



Me, Myself and I. 3.0 – Exploring the avatar as person brand in Second Life

By

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ABSTRACT

Keywords: Avatar Branding, Person Branding, Avatar Person Brand, Online Person Branding, Dramaturgical Theory, Brand Identity, Brand Positioning, Brand Performance, Impression Management, Self-Presentation, Brand Image Assessment.

Person branding and personal branding are two terms generally used interchangeably by scholars when describing the same phenomenon. While these terms might also attest to the novel nature of the concept, for the purpose of this dissertation the concept of 'person branding' will be utilised.

Person branding in the business industry is still considered a relatively new phenomenon, with most of the content written about it heavily influenced by self-proclaimed experts and self-help book. The recent rise of the ever-evolving Web 3.0 and the collapse of complex systems has given individuals the accessibility and liberty to present themselves to a plethora of audiences. More importantly, this online empowerment has, as Tom Peters describes it, made everyone the CEO of their own, evermore obligatory company: "You". Whilst person branding literature on digital platforms is starting to grow amongst scholars, it is still greatly dominated by investigation on social media sites.

This study, therefore, aimed to explore branding in the context of the virtual social world, Second Life, and the role of the avatar as a person brand. Literature was reviewed on how person branding has evolved, including the motivations, person branding in the digital era, the process and practice of online person branding, self-presentation and impression management, and the overview of both virtual social worlds and the avatar. The research utilised an exploratory research design through the lens of the interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews were subsequently conducted with ten participants to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences and opinions regarding their avatars and the use of person branding practices.

A content analysis was applied, which incorporated a mixed method of deductive and inductive coding when analysing the rich data, allowing for themes and patterns to emerge. The findings from the research revealed a similar connection on how people

brand themselves, to the behaviour of avatars. The creation of an established identity and the projection of an image through positioning and brand image assessment practices emerged. The findings also highlighted the significance that role-play had in the branding process and the emphasis of Second Life as a suitable environment for person branding to occur.

The discoveries of this research contribute to the growing phenomenon of online person branding. However, it has also filled a gap in the literature that is centred around person branding of avatars and the virtual social world, Second Life. This research can also serve as a framework for people who are interested in successfully positioning their person brand in a virtual social world and provide insight to help marketing managers with the creation of virtual products that better help users define and manage their brands.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the dissertation submitted for the Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership degree to The Independent Institute of Education is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another university or higher education institution for a degree.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter focuses on a brief overview of the thesis and its intended purpose. It highlights the need for a person brand in an ever-growing digital space by outlining its inception, the importance behind it and ease of accessibility for an individual to create a person brand through evolving technologies. It also emphasises the importance of virtual worlds and the avatar as important prospects for person branding, as well as their key differences from other digital platforms. More so, this chapter looks at the person branding process and the similarity it shares with self-presentation. It furthermore points out three major challenges with current person branding literature and illustrates the research gap needed for investigation. Lastly, the chapter frames how an investigation of person branding in a virtual social world might contribute academically and commercially to the marketing industry.

*Since the onset of this study, it has become clear to the researcher that many scholars acknowledge that there are two main terms used to describe the same phenomenon, namely personal branding (Khedher, 2015; Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; Arruda, 2003; Shepherd, 2005; Gorbatov, Khapova & Lysova, 2018 and Rangarajan, Gelb, and Vandaveer 2017) and person branding (Parmentier, Frischer & Reuber, 2013; Cohen, 2014; Thomson, 2006 and Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019). Smith and Frischer (2020) are such scholars that use both terms mutually in their research, **however for the purpose of this thesis, the latter term, person branding, will be used.***

1.1 Person Branding in the Digital Era

In today's globalised modern era of the soon-to-be Web 3.0, the shift to person branding on a digital frontier is everything. With nearly 3.6 billion social network users in 2020 and with a predicted 3.78 billion users by 2021 (Clement, 2020), the digital world offers a gateway to a plethora of desired target audiences that are more readily accessible. Paired with this is a rising number of teenagers and young adults spending even more time engaged online and on social media, averaging close to nine hours a day (Willet, 2016). A 2020 "Global Digital Overview" report by *datareportal*, *Hootsuite* and *We Are Social* shows that the typical worldwide user is spending on average of six hours and 43 minutes online each day (Kemp, 2020). With such important

observations, it becomes increasingly hard to deny the overarching significance of the digital environment.

Furthermore, together with the rapid growth of the internet, has come the ability for anyone to instantly upload text, pictures, and videos to a site from a person computer or mobile phone without the knowledge of complex coding languages or other technicalities. This has inevitably made the web and social media the perfect platforms for person branding and self–presentation (Labrecque, Markos & Milne, 2011; Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, & Howe-Walsh, 2018). Dan Schwabel also supports this by pointing to online tools or applications, such as blogs, Twitter and Facebook as becoming effective channels for people to establish person brands in the Digital Age (2009). Johnson (2017) also notes that there are numerous tools available on social media to convey one’s brand, by providing people with the methods to share personal stories, photos, videos, or comments on others’ postings (Willet, 2016; Vanderford, 2017).

Person branding is nothing new in marketing and has during recent years become a crucial concept in management literature (Gorbatov, Khapova & Lysova, 2018). The term person brand was first coined by Tom Peters, who said “our most important job is to be head marketers for the brand called You” (Peters, 1997: 83). Peter’s famous statement infers that anyone is at some point, responsible for consciously managing themselves. The conscious effort of branding a human being is not a new idea. Kotler and Levy (1969) outlined how marketing efforts could be applied not only to products but also to services, persons, and ideas. However, since its conception person branding primarily remained in the domain of politicians and individuals such as celebrities, looking to advance their professional careers, given that the majority of person branding literature has collectively referred to the outcomes of person branding as either for the progression of professional careers, or the continuation of positive social regard (Peters, 1997; Smith, 2018; Arruda, 2013; Montoya, 2005).

Since then, the active positioning or presenting of one’s brand online has become more prominent with nearly every individual who engages in a digital space either creating or modelling their brand to a desired target audience. This is related to the rise of Web 3.0 and social media (Urbanová & Slind, 2016) which has drastically

contributed to the increased popularity of person branding (Khedher, 2015), making it more accessible to the greater public. In today's society, individuals continuously interact on digital spaces including social media because of the ability to immediately reach a broad range of audiences. This interaction occurs through personalised digital profiles where users practice person branding via the content that they create and publish (Urbanová & Slind, 2016) to others, making digital spaces a favourable person branding environment. An example is the professional crafting of "you" on LinkedIn to attract potential job employers or the construction of an idealistic presented self on Instagram or Facebook for positive instant social regard from others. In addition, there is a growing acknowledgement that if one does not manage and maintain their brand, then someone else will manage it for them: "If you don't brand yourself, others will" (Kaputa, 2003 cited in Shepherd, 2005). This emphasises the growing importance and need for managing person branding in a subjective capacity.

One digital platform, however, that is weak in person brand research is that of virtual social worlds. Driver and Driver (2009) define virtual social worlds as an amalgamation of immersive, simulated, and highly dynamic rich graphical 3D high-fidelity audio, motion, viewpoint, and interactivity (Girvan, 2018). Since its induction, virtual or online social worlds have been dismissed as environments purely for play; they have also gained legitimacy in commercial and educational settings (Schultze & Orlikowski, 2010) and according to scholars such as Stuart Barnes and Jan Mattsson (2011), are important channels not just for marketing, but also for brand building (including person branding).

Arguably the most successful and long-running virtual social world is Second Life. Two main things, however, separate and differentiate it from other social media platforms. Firstly, according to Smith and Fischer, (2020) individuals on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn have the capability and time to plan and craft communication presented to others. This view is supported in academic research by Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) who reported that their participants used Facebook to conscientiously manage their self-identities. Schau and Gilly (2003) found that their informants put a lot of thought into deciding what person content to disclose on their websites. Users in Second Life, although they can consciously plan their communication, are, however, more involved in quicker real-time simulation (Schultze

& Orlikowski, 2010) or instantaneous engagement between people either in text chat or via audio conversations.

Secondly, most social media platforms incorporate a variety of ways to communicate with others such as images, photos, videos, posts or messages or by tagging. Second Life differs in this aspect, in that it uses a 3D representative avatar as the medium of communication between others, as opposed to the individual in-person themselves. Hemp broadly defined an “avatar” as a “complex being created for the use in a shared virtual reality” or as a “visual representation of a user in an online community” (2006: 50). This is valid as avatars not only serve as the representation of “real-life” communicators (Schultze & Leahy, 2009), but moreover, serves as a direct reflection of a communicator’s personality. “Avatars are also recognised as body-representatives that exist in an imaginal space together with representatives of other individuals” (Stone, 1991, cited in Taylor, 2002: 50). Thus, these bodies themselves serve as mediators of engagement (Taylor, 2002) and contribute to the notion that real-time engagement is possible.

A significant aspect of online person brand development according to Labrecque et al. (2011) is to establish a brand identity and communicate it through brand positioning to a specific or desired target audience. Authors such as Rangarajan, Gelb, and Vandaveer (2017), Bence (2008) and Montoya (2002) also point to the most important thing to think of when you shape your brand is to define yourself, communicate it to others, and then maintain your brand. “Brand identity is how the marketer wants the brand to be perceived,” (Aaker, 1996: 44) or in the case of person branding how the individual as a brand would want themselves to be perceived. Brand positioning uses brand identity to distinguish the person from other people found within their target audience by emphasising a brand value statement or the unique aspects of the brand identity. The foundation for any person brand is therefore, found in the practice of positioning.

Marketing traditionally defines positioning as not what is done to a product, but what is done to the mind of the prospect. This implies that positioning is about moving the product in the mind of the prospect (Ries & Trout, 1982). More so, brand positioning is the active communication of one’s brand identity or unique value proposition to the

target audience (Aaker, 1996). Most authors who have explored online person branding such as Chen (2013) about YouTube, Brems, Temmerman, Graham, and Broersma (2016) about Twitter, Labrecque, Markos and Milne (2011) about Facebook, and Heikkurinen (2016) regarding Instagram, all denote that positioning a person brand is done through self-presentation methods or self-performances of uniqueness and personality. Erving Goffman's work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is regularly cited in person branding literature, as person brand positioning is argued to be carried out through self-presentation (Khedher, 2015).

Self-presentation is a method for a person to convey information to others (Goffman, 1959) and that becomes the outlook for a person to create and maintain their brand identity. Goffman likens people to theatre actors who base their roles on each life scene cycle through a series of appropriate props, backdrops, and wardrobes to a desired target audience, and who adjust to maintain a consistent identity (Goffman, 1959). Similarly, features on digital platforms such as photographs, person information, videos, person website design and layout choices, and posts such as comments are akin to the wardrobe and props of the theatrical metaphor. Ideally, the objective of each actor is to instill certain attitudes and behaviours in target audiences.

In a sense, the act of positioning or self-presenting a person brand, therefore, becomes the conscious effort to control, regulate and manipulate attitudes and behaviours to impose a favourable impression on a targeted audience (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011). Hence, the act or process of positioning becomes the task of maintaining favourable impressions, or impression management (Edmiston, 2016). Labrecque et al. (2011) additionally argue that for online person branding, brand positioning occurs through impression management. Shuker (2010) also proposes that person branding is an art involving impression management and strategic practices in variable degrees, for the purpose of projecting a desired impression (Agyemang & Williams, 2016).

Positioning a person brand online, therefore, follows a shared pattern of self-presentation through impression management on most digital platforms. The question now arises as to whether this process of positioning is true for virtual social worlds or is it different if accounting the nature of the avatar and the real-time dynamics of

engagement in virtual worlds. Khedher (2013) suggests a dramaturgical perspective as a theoretical framework on the practice of online person branding, which was built upon Goffman's work around the Presentation of Self and traditional marketing practice. The premise is that the online person branding process happens in three steps namely: (1) Brand Identity: to develop a character or role personality or style; (2) Brand Positioning: brand communication develops through a performance of scripting, appearance, display manners and verbal communication, and (3) Brand Assessment: interpretation and comparison of self-stated brand goals and others' feedback leading to success or failure (Khedher, 2013). A similar comparison can be drawn with Goffman, such as the actor, their performance, and the audience's response to the performance. Arruda (2003), comparably identified a three-part process to person branding namely that of extracting unique value, expressing this value with communication tools, and exuding or aligning it to the right environments. These authors and their theories will be used congruently and will form a conceptual framework for the investigation.

1.2 The Challenges

One of the most prominent challenges with person branding literature is that a large majority of it lacks academic inquiry. The existing literature is centered around self-help guides curated by self-confessed experts and consultants (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016; Shepherd, 2005; Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005; Chen, 2013). The problem with this is that the credibility of the information rests on intuition and unsubstantiated case studies. This is supported by Urbanová and Slind (2016) who underpin that most person branding literature stems from articles and books produced by self-acknowledged experts, and therefore the advice is often grounded on unsound experience (Shepherd, 2005). While interest in person branding is growing, particularly with academics (Barware & Meehan, 2010; Holt, 2016; Gensler, Völckner, Liu–Thompkins & Wiertz, 2013; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012) on digital platforms, the phenomenon is lacking in theoretical insight. A deeper investigation of person branding literature on digital platforms and furthermore, virtual social worlds is therefore needed to gather a better understanding of the phenomenon.

A second challenge lies therein that most literature in both social and gaming virtual

worlds focuses on the cyberpsychology of self and identity. This is reflective in studies done by Nagy and Koles (2014) who looked at virtual self-identities – real and extended, Vasalou and Joinson (2009) who focused on the self-presentation of avatar identity based on contrasting environments, and Mitra and Golz (2016) who investigated the intrinsic gender identity of avatars. This is also reinforced by Nolan (2015) who concludes that person branding has been primarily concerned with the sociological concept of self. Furthermore, most marketing literature in Second Life focuses on the branding of virtual products (Hemp, 2006) and not avatars, despite the argument of person branding advocates who argue the similarities of a person being branded, to that of products.

According to Arruda (2009) and Aaker (1996), the success of person branding lies in creating awareness of a brand through communication efforts. Therefore, brand communication must exist to ensure that the message is conveyed to the intended audience. The final challenge is that there is minimal literature written on the avatar as a communication tool in comparison to others, as the majority of person branding literature on digital platforms is dominated by communication tools such as videos (YouTube), stories, photos (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) and professional profiles (LinkedIn) or person websites (such as person blogs) and more so, the content users put on these channels. This emerged in research done by Chen (2013), Labrecque et al. (2011) and Brems et al. (2016) who found that users brand themselves employing the implicit or explicit communication of content such as posts and videos on platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.

1.3 The Missing Gap

Based on the minimal person branding literature focused on the avatar as a marketing communication concept and the immense amount of studies surrounding person branding on varying digital platforms besides virtual worlds, the purpose of this thesis is therefore, borne out of a gap in person branding literature in virtual social worlds. In particular, the aim is to investigate and further conceptualise the key factors on how a person positions their brand in Second Life by exploring what methods or processes they practice or use. This is motivated by the numerous studies that have focused on the importance of having a strong person brand and in most cases on social media

platforms, but which have mostly ignored the way of developing and understanding it in the virtual world (Shaker & Hafiz, 2014), particularly in Second Life.

It is also motivated by the understanding that virtual social worlds much like blogs and social networking sites (such as Facebook) are higher in self-presentation and self-disclosure concerning social presence as opposed to YouTube or virtual gaming worlds such as World of Warcraft (W.O.W) which are lower in self-presentation and self-disclosure with social presence (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social presence as defined by Gunawardena (1995), is the degree to which an audience perceive a person to being present, there, or real, in mediated communication. Moreover, Taylor (2002) attributes the concept of presence to the embodiment of social practice through digital bodies, for example, “to greet, to play or to signal feelings or emotions” (Taylor, 2002: 41) making the avatar a vital point in how users interact in a virtual environment and therefore, also how they feel they are present. These dynamics of social practice and the degree of self-representation in relation to social presence make both avatars and Second Life equally suitable and important concepts for person branding examination.

The objective of this research is therefore to obtain a better understanding of the importance and dynamics of person branding in a virtual social world and the role of a mediated representative or communicator (the avatar) in positioning a person brand in the digital space of Second Life. The main research statement of inquiry was therefore:

To explore the avatar as a person brand in Second Life.

The research objectives were the following:

1. To contribute to the understanding of the online person brand concept.
2. To gain a deeper understanding of online person brand positioning practices.
3. To explore the role and relationship avatars play in positioning an individual's brand in Second Life.

1.4 The Two Viewpoints of Contribution

The contribution of this thesis is twofold. Firstly, this thesis seeks to provide a theoretical contribution in terms of filling gaps within the existing literature on person branding in virtual (social) worlds and particularly in Second Life. Secondly, the thesis intends to provide a practical contribution in terms of factors of person branding in virtual social worlds via the avatar in Second Life. These two contributions are further contextualised and discussed in the following section.

1.4.1 The Academic Viewpoint

The theoretical aim of this thesis is to contribute to the literature on person branding and, in particular, the phenomenon of person branding in virtual social worlds. Research on this topic is highly relevant given the digital era in which we live, where both virtual gaming and virtual social worlds are becoming increasingly more popular, especially with the development of Second Life's predecessor SANSAR (Figures 1.1 and 1.2) and VRCHAT (Figure 1.3). However, as previously discussed, most of the existing academic literature related to online person branding is focused on the cyber psychological aspect of avatar identity and explicitly explores the method and practice of person branding via the use of various communication tools and content, unrelated to the avatar. Thus, an in-depth investigation of the avatar and practice of person branding in the virtual social space seems to be long overdue. By exploring avatars, this thesis aims at providing insights that will contribute to enhancing the knowledge and understanding of the avatar as phenomenon from a marketing perspective.



Figure 1: Sansar Avatar Creator (Linden Lab, 2019)



Figure 2: Sansar in world (Linden Lab, 2019)



Figure 3: A bar in VRChat (VRChat, 2017)

1.4.2 The Business Viewpoint

The practical and commercial contributions of this thesis can be divided into two paths. Firstly, it aims to provide branding and marketing practitioners and academics of person branding with a guideline that can serve as direction when engaging in person branding in virtual social worlds, as well as potentially assisting with the curation of commercial virtual products for avatars. Because person branding on digital platforms including virtual social worlds is becoming increasingly popular worldwide, a contribution of this kind is relevant.

Secondly, this thesis aims at potentially providing marketing managers with insight into personally branded individuals who hypothetically could become virtual avatar influencers as some avatars might have greater influence and impressions with other avatars in more recent and upcoming virtual worlds.

Summary of Chapter

This chapter looked at the rapid migration towards digital platforms and the increasing accessibility and ease of use for individuals to establish person brands on them. It also highlighted the importance and automatic practice of online person branding when an individual enters the online space. It further illustrated the key differences between virtual worlds and social media, namely, instantaneous interaction and the use of the avatar. The person branding process of brand identity, brand positioning through self-presentation (impression management) and brand assessment were also introduced. Additionally, this chapter, identified the three main challenges concerning online person branding, which are the lack of academic inquiry surrounding person branding, prior research in virtual worlds been focused on aspects of cyberpsychology and the influx of research of online person branding that are primarily conducted on social media platforms. This chapter also mentioned the commercial and academic contributions this thesis will potentially provide, such as, insight into a new phenomenon for market viability and expansion of knowledge.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 2 discusses the nature and occurrence of online person branding by interrogating the concept of person branding, including its origin and how the primary objectives of person branding have evolved. This chapter also solidifies the modern concept of person branding and sets out to explore the shifting importance of managing branding from a human perspective and the impact digital platforms have had on the development and processes of person branding, including accessibility and how we communicate. The section also highlights the foundation of the person branding process, namely brand identity creation, brand positioning, and brand image assessment. It also illustrates the relationships between impression management, self-presentation and positioning using online content and seeks to explain the implications of person branding in the context of a virtual world and more so, with the avatar, including the motivation and justification of both. It lastly proposes a conceptual framework on how person branding might occur in virtual worlds.

2.1 From (Branding) Cattle to People

To understand person branding, the origin and purpose of human brands and branding must be first discussed. According to de Chernatony and McDonald (2003) Berthon, Pitt, Chakrabarti, Berthon and Simon (2011), the primary purpose of branding was a form of organised farming by Norse cattle farmers, who would burn a mark or symbol into the hides of livestock as a method to identify and distinguish their animals from others. Furthermore, it can be argued that the idea of branding can be traced even further back to ancient Mediterranean civilisations where tradesmen used symbols and signs to visually convey what products they had to trade (de Chernatony & Riley 1998; de Chernatony & McDonald 2003; Roper & Fill 2012).

Urbanová and Slind (2016) conclude that these two points of inclusion lead to two main ideas. Firstly, brands function as a unique factor for differentiation (in most modern cases against competitors) and secondly, brands can be used to communicate a message to a (target) audience (Kapferer, 2012). Morgan highlights this, arguing that it is the acquisition and dissemination of communicated information and visual images that allows the differentiation of commodities to others (2009). Brands in this

sense, serve the purpose of identification of products by communicating their differences in comparison to their relative competitors. Brands are ideally the image that a person will create in their mind (Aaker, 1996).

Although most branding writings and popular theories are focused on branded commodities, there is a growing basis of acknowledged literature that has allowed for the extension and inclusion of people into the realm of branding logic and has therefore extended the borders of branding past simply products and services (Arvidsson & Bandinell, 2013; de Chernatony & McDonald, 2003). The idea that a person much like a product can be marketed, and subsequently be a brand, was first established by Kotler and Levy (1969) who discuss how the concept of marketing can be expanded from the selling of products to the marketing of other entities such as services, ideas, and people. Rangarajan et al. (2017) support this by arguing that the methods of marketing people are reflective to that of products and organisations. The marketing of people according to Kotler and Levy is an “endemic human activity, [whether this involves] the employee trying to impress his boss to the statesman trying to win the support of the public” (1969: 12).

Kotler and Levy conclude with two points. Firstly, that a product is multifaceted and can fall under many forms, and secondly, that the same principles used for the promotion and selling of products can be applied to humans. Khedher (2015) and other scholars reinforce this by arguing that traditionally, brands have been associated with businesses, products, organisations, or services, but today researchers recognise that brands can also be human (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Parmentier & Frischer, 2013; Thomson, 2006; Smith & Frischer, 2020). It emphasises that like brands, humans can have associations and features and also be strategically managed (Khedher, 2015; Cohen, 2014). This can include personality attributes such as sophistication, ruggedness, or excitement (Aaker, 1996).

The concept of person branding as a commercial entity was first introduced and popularised in 1997 by Tom Peters’s Fast Company in his article, “The Brand Called You”. Here, Peters credits person branding to individuals being CEOs of our own companies, and in business today, “our most important job is to be head marketers for the brand called You” (Peters, 1997: 83). Theoretically, person branding derives from

Aaker's brand identity model (1996), by which the brand-as-person perspective suggests that a brand is like a person who owns their self-identity, including having a unique personality. Arruda (2003) further claims that the person branding process mirrors the product or corporate branding process. Additionally, Thomson (2006) contributed to the thought around commercialised human brands when investigating a consumer's attachment and investment into celebrities. This was also discovered by Eagar and Dann (2016) who support the self-human brand by suggesting the concept of a consumerist by which we view human brands from the position of consumers (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019).

An overwhelming amount of contemporary literature on person branding subscribes to the latter two approaches, which are evident in most self-proclaimed experts who have approached person branding from a marketing perspective by employing traditional promotion practices to people (Urbanová & Slind, 2016). The argument, therefore, is that the idea of a person being a brand is apparent. The practice, however, of it is still considered to be in the domain of specialists in the job market even though the foundation of person branding lies in the hands of the individual who has the ability to market themselves (Shepherd, 2005).

A more relatable concept of person branding according to Shepherd (2005) comes from Kotler and Levy's concept of self-marketing or person marketing. However, it slightly diverges from the traditional self-marketing concepts and highlights the need for being differentiated. Schawbel (2009), Kaputa (2005), and Shepherd (2005) describe person branding as the process of how individuals' market themselves to others. This is like product branding in that person branding involves the identification and promotion of an individual's strengths and distinctiveness to a target audience. Gorbатов, Khapova and Lysova EI (2018) provide a broader understanding of person branding as being an intentional process that involves creating, positioning, and maintaining a distinctive set of individual characteristics that indicates a clear promise to the desired target audience. The concept of person branding is, therefore, more defined as a form of active participation as opposed to a concrete idea (Gujarathi & Kulkarni, 2018).

In conjunction with defining person branding, the motivation behind person branding

practice is important in identifying a more holistic understanding. According to Gorbatov et al., there are two broad groups of drivers (2018) – mainly role- or industry-related, and individual drivers. Authors such as Johnson (2017) and Manai and Holmlund (2015) indicate that specific jobs and industries in today's professional world require an individual to engage in person branding to promote themselves, while others such as Zinko and Rubin (2015) note that people are motivated to have a positive person reputation consisting of the need for self-esteem (Pounders, Kowalczyk, & Stowers, 2016), the need to fit in, and a desire for incentives, such as attention (Smith & Fischer, 2020).

To establish a working definition for this thesis, the definitions offered by Gorbatov et al. (2018), Rampersad (2008), and Khedher (2015) are drawn from- and together refer to person branding as the conscious efforts made by individuals to create awareness and visibility of their persona among a target audience, which enables them to stand out from the crowd and gain person or professional success.

2.2 The Digitisation of Interaction and Person Brands

The personal development industry has grown globally and encourages individuals to market and brand themselves (Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018). As mentioned earlier, this industry is based on the obvious logic of applying the same marketing and branding principles originally developed for products and corporations, to individuals (Schwabel, 2009; Shepherd, 2005). Initially, person branding was predominantly employed as a strategy for leaders in businesses, politicians, and celebrities in the entertainment and sporting industries (Agyemang & Williams, 2016; Rein, Kotler, & Shields 2006), however, since the introduction of online tools it has become an equally important marketing task for not just consumers, but individuals too (Shepherd, 2005; Smith, 2018). Labrecque et al. (2011) highlight this further by pointing to the collapse of technological barricades and the ubiquitous accessibility of the Web as a catalyst for online sites as the perfect platform for person branding. This ease of accessibility to technology, especially Web 3.0 tools such as social media platforms, has been a quintessential driver for people engaging in digital person branding (Harris and Rae, 2011; Johnson, 2019; Holton & Molyneux, 2017).

Chen (2013) further points out that the technological advancement of the last decade has enabled the growth of the internet into the Web 3.0 era and the future Web 4.0 era where online sites have developed and flourished. The media landscape has also in recent years seen dramatic change, which has given rise to new online platforms that alter the ways in which people connect with one another. Social media and more so digital platforms are such tools that have enabled people to interact more virtually (Urbanová & Slind, 2016). This is supported by the fact that there is a rapid growth of internet users who are actively engaging and communicating on social media (Lenhart, 2015;); inevitably, influencing and shaping how people communicate in general (Urstadt, 2008; Hennig-Thurau, Malhotra, Frieger, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy, & Skiera, 2010).

Based on the ability to communicate with each other through sophisticated digital platforms turns the internet into not only an asset for marketers, but also a setting for consumers in which to communicate (Abdul-Ghani, Hyde & Marshall, 2019; Fournier & Avery, 2011). Furthermore, digital users are less restricted online and can communicate freely and immediately without boundaries and have the environment to create relationships (Abdul-Ghani et al., 2019; Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012). Henceforth, the internet bears a clear social aspect, as individuals can both interact and form relationships at liberty. This change in communication has also disrupted how people share information and has given rise to a whole new practice of consumer-to-consumer information (Holten & Molyneux, 2017; Abdul-Ghani et al., 2019; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). With platforms like social media, therefore, consumers can share and obtain information between- and from one another, more effectively and efficiently. Fullwood calls this the ushering in an era of “participation, egalitarianism and empowerment” (2019: 36).

The shifts in the way people communicate and interact ultimately supports the idea that online tools such as blogs or personal websites, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, serve as efficient channels for establishing person brands to others or an audience (Schawbel, 2009). This is supported by Pera, Viglia and Furlan (2016: 45) who state that “online tools have allowed personal reputation to become an important marketing task for everyday people” and by Harris and Rae (2011), Holten and Molyneux (2017) who note that the ease of access to online tools acts as a key driver for person

branding and more crucially, managing one's reputation. Conversely, while technology facilitates person branding, it also makes it harder for an individual to differentiate themselves in a "hyper-saturated and hyper-fluxed media environment" (Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017: 65).

Considering the difficulty to separate an individual from others in an overcrowded media space, digital platforms also counteract this by enabling individuals the ability to create person profiles on various sites, and more evidently so on social media sites, whereby they construct and portray themselves to a myriad of audiences (Labrecque et al., 2011; Liu & Suh; 2017; Holt, 2016). Labrecque et al. (2011) further highlight this action as a way for individuals to build a person brand identity (Vanderford, 2017; Johnson, 2019). They further suggest that "in an online context, personal brand identity relies on self-presentation, as identities are created in computer-mediated environments using social networking profiles, blogs and person web pages" (Labrecque et al., 2011: 44). In other words, it can be argued that online platforms make person branding both more efficient, and less complicated than physical methods, and therefore more important to investigate.

Although digital spaces afford an individual accessibility to easier person branding, once they enter this environment, they automatically become obligated to manage and position their brand. This is surrounded by the idea that if a person does not (continually) manage their brand, the responsibility is given to someone else and it is almost likely that their brand description will not be what they intended (Kaputa, 2005). This suggests that person branding is more than a profile; it is about how an individual manages their person brand strategically, consistently and effectively (Rangarajan et al., 2017; Rampersad, 2008). Consequently, the responsibility to position the person brand becomes apparent.

2.3 The Trinity: Identity, Positioning and Image

Most scholars in branding have understood and determined that physical and online person brands are constructed through a process of three main parts, namely brand identity, brand positioning, and brand image (Rangarajan et al., 2017, Johnson, 2019; Kheder, 2015; Labrecque et al. 2011). Brand identity refers to what the brand stands

for, and what it delivers, commonly explained as the brand's promise, values, and personality (Manai & Holmlund, 2015; Kapferer, 2012). Aaker (1996) emphasises that brand identity is how the marketer wants the brand to be perceived, while Baker (2001) argues that within the digital world, an essential part in establishing a brand identity is discovering what makes you unique and what you believe in. Person brand identity is subsequently based on the intrinsic internal characteristics of a branded person (Kucharska & Confente, 2017; Rangarajan et al., 2017; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2017; Brooks & Anumudu, 2016). This is supported by Rein et al. who define person branding as an inside-out process where individuals look within for strengths and uniqueness in relation to a target market (2005). Practitioners therefore use brand identity as a starting point in differentiating one person from another by assessing what internal unique points are specific to them.

It is generally agreed that once an identity is established, it must be positioned. Ries and Trout define positioning as not what is done to a product, but what is done to the mind of the prospect (1982). That is, positioning involves the movement of a product in the mind of the prospect. This illustrates the importance of positioning as being in creating ways that mentally move your brand within the consumer's mind. Ries and Trout refer to this effort as a "manipulation of the mind-set" (1982: 2–5). Brand positioning according to Keller (2012) refers to the active differentiation of value or uniqueness of the brand regarding its competitors. This is emphasised by Khedher (2015) who attributes brand positioning to the promotion of self through an active marketing communication attempt of one's brand identity to a precise target market.

Labrecque et al. (2011) state that person branding is a process of establishing a brand identity and communicating that through brand positioning to a specific- or desired target audience. Therefore, the role of brand positioning is to communicate a certain aspect of one's identity at a specific given time to a determined market segment within the area of competition (Kapferer, 2012). Hence, the act of positioning concerns the communication aspect of the person branding process. This involves a person communicating controlled characteristics of identity to a targeted audience (Rangarajan et al., 2017; Marwick, 2014; Parmentier et al., 2013) at any given time, allowing them the liberty to choose what to communicate depending on the audience type or how they want the audience to mentally position them.

Brand image follows after positioning and focuses on a brand's perception to its consumers (Aaker, 1996). This includes what a consumer thinks and feels about a brand (Roy & Banarjee, 2007), and the mental images consumers construct about a brand's distinct attributes against its competitors (Lee, Lee & Wu, 2011). Regarding person branding, theories offered by Keller (1993) and Aaker (1996) highlight a human brand image as a part of the process, which refers to the external perceptions or perspectives of an individual; in other words, how others think of them as a person. Thus, a person brand is furthermore created around the feedback of a branded individual's personality and talents, and to a greater extent on public perception such as the case with celebrities and politicians (Agyemang & Williams, 2016; Rampersad, 2008; Gandini, 2016; Montoya, 2005; Shepherd, 2005). Consequently, it can be said that person branding does not only consist of creating a brand identity and communicating identity through positioning, but also includes a person's reputation or brand image (Parmentier et al., 2013; Grzesiak, 2018).

Person branding is therefore creating mental shifts; however, a more comprehensive explanation of the person branding process must be explored. Arruda (2003) claims that the person branding process mirrors the product or corporate branding process and should follow three broad stages, namely, to extract, express, and exude. In the first stage, individuals are encouraged to look inside themselves to discover their key identifying attributes or their unique promise of value (brand identity). Second, they develop communication tools to express this attribute to their target audience. Finally, they align their brand with the desired, or right environment. This strategy for expression and exuding can be attributed as the act of positioning, because it focuses on elements and the acts of both calculated verbal and non-verbal communication.

Similarly, Khedher (2013) utilises a dramaturgical perspective as a theoretical framework on the practice of online person branding, which is built upon Goffman's work on the Presentation of Self (1959) and traditional marketing practice. Khedher (2013) refers to the concept as 'personal brand' in this framework and the overarching premise is that person branding – both physical and online – happens in three steps, namely (1) Personal Brand Identity, to develop a character or role and personality/style; (2) Personal Brand Positioning, when brand communication develops through a performance of scripting, appearance, display manners and verbal

communication, and (3) Personal Brand Assessment, with the interpretation and comparison of self-stated brand goals and others' feedback leading to success or failure (Khedher, 2013).

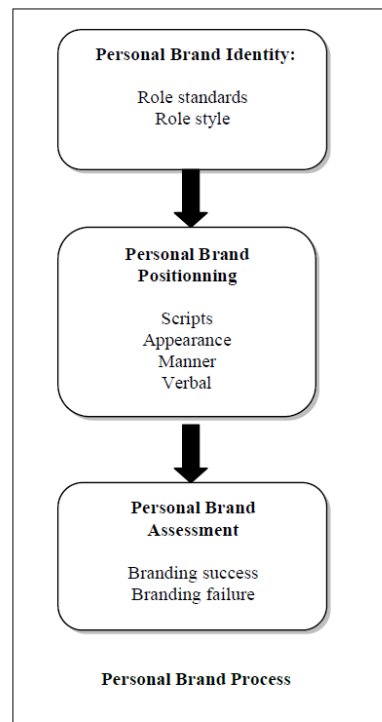


Figure 4: Personal Brand Process (Khedher, 2013)

In the first stage, Khedher emphasises the crafting of a person brand identity. This is achieved through the definition of a role style or character that is established through a collection of an individual's objective attributes such as ideals, personality, morals, purpose and unique experiences (Kucharska & Confente, 2017; McNally & Speak, 2011). According to Pittman and Kivisto, role style is a subjective or ideal image that makes up one's uniqueness in the minds of others and constitutes what an individual wants to convey (2013). Moreover, Khedher argues that besides role style, adherence to a role standard is equally important in terms of believability; roles come with determined expectations and actions that individuals must closely abide by. Liu and Suh (2017) further highlight the importance of authenticity in making a brand, trustworthy. Role standards also act as guidelines by defining what behaviour is used and displayed in the next stage (Peacock, 2007; Gander, 2014).

The second stage of the model focuses on person brand positioning, which is centered

on the communication of the self. Here, Khedher states that individuals engage in performance as a means to highlight their positive attributes that are of value to their target audience (2013) with the hopes of ideally matching their brand to their desired outcomes. Furthermore, Khedher (2013) points to a performance consisting of verbal and non-verbal behaviours and tactics involving acting out scripts, mannerisms, physical features and verbal speech (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Chen, 2013; Schau & Mary, 2003; Barrick, 2009). This performance and more so brand positioning, consequently, share similarities to Goffman's theory on Self Presentation (1959) whereby Goffman likened people to actors who choose what scripts, props or backdrops in the backstage (Bute, 2016; Chen & Wang, 2018; Gilmore, 2014) to display and perform (the front stage) to desired audiences in the hopes of getting positive regard or appeal. Therefore, the process of positioning is also a process of self-presentation; once again, it emphasises the idea that the presentation of the self happens through the conscious management and advancement of the self.

The final stage in the model focuses on brand assessment, whereby a person determines whether the branding efforts had achieved the branding and person goals set out by the individual (Grzesiak 2018; Bolino, Long & Turnley 2016). This can either be in what Khedher (2013) describes as either achieving human capital, such as establishing reputation and credibility in advancing their careers (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Gujarathi & Kulkarni, 2018; MacNally & Speak, 2011; Montoya, 2002;), or social capital, which represents investments made by individuals to create and enhance their public image (Gandini, 2016; Scolere, Pruchniewska & Duffy, 2018). Khedher (2013) concludes that in this stage individuals substantiate their identities through audience recognition and interpret if their brand has been a success, or a failure (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Ambady, Hallahan & Rosenthal, 1996). Furthermore, if deemed a failure, the individual will adjust their performance to be more in line with the target audience.

2.4 Impression Management through Online Content

Based on studies done by Khedher (2015), Chen (2013), Labrecque, Markos and Milne (2011), Urbanová and Slind (2016), the dramaturgical theory of Erving Goffman's 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life' (1959) is regularly cited in online person

branding literature since theorists often argue that person brand positioning is carried out through self-presentation (Khedher, 2015). Self-presentation is a method for a person to convey information to others (Goffman 1959) and becomes the outlook for a person to create and maintain their brand identity. In other words, it is done to communicate a consistent projection of oneself.

In this sense, the act of person branding or self-presenting thus becomes a conscious effort to control, regulate and manipulate attitudes and behaviours in order to establish and maintain a favourable impression to a targeted audience (Rosenberg & Egbert 2011; Tashmin, 2016). Many self-presentation definitions that scholars have uncovered tend to revolve around words such as identity and impression, reputation and image, strengths or uniqueness, self-gain and promotion (Parmentier et al., 2013; Molyneux, 2015; Schlosser, 2019). These definitions help contextualise self-presentation as a person-centric activity that shows a stark resemblance to the person branding process, where both focus on managing how others view the individual or more specifically, a process of impression management. Bolin et. al. (2016) on drawing from Goffman's work, distinctly view the promotion of self as an impression management technique, where people or actors are motivated to express their achievements, accept and receive positive regard for their outcomes and minimise the seriousness of negative instances that they are connected to.

Therefore, one can clearly argue that self-presentation or promotion, and more importantly brand positioning, are co-reliant on impression management (Fullwood, 2019; Labrecque et al., 2011). Impression management is the unconscious or conscious decisions people make to sway, or influence the perception others have of them, an object, or event (Bolino et al., 2016). This behaviour is often described as goal-orientated and aims to regulate and control the information in social interaction between people (Tashmin, 2016). Goffman (1959) believes that when an individual encounters other people, they will attempt to control or guide the impressions that others might make of them by altering or fixing their setting, appearance or mannerisms. Leary and Kowalski support this view and argue that impression management is "the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them" (1990: 34). This highlights the need for an audience and that a person brand will naturally occur in the absence of regulated impressions performed

by an individual.

Effective impression management is crucial and involves sustaining a consistent image by purposefully revealing and changing certain artefacts of person information even when individuals engage online (Labrecque et al., 2011). Impression management is thus a combination of online and offline strategies (Fullwood, 2019) and more importantly, the vehicle for positioning the person brand (Labrecque et al., 2011; Khedher, 2015). Urbanová and Slind (2016) agree, and further point out that individuals are able to present themselves to a wide audience through their use and integration of online content and to a lesser degree, their profiles.

Online content relates to anything that an individual creates and then uploads to a website or on the internet. This can be in the form of words, motion, or still graphics (Handley & Chapman, 2011). Affirming this view, Urbanová and Slind (2016) argue that online content consists of anything that offers information, and that this can include written texts, blogs, audio or video files, symbols, or imagery (Vanderford, 2017). Regarding person branding, content is an essential part of the process, especially when developing and promoting a brand in an online space, as content enables an effective way for marketers to communicate and extend their brand offerings with consumers (Gensler et al., 2013). It is for this reason that online content is often termed as branded content, or by the actionable word of content marketing (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

According to Pulizzi and Barret (2008), and Rose and Pulizzi (2011), content marketing is a strategic approach to creating and sharing a valuable experience or compelling content in multiple ways to appeal and maintain a specific audience. Schau and Gilly (2003) agree with this by outlining that one of the prominent reasons a person will generate and share content is to express their identity. Similarly, on digital platforms, individuals make use of content such as websites, photographs and videos, written posts and blogs to communicate (Vanderford, 2017; Sczesny & Kaufmann, 2018; Labrecque, et al., 2011) and relay certain information to targeted audiences. Ideally, the objective is to instill certain attitudes and behaviours from target audiences with the expectation that they maintain the desired brand image and impression within the audience's mind. Chen (2013) furthermore identifies that the type of content elements

used on digital profiles such as person information and visual imagery resembles Goffman's theatrical metaphors of scripts, props, wardrobes and backdrops in the front stage of self-presentation (Tashmin, 2016).

Research shows that people make conscious decisions on what kind of props they use when communicating to their audience on the stage of social media (Labrecque, et al. 2011). A key motivation for this decision could be to maintain the possibility of future interactions or relational goals, both short- and long-term (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Brown, 2014). Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of person branding, these decisions should closely reflect the person's intended message (Labrecque, et al. 2011).

Based on the literature, the concept of person branding for each person engaging in a digital space is obligatory, and the positioning of the online person brand becomes increasingly more important to manage. A distinctive pattern of the process of online person branding also emerges, namely brand identity creation, self-presentation or positioning of identity through impression management, and brand image evaluation. The authors, from a dramaturgical viewpoint, also clearly outline what is essential for person branding, namely a defined role, props, scripts, a wardrobe, a stage, and an audience. This set of criteria is quite evidently found in Second Life, and particular with the avatar. However, the question arises whether the process of online person brand development is incorporated in Second Life, and what are some dynamics and the role in person branding of a mediated communicator, namely the avatar.

2.5 Virtual Social Worlds and The Avatar

According to Schroeder (2008) and Girvan (2018) virtual worlds are effectively real-time 3D computer-generated environments where people connect in a digital form with others and experience being there with them. This is paramount as virtual social worlds are primarily concerned with the aspect of social interaction and to a greater extent, communicating (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). More importantly, previous research highlights online role-playing games and virtual worlds as setting the perfect stage for people to define themselves anew in front of a desired or unknown audience, allowing them to

autonomously be more the person they wish to be (Kim & Sundar, 2012; Przybylski, Weinstein, Murayama, Lynch, & Ryan, 2012). Similarly, the practice of self-presentation conveys and communicates specific information to obtain and maintain a desired identity, and therefore, supporting Second Life as a platform for person branding. Vasalou and Joinson (2009) confirmed this principle when they investigated a range of online platforms including virtual worlds and concluded that every platform motivates self-presentation tactics. The reason behind this could be what Kaplan and Heinlein argue; that virtual worlds are high in self-presentation and self-disclosure concerning social presence (2010).

In their studies, Schau and Gilly argue that “consumers use brands, establishments, and other commercial enterprises as vehicles in the form of online visual collages to establish and communicate aspects of their identity to others through these online visual collages” (2003: 386). One of the most unique factors that separates Second Life from these vehicles including social media, is the avatar. Avatars, according to Schultze and Leahy (2009), are 3D representations of real-life (human) communicators in virtual worlds, meaning that avatars can be considered a vehicle for identity creation based on their ability to not only create visual collages, but also on their capability to communicate and convey information. This is supported by Hemp (2006), who describes avatars as serving the purpose of peoples’ different identities.

Avatars, more importantly, provide communicators with a body in virtual spaces that helps facilitate interactions with other users and the environment. Again, Messinger, Ge, Stroulia, Lyons and Smirnov highlight that avatars serve as a means for communication that can connect a user’s interaction with audiences and settings (2008).

This connection is achieved through the affordance of embodiment which contributes to presence, and makes people, places, and things more concrete, tangible, and present to a user (Schultze & Rennecker, 2007). The exact affordance of the avatar, however, varies from user to user whereby some users might argue it to be an extension of their physical self into the online world (Teng, 2019), and others experience it as an entirely different identity (Nagy, 2014). Some users consider that avatars are simply used to act out social narratives on a virtual platform, and some

view avatars as a virtual representation of themselves (Bailey, West, & Kuffel, 2013; Burleigh, Stavropoulos, Liew, Adams & Griffiths, 2018). In this phase, users ultimately perceive no distinction between themselves and their avatar. Knox attributed this as a direct reflection of a communicator's personality (2009). It means that the only difference there is, is a person having the same identity, but just in different worlds (real and virtual). In both instances, an avatar could be attributed to a means of self-presentation through impression management of creating and then acting out consistent narratives. This is supported by Westerman, Tamborini, and Bowman (2015), who identify avatars as important for forming impressions based upon the role of online representation they play (Fong & Mar, 2015).

No matter what the affordance the user attaches to the avatar, they are, inevitably, engaging in person brand positioning when presenting the avatar to an audience.

When examining the constructs and roles of the avatar in relation to person branding it becomes evident that an avatar does have the capacity to serve as a person brand. Both Second Life and the avatar share similar dramaturgical characteristics to that of other existing digital platforms, in that they all include a stage, audiences, an actor and to a greater degree, similar social presence, which in this context is "the ability to project one's self and establish person and purposeful relationship" (Garrison, 2007: 62). Given the factors surrounding online person branding and the common practice across multiple social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, an investigation becomes necessary to examine if online person branding exists in Second Life and if a similar process is used to that of Goffman (1959) and Khedher (2015). To gain an understanding of this, the researcher aimed to explore the avatar further with the aim of uncovering insights into a potentially new phenomenon.

Summary of Chapter 2

This chapter analysed arguments for how the concept of branding has expanded to include the branding of people, emphasising that like products and organisations, people too can be strategically managed, and more importantly, have associations developed about them. This chapter also revealed the growth of individual online communication and person branding practice that has emerged due to the ease of

accessibility and usage of technology. Additionally, the common aspects of person branding such as brand identity, brand positioning and brand image were discussed. Different perspectives on how the person branding process is constructed have been examined from Arruda's steps of extract, express and exude (Arruda, 2003) and Khedher's (2013) three-step process of 1) defining brand identity; 2) engaging brand positioning or performance based on Goffman's (1959) theory of presentation of the self, and 3) brand image assessment. This chapter also included an analysis of the drivers to person branding with a specific focus on the rise of digital platforms and highlighted the relationship between online person branding and impression management through content. Finally, this chapter introduced the viability of the virtual social world, Second Life, and emphasised the significance of the avatar's potential role in the online person branding process.

In summary, the proposed conceptual framework (Figure 5) for this thesis is based on the works of Goffman (1959), Arruda (2003) and Khedher (2013), as numerous commonalities are reflected in the process of online person branding. This includes crafting a desired identity, image or personality, the communication and management of that defined identity and a person brand assessment of the brand image.

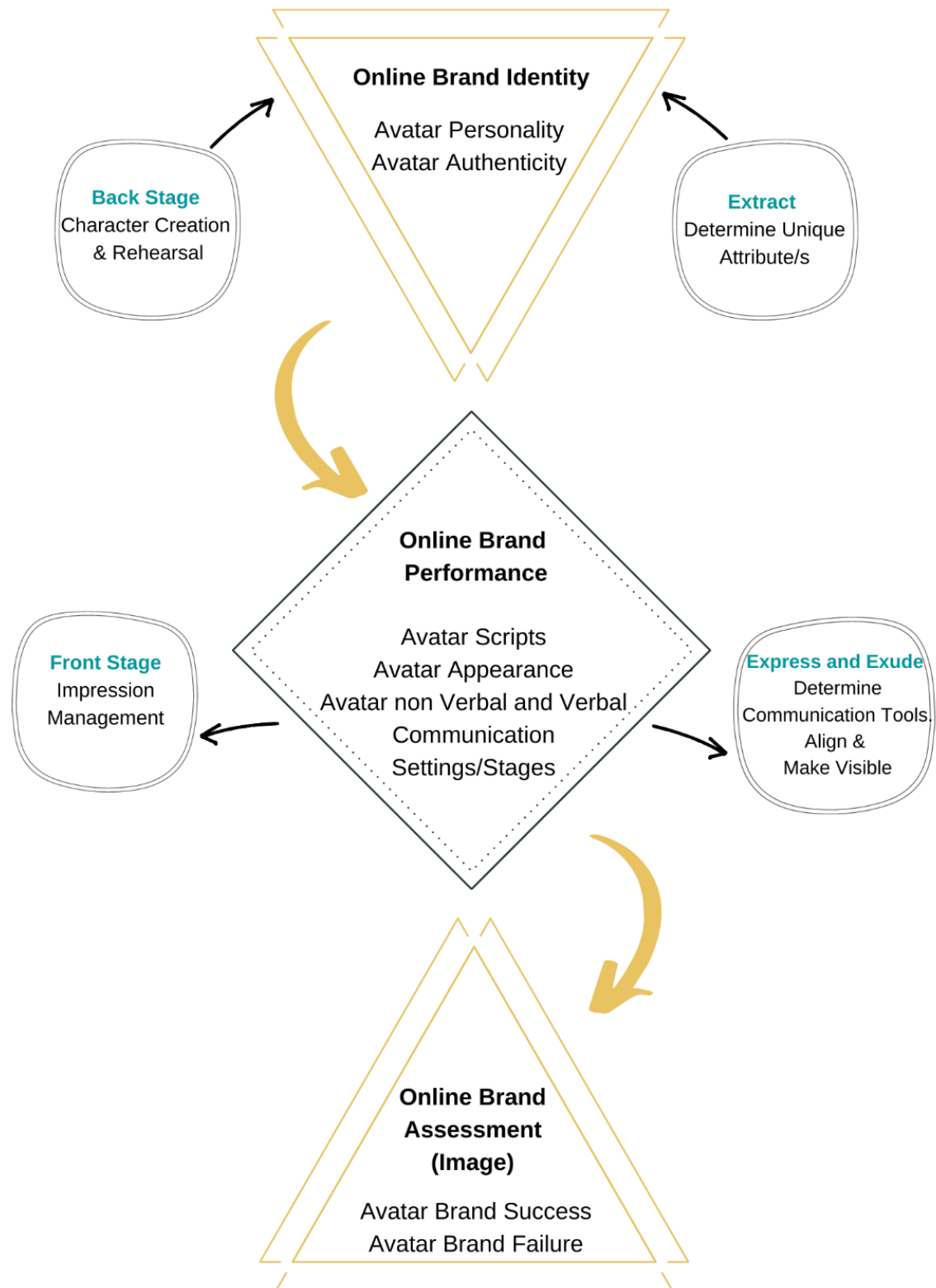


Figure 5: A proposed conceptual framework of Avatar Person Branding

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter presents the argument for the methodological choices of this thesis. It contains the research philosophy, which includes the interpretivist epistemological, and ontological standpoints selected. The chapter also addresses the limitations of the initial sample and site, the criteria for the sample, as well as the in-depth interview method used. It furthermore mentions the solutions to the limitations and the choice of the qualitative method and research instruments for both data collection and data analysis that is presented and reasoned for, including the sample techniques and the deductive coding process adopted. Lastly, it includes how trustworthiness was achieved, the ethical concerns that were considered and the delimitations put into place.

3.1 Research Paradigm

The objective of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of online person branding using a mediated communicator, and therefore was primarily focused on discovering new insights into the realm of online person branding, and in particular those surrounding the nature of an avatar. This research, therefore, adopted both an interpretive epistemological and ontological perspective and fell within an interpretive research paradigm, as it predominately focused on creating and converging in-depth understanding (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). This was achieved by utilising both social aspects of exploring and describing (Neuman, 2019) avatars in a virtual context and how they were positioned as a person brand, as opposed to explanations of the phenomenon. This study additionally supported an interpretivist paradigm as it incorporated a humanistic element and interest into the study on how behavioural traits among avatars (Myers, 2008) are displayed and practiced and more so, sought to comprehend the motives, meanings, reasons and other subjective experiences behind those behaviours (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988; Neuman, 2019).

From an epistemological viewpoint, this research dealt with the social actions and/or behaviours in virtual social worlds. Individuals in virtual worlds were considered as social actors because they have to communicate and engage in virtual relationships in virtual worlds. Therefore, the objective was to understand these 3D representatives

and the elements composing their communication, both verbal and non-verbal on virtual social worlds. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), this led to the epistemological considerations of interpretivism. In other words, this research tried to explain and understand person branding in virtual social worlds by interpreting the activities of avatars or social actors. By adopting an interpretative approach this study sought to develop a greater understanding of the quality and meaning of avatars and Second Life, therefore facilitated in the interpretation of perceptions (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

When considering the ontological position of this research, the social reality of this phenomenon was presented via branding theories and a subjective stance was adopted because this phenomenon was interpreted based on the researcher's perceptions of avatars' actions in virtual social worlds (Bryman & Bell, 2015). By investigating the phenomenon based on branding theories, the premise was that individuals construct their brands through their actions on digital platforms and not the real world. That is, the individuals or avatars are branded because the audience accepted and acknowledged their brands as a reality. Thus, the premise was that personally branded individuals can only be defined as such if they are recognised and acknowledged by a wider audience on digital platforms. In that sense, the research of the phenomenon of person branding on digital platforms fell into the ontological perspective of Interpretivism, and to some degree, Social Constructivism (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

3.2 Research Approach and Method

Based on an Interpretivist paradigm of generating insight and comprehension (Hair, Bush & Ortinau, 2009) this research applied an exploratory method (Kulp, 2007). Furthermore, the theories that are outlined in the second chapter of this thesis were considered to be the basis for the understanding of the phenomenon; however, they served as a building block. Therefore, an exploratory method offered an open and curious approach to the research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009), which in line with the research objectives and the exploratory purpose, uncovered elements of person branding that can be considered as key factors to build a conceptual framework for person branding in virtual social worlds.

As a result, a mixed method was adopted whereby an inductive approach was applied (Bryman & Bell, 2015) in understanding what establishes successful person branding in virtual social worlds via virtual mediators (Easterby-Smit, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). Conversely, empirical data was collected, and deductively coded well-being frequently analysed in light of the conceptual framework. This aimed to underline the multiple levels of the phenomenon and contributing to current literature (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The analytical process, therefore, aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of the virtual person branding with an emphasis on how the concept of the avatar is central to furthering the understanding of the phenomenon.

As has been previously discussed, the literature on the phenomenon of person branding in virtual worlds are scarce, particularly when it comes to the use of virtual mediators. Thus, a qualitative strategy seemed to be the best choice because it served the purpose of contextualising and developing a relevant conceptual framework (Bryman & Bell, 2015) and adding to existing literature. It was also chosen given the interpretive and exploratory nature of the research. A qualitative strategy was appropriate, as it allowed for theories to emerge based on flexibility in terms of data collection and analysis, and allowed for meaningful descriptions (Bryman & Bell, 2015) by exploring complexities and highlighting insight. Such descriptions were particularly relevant when observing how individuals in virtual social worlds build their brand through content creation, since the information offered in the content can be both clear and unspoken.

3.2.1 Limitations of Site and Sample

In order to have uncovered how individuals and their avatars create and build their brand via branded content or props, it was necessary to collect the qualitative material from the location where they manage their impressions. However, one of the major limitations concerning the virtual world of Second Life was the lack of local or nearby servers as Second Life servers are based in the United States of America. What this meant was a delayed latency with the loading of textures of avatars and the various environments that avatars are found in. Second Life also restricts the download speed of data to 10mbps which heavily impacts the rate of loading textures, stability and delay of in-world voice chat.

Due to the numerous and vast locations in Second Life, it became difficult to locate the appropriate sample. It also became more challenging when users originate from real-world countries and automatically fall into different time zones. One important point to emphasise is that although the vast majority of Second Life users are actively engaged in Second Life, they have gradually become more present on multiple social media sites and post content in various forms allowing for another place of contact. Some users actively post photos on Flickr and others actively engage in conversation or promote virtual products on Facebook.

3.2.2 Site and Sample

These restrictions, together with the usage of other digital platforms by the Social Life community, prompted the researcher to collect the empirical data on the popular Second Life Friends group on Facebook (Figure 3.1) through the Facebook Messenger application. Second Life Friends is currently the largest Second Life community network on Facebook with 41,313 members (Facebook, 2020). This made the number of potential avatars/individuals that can be investigated, more accessible. Furthermore, the group has daily active members who are engaged in an array of diverse activities (including gaming, education, entertainment and commerce) in Second Life, as well as avatar appearance and behavioural characteristics.



Figure 6: The Second Life Friends Facebook Group (Facebook, 2020)

Due to the unknown information regarding participants, this research initially used a convenience sampling to collect data from Second Life Facebook Friends members who were conveniently available to participate in the study or easily accessible to the researcher (Saunders et al., 2012). Convenience sampling was also chosen based on the exploratory nature of the research outcomes, mainly to gain an understanding of online person branding in Second life. Saunders et al. (2012) highlight convenience sampling as highly effective in this regard. Once a successful participant had been interviewed, purposive snowball sampling was used by which participants were asked to recommend additional participants believed to have the characteristic of interest, such as how long they have played Second Life (Johnson, 2014).

3.2.2.1 Criteria for the sample

To isolate the population into a manageable sample, the sampled units were chosen and considered based on certain criteria as data could become insufficient or irrelevant in the absence of criteria. Altogether, a fixed list of criteria was as follows:

- The interviewee had been in Second Life for a minimum of five years. This criterion was set based on the user having sufficient game time in Second Life, experiences playing as their avatar as well as the number of target audiences they would have encountered and engaged with over that time frame.
- The interviewee was proficient in the English language. A criterion established for practical reasons, such as lowering the risk of misunderstandings and misinterpretations of both questions asked and answers given.
- The selection of interviewees included both male and female and had to be 18 years or older. This was to ensure further diversity and the intellectual nature of the samples. The interviewees were not restricted to any type of avatar, for example, only human avatars.

3.2.3 Data Collection – Interviews

In-depth interviews were chosen as the preferred collection method, since the researcher wanted to acquire a deep understanding of the individual motives, experiences and perceptions (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014) that encourage building a person brand through the avatar. Interviews were also employed as it

allowed for the flexibility of this study (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). This meant that although interviewees were encouraged to answer all the questions, they had the choice to disclose any additional information to express themselves better. It also meant that the researcher was afforded the freedom to guide the interview, ask follow-up questions, clarify answers and probe further when pertinent information was noted during the interview process (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This led to the researcher being able to accumulate a more comprehensive analysis of the role avatars play and subsequently generate a richer understanding of person branding (Steber, 2017).

One of the benefits of interviews is their directive nature, which allowed the researcher to engage with individuals face-to-face when uncovering practices of brand building that would otherwise be subjected to researcher bias if the only observation was conducted in Second Life (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This would inevitably have led to insufficient analysis of collected data and consequently, major misinterpretations.

3.2.4 Limitations of Interviews

The most significant limitation of qualitative interviews regarding this study was the possibility for bias, which involved person characteristics potentially affecting what information was gathered (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Biased answers are very limiting and reduce the amount of information and rich data collected (McCracken, 1988). To minimise the risk of this, the researcher meticulously crafted open-ended questions that also allowed participants to speak their minds. It was vitally important that the researcher remained neutral when interviewing and not guide participants based on person preconceptions (McCracken, 1988).

Another area of concern was what Kvale describes as the “power dynamics” or “a one-way dialogue” (2006: 484) of the interview environment, whereby the interviewee feels less obligated to speak. To reduce this limitation, the researcher ensured that rapport was first established and that during the social interactions, thoughtful questions were asked, careful listening was applied, and encouragement was given to participants’ responses (Kvale, 2006).

While there were limitations to the chosen method, it was believed that the benefits of providing rich data around the avatar overshadowed the negatives. This suggested

that interviews still provided the most accurate picture of how people use their avatar to create a person brand, as the information captured was highly meaningful. Besides the mentioned drawbacks, this method of interviews was also selected because it was the most time-efficient, and the most appropriate manner to conduct the study, as avatars are still real-life individuals who have busy lives outside of Second Life (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

3.2.5 Research Instruments

The interviews were both semi-structured and person-to-person/avatar interviews, whereby a set of predetermined open-ended questions were asked to ensure consistency. At the same time, the respondent was allowed the freedom to further elaborate on their answers when asked probing questions. This involved adding or restructuring questions based on participants' answers and accordingly, enabled the interview to progress more like a conversation with a continuous flow (Doyle, 2018). Additionally, open-ended questions were used as the information obtained was more easily structured, analysed and compared to the views and opinions of other participants (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014). The preliminary questions used for this research were modelled by Marshall and Rosman's guidelines (2014). All interview questions can be found in **Appendix C**.

Interviews were conducted with ten participants. Data saturation was achieved after analysis of 10 interviews had started to show answers that were similar in nature and patterns started to become more evident. This included data regarding identity construction, role playing and avatar performance. Saturation was also achieved as no new information or themes were observable in the data that fell in line with research objectives, and emphasises what Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) suggest, that for qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews, six to ten participants are needed in the sample to make it credible. This credibility also contributes to the trustworthiness of the study. All ten interviews were included in the findings.

All interviews were conducted online via the Facebook Messenger application and were done separately from each other. Interviews were conducted on separate days and at different time., This was due to the participants' schedules and who lived in

different countries (Canada, Israel, the United Kingdom etc.) and therefore, had different timelines than the researcher. Interviews were equally conducted in both the mornings and early evenings. Seven interviews were conducted through the audio call feature on the Facebook Messenger application and were verbally recorded live via the free computer software program Open Broadcast Studio directly as a sound.wav file that was stored on the researcher's computer and can only be accessed by the researcher. Three interviews were recorded as online written text messages on the Facebook Messenger application that were captured on a private Facebook Messenger conversation shared between the researcher and the participant. This was done due to participants who did not feel comfortable using voice calls. This can only be accessed by the two of them.

The interview was first used to gain background information on the participant's use of Second Life, to be introduced to their primary avatar, the groups they had joined and the places where they spend most of their time. As a result, open questions were designed to explore the degree of separation between the participant and the avatar; several questions in the interview were worded in a way that the avatar, not the participant, would become the focus. For instance, "Introduce me to [avatar name]," or "Does [avatar name] have hobbies?" A key objective to the beginning of the interview was to build the kind of rapport and trust needed to continue.

Once rapport was established, the purpose of the interview transitioned into gaining greater insights into person branding and positioning in Second Life and the role the avatar serves in this process. Strydom and Bezuidenhout (2014) outline this, whereby interviews begin with the broader, more generalised questions before narrowing the questions down to get as much detail as possible. Again, open-ended questions were designed to explore the existence of person branding, whereby questions in the interview were crafted to probe and explore person branding concepts such as brand identity and personality, the relationship of the avatar, self-presentation methods and impression management methods of the avatar in Second Life. Questions were worded in a manner that allowed for deeper and more meaningful answers such as "Why does [avatar name] play Second Life?" or "How would you describe [avatar name]?" or "How do other avatars perceive you [avatar name] and why?"

3.2.6 Data Interpretation and Analysis

The data collected underwent a content analysis that involved working with the data, organising it, breaking it into manageable units, coding it, synthesising it, and searching for patterns. The content analysis of this data aimed to discover patterns, concepts, themes and meanings in determining the inter-dependence of theories of person branding practice, self-presentation and avatars (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative content analysis was adopted as it provided an in-depth understanding of person brand and avatars through systematic analysis of the data collected (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2014). Conclusively, by using this technique to focus on certain themes from the data, it provided the researcher with the most pertinent data to develop a rich and comprehensive understanding of participants' responses, which is reflective of the interpretive nature of this study (Du Plooy, 2014).

This study utilised Zhang and Wildemuth's nine steps for qualitative content analysis (2009: 309-311).

Steps:

- 1) Prepared data: All recorded data collected from the interviews was drafted into writing and was prepared to be analysed.
- 2) Defined coding unit to be analysed: Researcher deduced which coding units were to be implemented that consisted of phrases, single words and sentences.
- 3) Developed categories and coding scheme: Related coding units were grouped and formed into categories.
- 4) Tested coding on sample text: Category definitions were tested for consistency and clarity against the sample of the data to ensure all doubts and possible issues were resolved.
- 5) Coded all text: The selected form of coding was used by the researcher to code all data.
- 6) Assessed coding consistency: Consistency of conducted coding was rechecked.
- 7) Conclusions were drawn from coded data: Categories and themes identified needed to be interpreted.

- 8) Three steps according to Bezuidenhout and Cronje (2014) were used for interpretation: 1) the relationships identified were explained; 2) consideration was given to unnecessary information; 3) consideration was also given to all relevant factors pertaining to the problem. These steps were utilised by the researcher for the interpretation of the findings.
- 9) Reported methods and findings: The researcher reported on the process applied in coding, analysis and interpretation as completely and truthfully as possible.

As mentioned before, the researcher used a mix of inductive and deductive methods and the analysis of this study adopted thematic or deductive coding with a rough codebook that was initially created using a proposed list of known themes derived from the proposed conceptual framework (Figure 5). However, new codes were added during the coding process (Christians & Carey, 1989). Deductive coding was also utilised as the process of data reduction was done by the identification of anticipated themes derived from the literature review. Coding was captured using the qualitative analysis program Quirkos.

3.3 Trustworthiness

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, reliability and validity are often determined by the degree of trustworthiness (Koonin, 2014) by assessing the quality of documents and ensuring valid interpretation of data (Byron & Bell, 2015). In order to ensure that the evidence for the results reported was sound and based on strong results (la Banca, 2010), the four criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985) for trustworthiness was used, which includes the points of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility is the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation of participant provided data (Koonin, 2014). To ensure and increase the credibility of this study, the researcher engaged in several techniques, namely prolonged engagement (Tracy, 2010), member checking (Guba, 1981), and peer debriefing (Anney, 2014). Prolonged engagement was executed whereby the researcher had long interviews, up to two hours with participants, investing sufficient time to become familiar with the context

and setting, allowing the researcher to build trust and acquire rich data.

Member checking was also used which involves allowing participants to revise their responses and provide additional information if necessary (Guba, 1981). By allowing the feedback of data and interpretation to the participants, the researcher was able to strengthen the data as both the researcher and participant see data differently (Tracy, 2010). As a final strategy, peer debriefing which initiates support from other academic professionals, was employed to provide scholarly guidance and to assist in improving the quality of the study (Anney, 2014).

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which the results or findings from the study, which is specifically focused on person branding in Second Life, can be applied to similar environments such as another virtual social world or digital platform to deliver similar results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), by the researcher providing a detailed or thick description of all research processes, participants' behaviour and experiences including their context and the assumptions that were central to the research, transferability was achieved (Anney, 2014).

Dependability

Dependability is the quality of the integration process that happens between the data (both collection method and analysis) as well as the theory generated from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004; Collis & Hussey, 2003: 278-279). To improve dependability an inquiry audit was utilised whereby a researcher outside of the data collection and data analysis examined the processes of data collection, data analysis, and the results of the research study. This was done to confirm the consistency of the findings and to ensure the findings are supported by the data collected (Chilisa & Preece, 2005). Additionally, to confirm that quality integration takes place, an audit trail was implemented where cross-checking between the actual research that took place, and the initial design of the research was done by the researcher and any documented changes were made accordingly (Li, 2004).

Confirmability

Confirmability as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) refers to how closely the collected data supports the interpretations and findings of the researcher. Confirmability concerns the aspect of neutrality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and is not based on person preferences and viewpoints but is grounded in the data. To assure confirmability the researcher focused on the interpretation process embedded in the process of analysis by making use of direct quotes from participants' responses to secure the inter-subjectivity of the data.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Due to the nature of this research being concerned with the interviewing of participants on the internet, netiquette was strictly considered and ensured by the researcher. Netiquette is the term given to socially acceptable etiquette when conducting internet activities including conversations and research (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Mann & Stewart, 2000) such as using no swear words or offensive words or replying with negative comments, as well as thanking participants for their time. The practice of netiquette was necessary as there is almost no legislative framework when communicating electronically on the internet (Mann & Stewart, 2000). Additionally, the lines between ethical and unethical behaviour become unclear as the internet is a free space available to anyone.

Before starting an interview, a participant was briefed both verbally and in writing on the research process. The researcher would outline what the research was concerned with and how the data would be gathered. Participants were also assured of the confidentiality of their real-life identity and the protection of their privacy (Bryman & Bell, 2015) and were required to sign a written consent form, outlining the voluntary nature of the study and how their data would be used. The form also included written consent for recording during the interview as well as to inform the participants as to who would have access to the recorded data, namely the researcher and their respective supervisor. Because of this, written consent allowed participants to give more honest and detailed information, as it made them feel more certain and comfortable about their privacy (Louw, 2014).

From the researcher's perspective, ethical conduct on their behalf ensures fair and accurate results (Louw, 2014). This ethical conduct includes:

- No falsification, distortion or subjective reasoning when interpreting results
- The use of appropriate research methods when collecting data
- The results and information collected will not be used for other purposes besides this study

Various themes and topics derived from the literature review including person branding, avatars, brand positioning, digital person branding, and brand identity were included in the interview. Both the consent forms and the ethical clearance can be found in **Appendix B** and **Appendix D**.

3.5 Delimitations

The first delimitation of this study is that it is focused on the research design of the sample site (Enslin, 2014). As stated in the limitations, due to the lack of a local or nearby server and a limited data transfer speed, loading of textual artefacts heavily impacted the flow of communication. Therefore, this study utilised the digital platform of Facebook and particularly, the private Facebook group, Second Life Friends, as the site from where the samples were drawn.

The second delimitation is centered around the conceptual framework in that the results of this study are specifically centered around the virtual social world of Second Life and more specifically on the avatars within that world and therefore cannot be applied or generalised to other virtual worlds or on other digital platforms (Enslin, 2014). Furthermore, a delimitation was imposed on the sample criteria, such as English-speaking participants only. Participants also had to have been active in Second Life for five years or more, as opposed to five months. This was done to ensure that the quality of the data collected is substantial in meaning, and that there are no misunderstandings from language barriers.

The final delimitation is concerned with the aim of this study. Since this study's aim was to gain an understanding of the role of the avatar as a person brand by use of qualitative means and not to compare or calculate prospective findings a quantitative

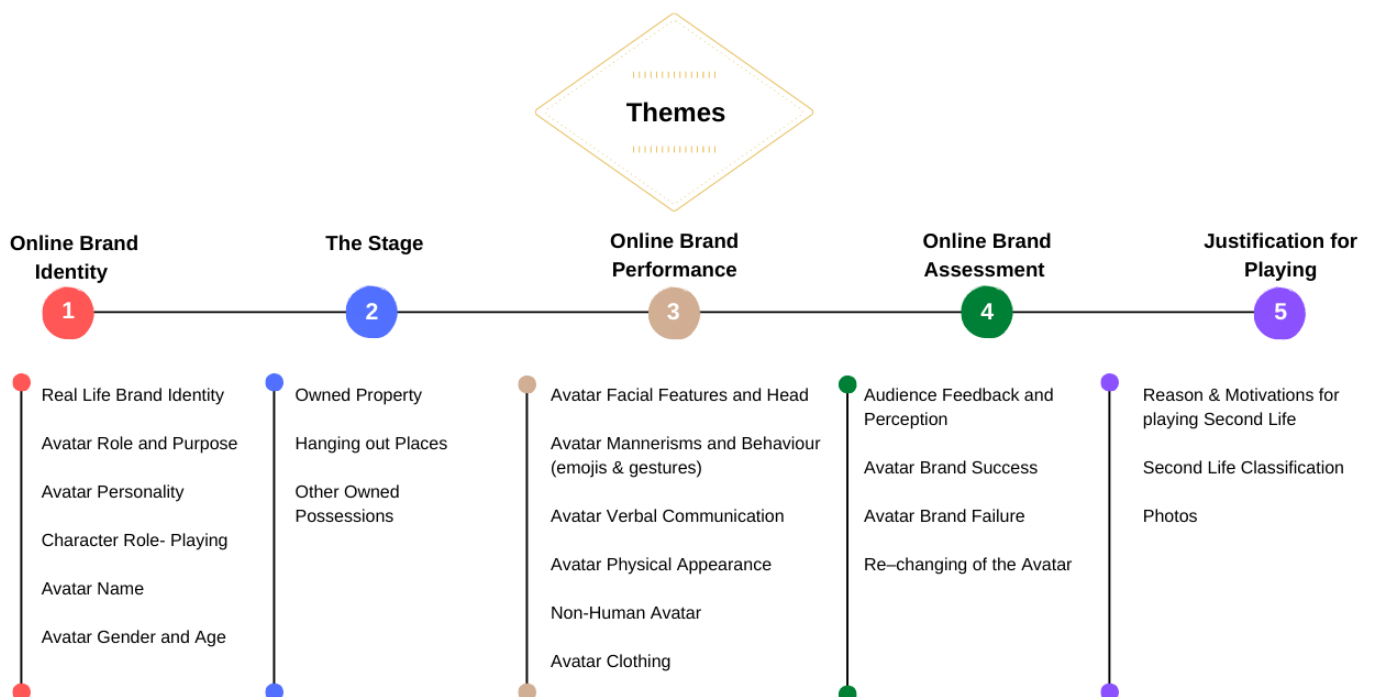
approach will not be employed.

Chapter 4: Findings on Empirical Data

The following section presents the main findings prepared from the collected data of the ten interviews conducted. The findings have been structured in line with the conceptual framework outlined in the literature review, centered around the concepts of brand identity, brand impression management and avatar perception, as a basis for exploring the avatar person branding phenomenon. This chapter also lists the main themes discovered and codes identified based initially of deductive coding.

Deductive coding was employed to divide the data into various categories and themes which were relevant in ensuring that the objectives of this study could be fulfilled, and the research question answered. Through the process of content analysis, 22 categories, including a visual data category, emerged. Five themes that fall in line with the research objectives and deductive coding were developed. This is depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: List of Code Categories and Themes derived from the qualitative capturing program Quirkos



All images that contain the coded categories (circles) are the researcher's data using the qualitative capturing program Quirkos. The increased size and darker colour shades of the coded circles indicates the importance according to information collected

4.1.1 Theme 1: Online Brand Identity



Figure 7: Theme 1: Online Brand Identity

When asked questions focused on avatar identity such as their avatar's role, personality characteristics and certain demographic indicators such as gender and age, three predominant factors emerged as important, namely: avatar role and purpose, character role-play and avatar personality.

Real-life Identity

When participants were asked about describing their avatar's creation the majority pointed to identity as an important aspect. Most of them highlighted that their avatar has been created as themselves, or an extension or ideal self, stating:

"I do for the most part try to make my real-life me in Second Life because my avatar is me in the end, just in a digital form but better". (Participant 1)

"She is literally me; I play me very very well. I'm very bad at playing anybody else, I think that's why Abi is the way she is because it is me, it's a mini-me". (Participant 2)

"My avatar is like an extension to myself in real life, even though it looks different obviously. The way he is acting and the way he is portraying himself on the platform is

the way I'm acting in real life. He doesn't do anything differently". (Participant 9)

"Yes, I would say I see it as more of me in a virtual body and being the person that I want to be but I'm too afraid to be if that makes sense? Almost like an ideal state of myself". (Participant 8)

Participants also emphasised the points of the avatar being them in a digital form or virtual body, while others identified the avatar as a "literal me".

Character Role-Play (Identity)

Some participants referred to the fact that they have avatars strictly for role-playing with specific roles, while others also role-play, but only with their avatar.

"I change what I am playing depending on the mood of the time, so top 5 now will not be a top 5 tomorrow or maybe even in a few hours. I've got a Ninja that is a daughter of a crime boss, I got a demon that possesses a human body turning her into an evil being known as puppet mistress, an angel bound to the land of humans because of an act of blood and a time traveller with no memory of her past". (Participant 1)

"I have [created] 13 avatars over time. I found I love to role-play and that keeping all my characters on one avatar was hard, especially since I role-play in different genres. I have an Asian avatar, a black one, a white one, some mixed races as well. It really depends on what character I am". (Participant 4)

"... I like to go to a lot of the role-play simulations, so where people are role playing, so recently got in to sort of like medieval role-plays". (Participant 5)

"Michelle is my secondary avatar's name and that one is used for teaching purposes at a role-play school". (Participant 8)

"I'm actually quite diverse with my avatars but I always come back to being Asian because I'm very fascinated by the culture and just the whole eastern side of the world". (Participant 3)

Participants also seem to choose different characters (avatars), or roles based on their

mood or what race they want to be, and some choose based on the type of role-play such as a medieval character or teacher, or for the affection of different cultures.

Avatar Role and Purpose

When asked questions relating to their avatar's role and more importantly, its purpose, there were a few points of interest, such as that certain participants see the role of their avatar as a tool for exploring, hanging out and socialising.

"The augmentationists are the ones who basically use their avatars as a tool and see Second Life as just a platform. I think I'm like 90% in that vein". (Participant 6)

"I perceive her as this cute little thing that I use to play dress up and explore around worlds in SL, just hanging out and socialising with friends, and stuff really". (Participant 10)

In one instance, a participant noted that their avatar is something deeper than socialising, by stating *"I do use it as a tool for socialisation but at the same time that socialisation, you get to know the people and their characters, and all that stuff and it just really does run on a deeper level than just a tool". (Participant 8)*

Some other participants emphasised that their avatars serve as a means of self-expression or dealing with social issues. Participant 7 noted *"I have a moment where I look at my avatar and go 'darn I put together a pretty avatar there'. It's kind of self-expression"* while Participants 2 and 9 stated that *"I came back to Second Life in hope that watching Abby socialise and be the butterfly that I was"* and *"I have my anxieties and my avatar actually helped me and improve my social life"* respectively.

Avatar Personality

An important part of identity development is the aspect of personality. When asked about the personality of their avatars, most participants said that their avatar's personality is different from their real-life personality. As an example, Participant 5 said, *"Maori Panache, my avatar tends to be a little bit more arrogant, a little bit more driven, he's a bit of a megalomaniac, I wanted to portray the character as this kind of*

I'm not a mad scientist but sort of a mad industrialist, especially because of my steampunk business" whereas Participant 6 responded with, *"when I'm in the Firefly companion's guild, the people who I've been researching, I put on a sort of stodgier, grumpier old man persona"*. Participant 9 said, *"I think my avatar is much more forward and probably much ruder than I am"*.

Based on those responses, it becomes clear that personality is occasionally dependent on the environment the avatar is in. However, some participants showed that their personality is a past self or carries over from their real life as Participant 10 revealed that she *"always has been a bit antisocial. So, it kind of follows into Second Life because I can't just automatically become a social butterfly"*. However, Participant 3 said that their avatar has a *"certain personality, which is more of how I used to be, it's kind of like her personality can be a bit ruthless, she does have that side where she could be very bitchy"*. Participant 2 also said that her avatar *"has still got all the confidence, she is still got the ability to do whatever she feels like doing and I don't in real life anymore"*.

Avatar Name, Gender and Age

When asked about their avatar name, some participants indicated that their avatar name is based on their real names, saying things like: *"Maxim is my real-life name"* and *"Abigail is actually my real name"*. However, some participants revealed that their name was chosen for a purpose or to fit the avatar's personality.

"Once I got my doctorate in education, I changed my name to Dr Duke van Acker, I did it just to be egotistical, I wanted to show off a little bit". (Participant 6)

"Panache is obviously meaning like flare or kind of over the top, and that's a little bit of what I wanted to portray in the character". (Participant 5)

Kye, the Asian because that's kind of where I derived my name Kairi from a computer game which was where I started my avatar". (Participant 3)

When asked about age and gender, most responses pointed to having different ages but the same gender. More importantly, based on the responses, participants selected

specific ages due to a reason or motivation, whether it was to be young or to fit in with a role-playing character or even to have one's opinions respected.

“I’m a female and then my avatar is still looking quite youngish like 19ish. I have picked that because I’m 33 in real life and I don’t want to be 33. I want to be younger, so I thought why not relive my youth through my avatar”. (Participant 10)

“...besides being an elf or where the age of a human [being] can be a 1000 years old, it’s not really me, and my avatar is me in the simulations, I am, however, still required to be adult”. (Participant 1)

“I wanted someone, who is a little bit older than myself when I started in Second Life, I was like 19 and nobody takes 19-year-old seriously, so I made my character look, you know, somewhere in his late twenties to thirties, that way there was just no question about like ‘this guy doesn’t know what he’s talking about, he’s too young’”. (Participant 5)

“The older avatar I created; I chose that age for her simply because I wanted to be able to do things as an adult in the world occasionally”. (Participant 8)

4.1.2 Theme 2: The Stage

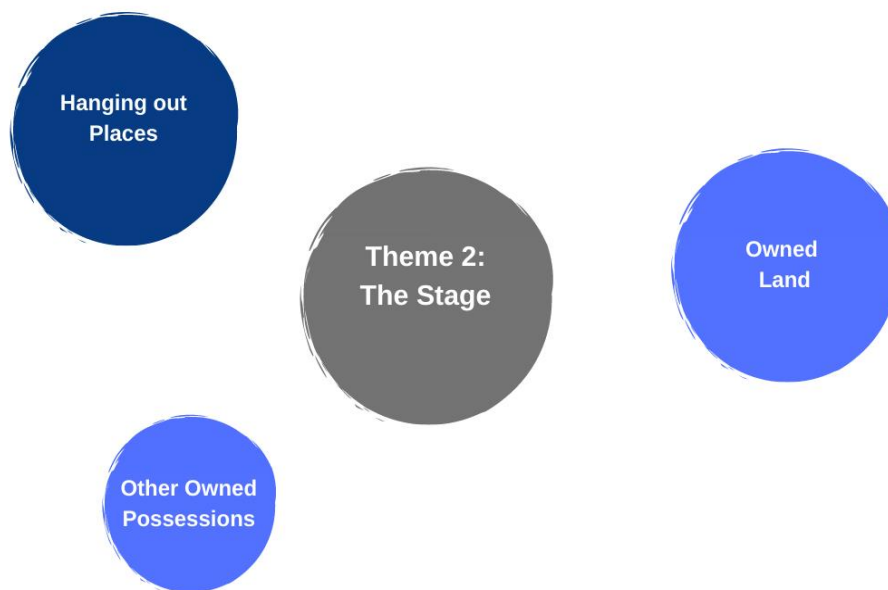


Figure 8: Theme 2: The Stage

Hanging out Places

When participants were asked about the place where they hang out, their responses showed two clear environments: (1) hanging out where their avatar works or involved in their avatar's profession; (2) hanging out with avatars that are engaging in role-play. Regarding the first point, participants said this:

"The places that I am in when I'm in Second Life are like, a place called Cypress Chat, that's a language learning group, as I'm an English Teacher in [the] world". (Participant 6)

"I am a singer, so when I sing on stage it's (in Second Life) at bars and clubs, I will also go and see other performers as well, so I would say, 60% would be split between myself performing or watching another performer". (Participant 2)

Regarding point two, Participant 1 said, *"I hang a lot in one of three superhero role-play sims because basically anything can happen there, you have space travellers with medieval knights and crazy guys dress as bats".* Participant 8 said *"When KitKat*

the child avatar is not [at] a children's club or in school, she is hanging out with my Second Life grandparents usually, on their sim. We do things like watch movies; we role-play mealtimes, and we role-play chores and all that fun stuff and it's like just a family situation basically".

Owned Land (Property) and Other Possessions

After questioning about if their avatars owned any land or property, most participants said that they do own land and use it as Participant 10 described *"So I could be by myself sometimes and have no one bother you"* or to *"experiment like decorating my house or a garden or something"*. As mentioned by Participant 9 or moreover, as Participant 7 mentioned, *"We wanted a place of our own. We wanted something that reflected us"*.

Interestingly, certain participants owned other property besides a home and own it for different reasons, mainly, role-playing and/or running a business.

"Yes, I own a lot of buildings and stuff, that I use for role-plays mostly when I build the role-playing area. Sometimes I see my buildings and land as a stage, but in the same way, I will consider a workplace or school as a stage, I don't see my role-plays much as play as much as I see it as a life". (Participant 1)

"I'm a business owner in [the] world so I have a lot of different things on the go but one of them is my beach club, the panache beach club and you know I hang out there to be present for people that drop in and want to chat or whatever it is they want to do that day". (Participant 5)

Participant 5 also mentioned protected land, stating *"There's land called Protected Land and it usually goes for double what any other property would, and it's just characterised by one or two sides, so there's like a seafront or a mountain or something like that"*. The importance of the Protected Land according to the participant is that *"Those areas give off sort of in-world they give off a bit of a prestige because, if you can afford them, you're obviously living the good life right and nobody can mess with your view and stuff like that"*.

When questioned about owning other possessions, a few participants mentioned that they do own things like a bike or a boat. One participant said this *“I do own a bike in Second Life, I’m not a biker I don’t drive at all in real life. I don’t like to drive, but my avatar does drive a bike in Second Life, also I find bikers sexy in real life”*. (Participant 9)

4.1.3 Theme 3: Online Brand Performance

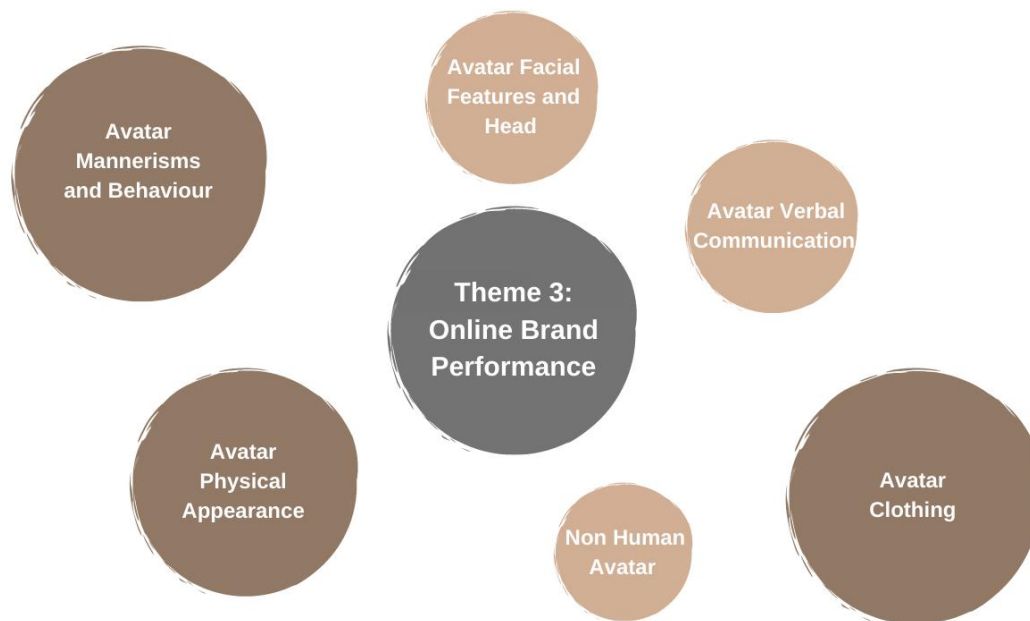


Figure 9: Theme 3: Online Brand Performance

When asked about how they communicate aspects of their identity through their avatar, most participants identified avatar clothing, avatar mannerisms and behaviour, and avatar physical appearance as important.

Avatar Clothing

Based on the responses about avatar clothing, participants believe in choosing or wearing clothing for three reasons: (1) event and audience; (2) their profession; and (3) to blend in with role-playing.

Participants said this about point one, mentioning the importance of what venue or event or audience they are in as a guide for choosing what clothing to wear:

“Clothing-wise, it depends on the audience I'm going for. In general, you'll see me in a suit and a tie but kind of a casual suit and tie, nothing like a tuxedo or anything silly like that but if you're going to a party, I'm probably going to be a little bit more relaxed, laissez-faire about what I wear”. (Participant 5)

“If I'm doing a special event where I'm going to be doing a fantasy look. I'll wear the fantasy look, go to the event and change out when I'm done”. (Participant 7)

“Because I sing on stage (in Second Life) I tend to dress her in a manner that is befitting the venue that I'm singing in”. (Participant 2)

Regarding point 2, Participants 6, 3 and 8 had the following to say:

“Since I teach students, I still generally stick to suits, in the way, I wanted to project the image that I was a teacher and a researcher, and I was relatively serious and formal and not there to just pick up chicks”.

“I dress my avatar the way I would other than my blogging, which is very different to how I would usually dress my avatar, as soon as I put the avatar in blogging, I'll take the picture, I get changed in seconds back into something [I am] more comfortable in”.

“Michelle, she dresses really conservatively as she's a teacher so she's always completely covered very rarely will you see her in anything less than jeans and a t-shirt, clothing-wise”.

From responses from the participants, clothing is also chosen based on the profession type and projected image that goes with the profession. Regarding the third point participants mentioned: *“Outfits are something I really change a lot depending on mood and character if doing a role-play at the time. My clothing will change depending on the role-playing group because the group will change what character I am playing/being”. (Participant 1)*

“In the other group that I am studying, which is sort of a sci-fi role-playing group, I end up wearing kimono because it's sort of Asian sci-fi”. (Participant 6)

Physical Features and Non-Human Avatars

When the participants were questioned about the physical features or race of their avatars, most of them stated that their avatar was modelled after their real selves with minor changes and most of the participants have not played non-human avatars.

Participant 7 said *"It is relatively close to my own self"*, Participant 8 said *"I kind of had a vision of her to look more like the real-life me. She is an extension of myself and so and I put a lot of time and effort into making her look the way she does"*. Participant 5 said *"I chose the human form just because that's how I wanted to relate to the world around me. It basically looks very much like I do in real life, only more tanned"*. Participant 4 mentioned that an avatar is what she used to be, saying *"Coco is me the only real difference, she stayed skinny, it was hard back then to make a fat avatar and she also stayed young"*.

Some participants, however, based their avatar's physical appearance and race on something that is not related to their real selves. Participant 10 said, *"My avatar is human, it's got blonde hair and it's nice and long and she's really small and slim and younger than me, the body shape is quite small and petite, which is not like me"*. Participant 3 mentioned that *"I'm not from an Asian background. I'd love to be Asian because I'm very fascinated by the culture and just the whole eastern side of the world"*. Participant 1 described her avatar as somewhat of an evolving one, *"I have many shapes and forms, going all from an ant to a demon and even a glitch (something that looks wrong with it),"* highlighting that some participants chose avatars with a specific image in mind and non-human avatars too.

Facial Features and Heads

Concerning head shapes and facial features, participants mentioned that choosing heads and tweaking facial shapes are reflective of their real selves. For example, Participant 2 who said, *"My ideal was to get Abi to look close like me to me as a person, and so that's why I chose this specific head that I'm wearing"* and Participant 7 who mentioned that *"faces are harder to do (change), bodies are simpler. I spotted one I found particularly compelling, and I bought it. I did tinker with the face later because I*

wanted to add some features that reminded me somewhat of myself". Participant 9 emphasised that *"My face shape is made by me, so his face is a little bit closer to mine in real life, he's also brunette like me, with kind of the same jaw"*.

Although most participants opt for facial features and heads that resemble them, some participants stated different reasons, such as Participant 5 who said *"I wanted to look professional. I wanted to look attractive in Second Life, so I went with him [having a] more attractive shape and face then silly looking or different to me"*. Participant 10 also stated *"I wanted something just really cute and sweet looking which I'm not really sweet and cute looking. So, she just looks very innocent and adorable"*. These responses indicate that facial features and heads are chosen on a certain image a participant wants to project such as attractive or cute and sweet.

Avatar Mannerisms and Behaviour

When asked about their avatar's behaviour and mannerisms, including emojis or gestures used, participants said:

"When I'm role-playing a knight I am very respectfully, so I'll do things like bow because I want to be seen as respectful". (Participant 1)

"...if I don't want my avatar to get involved with them, I would refer to myself as Kye and let them know, that 'whatever, I'm out' and I'll go. I'll scoot over because I'm that young adult, a bit of a rebel, who doesn't really want to listen to anybody unless it's constructive". (Participant 3)

"Well, Kit Kat is a kid, she goes and gets dirty and she has to take baths and she has to change clothes because they got dirty. She gets very playful and she'll demand cuddles and so a lot of the time she's in her grandma's arms or her grandpa's arms getting cuddles because she's a big cuddle bug. Michelle – because she is an adult, she knows that you know 'OK I've gotta be professional because I'm at work'". (Participant 8)

"When I'm in my role-playing situation with the other group and meeting someone for the first time then I go out of my way to obey the conventions of text role-playing in

Second Life which is talking about myself in the third person, 'Duke van Acker bows and greets you' that kind of thing". (Participant 6)

Based on the responses, participants indicated that the behaviours their avatars display are constructed on the type of role they portray, whether it is a character, like a knight or a teacher or even themselves, as with Participant 9 who said *"I know a lot of gays on the platform, they do stuff that they would never do in real life, like BDSM or intimacy. If I don't find myself comfortable doing them in real life, my avatar will not do them in Second Life"*.

Verbal Communication

In conjunction with their behaviour, participants similarly base their verbal communication on the role or character they are playing, for example, Participant 3 said *"I'm an Asian character, so I'll [use] words like oppa (Korean) for my brother in Second Life and a few words I picked up from Korean dramas, words for love and baka (a Japanese word for idiot). I also would be more rebellious, and I'll speak more slang which I don't usually use slang in real life"*.

Participant 1 said, *"If I am, let's say the hacker, most of the [way I] talk will be emojis and slang. If I am a knight, I will talk more respectfully with no emojis"*. Participant 4 said *"On Pure, I play a GOR character that I have played for 6 years in urban. I was a mechanic in the military in real life, so I used to have her with a military background and would speak terms relating to the military and in a manner that is reflective, such as strict and orderly"*.

An important observation from the responses is that the tone and formality of speech changes depending on the audience. For instance, Participant 5 said *"If there's already an emotional investment then, of course, I'm going ask how was your day? you know, how is real life going? How're the kids? How's the family? That sort of thing and you might go and do things together like, let's go dancing, let's go listen to music stuff like that"*. Participant 8 noted that *"with KitKat when I'm with adults I do use what's called baby speak. I replace R's with W's and stuff like that. I'll also walk up to anybody and say 'Do you have any cookies?' in a cute baby voice"*.

4.1.4 Theme 4: Online Brand Assessment



Figure 10: Theme 4: Online Brand Assessment

Audience Feedback and Perception

When asked about whether other avatars form any perception about their avatars, participants said the following:

“Yes, I think everybody knows that Abi is quite a soft and gentle character, that if she sees somebody in need, she’s going to go run in and sometimes to her own detriment. So, I think most people like her”. (Participant 2)

“Well, a fair number of people do find me attractive. I actually do have to watch where I am sometimes because I get tired of being hit on at random”. (Participant 7)

“I don’t hide the fact that I’m Kit Kat and Michelle, everybody I hang around knows that and I think they are able to see that it’s more than just a tool for me. They see it as an extension of myself”. (Participant 8)

Two observations emerge from participants' responses. Firstly, that perception is made by other avatars or audiences and secondly, that perception is constructed off the physicality and personality or the self-extension of a person or avatar.

Some participants mentioned voice being important to influencing perception. Participant 9 said, *"When I start talking on voice, they find him [my avatar] very social but when he doesn't speak, they find him intimidating or just erotic, hot or sexy"*. Participant 6 said, *"My voice tends to have an effect on people. Whether they like it or they don't like it, they have an immediate reaction based more on that than on my avatar"*.

Avatar Brand Success and Avatar Brand Failure

With regards to questions asked about whether other avatars understood the role or type participants are trying to portray, the majority of them responded with positive answers of success. Participant 5 said *"If I dress professionally, people take me more seriously. If I dress like in the suit and tie, people are more likely to ask me about the shops that I run and things like that. You know I want a certain persona to be recognised, by wearing the suit. It just reinforces that in people's minds, 'ok that Steve, he's all about business.'* If I dress like a party boy, I'm very non-judgmental, very easy going for the most part when it's not about business so I do tend to attract a lot of friendly avatars and people come to the beach club". Participant 2 said, *"On the whole, I think everybody likes Abi, which is nice. I have fans who stalk me, and I say that very lightly, as they even copied Abi's head and face! You know what? I've just decided to embrace it, most singers wouldn't. For me, it's not a big deal. On the whole, everybody sees Abi as a social butterfly that I intended, and my fans quite often contact me and asked me to go here or go there or come and support them with something"*.

Participant 3 said *"Yeah, people 'get' me, they know me for the Asian girl in Second Life who loves K pop and doesn't wear bright colours. I've even had anime (Japanese animation) looking avatars who have spoken to me many times in Japanese and I've met people of a darker complexion speak Indian to me"*.

Although audiences make the connection between what the avatar and role participants are trying to establish, some participants revealed that audiences sometimes do not also understand the role they are portraying, for example, Participant 1 said: *"I want to be somewhat sexy, however, I'm cursed to always be called cute, I mean sometimes I feel kind of like I'm treated like a child because I am kind of small, and being sexually desired is something that feels nice"*. Participant 9

said *“I don't want to be perceived as a hot guy, intimidating or just like a sex toy or for photos. I prefer to be known as a social friendly person even though my avatar looks the way it looks”*. Participant 3 emphasised that when role-playing as a different race and ethnicity *“I have come as a tiny black child and I put on this very ghetto persona, it's obviously from what I've heard and seen and they like, 'oh god Kye, she's on drugs or something is up.’”*

Re-changing of Avatar

An interesting observation was when asked about if they change or changed their avatar based on feedback from others, participants said:

“If I'm not seen as 'sexy' I would wear sexier clothing and use flirty language and emojis”. (Participant 1)

“I used to be a little more outer focused about that but I kind of got past the self-consciousness part and now it's just I might look every so often for, is there something that I like, that I would like better on what I am doing and what I'm looking at and if so, I may shift to it”. (Participant 7)

“Probably, I will make him less friendly like make him a little bit more arrogant because of the last experience I had with him the last few weeks, with some people on the platform”. (Participant 9)

“To be honest, I don't think I would change much maybe if the realism for the looks of the avatar but no nothing else really. I'm pretty happy with how she looks for now (pretty and cute) and how she interacts with everyone so I'm happy with how it is so far”. (Participant 10)

One of the motivations for managing avatar changes, as mentioned by participants, is that some changes are linked to other avatars' feedback. Some participants, however, like Participant 10, are interested in changes based upon their own perception of their avatar. Participant 8 also said, *“With Michelle, her head, I've never been able to get it exactly how I want it and so I'm gonna go through another store and see if I can find a head that I can customise a little bit more and make her look exactly the way she's supposed to”*.

4.1.5 Theme 5: Justification for Playing



Figure 11: Theme 5: Justification for Playing

Second Life Classification and Motivation for Playing

During the interview process, a certain number of participants mentioned classification and person reasoning being behind their choice to play Second Life. Although this specific theme does not relate to the research question and objectives, there were two points of interest. Firstly, some participants believe that Second Life is not a game but a social platform, for example, Participant 2 said, *“I have an issue when people call Second Life a game because it's not really a game. It is a social platform, it's a very large social platform, and an extremely effective social platform”*. Participant 3 said, *“It's not just a game to have a fantasy in or anything. We are real people and that's how I'd like to bring myself into the game and say what you see is an avatar but behind it, you are going to get me through my avatar, it's how I represent myself in-game”*.

Secondly, participants mentioned that the justification for playing Second Life is based upon social reasons, for example, Participant 10 said, *“I just log on every so often to chat people but once I got ill it's been kind of my lifeline to staying social otherwise, I'd never speak to anyone”*. Participant 4 said, *“What happened to her [Coco] affected me in Real Life, it was an if she was happy, I was happy sort of thing. Second Life was my*

social circle". Participant 3 said, "I don't think I'll ever leave the game. I've left it for short periods, but I'm always come back, something's always drawn me back, if it's not my friends or family I've made in the game, it's what can I do with my avatar, what looks can I go for or can I change it up a bit and bring a bit more than my real life into the game. For me it's a social ground, I like talking to people".

Summary of Chapter

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the various aspects of the avatar and to uncover new information regarding its role and purpose concerning person branding. Based on the findings gathered from participants' responses the identification of various key findings has been established. As illustrated by the responses, the concept of an established identity is important to users and role-play has a significant part in an avatar's function, personality and identity construction. The projected image or avatar profession is central to where an avatar spends its time and what an avatar owns in terms of land or non-clothing items. Users also see clothing, physical and facial features as vital ways to build and communicate a projected image they are trying to convey, which is closely related to the character the avatar is playing.

Both verbal and non-verbal communication are similarly used for building and maintaining a role and are influenced by the role users are trying to portray. Audience feedback is a particularly important factor in determining if an avatar is correctly portrayed the way the user intended, and it also plays a part in directing changes made to avatars. These findings highlight that users engage with some form of constructing and managing regarding their avatars and the perceptions received which is reflective of certain person branding elements. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter discusses the key empirical findings from Chapter 4 in relation to the main theoretical concepts and framework derived from Chapter 2. The Chapter 5 discussion aims to objectively gain a better understanding of the person branding phenomenon in Second Life and to highlight the role an avatar plays. This chapter focuses on three key areas from the conceptual framework, namely, online brand identity, brand positioning and brand image. This entails discussion around key concepts such as role style and standard, nonverbal and verbal artefacts that are used to create and maintain a desired image, and the evaluation based on success or failure that an avatar/user will carry out, including making any necessary adjustments to align their image to their communicated identity if perceived as a failure by the audience.

5.1 Online Brand Identity

One of the key patterns identified from the findings is that all users believe in establishing an identity for their avatars. This correlates fundamentally to the initial stages of a person branding process that Khedher (2013) and Arruda (2003) emphasise. Person branding begins with an individual expressing themselves by identifying a set of ideals, personality, morals, purpose, and experiences (Vanderford, 2017; Rangarajan et al., 2017; McNally & Speak, 2011). Baker (2001) additionally argues the point of an individual pinpointing out their beliefs and what makes them unique. Khedher (2013) refers to this beginning stage as the role internalisation, whereby identity is an internally constructed role that individuals abide to, in relation to others, the situation or environment. Goffman refers to this as the “backstage” whereby people prepare and rehearse (Bute, 2016; Chen & Wang, 2018; Gilmore, 2014) various behaviours or roles (identities) for the front- or performance stage (1959). Based on the proposed conceptual framework in Chapter 2, two things are needed in (online) brand identity construction, namely avatar personality, and avatar authenticity.

5.1.1 Avatar Personality (Role Style)

Role style or personality is found to be quite evident in the findings presented in

Chapter 4, where users when role-playing, actively create their avatar's identity upon specific roles with unique characteristics, either fictional such as a *"ninja that is a daughter boss of a crime or a demon that possesses a human body turning her into an evil being known as Puppet Mistress"* (Participant 1) or something more fictional such as *"a teacher used for teaching purposes at a role-play school"*. (Participant 8)



Figure 12: Participant 1 as Puppet Mistress (red2blaze, 2018)

This falls in line with Pittman and Kivisto (2013) who describe role style as a subjective or ideal image, consisting of attributes that make up one's uniqueness (Kucharska & Confente, 2017; Rangarajan et al., 2017) in the minds of others and constitutes what an individual wants to convey. To some degree, it is a sense of self that the individual wants to portray to the world. This also reinforces Khedher's argument (2015); that an individual learns and manifests the most relevant presentational characteristics concerning the type of situation, in this case, distinctive role-playing situations, such as a teacher at school. Attributes like avatar names can also contribute to role style such as with Participant 6, whose avatar is an educator in Second Life and is named *"Dr Duke van Acker"* reflecting a highly educated person.

An interesting point to note is that some users also base their personality on a past, ideal or extended version of themselves. For example, Participant 2 said that her avatar is *"literally me; I play me very very well. I'm very bad at playing anybody else"*

or Participant 9 mentioned that his avatar is *“like an extension of myself in real life but more social”*. In all instances, the objective, much like a branded product, is to differentiate themselves and stand out (Gorbatov, Khapova & Lysova, 2018; Peacock, 2007), whether it be a highly unique character like a female ninja of a crime boss, an avatar with the title of doctor or a more realistic person such as their real-life selves with the same defining traits.

5.1.2 Avatar Authenticity (Role Standard)

Role standard or authenticity is also practised by participants in the findings and is the level of performance an individual is willing to put in place, and the degree of conformity to set values and competencies (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Liu & Suh, 2017). This means that avatars that play specific roles aim to project an image that is an accurate reflection of the archetypal characteristics of the role they are playing (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). For example, Participant 5 whose avatar *“tends to be a little bit more arrogant, a little bit more driven, he’s a bit of a megalomaniac as I wanted to portray the character as this kind of I’m not a mad scientist but sort of a mad industrialist, especially because of my steampunk business”*. Adherence is done to increase the legitimacy of the role (Khedher, 2013) as with Participant 6 who said, *“when I’m in the Firefly companions’ guild, the people who I’ve been researching, I put on a sort of stodgier, grumpier old man persona”*.

An interesting finding that surfaced is that archetypal characteristics are sometimes based on the user’s past or ideal self, for example, *“Kye is more of how I used to be, its kind of like her personality can be a bit ruthless, she does have that side where she could be very bitchy”*. (Participant 3). However, even though the user utilises their real life as a character blueprint they still comply to the role’s image they want to portray, like being a *“young rebellious adult in their 20s”*. (Participant 3)

5.2 Online Brand Performance

Another prominent key finding that emerged is the importance of communication of an avatar’s role to a desired audience. It mirrors discussions in Chapter 2, that once an identity has been established, an individual as described by Arruda (2003) moves on to the express stage of designing strategic communication tools to promote the self.

Promotion of the self is done through the active marketing communication efforts of one's brand identity to a specific target market (Khedher, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2011). Brand positioning as outlined in Chapter 2 happens through self-presentation or impression management by which the conscious efforts of verbal and non-verbal behaviours are practiced by an individual or performer to maintain a desired or ideal image (Scolere et al., 2018; Tashmin, 2016). These verbal and non-verbal behaviours involve scripts, mannerisms, physical and facial features, and verbal speech (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013).

For the brand positioning process or brand performance to occur individuals need a target audience to whom they can present. Bob Baker (2001) stresses the point of sharing your defined unique attributes by using a variation of channels that are visited by the people interested in you. Goffman argued that individuals will engage in front stage behaviour or performance (Gilmore, 2014) when they are aware that others (an audience) are watching them (1959). This front stage performance is often reflective of internal expectations, such as what to say and do, how to dress and style yourself as well as what items to carry (Goffman, 1959) and is somewhat shaped and determined by the setting and the role that one plays in that environment.

Based on the proposed conceptual framework in Chapter 2, brand performance or positioning will be discussed using avatar scripts, appearance, mannerisms, verbal communication and settings.

5.2.1 Avatar Scripts

As a form of impression management, an individual can develop and follow scripts or guidelines allowing them to market themselves and further reinforce the projected image or role they are trying to communicate (Khedher, 2013). For example, Participant 3 has scripted herself as a fashion blogger in Second Life and on other digital platforms, stating that *"I'm a fashion blogger, I blog fashion for babies too sometimes"*.

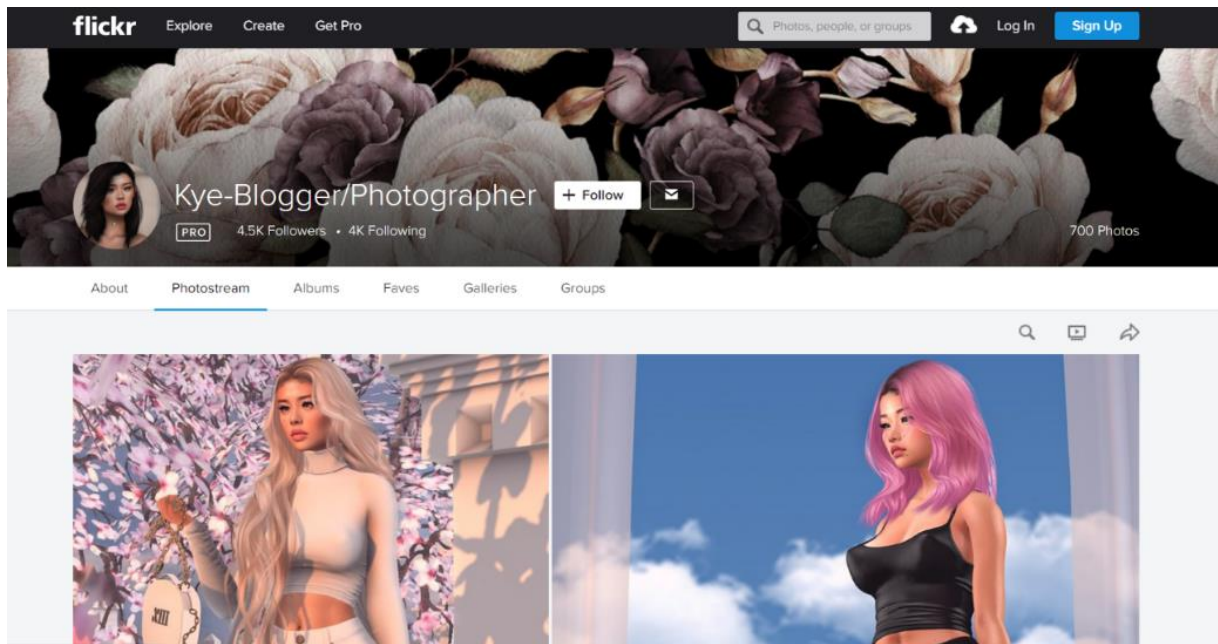


Figure 13: Participant 3's scripting as a fashion blogger (Kye, 2020)

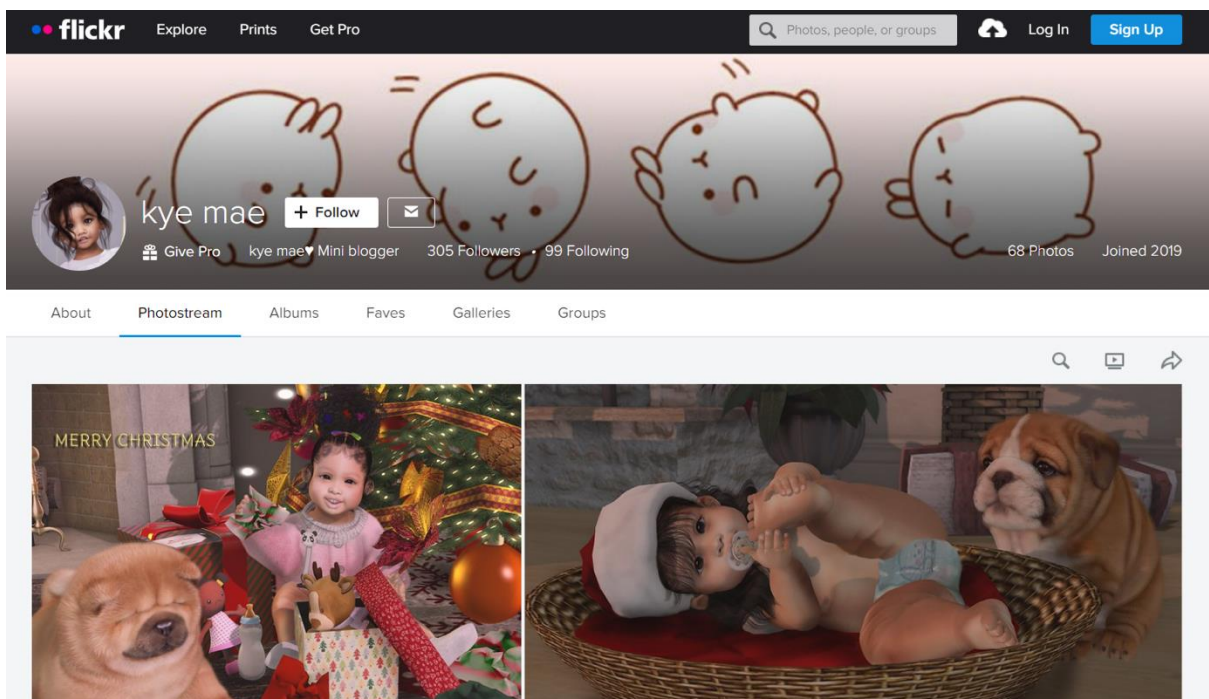


Figure 14: Participant 3's scripting as a baby fashion blogger (Mae, 2020)

Occasionally, avatars can also arrange for other people to do the scripting of roles that they play. For example, Participant 5 said: *“People that do scripting for me definitely feel like I’m this rude and professional, kind of cold person because I keep that [the script] strictly business”*.

5.2.2 Avatar Appearance

When looking at the tools of appearance, the findings presented in Chapter 4 highlighted three important areas. Firstly, physical appearance, clothing and facial features emerge. Patterson (2017) and Brown (2014) similarly acknowledge appearance as the combination of grooming, the style of dress and person cleanliness. One very notable difference is that facial features have a significant role in impression management (Sczesny & Kaufmann, 2018) in Second Life; an individual can regularly alter their face as opposed to real life, where this is more difficult. For example, Participant 5 stated that he wanted his avatar to *“look professional and attractive in Second Life so I went with him more attractive shape and face then silly looking or different to me”*. In addition to facial features, the choice of clothing is very important to users as projecting the intended or correct impression to the targeted audience, which findings from Chapter 4 illustrate that clothing is based on accurately portraying a role that they are playing such as Participant 6 who, when he *“attends a sci-fi role-playing group,”* ends up *“wearing a kimono because it’s sort of Asian sci-fi”*.



Figure 14: Avatar Duke van Acker (centre) in a kimono (Qi, 2019)

Furthermore, individuals also utilise their clothing based on the image they want to construct in the workplace (Gujarathi & Kulkarni, 2018; Johnson, 2017; Barrick, 2009). This is reflective in certain participants' clothing choices such as Participant 2: *“my avatar sings on stage (in Second Life), I tend to dress her in a manner that is befitting to the venue that I’m singing in”*. and similarly, like Participant 7, who bases her appearance on an event she is working at, like *“if I’m doing [DJ-ing] a special event*

where I'm going to be doing a fantasy look, then I'll wear the fantasy clothes and makeup”.



Figure 15: Avatar Abi dressed according to the venue and occasion (Hastings, 2020)

According to Barrick (2009) people also attempt to regulate their appearance for self-presentation purposes to influence the impressions made by others in the workspace (Thompson-Whiteside et al., 2018). Drawing from the findings, a few participants stated that they dress their avatars intending to receive the correct impressions from others in the workspace such as Participant 8, who dresses her avatar Michelle *“really conservatively as she’s a teacher so she’s always completely covered very rarely will you see her in anything less”*. Participant 6 also mentioned that since *“I teach students, [so] I still generally stick to suits. In a way, I wanted to project the image that I was a teacher and a researcher, and I was relatively serious and formal and not there to just pick up chicks”*.

The findings also emphasised the importance of physicality such as body types and culture have in communicating a certain impression (Pounders et al., 2016), something that Peter Montoya (2002) stresses as necessary to be distinctive. For example, Participant 10 mentioned her avatar’s physical appearance as being *“really small and slim and younger. The body shape is quite petite, which is not like me”*. This is a considered choice by the user which relates directly to the impression the user had intended for her avatar as she has labelled it a *“cute little thing”* (Participant ME).

Similarly, Participant 3 mentioned her avatar being completely different in appearance saying *“I’m not from an Asian background. I’d love to be Asian because I’m very fascinated by the culture and just the whole eastern side of the world”*. This again reiterates the notion that users utilise appearance as a tool to communicate and gain the intended impressions (Patterson, 2017) about their established identity.

5.2.3 Avatar Mannerisms (Emojis and Gestures)

One of the most impactful ways to communicate an attitude is through non-verbal means which includes gestures, body language and facial expressions (Sczesny & Kaufmann, 2018; Khedher, 2013; DePaulo, 1992). These provide signals that communicate information about a mood or physical state of an individual which reflects the roles we are meant to play (Pounders et al., 2016; DePaulo, 1992). This was evident when looking at the findings, for example, avatar Mayza, who refers to herself as “cute and innocent” tends to adopt a “shy” demeanour of being quiet or withdrawn when interacting with other avatars. Similarly, Participant 1 noted that *“When I’m role-playing a knight I am very respectfully, so I’ll do things like bow because I want to be seen as respectful”*. Both these points support the idea that mannerisms are based on the role avatars play, either to strengthen the believability of a fictional role or reflect nuances of their real-life characteristics or personality (Fullwood, 2015).

To a greater extent, Goffman (1959) notes that non-verbal communication is more importantly a sign to convey attitudes with an attempt to form certain impressions (Tashmin, 2016; Pounders et al., 2016). Certain users do this to the point where it can be seen as a major tool in achieving the desired impression, such as Participant 8 who notes that her avatar *“Kit Kat is a kid, she goes and gets dirty as kids do. She also gets very playful and she’ll demand cuddles and so a lot of the time she’s in her grandma’s arms or her grandpa’s arms getting cuddles because she’s a big cuddle bug”*. Not all participants engage with non-verbal communication to reflect a role. For example, Participant 9, who actively implements disengaging behaviour to signify his attitude towards certain activities when he says *“I know a lot of gays on the platform, they like BDSM or been intimate. If I don’t find myself comfortable doing them in real life, my avatar will not do them in Second Life”*.



Figure 16: Participant 9 walking down a street in Second Life (Koudounaris, 2020)

5.2.4 Avatar Verbal Communication

Considering verbal communication, a key pattern is derived from Chapter 4; that participants similarly intentionally base their verbal communication, such as words and tone on the character they are playing. An example is seen when Participant 3 says that *“I’m an Asian character, so I’ll words like oppa (Korean) for my brother in Second Life and a few words I picked up from Korean dramas, words for love and baka (a Japanese word for idiot) I also would be more rebellious and I’ll speak more slang which I don’t usually use slang in real life”* or Participant 4 who similarly speaks in *“terms relating to the military and in a manner that is reflective, such as strict and orderly”*. This is in line with the assertive verbal communication strategy outlined by Kacmar, Delery and Ferris (1992), whereby assertive strategies are those which are used to promote and generate images and appropriate qualities (Tashmin, 2016), and in this case, a young rebellious Asian girl or a military professional.

To enhance a strong impression, an individual must express themselves in ways that are unique from others in the same space. This can include aspects like speech (Montoya, 2002). Participant 1 uses verbal communication to add depth and heighten the impression of the role she plays, for example, *“If I am, let’s say the hacker, most*

of the [way I] talk will be emojis and slang. If I am a knight, I will talk more respectfully with no emojis”.

An unexpected finding that was noted is that users occasionally base their verbal communication strategies around the audience, meaning, tone, and formality to adapt to the audience and not only to the character they play. For example, Participant 5 *“If there's already an emotional investment then, of course, I'm going ask how was your day? You know, how is real life going? How're the kids? How's the family? that sort of thing”.*

5.2.5 Settings/Stages

As mentioned before, front stage behaviour is also impacted by the various settings and the role an individual plays within that setting (Gilmore, 2014; Marwick & Boyd, 2014). This is reinforced by Arruda's (2003) *Exude* phase by which an individual aligns their brand with their environment and by Yang and Brown (2016) who affirm that self-presentation is always perceptive to social and relational surroundings. This was evident in the findings where participants noted the importance of the right setting and the related audience and its congruence to their avatar's behaviour, for example, Participant 2, who said: *“I am a singer, so when I sing on stage [in Second Life] it's at bars and clubs. I will also go and see other performers as well”.* And Participant 6 who said, *“The place that I am in when I'm in Second Life is, a place called Cypris Chat, that's a language learning group, as I'm an English Teacher in the world”.* These settings are important as they help shape how others interpret individuals, what their expectation is of them, and how they act towards them.



Figure 16: Cypris Chat English Learning Program in Second Life (Coy, 2014)

From the findings, it was also emphasised that participants own land and buildings that they use as platforms for front stage performance. For example, Participant 1 stated that *“I sometimes see my buildings and land as a stage, but in the same way I will consider a workplace or school as a stage”*.



Figure 17: Ministry of Trance, an EDM (Electronic Dance Music) club in Second Life (Second Life, 2020)

5.3 Online Brand Assessment

The final part of the online person branding process is a brand image assessment. As mentioned in Chapter 2 a person concludes whether the positioning efforts they had performed, achieved the branding and person goals of the identity set out by

themselves (Khedher, 2013). The outcome of a brand assessment is based on the perception of a target audience's impression by which the individual will perceive the response and either see their performance as a success or failure (Garder & Matinko, 1988). Following the proposed conceptual framework in Chapter 2, this discussion focused on online brand success and online brand failure.

5.3.1 Avatar Brand Success

From the findings, it is evident that individuals can successfully achieve the desired image they had intended. This success lies in the similarity between the intended image set out by the individual and the impressions received (Khedher, 2015; Grzesiak 2018; Bolino et al. 2016). This congruency was evident with Participant 3, who structures her brand identity around an Asian character and mentioned this concerning audience feedback, *"Yeah, people 'get' me, they know me for the Asian girl in SL who loves K pop and doesn't wear bright colours. I've even had anime (Japanese animation) looking avatars who have spoken to me many times in Japanese and I've met people of a darker completion speak Indian to me"*. Or with Participant 5 who said *"If I dress professionally people take me more seriously. You know I want a certain persona to be recognised, by wearing the suit. It just reinforces that in people's minds, ok that Steve, he's all about business"*. This reinforces what Garder and Matinko (1988) argue in that brand assessment is centered on the feedback or information given by the audience and comes in the form of verbal and non-verbal behavior (Khedher, 2015; Bolino et al. 2016), such as treating an avatar more professionally or the verbal feedback in Japanese or Indian.

Moreover, the findings also highlighted that the desired impression received can go beyond the normal feedback of words and physical recognition as with the example of Participant 2, whose avatar's identity is a singer, and mentions that not only do people recognise her as a singer, but there are *"fans who stalk me and I said that very lightly, who have also copied Abi's head and face. I've just decided to embrace it, most singers wouldn't"*. This is interesting to note that brand success can sometimes reach a level where others want to model their identities on the actor, as in the case of Participant 2.

5.3.2 Avatar Brand Failure

On the other hand, not all audiences' impressions matched the desired identity communicated. As with the findings, there were instances where audiences could not make the connection between the avatar and the role participants were trying to establish, for example, Participant 1, stated, *"I want to be somewhat sexy, however, I'm cursed to always be called cute, I mean sometimes I feel kind of like I'm treated like a child because I am kind of small"*. Furthermore, Participant 9 mentioned *"I don't want to be perceived as a hot guy, intimidating or just like a sex toy or for photos. I prefer to be known as a social friendly person even though my avatar looks the way it looks"*. This reinforces the notion that if an audience perceives the positioning or performance to be misaligned then this will lead to a likelihood in negative responses (Khedher, 2013) as with Participant 9, who is perceived as intimidating.

An interesting point from the findings is that users might revisit their performance based on the feedback they received from the audience. Khedher (2013) highlighted this, by asserting that actors can adjust their verbal and non-verbal behaviour to better suit the target audience and elicit the intended response or target a completely different audience. Fullwood, points out that actors may "adapt their behaviour and interactions on the fly to make good impressions" (2019: 39). This is evident in the case of Participant 1 who said: *"If I'm not seen as "sexy" I would wear sexier clothing and use flirty language and emojis"*. and Participant 9 who said, *"probably I will make him less friendly like make him a little bit more arrogant because of the last experience I had with him the last few weeks, with some people on the platform"*. These actions also fall in line with the impression management as participants engage in the conscious effort/s to control, regulate and manipulate attitudes and behaviours to impose or maintain a favourable impression to a targeted audience (Fullwood, 2019; Rosenberg & Egbert 2011).

Chapter Summary

Successful online person branding consists of a three-part process, Online Brand Identity, Online Brand Performance and Online Brand Assessment. This is in line with the works of Khedher (2013) and Arruda (2003) and is reflective on how avatars

create, perform and maintain their perceptions and impressions that they receive from others. Users of Second Life adopt these fundamental principles and engage in a step-by-step process of planning and creating an identity for their avatars and ensure that they adhere to the role of that avatar, whether it be a real-life extension or a fictional character. This is determined heavily on the style or personality of the avatar, and relates to the objective of person branding either achieving human capital, such as establishing reputation and credibility, advancing their careers (Fournier & Eckhardt, 2019; Gujarathi & Kulkarni, 2018; MacNally & Speak, 2011; Montoya, 2002), such as a singer or an English teacher, or achieving social capital, which represents investments made by individuals to create and enhance their public image (Gandini, 2016; Scolere et al., 2018), such as cute, sexy or professional.

Moreover, users partake in extensive positioning activities through a performance to maintain and communicate desired identities to audiences. This includes the avatar scripts, avatar clothing, avatar features and body, setting or stage, and the verbal tactics employed. This plays true to both Goffman's (1959) self-presentation metaphor that individuals are like actors that choose and cycle through scripts, props, or backdrops (the backstage) to display and perform (the front stage), and to Khedher (2015) who attributes person branding to the promotion of the self through an active marketing communication effort of one's brand identity to a specific target market (Johnson, 2019).

A final point of discussion is that users of Second Life, and more so their avatars, undergo brand image assessment, which similarly happens in-person or on other digital platforms, and is necessary to evaluate if the intended identity has been perceived successfully or not. This is to say, whether users perceived the feedback as meeting the set objectives or whether adjustments need to be made to reinforce that (Khedher, 2015). This was seen with the responsive behaviour audience members relayed back to users, such as speaking in different languages or the fanatical behaviour of copying an avatar's look and profession. Furthermore, avatars also altered the performance stage if the response was negative.

In navigating and understanding the correlation between coded themes, the research objectives and reviewed literature, a summarised theme table (**Table 2**) is presented.

Table 2: A summarised table of themes, literature and findings

Theme	Codes	• Source/ Authors	Research Objective	Discussion/Findings
Research objective was answered in the Literature Review	Research objective was answered in the Literature Review	• Urbanová and Slind (2016) • Labrecque et al. (2011) • Pera, Viglia and Furlan (2016) • Holten and Molyneux (2017) • Gorbato et al. (2018)	1. To contribute to the understanding of the online person brand concept	This study revealed that people, much like products in a company, can strategically market themselves in digital environments to a desired target audience. It also showed that individuals automatically participate in person branding practices whenever they engage with any social online activity or communication. Much like face-to-face person branding, online person branding also mirrors the same motives, such as human- or social capital. This automation is made easier due to the simplification of growing digital platforms, which makes online interaction both more accessible, and common. The ease of navigation through a range of tools and content also contributes to formation and management of a digital person brand.
Research objective was answered in the Literature Review	Research objective was answered in the Literature Review	• Rangarajan et al., (2017) • Johnson, (2019) • Kheder (2015) • Labrecque et al. (2011) • Goffman (1959) • Kheder (2013) • Chen (2013) • Arruda (2003) • Kapferer (2012) • Gandini (2016)	2. To gain a deeper understanding of online person brand positioning practices in digital spaces.	When analysing online person branding practices on most major digital platforms, this study revealed that successful practice must firstly include an established brand identity by identifying a unique or desired attribute that sets you apart from others. Moreover, the concept of roles also has a significant part in an individual's character, personality, and identity construction. Secondly, an individual needs to communicate this brand identity through self-presentation or the practice of positioning. Based on the research, users in a digital environment utilise an array of verbal and nonverbal communication tools and online content such as stories, images, videos, blogs and person websites to create mental shifts and manage impressions from others. Lastly, to measure the success of online person brand positioning, an assessment must be done by which a person evaluates the planned outcome

				against a target audience's feedback or impressions, deeming it a success or failure. They do this by either adjusting their performance, or appearance based on the feedback of others, with the hopes of better aligning their identity to the image assessment.
Online Brand Identity	Real Brand Identity	• Rangarajan et al., (2017) • Baker (2001)	3. To explore the role and relationship avatars play in positioning an individual's brand in Second Life.	Empirical data revealed that some users see the role and relationship of their avatar as merely a tool for exploring, hanging out and socialising, while others reveal that their avatar is a virtual embodiment of their real identity or strictly for playing different characters. However, in both views, users outline and play specific roles through their avatars based on an audience or environment, whether this is in a sci-fi fantasy guild, or a singer in a bar. This indicates that the users construct their avatars' roles with objective intention and therefore emphasises that the avatar is more than just a means for exploration in Second Life, but also serving as a medium for users to practice online person branding.
	Avatar Role and Purpose	• McNally and Speak (2011)		
	Avatar Personality	• Pittman and Kivisto (2013) • Kucharska and Confente (2017)		
	Character Role-Playing	• Inductive Coding (participants' answers)		
	Avatar Gender and Age			
The Stage	Owned Property	• Inductive Coding (participants' answers)		Users through their avatars partake in extensive positioning activities through a performance to maintain and communicate desired identities to audiences. This includes the avatar scripts, avatar clothing, avatar features and body, setting or stage, and the verbal tactics employed. This plays true to both Goffman's (1959) self-presentation metaphor that individuals are like
	Hanging out Places	• Goffman (1959) • Gilmore (2014) • Marwick and boyd (2014)		

	Other Owned Possessions	• Inductive Coding (participants' answers)		actors that choose and cycle through scripts, props, or backdrops (the backstage) to display and perform (the front stage), and to Khedher (2015) who attributes person branding to the promotion of the self through an active marketing communication effort of one's brand identity to a specific target market
Online Brand Performance	Avatar Facial Features	• Szczesny and Kaufmann (2018)		
	Avatar Mannerisms and Behaviour	• DePaulo (1992) • Khedher (2013)		
	Avatar Verbal communication	• Pounders et al. (2016) • Montoya (2002)		
	Avatar Physical Appearance	• Patterson (2017) • Brown (2014)		
	No-Human Avatar	• Inductive Coding (participants' answers)		
	Avatar Clothing	• Gujarathi and Kulkarni (2018) • Johnson (2017) • Barrick (2009)		
Online Brand Assessment	Audience Feedback and Perception	• Inductive Coding (participants' answers)		Users of Second Life, and more so their avatars, undergo brand image assessment, which similarly happens in-person or on other digital platforms, and is necessary to evaluate if the intended identity has been perceived successfully or not. This is to say, whether users perceived the feedback as meeting the set objectives or whether adjustments need to be made to reinforce that. This was seen with the responsive behaviour audience members relayed back to users, such as speaking in different languages or the fanatical behaviour of copying an avatar's look and profession. Furthermore, avatars
	Avatar Success	• Khedher (2015) • Bolino et al. (2016)		
	Avatar Failure	• Fullwood (2019), Rosenberg		

		and Egbert (2011)		also altered the performance stage if the response was negative.
Justification for Playing	Reasons and Motivations for Playing Second Life	• Inductive Coding (participants' answers)		Although this specific theme does not directly relate to the research question and objectives, there were two points of interest that add to them. Firstly, some participants believe that Second Life is not a game but a social platform and secondly, participants mentioned that the justification for playing Second Life is based upon social reasons. These both highlight the role an avatar can serve in achieving social capital and consequentially drive individuals to engage in person branding in Second Life.
	Second Life Classification			
	Photos			

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Further Recommendations

This chapter concludes the key findings of the research by answering the research question and the research objectives. The focus is on how the research has contributed to the growing understanding around the person branding concept, the relevant and prevalent person branding practices used both on digital platforms and in virtual worlds, as well as the defining the exact role and relationship an avatar has with its user. Furthermore, it discusses and offers solutions to three major limitations of this study namely researcher bias, the subject of equality, and the technical limitations presented in the research methodology. Lastly, this chapter emphasises how this research will contribute both academically and commercially to the field of marketing and more importantly, offers recommendations for future research.

6.1 Conclusion and Contribution

The study has examined the phenomenon of person branding in Second Life through the virtual mediator on the avatar. By combining a review of literature and a thematic analysis of ten in-depth interviews, the researcher was able to identify distinctive patterns that answer the research question:

To explore the avatar as a person brand in Second Life

To answer the research question, the research objectives must first be addressed.

These are:

1. To contribute to the understanding of the online person brand concept.
2. To gain a deeper understanding of online person brand positioning practices in digital spaces.
3. To explore the role and relationship avatars play in positioning an individual's brand in Second Life.

In answering the first research objective, this study reveals that people, much like

products in a company, can strategically market themselves in computer-mediated environments to a desired target audience. This study also shows that individuals automatically participate in person branding practices whenever they engage with any social online activity or communication. Much like face-to-face person branding, online person branding also mirrors the same motives, such as human- or social capital. This automation is made easier due to the simplification of growing digital platforms, which makes online interaction both more accessible, and common. The ease of navigation through a range of tools and content also contributes to the digital person branding.

Regarding the second research objective, when analysing online person branding practices on most major digital platforms, this study revealed that successful practice must firstly include an established brand identity by identifying a unique or desired attribute that sets you apart from others. The analysis of empirical data in Second Life also revealed this, as users choose a role, style, or personality for their avatar that is unique to them, whether that was a fictional role like a demon dog or modelled after their real selves. Moreover, the concept of role-playing also has a significant part in an avatar's character, personality, and identity construction.

Secondly, an individual needs to communicate this brand identity through self-presentation or the practice of positioning. Based on the research, users in a digital environment utilise an array of communication tools and online content such as stories, images, videos, blogs and person websites to create mental shifts and manage impressions from others. In the context of avatars, users similarly use both verbal and non-verbal vehicles like avatar facial features and body type, clothing, language, mannerisms, emojis and stages. Users constantly display these to enhance, reinforce, and extract the appropriate impressions from targeted audiences. Lastly, to measure the success of online person brand positioning, an assessment must be done by which a person evaluates the planned outcome against a target audience's feedback or impressions, deeming it a success or failure. Equally, the same was found when investigating the avatar and Second Life, in that users want to achieve the intended image for their avatar. They do this by either adjusting their avatar's performance, or appearance based on the feedback of others, with the hopes of better aligning their identity to the image assessment.

In answering the final research objective, the empirical data reveals that some users see the role and relationship of their avatar as merely a tool for exploring, hanging out and socialising, while others reveal that their avatar is a virtual embodiment of their real identity or strictly for playing different characters. However, in both views, users outline and play specific roles through their avatars based on an audience or environment, whether this is in a sci-fi fantasy guild, or a singer in a bar. This indicates that the users construct their avatars' roles with objective intention and therefore emphasises that the avatar is more than just a means for exploration in Second Life, but also serving as a medium for users to practice online person branding.

Overall, this study has added to the strength of the existing person branding theories of Khedher (2015) and Arruda (2003) by adopting the same principles in Second Life and henceforth answers how avatars can equally follow and practice online person branding by applying the same three-step process used on other online platforms. This signifies that when practiced, a user can build a compelling person brand through the vehicle of a mediated representation like the avatar. Following the conclusions, it can be argued that the field of branding can be extended to the phenomena of humans and avatars. Considering this research, this thesis also contributes to theories around person branding and serves as a contribution to the field of branding in virtual social spaces.

6.2 Limitations of the Research

The first limitation is concerned with sampled participants and more specifically the subject of equality, meaning the level by which all avatars within the phenomenon are represented equally in the study. While the researcher has ensured that the set of samples are diverse in terms of age, race, gender, and sexual orientation, it can be disputed that the empirical findings were derived from a specific social group in terms of Western cultures. This could to some degree, have an impact on misrepresenting the understanding of the phenomenon, or lead to cultural bias (Brutus & Wassmer, 2013). However, it must be noted that including participants of other cultures could have run the risk of misinterpretations caused by language barriers and cultural understanding.

The second limitation identified is that this study is based on qualitative methods, which is often criticised for being too interpretive (Bryman & Bell, 2015) and therefore can be deemed subjective, as it depends on the researchers' interpretations of collected data. The opportunity for researcher bias can happen when drawing important information from empirical data as this relies heavily on the interpretive nature of the researcher even though the researcher's aim was to stay neutral (Bryman & Bell, 2015). However, subjectivity is more difficult to duplicate (Bryman & Bell, 2015) and therefore can be viewed as a strength, as it allows researchers to discover different meanings through interpretations of the same phenomenon (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). However, concerning bias, the researcher of this thesis employed a method of having participants check their own data to establish if the researcher's interpretations seem to be representative of their beliefs.

The final limitation is concerning accessibility to various samples within Second Life. This limitation is based on the restricted 10mbps download speed of Second Life and the existence of only American servers, which directly affects the loading of textures including places, objects, and avatars, essentially causing a lag or delay. Due to the delays, the limitation to access other or diverse avatars was not possible which subsequently limited the responses to the members of the Second Life Friend's Facebook group as mentioned in the research design.

6.3 The Significance of the Thesis

The discoveries of this study as mentioned earlier, contribute to the growing phenomenon of online person branding; however, it has also filled a gap in the literature that is centered around person branding of avatars and the virtual social world, Second Life. This research can also serve as a framework for people who are interested or who are actively engaging in online person branding in a virtual social world. This includes a person who wants to successfully position their avatar in a certain role, or someone who wants to adjust their avatar's identity to generate different perceptions. Additionally, the study can provide marketing managers with insight into how to market and design virtual products that better help users define and manage their brands in both Second Life and other virtual social worlds.

6.4 Suggestions for Further Research

As a proposal for further research, these findings could be strengthened and extended by incorporating in-world ethnographic research, to further contextualise and investigate the relationship between the avatar and online person branding. Since this study only dealt with one method of qualitative inquiry, it might be beneficial to incorporate others, and determine if the results are similar or different. It would also be worthwhile to conduct similar research on other virtual social worlds such as VR Chat and Sansar or even virtual gaming worlds like World of Warcraft, to determine if similar results emerge. This is taking into consideration that these worlds also make use of common concepts such as avatars, clothing and physicality, and additionally include the concept of role-playing. Since this study primarily dealt with human avatars, it may also be valuable to gain more non-human avatars' perspectives in this study, in order to understand and investigate whether possible differences in behaviour or brand identity construction might occur. As mentioned in the limitations, this study focused exclusively on avatars from Western cultures, and therefore, leaves the gap for research on avatars from an Eastern culture. The latter may provide key insights into further understanding the phenomenon of avatar person branding.

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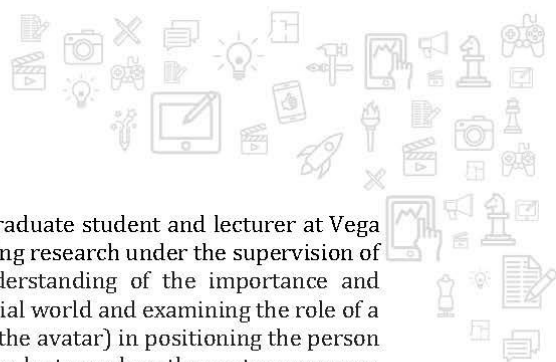
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Appendix A: Explanatory Information Sheet



To whom it may concern,

My name is David Kwaan and I am a post graduate student and lecturer at Vega School, South Africa. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Franci Cronje about obtaining an understanding of the importance and dynamics of person branding in a virtual social world and examining the role of a mediated representative or communicator (the avatar) in positioning the person brand. The main research focus will therefore be to explore the avatar as person brand in Second Life. I hope that this research will enhance our understanding of the importance of an avatar in virtual worlds and the role it plays in personal brand positioning on other similar online platforms.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study. In order to explain to you what your participation in my study will involve, I have formulated questions that I will try to fully answer so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any additional questions that you feel are not addressed or explained in this information sheet, please do not hesitate to ask me for more information. Once you have read and understood all the information contained in this sheet and are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

What will I be doing if I participate in your study?

I would like to invite you to participate in this research because I feel that you would be valuable in providing insightful information about avatars particularly in uncovering the communication of personal brand positioning. If you decide to participate in this research, I would like to conduct an audio interview with you through the platform of Facebook Messenger. The interview will consist of 25 questions and should take about 30-40mins.

You can decide whether or not to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you can choose to withdraw at any time or to decide not to answer particular interview questions.

Are there any risks/ or discomforts involved in participating in this study?

Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no negative impact on you. There are no direct risks or benefits to you if you participate in this study. You might, however, indirectly find that it is helpful to talk about any issues you might experience or are experiencing during the interview. If you find at any stage that you are not comfortable with the line of questioning, you may withdraw or refrain from participating.



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Do I have to participate in the study?

- Your inclusion in this study is completely voluntary;
- If you do not wish to participate in this study, you have every right not to do so;
- Even if you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without having to provide an explanation for your decision.

Will my identity be protected?

I promise to protect your identity. I will not use your name in any research summaries to come out of this research and I will also make sure that any other details are disguised so that nobody will be able to identify you. I would like to ask your permission to record the interviews, but only my supervisor, I and possibly a professional transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings. Nobody else, including anybody at Vega School South Africa, will have access to your interview information. I would like to use quotes when I discuss the findings of the research but I will not use any recognisable information in these quotes that can be linked to you.

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

Once I have finished all interviews, I will write summaries to be included in my research report, which is a requirement to complete my Master's Degree in Creative Brand Leadership. You may ask me to send you a summary of the research and/or a copy of your recorded audio interview, if you are interested in the final outcome of the study.

What happens if I have more questions about the study?

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor should you have any questions or concerns about this research, or if there is anything you need to know before you decide whether or not to participate.

You should not agree to participate unless you are completely comfortable with the procedures followed.

My contact details are as follows:

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David.kwaan@gmail.com

The contact details of my supervisor are as follows:

Dr. Franci Cronje

+27 21 461 8089

fcronje@vegaschool.com



GRAPHIC DESIGN



DIGITAL DESIGN



COPYWRITING



GAME DESIGN



PHOTOGRAPHY



FASHION DESIGN



INTERIOR DESIGN



DIGITAL MARKETING



BRAND COMMUNICATION



BRAND MANAGEMENT

MASTER'S

HONOURS

DEGREES

DIPLOMAS

CERTIFICATES

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Appendix B: Consent Forms

Consent form for participants

I, _____, agree to participate in the research conducted by David Kwaan about obtaining an understanding of the importance and dynamics of person branding in a virtual social world and examining the role of a mediated representative or communicator (the avatar) in positioning the person brand.

This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that:

1. I agree to be interviewed for this research.
2. My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private.
3. My participation in this research is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time. There will be no repercussions should I choose to withdraw from the research.
4. I may choose not to answer any of the questions that are asked during the research interview.
5. I may be quoted directly when the research is published, but my identity will be protected.

Signature

Date



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Consent form for audio-recording/ video recording

I, _____, agree to allow David Kwaan to audio record my interviews as part of the research about obtaining an understanding of the importance and dynamics of person branding in a virtual social world and examining the role of a mediated representative or communicator (the avatar) in positioning the person brand.

This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve. I understand that:

- 1. My confidentiality will be ensured. My name and personal details will be kept private.
- 2. The recordings will be stored in a password protected file on the researcher’s computer.
- 3. Only the researcher, the researcher’s supervisor and possibly a transcriber (who will sign a confidentiality agreement) will have access to these recordings.
- 4. You may at any time request a copy of the audio recording

Signature

Date

MASTER'S**HONOURS****DEGREES****DIPLOMAS****CERTIFICATES**

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Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your avatar? [how would you describe avatar name?]
2. Why did you choose this user name?
3. Why you have chosen this race and skin colour?
4. Why did you choose this specific body shape and face?
5. Why did you choose that gender and age for your avatar?
6. Tell me about your choice of clothing? Why did you opt to wear that? Is it a reflection of you in real life?
7. How much did it cost? And why did you buy it? Does your avatar change clothes regularly and why they?
8. Where do you normally hang out? And why would you go there? What type of places are these?
9. Who do you hang out with and why?
10. Do you own any land? What else do you own and why did you buy it? Do you want to imply something with it [a mansion = wealth]?
11. Why have you chosen an avatar that is similar or separate to you in real life?
12. Is your avatar any different to you in person, personality wise? And how so?
13. Why do you play Second Life?
14. What role does your avatar specifically play? Why? Does it stick to that role?
15. What does your avatar mean to you? Is it a simple tool or something more?
16. How do you perceive your avatar? Do you perceive it as you?
17. How do other avatars perceive your avatar?
18. How do you want your avatar to be seen by other avatars? Is this how you want to be seen?
19. How do you interact with random or new avatars? Do you display any specific type of mannerisms [emojis or gestures] and why?
20. How do you interact with avatars you want to be friends with? And why?
21. How do you interact with avatars that you are familiar with? And why?
22. Do avatars “get” or “understand” what type of person you trying to portray or not? How so?
23. Do you change things about your avatar? How often and why?
24. Would you change anything about your avatar and/or how you interact with other avatars and why?

Appendix D: Ethical Clearance



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LETTER OF APPROVAL FOR MASTERS PROPOSAL DEFENCE

Date: 29 September 2016
Student number: 15003857
Institution where registered: VEGA School of Brand Leadership
Qualification: Master of Arts in Brand Leadership

Dear Mr David Paul Kwaan,

Thank you for the defence and resubmission of your Master's proposal entitled:

"Me, myself and I. 3.0 - Exploring the avatar as person brand in *Second Life*."

I am pleased to inform you that the Research and Postgraduate Committee considered and **has approved your research proposal**. Ethics clearance has also been granted.

The Research and Postgraduate Committee raised a number of questions and made suggestions which can assist you with your study. These should be attended to under the guidance of your supervisor.

The Committee confirms that Dr Franci Cronjé has been appointed as your supervisor.

All the best with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Zakhele Mbokazi
Acting Academic Manager