on a front in order to get votes.
Interviewer: Yeah?

Kevin: I’m not saying that I’m better than them. Definitely launching such an initiative I know obviously helps my campaign, but even if I wasn’t running as a politician, I think it’s something I would be doing anyway because I care so deeply about the community.

Interviewer: And if you were forced to do something that you didn’t care about?

Kevin: Yeah, that would totally go against my value system. I don’t think I would feel comfortable about that. I would feel like a huge fraud and I would just fit the stereotype of a typical politician.

Like Rose, Kevin’s experiences reveal how personal integrity and brand authenticity work in combination to guide him away from the pitfalls of production at a non-resonant positioning – a state of being resulting from marketising brand meanings entirely disconnected from his true self, excessive commodification, sacrificing substance for image, losing authorial direction, failing to manage his absence from damaging/diluting sites of identity production, and violating the personal and professional ethical frameworks structuring his personal branding practices.

By illustrating the dialectic structuring all participants’ attempts to achieve brand resonance, Rose and Kevin’s experiences can also be used to more deeply explore conceptions of brand authenticity. Their primary framing of brand authenticity was as a perception held by marketplace actors (especially consumers), and based around, as the existing literature suggests, the believability of a manufactured persona’s claim-making (Stern, 1994). Participants understood their brand’s authenticity was constructed and managed: a product of both their authoritative performances and authenticating acts (Beverland, Farrelly, & Quester, 2010) and the connection between their private selves and brand persona (Moulard et al., 2015). Similar to the entrepreneurs that Thompson-Whiteside (2018) studied, the participants understood that personal brand authenticity was negotiated through this connection and the personal disclosures they included in their marketplace performances to be perceived as ‘real’, ‘genuine’, and ‘authentic’. Brand authenticity did not represent itself as a crisis or insurmountable paradox for participants, as previous researchers have questioned (see Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005). Instead, participants approached their production of brand authenticity with the understanding that the reductive nature of their brand persona and the liminal space of the identity market did not necessarily tie their image and narrative production to a full, complete, and strict representation of reality. That is, ‘realness’ was permeable, and included expressions of what was probable, possible, or congruent as a
representation of reality from the identity project of their brand persona. This conception fits with Holt’s (2002) framing of cultural brands’ performance of authenticity as a hyperreal condition of postmodern consumer culture.

An important qualifier to note, however, is that the requirements for producing brand authenticity varied markedly across participants, with this variance largely due to organisational field dynamics, which field-specific studies of personal branding have highlighted in detail (Motion, 2000; Parmentier et al., 2013). This influence ensured that Rose’s production of brand authenticity reflected the high cultural capital of a writer whose authenticity required critical distance from the profane practices of mass marketing (Holt, 2002, 2004), while Kevin’s brand authenticity needed to be managed within the complex network of actors in the field of politics and accommodate their various expectations and aspirations for him as a political leader (Dean et al., 2015). Further discussion of how the participants managed their brand authenticity will follow in the two subsequent chapters.

In summarising the discussion to date, the previous sections have mapped six intersections within the field of the identity market, revealing its contested terrain and complexity for personal branders to navigate. Achieving the alignment of personal integrity and brand authenticity that brand resonance requires is a formidable challenge, and one the personal branders undertook to accumulate capital, a topic to which attention will now turn.

7.4 The capital of personal brands
This section draws on Bourdieu’s (1986, 1993) concept of capital within fields to understand the capital accumulated by personal branders in the identity market. To do this, it explores participants’ experiences of work with and without their brands in the overlapping fields of the identity market and labour market. This discussion unpacks the ramifications of personal branding in terms of participants’ accumulation of symbolic capital and the life projects of their careers. A more detailed explication of the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of the capital that personal brands accumulate follows to complete this section.

7.4.1 Symbolic capital and self-actualised work versus brandlessness and ordinary work
Symbolic capital refers to the social recognition, prestige, authority, respect, and legitimacy that a person accumulates within a field (Bourdieu, 1993). As an amalgam that reflects, and is constituted by, economic, social, and cultural forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986), symbolic
capital is an indicator of an actor’s field-specific power and status. Participants were clear about the power, control, and status gains their brands conferred:

[Without a brand], I don’t think that people would recognise me. I’d just be yet another psychic in the newspaper that, oh yes, can pass by that really easily. People can’t pass by me that easily, because there you are. That’s what you are. I’m recognisable. [Madeline, psychic]

The advantages of having a brand is having longevity, no matter what economic climate comes and goes and no matter what jobs you are offered. You know, it’s like being in control of your own business and being able to guide that and build that. It’s definitely a positive because you are in control. It’s not like, ‘Oh well, the factory is closing and now you are out of a job.’ [Rose, writer]

A reward in having a profile is being known so that sometimes I’ll go into an agency to sell some work and they’ll be like, ‘Oh, we saw you in the press’. They’re thinking this guy is somebody. He’s out there. We want to be attached to that because obviously, you know, if he’s at all these things, then he must be somebody that we want to be associated with. [Tom, producer]

I have more power because I’m not just a comedian. ‘Oh we need to get rid of two comedians.’ Only Jasmine can be Jasmine. [Jasmine, comedian]

These descriptions evidence the cynosure, ingratiation, distinction, and irreplaceability that personal brands provided participants, which elevated their sense of power and status in the overlapping fields of the identity market and labour market. As the personal branders all had established brands connected to their occupational roles, the pursuit of, and benefits from, personal branding were understood through the more encompassing lens of participants’ ‘careers’. As such, their personal brands were purposively constructed as either a means of pursuing self-actualised work or as a response to the requirement for high visibility status to compete for capital within their chosen occupations and organisational fields. Rather than having their identities masked, obscured, subsumed, or silenced by their employer’s organisational brand/s, participants’ personal brands provided them with direct entry to the identity market without “the institutional mediation historically required” (McQuarrie et al., 2013, p. 136). The symbolic capital that participants’ brands acquired sometimes had a transformative effect on the substantive work they undertook in the labour market. As an example of this transformation, Wayne’s role changed from being a ‘media worker’ to a ‘media personality’:

Wayne: One of my major objectives [of engaging in personal branding] was to move from objective media work to subjective media work. To write as me. To be me. Not to be just faceless media presenter ‘x’ and I was able to do that to great effect.
Notably, participants described the experience of having a highly visible brand as akin to *having* an element of celebrity – albeit delimited in scale to the particular identity space they circulated within. It was not, however, motivated by, nor equivalent to, *being* a celebrity, which they tended to associate with the condition of ‘being famous for being famous’, a popular conception of celebrity in postmodernity (see Gamson, 1994). Participants’ instrumental, pragmatic, career-focused motivations support Bandinelli and Arvidsson’s (2013) argument that personal branding is a logical, productive response to the commodification of everything in consumer culture. That is, personal branders appropriated marketing and branding practices to disrupt the replication of capital in the labour and identity markets, which in turn, elevated their statuses from that of ordinary workers. Success, for the personal branders, was thus associated with their pursuit of self-actualised work. As such, personal branding success was idiosyncratically defined outside of the metrics conventionally espoused by the brand management literature, such as brand equity, profitability, or market growth (see Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2013), as Jasmine and Tom illustrate:

**Jasmine:** I’m not interested in any other markets. You know, having an international profile would be to just sell a few more shows, but I don’t need more work and I don’t need more places to be able to have my voice.

**Tom:** I don’t aspire to be filthy rich. I don’t aspire to be, you know, the money thing is not in my aspirations as long as I can afford my lifestyle and live somewhere nice, eat what I want, travel, that’s fine. That’s the lesser part of it. The more part of it is what I’m actually doing on a day-to-day basis and enjoying what I do.

All participants provided detailed descriptions of their experiences of self-actualised work in their occupational roles, with the common underlying qualities of this work being that it was interesting, meaningful, varied, challenging, and enjoyable. The marketing work of personal branding was a quotidian aspect of their careers, with the latter tending to be framed in relation to the broader life themes of ‘pursuing a passion’, ‘responding to a calling’, or ‘creating a legacy’. Returning to the experiences of Jasmine and Tom, the qualities of self-actualised work are apparent in their descriptions of what it means to them to work as a comedian and as a producer, respectively:

**Jasmine:** When I got up on stage and did my lines and got off, I felt like I arrived. I felt like I had been kind of baptised. I had done the thing I was most scared of in my life, even though I never really realised I was scared of it. It was only the amazing sense of relief afterwards and thrill that I had done it. [...] It was something that I always think I harboured in the back of my mind, doing stand-up. And why? I think, you know, to prove you’re funny. To get
attention. To perform. To have that sense of power. To have that communion with the audience. I think it had always been in my mind, but it was something that I didn’t think would… like gee, I really want to go to the moon, but as if I could do that.

**Tom:** Love it. I love it. It’s really interesting. It never becomes boring. […] I enjoy what I do. I get to do on a daily basis…create something and get to see the end result. And it’s consistent. Like you are consistently putting these things together and creating something and then seeing this end result that, you know, most of the time, you are anywhere from happy to, you know, extremely overjoyed. But there are some things that I look at, you know, you get so excited and happy seeing this thing you’ve put together. So proud of your work. I think that’s really important.

Compared to their experiences of self-actualised work in the occupational roles that their brands were established in, participants understood ‘brandlessness’ as the experience of being invisible in the identity market, a status they equated with being an ordinary ‘9-5’ worker employed by an organisation in the labour market. This understanding of brandlessness developed from the personal branders’ early experiences of work before their brands were established, imagined experiences of work in their organisational field had they not established their personal brands, or their observations of the nature of work in the labour market more generally (within and across organisational fields).

For all participants, brandlessness was associated with a loss of power, status, and capital within their respective occupations and organisational fields. As such, most, but not all, participants constructed being an ordinary worker as an unsustainable identity project, either rejecting it categorically as incongruent with their self-concept (“It’s really not for me.” [Ben]), more tentatively expressing uncertainty about their ability to perform it (“I honestly don’t know if I’m built for it.” [Wayne]), or framing it as a suboptimal choice (“We don’t have to do anything, do we? We can choose to do whatever we chose to do… but I would, quite frankly, be bored shitless.” [Rose]). For these participants, ordinary work was constructed as repetitive, boring, mundane, and lacking in creativity, autonomy, and control. Their descriptions of ordinary work in the labour market have strong conceptual fit with neo-Marxist notions of alienation at work which have been developed by the sociologist and social psychologist, Melvin Seeman (1959, 1975). Seeman’s (1975, p. 93-94) highly influential work advances six dimensions of alienation from the experiential viewpoint of an actor. As such, it provides a useful framework to understand how participants’ experiences of brandless, ordinary work in the labour market were consistent with the experience of being alienated at work, with Table 7.1 illustrating this linkage for two different participants.
Table 7.1 Participants’ experiences of alienation in the labour market as brandless, ordinary workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seeman’s (1975) dimensions of alienation</th>
<th>Participants’ experiences of alienation as brandless, ordinary workers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Powerlessness (the sense of having low control)</td>
<td>Context: Sue describes her rejection of ordinary work, reflecting on a range of previous experiences she had as an employee in organisations before establishing her brand as an entrepreneur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Meaninglessness (the sense of uncertainty and incomprehensibility)</td>
<td>Sue: I cannot imagine a lifestyle of owning a house, the white picket fence, the dog and the mortgage and the cars. The 9-5 scares the shit out of me. Can’t do it. Cannot imagine it. No. […] Every job I’ve ever had, I was always chasing something else. I was never satisfied in any of the jobs I’ve ever had before. I might have enjoyed them, but I wasn’t passionate about it. It wasn’t something I loved to do.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) Loneliness or social isolation (the sense of social exclusion or rejection)</td>
<td>Interviewer: What is it like when you’re working at a job you aren’t challenged by?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Cultural estrangement (the sense of rejecting commonly held social values)</td>
<td>Sue: What’s the fucking point? If you are not passionate about it, what is the point?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) Self-estrangement (the sense that activities are not intrinsically rewarding, creative, challenging, enjoyable)</td>
<td>Kevin: [Life would be] boring as hell! I don’t think I would be able to survive. I think I would probably shoot myself if I had to go to work between 9-5. Yeah, no.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Normlessness and distrust (the sense that socially unacceptable behaviours are routine and required)</td>
<td>Interviewer: So you couldn’t do that?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In marked contrast, three participants (Jasmine, Madeline, and Suki) were far less negative about ordinary work, constructing it as a viable, albeit less desirable, alternative to their current roles. Working in volatile, less established occupations (as a comedian, psychic, and hostess, respectively), the stability of ordinary work represented a fall-back option or safety net for these participants to return to if their brands failed or they desired to change occupations. For example, while Suki described the work of hostessing as ‘interesting’, ‘fun’, and ‘like a party’, she recognised the downsides of the role too, including physical exhaustion from working late into the night and dealing with abusive customers. Suki understood that
hostessing was likely to be a liminal episode in her life. Maintaining the possibility of undertaking ordinary work in the future freed her from the constraints of being trapped in the ‘bar world’ of hostessing: “If I only have the bar world, I cannot get out. I cannot have a normal life.” Jasmine, Madeline, and Suki reveal that brandlessness can be embraced as an alternative identity project that recursively supported their desire to engage in personal branding in the identity market. For the other participants, their rejection of ordinary work and brandlessness incentivised their exploration of the identity market as they sought alternative statuses, identity projects, and careers to the alienating experience of a ‘9-5’ job.

The symbolic capital and self-actualised work enabled by personal branding versus the significant potential for alienation from brandlessness and ordinary work is a finding that challenges the critical literature’s supposition that the self-commodification that personal branding entails necessarily results in worker alienation (Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005). While the first outcome of a worker’s commodification that Marx (1867/1954) predicted – ‘reification’ or objectification – was readily observed in this study when describing participants’ production of their brand personas, his second outcome of worker alienation is more problematic. In this study, participants associated alienation with the experience of being brandless, ordinary workers that had been reduced to the status of a commodity in neoliberal labour markets. Thus, by commodifying their branded self in the identity market, the personal branders created symbolic capital that decommodified them from the status of an ordinary worker in the labour market. This framing is consistent with the marketing view of commodification, which holds that decommodification occurs when marketing is applied to a commodity, transforming it into a unique, meaningful, and valued object circulating in the brand territory of the marketplace (Applbaum, 2004). However, as the next chapter reveals, personal branding did have the potential to alienate participants in at least three ways (burning out, selling out, fading out), with these pitfalls a constant possibility for personal branders who struggled to navigate the identity market and sustain a position of brand resonance.

7.4.2 Social, cultural, and economic dimensions of personal brand capital
The symbolic capital of participants’ personal brands can be further deconstructed into economic, social, and cultural dimensions, with this dimensionality consistent with Bourdieu’s (1986, 1993) conceptualisation of capital. From a Bourdieun perspective, ‘economic capital’ can be directly converted into money and/or institutionalised as property
rights to an asset, while social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 51). Cultural capital is instrumental in structuring social hierarchies within fields and exists in three forms: ‘embodied’ (e.g. mental and bodily dispositions, tastes, and skills), ‘objectified’ (e.g., cultural goods), and ‘institutionalised’ (e.g. qualifications and certifications) (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993). These dimensions of capital have strong fit with participants’ descriptions of the advantages, benefits, and outcomes of having an established brand in the identity market. This study is not the first to recognise the applicability of these dimensions to understand the construct of ‘personal brand capital’, with previous studies supporting this application conceptually (Khedher, 2015) and empirically in relation to the emerging brands of bloggers (Delisle & Parmentier, 2016) and models in the field of fashion (Parmentier et al., 2013). Thus, this study builds on this literature by empirically verifying the applicability of Bourdieu’s (1986, 1993) concept of capital as an organising framework to represent the dimensions of personal brand capital in the field of the identity market. To this end, Figure 7.3 synthesises the range of examples from participants to support each dimension of personal brand capital. One point to note is that the conceptual focus of this section is on the capital accumulated by personal brand objects. The embodied cultural capital (knowledge and skills) that personal branders draw upon to undertake the marketing work of personal branding is an important topic that will be discussed in the next section when examining how participants were habituated to the identity market.

To unpack some of the sub-themes concerning the accumulation of personal brand capital, participants understood that achieving brand resonance required their brands to be culturally relevant, with cultural capital created through the personification of brand meanings, production of brand artefacts, and promotion of institutional awards and endorsements to legitimise and credential their brands. Examples from Jasmine, Suki, and Kevin reveal participants’ consciousness of creating these three forms of cultural capital:

**Jasmine:** What I personify to people… am I the girl that didn’t fuck them? The girl that chased them? The mum that adored them? Am I the teacher than illuminated them? Am I the nun who hit them? Am I the woman they are very scared will laugh at them? I personify a lot of things.

**Suki:** If you are beautiful, but dumb, they [customers] will get bored in, like, three days. [*Suki and the interviewer laugh*] You don’t want to have a doll that is really beautiful. You want the
personality and communication skills from a girl, so I think appearance isn’t that important. But still, if you have both, you are so powerful.

**Kevin:** We find that people are more likely to believe in something if it comes from an unbiased third-party source, especially if it’s written and it comes from a major newspaper.

This conscious and active construction of identity myths is consistent with recent case studies examining the team-managed, cultural production of iconic human brands (Cocker et al., 2015; Fillis, 2015; Hewer & Hamilton, 2012; Stevens et al., 2015). In comparison to these studies, the adroitness of personal branders’ knowledge and skills to self-manage this cultural dimension of marketing work can be more fully apprehended.

**Figure 7.3 Dimensions of personal brand capital**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic capital</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition:</strong> Money, gifts convertible into money, and the value of property rights to the personal brand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples:</strong> Cash payments for work/products/services; monetisation of personal brand through sponsorships, endorsements, donations, and advertising contracts; luxury gifts; commercial valuation of ownership of personal brand property rights.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Social capital</th>
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<td><strong>Definition:</strong> The aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to the possession of a social network of relationships.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Examples:</strong> Social influence, social attention, elite access to social events/institutions/other elite market actors.</td>
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<th>Cultural capital</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Definition:</strong> Exists in three forms: (1) personal brand meanings as <em>embodied</em> cultural capital; (2) personal brand artefacts as <em>objectified</em> cultural capital; and (3) personal brand awards and endorsements as <em>institutionalised</em> cultural capital.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of brand meanings as embodied cultural capital:</strong> Personification of cultural archetypes, myths, and meanings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of brand artefacts as objectified cultural capital:</strong> Name, logo, physical appearance (body, clothing, grooming), personal websites, social media content, participants’ branded products/services, merchandise, mediatised archives of marketplace performances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of brand awards and endorsements as institutionalised cultural capital:</strong> Award nominations/wins, institutional affiliations (qualifications, current/previous employers), testimonials and endorsements from other market actors (particularly organisations, media, and other human brands).</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Consistent with Parmentier et al. (2013) and Delisle and Parmentier (2016), to build personal brand capital, participants needed to simultaneously ‘fit in’ to the aesthetic conventions and taste regimes of their occupational roles and organisational fields while cultivating brand meanings, artefacts, and awards to ‘stand out’ from other actors in the field. Jane and Tom elucidate how changing their careers to work in their current roles as a public intellectual and producer altered the aesthetic conventions and taste regimes structuring the identity construction of their brands:

**Jane:** [Jane points to a website image of herself] And this one was meant to be much more of the new image, which is that I no longer feel compelled to look like an academic. I no longer feel… I feel like it’s important for people to feel they can approach me.

**Tom:** Before, I used to be a bit more funky and edgy and bit more crazy with my look when I was working in a different profession. Now that I’m working as a producer, it is a bit more sophisticated.

Each participants’ accumulation of personal brand capital was different in composition and varied dramatically and unpredictably over the seven years of fieldwork (with the next chapter discussing this instability as a key challenge confronting the personal branders). One common trend, however, was that increases in the social capital of participants’ brands tended to be a transformative experience for them that elevated their social influence and attention. This rise in social status was associated with participants receiving preferential ‘V.I.P’ access and treatment in various social and institutional spaces. Participants often described the experience of being a social elite as ‘surreal’, ‘flattering’, ‘humbling’, but also ‘uncomfortable’, ‘awkward’, and ‘addictive’, as Wayne, Jane, and Tom evidence:

**Wayne:** It has allowed me to do things that I never would have got to be able to do. […] Fame is a drug, you know? When you don’t get treated the way you are used to being treated or when you are… it can be very confronting. I’ve become used to being treated a certain way, you know?

**Jane:** Pleased and uncomfortable in equal amounts. It’s kind of… it’s a weird sensation actually. […] It’s kind of a reminder that in fact your words are going out there and they are going into people’s heads and ears and making an impression. That’s incredibly gratifying. That’s what you’re trying to do. It’s a confirmation of the exercise. But at the same time, you get worried about this thing that somehow you are being perceived to be bigger and more important than I really am.

**Tom:** You feel such a rush from it. You feel like a celebrity or like everything… you don’t have to spend a cent. Everyone wants to know you. Everyone wants to talk to you. Everyone wants your photo. You get a limousine to drive you around. It’s like, having somebody work for you, having a driver to call when you are ready to be picked up. […] And then you get up the next morning and you are humbled again because you are back in reality. Sometimes, I’ve had these days or nights that are so surreal. You wake up the next morning and it’s all gone, but you are still there and still the same person.
Bourdieu (1986) notes that the distinction, affiliations, and access to resources that social and cultural capital provide an actor can be converted to economic capital, but this conversion is difficult. This difficulty was a strong theme for most participants, with even the most commercially-oriented personal branders such as Ben describing the monetisation of his personal brand’s social and cultural capital as an ongoing challenge. The opportunities to accumulate economic capital directly, or monetise other forms of personal brand capital, were asymmetric across participants. While some participants were financially secure and liberated from ever having to work again, others earned average incomes, and some struggled to be monetarily compensated at an appropriate rate, as Jane explains:

**Jane:** Honestly, getting properly paid is so hard. It is so hard. And it’s completely depressing in the areas that I work in. […] It’s hard for me to get a gig. So, you know, I don’t think my experience has been that as I get more senior, everything gets easier. Some things get easier, some things don’t. In some instances you get paid slightly more, but mostly, you don’t.

Jane’s experience attests to the complexity of accumulating economic brand capital. Multiple individual and structural factors affected the commercial valuations and monetisation of participants’ brands, affirming several researchers’ problematisation of the personal branding movement’s assurances concerning the efficacy of engaging in personal branding as a means of achieving financial liberation (Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005).

In summary, this study found no evidence of a direct or linear relationship between the accumulation of any dimension of personal brand capital and: (a) the length of time a personal brand had been established for; (b) the level of visibility a personal brand was established at; and (c) the quantity of marketing work a personal brander engaged in. Instead, capital accumulation tended to be structured by the availability and distribution of capital within a participant’s occupation and organisational field, and more individually determined by their ability to navigate the intersections of the identity market and sustain a position of brand resonance. As such, ‘difficult’, ‘volatile’, and ‘unpredictable’ are the qualities that most accurately characterise participants’ long-term experiences of accumulating personal brand capital in the identity market.

### 7.5 The knowledge and skills personal branders develop to navigate the field

This final section completes the conceptualisation of personal branding advanced in this thesis by exploring how participants became habituated to the identity market. To do this, it
first examines the conjoint role of habitus and strategy in orienting personal branders’ practice of marketing work before distilling the skills and abilities that constituted personal branders’ field-specific cultural capital. Next, it examines the utility of the popular press literature on personal branding for participants before focusing more in-depth on the formative sources of knowledge and learning that enabled personal branders to navigate the identity market’s intersections and sustain positions of brand resonance.

7.5.1 Habitus, strategy, and personal branders’ field-specific cultural capital

There were strong hallmarks of Bourdieu’s (1990; 1992) revised concept of ‘habitus and strategy’ working in combination as the unconscious predispositions versus conscious decisions that participants relied upon to apprehend the rules of the identity market and navigate the performance of their brands through its intersections. The following quotations from Tom, Rose, and Jane exemplify this conscious/unconscious duality which structured their practice of marketing work:

**Tom:** It’s a mix of strategy and intuition. The strategy is having a look at who you are targeting, how you are going to approach them, what you are going to do to impress them. I guess that’s a strategy, but that comes in place in the very early stage I guess. When you sort of start, that’s when the strategy is there, then you roll with it. It becomes natural. I don’t sort of think, ‘What’s my strategy?’ […] Some of it is innate, but you have to roll with it after a while.

**Rose:** I’ve got a good feel for when things are ready and when the next step… and you know? I’m getting close to that. I really kind of quite clearly see the path of where I’m going to go and what I’m going to do and what I’m going to bring in and how I’m going to morph it out to a bigger brand.

**Jane:** It starts up top and if up top fails me, I have to rely on my subconscious, which often will do work for me. […] Like one day I will just wake up and go, ‘I know’ because that’s how it works for me. My sub-conscious must just chew and chew away at it until it just spits something up and I’ve come to rely on it. […] I’ve got a pretty strong internal voice, so once I see it on the page, I just know. Obviously, I’m capable of being wrong, but I know in a kind of more objective sense, ‘That’s right’. That feels right. That’s got the elements that I think need to be there.

The notion of ‘strategy’ in participants’ descriptions is not consistent with the prescriptive, rationalist, graduated processes outlined in the personal branding movement’s discourse. Instead, the human dimension of marketing work surfaces as the dominant frame in participants’ descriptions of habitus and strategy, expressed in terms of feelings, intuitions, emotions, visions, and sensations. This framing affirms previous studies of marketing practitioners that have shown marketing work is informed by tacit and implicit knowledge.
(Hackley, 1999; Kaptan, 2013; Kover, 1995) and embodied through feelings, intuitions, and everyday impressions and judgements (Alvesson, 1994; Ardley, 2005; Browne, Sharkey-Scott, Mangematin, Lawlor, & Cuddihy, 2014; Brownlie, 1998; Nyilasy et al., 2013; Patterson, Quinn, & Baron, 2012). While previous studies having examined practitioners such as agency-based advertisers (Nyilasy et al., 2013) and corporate marketing managers (Patterson et al., 2012), this study adds the category of personal branders to this body of literature which collectively advances a more humanistic conception of marketing work.

As all participants entered the identity market as adults, similar to the participants in Üstüner and Thompson’s (2012) study, their acquisition of habitus developed over time from actively working to reflexively understand the rules and correct practices for generating visibility, performing their brands, and sustaining brand resonance. The personal branders consistently described the acquisition of habitus as the internalisation of a voice that sub-consciously guided the production of their brands. For Jasmine, this ‘inbuilt’ voice clarified over time, though often remained difficult to rationalise or articulate:

**Jasmine:** It’s a very clear pathway. I don’t even question so many things I do. I just do them. Like wearing that outfit. Titling a show. Choosing certain images…I don’t know why I’m doing it, but I know it will work.

The complexity of intersections that participants needed to navigate ensured their habitus was multi-dimensional, with strong emotional (Arsel & Bean, 2013) and moral (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013) dimensions to (a) retain their sense of personal integrity and avoid the negative brand meanings associated with immoral production of their brands, and (b) both anticipate and respond to the desired brand meanings they could authentically perform to continue accumulating capital in the identity market. Consistent with Bourdieun theory (1977, 1990, 1993), becoming habituated to the identity market was entwined with personal branders’ embodied cultural capital, or the field-specific skills and competencies they employed to enact the marketing work of personal branding. Participants understood this relationship, noting their personal branding skills and competencies were not universally distributed across the population nor emerged fully-formed, but were the consequence of careful, persistent work:

**Sue:** [Personal branding] is not just words, it’s intelligence. It’s this ability to think of the big picture and put the puzzles in the right places. That’s not something everybody has. […] I’ve always had this ability to self-analyse. I was always conscientious of what I didn’t want to be,
who I didn’t want to be seen as. I am so self-aware. I’m always aware of my effect on other people. But I’ve worked at this to build my brand. It’s hard work.

**Wayne:** You’ve got to work really hard to build the skill set that goes with the fame. You can’t just have fame and expect it to take you somewhere. You’ve got to… You’ve got to be prepared to eat some shit and learn and work.

Field-specific skills and competencies evidently contributed to the personal branders’ accumulation of habitus and capital in the identity market. Attempting to further prescribe a definitive list of these abilities is problematic, however, and risks advancing an inflexible and unrepresentative conception of the dynamic and variable behavioural repertoire required. What can be stated at a general level is that participants’ practice of marketing work drew upon a series of competencies and literacies that included, but was not limited to: (1) self-awareness and reflexivity; (2) market sensing; (3) image and narrative production; and (4) identity performance. Throughout the period of fieldwork, there were clear examples of participants’ creativity, courage, resilience, empathy, pragmatism, confidence, risk-taking, and diligence. The broad skill set and portfolio of personal competencies that marketing work requires is not a novel finding, and is consistent with previous studies examining diffuse contexts, from amateur speed-daters’ self-marketing abilities (Patterson & Hodgson, 2006) to the expansive skill sets of marketing managers working in large organisations (Ardley, 2006).

In contrast to the more generic marketing skills previously described, a particularly pronounced skill common to all participants was an entrepreneurial sensibility they demonstrated as brand managers. This entrepreneurialism consisted of an opportunistic capability to sense and respond to the capital-creating/capital-converting possibilities of a marketplace performance, whether it be anticipating the cultural relevance of personifying a brand meaning, playing status games with other marketplace actors, or re-/circulating representations of a performance on mediatised stages to increase their visibility. In this way, this study affirms the centrality of Du Gay’s (1996) notion of ‘entrepreneurial selves’ to personal branders, which further validates Bandinelli and Arvidsson’s (2013) proposal that entrepreneurialism is quintessential to the practice of personal branding. In summary, participants recognised the need to work hard not only to become habituated to the dynamics of the identity market, but to be sufficiently skilled to execute strategies that enabled them to navigate the field’s intersections to a position of brand resonance.
7.5.2 The limited utility of the popular press literature on personal branding

The popular press literature was not a highly regarded source of knowledge and learning to habituate personal branders to the identity market. With the exception of Kevin, Jane, and Sue, the participants had not read the books, articles, and websites of personal branding consultants nor contracted their services in the course of managing their brands. As such, they tended to have low awareness about the personal branding movement’s discourse, and held ambivalent or indifferent attitudes towards it.  

Supporting their attitudes were three commonly held beliefs that the popular press literature was:

1. too commercially-focused and failed to account for the personal, social, and cultural logics informing the personal branders’ marketing work. Rose illustrated this belief when explaining her hesitancy to engage with the popular press literature:

   Rose: I haven’t [read any personal branding literature], but I know I probably should.

   Interviewer: Oh really?

   Rose: Well, maybe. I don’t know… See, then if I did, I’d become everything that people… it’s like when that announcer at the radio station was like, ‘You’re just selling out’ and all that kind of thing and I was like, ‘Well, if I had sold out, I would have done all this stuff.’ I guess if I do do that, then I become something other than who I am.

2. based on prescriptive formulations of personal branding that did not relate to the disorienting and idiosyncratic task of producing a brand and navigating the identity market. This belief surfaced in Wayne’s appraisal of the literature:

   Wayne: I have not read personal branding books. [...] When you set up a website with a picture of yourself and call it ‘Wayne.com’. It’s… there’s no template, you know? It’s a very odd thing to be marketing. You are marketing yourself. There’s no product, it’s just you. [...] I just feel like there’s no real rule book to it. There’s no kind of… how do you monetise fame?

3. replete with common sense knowledge the personal branders already knew. Tom’s evaluation of the literature exemplified this belief:

   Tom: I haven’t [read any personal branding literature]. Maybe at the end of last year I read a book on PR, but the funny thing was that everything I read I kind of knew already, so I didn’t learn anything from the book. There was nothing new.

The participants had similar, if not lower, awareness and indifferent attitudes to the academic literature on personal branding.
In contrast to the other participants, Kevin, Jane, and Sue had more extensively engaged with the personal branding movement’s literature. As their learning experiences occurred at various stages of developing their brands, the participants’ individual experiences warrant attention before comparisons are drawn. First, in the planning stage of his electoral campaign, Kevin read personal branding articles and undertook a leadership development course that included personal branding exercises. These exercises involved: (1) an introspective phase of Kevin describing his current and aspirational self; (2) a market research phase of Kevin soliciting feedback from friends, family, colleagues, and associates concerning their perceptions of his personality, appearance, and capabilities; and (3) a strategy development phase of Kevin and his campaign team using the insights from the first two phases to formulate a personal branding plan, which was integrated with Kevin’s broader election strategy. Kevin regarded formal learning about personal branding as a necessary, preparatory component of creating a successful political brand. He perceived accessing this knowledge as an act of due diligence, remarking in an early interview that “I always believe that you need to do your homework before you start anything.” As his campaign progressed and the actual marketing work of performing his brand became central to his lived experience, a practice-based understanding of personal branding emerged that challenged the knowledge Kevin had acquired from the popular press literature. When asked about whether he had applied the lessons from his personal branding reading and exercises, he offered the example of deciding on his brand’s logo to reveal its peripheral influence:

**Kevin:** I think we definitely took it into consideration, but when it comes down to it, I think it comes down to your gut instincts that this looks really good. And that’s the way it came down for myself. As much as I took into account what the experts were telling me in these articles, when I looked up the logo and the branding of it and it felt good to me, that’s what I ran with.

Unlike Kevin, Jane’s engagement with the personal branding movement occurred after several years of high visibility status as a public intellectual. While Jane had an established brand, the idea that she was a ‘brand’ was a relatively new mindset for her, having previously used synonyms such as ‘profile’ and ‘public persona’ to understand the highly visible professional self she had developed. For Jane, the personal branding discourse represented a marketing knowledge she was unfamiliar with, but sceptical about, which she remedied by attending a personal branding workshop. Reflecting on the workshop, Jane surmised that she “didn’t find the information unhelpful”, but that it was mostly ‘superficial’ in focusing on image analysis and impression management. Jane explained that the workshop did not alter
the marketing work of performing her brand, but was useful in stimulating reflection about
the meaning, purpose, identity, and future evolution of her brand: “For me, it was useful in
that I was able to take the little bits the personal branding consultant was throwing out and
kind of run with them in my own head.” Over time, the self-knowledge this reflexivity
generated made it easier for Jane to navigate the identity market, demonstrating a connection
between this reflexive form of knowledge and learning and the accumulation of habitus it
enables:

Jane: It gets easier because I’m just a bit clearer about what I will and won’t do. What I think
matters and what I don’t. […] Just sort of a little bit of value sorting about what I really care
about. What I really want. What being me, the brand of being me, means. What I’m trying to
achieve in this life. […] I’m a lot happier now that I’ve worked it out, because otherwise it’s
impossible to structure your time. It’s impossible to know what to say yes and no to.

Sue approached the personal branding literature with a dual purpose that incorporates both
Kevin’s and Jane’s points of engagement. Similar to Jane, Sue had an established brand as an
entrepreneur from extensive media work she had undertaken. When she encountered the
popular press literature on personal branding, Sue saw the immediate potential of the
discourse to assist her in controlling her public image given her high visibility status. Like
Kevin, Sue followed the processual stages of personal branding variously outlined in the
popular press literature when attempting to grow her brand online as part of a broader shift to
developing an online business. After reading several books and articles on the topic, Sue
methodically worked through the exercises of a best-selling ‘how-to’ book on personal
branding, documenting her responses to the exercises and reflexively writing about the
experience for a period of six months11. At the completion of this process, Sue perceived that
engaging with the discourse had benefited her in three ways. First, it had improved her self-
knowledge: “I was able to learn so much about the person I am and the value and the worth
that I have in this community.” Second, it had validated her self-concept as a brand: “I think it
is just nice to have concepts or ideas reaffirmed or have things I’m already doing noted by
other people.” Third, it had provided her with visibility-raising tactics to apply online, such
as cross-promoting social media channels and collaborating with more digitally-established
human brands.

11 Sue provided approximately 10,000 words of reflexive writing about her personal branding process to the
researcher. This material was included as part of the documentary data on Sue’s brand that provided points of
discussion in the long interviews and assisted the researcher to interpret Sue’s case.
For Sue, the popular press literature represented an expert knowledge that she venerated and tended to reproduce in aphorismic statements (“It’s about savvy marketing.”, “Personal branding is about being recognised. You can’t be recognised unless people see your name.”, “If you believe in yourself and your abilities, then so will everybody else.”). Over time, the general, tautological, and assumptive statements that Sue reproduced from the popular press literature became more difficult to reconcile with her lived experience of being/managing her brand. She described the content as ‘alien’ to her actual experiences in the identity market, including the practices she engaged in (such as identity compartmentalisation and marketplace performances), the challenges she faced (the relentless nature of the marketing work), and the paradoxical outcomes that defined her everyday experience of being a brand (for example, being hyper-social, yet feeling socially isolated). Sue’s initial advocacy for the personal branding movement changed substantially throughout the period of fieldwork, particularly as her online brand failed to attract sufficient attention to generate economic capital. Three years after completing the personal branding exercises, Sue re-discovered her reflexive writing about this process and adopted a more critical framing of the personal branding movement’s discourse as ‘bullshit’ and ‘irrelevant’, dismissing it as being disconnected from the actual experience of engaging in personal branding.

Drawing Jane, Kevin, and Sue’s experiences together, regardless of the stage at which they interacted with the discourse (planning, establishing, or maintaining their brands), or the valence of their initial attitude towards it (Kevin and Sue’s positivity versus Jane’s scepticism), there were strong commonalities in their evaluations of its limited utility, which centred on the reflexivity it encouraged. Conceptually, reflexivity has been proposed as the outcome of engaging (a) with the personal branding movement’s literature (Wee & Brooks, 2010), and (b) the process and practice of personal branding (Khedher, 2015). This study empirically affirms the former contention, but challenges the second, with the outcome of personal branding for participants in this study centring not on reflexivity, but more instrumentally on the accumulation of capital, sustaining a position of brand resonance, pursuing self-actualised work, and further developing their careers. By ignoring, rejecting, or finding limited utility in the personal branding movement’s literature, the personal branders mirror previous studies of marketing practitioners and their disconnection from, and dismissal of, the codified, explicit, overly rationalist knowledge contained in marketing texts (Ardley, 2005; Browne et al., 2014; Brownlie, 1998; Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Hackley, 1999; Kover, 1995; Lien, 1997; Nyilasy et al., 2013). Underlying this disjuncture is the failure of the
popular press literature to account for the human dimension of marketing work and the tacit knowledge that informs it, with this problem widely replicated across mainstream marketing texts (Hackley, 1999, 2001, 2009). Acknowledging that the popular press literature played, at most, a peripheral and limited role in habituating participants to the identity market, attention now turns to the sources of knowledge and learning that participants found more salient and instructive.

7.5.3 Developing habitus and strategy: Personal branders’ sources of knowledge and learning

Multiple sources of knowledge and learning informed the personal branders’ understanding of the identity market and the marketing work required to achieve brand resonance. Across participants, the five most formative sources can be structured into two categories of ‘within market’ and ‘exogenous market’ sources, as illustrated in Figure 7.4. These categories were not separate and discrete sources of knowledge and learning, but were iteratively synthesised and integrated by participants, and each will be discussed briefly in turn.

Figure 7.4 Sources of knowledge and learning habituating personal branders to the identity market

That personal branders used experiential, social, organisational, and cultural forms of learning, and tacit, emotional, moral, commercial, and creative knowledges, reflects the multi-dimensional nature of habitus and the broad skill set required to enact the marketing
work of personal branding. Similarly complex networks of knowledge and learning have been mapped in Peñaloza and Gilly’s (1999) ethnographic study of how marketers acculturate their practice of marketing work in new cultural fields, and multiple studies examining marketers’ habituation to their work (Alvesson, 1994; Ardley, 2006; Brownlie, 1998; Kaptan, 2013; Svensson, 2007). That personal branding is recognised in the same vein – as a complex form of marketing work informed by diffuse sources of knowledge and learning – is an important counterpoint to the personal branding movement’s narrow focus on formal learning based on the explicit, formal, and codified knowledge contained in their texts.

7.5.3.1 Within market sources of knowledge and learning
All participants cited the experience they accumulated in the identity market, followed by personal branding exemplars, were the most salient sources of knowledge and learning that, over time, improved their practice of marketing work and helped them to navigate the field’s various intersections to find a resonant position. Focusing on the role of accumulated experience first, the following examples capture the various ways that participants described this experiential form of knowledge and learning:

**Tom:** Just from experience and being out there. I guess from… I wouldn’t say learning from mistakes… I guess it’s just from being out there and seeing what happens when you act a certain way, you know?

**Madeline:** I think I’ve just said, ‘That looks good. That doesn’t.’ I’ll try this out on a few people. It evokes that response. Okay, let’s change this. Tinker, tinker, tinker. That’s what I’ve done over the years.

**Rose:** I do definitely kind of sense the market for the brand and the brand for the market and kind of evolve intrinsically like that. I do kind of try on different things and if I get bites… I do see it a little bit like fishing, you know? You throw all these ideas out and you see how many bites you get. [...] ‘Oh, they’re not interested in that.’ Okay, okay, okay. Reassess, redefine, rework, set it out. ‘Oh, got two bites!’ Okay, rework, redesign.

This revisionist approach to personal branding was common among participants, with ‘errors’ tending to be framed as ‘lessons’ that they perceived were necessary and inevitable. This mindset echoes the entrepreneurs in Thompson-White et al.’s (2018) study whose marketing work was characterised as ‘experimental’ in nature. The personal branders’ in-market experiences gave them a greater sense of the tactics and strategies that were effective in generating visibility, the marketplace performances that were in demand, and the brand meanings they could authentically perform. The inseparability of personal branders from their personal brands ensured that a brand management perspective was a constant sensibility they
possessed which reflexively mined their brand’s in-market experiences for knowledge development and learning opportunities.

Personal branding exemplars were also seminal for participants who observed exemplars directly through interactions in person and online, and indirectly through studying their marketplace performances and personal brand artefacts. Participants’ use of exemplars partially mirrors the consumer culture studies of Üstüner and Holt (2010) and Üstüner and Thompson (2012) which found that to rise in status, actors with lower cultural capital in a field actively studied, observed, and sought to emulate the consumption practices and aesthetic tastes of actors with higher cultural capital. The key difference in this study is participants’ use of both positive and negative exemplars in their social learning and sense-making of the identity market. That is, while participants’ use of exemplars varied considerably, they generally served an indexical function of being idealised or criticised, invoked as a representation of the in-/efficacy of a particular strategy or tactic, or selected because they had similar or antithetical brand meanings. This oscillating frame of ‘studying up’ and ‘studying down’ potentially reflects the more dynamic and disorienting terrain of the identity market, which was not neatly organised according to rigid hierarchies of social class (as studied by Üstüner & Holt, 2010; Üstüner & Thompson, 2012). The following quotation from Jane the public intellectual typifies this indexical use of exemplars and the valued form of social learning it represented:

**Jane:** So far I’ve only just been watching other people. Like I said, I watch one personal brander pretty closely. I’ve just been more observing through the social media stuff that I do, the people whose styles I like and the people whose styles put me off. And there have been several people I’ve had to drop because I just can’t bear them, who don’t get the medium.

**Interviewer:** Yeah?

**Jane:** I mean, that’s how I’ve learned most of the things I know to be honest. Just by watching.

Compared to the existing literature examining the knowledge and learning of marketing practitioners working in teams with other marketers in organisations and advertising agencies (e.g., Alvesson, 1994; Ardley, 2006; Brownlie, 1998; Kaptan, 2013; Peñaloza & Gilly, 1999; Svensson, 2007), the participants’ ‘lone wolf’ status limited their knowledge sharing and situated learning opportunities. This theme will be returned to in the next chapter’s examination of the deeper challenges and contestations that personal branders confronted in
the identity market, but an immediate impact to acknowledge is that participants’ social
learning from exemplars was fractured and episodic. The exemplars that participants referred
to were dispersed throughout the identity market and had brands established at three levels of
proximity to their own brands: within the same occupational category, within the broader
organisational field, and within the identity market more generally. This wide range is
evident in the following three examples:

When we were developing the logo and branding for my campaign, we definitely studied a lot
of what happened with Barrack Obama’s branding. So we tried to learn from the best there is
and take the successes around there. [Kevin, politician]

What I’ve learnt from reading all of these autobiographies of performers and stuff is how they
have an image created. So these people will get a recording contract and their marketing
people will make an image for them. They will tell them how to do their hair, how to do their
make-up, how to wear their clothes, how to present themselves. They almost mould this look,
and that’s what I do. [Tom, producer]

I started to unfold my character. The analogy I always use is like Madonna, every time she
brings out an album, she changes it up. She almost re-brands each time. That’s what I was
doing. [Wayne, media personality]

It is also important to clarify that the knowledge and learning that participants gleaned from
exemplars required creative interpretation through the frames orienting the production of
their brand. Imitation of exemplars was uniformly dismissed by participants who understood
it would dilute the uniqueness of their own brand’s meanings, as Madeline the psychic
explains:

Madeline: Oh look, I just do my thing and I purposively don’t focus on other people and
what they are doing. I might have the occasional glance, but I don’t do comparison because
I’m uniquely me. I’ve got a unique offering and I know that. I’ve actually had some of those
people calling me up, asking me how they can become more successful. I’ve even had one of
them on the phone say to me, “I’m going to build my business model based on what you have
done, because you look like you are having a much more exciting life than me.” It’s like, you
can’t do that. To be anything other than who you are is to be a poor second copy. Be yourself.

This excerpt from Madeline highlights the incomplete transferability of comparative social
learning from exemplars given the uniqueness of participants’ respective positions in the
market and the different compositions and qualities of their personal brand capital. Together,
while the ‘within market’ sources of experiential and social learning were the most powerful
for participants, they were incomplete, sometimes limited in transferability and application to
their own marketplace performances, and often gained through experiences of failure, error,
and avoiding undesired positions to accumulate capital from in the market.
7.5.3.2 Exogenous market sources of knowledge and learning

The personal branders entered the identity market as adults equipped with a reservoir of personal, organisational, and cultural knowledge and learning they had acquired in other fields. Attention now turns to describing each of these exogenous market sources (outlined in Figure 7.4) to understand their role in habituating participants to the new field of the identity market.

**Exogenous market source of knowledge and learning 1: Personal/life experiences and familial influences**

Despite entering the identity market as adults, and generally being alone in their high visibility status within their families, participants’ early life experiences and familial relationships represented an enduring, albeit less prominent, source of knowledge and learning habituating them to the identity market. Bourdieu (1977, 1984) considered an actor’s childhood, family, peers, and early education to be their primary, and most enduring, sources of habitus. This conception reflects the original intention of Bourdieu’s work, which was to account for the persistent reproduction and distribution of capital based on rigid social hierarchies that he observed in class-based society. For participants, personal branding was a disruptive, status-changing technology that altered the static reproduction of capital available to ordinary workers in the labour market. As such, the identity market was a discordant field to the other social and organisational fields they had previously experienced in their lives. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that while participants drew on their early life experiences and familial influences, they emphasised the utility of experiential and social sources of learning within the identity market to better apprehend the identity market’s different rules and disorienting intersections.

From childhood through to adolescence and adulthood, the personal branders had experiences of identity performance and impression management in social fields that were instructive to the task of performing their brands. First, several participants began performing theatrical roles in their childhood and adolescent years. Their early experiences in plays, musicals, and concerts were formative in socialising them to the frontstage liminality of identity performance. Less formal episodes of identity play also surfaced in participants’ life stories. For example, Ben’s earliest experiences of the internet involved creating multiple online personas in web communities. He produced images and narratives for these personas, using them to interact with other internet users. For Ben, the internet was a hyperreal space of
fantasy and community that allowed him to explore his various selves. This identity play was motivated by the enjoyment he received from it ("It’s fun!") and the attention it gave him in a period of social isolation ("I love attention... and the internet gave me that"). Learning which identities he could authentically personify and what images and narratives attracted the most attention provided Ben with knowledge he applied when constructing his brand as a blogger.

Participants’ early experiences of engaging in impression management were also salient as a pre-cursor to the self-surveillance and behavioural modification that performing their brand required. For example, aware of the permanence and traceability of online content, Sue engaged in impression management when writing a blog before she established herself as an entrepreneur. Her experience of impression management was so similar to that of performing her brand that Sue equated the two, framing her blog as an earlier incarnation of personal branding (doing ‘personal branding stuff’):

Sue: I think the personal branding stuff is something I’ve been doing for a really long time anyway. Before I started as an entrepreneur, I was writing a blog. […] So I think because of that previous experience, I was already aware of my online presence. When you are aware of your online presence, you are aware that everything you do online is permanent. That changes everything you do. As soon as you realise there is no eraser – it’s not like in person, where you can take it back or apologise or change what you said – when you write online, you are aware that it’s always going to be there, so you have to be 100% accountable.

Sue’s example typifies the experiences of other participants who highlighted the similarity between impression management practices they undertook in previous social roles and the practice of performing their brand in the identity market. The transferability of knowledge and learning from participants’ earlier life experiences supports that the marketing work of personal branding had precedent in their lives.

Consumer culture researchers affirm that family identity (Epp & Price, 2008) and family ideology (Jayasinghe & Ritson, 2013) shape a person’s consumption practices and interactions with marketplace resources such as products, brands, and advertising. This research extends the influence of families to the production of personal brands, with all participants able to recall stories, lessons, and advice from family members that had informed their personal branding practices. Examples from Wayne and Kevin illustrate how family members were constructed as human exemplars for participants that guided them through the social and moral territories of the identity market. Beginning with Wayne, his family’s
aversion to capitalist ideology was a formative influence that problematised the application of market rhetoric to frame his personal branding practices:

**Wayne:** I do maintain, just through the inculcation of my youth and family, an aversion to any of the lexicon of capitalism, you know? Products, business and all that shit. I would never think of myself as a product. I suppose I think of myself as a personality and I’m selling me, not a product.

Wayne drew on this familial learning to discursively negotiate his identity as a brand, avoiding certain terms (‘product’, ‘business’) while accommodating others (framing his practice as ‘selling’ a ‘personality’ that he produces). In addition to participants’ identity negotiation, families guided the personal branders on social norms, ethics, and morality, as Kevin the politician reveals in this passage:

**Kevin:** I was raised by my parents not to think that I’m the coolest thing in the world, you know? And to tell you the truth, I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have the support of family and friends. […] My parents always reminded me to be humble and not to boast about yourself. And that’s not the case in terms of politics, because you always have to talk about yourself because you are the brand, you are the politician, you are representing the people, and your life is an open book basically. I found it very difficult at the beginning of this campaign to talk about my past accomplishments on behalf of the community, that I chaired all these different things and raised money for this particular thing. I found it really hard to talk about myself.

**Interviewer:** You found it hard?

**Kevin:** Yes and I’m reminded by my campaign team that if I’m not able to tell my story to the voters, they are not going to be able to connect to me. I guess that’s one of the strategies that we are using is that instead of me listing off all of my accomplishments, I communicate it through a story.

This example from Kevin demonstrates how familial learning influenced participants’ personal branding practices. In this case, Kevin used storytelling to integrate personal narratives with policy detail, resolving the tension he experienced between generating brand meanings and visibility, while avoiding the social taboo of being boastful that his parents sensitised him to as a child. As participants’ brands became more established and highly visible in the identity market, the habituating role of their families continued to evolve. For example, participants tended to become increasingly sensitive to the imagined, anticipated, or actual responses of family members to their marketplace performances, as Ben evidences when discussing his family’s readership of his blog:

**Ben:** That’s the reason I’m a lot more private now because, you know, your family are reading it. I can’t do the crazy shit anymore. It’s funny because they’ve seen me do crazy shit,
but for me, it’s really a self-conscious thing. My parents are going to read about it. I’ve put my parents through hell and back. [...] I’m kind of like... it gets to you. I would read over my old entries and I’ll be like, ‘I can’t believe I said that.’ So embarrassing. And now there’s like so many people [reading], you know?

Ben’s sensitivity, like all participants, was predicated on the understanding that marketplace performances had the potential to damage his familial relationships, causing shame, hurt, embarrassment or a sense of betrayal and exploitation among family members. This knowledge ensured that families’ responses (real or imagined) represented an ongoing source of knowledge and learning that oriented the personal branders’ marketplace performances around desired family identities, family relationships, and ethical and moral standards reflecting family ideologies.

**Exogenous market source of knowledge and learning 2: Occupations and organisational fields**

Participants’ occupations and organisational fields were the second exogenous source of knowledge and learning habituating them to the identity market. Participants’ occupations and organisational fields reinforced their disposition to engage in personal branding, oriented their self-presentation styles, and contextually influenced how participants applied commercial marketing and branding concepts to their substantive role and marketing work. Beginning with this first function, personal branding was both proactively and reactively undertaken by participants because of the dynamics structuring their in-/visibility within their organisational fields. For example, Kevin foresaw the need to engage in personal branding to enter the field of politics. He understood the power of personal branding for a politician competing for symbolic capital in competitive elections, framing personal branding as fundamental to political success:

**Kevin:** I realised very early on, even before I registered as a candidate, that I needed to create a public persona that I was able to control and manage. [...] The politicians that don’t see themselves as a brand don’t get elected.

**Interviewer:** How so?

**Kevin:** Because somebody could have the greatest ideas in the world, but if nobody can connect with it and you can’t get it out there, then nobody is going to vote for you. So it’s like you are standing for an election, but you don’t have any election signs, no election materials. How is anybody going to know who you are then?
The competition for elected office that Kevin faced mirrored the ongoing competition that other participants experienced in occupational labour markets defined by freelance, contract, project-based, or self-generated work (such as working as a media personality, psychic, comedian, hostess, and writer). In these occupations, participants learned that having a highly visible personal brand not only enabled them to stand out from competitors, but elevated their status within their occupations, providing them with what they variously referred to as a ‘voice’, ‘platform’, ‘profile’, or ‘stage’. For other participants, personal branding was retroactively pursued to respond to the publicness of their occupational role. Emblematic of this approach, Sue constructed personal branding as a forced choice emanating from the high visibility created from the extensive media work she undertook as an entrepreneur:

**Sue:** Personal branding came into it when I was… well, when I first started working in the media and I started looking at my personal reputation. I was a bit worried. I was really concerned about what it would be like to be … I hate the word, but a celebrity of sorts in this community. By a celebrity, I don’t mean particularly famous, I mean well known. What I’m aware of is my ‘two worlds’ effect again – be careful that I keep my private world private and my public world, my projects world, that’s public. I had no choice. So I have a lot of conflict between who I am when I leave the house, who I am when I’m with my friends and who I am when I’m out being an entrepreneur.

Evidently, participants’ occupations and organisational fields were important sources of learning that structurally influenced their disposition to brand themselves either in response to, or to achieve, high visibility status. This structural influence extended to participants’ self-presentation styles, affirming Parmentier et al.’s (2013) conclusion that personal branders’ marketplace performances must conform to the behavioural expectations and field-specific tastes of an organisational field to accumulate capital and habitus within it. Based on a single occupation (fashion models) and examining an established organisational field (fashion), Parmentier et al. (2013) called for future research to examine more diverse contexts to further understand the habituating role of occupations and organisational fields. This research found support for Parmentier et al.’s (2013) findings across the ten occupations and various organisational fields examined, but observed variance relating to the rigidity of rules and templates governing self-presentation. Underlying this variance was the established versus emergent nature of the occupation and organisational field that a participant’s brand was established in. For example, as a politician, Kevin worked in an established occupation and organisational field that had strict rules and clear style templates that oriented his self-presentation. When in public, he described the formal attire, conservative hair styling, smiling facial expression, open gestures, and inclusive language he needed to perform. In contrast,
Ben’s work in the emergent occupational category of a blogger provided him with considerable latitude to experiment with style and “make it up as I go along”.

An additional form of organisational learning concerned the extent to which participants could apply commercial marketing and branding concepts to their substantive occupational roles and practice of marketing work. For example, Tom was aware that the commerciality of his occupation posed few obstacles to discursively framing his work as a producer in market rhetoric. Being a ‘brand’, ‘selling himself’, and having his marketplace performances ‘consumed’ were all natural, logical states of being in Tom’s lifeworld. He contrasted the more commercial nature of his work from cultural production framed as ‘art’ and motivated singularly by ‘artistic integrity’:

**Tom:** The whole point in working in a commercial industry is knowing that you are not always going to have your artistic integrity. There’s some things you are going to shoot that you don’t really love. You are doing it for the money. Otherwise, you’d just be a fine art photographer and you’d just do exhibitions and make your money from selling your work.

The relative ease that Tom had in applying commercial marketing and branding concepts to his work was not shared by all participants, particularly those working in: (a) more creative occupations, such as a writer and comedian; and (b) less commercial occupations, such as a public intellectual and a politician. Participants’ habitus in their organisational fields sensitised them to the unique characteristics of their occupation that prevented the wholesale applicability of commercial marketing and branding concepts to inform the practice of both their substantive and marketing work. Focusing on Jane’s example, she highlighted inconsistencies between the commercial logic of marketing and the cultural logic of the academic field that structured her role as a public intellectual:

**Jane:** The tactics you would associate with marketing would be seen to not pay heed to things that academics would deem to be important and see as fair play. […] Marketing would be seen to offer one side of the story. You can edit and manipulate information as you choose in order to achieve your aims because it’s all about what the client wants and it’s all about achieving the aims that the client has set down for the marketing exercise. Academics would not judge it to be legitimate to, for instance, be in a public forum and dispense or refuse to dispense certain information, even though to make that choice it would help them win the argument. […] You have to be honest. You have to be thorough. You have to offer all the information you have – both the pros and the cons. You have to put all the information before people and they should decide based on a complete set of facts.

Jane’s occupational knowledge clearly socialised her to the different rules structuring her occupation and organisational field compared to the logic underlying commercial marketing.
and branding. Jane used this knowledge to not only identify the boundaries and limitations of applying commercial marketing and branding logic to her occupational role, but shape her personal branding practices accordingly. This considered position echoes the conclusion that Nixon and Crewe’s (2004, p. 146) study of marketing practitioners reached, which was that “the subjectivities of creative workers and the occupational cultures they inhabit mediate the practices of cultural production in which they are engaged.” In summary, each personal brander’s knowledge and learning from their occupation and organisational field contributed to their disposition to remain in the identity market and strengthened their ability to navigate its contested terrain.

Exogenous market source of knowledge and learning 3: Marketing and consumer culture

A final source of knowledge and learning habituating participants to the identity market was their broader experiences engaging with marketing and consumer culture phenomena. Previous researchers have noted that everyday consumption practices and social interactions involving marketplace resources (such as products, brands, and advertising) can enhance a person’s ability to decode marketing tactics and strategies, which they variously referred to as ‘advertising literacy’ (O’Donohoe & Tynan, 1998) and ‘brand literacy’ (Bengtsson & Firat, 2006). In this study, participants’ literacy of marketing and consumer culture equipped them with market rhetoric, an understanding of marketing and branding concepts and practices, and consumer experiences to aid their sense-making of the experience of being a brand and their ability to navigate the identity market. This knowledge transfer was evident in the way participants routinely incorporated elements of the marketing lexicon to describe their experiences (for example, referring to their ‘market segments’ or ‘target market’), and the rhetorical devices (metaphors, similes, and analogies) they used to discursively represent the conceptual similarities and differences between marketplace resources and their personal brands:

It’s like, if you’re just Reece’s peanut butter cups then you are just Reece’s peanut butter cups. But if you take the Reece’s brand and you move it on to peanut butter, then all of a sudden, it’s a brand. It has many different projections. [...] When I stopped being just an academic and I moved from academia, and then the fact that you could transport me and my voice somewhere else, maybe that was the point [when I became a brand]. [Jane, public intellectual]

I think people are reassured by a large fee. [...] It’s the same way as if you are in a foreign country and you are bringing ice-cream for dinner to someone’s house that you want to impress. You are at the supermarket and you’re just going to buy the most expensive. [Jasmine, comedian]
I suppose I’m not Coke, so I shouldn’t try to appeal to everyone. [Wayne, media personality]

Whether it was product brands such as Reece’s or Coke, or consumer experiences of gift-giving, participants compared and contrasted marketing and consumer culture phenomena with their personal branding experiences to craft and contextualise their practice of marketing work. Across participants, one key difference relates to the valence of their conceptualisations of marketplace resources such as ‘brands’, ‘products’, and ‘marketing’. Suki and Jane had the most polarised understandings of these terms, which, in turn, supported their willingness/reluctance to identify as having/being a brand. For example, Suki explained that her designer handbacks were her most cherished possessions, and referenced this product category when explaining why being a brand was an aspirational status she associated with luxury and glamour:

**Suki:** Nobody hates brands. You ask on the street. Do girls want a normal bag or a Vuitton bag? A Vuitton one, please.

In contrast, Jane’s more ambivalent conceptualisation of marketing problematised her identification as a brand:

**Jane:** What I see marketing as is devices and strategies that are used to sell people things that they may or may not need, may or may not want, and may or may not be good for them. […] Selling is all about trying to make you want to buy something you don’t necessarily want and don’t probably need.

These examples reinforce that the positive and negative meanings that participants attached to personal branding, and their subsequent personal branding practices, were informed by a broader network of conceptualisations they held concerning marketing and consumer culture. Many of the negative meanings that participants loaded onto personal branding drew on their culturally shared knowledge of tropes about the phenomenon (for example, being a ‘sell out’ or a ‘shameless self-promoter’). This cultural knowledge was pivotal to navigating the various intersections of the identity market, affirming the previous literature that has persistently identified cultural literacy as an essential knowledge for marketers to create culturally relevant meanings desired by consumers (Cronin, 2004; Peñaloza & Gilly, 1999; Svensson, 2007). In concert with the social and experiential forms of ‘within market’ learning previously outlined, these exogenous market sources based on personal, organisational, and
cultural learning were integrated and synthesised by participants to form a fragmented, incomplete body of knowledge to negotiate the complex and contested territories of the identity market.

7.6 Summary
A complex understanding of personal branding emerged in this chapter’s conceptualisation of the phenomenon. Bourdieun theory provided a useful framework to develop the concept of the identity market as a dynamic, dramatic, and highly contested field constituted by six major intersections that the personal branders navigated to find and sustain a position of brand resonance. From a productive position of alignment between their personal integrity and brand authenticity, the personal branders performed their brands, accumulating symbolic, economic, social, and cultural brand capital. Their elevated status enabled them to pursue self-actualised work while avoiding the alienation of being an invisible, ordinary worker in the labour market. However, the task of navigating the field and accumulating capital was persistently difficult, with participants relying on fractious sources of knowledge and learning to develop the habitus and strategy they needed to understand the shifting structures of the identity market and orient/re-orient the production of their brands accordingly. With the broad elements of this thesis’s conceptual framework established, the next chapter focuses in on the deeper, underlying challenges that personal branders confronted in the identity market.
Chapter 8
Challenges to generating habitus, capital, and brand resonance in the identity market

8.1 Introduction
With the overarching conceptual framework established in the previous chapter, this second chapter of findings narrows in to address the first research question of this thesis regarding the challenges that personal branders confront in the identity market. Over the seven years of fieldwork, the personal branders’ tasks of generating habitus, capital, and brand resonance while navigating the identity market’s complex, contested territories was revealed to be persistently difficult, continuously laborious, and often abstruse. From a deep analysis of participants’ experiences, six major challenges emerge, and will be discussed in turn throughout this chapter. These challenges concern: (1) limited knowledge sharing about the covert subject of personal branding in a heterologous field; (2) hyper-social loneliness and personal relationship strains from asymmetric statuses; (3) the ephemeral and unpredictable nature of brand visibility; (4) the continuous evolution and reductive consistency of marketplace performances; (5) alienation from difficulties accumulating and converting brand capital in the identity market; and (6) marketplace drama and symbolic domination in the field. Cumulatively, participants’ lived experiences of being a brand were marked by volatility, obstruction, and conflict – an account of personal branding that differs starkly from the overly optimistic representations of the phenomenon contained in the popular press literature.

8.2 Limited knowledge sharing about the covert subject of personal branding in a heterologous field
Acquiring habitus and the field-specific cultural capital to enact the marketing work of personal branding was a challenge exacerbated by the heterologous nature of the identity market and participants’ limited knowledge sharing within it. Beginning with the field type of the identity market, Bourdieu (1977) argues that people tend to gravitate to social fields (and positions within them) that are congruent, or homologous, with their socialised predispositions (based on their endowments of high or low cultural capital). Within a homologous field, an actor’s sense of compatibility between their high/low cultural capital
habitus and the high/low social status of the field has been described by consumer culture researchers as a ‘fits-like-a-glove’ experience (Allen, 2002). Conversely, heterologous fields are structurally incompatible with an actor’s high/low cultural capital endowment, and as such, are experienced with reflexive unease, insecurity, or dissonance (Allen, 2002). The preceding chapter established the identity market was a new and difficult field for participants to navigate that offered the potential for significant status gains compared to being an ordinary worker in the labour market. Like other consumer culture studies of lower-status actors in heterologous fields (Üstüner & Holt, 2010; Üstüner & Thompson, 2012), participants had to actively work to become habituated to the identity market, drawing on disparate sources of knowledge and learning to make sense of their experiences. Participants were acutely aware of the transformative effect that having an established brand had on their statuses and experiences of work, with personal branding being a disruptive technology to the existing reproduction of capital in the overlapping fields of the labour and identity markets. Notably, heterologous fields are characterised by sociocultural disruption (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), and have become more commonplace in postmodern consumer culture with the pace and scale of social, cultural, and economic change (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013).

Consistent with a heterologous field, the personal branders’ acquisition of habitus was not linear, nor neatly correlated with their length of experience in the identity market. The unease, insecurity, and dissonance that Allen (2002) describes was a constant for participants, who often struggled to apprehend the rules and status games of the identity market and their shifting positions within it, as Wayne and Tom reveal in the following excerpts:

**Wayne:** Where the fuck do you fit? [...] I often feel that I’m just… and maybe this has got something to do with my lack of focus, which might be just a personal thing rather than generalising to… there’s no template, you know? There’s no fucking rule book is there? You do feel very lost.

**Tom:** I got an agent and they completely screwed me over. After that situation, I was like, ‘Okay, this is probably why I should have learnt how to deal with these things.’ Because I didn’t really know the rules, didn’t know all that sort of thing. I sort of expected that I was… I can do this. This is so easy. I can do this.

Similar to Wayne and Tom, participants tended to blame their own lack of habitus when their brands fell out of resonant positions or after experiencing criticism/attacks from other actors. The personal branders’ attribution of failure to personal inadequacies rather than
heterologous field dynamics is consistent with Bourdieu’s conception of lower-status actors being habituated to their symbolic domination (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Compounding the personal branders’ difficulties was their limited knowledge sharing about the insider experience of being a brand and the marketing work it entailed. While other studies have identified personal branders’ difficulties in accumulating knowledge about marketing work (e.g. Thompson-Whiteside, 2018), the prolonged engagement with participants in this study found that the subject of personal branding tended to remain a covert subject that participants reserved for self-reflection and private discussion with family, friends, colleagues, and associates. There were both internal and external drivers to their communal silence about the topic in the public domain. From an internal perspective, participants demarcated personal branding as a private topic not only because it traversed the personal territories of their own lives – including their goals, ambitions, anxieties, and disappointments – but those of their friends and families too. Participants were particularly vigilant in protecting the inalienability of their personal and familial relationships from other actors in the identity market who sought to appropriate their identities for their own ends. Sue illustrates this internal, protectionist driver when elaborating on why she considered personal branding to be a private topic:

Sue: I come back to the term that it is personal… it is a private marketing tool. […] No, I never talk about it because it’s none of anyone else’s business. I’m doing this for me. […] That’s out of respect to my family. I’m choosing a public life. They are not.

A second, external driver was participants’ concern that talking publicly about personal branding revealed the backstage marketing work they engaged in, which risked damaging their brand capital by: (a) deconstructing their brand aura and resolving their brand antimony, which were essential to their brand meanings/embodied cultural capital (Brown et al., 2003); and (b) jeopardising their brand legitimacy by revealing the intentionality of their marketing work and the staged authenticity of their brands. Kates (2004) explains that the perception of inauthenticity violates brand legitimacy, which is defined as the social fit between a brand and the shared norms in a community/society. Participants’ concerns are supported by the consumer literature on human brands, with Thomson (2006, p. 116) highlighting that ‘perceived opportunism’ and ‘trying too hard’ were consumer attributions problematising
human brand authenticity. The fragility of participants’ brand authenticity reinforced that
dialogic openness about their marketing work in the public domain was misguided.
For a distributed community of largely independent marketing practitioners, participants’
public silence about personal branding limited their collective knowledge and learning. This
challenge affirms the habituating role of social and situated learning at work for marketing
practitioners, a finding reported by several studies examining team-based marketing
practitioners (Alvesson, 1994; Ardley, 2006; Browne et al., 2014; Kaptan, 2013). Together,
the heterologous nature of the field and the covert subject of personal branding were
obstacles to participants’ habituation to the identity market, ensuring its rules remained
opaque and difficult to apprehend.

8.3 Hyper-social loneliness and personal relationship strains from asymmetric statuses
With the elevated status of having an established brand came the challenge of managing
loneliness and relationship strains in participants’ lives. Loneliness or social isolation (the
sense of social exclusion or rejection) is one of the six dimensions of alienation (Seeman,
1975) and was experienced as a pertinent and visceral challenge for participants. Recognition
of this challenge, however, is largely absent from the personal branding movement’s
discourse. While the dark side of fame has been more fully examined within the celebrity
studies literature (see Gamson, 1994; Turner, 2004), it is important to connect this
understanding to conceptions of personal branding to counter the fetishisation of high-
visibility status celebrated by the personal branding movement.

The previous chapter established the social capital that participants’ brands accumulated, with
their lived experiences in the identity market defined by the hyper-social condition of
receiving large amounts of attention as objects of cynosure. What is essential to note is their
consumer-brand relationships were not equivalent to human-to-human relationships, with the
former based on the reification and consumption of participants’ marketplace performances.
While this distinction was clear for the personal branders, it was not always so for consumers
and the networks of personal relationships in their lives. Focusing on the latter, personal
branders’ publicness and visibility created marketplace images and narratives that some, but
not all, of their friends and family substituted for actual social interactions with them. Over
time, this tended to destabilise the reciprocity underlying their social relationships and restrict
the social invitations that participants received, with participants perceived as too busy or
important to engage in profane, everyday social events.
Participants provided lucid accounts of this challenge which are important to represent given their absence in the existing literature and discourses about personal branding. For purposes of expediency, in-depth passages from Rose will be used to illustrate how the contours of this challenge manifested in participants’ lives, beginning with the impacts on friendships:

**Rose:** You have friends who stick with you through thick and thin. Then you’ve got your friends who drop you the second there’s a scandal. Then you’ve got the friends who try to be your friend because of what they can attach themselves to. Then you’ve got people who you’ve not heard from in 20 years who suddenly go, ‘We were such good friends. We should catch up!’ You just go, ‘Oh my god, seriously?’ And then you’ve got friends that you think are friends, but they’ve got hidden agendas. You get to the point where you can’t even have an encounter with someone without distrusting them. So you make friends... well, you try to make friends, but nobody invites you anywhere because they think you are so busy and so popular that they automatically don’t invite you or they automatically defer themselves. So they immediately put you up on a pedestal, and them down, so they think, ‘Well, you wouldn’t want to come to that.’

Similar to Rose, the two most commonly described ramifications of asymmetric statuses that participants described included: (1) the loss of established friendships and personal relationships due to jealousies or estrangement from limited contact; and (2) their increased distrust of the intentions of new/potential friends and relationship partners. Across the participants, the experience of loneliness tended to be less pointed for those with relationship partners and close circles of long-established friends and family. While the grounding role that family identity plays in shaping consumption practices has already been examined (Epp & Price, 2008), this study highlights this role applies to cultural producers too, with participants’ families functioning not only as insider confidantes, but anchors connecting them to the sacred ‘ordinariness’ of their human identities. Without this social support within the inalienable territory of their private lives, participants’ capacity to separate from their brands and safeguard their humanity was jeopardised—an experience they all described as ‘burning out’, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Returning to Rose, her internationally-established brand and single relationship status heighted both her experience of loneliness and the potential for relationship strains with new partners:

**Rose:** I’m actually lonely too.

**Interviewer:** Yeah?

**Rose:** It is the hardest burden to bear. And, you know, Google. Fuck!

**Interviewer:** Yeah?
Rose: You know, like, the minute you meet someone, they Google you and then you have no hope of meeting anyone on a level playing field. […] Where I’m known, I could only have someone in the media and intrinsically I hate most of the people in the media. But like the common person only wanted to be in there because I was famous.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Rose: They already knew everything about me. So I was kind of destined to remain single. And then, so, because you get with somebody who doesn’t get it, and they’re jealous and they’re… you know, it is a weird minefield, right? Someone who doesn’t get the industry is really hard. But when you don’t like the people in the industry, it kind of like reduces your chances. […] If you change your name, and then how can you start a relationship if you’re someone else? Do I lie? It is really intrinsically the most fucked up part of creating new relationships. Like, I feel doomed to have to be with someone in the industry, so at least they get all the crap that comes with it. I don’t know. It is weird. I don’t belong in either field, because I’m a common person who became a part of the industry, but I’m not really a part of that world either. But then I’m not a part of the common world anymore either, so it’s….it’s a little bit like being stuck between universes.

Like Rose, the other single participants recognised that finding a relationship partner with insider-access to the identity market was one way to partially mitigate the relationship strains arising from their asymmetric statuses. To disconnect or omit these deeply personal admissions about the relationship challenges associated with the marketing work of personal branding – as the personal branding movement has done – misrepresents the lived experience of the phenomenon. The negative consequences of loneliness and relationship strains from participants’ elevated statuses and para-social relationships have not been identified in previous studies of the relationships that consumers have with brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2017; Fournier, 1998) or marketing practitioners have with clients (Haytko, 2004; Price & Arnould, 1999). Personal branding is a context in which these challenges surface due to the public-private and social-commercial territories the identity market spanned and participants’ dual role as marketing practitioners and animate brand entities. In voicing this challenge, the participants draw attention to the interrelatedness of personal branders’ personal and professional lives in supporting and sustaining the marketing work of producing a resonant brand persona.

8.4 The ephemeral and unpredictable nature of brand visibility

Difficulties associated with managing brand visibility were a further challenge obfuscating the personal branders’ acquisition of habitus and capital from a resonant positioning. Participants’ affirmed the conceptual propositions of previous researchers concerning the laborious nature of constantly producing, circulating, and re-circulating images and narratives
to ensure their brand’s high visibility status (Hearn, 2008; Sternberg, 2005). Underlying this constant requirement for marketing work was the ephemeral nature of brand visibility, as Jane explains:

**Jane:** If I want to continue to do this thing where I have a profile and I get to talk about things that I want to talk about when I want to talk about them and sell my books, I need to keep being a face on tv and keep being a voice on radio.

**Interviewer:** So you have to be visible?

**Jane:** Oh yeah. God, everyone’s profile is visibility-based. Honestly, they’ll forget you the minute you are not there.

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Jane:** Oh yeah. Well except for those loyal groups. So no, not completely. The ones who, like, are sworn onto you because you once said something that meant so much to them – no, they’ll never forget you. Eventually they will, but, you know, it takes longer. But for the average punter who couldn’t give a crap, [if] you are not there, you are not there.

The laboriousness of managing brand visibility was compounded by the unpredictable efficacy of marketing work surrounding visibility generation. Participants understood that the prominence a marketplace performance achieved was not singularly determined by their marketing skills and competencies, but structural dynamics within the field, including the marketplace performances of other actors, changing consumer desires, and broader cultural events. Reflecting this unpredictability, over the seven years of fieldwork, participants’ visibilities followed turbulent, heterogeneous trajectories that mirrored the diverse visibility lifecycles outlined by Rein et al. (2006), especially the wave-like pattern. A range of metaphors and idioms were used to describe the variability of participants’ sinuous visibility trajectories, including: “It goes in ripples.” [Madeline]; “It’s so fluid.” [Ben]; “It’s about weathering the storm.” [Rose]; and “I have boom and busts, you know?” [Wayne]. Participants repeatedly highlighted that episodic spikes in their visibility from the virality of their content or their heightened relevance as a signifier of a cultural moment were unplanned and unexpected – a product of luck, timing, field dynamics, and participants’ entrepreneurial abilities to sense, respond, and capitalise on an opportunity. Framing these visibility spikes as a universally positive experience is misleading, however, with participants describing feelings of being disoriented, vulnerable, and exposed by their suddenly elevated visibility in the field.
A corollary to the unpredictability of brand visibility is that the marketing work to generate it was unstructured, ambiguous, and informal, with these qualities surfacing repeatedly in practice-based studies of marketing work (Ardley, 2005; Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Kaptan, 2013; Lien, 1997; Svensson, 2007). Participants did not enact the marketing work of visibility generation by adhering to codified marketing plans, nor were their positions and performances determined by the graduated processes recommended by the personal branding movement. Instead, the unpredictability of brand visibility reinforced the need to be habituated to the field’s rules while dynamically crafting strategy within its shifting currents. The participants understood that planned, codified, and formalised approaches to marketing work were alien to their lived experiences of engaging in personal branding, as Ben evidences in the following passage:

**Ben:** I really don’t like to talk about the future because I never really had plans for myself. I never knew this was going to happen. Never. I’m not the type of person who creates a one-road path for themselves because for me, every time I plan on doing something it doesn’t happen.

**Interviewer:** So...do you have goals?

**Ben:** For me, I just take each day as it comes. For example, I don’t sit here and say in five years’ time, I want to be so-and-so person doing so-and-so things. I don’t have anything like that. [...] Like, in my case, it’s just so unpredictable... you don’t really know. If you plan something... you can’t really have a set plan.

A further ramification of the ephemeral and unpredictable nature of brand visibility is to acknowledge that participants frequently produced images, narratives, performances, products, and services that failed to generate visibility or capital in the identity market. An example from Wayne illustrates the dissonance that participants experienced from multiple failures, revealing their limited agency to sustain their desired levels of brand visibility:

**Wayne:** I look at myself and go, ‘Fuck. What’s the plan now, man?’ I’ve pitched a million shows and 15% of them come off and you are doing all this and is this just an illusion? [Asking] ‘What are the things I want to do?’ and ‘Where could I possibly do them?’... it’s not quite as linear as that. What you end up doing is doing the things that come along and fate plays some kind of role, I suppose.

Across the participants, no clear or linear relationship was apparent between the extent of marketing work a personal brander engaged in and the brand visibility they achieved. This finding contests the guaranteed visibility and subsequent business ‘success’ the personal branding movement promises potential personal branders who adhere to its prescriptive
advice. Shepherd (2005, p. 597) labels the inflated claims of efficacy permeating the discourse as ‘deceptive’ because “there are simply too many people competing even within specific business niches to permit more than a few of them to share high-level success.” Even for the participants in this study who all had established brands, maintaining their visibility was an ongoing struggle. As such, this challenge needs to be suitably represented in knowledge claims about the efficacy of personal branding in both the academic and practitioner literature.

8.5 The continuous evolution and reductive consistency of marketplace performances

Sustaining brand resonance was amplified as a challenge by the dual requirement for evolution and consistency in participants’ marketplace performances. While this requirement may appear to be paradoxical, the personal branders understood that consistently producing elements of their brand’s cultural capital (its meanings, artefacts, and institutional endorsements/associations) did not equate to being rigid or static. Instead, participants’ brands and their practice of marketing work continuously evolved in concert with: (1) their self-development (changing interests, ambitions, worldviews, and self-concepts); (2) changing consumer desires and appetites for personal brand identities in the marketplace; (3) the performances and status games of other actors in the marketplace; (4) the available technologies and sites for identity production; (5) their developing habitus and capital; and (6) broader cultural events, themes, and discourses. This evolution was necessary as an ongoing process to find ‘fit’ – a place of brand resonance – within the shifting cultural and commercial currents of the identity market. As such, personal integrity and brand authenticity were omnipresent concerns orienting participants’ evolution, as Rose explains when describing the limited, market-mediated possibilities for her brand’s evolution:

**Rose:** You know, if I turn around and go, ‘Well, I want to write novels like James Patterson’, that’s going to be a hard sell. It’s a little bit like giving birth. If you push it out straight away, you are going to rip yourself from one side to the next. Your evolution has to be the same, because the media are not stupid. And if you try to do too much, they’ll just clam up and go, ‘eh’. If you’re a chef and you suddenly produce running shoes, people are going to go… you know, you’re not going to reach as many people. […] It’s not about selling anything or whatever is present, but it is kind of evolving intrinsically and listening to what opportunities you’ve got to market, but also what the market wants. I mean it comes down to economics. That basic lesson. Supply and demand.

Participants’ ongoing, rather than discrete, negotiation of brand legitimacy and authenticity accords with other longitudinal studies examining the dynamics of brand evolution through
marketplace performances (Giesler, 2012; Kates, 2004). Within this literature, the dynamism of brands (and brand managers) surfaces as an essential quality to create and respond to cultural moments and interact with the performances of other actors. For the personal branders, this in-the-moment crafting of strategy relied on their habitus and entrepreneurial abilities, which again, problematises the personal branding movement’s conception of marketing work being enacted through codified marketing plans and formulaic, largely introspective, branding processes.

By failing to sufficiently account for the structural forces within the identity market that fundamentally enable and constrain the evolution of a personal brander’s identity production, the discourse over-represents the performative possibilities open to a personal brander. For example, in their study of emerging personal brands, Parmentier and Fischer (2011) found that the turbulent field of fashion and churn within the occupational category of a ‘fashion model’ significantly restricted the available identity projects for their participants (aspiring fashion models). Their study revealed that emerging personal brands often had short lifecycles, and either failed or were abandoned as unsustainable identity projects with limited performative repertoires. Despite the personal branders in this current study having established brands, the threat of an unsustainable identity project was common to them all, regardless of their occupation or organisational field. Even if participants’ marketplace performances remained culturally relevant, the personal branders constantly worked to broaden their performative territory. The participants understood the breadth and depth of their brand’s cultural capital provided greater resilience against the market forces that sought to reductively constrain their identity production, or what they ethically referred to as being ‘pigeon-holed’. This tension manifests in the following exchange with Ben, who recognised his limited agency to evolve his brand while sustaining its resonance with consumers:

**Ben:** I don’t want to be this crazy-arsed person forever. Like what I told you, of course I want to evolve, but evolving doesn’t happen overnight.

**Interviewer:** How so?

**Ben:** I get so many emails from people saying, ‘Oh, how come you don’t really write how you use to before or how come you don’t take pictures? We go to your site because you entertain us.’ Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But for me, my blog is an extension of me. I don’t have to be the same person I was four years ago, you know? I just don’t want them to, like, think of me as a certain person or just like a one-dimensional view of me. There are different sides of me too. […] I can not be the same person over and over again. I want to change. I want my readers to change with me, too.
Ben’s incremental, long-term approach to brand evolution was shared by the other participants, and mirrors the recommendations for brand managers that Thomson (2006) formulated to preserve fragile consumer perceptions of human brand authenticity. Importantly, with the new performative territories that the personal branders explored came new rules to apprehend, new constellations of actors to interact with, and new compositions of capital to protect. Their ever-changing positions in the market tended to destabilise their habitus, which in turn, reinforced the need to actively work to make sense of their experiences and develop the skills and competencies they required to navigate the identity market and find elusive and valorised positions of brand resonance.

8.6 Alienation from difficulties accumulating and converting brand capital in the identity market

The fifth challenge identified concerns the instability and incommensurability of the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of personal brand capital that participants accumulated in the identity market. Importantly, the personal branders collectively understood the dimensions of their brand capital were interrelated, with elevated visibility and their performance of in vogue identities being accompanied by higher remuneration and more opportunities to monetise their brand from bookings, appearance fees, endorsements, sponsorships, merchandise, advertising revenue, and in-kind donations. However, with the erratic and unpredictable brand visibility lifecycles that participants experienced (previously discussed in section 8.4), came similar variability in the economic capital of their brands. Participants’ accumulation of social, cultural, and economic brand capital was characterised by wave-like patterns of peaks and troughs, and periods of relative stability versus volatility – a finding which suggests that instability is a quality of personal brand capital, with capital accumulation reflecting the personal branders enduring struggles to find and sustain positions of brand resonance.

Compounding the challenge of accumulating brand capital was the difficulty of capital conversion – a classic dilemma that Bourdieu (1986) identified, which acknowledges that an actor’s social capital can be used to legitimate and gain access to higher cultural capital, and recursively, aesthetic displays of cultural capital can be used to bolster an actor’s popularity and social networks. However, converting social or cultural capital to economic capital is more difficult, particularly in fields of cultural production in which cultural logic and social relationships are sacralised in juxtaposition to the profanity of commercial logic and
transactional exchanges (Bourdieu, 1993). Participants were acutely aware of the limited fungibility of their social and cultural brand capital to economic forms of capital, with the monetisation of their brands representing a significant tension given that the identity project of their brands was fundamental to their financial earnings. The following quote from Wayne evidences the visceral manifestation of this tension in his practice of personal branding:

**Wayne:** The analogy I use is that I feel like I’ve got two big suitcases full of Greek drachma and I’m desperately trying to cash them in for some pound’s sterling or some euros or American dollars. I’ve got fame, but it’s cheap fame. It’s flimsy, Chinese-made fame. And I’m constantly fucking desperately trying to convert that into something of value, whether that be commercial value or just to upscale in terms of that ultimately commercial enterprise. […] It’s very difficult, man, because you want to make money. You’ve got to live.

Insufficient accumulation and conversion of brand capital was equated with having an unsustainable identity project – an experience signalling the demise of a participant’s brand. Brand demise has been conceptualised as a natural and inevitable development within the lifecycle of a brand, with the vast majority of brands ever created experiencing senescence (Ewing et al., 2009). While recent research has revealed the active role that consumers can play in co-creating negative meanings to destroy a brand (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015), this study uncovered three paths to personal brand demise from producers’ perspectives (which included ‘burning out’, ‘selling out’, and ‘fading out’). Figure 8.1 illustrates how each of these paths were possibilities that existed outside of a resonant position. Together, burning out, selling out, and fading out constitute the major pitfalls that personal branders sought to avoid when accumulating brand capital or attempting to monetise their brand’s social and cultural capital.

Each path to a brand’s demise represented in Figure 8.1 was associated with alienation, an experiential condition defined by its contradistinction to the self-actualisation made possible from a resonant position (which enabled participants to pursue interesting, enjoyable, varied work of their choice). Consistent with Seaman’s (1959, 1975) foundational work in the field of alienation studies, the conception of alienation invoked in this study is not as an absolute status, but a subjective, psycho-social experience comprised of feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, social isolation, cultural estrangement, self estrangement, and normlessness. All six of these dimensions of alienation do not need to be simultaneously and uniformly present for a person to experience alienation, but do cumulatively magnify the extent of alienation they perceive (Seeman, 1959, 1975). Within this study, each participant’s
descriptions of burning out, selling out, and fading out contained several, but not necessarily all, dimensions of alienation. This condition is important to clarify as all participants had multiple experiences of alienation that served as an orienting structure which directed them, over time and through experiential learning, back to resonant positions.

Figure 8.1 Forms of alienation associated with personal branders’ capital accumulation and conversion in the identity market

To unpack the personal branders’ experiences of alienation further, the three paths to brand demise that are outlined in Figure 8.1 will be discussed in turn. Table 8.1 also offers a comparative perspective of how the three forms of alienation manifested in the lifeworld of a participant (Wayne). While each participant’s experiences of alienation were unique, Wayne’s examples are representative of the ardent emotions and lucidity that surrounded their distinct understandings of the ever-present threats of selling out, burning out, and fading out.
## Table 8.1 Descriptions of alienation from difficulties accumulating and converting personal brand capital

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seeman’s (1975) dimensions of alienation</th>
<th>Wayne’s experiences of alienation</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Alienation from burning out</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Context:</strong> Wayne describes the experience of burning out from excessively performing his brand for consumers.</td>
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<td>“It’s exhausting after a while, man. You feel like an actor, you know? [...] When someone recognises me and wants to talk to me, I give them everything. I exhaust myself for them because I feel like the second I don’t… well, how can I have a public profile and try and make money out of it while at the same time resenting people, you know? [...] You’ve got to give them a polite couple of minutes of sunshine. A polite slice of you. Well, it’s not polite… you’ve got to give them energy, you know? You’ve got to give them charisma and thought and 90% of the time, that’s fine. But there are 10% of the time, you know, you don’t want to fucking doing that. You’re tired. You don’t want to have to give them energy, give them the show. I call it ‘the show’. You don’t want to have to go, ‘Yeah, I’m that guy. Fucking blah, blah, blah.’ Sometimes you just… you have to because you’ve made the conscious decision to become famous so you can use that persona for something. You can’t… Sometimes you are just like, ‘Fuck off!’.”</td>
<td><strong>Context:</strong> Wayne describes the experience of selling out by performing his brand for an organisation that he despises because he needed the lucrative appearance fee.</td>
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<td>“When I was actually there as the face of a brand that I absolutely hate, that was really difficult. The only reason I did it was for money and I felt dirty doing it. [...] Actually being the face of it and then seeing it, I don’t know why, but it made me feel dirty. And I do think that that would be really damaging to my brand if my core people knew that I was doing that… I really do hope that no-one knows that I did that. [...] I needed the money. I need to eat. It’s all well and good to have a whole host of principles and live in obscurity, but sometimes you do have to do these things.”</td>
<td><strong>Context:</strong> Wayne describes the experience of fading out from multiple failures to accumulate capital from a more resonant position that fits with the self-actualised work he seeks as a media personality.</td>
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<td>“I’m desperately trying to fucking make something of it and I’ve tried something and it just doesn’t seem to be working out the way I want. I’ve done all of these auditions. What have I done wrong, you know? [...] You are aware of your place in the market and where others perhaps sit and, you know, it’s very difficult to divorce that from yourself, because you’re your own product. That can mean that I suppose you are somewhat victim to the… because you’ve got emotions like any other human being… I suppose there is no distance, you know? If I was part of a failing business selling widgets, at the end of the day when I have to shut the shop or the café stops because it doesn’t make a profit or whatever, but when you yourself don’t work or you feel like you are not getting anywhere, then that obviously has a much more deeper emotional impact on you.”</td>
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</table>
8.6.1 Alienation from burning out

Burning out was associated with participants’ feelings of ‘losing themselves’ and experiencing mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion from the unsustainable accumulation of brand capital. Previous literature has problematised the focused and consistent identity performance that a brand persona requires, framing this labour as a form of ‘personal engineering’ about which the psychological consequences are largely unknown (Shepherd, 2005). In response, this study finds that burning out was a key risk for participants and manifested not only from the aesthetic and emotional labour requirements of marketplace performances, but the cognitive vigilance to identify opportunities and dynamically craft marketing strategy within the identity market. Participants’ experiences of burning out manifested from their failure to separate their private self from their publicly branded self, hence preserving their personal integrity and brand authenticity. The need for participants to engage in identity compartmentalisation to prevent burning out mirrors the findings of Hoschild (2012) who studied workers in occupations with high levels of emotional labour, such as nurses, carers, and teachers. What exacerbated this challenge for the personal branders, however, was the less bounded, self-managed, and laborious nature of their marketing work. The following example of Kevin describing his experience of burning out during an electoral campaign attests to the onerous, and sometimes excessive, nature of marketing work that personal branding entails:

**Kevin:** A lot of it is being ‘on’ all the time in terms of you are the candidate all the time that you’re campaigning, so it does take a lot of physical, mental and emotional strength every day to go out and do that. […] I think I came to a point that I was just physically exhausted from doing so many things and feeling just drained of energy. And then questioning…that was the key… I was questioning whether or not this whole thing was for me in the first place. So that was definitely a low point. […] That’s when I felt that hopelessness that I was being lost in all of this.

**Interviewer:** What have you learned from that?

**Kevin:** The main lesson is that win or lose in any election, once the election is over, your personal self still needs to be there and it needs to carry on. And so, I’ve always been trying to stay true to myself. Stay grounded from this whole process.

Like Wayne’s experience of burning out (detailed in Table 8.1), this passage from Kevin evidences his feelings of self estrangement, meaninglessness, and powerless that are consistent with the experience of alienation. From this experience, Kevin manoeuvred back to a resonant position by practicing identity compartmentalisation to more prudently navigate the marketisation intersection of the identity market.
8.6.2 Alienation from selling out

Selling out was associated with excessive conversion to economic capital that violated a personal brander’s personal integrity and brand authenticity. The various descriptions of selling out that participants provided accord with the popular conception of the term which is “typically used to indicate that someone has compromised his or her professional or ethical standards for purposes of financial gain” and connotes “a sense of lost authenticity” (Thompson et al., 1994, p. 439). While previous literature has revealed how easily a human brand’s authenticity can be violated by consumer perceptions of it engaging in opportunistic acts that are akin to selling out (Thomson, 2006), this study reveals similar concerns exist for personal branders as the cultural producers managing their brand’s marketplace performances and execution of marketing strategy. For participants, alienation from selling out was most strongly associated with feelings of self estrangement (“You’ll sell yourself out and you’ll hate yourself for it.” [Jane]), normlessness (“It’s prostituting yourself almost. It’s allowing yourself to be degraded.” [Madeline]), and cultural estrangement (“I think I’d be fucked if I put my brand on fucking Coke or something. People would say that personifies everything she is against and she’s doing it.” [Jasmine]). From the vantage point of having established brands, participants tended to frame selling out as either a desperate act motivated by economic necessity or as a choice that was symptomatic of adopting a short-term approach to managing a personal brand. Whether constructed as a free or forced choice, all participants understood that selling out expedited a brand’s demise and was antithetical to sustaining a position of brand resonance.

8.6.3 Alienation from fading out

Fading out was associated with ‘brand death’ or ‘invisibility’ in the identity market due to the inadequate accumulation and/or conversion of brand capital. During the seven years of fieldwork, several participants intermittently ceased production of their brands to: (1) seek respite from the identity market; (2) reposition (broaden, narrow, alter) the social and cultural capital of their brands; (3) establish their brands in different geographic markets; or (4) abandon certain sites of image production (such as withdrawing from social media or refusing media requests). For the participants, these experiences reinforced that fading out was an imminent threat if they more permanently ceased being culturally or commercially relevant or failed to undertake the marketing work of performing their brands and generating visibility. With personal branding being a disruptive technology in the heterologous field of
the identity market, participants apprehended that a structural inertia existed within the field that supported them fading out. This inertia reflects the challenges discussed earlier in this chapter concerning the constancy of marketing work required to generate visibility in the noisy, crowded, and competitive spaces of the identity market. This inertia towards fading out surfaces again in this telling admission from Sue:

**Sue:** If you drop the ball and stop working on it, no one comes looking for you. No one wonders where you are or what you're doing. You simply fall off peoples’ radar mostly because it's an egocentric world and we do personal branding simply to get our names recognised. If you don't keep working on it then people forget quickly.

Fading out returned the personal branders to the alienating status of being ordinary workers in the labour market, with this experienced having been described in Chapter 7 (see sub-section 7.4.1 on brandlessness and ordinary work).

### 8.6.4 Summarising the alienating paths of personal brand demise

Participants’ lived experiences support that accumulating and converting brand capital is a complex and non-linear process that is dependent on navigating the identity market’s six intersections while simultaneously producing a brand from the shifting alignment between their personal integrity and brand authenticity. This account diametrically challenges the personal branding movement’s assurances of personal branding success. In doing so, it empirically supports the criticisms that previous researchers have proposed which argue that the personal branding outcomes promulgated in the discourse are inflated, unrealistic, and unrepresentative of personal branders’ experiences of struggle and failure (Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005). By documenting the three paths to personal brand demise, this study contributes a more nuanced conceptualisation to the literature that includes the experiential pitfalls structuring the challenge of accumulating and converting brand capital in the identity market.

### 8.7 Marketplace drama and symbolic domination in the field

The final challenge pertains to conflicts that emerged between actors in the identity market and the symbolic violence that participants experienced. Consumer culture studies have revealed how marketplaces are hegemonic spaces defined by conflict and competition between brands and other marketplace actors (Giesler, 2008, 2012; Goldman & Papson, 2006; Murakami Wood & Ball, 2013; Thompson & Arsel, 2004). Giesler (2008) characterises these conflicts as ‘marketplace dramas’, understanding they unfold around deep
cultural contestations and ideological contradictions linked to the diverse interests of stakeholders in a market. Giesler’s (2008) conception of marketplace drama fits strongly with the dynamics between actors within the identity market and the dramaturgical metaphors that have already been explored concerning participants’ marketplace performances. This study builds on this literature by highlighting three forms of symbolic domination that personal branders endured as subordinate actors drawn into marketplace dramas that were structured by the powerful interests of media, organisations, other human brands, and consumers. These forms of symbolic domination include: (1) other actors’ appropriating participants’ brand capital; (2) violations of privacy; and (3) public criticism, abuse, and attacks. These experiences fall into the darker-side of personal branding and will be described first before Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic domination is more deeply explored.

The personal branders experienced multiple forms of capital appropriation, from organisations feigning association or endorsement with their brands, to media organisations fabricating images and narratives about them, to consumers constructing doppelgänger brand images, a term referring to “a family of disparaging images and meanings about a brand that circulate throughout popular culture” (Thompson et al., 2006, p. 50). While appropriating acts were sometimes malicious and designed to destroy a brand, as previous studies have documented (Giesler, 2008; Parmentier & Fischer, 2015; Thompson & Arsel, 2004), the extent and valence of appropriating activity tended to be based more primarily on the capital-creating opportunities that other actors perceived they could exploit from participants’ brands. Participants’ awareness of the opportunist motivating such appropriation is apparent in Rose’s description of a conflict she has had with a media outlet:

**Rose:** I would openly go, ‘This is completely slanderous and a lie.’ and they’d be like, ‘Yeah, but you know? We’re not going to re-neg.’ And you just go, ‘Oh my god’. But they know it sells papers. It is fodder. And it’s like fertilizer. […] A gossip columnist who had spent years bashing me, who has suddenly decided not to bash me anymore, said to me, ‘The reality is Rose, you sell newspapers. People don’t always want to read the good stuff and for a certain amount of time, people want to read the bad stuff. But at some point, it changes.’

Violations of privacy were related to these acts of capital appropriation and principally took three forms: (1) unsolicited and non-consensual images, video, and narratives being taken of personal branders and their partners/family/friends by paparazzi, media, and consumers; (2) the hacking of social media accounts and interference with participants’ mail and household garbage disposal, and the actual or threatened publication of this material; and (3) personal
disclosures about a personal brander from former partners, colleagues, friends, associates, and family members. While participants understood the high likelihood of having their privacy invaded, they tended to resent this experience and sought to minimise its potential. Staying with Rose’s example, this begrudging acceptance of this form of symbolic domination surfaces when she describes instances of having her privacy violated:

Rose: It does annoy you when you go to the bin and there’s a fucking photographer out there when all you want to do is put out your garbage. People rabbit through your rubbish bin. They found me in my new place. They papped me…and that is the worst trade-off of it. The intrusiveness… Fuck, don’t I share enough with you? Seriously, do you have to do all of that?

As objects of cynosure in the identity market, participants’ brands not only attracted positive attention (admiration, celebration, expressions of fandom), but criticism, verbal abuse, bullying, sexual harassment, and threatened and actual violence. The participants understood that a darker-side existed to consumer desires in the identity market, including demands for scandal, conflict, shaming, humiliation, vitriol, punishment, and retribution. The content of criticisms directed at the personal branders concerned their substantive work, their marketplace performances, and personal attacks problematising their gender, age, appearance, sexuality, morality, taste, and authenticity. Throughout the period of fieldwork, there was a significant increase in the quantity and extremity of online abuse (termed ‘e-bile’) that participants received, particularly through social media. A strong gender effect was evident in this abuse, affirming recent media studies research revealing that e-bile is highly gendered and disproportionately targets women (Jane, 2014). While all participants had experienced online abuse through social media, it was the female personal branders who received multiple threats of rape, murder, and kidnap, and had their images appropriated and altered in content (images, memes, animations, videos) depicting acts of extreme violence and pornography. This finding mirrors multiple studies of female personal branders (e.g. Erz & Christensen; Thompson-White, 2018), suggesting this challenge that female personal branders experience is robust across occupations and organisational fields.

In terms of online abuse, the textual and visual content that female participants received or were featured in fits strongly with the concept of ‘rapeglish’, which is defined as “an emerging yet increasingly dominant online dialect whose signal characteristic is graphic and sexually violent imagery” (Jane, 2017, p. 2). The negative brand meanings that participants were aware of (discussed in sub-section 7.3.1.6 on marketing ethics) reflect this gender skew,
with key cultural tropes associated with personal branding including being a ‘prostitute’, ‘shameless whore’, and ‘attention slut’. Within the personal branding movement’s discourse, there is insufficient acknowledgement of the challenge this abuse presents, nor adequate recognition of its gendered nature. Underlying this silence is the popular press literature’s failure to account for the negative, culturally-embedded meanings of brands (Arvidsson, 2005; Stern, 2006) and concede that brands have the ability to cause ‘trouble’ by commodifying culture and social relationships, violating notions of authenticity and artistic integrity, and reinforcing social hierarchies through the fetishisation of class-based, conspicuous consumption (Holt, 2002). Evidently, to advance more accurate and empirically-grounded knowledge claims about personal branding, there is a need to connect the darker-side experiences of the phenomenon to its self-actualising potential.

Participants’ experiences also suggest two context-specific revisions are required to Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic domination when applying it to the field of the identity market. For Bourdieu, symbolic domination occurs through a subordinate group’s habituation to the status hierarchies within a field, with this process naturalising and legitimising their subjugation as a ‘doxa’, or self-evident system of beliefs supporting an actor’s acceptance of ‘the way the world is’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Thus, a key element of symbolic domination is an actor’s complicity in it, which Bourdieu (1990) constructs as a predisposition formed subconsciously. The first revision problematises this subconsciousness, with the personal branders consciously rationalising and reflecting on their symbolic domination as a forced choice or Faustian bargain. That is, the forms of symbolic domination discussed represent conditions that participants knowingly endured to pursue self-actualised work in juxtaposition to the alternative state of alienation from brandlessness and ordinary work. This consciousness is clearly apparent in the following exchange with Rose:

**Rose:** You know, it’s interesting they say you do a deal with the devil. And it is… it has it’s price, you know? I guess you kind of weigh up that price, but then you get to a point where it is the point of no return. Like, I, you know, even if I went and got a normal job, do you think the media would ever let me go at this point?

**Interviewer:** Yeah. No.

**Rose:** I’d be photographed waitressing. They’d do articles about how shit my life is or how fucked up I was or how I gave up or whatever. There’d be, ‘Where are you now’s?’ There’d be… you know what I mean? Like, you kind of get down the path where you go, ‘Well, as much as they might put me down, they have intrinsically embraced my journey as much as I have.’ So it is really a one-way… it is a one-way street after a certain point.
The pragmatism underlying participants’ complicity in their symbolic domination aligns more with Gramsci’s (1971) theory of hegemony, which represents the major alternative theory of cultural domination to Bourdieu’s work. Elaborating on this difference, while Bourdieu frames an actor’s complicity as a product of habitus, Gramsci posits that there is knowing, conscious consent to domination that is informed by an actor’s ‘common sense’ appraisal of their experiences and situated agency within a field (Burawoy, 2012).

A second revision relates to the volatile and heterologous nature of the identity market. With changing rules, disrupted hierarchies, unstable accumulations of brand capital, and personal branders’ shifting positions within the field, their symbolic domination tended to be dynamically and strategically negotiated rather than subconsciously apprehended through habitus alone. From navigating the identity market, the personal branders understood the extent of symbolic domination that was attached to different positions within the field. Accordingly, they sought sustainable positions that represented a compromise between capital maximisation and psychological wellbeing, as evident in this passage from Ben:

**Ben:** I like where I am. If I become bigger, I don’t think I could handle it. It would mean I have to give more… give more of myself. Too much.

**Interviewer:** What would happen?

**Ben:** There’s nothing to give. If you give too much, there’s nothing left. Once you give it all, what else is there left?

**Interviewer:** At the level you are…

**Ben:** I have to give, but not everything. I share some of my personal life on my terms. What if everything of my life exploded and it was all put out there? I would freak out. It’s fucked up.

**Interviewer:** Does it come with the territory?

**Ben:** Yes. If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. Not for me.

Together, both revisions support a persistent theme in this research concerning the dual functioning of habitus and strategy for personal branders in the identity market. Participants both apprehended and consciously calculated, negotiated, and ultimately (as shown in the next chapter) incorporated their symbolic domination into their marketplace performances through interdependent status games with other actors. This study supports the revisionist stance on habitus being a less absolute and totalising construct that is accompanied by
consciously-enacted strategy (Swartz, 1997; Üstüner & Holt, 2010; Üstüner & Thompson, 2012), particularly for entrepreneurial cultural producers such as personal branders. Participants’ experiences of marketplace drama and symbolic domination provide a powerful testimony about a challenge that needs greater recognition in knowledge claims about personal branding. When describing how they coped with the forms of symbolic domination discussed, all participants used the idiom of developing ‘thick skin’. The methodologies they employed to achieve this resilience were complex and idiosyncratic, and represent a vital topic for future research to examine that sits beyond the scope of this current inquiry.

8.8 Summary
By focusing on the challenges confronting personal branders in the identity market, this chapter has advanced a more balanced account of personal branding that contests the overly optimistic knowledge claims permeating the popular press literature on the subject. From prolonged study of participants’ considerable experiences in the identity market, this thesis has captured the dark side of personal branding, revealing the lived experience of being a brand is replete with conflict, failure, symbolic domination, and multiple forms of alienation. The personal branders’ entrepreneurialism was essential to their survival in the heterologous field of the identity market, compelling them to acquire the habitus and strategy they needed to capitalise on the disruptive potential of personal branding. In stark contrast to the personal branding movement’s assurances of efficacy, graduated and prescriptive processes, and codified marketing plans, this study supports that the marketing work of personal branding is more accurately described as being tacit, ambiguous, informal, creative, and ambiguous in nature. The human dimension of marketing work documented in these findings suggests that fundamental revisions are required to the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims.

In reviewing progress to this point, the preceding chapter introduced the overarching conceptual framework of this thesis. Drawing on Bourdieun theory, Chapter 7 mapped the intersections of the identity market, unpacked the dimensions of personal brand capital, and revealed the habitus and strategy that participants required in their practice of marketing work. This current chapter has built on this framework by examining the field dynamics structuring participants’ experiences, specifically focusing on the deeper challenges associated with generating habitus, capital, and brand resonance. The next chapter of findings completes this thesis’s Bourdieun analysis by examining the personal branding practices that participants employed to enact their marketing work and navigate the identity market.
Chapter 9
Personal branding practices: The marketing work to achieve brand resonance

9.1 Introduction
This final chapter of findings shifts focus to address the second research question of this thesis regarding how personal branders undertake the marketing work of personal branding. Concentrating on personal branding practices at this point is consistent with Bourdieun theory which holds that practices are shaped by the interaction of an actor’s accumulated habitus and capital within a specific field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1990). As such, this chapter complements the two preceding chapters which have: (a) mapped the field dynamics of the identity market, including its intersections and the deeper challenges pertinent to navigating it; (b) identified the compositions and qualities of personal brand capital; and (c) explored the knowledge, learning, skills, and competencies that contributed to personal branders’ habitus and capital. By examining these topics, this thesis has already described some of the more obvious personal branding practices related to navigating the intersections of the identity market, such as the ongoing task of managing brand visibility, undertaking marketplace performances, and adopting an entrepreneurial orientation to sense market opportunities. This chapter builds on this understanding of marketing work by focusing on four additional areas of practice that are absent or under-represented in existing conceptualisations of personal branding. Discussed in turn, these practices relate to the personal branders engaging in: (1) interdependent status games with other actors in the field; (2) identity compartmentalisation (separating and connecting brand persona and private self); (3) discursive identity negotiation (discursive distancing, reframing, and appropriation); and (4) shifting market exchange modalities (selling, gifting, and sharing their brands). Cumulatively, this chapter advances a more humanistic conception of personal branding – a perspective that is grounded in the everyday experience of undertaking marketing work to achieve and sustain brand resonance in the identity market.

9.2 Interdependent status games with other actors in the field
The identity market was not a vacuum in which personal brand capital was generated individually or independently by personal branders’ practice of marketing work. Instead,
personal brand capital was created and destroyed in the identity market’s conflict-ridden network of actors (consumers, the media, organisations, other human brands), with personal branders engaging in interdependent status games with other actors to accumulate and defend their personal brand capital. Gaming metaphors are central to Bourdieun theory, with ‘practices’ conceived as the games an actor plays to compete for capital within a field and ‘habitus’ referring to their understanding of the rules of the game (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In the consumer culture literature, Üstüner and Thompson (2012) significantly advanced Bourdieu’s game metaphor by highlighting that actors’ marketplace performances produce interdependent status games within a field for symbolic capital (as the composite of economic, social, and cultural forms of capital). That is, in the field of the hair salon they examined, symbolic capital was produced through interdependent status games between middle-class consumers (seeking aesthetic distinction and celebrity-like treatment from working-class stylists) and working-class stylists (seeking middle-class status legitimisation from middle-class consumers) (Üstüner & Thompson, 2012). This current study of personal branders extends the concept of ‘interdependent status games’ to the context of personal branding to account for the capital creating/destroying machinations of actors in the field of the identity market.

A starting point to understanding the personal branders’ interdependent status games is to acknowledge that a participant’s perceived power within the field oriented how they interacted with other actors to gain or defend their personal brand capital. In the following exchange, Rose the writer reflects on her complex relationship with media organisations who have both supported and attacked her brand. Surfacing in this passage is Rose’s awareness of how power-relations structure game-play in the identity market:

**Rose:** It’s all about power. I mean, it is a constant power game and it shifts and it goes one way and the next and the other way and the next... and it is really like a surfer rides the waves on the good days and the bad days. I’ve had a really bizarre relationship with them. [...] When they sense that you may not be as down as they made out you to be, then they get scared because then your value goes up. [...] It’s like those sharks with the sucker fish on top of them, like a symbiotic relationship.

**Interviewer:** Yeah? That’s an interesting analogy.

**Rose:** It totally is. And that is what it is like, you know? At any time, you can be the shark or the sucker fish. And you cling desperately to each other and you may or may not feed each other at any given time, but you surf the murky waters and it really is kind of like that. It’s very funny when they are against you, you get really angry and distant. But when they can’t hurt you, you’re kind of quite happy to kind of communicate with them because... you
know… intrinsically that you’ve kind of got something that they may or may not want. Even though you may not tell them and they might not know, they intrinsically can sense it, you know?

The ‘sucker fish and shark’ metaphor that Rose invoked was one of the more vivid discursive representations of the interdependent relationships that participants had with other actors. Participants understood that personal branding was a disruptive technology that – through their appropriation of marketing and branding logic, rhetoric, and practices – re-distributed capital and altered the status games played with established actors such as media organisations. Social media platforms contributed to this power shift, equipping participants with the social capital to combat and challenge the appropriation of their brand capital from media organisations, as Jasmine explained:

Jasmine: So now I have such a presence… Facebook, Twitter and a website… if people want to know what the fuck is going on with me, I’m there. I’m there. Media organisations don’t realise that it is such a strong tool for someone like me. If they fuck me over, I can tell everybody straight away and they’re already listening to me. They know…if they open up [a newspaper] and they see, ‘Jasmine accused of racism or crime of human rights’ then they can go to Twitter and can find out from me.

While social media technologies have been shown to amplify an actor’s voice (McQuarrie et al., 2013), this study reveals the ramifications of that amplification altered power-relations and status games within the network of actors in the identity market. Importantly, the disintermediation that social media provided the personal branders (in giving them direct mass communication channels to consumers) did not diminish, but entrench the interdependence of status games with the media. For example, while the personal branders used social media to regain authorial control of their brands, media organisations mined their social media content to use in their own content production. Recursively, personal branders tended to use this media content in their production of drama about the event/representation to affirm their brand meanings and increase their visibility. Returning to Rose’s status games with media organisations, both parties engaged in mutual appraisals of their shifting power and capital in response to changing technologies and rules in the identity market, with Rose’s entrepreneurial sensibility evident in understanding how to respond to being celebrated or attacked by the media:

Rose: When people like me come along and go, ‘Fuck you and your fucking rules’, they [media organisations] don’t like that. But eventually they have to subscribe to it because everyday people subscribe to it. And if they piss everyday people off, then they’ve got no audience. […] You can already see this shift. A writer at a media organisation has been my
arch enemy, suddenly has done two articles and neither of them has been nasty, vicious or bullshit. I sent them an email the other day going, ‘On a scale of 1 to 10 on the nasty and bullshit scale, they were well… I’m finding myself having to say ‘thank you’ again. What is the world coming to?’ I can have this little laugh with them, because I’ve always responded to them like that. Like, they once asked me for a quote a couple of months ago and I was like, ‘Oh you’ve always been so supportive of my career. I’m sure I would just love to give you an exclusive quote.’ Suddenly your power shifts. They go, ‘Oh, she might actually make it and she’s going to hate me, so I better suck some arse now.’

**Interviewer:** What if they attack you again?

**Rose:** I mean, you can respond, but sometimes, you give more power to them by responding unnecessarily.

**Interviewer:** Yeah?

**Rose:** You know, you have to understand the power of your response. If you respond to everything, then the power of your voice also diminishes, […] As part of your brand, every response that you generate or every noise that you make has to be relevant to who you are without being noisy. If you complain every single time, no-one wants to listen.

Status games were particular to each participant and varied over time with their changing position, capital, habitus, and the network of other actors to interact with. However, across the participants, status games with other human brands were particularly common and extended across both positive (endorsements, affiliations, praise/supportive commentary) and negative (disassociations, criticisms, attacks) game-plays. Polar examples are captured in the following exchange with Kevin. He begins by describing the value of an endorsement he has sought from a highly visible, respected senior politician before revealing the brand analysis informing his attack/defend status games with a political opponent:

**Kevin:** So if you’re associated with them, endorsed by them, it’s like god anointing you. [**Laughs**]

**Interviewer:** Yeah?

**Kevin:** So, you know, it’s being strategic. I have a close working relationship with them. My website shows I’m closely aligned with them and that I support them and they support me.

**Interviewer:** So how do you show that relationship?

**Kevin:** Well, you show it by number one, I think there needs to be a visual. So pictures of myself and them together at public events. I find that scared my opponent because the first day that this was launched I got a complaint saying that I was using unauthorised images of myself and them. [**Laughs**]

**Interviewer:** Are you aware of how your opponent markets himself?

**Kevin:** Yes. And we actually did extensive research and study on my opponent while we
were even developing the brand as well. And the most effective way we did that was we put up their brand versus my brand, and how did the two compare with each other. What were their strengths and weaknesses and what were mine. And what were potential weaknesses that they could hit me upon and what were their weaknesses we could really hone in on and really hurt them. So we really put the two brands together and really planned out our strategy based on that.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Is there an example of how you could use a weakness in your opponent’s brand?

**Kevin:** So, in terms of the weakness of my opponent, they are an established politician who hasn’t been able to achieve a whole lot that’s substantial to the community. As opposed to my brand where I’ve been able to accomplish so much in such a short period of time. The difference between the two is really striking. When I present that in front of voters, I get a positive feedback that it’s time for change.

Political marketing researchers have noted that the oppositional and competitive nature of political candidates’ brands reinforces the need to actively monitor the panoply of brand meanings in the market about a politician, including doppelgänger (or negatively-valenced) brand meanings (Dean et al., 2015). For Kevin, this monitoring informed the status games he played with an opponent, who in return, sought to prevent Kevin from appropriating the cultural capital from a prized political endorsement, demonstrating the ongoing manoeuvring to create and destroy brand capital among actors.

A second example of status games with other human brands further affirms the strategic mindset that participants had in carefully appraising how they incorporated status games into their marketplace performances to create and defend their personal brand capital. In the next passage, Jasmine the comedian reveals the value of marketplace drama and oppositional brands in building her social and cultural brand capital through juxtaposition and distinction:

**Jasmine:** The fact that a conservative commentator hates me is huge… it’s like, [Jasmine changes her voice to indicate she is representing a consumer’s perspective] ‘I hate them and they hate her, so she must be pretty fabulous.’ [Jasmine returns to providing her perspective] It’s been… it’s been very kind of polarising. It’s reinforced my brand. […] I’ve intentionally never spoken about this conservative commentator in public and if I’m interviewed and they ask me about them, my take is, ‘I have no idea who they are.’ I know who they are. I’ve never read their work, but I know who they are. And, I’ve let that just do its own work and it’s done very well. You know, because if I start attacking the conservative commentator, I’m just as bad as they are.

**Interviewer:** What’s going on there?

**Jasmine:** I don’t want to appear, and I am not, a response to the detractors. If I said, ‘People say this about me…’, ‘People say that about me…’, I don’t think my voice would come out as clearly as it does. […] I’ve never wanted to take on conservative commentators, and I think it really annoys them that I’m not playing their game.
Interviewer: Okay. That’s interesting.

Jasmine: I stand aside from the pack. But I need them there. You just put me on the web and there’s a fucking million nutter like me out there. […] You put a fucking nutter in a quiet church, they stand out. You put a nutter in a nuthouse, no-one sees them. It’s only in comparison and it’s only in relation to the uptight, white honkiness of the world… I’ve got a vested interest in keeping the world uptight, white and honky because if everybody starts doing what I’m doing, I’ve got no market.

These extended examples form Kevin and Jasmine affirm the findings of previous cultural branding studies revealing the strategic value of marketplace drama and doppelgänger brand images to create oppositional brand loyalty, generate visibility, and evolve actors’ marketplace performances to culturally relevant themes, significations, and discourses (Giesler, 2012; Thompson et al., 2006). An addendum to this finding extends this literature to more novel territory, and concerns the personal branders impersonating other actors to auto-generate drama and doppelgänger brand images about their brands in the identity market.

While not all participants engaged in this form of game-play, it is pertinent to acknowledge that these practices were part of the repertoire of status games played by some of the personal branders and, as such, warrant representation as a more extraordinary activity within their practice of marketing work. Examples from Wayne the media personality and Ben the blogger illustrate the diversity of these pseudo status games. While Wayne uses multiple consumer personas to publicly express ideas and opinions that he cannot otherwise express from the reductive identity project of his brand, Ben actively trolls his brand to drive traffic to his blog. In both examples, the participants understanding of the capital created by this fabricated content and conflict is evident:

Wayne: I created alternate personas where I would log on and comment on my own stories, often saying things that I wanted to say, but wouldn’t say in my own name. I’m just going to smash out some fucking hardcore rant. So I had a number of them [alternative personas] going. But also, it bumps up the comments. People are like sheep. If they see a story’s got thirty comments, they’ll go to it next to one that has got two, even though they don’t know that half of them are me talking to myself or talking to one or two other people. So you kind of find yourself creating your own drama.

Ben: Now I’m the one creating shit about me. [Laughs] And it’s true… like if I’m having a slow day on my blog and my numbers are going down, I would post anonymous comments on my own blog saying, ‘Oh my god, Ben is blah, blah, blah’ and then my readers will defend me, you know?

Interviewer: Wow, that’s interesting.
Ben: Yeah, and then you go to other sites…I’m always online and sometimes I will troll discussion forums and just trash talk me. [Laughs] You know, it’s fun to see what people say about me. Whatever. […] If people talk about me, they will all go to my website and see what I’m up to. You know, that’s numbers. I get more visitors that way. And for me, visitors are like, great for ads. It’s revenue.

Previous studies of human brands have noted the capital-creating potential of fabricating scandalous narrative for maverick brands such as the entertainer, Russell Brand (Mills et al., 2015). This study confirms personal branders with brand meanings conducive to drama or conflict were aware of this potential, and realised it in pseudo status games with other actors to build their personal brand capital. However, this form of game-playing was risky, with scandal, sustained attacks, and powerful doppelgänger brand images having the potential to destroy brand capital (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015), as several participants who endured unexpected public scandals experienced. Thus, the personal branders’ cumulative experiences support that interdependent status games had both capital creating/destroying possibilities. Compared to the status games of more statically-structured higher and lower status actors in Üstüner and Thompson’s (2012) study, the personal branders engaged willingly or out of necessity in a more diverse, and at times, aggressive and symbolically violent array of status games based on their shifting power and volatile compositions of brand capital. Most importantly, this game playing relied on their entrepreneurial abilities to create or defend their personal brand capital by managing their interactions with other actors in the identity market’s circulating mix of power, capital, interests, meanings, and performances.

9.3 Identity compartmentalisation: Separating and connecting brand personas and private selves

A second personal branding practice concerned identity compartmentalisation, which consisted of episodic acts of separating and connecting participants’ public brand personas and private selves. Rozuel (2011, p. 687) notes that the concept of identity compartmentalisation originates in psychology and “refers to the process through which we isolate and separate certain aspects of our personality from the rest of our personality or from our core self.” Consumer culture researchers have examined how consumers engage in identity compartmentalisation to pursue diverse and fragmented professional versus private identity projects (Goulding et al., 2002). Studies of marketing practitioners have similarly identified the practice of compartmentalising professional versus private identities, particularly for creative workers distancing their personal artistic endeavours from their
commercial marketing work (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004; Nixon & Crewe, 2004). An understanding of how personal branders enact this practice is, however, absent from the personal branding literature. This omission is of particular concern given the complex identity negotiations involved between a personal brander’s public and private selves and their dual role as brand manager and animate brand object. In his critique of the personal branding movement, Shepherd (2005, p. 596) recognised the difficulties associated with personal branders’ identity negotiation, arguing that as personal branding “inevitably focuses on selected personal abilities and attributes, and excludes others, this may lead to tensions emerging as they attempt to live (up to) a constrained version of themselves.” This study confirms Shepherd’s (2005) concerns and reveals the identity compartmentalisation practices that participants enacted to negotiate these tensions. To this end, Figure 9.1 illustrates the separation-connection dialectic uncovered in this study which enabled the personal branders to maintain their brand authenticity and personal integrity while navigating away from the pitfalls of selling out, fading out, and burning out.

Figure 9.1 Identity compartmentalisation practices to sustain brand resonance
Participants engaged in diffuse activities to separate from, and connect to, their brands, but a separation-connection dialectic was common to them all. This dialectic surfaces in the following exchange with Tom the producer:

**Tom:** I think because I created this thing [*brand persona*] myself, I have a lot more control of it.

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Tom:** Yeah. Like I don’t think I’m concerned about losing my identity. What I’ve created is my identity. It’s just little enhancements on that. It’s not a complete other person. [...] I’m in control. I created this thing. It’s not like I’ve had someone go, ‘You have to wear this. You have to dress like this. Don’t say this. Don’t say that.’ It’s all me. I’m controlling it.

**Interviewer:** But you are not always your brand?

**Tom:** Like, sometimes I think I have a split personality. Sometimes on weekends, I just wear shorts and a cap and runners and a t-shirt and people won’t recognise me on the street. [...] If I don’t have an event or if I don’t have work on the weekend, doesn’t matter how good the weather is out there, I will get dvds out. I will cook. I will sit here [*Tom gestures to his living room*] in whatever clothing feels comfortable and I’ll just watch dvds and switch off. Read a book and switch off. I won’t call friends or go out for coffees or a nightclub on the weekend. I will sit at home on a Saturday night and watch a dvd and just relax.

In the above example, Tom’s mental and physical connection with his brand gave him a sense of control regarding his marketplace performances and brand authorship, while physically and mentally disassociating from his persona enabled him to preserve private time, spaces, and activities. Together, both separation and connection activities were managed to sustainably produce his brand. Like Tom, the other participants tended to disassociate from their brands by relegating aspects of their personhood (such as their relationships, families, and homes) to private zones that they protected from the identity market, as evidenced in the following examples from Sue the entrepreneur and Rose the writer:

**Sue:** I very rarely have people over. I use to love having dinner parties and I miss having dinner parties with my closest friends. And I will only ever have my closest friends in my home. My home is my sanctuary. It’s the one place that is just mine. When I invite someone into my home that means they are pretty close to me.

**Rose:** There needs to be that separation. There just has to be because (a) there’s stalkers (b) my family don’t necessarily need to have their whole entire life publicised, nor do my friends and it’s more, you know, keeping something separate for them and something special and to be able to go, ‘I had a fucking shit day’ and it not turn up in the papers the next day, you know? Some things are just me. The other things are my business.
A second separation activity involved participants mentally disassociating from their brand personas by delimiting their brand ownership to their authorial production of their brands. This separation of brand author from brand object required them to relinquish control to the identity market’s plurality of brand meanings and meaning-makers. Ben the blogger described this disassociation as a coping strategy he learned over time in response to the identity market’s symbolic violence:

**Ben:** Anything you put online is going to be public fodder for the rest of your life.

**Interviewer:** Public fodder?

**Ben:** People can talk about it. Do anything about it. Twist it. Manipulate it. Whatever. They do. [...] It used to bother me. Now, I really don’t care. People can really think of me as whatever and I really won’t correct them. Like what I say, everyone… opinions are like butts, everyone has one and they’re entitled to it.

**Interviewer:** Can you be hurt?

**Ben:** I’m so desensitised with everything. I’m just so desensitised. I think a lot of bloggers who have been doing it for a while and treat it as a business would share the same view. It’s only words. Sure, it can be hurtful, but…. if someone attacks you over the internet, I just don’t take it seriously. [...] I don’t feel anything anymore. I’ve build up a certain tolerance or threshold.

To connect to their brands, participants’ identity transitions often entailed wearing specific clothing and undergoing styling processes (such as hair and make-up) to embody the aesthetic codes of their personal brand objects. These physical transitions were accompanied by a mental switch to a performative mode, which the personal branders variously described as a ‘mindset’, ‘energy’, and state of being ‘on’:

**Madeline:** When I’m doing readings, I’ll wear make-up and look a certain way and people recognise me. ‘Oh, you are Madeline!’ Whereas, if I’m at home, I don’t wear any make-up and I don’t even wear the same clothes. […] I put on the exterior that helps me cope with all this. And even with actors, there’s the ‘stage you’ and the ‘home you’. There has to be that separation. If there wasn’t, you wouldn’t last. [...] I have to wear that presence. If I go into that environment, my accent changes and I become very proper... very strong and assertive. That’s part of the brand when I’m doing that. The branding image type energy I have when I’m doing a reading.

**Kevin:** Every time I go out, I’m always so excited and high energy and I’m always ‘on’ in terms of the campaign. So every time I meet somebody, I always think of them as a potential voter, even if they don’t live anywhere near my constituency.

It is misleading to characterise participants’ identity compartmentalisation practices as rigid, absolute, and entirely within their control. Staying with the experiences of Madeline and
Kevin, both participants understood the need for separation from their brands to prevent burning out, but were aware that the performative demands of the identity market were not neatly bounded in time or space:

**Madeline:** I love it when I can slip into a crowd unidentified in my days off and just be me. Just not have to be Madeline, because sometimes that is a bit much, because it is what I am and it is what I do, but it is about boundaries. [...] I so enjoy sometimes just being invisible, because I’m so visible. I’m a private person when it gets down to it. There are times that I’d like to have the public and private very separate, but it doesn’t work out that way. [...] It’s not like just being the person who works at the bank. You can’t just switch off that easily. If you are at the chemist and one of your clients is there, it’s, ‘Oh, hi and I think I remember you’. [...] I don’t actually walk around my neighbourhood very much come to think of it, because, you know, ‘Hi Madeline’, ‘Hi Madeline’, ‘Hi Madeline’. So I won’t walk around my neighbourhood much. [...] But you feel like you switch on and you are under the microscope. I can feel like that, even on my days off if I am somewhere.

**Kevin:** I felt like I was losing my own self and my personality, because I was always on the campaign trail. Every time I went out, even with friends, everybody would want to know about the campaign and how it’s going, and wanted to talk politics when I just wanted to chill out and not talk about it. And I think the way that we were able to solve that was that in my own circle of friends, there’s an understanding that when we’re hanging out on the weekend, I’m no longer Kevin the candidate, I’m regular just plain old Kevin their friend. And I think that’s really helpful at this point in time because even after the campaign, win or lose, Kevin the person still has to be there.

**Interviewer:** What about your own social life? Has that been impacted upon?

**Kevin:** Well, when I’m out in public, I always feel that the political branding always comes out, so it depends where we are. If we’re somewhere out in public, out in the city, it’s a lot harder to maintain the private self. But if we’re in my own home or we’re in somebody’s house, that’s when we’re able to turn it off. But, now that I’m thinking about it, every time I go out, I’m always on and increasingly, especially as the election gets closer, my social life consists of always being out in the city, always campaigning. And the way that I balance that out is I usually invite friends along to the events.

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Kevin:** Yeah, so number one they are supporting me and number two we are having a good time at the same time, so it’s like we are combining two things, which is great.

Madeline and Kevin’s experiences highlight the complexity of personal branders’ identity compartmentalisation practices in the blurred public-private, social-commercial territory of the identity market. With limited ability to control their separation and connection at various times and in various spaces, each participant acted to navigate their brands to more sustainable positions. While Madeline restricted her public outings, Kevin created a shared understanding of his dual roles with friends which enabled him to simultaneously layer personal and professional performance modes at public events. Drawing these examples together, as contested commodities navigating the identity market, the boundaries and
transitions of the personal branders’ identity compartmentalisation practices were in flux. The context of personal branding supports that identity compartmentalisation can be incomplete, porous, and dynamic rather than being characterised by rigid and exclusive professional/private categories as previous literature examining identity management practices at work has described (Rozuel, 2011). These creative and pragmatic identity negotiation practices were not peripheral, but central to the personal branders’ navigation of the identity market. As such, the separation-connection dialectic structuring the practice of identity compartmentalisation needs to be sufficiently represented in conceptualisations of the marketing work of personal branding.

9.4 Discursive identity negotiation to find and sustain brand resonance

Examining the discursive dimension of personal branding practices is central to understanding how participants navigated the identity market and both found and sustained positions of brand resonance. Discursive practices are types of practices that reveal how “the world is meaningfully constructed in language” for a particular actor (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 254). Several studies support the importance of understanding the discourses that marketing practitioners produce about marketing work, with the ‘concepts of practice’ captured in their rhetoric not only representing their marketing work, but recursively shaping it through sense-making, legitimisation, and social learning and knowledge sharing (Ardley, 2006; Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Cronin, 2004; Hackley, 1999). Participants’ discursive personal branding practices were far more complex than simply embracing and adopting the marketing rhetoric advocated by the personal branding movement (e.g. uniformly referring to themselves as ‘brands’ and ‘products’ which they ‘marketed’ and ‘sold’). This finding is consistent with a stream of consumer culture research which has demonstrated the complex relationship between the semiotics of brands and marketing practices in consumer culture (Giesler, 2012; Holt, 2002; Thompson & Arsel, 2004; Thompson et al., 2006).

Adding to this literature, this current research uncovers three discursive practices that the personal branders used to negotiate their identities around negative, culturally-embedded meanings of personal brands and navigate both towards positions of brand resonance and away from paths to brand demise. The discursive practices pertained not only to participants’ internal sense-making and description of their lived experiences, but spanned the production of the discursive elements of their marketplace performances too. These identity negotiation practices included: (1) ‘discursive distancing’ from marketing rhetoric, which problematised
their identification with elements of the lexicon and/or reinforced its limited applicability to their identity projects and production; (2) ‘discursive reframing’ of marketing rhetoric through interpretations and linguistic devices such as metaphors, analogies, and metonyms to construct personal branding as a manifestation of cultural or professional logics layered with commercial/market concerns; and (3) ‘discursive appropriation’ of marketing rhetoric to acknowledge the applicability of the lexicon to their identity projects and production. Figure 9.2 illustrates how discursive personal branding practices were invoked to orient participants’ production of their brand towards resonant positions within the identity market.

Figure 9.2 Discursive identity negotiation practices to find and sustain brand resonance

Navigating away from burning out by signalling the boundaries and liminal production of the branded self.

Discursive practices: distancing and appropriation

Alienation from burning out: unsustainable accumulation of brand capital

Navigating away from fading out by supporting the legitimacy of personal branders’ presence in the identity market through representational arguments.

Discursive practices: reframing and appropriation

Alienation from selling out: excessive conversion to economic capital

Alienation from fading out: inadequate accumulation and/or conversion of brand capital

Navigating away from selling out by:
- reinforcing cultural and professional logics, tastes, and ethics informing personal brand production.

Discursive practices: distancing and reframing
- acknowledging commerciality of marketing work to consumers as ‘insiders’ co-authoring personal brand meanings.

Discursive practice: appropriation
The conceptualisation of discursive personal branding practices contained in Figure 9.2 is reminiscent of Fairclough’s (1995) notion of ‘discursive positioning’ whereby actors use rhetoric to strategically manoeuvre within a domain of social practice to represent their experiences against the constraints of the discourses available to them from their position. Bourdieu (1984, p. 366) acknowledges that cultural producers are often forced to invent “skilfully ambiguous discourses” to account for their nebulous experiences and shifting positions within fields. This discursive negotiation was particularly pronounced in the more ominous territories proximate to the experiences of selling out, burning out, and fading out, with the following sub-sections further elaborating on the discursive practices that participants employed to navigate these more difficult terrains.

9.4.1. Discursive practices to navigate away from burning out

To navigate away from burning out, participants engaged in discursive distancing and appropriation to signal their liminal identity transitions to/from performing their brand persona, especially when their mode of being was unclear in blurred social-commercial contexts. From the cultural anthropology literature, Viktor Turner’s (1969, 1974) classic works on liminality highlight that intrapersonal and interpersonal discursive signalling about an identity transition can personally and socially support an actor’s identity/role change. More recent research shows how workers employ such signalling to clarify identity misidentifications they experience between their personal and professional roles (Meister et al., 2017). This clarifying role in the contested spaces of the identity market surfaces in the following excerpt from Sue:

**Sue:** If I’m out with my close friends and I know I have to be the public me, I will say to everybody, I will say to my close friends, and they know now, I was honest about it. ‘Guys, I’m in work mode right now.’ And they will take a step back and recognise that I have work to do. And that, I can now, as long as they give me that respect, I can do both. I can do both very, very well. It’s just they have to understand that when I go into work mode, I change.

Across the participants, discursive signalling supported their identity compartmentalisation, enabling them to connect and separate from their brands, and hence, preserve their personhood and prevent burn out. As such, marketing rhetoric was bounded in application to participants’ branded selves, not universally applied in their lifeworld to understand their myriad roles, experiences, and relationships.
9.4.2. Discursive practices to navigate away from selling out

Participants used discursive practices to navigate away from selling out in two distinct ways. First, they used discursive distancing and reframing to resist excessive commodification by reinforcing the cultural and professional logics, tastes, and ethics informing the production of their personal brands. In this way, participants’ experiences affirm Radin’s (1996) conception that using marketing rhetoric to reframe an actor’s experiences and interactions constitutes a form of ‘metaphorical commodification’ – an experience and status they negotiated by rejecting, avoiding, or substituting marketing rhetoric with terms drawn from their discipline-specific lexicons. This discursive distancing and reframing was particularly pronounced for participants working in less commercial occupations and/or organisational fields with established regimes governing self-presentation. For example, Kevin maintained his personal integrity and brand authenticity as a politician by reframing concepts such as ‘selling’ and ‘product’ to fit in with occupational norms and avoid overt, explicit signalling of his commerciality:

**Interviewer:** Is one of the difficulties of door knocking that it can feel like selling?

**Kevin:** Yes, and to tell you the truth, I’m horrified of door knocking because most people associate it with you trying to sell them a product that they don’t need, so we call it ‘canvassing’. \[Laughs\]

**Interviewer:** Canvassing?

**Kevin:** We have our own political terms for it that sound better.

Participants’ problematised marketing rhetoric as a form of metaphoric commodification that potentially violated their personal integrity and/or brand authenticity. As such, this study supports that cultural producers such as personal branders were sensitive to the trouble that marketing and branding can cause within consumer culture, including that: (a) the authenticity of a brand with high cultural capital can be violated through the profanity of commercial mass-marketing (Holt, 1998); and (b) that actors with high cultural capital signal their taste and preserve their position within a field by expressing “detachment, disinterest, and indifference” to commercial activities and objects regarded as ‘common’ or ‘vulgar’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 34). This study supports that the personal branders working in cultural or less commercial occupations like Kevin tended to situate mass-marketing concepts and rhetoric in this problematic territory, and engaged in discursive reframing and distancing accordingly.
A second practice to orient away from selling out involved discursive appropriation to acknowledge the commerciality of marketing work to consumers as ‘insiders’ co-authoring personal brand meanings. This practice was discursively enacted in the marketplace performances and brand artefacts of personal branders with a stronger commercial orientation or working in more commercial occupations and organisational fields. For example, Wayne the media personality included visual and textual content on his website signalling the saleability of his event hosting/public speaking services. Reflecting on this content, Wayne explained:

**Wayne:** It is satire. What you are saying is, ‘I’m selling out’ or ‘Here’s the commercial aspect of it’, but I’m making a joke out of it I suppose… cutting to the nub of the fact that it is me that I’m selling effectively. So there’s an honesty in that, I suppose. […] It’s quite obvious that I’m saying there are sales. I’m not trying to hide behind anything. Of course it is me that you are effectively buying if you choose for me to come to an event or do something.

As Wayne’s example illustrates, discursive appropriation of marketing rhetoric to navigate away from selling out was often framed in irony, self-deprecation, and humour. These communicative approaches reinforced participants’ personal integrity and brand authenticity to consumers by honestly acknowledging participants’ backstage marketing work and the commerciality informing their personal brand production. This discursive appropriation evidences Holt’s (2002, 2004, 2006) propositions that cultural brands will evolve in postmodernity to more actively construct consumers as insiders, with the co-created, decentred, and distributed nature of marketing production working to support brand authenticity. Together, the two forms of distancing and reframing versus appropriating marketing rhetoric that were discussed in this sub-section support a more complex and dynamic conception of the discursive positioning practices used by personal branders as contested commodities who vigilantly managed the extent of their commodification in the identity market.

**9.4.3 Discursive practices to navigate away from fading out**

Discursive reframing and appropriation were used to navigate away from fading out by forming representational arguments to legitimise the personal branders’ presence in the identity market. Previous studies have shown how marketing practitioners use marketing rhetoric as a form of persuasion to add authority to their accounts of marketing work (Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Cronin, 2004; Hackley, 1999, 2001; Svensson, 2007). Compared to the marketers in these studies, the personal branders’ use of marketing rhetoric was less
assured and consistent across participants, and was complicated by the need to discursively navigate the cluster of negative meanings attached to personal branding. For example, in affirming the ethicality of his personal branding practices, Wayne discursively reframed the cultural trope of being a ‘shameless self-promoter’ to construct personal branding as a manifestation of self-belief and liberation from shame:

Wayne: I suppose you could turn it around and say I’m simply not ashamed of who I am and the way I act in circumstances. Shame itself is a loaded, pejorative term.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Wayne: It’s like a negative-negative, so shame-less [means] without shame. Shame, we don’t associate as a good emotion, so in some ways I suppose you are free of a bad emotion, so I suppose when you actually do deconstruct it, it’s not necessarily… Though the definition of the term that most people would have is negative, when you actually deconstruct it, it’s a blunted negative. You have to be a self-promoter. You have to believe in yourself. You have to have a strong ego.

To legitimise their presence in the identity market, participants also appropriated marketing rhetoric to problematise the existing replication of capital within the identity and labour markets related to their occupations. In this exchange, Jasmine, deconstructs the privilege and entitlement of other comedians who have criticised personal branding and distanced themselves from its marketing rhetoric:

Jasmine: I remember sitting around with some white, middle-class guys who have gone to private schools, right? They have a sense of entitlement. There is a thing about putting yourself out there. […] These guys are really narcissistic. They’re like, ‘I’m pretty fabulous. I don’t need to put myself out there. People will just call me because I’m so great.’ They will never go out of their way to promote themselves.

Interviewer: Behind that is what?

Jasmine: I’m certainly narcissistic, but very healthily, like I have a good, healthy dose of narcissism. But these guys, I think have narcissistic personality disorder. […] They’ll go, ‘Oh, you are promoting yourself’, ‘You’re up yourself’. No, no, no, no. This is just a business, but they don’t see it like that. […] They come from this ‘I’ve gone to the right university and I’ve met these people and I’ve read these books and I’ve had these beers and these people will just tap me on the shoulder and get me to do stuff because I’m me.’ And they are so appalled by this kind of thing, so threatened by it. […] If it was just about meeting guys in pubs, it was all fine, but now this has changed, they’re like, ‘Hmmm… don’t want to look like I’m trying too hard. I don’t do anything to create this. I am just so fabulous.’ I think it’s really prevalent amongst men aged probably 40 and up, maybe even 45 and up.

For Jasmine, personal branding offered a more egalitarian and meritocratic distribution of capital compared to the previous system of structuration based on unequal endowments of
habitus and capital based on gender, class, and ethnicity. Like Jasmine, each participant could articulate representational arguments to defend, justify, persuade, or advocate for their presence in the identity market, with these arguments reflecting the personal branders’ individual identity projects, life goals and themes, and their understanding of the power relations structuring their occupations and organisational fields. Whether reframing or appropriating marketing rhetoric, participants actively and creatively used discursive practices to form a schema of thoughts and feelings that sustained the production of their brands.

9.5 Market exchange practices to accumulate and convert brand capital: Selling, gifting, and sharing personal brands

To navigate through the contested territories of the identity market, particularly the social-commercial intersection relating to their commodification, the personal branders engaged in complex, varied, and dynamic market exchange practices. Compared to the personal branding movement’s more limited focus on the commercial aspects of selling personal brands, the consumer culture literature contains a series of sophisticated accounts of selling, gifting, and sharing practices which collectively advance a systems-based perspective on how market exchange modalities have the potential to create and destroy social, cultural, and economic capital for market actors (Belk, 2010; Giesler, 2006; Kozinets, 2002a; Marcoux, 2009). This systems-based perspective of market exchange modalities fits strongly with the personal branders’ experiences of selling, gifting, and sharing their brands to accumulate and convert brand capital while avoiding the paths to brand demise (selling out, burning out, and fading out).

Figure 9.3 illustrates the system of capital accumulation and conversion structuring personal branders’ market exchange practices, with this model delineating between more commercially motivated selling practices and more cultural and community motivated gifting and sharing practices. For these two major types of exchange modalities, a range of activities that the personal branders engaged in are listed, such as engaging in pro bono substantiative work as a form of sharing their brands versus hard selling their brands when pitching for work in a business meeting. Importantly, this system of capital creation was driven by multiple market exchange modalities, with: (a) each modality having the potential to gain or lose brand capital; and (b) gains or losses to a specific dimension of brand capital having a range of secondary impacts of varying valence on the other dimensions of brand capital. For
example, publicising a high appearance fee could reinforce a personal branders’ ‘premium’ high cultural capital position and generate visibility as a narrative that extends their audience. It also had the potential to signal an overly commercial motivation that invalidated brand authenticity and was tantamount to ‘selling out’.

Figure 9.3 Market exchange modalities and personal brand capital accumulation and conversion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Market exchange modalities: gifting and sharing personal brands</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition:</strong> marketplace performances and private interactions with other actors that are primarily motivated by cultural and communal reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activities:</strong> pro bono substantive work, endorsing/promoting charities and causes, volunteering, planned and spontaneous acts of giving brand artefacts/performances, personal disclosures in marketplace performances.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Market exchange modality: selling personal brands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition:</strong> marketplace performances and private interactions with other actors that are primarily motivated by commercial reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activities:</strong> hard/direct and soft/indirect selling of personal branders’ products and services in/through meetings, auditions, events, brand artefacts, other marketing communications, and marketplace performances.</td>
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**Key:**
- Brand capital gain
- Brand capital loss
To unpack this system of capital creation, an example from Jasmine the comedian highlights the personal branders’ awareness of the direct and indirect impacts that surrounded their market exchange practices. In this passage, Jasmine describes the action of giving fans a brand artefact of hers if she is approached in public:

**Jasmine:** I will meet people in public. They’ll say, ‘No offence, but you look like Jasmine’. And I’ll go, ‘No offence taken’ and I’ll give them one of my books and I know that that will go out. Those kind of stories will go out. ‘Oh, I met Jasmine. She gave me a book and she introduced me to her friends. I wonder what she’s really like?’

**Interviewer:** Is this a strategy?

**Jasmine:** I don’t do it consciously. I do it because that’s my natural reaction, but I know that it’s a positive thing to do.

Jasmine’s example reveals that acts of sharing and gifting had complex capital-creating potential across multiple dimensions of brand capital. In this exchange, she understood the impacts of gifting a brand artefact included affirming her cultural capital (brand meanings), increasing her social capital (narrative generation supporting brand visibility), and building her future economic capital (increasing the fan base who would commercially engage with her products and services).

Importantly, it is erroneous to assume that gifting and sharing always navigated participants away from selling out, and that selling necessarily oriented the personal branders away from burning out or fading out. Previous researchers have highlighted how commercial exchanges can offer consumers an escape from the reciprocal social obligations and status hierarchies attached to gifting (Belk, 2010; Marcoux, 2009). This research extends this finding to cultural producers such as personal branders too, with the transactional exchanges based on commercial selling providing clear and bounded roles that enabled participants to maintain their personal integrity and brand authenticity. For example, Suki the hostess recounted the experience of refusing a large gift from a new client because of the potential obligations and unclear expectations that accepting it entailed:

**Suki:** He [the new customer] was offering me, because it was my birthday, some shares. I was really excited, but it was $10,000. I thought, ‘I shouldn’t get it. I would feel guilty if something happens.’ So I decided not to take it.

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Suki:** Yes. I felt… guilty. Not guilty, scared. What’s going to happen? He could take
advantage of me. He would think, ‘Oh, I paid so much money.’ Maybe he can physically have a sexual relationship with me because I took the money? But he is not that kind of person, but maybe he is? Or maybe he may harass me? […] I was scared. I wanted the $10,000, but if I take it… no. But getting paid a few hundred dollars for serving him as a hostess? That’s okay.

Suki was aware of the dark side of the reciprocal nature of the gift economy, understanding that an excessive ‘gift’ given in a commercial context was layered with cultural meanings and relational expectations that could necessitate greater self-commodification that would violate her personal integrity. Ben offers a second example that problematises the gift economy, with his experience relating to organisations sending him unsolicited gifts to receive an endorsement or favourable content creation on his blog. Like Suki, Ben equated this gifting with being ‘bought’ or ‘selling out’:

**Ben:** I hate it when people give me gifts and then I’m expected to blog about it, because I can’t be bought that way. If people want to advertise they have to advertise on a banner ad. I can’t do one of those, ‘Oh, somebody gave me this free thing to try and then it’s really, really great’. I can’t do that shit. […] It’s like your integrity too, you know? I don’t want to be… I just can’t take free things. Some people are like that, I guess. For me, it’s not… I don’t want people to think the only reason why I’m blogging about some certain product is because I got it for free.

While Ben and Suki distinguished between commercial selling and gifting, underlying their rejection of certain gifting practices was an understanding that these gifts functioned as commodities or payments in-kind, with the gift economy obfuscating their navigation of the identity market’s social-commercial territory.

A further tension concerning participants’ acts of sharing and gifting their brands related to the need to carefully manage their charity/pro bono work to mitigate the threat of fading out (by accumulating social and cultural capital from this work), but not burning out through the unsustainable production of their brands or selling out by associating their brand with a charity/cause inconsistent with their brand meanings. The personal branders navigated this tension over time by becoming highly selective about only gifting and sharing their brands to charities and causes they were most passionate about and/or that were most clearly aligned with their brands. Engaging in selling practices with other charities and causes, such as negotiating an appearance or speaker’s fee for an event, assisted participants to navigate away from the pitfalls associated with excessively gifting and sharing their brands, as Jane the public intellectual explained in the following passage:
Jane: I have got to the point where I just think, like, ‘Okay, if it was about an issue that I really, really cared about, I would do it and I would probably do it for free. But unless it was something I really, really care about, you will have to pay me.’ Because partially that’s about saying… you can’t keep treating me like I’m just starting out as an academic. It’s just the same old stuff. You know, at some point, you have to go, ‘That’s just insulting’. You would not ask most people to do that and yet there’s a sense I think because of the areas we work in or because we’re feminists, that somehow it’s okay to ask me to work for absolutely nothing.

Evidently, the personal branders’ market exchange practices resist simplistic explanation or classification as merely ‘selling’ to monetise their brands and maximise their generation of economic capital, despite this representing the dominant framing of market exchange practices in the personal branding movement’s discourse. Instead, participants’ experiences support that a systems-based perspective is required to understand how the complex, plural, and dynamic market exchange modalities of personal branders are embedded in a system of capital accumulation and conversion within the field of the identity market.

9.6 Summary
The personal branding practices discussed in this chapter were enacted to navigate the personal branders through the contested spaces and persistent challenges of the identity market. Engaging in interdependent status games, identity compartmentalisation, discursive identity negotiation, and multiple market exchange modalities were practices that constituted key aspects of participants’ marketing work. These practices – which have remained absent from, or under-represented in, existing conceptualisations of personal branding – enabled the personal branders to find and sustain positions of brand resonance while orienting them away from the pitfalls of brand demise. Taken together, these practices support that the marketing work of personal branding was complex and dynamic in form, negotiated over time, and responsive to the broader structures of the identity market and the participants’ shifting positions within it. Becoming habituated to the identity market and accumulating brand capital were not singularly determined by a personal brander’s marketing skills, but their individual agency in combination with networks of actors and systems of capital creation/destruction within the field. By capturing the complexity of the personal branders’ everyday practice of marketing work, this chapter has advanced a more balanced and realistic conception of personal branding that accounts for the agency-structure forces that shaped the lived experience of the phenomenon.
In documenting the practices that constitute the marketing work of personal branding and identifying the challenges and contestations that personal branders confronted in the identity market, Chapters 7, 8, and 9 have addressed the first two research questions guiding this thesis’s inquiry. The next chapter of discussion will concentrate on the third and final research question of this thesis concerning how the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims reconcile with the lived experiences of personal branders. This more expansive discussion will synthesise the evidence presented across the three findings chapters preceding it to not only evaluate the veracity of the knowledge claims permeating the popular press literature, but suggest revisions to improve the current state of knowledge about personal branding.
Chapter 10
Discussion and conclusion

10.1 Introduction
This final chapter discusses the overall findings of this thesis. It begins by reconciling the knowledge claims of the personal branding movement with the personal branders’ lived experiences to evaluate the veracity of these claims and advance revised, evidence-based statements to address the identified discrepancies. Discussion then turns to more encompassing topics that synthesise the findings of this thesis relating to the role and function of personal brands in consumer culture and the importance of a humanistic understanding of the marketing work of personal branding. Following this discussion, this chapter summarises the theoretical contributions, managerial implications, limitations, and future research directions that stem from this current inquiry. Concluding thoughts on personal branders’ marketing work follow that draw this thesis to a close.

10.2 Reconciling the knowledge claims of the personal branding movement with personal branders’ lived experiences
Comparing the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims with participants’ lived experiences addresses the third and final research question guiding this thesis. To this end, Table 10.1 provides a detailed evaluation of each of the five major knowledge claims that were identified in Chapter 3’s critical review of the leading texts published in the popular press literature on personal branding in the past 20 years. The revised knowledge claims included in Table 10.1 were generated by synthesising the findings from Chapters 7, 8, and 9 on participants’ lived experiences of undertaking the marketing work of personal branding. A comparison of the personal branding movement’s ‘concepts of practice’ versus participants detailed accounts of their personal branding practices (based on their cumulative 145 years of experience in the identity market) revealed pervasive, significant discrepancies. Collectively, these discrepancies empirically support the concerns of researchers who had similarly reviewed the popular press literature and problematised the quality of its repetitious, non-empirical, and atheoretical advice (Davis, 2003; Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005; Wee & Brooks, 2010; Zarkada, 2012).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge claim from the personal branding movement</th>
<th>Evaluation of the knowledge claim</th>
<th>Revised knowledge claim based on personal branders’ experiences</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| (1) Personal branding is universal, natural, and inevitable. | Unsupported | Personal branding is a disruptive, status-altering technology requiring the production, performance, management, and promotion of a reified brand persona that forms para-social relationships with other actors. | - Personal branding is a disruptive technology to the replication of capital in the fields of the labour and identity markets. It can be proactively undertaken to pursue high visibility status and self-actualised work, or retroactively undertaken to manage high visibility status, but it is not a universal condition or inherent quality of a person/worker.  
- Established personal brands are the product of consistent and persistent marketing work that transcends normal 9-5 work and often involves extraordinary workloads.  
- The reification of personal brand objects creates asymmetric statuses and para-social consumer-brand relationships that are distinct from the natural qualities of human-to-human relationships.  
- Sustaining brand resonance is difficult and brand demise is an ever-present possibility. |
| (2) Personal branding is liberatory. | Partially supported | Personal branding is shaped by the dialectical experiences and outcomes of being liberated and subordinated, enabled and constrained, and self-actualised and alienated. | - Personal branding can liberate an actor from the alienating status of ordinary work in the labour market, enabling them to accumulate capital to elevate their status and pursue self-actualised work.  
- Personal branding subordinates an actor through symbolic domination and the possibilities of alienation from selling out, burning out, and fading out.  
- Personal brands are market-mediated identities constrained by the market’s demands and desires, the reductive space of a persona, and the performance possibilities available to an actor given their individual characteristics, occupational role, and organisational field. |
Table 10.1 Evaluation and revision of the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims based on personal branders’ experiences continued…

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Revised knowledge claim based on personal branders’ experiences</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
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</table>
| (3) Personal branding is an appropriable and transferable knowledge. | Mostly unsupported | Personal branding is predominantly informed by tacit knowledge acquired from social and experiential learning within the identity market, as well as broader life experiences and familial, organisational, and cultural learning. | • Most participants described the personal branding movement’s discourse as too commercial, prescriptive, and general to be a formative, relevant, or valued source of knowledge.  
• The minority of participants who engaged with the discourse found it disconnected from, and unrepresentative of, their personal branding practices, with the discourse’s limited utility related to its ability to stimulate reflexivity and self-awareness.  
• Knowledge transfers from celebrities and product marketing concepts were apparent, but were part of a larger system of knowledge and learning that equipped the personal branders with the habitus and capital to enact the marketing work of personal branding. |
| (4) Personal branding is structured and enacted by graduated branding processes and codified marketing plans. | Unsupported | Personal branding is structured by an entrepreneurial sensibility to identify, create, and respond to continuously evolving and largely unpredictable capital creating opportunities in the identity market. | • Personal branders’ marketing work was not structured by codified personal branding statements and marketing plans. While a minority of participants had created these textual documents, their static nature rendered them obsolete in the dynamic, unpredictable, and volatile territory of the identity market.  
• An entrepreneurial sensibility equipped participants with the ability to craft marketing strategy in-the-moment, which was essential to navigating the identity market’s intersections, playing status games with other actors, and continuously evolving their marketplace performances to culturally relevant, in-demand territories. |
Table 10.1 Evaluation and revision of the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims based on personal branders’ experiences continued…

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<thead>
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<th>Knowledge claim from the personal branding movement</th>
<th>Evaluation of the knowledge claim</th>
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</table>
| (5) Personal branding outcomes are determined by marketing skills, knowledge, and work. | Mostly unsupported | Personal branding outcomes are dynamic, idiosyncratic, unpredictable, and uncertain. Outcomes are determined by a personal branders’ marketing knowledge, skills, and work in combination with the field dynamics of the identity market. | • Personal branding was instrumentally framed as a ‘means to an end’ that allowed participants to pursue self-actualised work. As such, personal branding outcomes were idiosyncratic and reflected the broader life projects of the personal branders’ careers and life themes of creating legacies, pursuing passions, and responding to callings.  
• No clear or linear relationship was apparent between the extent of marketing work a personal brander engaged in and the brand visibility they achieved.  
• While significant episodes of capital accumulation were unplanned, unpredictable, and interdependent on other actors in the identity market, a key factor in their realisation was a participant’s entrepreneurial ability to sense, respond, and capitalise on an opportunity. |
In further analysing the nature of the discrepancies summarised in Table 10.1, it is apparent that the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims are fundamentally disconnected from the lived experiences of the participants in the study, who had established brands that spanned a diverse array of occupations, organisational fields, and levels of brand visibility. The discrepancies identified in Table 10.1 support that the popular press literature contained unrepresentative, inaccurate, and unbalanced knowledge claims that: (1) exaggerated the efficacy and outcomes of personal branding; (2) omitted or insufficiently described the challenges and dark side of personal branding; (3) inflated the limited role of formal learning, explicit knowledge, and codified marketing plans in personal branders’ knowledge sources, learning processes, and practice of marketing work; (4) incorrectly assumed that personal branders were defined by a state of universal, rather than contested and incomplete, commodification; and (5) disproportionately attributed success or failure to a personal brander’s individual agency rather than accounting for the combination of individual agency and structural forces in the identity market.

By tracking participants’ experiences in the identity market for a seven-year period and using Bourdieun field analysis to examine the broader socio-historic forces and power structures shaping their experiences, this thesis advances a more balanced and realistic conceptualisation of personal branding. The identity market was found to be a hostile, competitive, and highly contested space structured by six major intersections for the personal branders to navigate. Finding and sustaining a position of brand resonance within the identity market was further complicated by its opaque and changing rules, with the habitus that participants did accumulate often being destabilised by their shifting position within the market, the new performative territories they trialled, and the ever-changing population of other actors in the market to interact with. Personal brand capital was found to be inherently unstable, difficult to monetise, and marked by volatility. The marketing work to generate it was laborious and failure-prone, with the alienating possibilities of fading out, selling out, and burning out remaining as constant threats which damaged brand capital by violating a personal brander’s personal integrity and/or brand authenticity.

While personal branding elevated participants’ status and enabled them to pursue self-actualised work of their choice, it also alienated them from the ordinary world, resulting in loneliness and acts of symbolic violence directed towards them (such as enduring public attacks, criticisms, and invasions of privacy from other actors seeking to appropriate their
brand capital). In response, the personal branding practices that participants enacted were not based on codified marketing plans and personal brand positioning statements, but an entrepreneurial sensibility to identify, create, and respond to capital creating opportunities in the marketplace. These practices involved complex negotiations concerning the compartmentalisation and discursive representation of participants’ identities, their interactions with other actors in the identity market, and the mix of market exchange modalities they engaged in.

These nuanced findings are potentially less appealing to professional audiences compared to the personal branding movement’s overly-optimistic promises of fame and fortune, its aspirational statements of emancipation and self-discovery, and the hope and certainty it provides to devotees of its prescriptive advice. To explain the enduring appeal and commercial success of the personal branding movement, it is important to situate the phenomenon within the broader socio-historic structures it is located within. It is no coincidence that the popularisation of personal branding from the late 1990s parallels the neoliberal restructuration of labour markets, which has casualised, outsourced, contracted, and privatised jobs. Maintaining full-time employment in professional roles has become more volatile, difficult, and competitive (Harvey, 2005). In the 21st century, economic inequality between the remuneration of workers at the top and bottom of organisations has increased markedly (Piketty, 2013). Neoliberalism has also altered the nature of work, making it more predictable, controlled, standardised, quantified, and concerned with efficiency, or what the eminent sociologist, George Ritzer (2003) termed ‘McDonaldised’. At the same time, organisational cultures have emerged that encourage and reward individualism, impression management, and entrepreneurialism in workers (Du Gay, 1996). More broadly again, consumer culture has valorised marketing and entrenched materialism and conspicuous consumption – trends that have supported people constructing their identities as marketing objects and framing their everyday experiences in marketing rhetoric (Murphy, 2000). Within this environment and in response to these conditions, the appeal of the personal branding movement’s discourse is understandable, considerable, and unlikely to diminish in the short-term.

To the audience of everyday workers and potential personal branders, the personal branding movement does not set realistic expectations, provide reliable advice, nor contain empirically-supported processes and practices. Previous researchers have concluded that,
above all else, the popular press literature on personal branding is selling hope (Lair et al., 2005; Shepherd, 2005; Zarkada, 2012). In part, this study concurs, but also notes the role of persuasion in contributing to the commercial success of the personal branding movement. In short, proponents of personal branding have effectively marketed self-marketing and commodified self-commodification. Their discourse not only employs problem recognition techniques to align the movement to deep-seated anxieties that everyday people have about work, freedom, power, and success, but uses commonly applied rhetorical strategies to construct their texts as expert marketing knowledge. These strategies – which Hackley (2003) labelled ‘universalisation’ (personal branding is innate and practised by all), ‘instrumentalisation’ (personal branding is a powerful, appropriable knowledge that is necessary to acquire to be successful), and ‘normalisation’ (personal branding is an opportunity that responsible, successful people engage in) – combine to recursively reinforce personal branding as an intuitive, common-sense practice; an accessible, but expert knowledge; and a transformative pathway to elite status. Buoyed by its commercial success, the personal branding movement’s discourse is influential, voluminous, and ultimately difficult to counter with complex, nuanced knowledge claims. Recognising the enduring market demand for the personal branding movement’s products and services, this thesis offers the revised knowledge claims to practitioners and researchers alike with the intention that they may assist in evolving the advice and representation of personal branding to a more accurate, balanced, and evidence-based perspective.

10.3 The role and function of personal brands

Studies of brand history support that brands emerge over time and within cultures for social reasons, particularly in providing status and distinction to people (Eckhard & Bengtsson, 2010; Hirschman, 2010). These enduring functions of brands surface in the context of personal branding, with three underlying themes emerging about their specific role in postmodern consumer culture. These themes concern: the dramaturgical nature of performing a personal brand; the disruptive, entrepreneurial nature of personal brands as capital creating technologies; and the dark side of personal brands. In the following sub-sections, each of these themes will be discussed in turn.

10.3.1 Personal brands as masks, prosthetics, and liminal marketplace performances

The personal branders’ descriptions of being a brand and navigating the identity market had clear links to a range of dramaturgical metaphors and theory. At an overarching level, the
personal branders’ identity production and marketplace performances had strong fit with the
 dramaticurical framing of marketing advanced by Deighton (1992) in his classic article on the
 consumption of performance in consumer culture. For Deighton (1992), markets are
 theatrical stages on which marketers orchestrate performances based on desired meanings to
delight consumer audiences. The identity market was revealed to be a theatrical, cultural, and
performative space, but consistent with Geisler’s (2008, 2012) influential work, it was also
structured by conflict, contestations, and drama between actors.

In terms of specific personal branding practices, the identity compartmentalisation that the
personal branders engaged in had a striking resemblance to Goffman’s (1959)
conceptualisation of the ‘frontstage’ persona an actor performs in social roles versus the
‘backstage’ whole of their private self/elves. The careful management of participants’
marketplace performances was also reminiscent of Featherstone’s (1991) notion of the
‘performing self’, conceived as an outer-directed identity focused on image production and
impression management. To accumulate cultural brand capital, the personal branders
embodied brand meanings, created brand artefacts, and curated institutional endorsements
and associations. The complexity of this identity production suggests that participants were
equipped with high levels of brand literacy (Bengtsson & Firat, 2006), persistently
demonstrating their ability to understand, decode, appropriate, and interact with the system of
signs and signifiers circulating in consumer culture (Baudrillard, 1981; Elliott &

The episodic nature of the personal branders marketplace performances accords with
Turner’s (1974) concept of ‘liminality’, with participants’ identity transitions marked by acts
of separation and connection that layered and bounded their public and private identities.
Given the performative demands of the identity market, engaging in identity
compartmentalisation was a necessary practice that enabled, not constrained, participants to
produce an authentic brand persona while preserving their personal integrity. Like the
consumers pursuing multiple, diverse identity projects in Goulding et al.’s (2002) study, the
personal branders’ dual public and private identities resulted in the fragmentation, not
fracturing, of their identities. In short, the personal branders revealed that despite the level of
similarity or difference between their brand persona and their private selves, the liminal,
performative nature of personal branding did not alienate them from maintaining “a coherent
sense of self” (Thompson, 1997, p. 451).
Importantly, however, the participants understood that their production of images and narratives represented the exterior, skin, or veneer of their brands which needed to be continually reinforced by their substantive occupational work to sustain a position of brand resonance (Dion & Arnould, 2016; Dumont, 2017). This finding on the co-constitutive role of brand image and substance that structured participants’ locus of marketing work is likely to be specific to the form of personal branding this thesis examined (participants with established brands related to their occupations). Thus, while delimited to the particular type of personal branders examined, the findings on the locus of marketing work problematise the more critical literature suggesting that aesthetic forms of cultural production consistent with personal branding result in the fetishisation of image over substance (Boorstin, 1964; Debord, 1967/1977). More image-driven personal branders who are ‘famous for being famous’ (Gamson, 1994) warrant further attention from researchers to uncover the diversity of practices related to the various forms of personal branding that presently exist.

With specific regard to participants’ personal brands, Celia Lury’s (2009) work on the sociology of brands introduced the notion of ‘brands as assemblages’ which accords with the contested plurality of brand authors and brand meanings that the personal branders experienced in the identity market. Assemblage theory also frames branding as “a process of assembling culture” (Lury, 2009, p. 67), a conceptualisation that reflects the cultural logics, moral sensitivities, and social learning that informed participants’ marketing work. Lury’s earlier scholarship on ‘identities as prosthetics’ (see Lury, 1998) is also evocative in representing the subject-object hybridity of personal brands. As a prosthetic identity, personal brands were constructed as a possession: one that was both part of a personal brander and separate to them; an apparatus that was both worn and removed to support their functioning in the world. In the context of personal branding, this research reveals the capital-creating potential of identity prosthetics when commodified and marketised as a symbolic resource circulating in the identity market.

A second metaphor that captures the underlying role and function of personal brands can be found in Barbara Stern’s (1994, 2006) expansive scholarship on the semiotics of brands. In conceptualising the relationship between an inner entity and an outer persona, Stern (1994, 2006) advanced the metaphor of ‘brands as masks’, noting that this dramaturgical framing is consistent with the Latin origins of the term, ‘persona’. The metaphor of brands as masks is a powerful representation of the liminal, embodied, and performative nature of personal brands.
As masks, personal brands were embraced, connected to, and embodied, but also removed, separated, and distanced from. The constructed, aesthetic nature of a mask fits with a personal brand object’s reductive, partial, and refined expression and appropriation of human identity elements, and the sometimes exaggerated, amplified, aspirational presentation of that identity to create and manage meanings through performance.

Masks also shield an actor (Stern, 1994, 2006), with this function being imperative to the self-preservation of personal branders’ private selves, and in turn, the sustainable production of their brands in the identity market. The shielding function of personal brands is an important quality to observe as critics of personal branding have argued that the self-commodification it encourages leads to reification, commodity fetishism, and ultimately, the alienation of personal branders (Bauman, 2007; Davis, 2003; Hearn, 2008). While the findings of this research support that personal branding involved the reification of a personal brand object and the formation of para-social consumer-brand relationships, it did not necessarily result in the personal branders’ alienation. In this sense, the critical literature on personal branding appears to insufficiently account for the shielding function of a brand mask in preserving the inalienable territories of participants’ inner lives. That is, as contested commodities, personal brands involved both commodification and non-commodification (Radin, 1996), with personal branders enacting personal branding practices such as identity compartmentalisation, discursive identity negotiation, and mixed market exchange modalities to manage the extent of their self-commodification. It was the multi-functional nature of personal brands in combination with participants’ dynamic enactment of personal branding practices that enabled the personal branders to navigate to positions of resonance while avoiding the alienation that came from burning out, selling out, or fading out of the identity market.

In summary, the applicability of dramaturgical metaphors and theory to the phenomenon of personal branding evidences the thoroughly cultural nature of the personal branders’ marketing work. Personal branding is a form of person marketing that demanded creativity, drew heavily on cultural knowledge, and was marked by volatility as the personal branders navigated the identity market’s shifting currents among ever-changing constellations of actors vying for high visibility status on its crowded stages.
10.3.2 Personal brands as disruptive, entrepreneurial technologies of self

A second theme concerning the role and function of personal brands centers on their disruptive, capital creating potential, which was found to be contingent on personal branders’ entrepreneurial abilities. Similar to previous studies of marketing practitioners engaged in the cultural production of managing brands, the participants understood that their marketing work created cultural objects of cynosure (Diamond et al., 2009) and had a megaphone effect that amplified their voice and extended their audience reach (McQuarrie et al., 2013). Personal branding was a disruptive technology offering faster and greater capital creating opportunities to participants than the labour market’s more rigid hierarchical structures. From their early experiences and observations of ordinary work as employees in organisations, the personal branders rejected the labour market’s standard career progression trajectories. Understanding that labour markets were not shaped by meritocracy (such as a worker’s qualifications, capabilities, and experience), but the hegemonic interests of privileged actors and powerful organisations, the personal branders appropriated the dominant logic of marketing and branding that organisations had used to accumulate capital and applied it to their professional identities.

In a study of how politicians create and promote their public identities, Motion (1997) drew on Foucault’s work to conceptualise the participants’ commodification, positioning, and aestheticisation as ‘technologies of self’. For Foucault (1988, p. 18), technologies of self “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with help from others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” Across the diverse cases of personal branding examined in this research, this conceptualisation holds, with personal brands functioning as disruptive technologies of self that elevated the status of participants and enabled them to pursue meaningful, interesting, varied, and enjoyable work of their choice.

Realising the disruptive potential of personal brands was not dependent on adhering to the personal branding movement’s prescriptive processes, nor was it related to the codification of formal personal branding statements and explicit marketing plans. The creation of brand capital was not found to be in a direct or linear relationship with the extent of marketing work a personal brander engaged in, with this relationship obfuscated by the volatility and unpredictability of the identity market and the interdependent status games of other actors.
seeking to appropriate brand capital from a personal brander. Given these field dynamics, it was participants’ entrepreneurial abilities to respond in-the-moment to capital-creating opportunities that determined their success. These findings validate Bandinelli and Arvidsson’s (2013) propositions that entrepreneurialism is quintessential to the practice of personal branding, and that personal branding is an entrepreneurial response to the commodification of everything in consumer culture. Around the time that personal branding was popularised in the 1990s, researchers began observing the emergence of ‘enterprise culture’ (Du Gay, 1996) and ‘promotional culture’ (Wernick, 1991) in their studies of identities in the workplace and broader cultural conditions in postmodernity, respectively. These influential scholars highlighted the demand for people to be ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ in response to changing cultural values that favoured individualism, competitiveness, and winning (Wernick, 1991). In the workplace, the valorised entrepreneurial qualities of a worker that organisational cultures rewarded included “self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness and willingness to take risks” (Du Gay, 1996, p. 60). Considering these organisational and cultural trends, the appeal and utility of personal branding is apparent, particularly for ambitious actors who had strong entrepreneurial orientations and sought self-actualised work of their choice.

In summary, gaining high visibility status and achieving personal branding success were not predictable or assured as outcomes from engaging in the marketing work of personal branding. The personal branding movement’s discourse overstates the efficacy of personal branding while underrepresenting the intuitive, creative, risk-taking, entrepreneurialism it requires. The field-specific capital that personal branders drew upon to enact their marketing work was not democratically gifted to all people, nor was it an appropriable knowledge acquired from attending a personal branding workshop or purchasing a popular press book. The disruptive, entrepreneurial nature of personal brands ensured they were complex and difficult technologies of self which relied on an actor’s self-awareness, brand and cultural literacies, identity performance abilities, resilience, work ethic, commitment to ongoing learning, tolerance for risk-taking and game-playing, and capacity to understand the rules of the identity market. When a personal brander possessed these qualities, their brands functioned as capital-creating disruptors in the labour and identity markets, elevating their status from being ordinary workers to highly visible entities in their respective occupations and organisational fields.
10.3.3 The dark side of personal brands

A third theme pertaining to the role and function of personal brands relates to their dark side, which presented a series of challenges to the personal branders as they navigated the identity market. Within consumer culture, semiotic research has shown that brands are semantically loaded with a range of positive and negative meanings (Stern, 2006). As cultural icons and objects of cynosure, brands are not benign, neutral entities, but symbolic resources that have the potential to cause trouble in consumer culture through their perceived illegitimacy, inauthenticity, instrumentality, and contested meanings (Holt, 2002). Despite the cultural branding literature advancing a more balanced understanding of the sociology of brands, the valence of meanings about brands contained in the personal branding movement’s discourse was highly skewed to the positive, with personal brands conceived as aspirational, powerful, and signifiers of success. While this positive framing of brands was shared by some participants, it was coupled with the understanding that the semiotics of personal brands and branding also traversed negative territories. All participants could reproduce a range of negative, culturally-embedded meanings about these terms, which, through further analysis, were found to be clustered around moral concerns about excessive commodification, the inauthenticity of marketisation, the fetishisation of image over substance, and the shamelessness of self-promotion. To sustain a position of brand resonance, the personal branders needed to not only be aware of these negative meanings, but navigate around them discursively (through distancing, reframing, and appropriation) and through the modulation of their market exchange practices (selling versus gifting and sharing their brands). Ignoring the dark side of personal branding was not only morally hazardous for the personal branders, it jeopardised their brand legitimacy and authenticity in the identity market too.

By narrowly focusing on prescriptive processes and techniques to gain high visibility status, the personal branding movement has failed to adequately connect the high visibility status of an established personal brand with the experiential structures surrounding it. While the personal branding movement celebrates the accumulation of personal brand capital, it insufficiently represents the instability, unpredictability, and limited convertibility of that capital, and that other actors would aggressively seek to appropriate it through fabricated narratives, feigned associations, public attacks and criticisms, and violations of privacy. Similar to what has been described in the sociological and cultural studies literature on celebrities (Turner, 2004, 2006) and elites (Conti & O’Neil, 2007; Gilding, 2010; Nader, 1972), the gains to personal branders’ symbolic capital came at the cost of being alienated.
from their ordinary status in everyday life. That is, the symbolic capital of their brands created status asymmetries in their networks of personal relationships, which contributed to relationship strains and their feelings of loneliness and social isolation. These challenging experiences were central, not peripheral, to the lived experience of being a brand, and yet remain underrepresented in both the popular press and academic literature on personal branding. Underlying the revisions to the knowledge claims about personal branding that this thesis advances is the need to account for the dark side of the phenomenon. To do so, as Arvidsson (2005) supports, requires researchers to adopt a more critical perspective to understand both the light and dark contours of brands in consumer culture.

10.4 Humanising representations of the marketing work of personal branding

Underlying this thesis’ reformulation of foundational knowledge claims about personal branding is the more humanistic representation of marketing work it advances. From this practitioner-focused perspective, this study echoes the criticisms of researchers who have problematised the assumed conceptual equivalence of people and products which supports the personal branding movement’s transference of product marketing concepts to personal branding (Hearn, 2008; Lair et al., 2005; Parmentier et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2005; Zarkada, 2012). In particular, it builds on Parmentier et al. (2013)’s finding that extensive modifications are required to mainstream marketing theory to account for the domain of person marketing and the marketing category of personhood. In Parmentier et al.’s (2013)’s study, this entailed revising the concept of personal brand positioning, which was more accurately represented as the process of fitting into the expectations of an organisational field while standing out from competitors within that field, instead of establishing points of parity and points of differentiation based on product attributes. This thesis expands this reformulation, arguing that conceptualisations of personal branding need to be grounded in the lived experiences of personal branders and their descriptions of the experiential structures of being a brand. From this perspective, personal branding is framed as a means of pursuing self-actualising work and fulfilling broader life themes; personal brand positioning is a process of finding and sustaining brand resonance; and personal branding practices are activities enacted to navigate the identity market, accumulate brand capital, and avoid the alienating pitfalls of selling out, burning out, and fading out.

In pushing for greater acknowledgement of the human dimension of how marketing work is practiced, this research emphasises the embodied nature of personal branding. Participants’
bodies influenced the brand meanings and the brand artefacts they could authentically produce, and the aesthetic nature of their marketplace performances. Personal brands were not informed simply by commercial logic, but personal branders’ personal values, their awareness of occupational norms, and their understanding of cultural tropes, themes and events. In turn, the habitus that participants developed as they navigated the various intersections of the identity market was multi-dimensional in nature, affirming the literature highlighting the role of an actor’s emotional (Arsel & Bean, 2013) and moral (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013) habitus in generating capital in consumer culture.

The systems of knowledge and learning informing the personal branders’ marketing work were similarly complex, and constituted by tacit or implicit sources of knowledge, and personal, familial, professional, and cultural forms of learning. This fragmented body of knowledge and learning ensured that, consistent with previous studies of marketing practitioners, the personal branders’ practice of marketing work was often uncertain and ambiguous in nature, and characterised by creative interpretation and improvisation (Ardley, 2005; Browne et al., 2014; Brownlie, 1998; Hackley, 1999; Kaptan, 2013; Lien, 1997; Nyilasy et al., 2013). In summary, the complexity of personal branders’ orienting logics, lenses, and sources of knowledge and learning affirms the literature highlighting that the sentient, moral, emotional, and social nature of a human being necessarily complicates the self-marketing practices they enact (Bendisch et al., 2013; Hirschman, 1983; Tregear, 2003).

Evidently, representing the human dimension that permeates, constitutes, and informs the marketing work of personal branding is a powerful way to conceptualise the phenomenon and reshape knowledge claims about it from an empirical, practice-based perspective.

10.5 Theoretical contributions
The findings of this thesis offer several theoretical contributions which can be grouped into five main areas. First, the research provides an empirical, practice-based account of personal branding that conceptualises the field of the identity market, including the intersections structuring it, the dimensions of personal brand capital accumulated within it, the challenges that actors confronted throughout it, and the personal branding practice enacted to navigate it. Bourdieun field analysis provided a permeable framework to draw out this conceptualisation, accounting for both personal branders’ individual agency and the structural forces shaping their practices in the identity market. By capturing the experiences of personal branders with established brands spanning a diverse range of occupations, organisational fields, and levels
of brand visibility, this study contributes a robust and more holistic conceptualisation of personal branding that describes the lived experience of being a brand. In this way, it compliments existing studies of personal branding which have examined personal branding practices within single occupational contexts, such as fashion models (Parmentier & Fischer, 2011; Parmentier et al., 2013), fashion bloggers (Delisle & Parmentier, 2016; Erz & Christensen, 2018), politicians (Motion, 1999; Sanghvi & Hodges, 2015), entrepreneurs (Bandinelli & Arvidsson, 2013; Thompson-White et al., 2018), and academics (Close et al., 2011). The sample’s diversity and depth of experience coupled with the prolonged period of fieldwork undertaken ensured that both the light and dark contours of the phenomenon were captured, providing a sufficiently broad empirical base from which the veracity of the personal branding movement’s knowledge claims could be evaluated. With the personal branding movement’s discourse being legitimised through citation and replication within the academic literature, the revised knowledge claims serve as a more accurate and coherent knowledge base on which future academic and popular press literature can build upon.

Second, this thesis introduces Radin’s (1996) theory of ‘contested commodities’ and ‘incomplete commodification’ to the personal branding literature to conceptualise the marketing category of personal branders and the complex form of self-commodification their personal branding entailed. Radin’s (1996) theoretical work on contested commodities serves as a useful addition to the commodification theories widely cited in the existing marketing literature. It captures the subject-object hybridity that is central to Latour’s (1993) work, and the fluidity of an object’s movement through social-commercial spheres that is the hallmark of Kopytoff’s (1986) processual theory of commodification. When applied to the context of personal branding, Radin’s (1996) theory has particular utility in recognising the broader contestations surrounding these qualities of personal branders’ self-commodification, with forces of commodification and non-commodification structuring their status and movement along a continuum bounded by the poles of universal commodification and universal non-commodification. This complex and dynamic theory of commodification recognises the partial, shifting nature of personal branders’ commodification as they navigated the identity market, which in turn, problematises the epistemological assumption of universal commodification that underlies the personal branding movement’s discourse.

Radin’s (1996) work also serves as a foundational theory to support the conceptual underpinnings of person marketing, a vital domain of marketing practice that Kotler and Levy
– who are widely considered the academic pioneers of modern marketing thought – have persistently encouraged marketing researchers to examine (Kotler, 1972, 1975, 1987, 2005; Kotler & Levy, 1969; Levy, 2002). The notion of contested commodities and incomplete commodification also has potentially broader applications to other non-traditional marketing domains, such as health, education, politics, the arts, religion, and tourism. Like personal branders, the marketing categories within these domains are not pure commodities; and similar to the identity market, these fields are structured by contestations between social and commercial logics, rhetoric, and practices. As such, theories of contested and incomplete commodification offer a way to unpack the complex and contested marketing and branding practices being enacted in these growing areas of marketing practice.

A third contribution relates to the literature on marketing practitioners and their practice of marketing work, with this thesis adding the context of personal branding to this expanding body of research. While previous studies having examined practitioners such as advertising agency executives (Alvesson, 1994; Hackley & Kover, 2007; Kaptan, 2013; Nyilasy et al., 2013), copywriters (Kover, 1995; Kover & Goldberg, 1995), and corporate marketing managers (Ardley, 2005; Brownlie, 1998; Hackley, 1999; Lien, 1997; Patterson et al., 2012), this thesis adds the more novel practitioner group of personal branders. This thesis reveals that personal branders’ self-managed, self-enacted marketing and branding practices were, similar to the practitioners previously studied, informed by: social learning and tacit knowledge; embodied feelings, intuitions, impressions, and judgements; uncertainty and ambiguity; and creativity. Collectively, this body of research advances a more humanistic conception of marketing practitioners and their marketing work, with this theoretical perspective challenging the dominant representation of marketing work in mainstream marketing/branding texts, including its over-emphasis on graduated processes, formal and codified knowledge, and rationality (Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Hackley, 2001; Mason et al., 2015; Svensson, 2007). In this thesis, the utility of this sociological perspective on marketing work was evident in the significant discrepancies it identified between the personal branders’ actual practices and the personal branding movement’s socially constructed concepts of practice.

Fourth, the findings of this thesis contribute to several streams of research within the cultural branding literature relating to brand authenticity, the negative meanings of brands, and the concept of brand demise. Each of these contributions will be discussed in turn. Recognising
that existing research on brand authenticity has predominantly explored the concept from consumers’ perspectives (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010; Beverland et al., 2010), this thesis reveals how producers such as personal branders negotiate it. Importantly, brand authenticity and personal integrity were found to be dual requirements to find and sustain ‘brand resonance’, a new construct uncovered in this thesis which describes a position of sustainable capital accumulation that personal branders sought to navigate to in the identity market.

While personal brand authenticity has previously been found to require connection between a personal brander’s public and private selves (Moulard et al., 2015; Thompson-White et al., 2018), this thesis supports that a more complex dialectic of separation and connection better characterises personal branders’ identity compartmentalisation practices, which, in turn, sustain the production of brand authenticity.

With respect to the literature examining the negative meanings of brands (Arvidsson, 2005; Holt, 2002; Stern, 2006), this research comprehensively maps the range of negative meanings associated with personal branding. This thesis supports that personal branding was not a neutral concept within consumer culture, but loaded with negative, culturally-embedded meanings that were clustered around moral concerns about the instrumentality of commodification, the artificiality of marketisation, the superficiality of image production, and the shamelessness of self-promotion. The pivotal role of moral habitus in assisting an actor to navigate around negative meanings was found to apply not only to consumers attempting to manage their identities (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013), but cultural producers such as personal branders too.

Finally, brand demise has been conceptualised as a natural and inevitable development within the lifecycle of a brand (Ewing et al., 2009), with this thesis revealing three paths to personal brand demise from producers’ perspectives (including burning out, selling out, and fading out). This finding complements recent research which has revealed the active role that consumers can play in co-creating negative meanings to destroy a brand (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015) by revealing four practices that personal branders enacted to manage their brands, respond to attacks, and avoid brand damage and demise. These practices included engaging in identity compartmentalisation, interdependent status games, discursive identity negotiation, and mixed market exchange modalities of selling versus gifting and sharing their brands. Together, these findings support that a personal brander’s practice of marketing work
is dynamic, responsive to field dynamics, and has the potential to navigate an actor away from brand demise and towards a resonant position.

Fifth, this thesis joins Bourdieun scholars and consumer culture researchers in supporting a revisionist stance to Bourdieun theory concerning the ongoing acquisition of habitus and the dual role of habitus and strategy in orienting an actor’s practices. Scholars expert in interpreting Bourdieun theory have noted the evolution in Bourdieu’s thinking about habitus, with the concept represented in latter works as a less absolute and totalising disposition that is accompanied by consciously-enacted strategy (Gronow, 1997; Ignatow, 2009; Swartz, 1997). More recently, consumer culture researchers have further problematised the passive, subconscious process of acquiring habitus, establishing that: (a) habitus can be actively worked for well into adulthood, particularly in heterologous fields discordant with the high or low status position an actor was socialised in during their early, formative years (Üstüner & Holt, 2010); and (b) that strategy crafted in-the-moment is central to the interdependent status games that actors play in seeking to improve their position within a field (Üstüner & Thompson, 2012). This thesis supports and extends these revisions, revealing the multiple sources of knowledge and learning (including personal, familial, professional, and cultural) that personal branders used in their persistent attempts to understand the identity market’s rules and games. It further supports the essential role of strategy in combination with habitus to navigate heterologous fields such as the identity market, which are shaped by contestations, symbolic violence, and unstable compositions of capital. In summary, this thesis supports the value of Bourdieun field analysis to examine the phenomenon of personal branding, but qualifies this advocacy with the need to treat Bourdieu’s work as a dynamic theoretical perspective informed by a growing body of scholarship.

10.6 Managerial implications
As the personal branding movement has primarily targeted managerial audiences, the findings of this research have important implications for professionals, particularly those considering the relevance and utility of personal branding in their careers. If professionals are seeking to engage with the products and services offered by the personal branding movement – such as purchasing a popular press book, attending a personal branding workshop, or hiring a personal branding consultant – this research supports they do so cautiously and critically. A detailed review of the key popular press books on personal branding identified several concerns about the quality of their advice, which was found to be largely based on personal
anecdotes rather than evidence from practice, and exaggerated the effectiveness and outcomes of personal branding. At a minimum, this research supports that professionals approach the personal branding movement with an awareness of these quality issues.

For professionals considering establishing a personal brand, this research found that personal branding can be undertaken to either gain high visibility status in an occupation, industry, or the broader public domain, or to manage the high visibility status they have from an existing occupational role. Navigating the identity market will require a personal brander to manage the following six tensions:

1. Consistently performing a public brand persona they build around desired brand meanings, selected brand objects (e.g. clothing, styling, logo, name), and curated institutional affiliations (e.g. qualifications, endorsements) while preserving their private selves from the identity market;

2. Mixing commercial and social/community intentions and performances to legitimise the authenticity of their brand and avoid brand damage from accusations of selling out;

3. Simultaneously undertaking the marketing work of promoting and performing their brands while engaging in the substantive work related to their occupation to balance the production of both brand image and substance;

4. Maintaining control of the authorship of their brands while accepting a network of stakeholders in the identity market (other personal brands, organisations, the media, and consumers) will appropriate it and co-create meanings about it based on their own interests;

5. Managing their visibility (its presence and absence) across online and offline sites of identity production to support their desired brand meanings and protect their brand’s value;

6. Monitoring the perceived ethicality of their brands while remaining sensitive to the culturally-embedded negative brand meanings attached to personal branding, such as being a ‘shameless self-promoter’, ‘sellout’, and ‘attention seeker’.

If a professional can successfully establish their brand and navigate the identity market, this research supports the potential, but not necessarily guarantee, that personal branding can
increase their monetary income, grow their audience and visibility, and strengthen their public image around desired brand meanings.

For professionals who already have established personal brands, the accounts of personal branding captured in this thesis may provide a useful representation of their shared experiences which validate their own lived experiences of navigating the identity market. Many of the personal branding challenges identified in this study relate to deeply personal issues that have not previously been discussed as key aspects of the experience of being a brand. These challenges are: feeling illegitimate or like an outsider in the identity market and being unable to fully understand its rules; grappling with loneliness and relationship strains with partners, friends, and family from elite or high visibility status; experiencing burn out from the energy required to perform a brand persona and the relentlessness of the promotional work to maintain its visibility; withstanding the pressure to only give the market what it wants/knows by evolving and avoiding being pigeonholed; negotiating remuneration and monetising a brand without selling out; and enduring attacks, public criticism, and privacy violations.

For personal branders struggling to navigate these challenges, this study supports that an orienting framework guiding them to a sustainable position of production in the identity market is when their brand persona has integrity with their personal values and ethical frameworks and is perceived as authentic by the market. A personal brander may experience the alignment of these qualities as a conscious or subconscious series of thoughts, feelings or beliefs that their brand is working, connecting, or resonating in the identity market.

Finally, in terms of their personal branding practices to navigate to a resonant position, this thesis recommends that personal branders:

(1) clarify the boundaries of their public and private selves, maintaining a connection between the two when performing their brand and separating them when not, to remain in control of their brands while preserving zones of privacy that restore their humanity;

(2) continuously scan the identity market for opportunities to endorse, collaborate, or respond to the performances of other personal branders, media, organisations, and consumers when such interactions have the potential to strengthen their own desired brand meanings;
(3) produce images and narratives that recognise the disciplinary norms relating to their occupation/industry, that are consistent with their desired brand meanings, and that feel legitimate based on the relationships forged with consumers;

(4) modify the mix of selling versus gifting and sharing their brands they engage in to find a balance between earning an income, strengthening relationships and brand meanings, generating visibility, and gaining fulfilment from contributing to social causes.

The above recommendations are offered as general guidelines, not prescriptive advice. This is an important caveat for personal branders to observe as this research supports their practice of marketing work is unique and best guided by their accumulated experiences in their occupations and the identity market, their reflexive understanding of their public and private selves, and their emotions, morals, intuitions, and creativity.

10.7 Limitations
It is pertinent to acknowledge the limitations associated with this thesis’s methodology and findings. First, the generalisability of the findings is limited to the participants of this study. This thesis does not contend that the ten cases of personal branding examined represent the only occupations or organisational fields in which the phenomenon is present, nor that the sample is representative of the entire population of personal branders and their diverse personal branding practices. More generalisable findings are possible to generate with alternative research designs using quantitative approaches and larger samples of personal branders.

As a text-dependent methodology, phenomenology is restricted to what participants can consciously articulate in an interview setting (Goulding, 2005; Laverty, 2003). As such, the texts produced from the phenomenological and life story interviews are subject to participants’ memory biases (e.g. forgetting, reconstructing experiences), are potentially distorted by social desirability and impression management, and are likely to contain inconsistencies between participants’ described versus observed behaviour (Arnowld & Wallendorf, 1994; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Moustakas, 1994). While the researcher employed a range of techniques such as autodriving with documents and observations in the interviews to mitigate these textual limitations, this thesis’s inquiry is primarily based on ‘perspectives of action’ (participants explanations of their actions to the researcher), with participants’ verbal
reports regarded as “situated, particularistic, and motivated” (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994, p. 493).

While participants exhibited high levels of dialogic openness with the researcher, the representation of their experiences was constrained by the need to protect their commercial interests and the researcher’s need to preserve their anonymity. While the broader experience of being a brand was the focus of this research, aspects of the inquiry touched on commercially sensitive topics for participants (for example, monetary compensation and personal brand valuations). At times, this limited the detail of participants’ responses. The difficulty of navigating commercially sensitive topics with participants has been noted by other researchers (for example, Alvesson, 2003; Jehn & Jonsen, 2010). Given its peripheral contribution to the research questions and the researcher’s need to protect the commercial interests of participants, commercially sensitive details have been removed from this thesis. The highly visible nature of the sample and the volume of information published about them in the public domain also limited the use of documents and observations given the extent of identifying information contained in these data. The limited description of participants that was publishable prevented an in-depth analysis of individual differences within the sample, such as whether personal branding experiences varied by age, gender, social class, and culture. This thesis’s limited exploration of variance at this level was a necessary trade-off to gain access to the personal branders for whom privacy was a principal concern in participating in the research. Cotte and Kistruck (2006) highlight that confidentiality requirements can be restrictive in terms of the publishability of data about marketers given the traceability of their work and the organisations and customers they work for.

Another limitation of this thesis is that all the interviews were conducted by the male researcher, and as such, the potential for the researcher’s gender to have constrained data collection and the interpretation reached is acknowledged. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) note that the researcher-participant gender combination tends to impact data collection in terms of the relationships formed with participants, and contingent on these relationships, the types of information gathered from participants. More critical scholars have observed the tendency for Western male researchers to overlook the influence of gender and other power relationships in their interpretations (Thompson, Stern, & Arnould, 1998). Aware of these limitations, a bi-gender, multi-disciplinary interpretive group was used to sensitise the researcher to gender effects in the data and broaden the interpretation reached. The researcher also reflected on
power-relations with participants throughout the research encounter, with Chapter 6 presenting detailed reflections and methodological guidance for future researchers.

Finally, understanding that personal brands are co-created by multiple authors (personal branders, consumers, the media, other brands, and organisations), this thesis is limited to representing the perspective of personal branders. As such, it does not holistically capture the dynamics between brand authors. Accordingly, it recognises the potential for multi-vocal accounts of the phenomenon to more comprehensively account for how personal brands are systemically produced and consumed in consumer culture.

10.8 Future research directions

This thesis’s findings suggest several promising avenues for future research. To explore the boundary conditions of the conceptualisation of personal branding this thesis advances, additional studies could examine different populations of personal branders, such as those whose practice is based on being ‘famous for being famous’ or personal brands managed by teams/organisations. For these populations, key questions to explore include: (1) do they experience similar/different intersections and challenges within the identity market?; (2) does brand resonance continue to be structured by the dual requirements for personal integrity and brand authenticity?; and (3) is their marketing work constituted by similar/different personal branding practices? Research of this nature has the potential to develop a taxonomy of personal/human brand types to understand the diversity of form and function that exists in this area of person marketing.

By focusing on the missing voice of personal branders, this research captured the insider experience of what it means to be a brand, perform and manage a brand persona, and navigate the challenging terrain of the identity market. To complement this study, future research could be designed to holistically capture the multiple perspectives of the various brand authors of a personal brand (including personal branders, organisations, the media, consumers, and other human brands). This line of inquiry has the potential to examine the dynamics between the network of brand authors, providing insights at a systemic level on the production and consumption of contested, multiplex personal brand meanings in consumer culture.
Two of the experiential themes uncovered in this study relating to symbolic violence and interdependent status games also warrant further research. While gender differences were apparent in the quantity and quality of attacks that participants endured, a more granular focus is needed to critically understand female personal branders’ experiences and the deeper cultural drivers behind the pattern of symbolic violence directed towards them. More generally, comparative case studies could be used to examine the extent of gender impacts on personal brand positioning spaces, strategies, and practices across different occupational categories, organisation fields, and cultures. A related program of research relates to the concept of ‘brand resilience’ in tracking how personal branders do or do not recover from acts of symbolic violence and episodes of brand damage and demise. Longitudinal research designs are especially well-suited to exploring these questions. The interdependent status games that personal branders engage in also represents a novel and interesting topic for future researchers. Comprehensively mapping these strategic manoeuvres could further reveal how game-playing (and the game metaphor more broadly) are an essential component of the entrepreneurial marketing work that personal branding requires.

Finally, this thesis found that Radin’s (1996) concepts of ‘contested commodities’ and their ‘incomplete commodification’ were particularly useful as a foundational theory of commodification to understand the experiences of personal branders and account for their complex marketing and branding practices in the identity market. Beyond this study’s focus on personal branding, self-commodification, and the marketing category of personhood, it would be fruitful to examine the broader applicability of this commodification theory to other non-traditional marketing domains which involve complex, hybrid, social-commercial marketing categories (for example, health, education, the arts, religion, politics, and tourism). In each of these marketing domains, the potential exists to similarly challenge the epistemological assumption of universal commodification that pervades mainstream marketing theory. This research agenda offers promise in better accounting for the experiences of marketing practitioners and the contestations structuring their practice of marketing work in these fields.

10.9 Concluding thoughts

Personal branding represents a distinct form of relations between humans and brands that has evolved in the broader genealogy of human-brand relationships. From literal marks burnt into the flesh of livestock in the late Neolithic period, to dark chapters of branding slaves in
antiquity through to early modern times, to the emergence of national manufacturer brands following the Industrial Revolution, to the panoply of animate brand characters created by modernist systems of mass marketing, to the commodification and marketisation of celebrities in postmodern consumer culture, to the self-commodification and marketisation of professional selves that personal branding encourages, this genealogy has always involved shifting patterns of signification, capital, markets, commodification, power, identity, and social hierarchy. This expansive socio-historic perspective reveals that personal branding is not a fad, disjunction, or anomaly, but a series of practices that have manifested in response to macro-level trends concerning the commodification and marketisation of personhood and the anthropomorphication of brands. Situated at the nexus of these trends in postmodern consumer culture, the account of personal branding this thesis has advanced departs significantly from the dominant representations of the phenomenon that have not only been propagated by the personal branding movement, but replicated throughout the academic literature. The fundamentally revised knowledge claims this thesis advances speaks to the specious quality of these existing representations of personal branding and the persistence of theory-practice gaps about the phenomenon in the domain of person marketing.

The ten participants in this study provided rich, detailed descriptions of their experiences in the identity market that uncovered both the light and dark of personal branding. Their experiences support that – contrary to the popular press literature’s knowledge claims – personal branding is not a panacea for career success. It does not guarantee fame or fortune, nor is it an introspective process of discovering a personal brander’s authentic self. Most tellingly, the marketing work of personal branding is not enacted by prescriptive adherence to the personal branding movement’s graduated step-by-step processes and codified positioning statements and marketing plans.

While critical scholars have drawn on neo-Marxist critiques of self-commodification to lambast not only the personal branding movement, but the practice of personal branding in general, this research asserts that the lived experiences of personal branders demands a more complex conceptualisation of commodification. The personal branders were not cultural dupes, but entrepreneurial marketing practitioners who had appropriated marketing and branding logic from organisations and consumer culture to produce, promote, manage and perform their personal brand objects. This identity production disrupted the existing replication of capital in the labour and identity markets. Engaging in personal branding
reified their public brand persona and fetishised their para-social relationships with consumers, but the incomplete commodification their marketplace performances involved also masked and protected their private selves as an inalienable territory from the identity market. As such, the complex, dynamic, and contested form of self-commodification that person branding entailed did not necessarily result in the alienation of participants. Instead, as contested commodities or subject-object hybrids, the personal branders negotiated their commodification/non-commodification to avoid the alienation of their brand’s demise which they understood would diminish their power and return their status to that of an ordinary worker in the labour market.

In summary, personal branding was structured by dialectical forces, experiences, and outcomes. It enabled the personal branders to pursue meaningful, interesting, enjoyable work of their choice, but constrained them to the reductive position of their brand persona and the laboriousness of marketing work to sustain a resonant position. Circulating in the identity market’s turbulent, competitive terrain, their personal brands were objects of cynosure – both admired and celebrated, but also attacked and scandalised. Tracked over time, the personal brand capital that the participants accumulated was best characterised as unstable; while the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of this capital were interdependent, it was difficult to convert and risked participants’ damaging their brands through burning out, selling out, or fading out. Importantly, the accumulation of personal brand capital was non-linear and largely unpredictable, with the challenging task of navigating the identity market informed by experiential learning, tacit knowledge, and the personal branders’ entrepreneurial sensibilities as brand managers and performative, animate, sensate brand objects. The personal branders’ practice of marketing work was embodied, negotiated, contested, and embedded in personal, familial, professional, and cultural sources of knowledge and learning. Steeped in emotions, morality, intuition, and creativity, it is ultimately this humanistic account of the marketing work of personal branding that this thesis seeks to promulgate to improve the current state of knowledge about the phenomenon.
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