



SPECIAL SECTION

## “I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man”

### Typing the neoliberal self into a branded existence

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This article discusses personal branding, a performance genre that many job seekers in the United States are told to master in order to get a job. I discuss the specific techniques you are supposed to use to brand yourself, some of the origins of these techniques, and the reasons why people find it challenging to put these techniques into practice. I analyze the self that personal branding assumes everyone should be able to present to others by deploying a set of semiotic practices meant to create the impression of a coherent authentic self. Personal branding is treated as a lens into some lived dilemmas that emerge when one tries to put a model of a neoliberal self into practice, with special attention drawn to the tension between flexibility and legibility.

Keywords: Branding, neoliberal self, hiring, employment, career advice

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Personal branding is a performance genre that includes a set of semiotic techniques designed to solve a problem that emerges when workers seek to present themselves as worthy of alliances under contemporary neoliberal conceptions of the ideal working self. Many critics of the entrepreneurial self argue that the ideal neoliberal self is maximally flexible, constantly adapting to new working conditions, and able to smoothly enhance their skills to meet market demands (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006; du Gay 1996; Martin 1994; Sennett 1998, 2006). Yet in practice when hiring, flexibility can undercut legibility. Job seekers with a history of varied jobs who demonstrate flexibility will often struggle to present themselves as coherent and employable selves when producing the genre repertoire of resumes, interviews, business cards, and so on required to apply for a job. Simply put, too many different kinds of jobs can make one’s

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The title of this article is a quotation from West, Kanye feat. Jay-Z. 2005. “Diamonds from Sierra Leone (remix).” Rock-A-Fella Records LLC.



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application difficult for employers to interpret favorably. How does someone persuade potential employers that he or she is a predictable and coherent self who is suitable for the workplace-specific requirements of a job or particular business alliance when in practice one is supposed to embody an idealized version of a flexible self?

Especially in the United States, career counselors and other experts on the job market will often turn to the performance genre of personal brand as providing the semiotic set of techniques that will putatively provide the needed coherence, supplementing their equally enthusiastic recommendation that people aspire to an idealized neoliberal version of flexibility. In this article, I analyze the self that personal branding assumes everyone should be able to present to others by deploying a set of semiotic practices meant to create the impression of a coherent authentic self. In doing so, I am engaging with Susan Gal's call in her article, "Language and political economy" to view this genre as one example of an "authorized or hegemonic linguistic" practice that carries "cultural definitions of social life that serves the interests of dominant classes" (Gal 1989: 348). Yet as Gal also points out, these forms are also often constraining, even to the dominant classes, when deployed (Gal 1989: 348). Following these insights, in this article, I explore how branding tries to offer an ideological response that is meant to ameliorate the practical dilemmas of living as an entrepreneurial self, but is a response that in practice generates more social conundrums than it resolves. Personal branding, in short, is a lens into some lived dilemmas that emerge when one tries to put a model of a neoliberal self into practice, in particular the tension between a neoliberal take on flexibility and the practical need for legibility.<sup>1</sup>

Personal branding has a popularly recognized origin, linked directly to the promotion of an initially US-based version of the neoliberal self. In 1997, Tom Peters, a well-known business author and "management guru," introduced personal branding in the magazine *Fast Company*, arguing two points simultaneously. His first claim was that everyone should recognize that they were not only entrepreneurs but also business enterprises in their own right: "We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc." As a logical extension, everyone also needed to be involved in creating her or his own brand. To present oneself as hireable is to present oneself as an appealing bundle of temporary business solutions—the language of business problems and solutions situating branding squarely in a broader register of US business-speak. Resumes and interview answers are also supposed to be marketing tools in which the job candidate details their experiences at providing business solutions to market-driven problems that a particular company might face. Given this, Peters' suggestion that one develops a personal brand is but one of a number of logical extensions of the neoliberal conceptual framework, turning this model into a set of practices geared toward future employment. As such, self-branding has become widely promoted in the United States by career counselors, personal branding experts, and self-help publications—a concept turned into a commodity through workshops, publications, and consulting services. It has also spread

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1. Neoliberal perspectives are not the only locus for contradictions between a flexibility seen as innovative and creative and a need for predictability and legibility. See Eitan Wilf's work on the paradox at the core of jazz schools, which provide a standardized and regimented approach for an improvisational art form (Wilf 2014).

internationally—one can find personal branding experts and classes in any number of countries, from Cambodia, Egypt, Kenya, to Kazakhstan.

The notion of personal branding is an offshoot of what many scholars describe as the entrepreneurial self, a subjectivity that Foucault, Nikolas Rose, and others argue needs to accompany neoliberal logics so that a market logic can be extended into all realms (see Brown 2015; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Cruikshank 1999; Foucault 2010; Rose 1998). Broadly speaking, the entrepreneurial self should, as Rose states, “make an enterprise of its life, seek to maximize its own human capital, project itself a future, and seek to shape itself in order to become that which it wishes to be” (Rose 1998: 154). In Rose’s account, as in many others, the reflexive management of one’s self as an object is key, as is the understanding that one can constantly enhance one’s self. Yet what is to be enhanced is left vague in many of these accounts, described largely as the source of human capital.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I argue that in the United States there is a more detailed notion of what can and cannot be enhanced about the self. The entrepreneurial self is taken to be a bundle of skills, qualities, assets, experiences, and relationships, and it is this compilation that must be enhanced, with the sole exception of one’s qualities. As personal branding workshops in the United States reveal, one’s qualities are assumed to be authentic and unchanging. Indeed, as I argue throughout this article, it is qualities, as understood in this fashion, that demarcate the style by which one manages oneself and differentiates oneself from others: qualities are considered the source of brand uniqueness. Thus the techniques for creating a personal brand are meant to reveal one’s self-managerial style, who one will predictably be in all contexts, supposedly. This, however, is a model, and thus raises the question: what kinds of problems emerge for people actively trying to implement this model in which most, but not all aspects of the self, can be enhanced?

There is a growing body of literature on neoliberalism and the neoliberal self that is contributing to the critique of neoliberalism, not by pointing out the dangers of neoliberalism from the outside, so to speak, but by addressing internal fault lines (Cook 2016; Feher 2009; Freeman 2007; Reich 2016). That is, these scholars are tracing the internal contradictions with neoliberal logics when put into practice, exploring how people on the ground mobilize different aspects of neoliberal logics to critique neoliberal political and economic systems, forms of expertise, and the ways others instantiate neoliberal logics. For example, Jennifer Reich explains how a neoliberal valorization of choice leads mothers opposed to vaccination to reject the advice of experts, also made essential by neoliberal logics (see Rose 1998). Reich states:

Mothers’ perceptions of vaccines as potentially harmful and their resulting strategies of refusal underscore larger systems of meaning, which include desires to optimize their children’s health and emphasize their children’s unique needs instead of generic public health policies. They do so in dialogue with cultural norms that hold them uniquely accountable for their children’s successes, failures, health, and disability. (Reich 2016: 699)

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2. The concept of human capital comes from economist Gary Becker (1964), who has been influential in extending a market logic to how people are meant to understand themselves as market actors.

This is an example of how mothers bring together neoliberal understandings of choice, risk, and responsibility to refuse institutionally sanctioned forms of expertise. While Reich is studying a group that consistently makes the same decision in a neoliberal conflict between choice and expertise, in my fieldwork, people were not as consistent in how they handled parallel contradictions. I am contributing to this line of questioning by exploring the dilemmas job seekers encounter when creating a personal brand, that is, the lived tensions between the imperative to be flexible and the imperative to be legible, as well as between the simultaneous need for uniqueness, and/or authenticity as opposed to the need for standardization.

In the United States, job seekers, and workers in general, are actively encouraged through workshops and most job advice to inhabit a version of the neoliberal self in which the self is taken to be a business. In hiring, if the self is a business metaphorically, then by extension, the employment contract is a business-to-business alliance (Gershon 2017). The question for job seekers is how to ensure that a company wants to enter into a business-to-business alliance with them. Yet when personal branding is presented to job seekers, it is presented as more than just an extension of the idea that one must market oneself as if one was a business. As I discuss in this article and elsewhere (Gershon 2014, 2017), the challenge is to turn a complex person, intertwined in varied and often not so compatible relationships and social orders, into a regimented semiotically constructed subject that can be represented, primarily online, as a coherent and predictable self for potential business alliances.<sup>3</sup>

This involves captioning experience in putatively generic<sup>4</sup> business standards of self-presentation. Michael Silverstein argues that in American politics, the political version of the branded self, the message, has “the characterological aura of a persona, much like a character in realist literature, who has not only said and done things, but who has the potential, in the fictive universe of a plot, to be imaginable as acting in certain ways in situations still unrealized in plot spacetime—the character’s plot-framed ‘future’” (Silverstein 2011: 204). Job seekers, in short, are supposed to identity their “story,” the narrative that provides a working history whose lead character is a predictable self composed of recognizable and named qualities that will determine how the person will act in any future circumstances. Silverstein implies that this character or self, while obviously immersed in various contexts, is not supposed to be influenced too much by the contexts they encounter. In short, once hard working, always hard working, regardless of one’s unpleasant boss, tedious work, or difficult coworkers. While what Silverstein describes might at first glance sound like the creation of a person’s reputation, and thus imply that message, branding, and reputation are all interchangeable concepts, this conflation overlooks how message, brand, and reputation are semiotically constructed.

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3. For brevity’s sake, I am not developing an argument in this article that the branded self operates according to an animation logic, but see Teri Silvio (2010) for a fuller explanation of how brands in general exemplify the animation trope. In turning to animation instead of performance, I am suggesting that Erving Goffman’s analysis of participation frameworks (1974, 1981) are more applicable for this phenomenon than his arguments in *The presentation of self in everyday life* (1959).
  4. These registers are understood as generic and traveling smoothly across industries in part because market interactions are held in these contexts to be universal.

As I show in this article, in practice, personal branding involves specific semiotic techniques that make personal branding a project distinct from attending to one’s reputation.

In the job-seeking workshops I attended, motivational speakers stressed that this narratable self also has to be an authentic self. As Sarah Banet-Weiser points out in her book, *Authentic TM*, this is a reconfiguration of earlier Western notions of the relationship between the authentic self and commodification. While previously scholars ranging from Thoreau to Marx viewed commodification as fundamentally undercutting the true self, this is no longer the presupposition with branded selves. Instead, as Banet-Weiser argues, “within contemporary consumer culture we take it for granted that authenticity, like anything else, can be branded” (Banet-Weiser 2012: 13). I would add, that for US–self-branding experts, authenticity is not only available for branding but the basis for a brand. The authenticity at the heart of a personal brand presumes an unchanging, transcontextual set of qualities each person is supposed to possess—qualities such as being motivated, organized, responsible, strategic, and so on. This insistence on authenticity, as I will describe in detail later, is where people espousing neoliberal logics locate the form of predictability that a neoliberal logic requires of those entering into business-to-business alliances.

If the self-as-business is meant to be a bundle of skills, assets, experiences, qualities, and alliances, then the branded self privileges some aspects over others (see Hearn 2008: 203 for a similar argument about reality show stars’ personal brands). Other genres involved in hiring, such as the resume or LinkedIn profile, reveal one’s professional connections or skills. One’s brand reveals one’s qualities. For personal branding advocates, the unchanging nature of these qualities supersede skills and experiences as predictors of who an employee will be in the future, especially since in the neoliberal framework, skills and experiences are components of the self that are constantly being transformed.<sup>5</sup>

The emphasis on qualities instead of skills in the personal brand is not so surprising when one takes the oft-touted flexibility workers are meant to have under neoliberalism as a dilemma people on the ground struggle with instead of a consistently held ideal. Indeed, it points to the tensions between flexibility and legibility that repeatedly emerge because of a neoliberal emphasis on continual enhancement. Many critics of neoliberalism argue that flexibility is now an unchallenged ideal—both companies and people (viewing themselves as analogous to companies) are expected to be maximally flexible to survive how the market is currently structured.

The argument about flexibility centers on the fact that under neoliberal capitalist conditions, the firm has fundamentally changed its nature. I turn to Richard Sennett’s account (1998, 2006); others such as Karen Ho (2009) and Peter Cappelli (1999) have made complementary arguments. Sennett argues that flexibility has become so prized for workers partially because of the way in which flexibility has

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5. Hiring managers, recruiters, and HR that I interviewed said they were as concerned with whether someone had the right skills for a job as they were with “fit,” which they described as determined in interviews rather than by interpreting displays of branded selves.

become prized for companies. As Sennett argues, businesses are valued largely in terms of their immediate returns to stockholders—short-term market valuation has become the measure rather than long-term growth and profit. And stock prices tend to rise whenever there is any strong signal of institutional change. Sennett writes: “While disruption might not be justifiable in terms of productivity, the short-term returns to stockholders provide a strong incentive to the powers of chaos disguised by that seemingly assuring word ‘reengineering.’ Perfectly viable businesses are gutted or abandoned, capable employees are set adrift rather than rewarded, simply because the organization must prove to the market that it is capable of change” (Sennett 1998: 51). When the product matters far less than the stock price, companies must be able to shift direction rapidly. These kinds of shifts require, as Sennett points out, a workforce that can grow or, more commonly, shrink rapidly, as well as workers able to follow the company in whatever new direction it is supposed to go. When companies are expected to be able to signal to “the market” an ability to change rapidly, they also require workers who are equally fluid in their focus and abilities (see also Boltanski and Chiapello 2006; Martin 1994).

Lisa Adkins and Celia Lury (1999) argue that within organizations, this imperative to be self-flexible has not only transformed the employment contract but also the mechanisms by which organizations police their employees’ ability to adequately fulfill this contractual requirement, increasing feedback. “Each worker’s ability to enter into an employment contract therefore implicitly depends upon his or her ability to be self-transforming, self-governing, and self-possessing in regard to self-identity, their progress monitored by regular self-appraisal and performance reviews” (Adkins and Lury 1999: 601). They point out that companies increasingly use performance reviews, team-building exercises, and various institutionalized forms of mentoring and reports generated by workplace surveillance to encourage employees to consciously transform themselves in anticipation of the company’s future needs. These techniques are meant to encourage workers to imagine themselves as context-free personalities available for improvement. The feedback itself, however, is often framed as both psychological and gender-specific—Adkins and Lury argue that some identities are able to be more context-free than others. At the same time, because this feedback is psychological, not structural, workers are rarely given insight into a company’s potential needs. As Elaine Swan and Stephen Fox point out: “The organization imposes a responsibility upon the worker to effectively become ‘psychic’—to be able to sense and know in what way he or she must self-transform to remain with the organization and not be found in breach of contract” (Swan and Fox 2009: S153). While the burden of self-transformation is individualized through these “pedagogies of feedback” with the company (Swan and Fox 2009: S151–52), for job seekers, self-branding becomes a disciplining technique for encouraging some forms of stability and not others.

The ever-present pressure on US companies to be able to turn on a dime presents a conundrum for those seeking to be hired under these circumstances: how does one present oneself as a good hire to a company that is supposed to be always on the verge of transformation, and in directions one cannot predict? Personal branding, for many, promises to be a more effective basis for an alliance that can accommodate the churn and constant new directions that businesses in this model are meant to embrace. One’s skills, after all, may be suitable for a temporary need,

but this is only a temporary market solution. The solutions employees can offer to a business may not be needed in the business’s next incarnation. In a situation of such instability, how is a worker to anticipate how they can be valued, and successfully enough to continue having a job over the course of their working life, albeit at many different organizations? Branding experts promise that the combination of flexibility and predictability that branding is supposed to provide will in fact lead to employability in the future.

Yet none of the employers or recruiters that I spoke to during my research mentioned paying attention to applicants’ personal brands, or any of the semiotic techniques I describe in this article. Their focus was far more on applicants’ skills and ability to interact well with their specific workplace than context-free personal qualities.<sup>6</sup> In my fieldwork, personal branding was a concept and set of activities that career counselors and motivational speakers promoted, job seekers would engage with, and those hiring ignored in their evaluations of job candidates.

Why should so many promote the concept of personal branding when its efficacy is so elusive? First, as Peters suggests, it is a logical (but not necessary) extension of how people think about the employment contract nowadays. Second, it provides a set of prescriptive standardizing techniques for managing something that baffles many job seekers these days: constructing an online presence that signals to others that they are not only employable but also desirable as a worker. Third, the techniques of personal branding can so easily be packaged as commodities in themselves. While personal brands as a performance genre don’t prove to be useful insights for people selecting job candidates, the genre itself is a tidy semiotic package of techniques to sell to job seekers. Yet, however tidy it may seem in workshops, in practice there is a constant tension in representing one’s self as unique or authentic through standardized and regimented techniques.

### *Personal Branding Workshops in the United States*

Personal branding workshops now abound wherever people might be inclined to attend a class or workshop for learning how to be a more successful job applicant. During 2013–14, I observed fifty-four workshops in the Bay Area that were geared toward finding jobs, five of which were solely focused on personal branding, although the topic was discussed in the other workshops. I also interviewed 170 job

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6. Obviously, there is no way to discern whether or not personal branding works, but to the degree that my interlocutors in the field thought it was successful in some cases, it reflects not some inherent power to the practice itself but the potential value of mastering professionally recognized performance genres. In a set of interviews I conducted in July 2016 in the same region with primarily African Americans living on the poverty line and seeking employment, two years after the fieldwork discussed here, I heard for the first time about an in-person job interview in which a self-branding technique was openly requested. The interviewers asked an African American woman in her 50s to name three or four words that described her authentic self. Unaware of self-branding techniques, she found this odd, but gamely answered: “I am a woman of character, a woman of integrity, and a woman of color.” She recognized after the fact that this answer went down like a lead balloon. Here the problem seemed to be that she had not properly mastered the branding performance genre—being a woman of color is not supposed to be an authentic quality according to branding logic.

seekers, jobholders, career counselors, people in HR, hiring managers, and recruiters on personal branding, among other topics.

When I returned to my home institution, Indiana University, I decided to attend a Google recruiter's workshop to teach undergraduates how to brand themselves. I was curious whether personal branding workshops would be different for college students than they were for the workshops in the Bay Area, which were primarily filled with job seekers who were forty-five years old and older. I thought perhaps that college students faced a different problem than older job seekers do because of their lack of experience. As hiring managers would point out, it was difficult for them to be able to distinguish between recent graduates—their resumes were a bit too similar on paper. Perhaps branding workshops for recent graduates would place more emphasis on demonstrating uniqueness as a result. This did not turn out to be the case: every branding workshop I have attended recommends the same set of techniques and offers the same logic.

Admittedly, there were some obvious superficial differences from the beginning. Pepper, the Google workshop leader, brought a dozen pizzas for what ended up being eleven or twelve undergraduates—no other workshop I attended included pizza. In her mid-twenties, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, she played music and was dancing before the workshop began—she acted like she could have just graduated from college five months earlier. Yet I am turning to this workshop as a central focus for this article because so much of the discussion across all the workshops I attended about personal branding's semiotic techniques was so similar, and Pepper explained the assumptions in such vivid terms.

Twenty minutes into the workshop, she had everyone do an exercise in which people talked to their neighbor for thirty seconds, sketching out briefly some relevant background. The audience members then had to write down three words that each thought would describe their neighbor. I was a bit taken back that the determinedly good-willed Chinese undergraduate I chatted with decided to describe me as "sweet." I struggled to describe her; she had said such nondescript things about liking Bloomington and traveling to Boston for winter break in her thirty seconds. I ended up describing her as "earnest, curious, and tasteful." After this exercise, Pepper explained that the reason she got her job at Google was related to this adjective game, part of her effort to convince her audience that fashioning a personal brand was now an essential part of searching for a job. Like the other self-branding workshops I attended, the instructor assumed audience members do not know what a personal brand is, and are not already convinced that they need one. The first third or first half of every personal branding workshop is often devoted to convincing the audience of the value of branding techniques.

Pepper told the following story to illustrate how a personal brand could get someone a job. She explained that she had interviewed at Google in 2008, without openly reminding the audience that the financial crisis was unfolding then. After she got hired, she wondered why, and asked a man who had been on the hiring team that interviewed her:

I finally worked up the courage to ask him, "What was it in that interview that sold you on me? How did I get so lucky as to get this job?" He said: "Pepper, honestly, I can't tell you what your GPA was, I couldn't tell you



anything that you listed on your resume, I don’t remember the questions that I asked you, nor do I remember the answers that you gave. But I do remember that you were one of the most positive people I have ever met in my life. And I knew that in this customer experience role that you were applying for, I knew that you would be very positive with our customers, and you would help their perception of our products, and you would shed this positive light and make their days better. Because I definitely knew that you were going to make my day better every day that you worked on my team. You didn’t know this, but I had actually just started at Google about three months before I had interviewed you. And I worked for an auto company in Detroit that was failing. And the attitude at work was so negative that I had to leave and when I saw you, I knew that I wanted someone like you on my team.” So I didn’t even get three adjectives from this man who had interviewed me, I got one. And that, hands down, is what got me my job at Google. It wasn’t my answers. I am sure that had something to do with it, but it wasn’t my answers, it wasn’t what was on my resume. It was my personal brand that I was able to communicate in that interview.

This story captures many of the components of personal branding that circulate widely. First, determining what your personal brand should be requires particular semiotic techniques—choosing the three or four words that capture one’s essence, the terms that personal branding aficionados claim reveal one’s authentic self. Second, one should avoid being too direct about one’s personal brand, although what counts as direct speech is, of course, contextually specific (see also Silverstein 2011). Both in Pepper’s exercise and in her example, people are supposed to sense the words that underlie one’s personal brand without explicitly being told what these words are. Pepper was modeling how one knows if one has been successful in one’s attempts at self-branding, when the qualities someone believes he or she exudes, encapsulated in the handful of words one has preselected, are then reflected back in the words others would choose to describe that person. For Pepper, the mark of her branding success was that she and her interviewer agreed that she was a positive person.

Third, when her interviewer was explaining to Pepper why he hired her, he was reflecting upon a complicated socioeconomic situation, the collapse of the automotive industry in the wake of the Great Recession. Yet the recession only appears obliquely in a commentary on the kind of emotional labor her interviewer would like performed by his coworkers (Hochschild 1983). He wants to be surrounded by happy people, not people who are worried that a dire economic situation will lead to massive layoffs. These branding techniques encourage a focus on a person’s supposedly unchanging personal qualities and require ignoring socioeconomic contexts.

### ***Can a person be like a Diet Coke?***

This process of branding one’s self is, at its core, a paradoxical and recursive effort: using the techniques marketers had developed to endow an object with a personality, modeled putatively after human personalities but transformed through the process of translating a personality type associated with a person to one that could be

seen as emanating from an object (see Gershon 2014 for a lengthier account of this recursive process). It turns out that the ways in which a person is *not* a Diet Coke guarantees that people will face a range of relatively predictable problems when they try to brand themselves.<sup>7</sup> The conundrum for those trying to self-brand is not just that a person is not a Diet Coke but that a person is not an *anthromorphized* Diet Coke. When advertisers try to develop a brand for an object, their explicit goal is to endow an object with a personality. In his article, “From genericide to viral marketing,” Robert Moore (2003) addresses the techniques that marketers have developed to provide objects with a brand. The object is frequently branded through exercises that require those developing a brand to imagine the brand as a person (Moore 2003: 342). A group of marketers might sit around a table, trying to answer the question: “If Diet Coke was a person, how would you describe that person?” Once they have a list of adjectives, they then have to figure out how to imply these adjectives to a broad audience without openly stating these adjectives. This supposedly is based on how people reveal their qualities persuasively. As an example, Moore describes how one woman teaching branding to her coworkers explained that brands function like a beautiful person at a party. The beautiful woman does not announce her beauty verbally but she projects this beauty to partygoers, and if successful, she is associated with this attribute (Moore 2003: 340). The labor this beautiful woman performs is the labor advertisers must do when attaching personalities to objects. When motivational speakers were advocating personal branding in the workshops I attended, they were turning to techniques developed to associate an object with the attributes of a person, be it a person’s personality or appearance.

As Celia Lury points out in her book, *Brands*, in order for an object to have a personality in a US cultural context, the branded object’s personality has to be a context-free collection of traits. One can only ascribe a personality to an object as long as personality is understood to be independent of context. Diet Coke is meant to be associated with a set of qualities regardless of the surrounding conditions, how it was stored, the context in which someone drinks the Coke. And an object’s personality does not have to be based on a real person. As Lury argues: “The personality that sustains the iconic logo need not necessarily be embodied in an individual, fictional or real, alive or dead, but is instead an abstract amalgam of qualities . . . the indeterminate composite of values that are commonly associated with individuals in the abstract” (Lury 2004: 75). A brand personality is metaphorically linked to a person’s personality in the sense that a few of the words one might use to describe someone’s personality can be selected to describe an object too. This personality being attributed to the object isn’t based on an actual person, but a generic idea of what a personality is. The semiotic tokens are meant to refer to a person in a specific situation; instead, the qualities are, in fact, a fairly limited collage of generic characteristics. Thus brands are tied to certain objects, according to brand managers, by using a generic idea of an individual with a vivid but abstract set of personal qualities.

When personal branding experts recommend that people adopt the techniques that produce a generic idea of individuals, they are at the same time able to enforce

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7. See Susan Coutin (2010) for the practical problems of branding a war-torn country such as El Salvador and Bonnie Urciuoli (2014) for the practical problems of branding a college experience.

a generic idea of the job market. In this continual slippage between object and person, personal branding also presupposes that labor markets are structured along the same lines as commodity markets: that prices are the economic mechanisms that regulate supply and demand (Peck 1996); that metrics or other data analogous to commodities can serve as the basis of adequate market information for comparing different applicants; and that purchasing labor-power is equivalent in nature to purchasing any other form of commodity (and thus denying the social relationships underlying this concept of labor-power; see Marx 1849). The advice also posits that labor markets for all jobs are uniform in nature, operating according to the same basic principles regardless of the nature of the job or the conditions of the workplace. This becomes particularly apparent in the way that personal branding advice presupposes that hiring is the same ritual for all types of jobs, and thus requiring the same techniques for successfully being hired.

Because branding depends upon crafting a context-free personality in a putatively uniformly structured labor market, it can be used for unlikely populations. Ramina was a career counselor who explained why she thought branding was an ideal strategy for job seekers who were recently released from jail. She had been involved in a project organized by parole officers geared toward helping their parolees navigate job markets, a challenge that she loved. She thought branding encouraged them to see what value they had to offer others. She took the techniques that personal branding requires, of separating personality from context, and asked parolees to reimagine their past experiences along these lines. In workshops, she would say to the ex-offenders,

“Tell me about some of the good, strong skills that you have.”

“I’m good with selling drugs. I was one of the best drug dealers out there.”

“Great, great. Let’s talk about that. Let’s take that illegal element out of it and let’s focus on your skills. What did it take to make someone trust you over and over to come in and buy drugs from you?”

“I’m good with customer service. I was honest.”

“Jot that down. Then make a list of all these skills they use in order to do their illegal activity, minus the illegal part of it.”

“Let’s talk about your personal brand.” . . .

“I did drugs.”

“Ok, you did drugs. How did you figure out if this was the right drug dealer for you to approach or not?”

“I can read people like there’s no tomorrow. I can read them.”

“Ok. Let’s put that down. Ability to read people. And we’ll reword it later on but jot it down. How did you survive in prison? How did you survive? How did you keep yourself from being attacked, from being raped, from all of that? What is it that you have that ability . . .?”

“I have an ability to survive. I can work in any type of situation.”

“Jot it down!”

Ramina asks parolees to distinguish between the conscious strategies they used and what they were actually doing in that situation. Because a brand personality is context-free, it is irrelevant if you are good at finding a trustworthy drug-dealer

or a trustworthy car salesman. What is important is that the person has a talent at determining who is trustworthy. Here Ramina is reflecting on a core element of the neoliberal self—how one manages one's self is a consistent, reflexive engagement that putatively transcends all contexts, and it is possible to represent one's specific style of engagement through a handful of carefully chosen semiotic tokens.

Choosing three or four semiotic tokens is not a technique developed initially for people. When people try to brand themselves, they are using techniques designed to associate an object with a personality, techniques that had to be radically simplified to be effective precisely because objects don't engage in the world in the complex ways that people do. Diet Cokes aren't moody when talking to their ex-boyfriend or relieved and happy after getting a good performance review at work. Even in Ramina's version, branding oneself is a simplifying exercise in which one ignores all the reasons that someone might be using their particular abilities in the first place.

### *When do objects need personalities?*

This imperative behind branding—that objects must have personalities in order to appeal to consumers—has its historical origins in the dilemmas companies faced when mass-manufactured goods initially became widespread in the United States. At the turn of the twentieth century, companies were faced with a quandary: how to convince customers to trust their products when these consumers were far more familiar with market relationships based on trusting the seller, typically buying goods from trusted shopkeepers who sold undifferentiated merchandise. Supply chains could often be quite short; shopkeepers sold goods provided by local producers. US historian Bruce Schulman (2014) describes how the marked rise of mass-manufactured goods significantly altered people's shopping experiences from the 1890s onward, leading to the rise of product brands. Before the 1890s, people purchased goods from sellers that they knew—the local pharmacist compounding his own medicines or the peddler who came through every six months. They also bought tomato sauce or cough syrup, not Heinz's ketchup or Lydia Pinkham's cough syrup.

In the 1890s, with the rise of mass-manufactured goods, consumers had to learn how to trust new supply chains and new producers. Shoppers began to encounter goods that were differentiated because they were associated with a particular company, not a local shopkeeper or local farmer. People increasingly had access to large department stores, and even local dry goods stores began to stock a range of mass-manufactured items. Yet these consumers had a quandary: how did they know that the commodities they were buying were of good quality?

To reassure consumers, companies decided to mimic the personal relationships consumers had developed with local shopkeepers, and created recognizable and vivid figures to accompany the products. Schulman writes: "National advertising campaigns testified to the purity of products in a market where fears of adulterated goods ran rampant. Recognizable trademarks and packages became old friends, easing the transition to a brave new world of commerce. Some manufacturers even created characters, asking customers to write with questions, recipes, and problems" (Schulman 2014: 22). Providing companies with a brand personality was literal in a different sense than it is today. The companies were not ascribing a set of abstract personal qualities to an object. Instead, they were providing a corporate

character to take the symbolic place of the local shopkeeper, and thus reassure consumers. Brand personalities first began in the United States as a way to allude to the complex histories and familiarity that consumers had with individual sellers, encouraging them to create similar ties and loyalty to a company producing a broad range of mass-manufactured products. In short, brand personalities first emerged to solve a social dilemma created by a transformation in how goods are produced and distributed.

Over the course of the twentieth century, brands increasingly became used to differentiate products. The purpose of branding shifted away from primarily inspiring a consumer to trust a long supply chain and a distant company. As Moore points out, brands became a solution for a dilemma that companies have whenever they are selling a product: How does a company convince potential consumers that, say, two Starbucks lattes will taste the same, especially if they are made by baristas in different cities? Trademarks are symbols designed to suggest that the designated objects and events (say, ClubMed vacations) provide interchangeable and predictable experiences (Coombe 1998; Manning 2010). Pepper mentioned this in her workshop on personal branding, when she asked the audience to describe why Diet Coke had such an effective brand. One male undergraduate said, “I like the way it is always the same.” Pepper promptly agreed: “You can go anywhere, and get a Coca-Cola. Sometimes it is called, in Italy, when I was downing Diet Coke, as I was studying abroad, it was called Coca-Zero. But it still tasted pretty close to the same thing, which is definitely something that makes them unique.” In this workshop, Diet Coke’s success as a brand was based in its predictability.

### *Your inner manager*

Personal branding developed to solve a market-specific problem for job seekers, one that has resonances with how brands are supposed to make objects seem stable. When Tom Peters (1997) popularized personal branding in “The brand called you,” he argued that people need to brand themselves because career trajectories are no longer clear-cut vertical paths. He wrote: “A career is now a checkerboard. Or even a maze. It’s full of moves that go sideways, forward, slide on the diagonal, even go backward when that makes sense. (It often does.)” (Peters 1997). Now that staying with a single company is no longer an ideal career trajectory, people must find strategies for crafting a coherent narrative about their work history for recruiters and future hiring managers. The presupposition is that one’s career trajectory involves many job changes, enough that the already-established markers developed to explain who and what someone is as a worker are no longer as reliable or legible across industries. What Peters and other career counselors argue is that branding one’s self is an effective strategy for suggesting easily why a work history that may look like a maze at first glance does indeed have its own internal logic. Just as branding is supposed to help convince consumers that one Starbucks latte will be like another Starbucks latte, regardless if it is made in New Orleans or Paris, so too with personal branding. These techniques are supposed to convince employers that they are hiring a stable, predictable person, regardless of the varied complexities of where they have worked previously.

Creating the impression of a stable persona under these unstable employment conditions sometimes leads some consultants to suggest that one frame one’s

leisure activities as the source of one's stability, since one's skills and career aspirations would ideally change too much over one's lifetime. In a free workshop for job seekers at the San Francisco Public Library, Nick explained that if a person builds his or her brand not only around qualities but around culturally acceptable hobbies—biking, say, or hiking—the person can fashion an image that will create a sense of coherence no matter how many career transitions the person might make. In responding to someone's question about the difficulty of rebranding oneself during a career transition, Nick explained that if one's brand only revolves around professional practices, it might become difficult to switch to a new job. "It is really important not to rely too heavily on just your professional experience when you are building your personal brand, right. That way it becomes easier to make a shift because you are only changing a few small things, your core interests will stay the same." For Nick, the stability promised by maintaining a consistent and coherent image constructed around one's leisure activities would serve as a useful counterpart to the constant flexibility required by contemporary employment conditions. This presumes that one keeps one's hobbies and outside interests constant. Some aspect of one's persona has to be kept stable when fashioning a brand for one's self, and hobbies are a common solution.

If brands are, in part, ways to communicate to consumers that they will have the same predictable experience with a product every time they use it, then this becomes a much more complicated task when applied to a person, who may be predictable in undesirable ways. As an example of the difficulty of framing oneself in terms of a set number of qualities, Justin, who taught career development courses at Indiana University, explained to me that he had a particular class exercise for teaching students how to fashion their own brand, similar to Pepper's exercise. He would ask each class member to write three words or phrases that describes his or her individual essence. These words have to be specific enough that they mark what makes a person unique yet still well within an appropriate rubric. When I asked Justin what types of words did not work and why, he explained that "diva" or "liking the outdoors" were not good choices because diva is, in a sense, too distinctive, while liking the outdoors is not distinctive enough. In workshops, people aren't given a list of words and asked to choose the keywords that will be the basis for their personal brands. This would undermine the ways these words are supposed to come from within, reflecting the unique personality of that person. There is a general sense that there was a widely understood set of words people turned to, since certain words kept cropping up: passionate, reliable, hard-working, compassionate, committed, dependable, enthusiastic, and so on. Each person might choose his or her own set of three or four keywords out of this broader set, but no one chooses unexpected terms, or negative words (such as morose, irritable, melancholic) or ambiguous words (such as sarcastic and skeptical).

When people decide that their essence is reducible to words, people are outlining the ways in which their own collection of skills, experiences, assets, and alliances are to be managed and packaged. People are both signaling the set of choices they are making and the logic or style with which these choices are made. In general, the personal brand is supposed to be a standardized form that intertwines flexibility and coherence. By making visible the supposedly fundamental characteristics of the reflexive manager, the personal brand seeks to resolve precisely what

could appear to be a contradiction: how can someone always be willing and able to transform and yet remain a cohesive self?

***Unique and authentic in the right way***

In workshops, career counselors stress that everyone has an authentic self, and the brand one develops is supposed to reflect this authentic self. This authentic self is the stable element of oneself that is supposed to be consistent regardless of the context that one is in, the inner true core of a person that is putatively predictable. Personal branding allows people to represent themselves as both flexible and coherent and able to move fluidly and effectively through multiple contexts, yet with a managing impulse that makes them appear predictable to potential employers.

When workshop leaders talked about how important it was that one’s branded self was properly aligned with one’s authentic self, their explanations often had oddly moralistic overtones. Some talked about how a branded self that wasn’t anchored in an authentic self would be ineffective. Workshop leaders tended to use the following quote in their PowerPoint presentations, attributed to personal branding advocate Dan Shwabel: “Be the real you because everyone else is taken and replicas don’t sell for as much.” Every speaker stressed that this tactic would be wrong at some point during the workshops I attended. Pepper managed this with her usual panache: “I know that I have an awesome personal brand, and I know that everybody wants it, just kidding. But it is never going to work if you walk out of this saying, oh gosh, Pepper had a great brand, that’s who I am going to be. That’s not authentic, that’s not who you are and that’s not what you should be doing with your personal brand.” Why precisely this wouldn’t work was never clearly articulated, but people asserted repeatedly that this simply would not be successful.

Pepper suggested that there were other ways that a moral way of being was at stake. After informing people that every person’s brand had to be unique to themselves (despite the relatively limited set of qualities a person can evoke when branding), Pepper used Lance Armstrong as an example of how developing an in-authentic brand could lead to moral failure. She explained:

“What was Lance Armstrong’s brand? I am sure he had one.”

“LIVESTRONG. Live Strong on those bracelets, oh my gosh, those are the best. Um, so he even had like a branding campaign around his personal brand that said “Strong” in the actual name of the brand. So he was strong, he was fast, he was powerful, he was successful. He won the Tour de France and beat cancer in the same year. Um, so what happened? Do we think that brand was unique? Or was unique to him and authentic to him? Maybe not, maybe not so authentic because what happened? He got busted for, yeah, doping. He cheated all the time and maybe didn’t actually win some of those races. So that brand, it definitely wasn’t authentic to him. He couldn’t keep it up without having to cheat. And that definitely is not what we want to happen to you. So make sure as you are thinking about this uniqueness, this personal brand, make sure it is super-authentic to who you are.”

In discussing Lance Armstrong’s brand, Pepper immediately provides the four key terms that Armstrong probably used to ground his brand: strong, fast, powerful,

successful. According to Pepper, Lance Armstrong was driven to doping because the incongruity of the brand he had developed for himself and his actual capacities. He was forced to turn to illegal means to ensure that he could live up to his branded image, a trap he would not have fallen into if his brand had been more accurate in the first place.

Not everyone I spoke to wanted to make sure that their branded self was aligned with their authentic self. I talked to Judy, a woman in her 50s who talked about personal brands in a fashion that reminded me of earlier ways of understanding what it means to perform being a good worker (see Hochschild 1983). She told me that she liked the idea of personal branding a lot because it allowed her to create a work persona online that served as a shield for her authentic self, which resonates with the interpretation of emotional labor that Arlie Hochschild found in her research. By carefully crafting a safe professional persona, she was able to ensure that potential employers did not know her private self at all. I told her that it sounded to me like creating a personal brand was the work one had to do as a waitress, just on a larger scale. She agreed and admitted, however, that whenever she thought about creating a personal brand, it seemed like too much work. She wasn't sure she wanted to put in the time to create one. I was fascinated that she thought of branding as offering a protection from the prying eyes of employers, since her current job was working at the register for one of the large chain stores. She was constantly being monitored, and told that she had to create a positive experience for all customers. This is a kind of emotional work that, to perform it, one often has to be disconnected from whatever one feels at that moment (Hochschild 1983). By talking about personal branding as a way to shield oneself from employers' intrusiveness, Judy reinterprets personal branding according to older understandings of how one's work life is supposed to be connected to one's personal life.

Judy was an exception. Most people I spoke to were very concerned with aligning their branded self to their authentic self. Yet linking one's brand to one's authentic self was its own conundrum, because it entails knowing what one's authentic self is. Dorothy was the first person who explained to me this dilemma. She had been a career counselor, transitioned into becoming a human resources professional, and was currently looking for a job in her 60s. I asked her for an interview because she mentioned at a workshop in which we were discussing branding that she was struggling to figure out what her brand was. Over a latte at Starbucks, she mentioned she was struggling to rebrand herself in a way that aligns with her authentic self. I admitted to her that I didn't think branding was about someone's true identity, it seemed to me like a strategic performance one does for the job market. Dorothy disagreed.

Ilana: This doesn't sound like an identity crisis to me.

Dorothy: Oh. Well, it's more a search for the authentic self, I guess. I think I'm probably a lot more in touch with my authentic self than I think. But my opinion is I need to be more in touch. So that's what the rebranding is about. . . . And so I haven't been able to update my LinkedIn profile. I haven't been able to rebrand it . . .

Dorothy was stymied; she couldn't begin the work of branding until she figured out more about her authentic self so that she could more effectively align her authentic



self with her branded self. For Dorothy and others who accepted the branding workshop leaders’ logics, one of the principle challenges of creating a persuasive brand was finessing this form of alignment. And this also opens the door for a ready explanation from within this logic for why one hasn’t had any success getting a job, and how one might potentially fix the problem: the alignment between one’s brand and one’s authentic self is wrong.

To solve this dilemma requires elusive insight into one’s authentic self. Pepper warned that one of the hardest parts of branding was the self-reflection it required. She recommended beginning by answering a handful of questions, such as: “what is your superpower?” and “what do you do better than anyone else?”; questions that Pepper implied were synonymous. These questions, however, do not easily lead to the three or four qualities one should claim capture one’s authentic essence. Yet this question does manage to address a crucial component of personal branding. Asking someone about their superpower is trying to uncover a sense of uniqueness, but a very particular version of uniqueness that emerges only out of comparison with other potential workers. Personal branding pivots on this type of uniqueness, distinctive yet familiar, in part because it is so crucial for how objects acquire brands as well. As communication scholars Daniel Lair, Katie Sullivan, and George Cheney explain: “Brand products were marketed as *unique* goods able to provide *unique* advantages to consumers; it was the brand name that distinguished a product—for example, Spic’N’Span—from other household cleaners” (Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney 2005: 312; emphasis in original). Yet taking the uniqueness ascribed to an object or product line and using it to frame a person can be a complicated task.

In a workshop I attended on how to develop an elevator pitch in Palo Alto, Lucy had a heartfelt outburst about how frustrating she found it to express her uniqueness.

Lucy: My biggest problem with this, aside from focus, is that I think what I do is perfectly normal, and I, I don’t see how I am any different from all the other people that I have met at Promatch, JVS, [community organizations for job-seekers], and networking groups. I don’t see myself as particularly unique, um, so I don’t know what to do.

Saul: Talk to some people to find out what they think about you. Cause I haven’t met you and I think you’re unique, right . . .

Saul, the workshop teacher, was a bit stumped as he tried to reassure Lucy that she would be able to easily figure out what made her unique. Lucy was memorably awkward, running after anybody who started to leave the workshop early and insisting on exchanging business cards with them then and there. They tended to look pained when she did this, and one man absolutely refused to acquiesce to this perfunctory business card exchange. She took suggestions that she must have received at other workshops on how to network to such an extreme that she made the way she practiced networking seem like parody. Lucy, in short, was the kind of person that someone might say diplomatically about her that she was unique, and others would nod straight-faced, understanding in that moment the ways the term “unique” could mean a flair for imaginatively getting social norms wrong. Saul was faced with both reassuring Lucy that she was indeed unique, and transforming the potentially pejorative implications of how clearly distinctive she is into

a perspective that might help her get a job. Lucy's easily noticed uniqueness is a good example of the wrong kind of uniqueness for personal branding.

In attempting to brand themselves, people can also decide that they are particularly talented at something that isn't generally appreciated as an employable skill in workplaces. One job seeker in her late-50s explained that she was remarkably good at understanding the potential pitfalls of plans that people suggested at work. Yet she was an administrative assistant and not in a hierarchical position where this analytical approach was valued. Like many other office workers I talked to, she felt that her managers only valued people who enthusiastically supported proposed plans. She had to choose another trait, and decided to emphasize her gift at organizing office birthday parties. She talked at length about how this was her unique talent:

I am really good at kind of seeing people, at being supportive and doing things that will make people smile. I am really good at that, ridiculous sense of humor, and I just know how to make people smile. Like, one of the managers at work, he used to love comic books when he was a kid. That's kind of interesting, I made a mental note to myself.

So for his birthday, I went and found comic books from the year he was born. So I scanned just a few of them, cause I couldn't do them all. I Photoshopped his face on to one of the superheroes, and I turned it into a little booklet. . . . And so I gave it to him. . . . He couldn't stop talking about it, he was so thrilled. And that is just, like I say, one of many things I was doing. And this was off the chart, who does this? That is the level of creativity that I have.

It was abundantly clear from talking to her that she was an extremely organized administrative assistant. But she wasn't better at being an administrative assistant than anyone else—she was just very competent. When told that for the job market, she needed to come up with her “superpower,” that is, what she was truly gifted at doing, she came up with the part of her job that no one hiring seemed to value enough. This is precisely the kind of work that is important to maintain good will in an office but cannot easily be turned into a metric that shows a clear improvement to how a business is run. In short, being unique on the job market is not always a good thing, and why one is unique isn't always going to get one a job. One has to be unique in the right way: a standardized way of being talented at some set of tasks that most people must accomplish at their job, and that companies value.

According to this logic, it is possible to be unsuccessful at convincing other people that one is indeed the brand that one has chosen for oneself but not that one is wrong about what one's authentic self is in the first place. Pepper told a funny story about a coworker who wanted to be seen as knowledgeable and helpful but sat beneath his standing desk at work, with posture that indicated he wished to be left alone. She tried to understand how to make him a more integral part of the team, and asked him, in her re-telling at the workshop, to reflect on what his personal brand was. He told her that he loved being the expert on Google Analytics, and valued how much people turned to him for support on this project. When she heard this, she was surprised he saw himself this way and thought,

“You are the least approachable person I have ever met, and I'm not going to ask you a question about analytics because you are sitting under



your desk warding off questions.” She tried to explore the discrepancy with him. “I asked Frank, when is the last time somebody asked you a question? Or asked for help about Google Analytics? And he sat and he thought, “You know Pepper, you are probably right. I can’t remember the last time I answered a question about Google Analytics.” So what he believed about himself was *way* different than what I believed about him, and what the rest of the team believed about him. So we had this chat about personal branding. . . . I asked him to stand at his desk. I asked him to, uh, be a little bit more approachable. So what he did, he started having office hours.

She said that openly informing other people that he was available to be consulted on Google Analytics transformed how he was integrated into the team as a whole. For Pepper, the point of this story was not that her coworker was wrong about what his authentic self truly was but rather that his actions at work did not encourage other people to perceive him in the way that he wanted to be perceived. When one works at aligning one’s authentic self with one’s branded self, one acts as though it were possible to be conscious enough about all the ways that one represents oneself to others that one can, in fact, accurately convey the message that one wishes to send.

## Conclusion

Focusing on the internal fault lines within neoliberal logics reveals that while flexibility is often trumpeted as a neoliberal virtue, in practice flexibility of particular types is not always welcome. The flexible worker can also be the illegible worker, with a work history that does not readily seem intelligible to employers evaluating applications. How does one respond using neoliberal logic when the neoliberal ideal of flexibility in practice becomes a burden? I have argued that this is why personal branding has become so compelling for US job seekers. Those who advocate that job seekers should imagine themselves as businesses in their own right also recommend that that people develop personal brands. They are supposed to supplement their job flexibility with a coherent and repetitive assertion of their unique and authentic qualities. In doing so, advocates of personal branding are also encouraging job seekers to become what neoliberalism with its foundational reliance on contracts requires of neoliberal subjects: a predictable and responsible actor within the context of an alliance. Personal branding, however, in my fieldwork seemed far more important as a way for job seekers to discipline themselves into being the right kind of employable subjects, and went largely unnoticed by employers, who located reliability elsewhere. Yet it has such appeal because it offers a solution to a dilemma that contemporary employees face: how to present one’s self as a desirable employee when one is frequently changing jobs and sometimes careers. In short, when one’s work history is no longer a coherent narrative, personal branding offers a (not so easy to implement) strategy for representing one’s self as stable and legible.

I have been discussing some of the practical dilemmas that come up when people try to use personal branding techniques that were initially developed to endow

objects and companies with recognizable personalities. People have trouble reducing their complex and context-dependent personalities into three or four positive qualities. They also have trouble figuring out how to present themselves as properly unique, while at the same time providing evidence that they fit a relatively standard job description and set of workplace requirements. In addition, I argued that the techniques recommended all involve avoiding recognizing how much context matters. To brand one's self, one has to espouse a personality supposedly independent of context. This, it turns out, is a particularly useful set of techniques for motivational speakers and career counselors to be able to present in workshops filled with a mix of job seekers, each with their own complex work history and job-specific issues.

In general, workshop leaders and motivational speakers face a problem: they are speaking to a mixed audience about how to get a job in a generic way, but all too often, getting a job depends upon the specific idiosyncratic configuration of that workplace. What this means for workshop leaders and the motivational speakers that I heard is that they want to provide good enough general suggestions that job seekers approach them individually to get help navigating their specific situation. Personal branding is a useful generic set of techniques from that standpoint —practices that anyone can do, regardless of what job they have. Recent parolees working at Wal-Mart, classical musicians, or product managers all can have personal brands. From the point of view of people providing career advice, it is essential to be able to offer to job seekers a versatile and supposedly universally applicable form for representing an employable self.

Not all career counselors I met during my fieldwork talked about personal branding. The ones who did not were career counselors who worked for government-sponsored or community-based organizations geared toward helping unemployed people, although Ramina is a notable exception. When I asked these counselors why they didn't talk about personal branding, they said that their clients tended to respond badly to the suggestion. They had mentioned it a few times as a potential technique when personal branding first became popular, but their clients thought it sounded too much like marketing, too much like becoming the neoliberal self that their clients were ambivalent about becoming too thoroughly. As a result, while these counselors sometimes discussed finding a pithy and persuasive way to describe oneself, they did not discuss authentic selves or other aspects of personal branding.

Self-branding is an instance in which one is supposed to select a limited set of terms based on one's self-understanding, and then tries to imply those qualities through all one's social interactions both online and offline, in anticipation of a potential client or employer's interest.<sup>8</sup> If one can't persuade others indirectly that

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8. This fantasy of the maximally consistent self across all interactions, online and offline, is an exact inversion of what Asif Agha argues is central to the ways that processes of communication are intertwined with processes of commodification. Agha points out that while communication and commodification are often laminated upon each other, this only occurs within as "*communicative chain segments* of larger processes of non-mediated communication, which precede and follow them for every communicator" (Agha 2011: 175). Personal branding asks people to imagine that communication could



one has these qualities, one has failed at the project of branding. It also involves specific techniques that were originally developed to associate objects to personalities, as well as social media practices that require a constant investment of time. It encapsulates the neoliberal fault lines that are inherent to viewing the self as business in the United States. When following this logic to its end: One needs to be both flexible and stable at the same time. One needs to constantly improve oneself yet stay authentic. In addition, staying authentic is not a given, one has to work hard to be one’s true self. One needs to be both unique and predictable, and unique only in ways that lead to financial gain. One needs to be unique but only in standardized ways. One needs to treat every social interaction on any media as a moment to be true to (or potentially, to risk undermining) one’s personal brand.<sup>9</sup> Now that you are a business, there is no break from being a business.

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be otherwise, that it is possible at all times to communicate market-relevant information, in this case, by continually asserting one’s personal brand.

9. The work personal branding experts recommend is ensuring that one is always enacting one’s brand. Just as one is supposed to be always potentially on as a business self, providing services to one’s employer, one should always be aligning one’s interactions with one’s brand. In practice, as Constantine Nakassis points out in relationship to commodities, people are not always their brands, and especially when they believe they are far from a potential employer’s gaze, but from the standpoint of branding experts, they should try to always be their brand (Nakassis 2010).

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### **"Je suis pas un businessman, je suis un business, man" : Etude sur la vie de marque du soi néolibéral**

Résumé : Cet article s'intéresse à l'auto-branding, un genre de performance dont la maîtrise est souvent encouragée aux chercheurs d'emploi aux Etats-Unis. J'y parle des techniques spécifiques que l'on est supposé utiliser pour construire son image de marque, des origines de ces techniques, et des raisons pour lesquelles il semble souvent difficile d'avoir recours à ces pratiques. J'analyse le modèle de subjectivité que, d'après l'auto-branding, chacun est présumé pouvoir présenter, en faisant usage d'un ensemble de techniques sémiotiques qui donnent l'impression d'une subjectivité cohérente et authentique. L'auto-branding est traité comme une focale sur les dilemmes qui émergent lorsqu'un individu tente de mettre en pratique un

modèle du soi néolibéral, centrée en particulier sur la tension que cela engendre entre flexibilité et lisibilité.

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