Influence of Personal Branding on Career Advancement for Female Executives

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ABSTRACT

Gender diversity and inclusion in the workplace have emerged as global topical issues, with the need for equitable representation and equal opportunities for women across all levels of the corporate hierarchy becoming a priority. Although there has been some progress, women continue to be underrepresented at executive levels in private sector organisations and they continue to face unique challenges in navigating environments that were traditionally designed by and for men. For many females, corporate structures and cultural norms often reinforce the systematic barriers they face. The development of a strong personal brand has become an essential tool for female executives, not only for distinguishing themselves professionally but also for challenging and reshaping the barriers they face.

The purpose of this research paper was to investigate the influence of personal branding on career advancement for female executives, examining how women leverage their personal brands to overcome marginalization and secure executive roles in environments historically dominated by men.

A qualitative, exploratory research design was used where in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve women from various industries in executive position within private sector companies in South Africa. These interviews aimed to capture the participants' experiences, strategies and perceptions regarding the influence of personal branding on advancing their careers. And the study will provide insights into the ways female executives align their brand image and personality with their career objectives to drive professional growth and impact. An inductive analysis approach was used to identify and explore emerging themes from the data. Peer-reviewed literature and existing theoretical models related to the research topic, were also reviewed.

The findings revealed that female executives develop and utilize their personal branding in conjunction with other strategies, such as mentoring, professional coaching and sponsorship, to influence perceptions and expand their leadership opportunities. A conceptual model was developed based on the summarized findings, providing a practical framework for both women and organizations to apply. This model aims to enhance the understanding of the role of personal branding in career advancement and contribute to the broader body of knowledge on this topic.

KEYWORDS

Gender, Career Advancement, Personal Branding, Brand Personality, Brand Image

Declaration

I declare that this research project is my work. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master of Business Administration degree requirements at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorization and consent to carry out this research.

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Table of Contents

Contents

CHAPTER 1: PROBLEM DEFINITION AND PURPOSE

1.1 Introduction and description of the problem

The proportion of women in the workforce has seen a notable increase in recent years, however women remain significantly underrepresented in executive leadership positions (Choi, 2019). In South Africa, females constitute 26.5% of the top management positions in the workforce, compared to 73.5% of males (DOL, 2023). *The Leadership Quarterly (2022)* defined the strategic leadership team as a constituent of CEOs, Top Management Teams, and the Board of directors, who have a shared responsibility to drive organisational-level outcomes. These include performance, making strategic choices/actions, managing social and ethical issues, motivating, influencing, stakeholder engagement, as well as innovation. As most organisations prioritize succession planning and leadership development, the primary focus revolves around cultivating skills required for leadership roles (Griffith et al., 2019) - and little focus given to the invisible barriers that prevent women from reaching the upper echelons of leadership (Choi, 2019).

To fully understand personal branding, it is vital to first unpack branding within an organisation's ecosystem. Brands extend beyond promoting only products or services, they also create value by strategically targeting, positioning and aligning a business value proposition for society at large. Brands should align their brand value creation model, particularly in terms of brand differentiation, with the specific demands of the market and the needs of customers within these markets. (Deska et al., 2022).Additionally, any brand value delivery model should be strategically focused on enhancing brand competitiveness (Deska et al., 2022).Brands can achieve this by targeted positioning and addressing social needs, which resonate with an audience while driving engagement and creating positive social impact. Brand alignment is created when it addresses a society's objectives or concerns, an in turn creates a brand image that builds shared purpose with their audience through trust and loyalty, and lasting brand value. Cunningham (2021;1) postulates that branding is a business practice of strategically targeting, positioning, aligning, and executing a portfolio, product, or service in a way that benefits society.

Brand loyalty is cultivated when a brand resonates with its audience in an authentic and meaningful way, fostering connections that extend beyond mere transactional interactions. When brand strive to be authentic, they can deliver genuine value and create impactful experiences which form a foundation for lasting relationships with their audience.

Beverland (2021:134) identified that brands must be authentic, add value, and create meaningful experiences that foster a long-term relationship

As a strategic approach, it is important to emphasize a brand's identity –this can be achieved by focusing on its brand's mission and values to create an authentic identity. These brand elements contribute to how the brand is viewed by an audience and can affect the perceptions held about its value. The strategy of focusing on the underlying values of a brand, its mission and value, ultimately translates into a positive brand image and positions the brand to stand the test of time (Soechtig 2022:4).

Personal branding is an element of branding which is gaining traction in leadership and career advancement inquiries. There is growing interest in the contribution of personal branding to the perception and value of professionals in organisations and industries. It has been noted that personal branding has developed into an area of fragmented research with a diversity of definitions and conceptual boundaries (Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova, 2019). Despite the interest in personal branding as a tool for career advancement, little known on whether it can indeed positively influence the careers of individuals. It is further argued by Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova, (2019) that although there is growing research interest on personal branding as an influence on career behavior, little is known about the factors that predict personal outcome. Its popularity, however, on the business landscape has led to questions around whether other traditional career development methods are still required to advance the professional career of individuals (Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova, 2019). The lack of understanding also raises questions on whether personal branding should be incorporated as a tool for career advancement along with traditional career development methods that have previously been researched. It is argued that those who receive a lot of career advice (and, therefore, enjoy career help from own network) may have a lower need to engage in personal branding (Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova, 2019).

Personal branding is composed of various elements that work together to shape how individuals are perceived and positioned within their professional landscapes. Personal branding encompasses six elements: cultural capital, social capital, verbal self-expression, mediated self-presentation, authenticity, and appearance (Khedher, 2019). Whilst the most significant predictor for engagement in personal branding is the ambition

of career success, there is also a positive correlation observed between career self-efficacy and personal branding (Gorbatov et al., 2019).

Addressing and overcoming structural and social challenges enables women to be better positioned to gain access to executive roles. Women are likely to gain access to high status positions by breaking through the glass ceiling, this juxtaposed as crisis due to the stereotypical assumptions that women cannot lead (Branscombe and Baron, 2017:21). The perception of glass ceiling exists in many organisations and it is often attributed to a multitude of factors, namely bias-centred, structural-centred, and cultural-centred factors (Griffith et al., 2019). While mentorship, sponsorship and professional networking have been attributed as enablers which helped women navigate these biases and successfully breakthrough the glass ceiling (Dashper (2019), limited studies have focused on how their personal branding played a role in shifting perceptions and accelerating their career progression. Personal branding is a strategic tool that could be used benefit career advancement for females. Personal branding as a contemporary career technique is vital in promoting one's personal brand identity to achieve beneficial career outcomes Given that (Gorbatov et al 2019). This research aims to uncover how personal branding influences career advancement for female executives.

1.2 Research Problem

The research problem focuses on understanding the role of personal branding in advancing the careers of female executives, particularly within environments where structural and social challenges continue to impede gender equity at senior leadership levels. Despite the global emphasis on diversity and inclusion, women remain underrepresented in executive roles, often facing barriers such as the glass ceiling, gender biases, and a lack of tailored support systems that limit their career progression. These challenges are especially pronounced in corporate cultures traditionally designed with male leadership paradigms, which can hinder the visibility and recognition of female talent. As female executives increasingly turn to personal branding to establish credibility, influence perceptions, and build professional networks, there is a critical need to examine how effectively personal branding can serve as a strategic tool for overcoming these barriers. This study seeks to explore how personal branding influences the career trajectories of female executives, assessing its potential to support their professional advancement and contribute to gender parity in leadership. The insights gained aim to

bridge a gap in current literature by highlighting the impact of personal branding as a response to gender-specific challenges in the corporate sphere.

1.3 Purpose of research

This research paper aims to investigate personal branding's influence on breaking the glass ceiling for female executives, with the primary goal being to enhance an understanding of the role that personal branding plays in advancing women's careers to top leadership positions. The study will explore the strategies and perceptions associated with personal branding and its intersectionality with breaking the glass ceiling, primarily among female executives.

Key theories on both personal branding and glass ceiling phenomenon will be studied, and peer-reviewed literature perused, to better understand and refine the existing models, which can contribute to future research on personal branding, gender, and leadership studies.

There are multifaceted contributions that this research paper can contribute in the academic and business context, which will have both theoretical and practical implications on the intersectionality of personal branding and career advancement for female executives.

1.4 Significance of Research for Business and Theory

1.4.1 Academic Contributions

1.3.1.1 Theory Development and Validation

This research contributes to the body of academic work by validation of theories of personal branding that exist and offer insights on how these personal branding strategies are employed by female executives to foster their career advancement, challenge biases, and enhance visibility in making them eligible for leadership roles. Personal branding can serve as a powerful strategic tool for individuals to market and communicate their successes within an organization, as Heriberta et al. (2024) suggests. By consciously crafting and promoting their personal brand, employees can showcase their achievements, strengths, and unique value, thereby enhancing their visibility and positioning themselves favourably for career advancement opportunities. Women can also explore the use of personal branding to favourably position themselves for career advancement. Personal branding involves conscious self-commodification and

assessment, and enables women to ascend to leadership positions by embodying preferred values and enhancing visibility (Heriberta et al., 2024).

This research fosters a deeper understanding on the unique challenges and opportunities that female executives face in the corporate world, and through the lens of gender studies, be used to explore how personal branding strategies can be utilized to mitigate these issues. While these constructs have been researched in isolation, the specific relationship between them has not been researched extensively.

1.4.1.2 Development of New Models

Enhancing current models on the adoption of personal branding for career advancement can lead to better understanding and implementation of personal branding, which can contribute to future research and theory development. Prior research by Alonso-Gonzalez et al., (2019) viewed personal branding as an innovation and sustainable development tool within organizations. Furthermore, Alonso-Gonzalez et al., (2019) emphasized that it was crucial to connect the concept of personal branding with innovation, dynamic capabilities, or a sustainable development perspective within the context of knowledge management. Personal branding can be framed in good practice models, offering young professionals a clear understanding of branding, its practical applications, and possible outcomes it can generate (Ilieş, 2018). Currently the models of personal branding that exist for young professionals, are centred around people as brands, self-promotion, self-positioning, self-development, self-marketing and self-reflection (Ilieş, 2018).

The current academic models that are relevant to personal branding include Kapferer's Brand Identity Model for brand personality and Aaker's Brand Identity Model for brand positioning. Kapferer's model explores the dimensions that form a brand's identity, emphasizing how personality traits and core values shape the brand's essence and emotional appeal. Kapferer's (1997) "Brand Identity Prism" is a comprehensive model that outlines the various facets of building a brand identity. This model encapsulates all major elements currently understood about brand identity, making it a foundational reference for any study examining this topic. According to Kapferer, these elements become meaningful only through the brand's interaction with the consumer. Strong brands integrate all aspects of the prism into a cohesive, clear, and compelling brand identity, effectively resonating with their audience (Radtke, 2022).

Meanwhile, Aaker's model provides a framework for brand positioning, identifying elements that help create a distinct, memorable brand in the minds of target audiences. Together, these models guide the strategic development of a brand's identity and positioning, offering valuable insights for personal branding as a tool for career advancement. Aaker (1997) described this concept as the set of human characteristics or traits that consumers attribute to or associate with a brand. This highlights how symbolic and emotional meanings are increasingly integral to shaping a brand's positioning in the market.

1.4.1.3 Intersectionality of Personal Branding and Career Advancement

The study will examine the strategies and perceptions associated with personal branding and its intersectionality with breaking the glass ceiling, primarily among female executives. With the eventuality of being able to assist women who aspire to be executives but do not know or have limited access to how they too can use their personal branding to break glass ceilings and advance their careers. As Gorbatov et al (2019) proposed, leveraging personal branding as a modern career strategy is crucial for enhancing one's personal brand identity and attaining positive career results.

1.4.2 Business Contributions

Taking learnings from the Employment Equity Act of South Africa (Department of Labour, 2024), whose primary purpose is to remove unfair discrimination and to promote equity in the workplace. The Act provides a legal and moral framework for businesses in South Africa towards carrying out more inclusive practices, and it emphasizes the importance of diversity in the workplace. The Act also advocates for the inclusion of women to achieve workplace equity as women were historically marginalized in the workplace (Department of Labour, 2024). The fair treatment and elimination of unfair discrimination towards women in corporate South Africa are essential components in today's business landscape. This too would include greater representation of females on boards and in executive positions.

1.4.2.1 Professional Development Programs

Findings from the paper can be used by employers and employees as part of their leadership and talent development programs. Companies can also incorporate some of the learnings into initiatives that support the growth of female executives. The act of which can in turn enhance their own company image and demonstrate a commitment to gender

equality in the workplace. Alonso-Gonzalez et al., (2019) found that the value of individuals and the uniqueness of their growth stem from their Personal Brand. It was also suggested by Alonso-Gonzalez et al., (2019) that companies should incorporate the emerging discipline of Personal Branding into their Human Resources' knowledge management strategies, with the goal of fostering proactive innovation, dynamic capabilities, and sustainable development among their workforce.

1.4.2.2 Personal Branding Techniques

The paper may provide female employees with leadership aspirations, practical personal branding techniques and strategies to aid their career progression by enhancing their visibility, marketability, and credibility within the professional field. Research found that personal branding bore significance as a modern career strategy for enhancing the personal brand identity of individuals to attain favourable career results. (Gorbatov et al., 2019).

1.4.2.3 Organizational Policy

Key insights shared throughout the paper, can be used by companies to inform their policies on diversity and inclusion, and in turn contribute to a creating supportive environments for females to authentically take ownership of their personal brand and form part of a dynamic leadership team. There are business advantages and benefits that extend beyond corporate compliance or social responsibility for companies that focused on driving diversity and inclusion. An inclusive corporate culture positions companies to better maximize their potential across their workforce. This can be achieved through increasing engagement, better alignment of strategy to local and global markets, as well as driving innovation.

In today’s corporate climate, more scholars are focusing their studies on the positive correlation between diversity and financial performance, employee satisfaction, and positive organizational reputation.

Valls Martínez & Cruz Rambaud, (2019) strongly believe that regulators should promote greater female representation in top corporate positions, as this would benefit both financial and non-financial interests. Gender equality is a global priority across all sectors, including the economic sphere, and the proportion of women on boards remains a central focus of corporate governance reforms. Valls Martínez & Cruz Rambaud, (2019) also

believe that the ratio of women of corporate board and increased gender diversity, offers competitive advantages to the organisations. Gender diversity also contributes significant corporate value by introducing a wider range of knowledge, skills, perspectives, and experiences (Valls Martínez & Cruz Rambaud, 2019).

Receiving guidance on establishing a professional presence should naturally encourage greater engagement in personal branding activities. Through personal branding activities, individuals become more motivated to shape and project a distinct and impactful personal brand in their organisations. This could lead to improved performance and greater job satisfaction. Receiving constructive feedback correlated with various positive career outcomes, such as improved job performance, organizational citizenship behaviours, and heightened job satisfaction (Gorbatov et al., 2019). Consequently, receiving guidance on how to establish a professional position should heighten the inclination to participate in personal branding activities.

The responsibility of diversity and inclusion is jointly held by individuals as well as the corporate organisations, as both parties play a critical role in creating equitable workplaces. Corporates who incorporate diversity and inclusion into their HR policy statements, can play an important role in their strategic hiring and talent management by significantly influencing prospective candidates; additionally, employers who advocate for inclusion, highlights a workplace culture that values fairness and ensures everyone feels respected and appreciated (Jonsen et al., 2021).

However, the mere presence of diversity is not sufficient; companies must actively cultivate an inclusive environment where all individuals feel valued and empowered to contribute. This requires a commitment to inclusive practices at all levels, from recruitment and training to leadership development and succession planning. This paper will provide a valuable contribution to both academic literature and business practice to support the growth of females in professional settings, to advance their career through their application of their personal branding.

1.5 Research Scope

The scope of this research was limited to women serving in executive roles within private sector companies in South Africa at the time of the study. Focusing on the private sector is crucial, as it often offers a distinct environment for career advancement, shaped by

competitive dynamics, profit-driven goals, and fewer regulatory protections for gender equity compared to the public sector. To ensure meaningful conclusions and gain a deeper understanding of these women's lived experiences while navigating their careers, participants were required to have held executive positions for more than one year. This criterion allowed for richer insights into the strategies and resilience required to advance and succeed in South Africa's private sector leadership landscape.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The importance of inclusions and representation of women in organisation requires deeper understanding to address the inadequate representation of women in senior roles. Hideg and Shen (2019) discovered that the insufficient representation of women in senior roles presented ethical and business challenges. Forces that disempower and unsupportive cultural elements were identified as creating environments that impede women from shattering the glass ceilings in corporate boardrooms (Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2020). The presence of diversity in senior executive positions has contributed to elevated work quality, improved decision-making, heightened team satisfaction, and greater equality overall (Ely & Thomas, 2023). Over the past five decades, changes in structure, demographics, and expansion have taken place, underscoring the importance of ongoing efforts to gain insights into gender and broader social inequalities, focusing specifically on career mobility and intersectional research (Valizade et al., 2023). Choi (2019) questioned whether there was another way to build equity for women to advance their career? And agreed that achieving gender equity in the workplace might be far more complicated than initially anticipated.

2.2 Personal Branding as a concept

Bhargava & Bedi (2022) expanded on the traditional view that marketers have taken to define branding. And the shared association of perceptions and attitudes that came to mind, towards a firm and its offerings was used to explain the concept of branding. The strength of brands was summarized as types, strengths, and distinctiveness of the perceptions and attitudes that consumers hold in their mind for a given company and its offerings. Alternative concepts of branding were also offered by Bhargava & Bedi (2022) and these were that brands were a set of promises made by a firm. Considering brands being ethically akin to promises, they in turn generate obligations. The promise being expressed was not only in words but also constituting certain actions being undertaken, which generated an obligation to perform the promised action. A heterogeneity was noted in both brand building actions and the interpretation of those actions by consumers. The complexity of branding was explained by how it touches on marketing, psychology, sociology, philosophy, finance, data science, etc.

Scheidt et al. (2020) noted that although in its infancy, personal branding is an interdisciplinary concern. It too offers a wider spectrum of application across industries and demographics, the benefits of which can be yielded by the individual and stakeholders. There are, however, three pillars that can be used to conceptually approach personal branding – the input of the branded individual through their skills, competencies, expertise, and experience; the perception of the branded person by target groups or audience, and the outcome from the branding process for the individual which will produce distinction from their peers.

Throughout the researcher's peruse of literature, the human connectedness to personal branding, led to psychological theories forming the basis of application and understanding. Gorbatov et al. (2019) argued that personal branding was market born and read and has made its definitive headway into management science. Gorbatov et al. (2019) offered an integrative model of personal branding, noting that there were a diversity of definitions and conceptual boundaries. According to Gorbatov et al. (2019) personal branding definitions can be grouped according to underlying theoretical approach and identified two main categories which were based on marketing theory and the other, self-presentation behaviours. For the purpose of this research, the self-presentation behaviours will form the basis of the discussion. Gorbatov et al. (2019) clearly define personal branding as a set of an individual characteristics (attributes, values, beliefs etc) shaped into a differentiated narrative and image aimed at creating a competitive advantage in the minds of the targeted audience.

2.2.1 Brand Personality

Rup et al., (2018) illuminated the influence of social construct on brand personality. In its essence, a social construct refers to a mechanism within society that is formed and shaped by collective ideas and perceptions of individuals or groups through social interactions, encompassing elements such as perceived brand personality, beliefs, emotions, and similar factors. While some school of thoughts view brands as a lifeless entity, in contrast, adherents of various other schools contend that brands possess specific traits or attributes akin to those of humans. They argue that brand personality essentially comprises a fundamental collection of human characteristics linked with brands Brand personality was highlighted as playing a crucial role in creating market effectiveness (Rup et al., 2018). Furthermore, Rup et al., (2018) recognized that social constructs such as

gender, play a significant role in how brand personality is perceived. Primarily, it hinges on human personality, encompassing behaviours, perspectives, mindsets, beliefs, and various other traits. It is however noted that organizations may tailoring suitable messages to captivate the interest of their target consumers.

Brand personality refers to the set of human characteristics attributed to a brand, making it relatable and recognizable (Aaker, 1997). This definition stems from an approach that anthropomorphizes the brand. The alignment of individual and brand traits can help foster and strengthen relationships between customers and brands (Sundar & Noseworthy, 2016). When brand personality is applied to personal branding, it represents how an individual's traits, values, and behaviours come together to create a distinctive, humanized persona that others can relate to. It has been argued by scholars that having a strong brand personality in personal branding can help individuals to convey their authenticity, relatability, and trustworthiness, all of which are critical in building a reputable personal brand (Gorbatov et al., 2019).

Brand personality has played a role as a consistent representation of one's character, in personal branding, which can include traits like leadership, empathy, resilience, or innovation. A well-defined brand personality is able to better influence the perceptions that exist in the workplace, as they project a consistent and trustworthy identity that resonates with colleagues, clients, and other stakeholders (McNally & Speak, 2002). Furthermore, Cunningham (2021) highlighted that having an authentic brand personality can enhance one's personal branding, as individuals are likely to be perceived as being genuine and relatable, which can ultimately contribute to fostering long-term relationships and advancing their careers.

Kapferer's model delves into the dimensions that constitute a brand's identity, highlighting how personality traits and core values contribute to a brand's essence and emotional resonance. The "Brand Identity Prism" (Kapferer, 1997) is a comprehensive framework that covers the essential facets of brand identity, serving as a key reference for any research in this area. Kapferer posits that these dimensions gain significance through the brand's engagement with its audience. Successful brands leverage all aspects of the prism to create a unified, clear, and appealing brand identity that deeply connects with consumers (Radtke, 2022).

2.2.2 Brand Image

The implementation of the brand communication strategy forms part of branding activity and brand development process (Wijaya, 2013). Developing, measuring and overseeing brand image have emerged as crucial elements of strategic brand management (Plumeyer et al., 2019). Brand image pertains to the reputation and credibility of a brand, which subsequently serve as the "guidelines" for consumers when considering trying or using a product or service. It embodies the overall perception formed from information and knowledge about the brand, closely intertwined with attitudes and beliefs that drive brand preference (Plumeyer et al., 2019). The five dimensions of brand image can be summarized as brand identity, brand personality, brand association, brand attitude and behaviour, and brand benefit and competence. The stronger and more positive these aspects are perceived in the minds of consumers or target audience, the stronger and more positive the brand image of a product, individual, or organization becomes.

The importance of brand image in personal branding is supported by the idea that individuals must actively shape their public image to align with their career goals. Beverland (2021) suggests that having a strong brand image enables individuals to distinguish themselves in competitive environments. This is made possible by a cohesive and compelling professional narrative being conveyed. In personal branding, brand image is often utilized as a strategic to build credibility, which is encompassed in competence, completeness, persuasion, being ethical, honesty, being impressive, promises, and reliability (Hussain et al., 2020).
Individuals who carefully curate their brand image, can signal reliability, expertise, and other qualities that attract opportunities and foster career growth.

2.2.3 Theories

The fundamental theories at the core of personal branding include attachment theory; self-determination theory; social identity theory; cue utilization theory and structuration theory (Scheidt et al., 2020). Also Scheidt et al. (2020) suggested that the gender orientated role of personal branding, and given the interdisciplinarian domain of personal branding, further exploration is required to investigate the interaction process between the human brand, organizational environment and stakeholders. Due to the multitude of theories relevant to the research objectives, the researcher has chosen to apply self-determination theory and social identity theory for their high relevance to the study population and

compatibility with existing literature. These theories provide a thorough framework for analysis and will facilitate a better understanding of the research topic.

2.2.3.1 Self-determination Theory

Self-determination Theory (SDT) is a prominent theory of human motivation, renowned for its efficacy in identifying the factors that influence motivation and behaviour (Gilal et al., 2019). Furthermore, SDT argues that human nature is an intrinsic motivation, evident in behaviours driven by curiosity, the exploration of novel viewpoints, and the pursuit of ideal challenges.

Ryan & Deci (2020) noted that SDT provided a framework for comprehending the motivational foundation of personality and social interactions, as well as the correlation between fundamental psychological needs and well-being, psychological thriving, and a superior quality of life. The theory makes a clear distinction between autonomous and controlled motivations. Autonomy entails acting with a complete sense of volition, endorsement, and choice, while feeling controlled involves experiencing external pressure or compulsion to behave, whether due to the promise of a contingent reward, fear of punishment, ego involvement, or other external factors.

Scheidt et al., (2020) put forward that Intrinsic motivation is characterized by engagement in an activity for the inherent satisfaction of fulfilling three fundamental psychological needs that are essential for optimal functioning: autonomy (the need to feel in control of one's own actions), relatedness (the need to feel connected to others), and competence (the need to influence outcomes and one's environment). Wang et al., (2019) explained that people are motivated to satisfy these needs because they are regarded as vital for self-growth, social development and personal well-being. Vansteenkiste et al., (2020) define the term psychological need in a more specific and narrow way. The experience is seen as a psychological nutrient that is essential for individuals' adjustment, integrity, and growth. Vansteenkiste et al., (2020) detail that a specific desire can only be considered a basic psychological need when its fulfillment is not merely beneficial but essential for an individual's well-being, and when its frustration heightens the risk of passivity, distress, and defensiveness.

(Slemp et al., 2021) unpacked that employees reach optimal functioning when they are autonomously motivated—a state in which they self-endorse and willingly engage in their work because they find it inherently enjoyable or meaningful. Slemp et al.,(2021)

elaborated that could include providing opportunities for choice and input, promoting self-initiation, and avoiding external controls like rewards or sanctions to direct job performance. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), competence requires overcoming challenges and cultivating a sense of mastery. This, could include sharing knowledge, offering guidance, providing structured feedback, and setting realistic yet challenging expectations (Berntsen & Kristiansen, 2019; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedness involves a sense of mutual connection, belonging, and experiencing reciprocal care from others (Slemp et al., 2021). This, according to (Slemp et al., 2021), includes active listening, perspective-taking, mentoring, and fostering opportunities for connection. Cheon et al. (2019) however, warns that a psychological need can also be denied, anticipated or frustrated.

Autonomy, competence and relatedness are the three basic psychological needs which form a subset of the Self-Determination Theory framework, called Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT). Within BPNT, which proposes that the three core psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, are essential to derive motivation, engagement and well-being. BPNT a 'need' is qualified as basic provided it meets certain key criteria. These needs are essential for psychological health and well-being.

Table 1 provides a description of the Key Criteria of a Basic Need within Basic Psychological Need Theory (Vansteenkiste, Ryan, & Soenens, 2020). When personal branding is aligned with the core psychological needs of BPNT, it can enhance intrinsic motivation, engagement and career satisfaction. BPNT proposes essential criteria for well-being and personal branding development. These include psychological needs, which focus on mental rather than physical functioning and are crucial for fostering growth and well-being through satisfaction; inherent needs, representing evolved psychological aspects tied to adaptive strategies; distinct needs, which are independent and not simply the result of frustration of other needs; and universal needs, applicable to everyone regardless of individual differences. These are supported through associated criteria of persuasiveness; content specific; directional and explanatory.

Table 1: Key Criteria of a Basic Need within Basic Psychological Needs Theory

Basic criteria	
1. Psychological	A basic need concerns the psychological and not the physical functioning of human beings.
2. Essential	The satisfaction of a basic need contributes to growth, well-being, and adjustment *and* the frustration of the need predicts problem behavior, ill-being, and psychopathology.
3. Inherent	A basic need represents an evolved aspect of our psychological nature due to adaptive advantages associated with need satisfaction.
4. Distinct	A basic need concerns a distinct set of experiences and its emergence is not contingent upon or derivative from the frustration of other needs.
5. Universal	Felt need satisfaction and need frustration should predict the thriving and ill-being of *all* individuals, regardless of differences in socio-demographics, personality, cultural background or need strength.
Associated criteria	
1. Pervasive	The effects associated with need-based experiences should be reflected in myriad cognitive, affective, and behavioral outcomes, while also surfacing at different levels, from the psychological to the neurological/biological.
2. Content-Specific	Satisfaction and frustration of a basic need manifests through specific behaviors, experiences, and is well represented in natural language.
3. Directional	A basic need directs and shapes individuals' thinking, acting, and feeling, thereby spurring the pro-active search for need-conducive circumstances, partners, and activities under supportive conditions, while eliciting corrective behavior under need thwarting circumstances.
4. Explanatory	A basic need helps to account for or explain the relation between variations in social contexts, both growth-promoting and toxic, and wellness-related outcomes.

2.2.3.2 Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory was originally developed by Tajfel and Turner (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This framework describes how individuals derive a sense of identity and self-worth through their membership in social groups. According to SIT, individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups based on characteristics like race, gender, profession, or organizational affiliation. According to Holck & Villesèche,{2024) categorizing our social world is a natural and instinctive human behaviour that helps simplify our surroundings. It is through categorization that people define their identify

within social contexts, fostering a sense of belonging and shaping their behaviours, attitudes, and motivations.

The theory postulates that social identity has two fundamental components: personal identity, which are the individual characteristics, and social identity, which is a collective identity of the groups to which one belongs. When we categorize people into groups, we also assign ourselves to some of these groups, through the process of social identification. This is formed as individuals seek to achieve a positive self-concept by associating with groups they perceive as valuable or prestigious. By making this association, it not only influences one's personal self-esteem but also drives the individuals to adopt the norms, behaviours, and values of these groups (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tajfel and Turner theory explains that once we identify with a group (our "ingroup"), we tend to seek positive feelings through this association. This ingroup favouritism is a preference for members of one's group. A common way to foster these positive feelings is by viewing our ingroup more favourably than other groups ("outgroups"). Outgroup discrimination occurs when one differentiates from, and sometimes undervalues members outside their group (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This desire for positive distinctiveness within our ingroup can foster negative beliefs and attitudes toward outgroups, potentially leading to prejudice and, ultimately, discrimination (Holck & Villesèche, 2024).

Although identities are complex and encompass individual, interpersonal, and social processes that are intertwined with social structures, Davis et al., (2019) made a distinction between identity theory and social identity theory. Identity theory clarifies how individuals construct identity meanings, express them in social settings, and react to feedback that pertains to identity. Whereas social identity theory. Social identity theory examines identity processes within and between groups.

In the context of the corporate landscape, groups of individuals gather within organisational structures and interact across industries. Social Identity Theory can be utilized to provide an explanation into how employees may identify with their roles, teams, or organizations. According to Hogg,2001; van Knippenberg and Hogg, 2003), leadership takes place in the context of group membership that is shared between leaders and their followers comprising of either members of the same team, department, business unit or organisation. This group membership has an effect on how followers respond to their leader and in turn how leadership effectiveness is perceived by the followers' perception

on how they see the leader as a member of their group. Social identity could be used to explain how female executives may be influenced by both gender and professional affiliation, as they navigate the male-dominated organisations in their leadership roles. Their identification with other female leaders or professions, may be used to create a distinct social identity that fosters resilience, solidarity and shared strategies for success.

Social identity can also influence the beliefs and norms, which could be a potential factor in women's career choices and possibly play a role in the continued patterns of occupational gender segregation (Carpio & Guadalupe, 2022). This matters as it may affect the beliefs of success given prevailing stereotypes, such as gender stereotyping of oneself and others. This too having an affect on the beliefs about the ability and behaviour of men and women (Carpio & Guadalupe, 2022). Understanding how some individuals are able to pave a rewarding career path and climb the proverbial corporate ladder, may be attributed to more than the shared knowledge and skills.(Hogg et al., 2012) Social identity also shapes the perceptions of self and others, which can attribute to the motivation that female executives may feel to positively contribute to their professional gender groups and enhance its reputation. Leaders who closely embody group norms and values are better supported, and are perceived to be more trusted, and as more effective by members, particularly when group membership is a core part of members' identities and when members strongly identify with the group (Hogg et al., 2012).

The theory suggests that groups help define our identity, shape our thoughts, feelings, and actions, and influence how we are perceived and treated by others. As a result, prototypical members, individual within a group who best embodies the group's defining traits, values, and norms - often hold substantial influence within the group and are likely to assume leadership roles(Hogg et al., 2012). Career advancement has often been the focal point of research, particularly around women due to the gender disparities in the workplace.

2.3 Career Advancement as a Concept for Females

The term "career" is used within our discussions, to describe the series of work-related experiences that an individual accumulates throughout their lifetime, encompassing both

within and outside organizational settings (Bowles et al., 2019). The research also explored the strategies employed by women to navigate their advancement journey, encompassing upward, lateral, and occasionally downward movement within the career landscape often likened to a jungle gym. These strategies were likened to asking which is when the individual requests or proposals for career advancement, which would be considered typical topics open for discussion between employees and employers, are involved in the process. Bending strategies were the strategies women employ to manage work-life conflicts and gain access to gender counter-stereotypical roles and shaping strategies which proposed individual career advancement initiatives deliberately designed to reshape organizational structures or practices (Bowles et al., 2019). It is important to understand the definition of career might differ for men and women as it it uncovers the diverse motivations, challenges, and expectations each group may encounter, influencing their career paths and professional objectives.

Women have traditionally viewed employment differently from men as they perceive their work to be embedded in their personal life (O'Neill & Jepsen, 2019). While men have based their career definition on their career experiences (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Brown & Brooks, 1996; O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). O'Neill & Jepsen, (2019) suggested that there are other factors that continue to impact on women's career choices and capacity for paid employment. The fundamental issue facing women in leadership arises from the prevalent societal division of roles, where men are commonly perceived as assertive and women as nurturing and passive. This division often confines men to roles outside the domestic sphere, while women are primarily expected to operate within it (Coleman, 2020).

Coleman, (2020) found that the women acknowledged the presence of structural barriers in the workplace, but when discussing facilitators for overcoming these barriers, they emphasized individual actions over systemic solutions. The perception of glass ceiling exists in many organisations and it is often attributed to a multitude of factors, namely bias-centred, structural-centred, and cultural-centred factors (Griffith et al., 2019).

Women attributed overcoming these obstacles and achieving success to their personal agency, efforts, and hard work. Additionally, many mentioned mentoring and networking as career facilitators, noting that mentoring was more prevalent among younger women (Coleman, 2020). In addition to mentorship, Ayyala et al., (2019) found that sponsorship

plays a crucial role in successful career advancement. Recognizing sponsorship as a unique professional relationship can assist faculty and academic leaders in making informed decisions about strategically utilizing sponsorship for career advancement. A proposed approach to discover suitable career and leadership development tools for women, involved their active contribution to reshaping their leadership identity (Ng & McGowan, 2023).

2.4 Integration of Key Concepts and Theories

The above mentions concepts that indicate a solid relationship between personal branding, brand identity (with a lens on brand personality and brand positioning), brand image and career advancement. In its strategic state, personal branding is a useful tool to stand out and promote oneself in a marketplace for career advancement goals. As a marketing practice that is applicable to one's career, this strategic tool assists personnel to vigorously exhibit their skills, strengths, values, personality, and qualities within a competitive marketplace. Gorbatov et al. (2019), clearly demarcate self-standing construct of personal branding to advancing one's career through their authenticity, relatability, and trustworthiness. Thus, it is vital for personnel to invest in their brand image as it a concrete weapon to build long-lasting relationship (Wijaya, 2013). To achieve this, one must focus on their brand identity.

According to Cunningham (2021), brand identity is instrumental for up taking one's mission, vision, and values to create an authentic and meaningful presence that will stand out in the marketplace. Brand identity in the context of this thesis refers to the collection of all elements that one generates to depict favourable character within the workplace. In personal branding, this includes professional appearance, performance, content, communication style, and values for the betterment of the organisation. These elements must be purposeful and strategic to drive favourable response such as career advancement (Coleman 2020). By employing purpose-driven personal identity as one's personal brand, it is easy to showcase one's uniqueness, values, and intentions to establish trust and credibility within the workforce. Brand identity essentially adds value to one's personal brand because in a competitive environment like the workplace, one's brand identity adds advantage when defining what resonates with the markets and differentiating oneself (Beverland, 2021).

Essentially, brand personality ties directly to the overall brand identity – it refers to human traits or characteristics associated with their own personal brand. In personal branding,

brand personality is expressed through the interaction with other, communication style and overall behaviour within environments (Paul 2024). These personality traits define a personnel's unique professional style and help distinguish them from others in the industry. As noted by the key scholars like Kapferer and Aaker who coined the brand identity models, argue that brand personality is most likely associated with the brand in the mind of stakeholders (Ramli & Sukor 2021), in the case of this thesis, the internal stakeholders. The latter further asserts that brand personality within personal branding context is the centered around development and tests the relationship between brand identity and other related variable such as career advancements. A distinctive brand personality aids meaningful connection with the right people and attract opportunities that aligns with one's brand identity. Hence scholars like Cunningham (2021) argue that a purposed brand personality will not only resonates prominent stakeholders such as colleagues in the work environment but will also promote relationships that are crucial for success.

To cement the relationship between these variables, one must invest in their brand positioning to be perceived as the leader or a top candidate in their field of work. Brand positioning is used an element to remain top-of-mind when stakeholders assess potential key role players. It is often based on certain attributes or benefits that offers a competitive advantage – similarly to unique selling proposition (USP) as noted by Cunningham (2021). Using brand positioning as a personal brand element for career advancement means capitalizing on the unique skills, expertise and capabilities within the industry. Conversely, it will yield a favorable brand image which leads to to mentorship opportunities, promotions, and invitations to high-impact projects (Scheidt, 2021).

The shift towards a theory and practice within an organisation negates towards a collaborative ecosystem. Whilst a strong relationship exists between (SDT), Self-Identity Theory, personal branding, and career advancements, it is crucial to explicitly demonstrate the corelations. Each of these branding elements—identity, personality, positioning, and image signifies the interrelated circular relationship to create a purposeful personal brand that is instrumental for career development, it is very important for one to shape a positive personal brand through authenticity, networking, hard work, formidable work ethic. These are vital values in the advancement of one' career and benefits the organization and the individual equally (Gorbatov 2019 et al).

SDT argues that human nature is an intrinsic motivation, evident in behaviours driven by curiosity, the exploration of novel viewpoints, and the pursuit of ideal challenges. Given that female executives are often ostracized and experience exclusionary actions, they often motivate themselves by putting measures in place that will assist them break the glass-ceiling and debunk the notion that female executives must sub-surge the domestic role (Coleman 2020). The measures intrinsic motivations include upskilling, naturing, mentorship and desiring financial security which benefits the individual, in turn, the organisation will benefit from productivity, bridging gender parities and advocates of equality (Branscombe and Baron 2017). Moreover, as noted in the Social Identity Theory (SIT), it is imperative to build networks part of building a unique brand image. The importance of network and long-lasting relationships cannot be ignored in today's business. The "self" in social interactions reform one's personal experiences, continuously shaping an individual's self-concept towards improvement that will not only benefit one, but others around them. Similarly, as noted by the theory, an individual will then align their values and motivations towards achieving personal goals which will not only benefit them but also benefit the organisation as a corelation to the SDT. Thus, SIT that as part of social interaction, one will yearn for elements that will make them distinctive (Trepte and Loy 2017). It is through these unique traits that female executives exercise their maternal traits of care, whilst achieving the organisational goals. This is a strong motivation that distinguishes female executives are powerful and naturing than their male counterparts. In the complex business world where a lot of production-orientated goals thrive, and neglects a powerful element of personal branding such as people-centrism (Gorborav et al 2019), perhaps it is time to re-evaluate the role of reshaping leadership identity with a central focus on females and their benefit to organisational executive mandates (Ng & McGowan, 2023).

2.4 CONCLUSION

The literature indicates that personal branding plays a crucial role in the career advancement of women. Gorbatov et al., (2019) found that establishing a personal brand has become a vital career strategy for contemporary workers. (Klopper 2016:416) attributed branding to being more than names, logos and packaging, but instead included the experience an individual has when they interact with the brand. For people, this personal brand extends to what people think about when they hear the person's name as well as what they say in their absence. Dedication and quality of work, abilities, skills and

creativity; appearance; how you relate and connect with people; accomplishments; profession, these are some of the attributes that are taken into consideration when people are branded.

Personal branding has been instrumental in enhancing visibility, credibility and building long-lasting relationships. Additionally, the reputation and credibility of a brand is embedded in the brand image (Plumeyer et al., 2019). A strong personal brand can help women accelerate in their chosen career paths. Gorbatov et al., (2019) established that the strongest predictor of engaging in personal branding was the aspiration for career advancement.

Women have faced gender biases and stereotypes in the workplace (Coleman, 2020). The expression of individuals in social settings and their reaction to feedback is explained through the Social Identity Theory (Davis et al., 2019), which forms part of the fundamental theories at the core of personal branding. Additionally, the existence of glass ceilings has been attributed to a bias driven invisible barrier that prevents women from reaching the top positions in the workplace Branscombe and Baron (2017:21). Coleman, (2020) noted that women who overcame these obstacles and achieved success, attributed this to their personal agency. Personal branding plays a critical role in the career advancement of women, especially in overcoming gender stereotypes and navigating barriers. By developing a strong personal brand, female professionals can challenge limiting perceptions, assert their unique strengths, and gain credibility in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Self-determination Theory, as a theory of personal branding, explains the human motivation, renowned for its efficacy in identifying the factors that influence motivation and behaviour (Gilal et al., 2019). Personal branding helps women establish a distinctive professional identity, empowering them to build trust, influence others, and open doors to leadership opportunities. This further emphasises the interrelation that exists between personal branding and career advancement. Personal branding is not only a tool for career growth but also a powerful means for women to break through gendered barriers and redefine professional expectations.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In exploring the influence of personal branding on the career advancement of female executives, the literature review prompted fundamental questions concerning the perspectives, challenges, and strategies employed by women in leadership roles.

Personal branding is an interdisciplinary concept, which benefits both individuals and stakeholders through its broad application across industries and demographics. Conceptually, there are three core pillars which personal branding can be approached through: the input of the branded individual—encompassing their skills, competencies, expertise, and experience; the perception of the branded individual by target audiences or groups; and the outcomes generated by the branding process, which help create a distinct professional identity that sets the individual apart from their peers (Scheidt et al. 2020). Individual can enhance their visibility, credibility, and differentiation in competitive environments by strategically developing and communicating a clear personal brand. This could increase their opportunities for career advancement and success (Gorbatov et al. 2019). The field of personal branding provides theories with the scope of explaining how an individual can leverage their brand personality and brand image to strategically position their brand and gain visibility. The career advancement of female executives was therefore explored through the personal branding lens to answer the first research question:

Research Question 1 What are the perspectives of female executives on the importance of personal branding in their career advancement, its role in progressing their careers, and which factors hold the most influence on women's career progression?

The objective of this question was to gain insights into the perception held by female executives on the importance of personal branding, and its use as a tool to advance their careers. It was equally critical to observe which other factors have had greatest impact on the career progression of female executives. It has been suggested that personal branding is a vital contemporary career technique for promoting one's brand identity to achieve beneficial career outcomes, this highlighting the importance of actively managing how individuals are perceived professionally (Gorbatov et al. 2019).

A better understanding of how executives develop and use their personal branding to influence perceptions in their workplace was required. There are six-elements encompassed in personal branding: cultural capital, social capital, verbal self-expression, mediated self-presentation, and appearance (Khedher, 2019). Additionally, the most significant predictor for engagement according to Gorbatov et al., (2019), is the ambition for career success, and a positive correlation between career self-efficacy and personal branding. The second research question thus addressed:

Research Question 2
How do female executives develop and use their personal brand image and personality to influence perceptions in the workplace and advance their careers?

The objective of this question was to understand the drivers behind the personal brand that female executives develop, and how they utilize their personal brand image and personality to shape workplace perceptions. The overarching goal was to identify how these personal branding efforts contribute to career advancement. And whether there is a relationship between personal branding and professional growth, particularly in how branding helps women navigate challenges, enhance visibility, and establish authority within their field

Studies to date have mainly focused on mentorship, sponsorship and professional networking, as enablers which helped women navigate biases the faced as they navigated their career paths (Dashper (2019), there have been limited studies that focused on how their personal branding played a role in shifting perceptions and accelerating their career progression. The third research question addressed:

Research Question 3
Is Personal branding used in isolation, or does it form part of a bigger strategy plan of female executives to advance their careers i.e. Mentoring ?

The objective of this question was to explore whether female executives used personal branding as a standalone tool or whether it was integrated within a broader strategic career advancement plan.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

Fundamentally, research design is an orderly and methodical process of investigation with a goal of deepening our knowledge of a specific topic or event, particularly in field where the scope of conceptualization is not deepened as in the case of this study. Given that the conceptualisation of personal branding and career advancement with gender role are newer in the peripheral investigation, it is thus pertinent to employ an explorative enquiry. This stance will assist with investigating the current body of knowledge, ensuring that a dynamic and iterative, contribution to the ongoing advancement of knowledge across multiple fields realized (Research Prospect, 2024).

An explorative, qualitative study was conducted by making use of data collected from female executives in the South African private sector. The aim of undertaking an exploratory study was to gain new insights, ask new questions and evaluate subjects from a fresh perspective (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018). Multiple perspectives were required to enhance the validity, reliability, and depth of findings. It was important to have a comprehensive and credible understanding of how personal branding influences career advancement for female executives in South Africa's private sector. Exploratory design is used when more information is needed regarding the problem or opportunity to clarify the extent of the problem or opportunity to be solved or addressed, with an aim to develop, refine, extend or improve the conceptualization (Wiid and Diggines, 2023). The experiences shared by participants in semi-structured interviews, insights from peer-reviewed literature on personal branding and gender in leadership, and theoretical frameworks on branding and career progression, integrated multiple persepctives. As indicated, above, there was still an opportunity to triangulate the conceptualization of personal branding, career advancement and gender role in the context of business leadership to contextualize the unknown phenomenon in this regard (du-Plooy, Davis & Bezuidenhout 2024).

A qualitative research approach was particularly valuable, as it allowed for an in-depth exploration of the relatively under-researched area of how personal branding influences career advancement for female executives in South Africa's private sector. Qualitative research is a type of research method that explores and specifies insights into real world problems – particularly useful in to investigate nuisance that are not well understood

(Tenny, Brannan and Brannan (2022). Qualitative research helps generate insights to further investigate and understand phenomenon. This research employed a qualitative methodological stance because it concentrated on obtaining an all-embracing understanding of the diverse views in which individuals perceive reality which will be obtained through their thoughts, opinions, and feelings (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021). This enabled the researcher to unpack themes and patterns to provide contextualized meaning could be difficult to quantify.

4.2 Research Methodology

The Philosophy of Interpretivism entails researchers seeking a profound understanding of the dynamics among humans in their social roles (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018). Data was gathered from female individuals, with the objective of comprehending the strategies and actions that enabled them to overcome the advance their careers, with a specific emphasis on their personal branding.

An interpretivism paradigm was applied in this research study as it sought to understand the subjectivities of female executives' notion of personal branding and its relations to career advancement. According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al (2021:7), "interpretivism is the belief that individuals cannot be studied in the same way as objects can in the context of science". As social beings, individuals are prone to change and are constantly influenced by the environment around them. This philosophy outlines how individuals perceive and assign meaning to their experiences based on their views and environments. Therefore, the purpose of this study, the researcher outlines how female executives' employ personal branding an aid to advance in their carriers, by focusing on the subjectivities of the philosophical practices to conceptualize meaning (Saunders et al 2018).

A deductive approach was applied when researchers build theory from data that is already collected and analysed. Through the collection of data, themes are identified, and patterns are formed to either modify and existing theory or to develop it (Saunders et al 2018). This approach was appropriate for this study as data was collected from women in corporate settings, who were able to successfully overcome barriers and advance their careers - this was analysed to see if any themes and patterns emerge. Deductive theorising includes deriving from general to specific observations and facilitates the building of an existing theory (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021). By using this approach, the researcher was able to add to the scope of personal branding conceptualization with a focus on career

advancement process. The approach also allowed for deeper exploration of personal branding's influence to build on existing theories. Similarly to the theorization by scholars such as Park, Williams and Son (2020) who considered the exploratory, deductive nature of a qualitative inquiry and a phenomenology approach to grasp an overall understanding of student-athletes' personal branding via social media.

An explorative, qualitative research approach was conducted by making use of data collected from female executives in the South African private sector. The aim of undertaking an exploratory study is to gain new insights, ask new questions and evaluate subjects from a fresh perspective (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018).

An inductive approach was applied when researchers build theory from data that is already collected and analysed. Through the collection of data, themes are identified, and patterns are formed to either modify and existing theory or to develop it (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018). This approach was appropriate for this study as data was collected from women in corporate settings, who were able to successfully overcome barriers and advance their careers - this will be analysed to see if any themes and patterns emerge. The approach also allowed for deeper exploration of personal branding's influence to build on existing theories.

This research adopted a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach was adopted in the research to gain an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena of personal branding by capturing the nuanced perspectives, experiences, and motivations of participants. This method was particularly valuable for topics requiring rich, descriptive data, such as personal branding and career advancement strategies, where insights are best gathered through open, exploratory dialogue. The qualitative research allowed flexibility and enabled the researcher to adapt questions based on participants' responses, thus uncovering insights that may not emerged through structured, quantitative methods. Additionally, it was effective for studying social contexts, like workplace dynamics or gender-related challenges, where open-ended responses can reveal subtle, context-specific influences on behaviour and decision-making. By prioritizing depth over breadth, qualitative research offered a holistic view, informing theories, uncovered new patterns, and provided actionable insights grounded in real-world experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect the data by building on the theory, as well as to enhance and enrich the existing limited body of knowledge (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2021). The use of personal branding to advance careers by female executives, is not a well-developed area and through this study, the researcher efficiently established a proposed framework, minimized biases, and contributed in a credible manner to the research topic. This approach is similar to the a study conducted by Park et al (2020) who follow the same trajectory. A semi-structured interview is a method by which information is collected and employs questions driven by themes (George, 2023). This approach is beneficial to the study as it allows for the formation of open-ended questions, enabling interviewees to provide as much detail in their responses as they felt necessary, and allows the researcher to probe for more context (George, 2023). Open-ended questions assisted the researcher with getting wider understanding into the female executives' notions of personal branding and its relations to career advancement. By collecting the data, the researcher addressed the study's main research questions, to create a uniform triangulation which then provide the researcher with depth and insights. These interviews also proved valuable to the study as they provided the researcher with the benefit of being able to present follow-up questions to the interviewees (George, 2023)

This research adopted a qualitative approach. A narrative inquiry is a qualitative approach and involves an individual's account of an event or sequence of events. It involves storytelling through interviews conducted and it can provide deeper understanding of organisational realities, which are linked to participants realities (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018). This research paper focused on gaining insights into the application of personal branding strategies by female executives to advance their careers. The narration assisted with indicating a flow of related events, which added meaningful contribution to the research. Although subjective, the overall narrative of the female executives' experiences assisted in investigating the interconnectedness of their stories.

Due to time constraints for the completion of this research, the study was conducted over a cross-sectional time horizon, which Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, (2018) explained as being taken at one-point in time i.e. a 'snapshot'. Participant perspectives in this study were gathered through virtual interviews held over Microsoft Teams and conducted by the researcher.

4.3 Population

A population has been defined as a complete set of group members, which is not always limited to people or employees, and can include organisations and places (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018).

For this research paper, the population was female executives. The scope and organizational context differ between female leaders and female executives can be summarized as follows:

1. **Female Leaders**: This includes women who are in leadership roles across various levels, industries, and settings. The broad term is assigned to women who are in organisations and are recognized for their influence, guidance, and ability to drive change within their teams, communities, or chosen professional fields. The presence of leadership can exist at any organizational level and in non-corporate contexts, such as community leaders, educational leaders and team leaders. Thus, in the context of this paper, female leaders refer to women who demonstrate leadership qualities, regardless of their position within the organisation or formal title assigned to them.
2. **Female Executives**: This term specifically refers to women holding c-suite positions within corporate structures. The female executives occupy top management roles, such as CEO, CFO, COO, or Heads of Business Units, and they are responsible for strategic decision-making, directing business operations, and shaping organizational policies. They also sit on corporate boards and have clear reporting lines which have been established in their structured teams comprising of direct reports. Holding the executive title is defined by an official position within an organization's senior leadership team and typically implies a role with substantial authority and responsibility.

For this research paper, the sample selected was women in executive roles, who have managed to overcome the 'glass ceiling' barriers and achieved higher positions within their respective organisations. In the South African context, this is currently 26.5% of the workforce population (DOL, 2023). The sample that was studied was from diverse female executives who currently serve within the private sector companies of South Africa. These would be the individuals who have decision-making and management responsibilities at a strategic level. The research was carried out across different industries i.e. financial,

professional services, retail, real estate and other business services, motor and wholesale. Including diverse industries in this research was essential for capturing a comprehensive view of the challenges and strategies female executives use for career advancement. Different industries present unique barriers and opportunities, which affect how women navigate leadership paths and apply personal branding strategies. A cross-industry sample enriched the findings, offering a broader perspective on "glass ceiling" challenges, industry-specific support structures, and best practices that foster women's leadership. This diversity also improved the generalizability of the research, making the insights applicable across various sectors and more valuable for organizations seeking to support female executives effectively.

It was important that the appropriate unit of analysis is selected, and on which relevant categories will be attached (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018). The unit of analysis for the purpose of this research, was the female executive. Furthermore, categories will emerge from the data when using the inductive approach (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018). These categories were refined during analysis to test the research propositions.

4.4 Sampling Method and Sampling Size

Purposive sampling was used for this research as the data collected will be qualitative. This type of non-probability sampling is selected through the judgement of the researcher based on a range of possible reasons and premises to select sample members (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018).

The paper sought to understand how female executives that advanced their careers were able to do so and whether the influence of their personal branding played a role. Logical generalisations could be drawn from this, which could add to the body of knowledge around strategies being used to advance careers for females in corporate South Africa.

A heterogeneous sampling variety was selected and analysed. The reason for selecting this type of purposive sampling was that there was be sufficient diversity in the characteristics of sample, to provide variation in the data collected, and allow patterns to emerge that could add value to the research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018).

The participants in the research were sourced from a diverse group of female executives who were from different industries, had different backgrounds, lifestyles, ages, corporate experience and approaches to personal branding. By focusing on a diverse group of female executives from different backgrounds, lifestyles, ages, various industries, levels of corporate experience, and personal branding approaches, enriched the depth of the research. This diversity in the sample further allowed for a broader exploration on how personal branding is shaped by individual and contextual factors. There was also an opportunity to gain deeper insights into the unique strategies and challenges that women from different sectors face in their executive roles. The varied experiences allowed for a more comprehensive understanding between the personal identity and professional development intersectionality for these female executives, and better informed the researcher on how these factors influence career progression.

Twelve women with varying years of experience were interviewed from twelve companies in the insurance; banking; manufacturing; alternative investments; film and arts; consulting; retail; recruitment, and private equities sectors.

4.5 Measurement Instrument

The aim was to conduct semi-structured interviews with 12 participants, with each interview having a duration of 45 minutes. This type of data collection method is used when the interviewer has a set of predetermined interview questions, but allows flexibility in the order in which questions are asked and themes are covered. This allows for the interviewer to adapt to exploring additional topics or follow-up questions during the interview. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018). This approach was suitable for this study as it struck the required balance for structure and flexibility to gather comprehensive data from participants.

The objective of this research was to gain deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives and their insights into contributing factors that allowed them advance their careers, hence semi-structured interviews are a suitable measurement instrument to collect data. The semi-structured interviews also allowed for participant engagement, which created a platform for thoughts, views and experiences to be shared. The recommendations made by Bearman (2019) on how to elicit rich data from semi-structured interviews, were applied by the researcher. Creating an intuitive conversational structure and aiming for rich experiential data from participants by phrasing the

phenomenon of interest in a way that it made sense and was clearly communicated to the participant.

Preparation for the semi-structured interviews was guided by literature on female executives, career advancement, and personal branding. Follow-up questions were included as conversations evolved. These questions will form part of the interview guide, which will list topics for discussion and corresponding initial questions for each topic. The findings from these interviews are included in finding reports and data analysis. Additionally, the use of an interview guide will created structure and level of consistency across all interviews.

4.6 Data Gathering Process and Collection

It was important to consider ethical considerations throughout the data gathering process. These included confidentiality offered to participants, sensitivity towards participant's reluctance in answering questions, reactivity during the interview process that may affect data reliability, storage of data and honest behaviour when reporting findings (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018).

Bearing in mind the objective of this research, and questions to be asked in the semi-structed interviews – participants were invited for virtual interviews over Microsoft Teams platform. Participants were selected based on whether they met the following criteria: gender (female), active executive in private South African company (open to different career stages, i.e. recently ascended and well-established executives), had a good understanding of research objection and were willing to meaningfully engage, resided in South Africa, had diverse backgrounds (education and personal) and ethnicity for inclusive understanding on broader female experiences. The researcher leveraged both the personal and professional networks to identify and invite participants for interviews.

The objective of this research and the expected duration of the interviews was 45 minutes and was communicated to the participants ahead of the interview. Interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for the participants. Follow up reminders were also be sent ahead of the interview.

Written consent was obtained from participants, which explained the purpose of the research, afforded them the right to volunteer in parting or withdraw from the interview

without giving a reason, exercised the choice to be recorded via audio, and use of their anonymised quotes in publications.

The interviews were recorded, after being permitted by the participant, via note taking and audio-recording by the researcher. Immediately after each interview, the recordings were uploaded to a safe software for record-keeping and ease of access for transcription ahead of analysis and reporting phase. Field notes will also be used.

Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2018) noted that interview questions must be worded clearly and articulated appropriately, without the use of biased language. The tone, body language and appearance of the researcher will also matter in creating a comfortable environment to converse. The interview questions were a balanced mix of probing, direct, specific, indirect, structured, and interpretive type of questions. This was used interchangeably throughout the interview. It was important to touch on the background and experience, leadership style, challenges experienced, and opportunities identified within their professional career, organisational culture and their perception or understanding of personal branding, deep-diving into their development and application of their personal brand, and lastly valuable lessons learnt along their journey.

Saturation was reached after 8 interviews due to the population's homogeneity and the similarity of the questions. It is imperative to remain aware of new themes and additional insights that arise during the interviews, however the researcher remain mindful of when to apply their judgement to no longer collect new information as data saturation has been reached (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018).

To ensure the absence of ambiguity, the researcher pilot tested the interview and technique to ensure that the questions are understood – this was done by interviewing two executives who will not form part of the final data collection process. This assisted in identity if the questions were logical, and the researcher amended they saw fit.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

The researcher obtained ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Gordon Institute of Business Science prior to the collection of data (Appendix…). As part of the ethical clearing process, all participants were asked to complete a Consent Form (Appendix…), and with permission of each participant, each interview was recorded and transcribed. Interview proceedings were explained to the participants, and they were assured of their confidentiality. Care was taken during the data cleansing and analysis, and anonymity was maintained through the reporting of the findings, with all names of the participants being changed to pseudonyms.

4.8 Analysis approach

The data collected was non-text as it will be audio recorded interviews, which were transcribed as a word-processed document, to maintain consistent transcribing conventions (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2018).

The researcher employed ATLAS.ti software for data analysis. Through coding, the researcher identified and interpreted patterns to understand meaning rather than frequency. Key themes were derived from the collected data. Essentially, the analysis involved generating codes from participant responses to form categories based on similarities, a process repeated multiple times. Each interview was transcribed verbatim to extract themes, which were then categorized into codes frequently observed in the data. These codes and categories were analyzed to draw conclusions.

A thematic analysis approach was used to organize data based on recurring patterns and ideas, as identified repeatedly in the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017).Lester et al. (2020) describes qualitative data analysis as a generally nonlinear, iterative process and thus suggested a systematic, 7- phased approach to analysis called a Thematic analysis. This phased approach includes preparing and organizing data for analysis, transcribing the information from the data, becoming familiar with the data, creating memos, coding the data; categorising and identifying themes and creating transparency around the analytical process. The recorded semi-structed interviews used to gather data for the study, will be most suited for Thematic analysis.

4.9 Quality controls

The selection of diverse participants to be interviewed for the research paper offered broader perspective and served as a form of interviewer triangulation during the research process. Asking the participants the same questions from the interview guide also enriched the understanding of the research topic. It is crucial to guarantee quality and rigor in qualitative research (Lobe et al., 2020), this includes building credibility through Triangulation; dependability through documentation of research activities and conclusions; confirmability through audit trailing the steps taken during data analysis for others to easily confirm, and finally transferability through richly describing research activities and assumptions for ease of transferring conclusions or interpretations to similar contexts.

Additionally, the appropriateness of sample size ensured that quality data was sourced. The appropriateness of a sample size is determined by the researcher but typically, in qualitative research involving in-depth interviews, the sample size ranges from twelve to twenty-six as a general guide (Kumar et al. 2020).

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

5.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative study conducted from the interviews conducted with 12 females in senior executive positions in the South African private sector. It starts by describing the demographic information which was collected about the women during the interview process. The demographic information helped to provide context to the findings and described the characteristics of the participants such as their position and role in the company; the number of years they have worked for their company and overall industry experience, and their upbringing and current lifestyle to better understand their long-term influences. The format of this chapter will follow research question presented.

5.2. INTERVIEW DESCRIPTIONS

A total of 12 interviews were conducted with a diverse group of women from various industries, including insurance, finance, marketing, recruitment, and the film industry. The prominent positions held by these women range from CEO, CFO, executive heads of department, and directors within their organisations. Their average years of experiences is 15.1 years, with the least experienced having 6 years and the most experienced, 30 years in their respective field. Several of their backgrounds are those of humble beginnings who had to overcome socio-economic challenges, which pushed them to pursue education and career opportunities. Many attribute their successes to the influence of strong role models, particularly their mothers or grandmothers, and supportive parents. Across the board, their upbringing and family dynamics influenced how they shaped their approach to ambitions, resilience and work. Their current lifestyle is marked by significant responsibilities and personal success stemming from having achieved career milestones. Despite balancing demanding careers and leading teams, while driving key decisions in their respective organisations, across the board, the women expressed their desire to positively influence the next generation of women in leadership.

The years of experience for the participants ranged from 3 years to 20 plus years as summarized in the Table 2 below:

Table 2: Participant Industries

Participant	Industry	Years of Experience
Participant 1	Insurance	10+
Participant 2	Banking	14+
Participant 3	Manufacturing	13+
Participant 4	Alternative Investments	16+
Participant 5	Film and Arts	21+
Participant 6	Consulting	5+
Participant 7	Retail	12+
Participant 8	Marketing	3+
Participant 9	Consulting	20+
Participant 10	Recruitment	11+
Participant 11	Private Equities	15+
Participant 12	Retail	20+

Examining the wide array of perspectives, presented an opportunity for commonalities to be highlighted and differences in how the women's personal branding aided their career advancements. This approach also shed light on how the women navigate industry-specific barriers and deepens the understanding of personal branding as a tool for professional growth. The tailored strategies employed by the women from different sectors, provided valuable insights for the academic and business environments.

5.3 Results: Research Question 1:

5.3 Results Research Question 1

What are the perspectives of female executives on the importance of personal branding in their career advancement, its role in progressing their careers, and which factors hold the most influence on women's career progression?

The interviews generally began by gauging the women's conceptual understanding and perception on personal branding, particularly as female executives, and exploring how it shaped their career proregression. It also sought to identify the core values driving their personal brands and how those aligned with organisational values. Determining whether personal branding was used in isolation as a tool to advance their careers or whether it was used as part of a broader strategic plan, was also examined. Lastly, the question sought to uncover whether there were other factors beyond personal branding that contributed to their career advancement.

5.3.1 Personal Branding

To determine a view of what the women understood about personal branding, the participants were asked to share their understanding of personal branding, and their perspective as a female executive on the importance of personal branding.

The intent of asking the question was two-fold, firstly it was to gauge their knowledge and interpretation of personal branding, and secondly to understand what it meant in their professional setting. It also provided a gendered perspective on whether personal branding played a unique role in advancing their career.

During the interview, the women were asked:

- *"What is your understanding of personal branding?"*

In response to the above question, the participants expressed that personal branding was a very important element in their professional success, highlighting it as a differentiator that sets them apart in competitive environments. They see personal branding as the perception that others hold about them, and this is shaped by how they present themselves in the workplace. Many describe personal branding as an evolving process

that develops over the years as they navigate the professional space. For many, personal branding is viewed as a contributor to their leadership style and authenticity, impacting how they engage with others and foster trust. Participants also see personal branding as a source of value as it has contributed to their credibility and aligned their personal purpose to their professional goals.

Table 3: Personal Branding Themes

THEME	CODE
Differentiator	• Differentiators • Unique Skills • Outperformance • Agency, Pioneer • Position Yourself • Inner Drive
Perception	• Perception of Self • Reputation • Representation • Acknowledgement • Feedback • Communication
Evolving Process	• Personal Brand Evolution • Different Journeys • Inner Drive • Commitment • Spiritual Grounding • Growth Mindset
Authenticity	• Trust • Leadership Style • Openness • Leadership Style • Consistency • Self-awareness • Be Realistic
Values	• Values

	• Ethic • Purpose • Commitment • Responsibility • RESPECT • Solid Base

5.3.1.1 Theme: Evolving Process

Participants reflected on how they built their personal brands as a process which occurred over time. Participant 2 shared how initially did not think about their personal brand but over the years, they aligned their professional image with their core values and strengths. It was also noted that some participants viewed their personal brand through strategic visibility, especially in spaces where women were marginalized. Another participant shared that understanding their personal branding evolved with the career responsibilities that they took on as they moved up in their organisations. Through this feedback, the researcher observed that they were able to build a distinctive and credible presence that positioned them for advancement in executive roles.

P2: *"It's interesting. I wouldn't have thought I had a personal brand, but I think I have developed one over the past couple of years. It's really around being reliable, doing the things you said you are going to do."*

P3: *"Personal branding is not just about what you say, it's about how you show up and how you fight for the things that matter, especially in spaces where women's voices are often marginalized."*

P7: "I had to learn to evolve my personal brand as I took on more responsibility...it wasn't something I thought about early on."

5.3.1.2 Theme: Perception

Participants also shared that their personal branding influenced how they are perceived by clients, colleagues, and broader professional networks. Participants highlighted the importance of intentionally managing their brand, with one participant noting the need for clarity about how they wanted others to see them. Many expressed that personal branding

created positive perceptions about their job performance, and the associations made about them delivering high-quality work, thereby fostering a strong, credible reputation over time. Participant 6 also reflected on the long-term benefits of investing in personal branding, noting that a well-established brand required less effort to maintain over time and continued to grow along with their legacy within the organization

P4: *"Your branding influences how you're seen, especially in how clients and colleagues view you."*

P5: *"Your branding influences how you're seen... you have to be clear about how you want people to see you."*

P7*: "I think that I didn't fully understand personal branding until recently. It's about how people perceive you, not just in terms of what you do, but who you are as a leader.*

P6: *"* P6: "*it plays a big role. So this this when you realize that all the investment. You had to do or. I had to do in building this brand. Now it's paying off. There's less, more, there's less. I do now to build my brand cause. It's already there. It's existing. What I have to do is Polish it, you know. Then there again we grow, we evolve. You know that kind of thing. Polish it then. There, but the core of it is the and it'll continue doing that. You know that that becomes my legacy in the organization. I've always made sure my work speaks for me. Personal branding is about ensuring that when people think of me, they associate me with quality work and integrity."*

The follow up question was asked to understand the women's views on the importance of personal branding as female executives:

- "What is your perspective as a female executive, on the importance of personal branding?"

5.3.1.3 Theme: Differentiator

Participants frequently highlighted that their personal branding functioned as a differentiator for them in competitive environments. The importance of its uniqueness was highlighted by Participant 1, indicating that their personal branding must distinguish them from others. Participant 3 described this distinctiveness as a "secret sauce," an

individualized formula comprising skills, unique methods, and personal value that no one else possesses. This uniqueness, allowed Participant 3 to communicate complex ideas clearly and concisely, setting them apart. Participant 5 shared that her personal branding was instrumental in helping them stand out a place in a male-dominated industry. Participant 11 echoed these sentiments by identifying attributes like innovation, bravery, and a trailblazing spirit as core differentiators that contribute to a strong personal brand.

P1: *“Geez, I mean, it better be standing out, first of all.”*

P3: “*Your personal branding. Have a formula. So, what you do plus how you do it, plus your value, your differentiator. You know whether what it is she can bring. She can take all of these numbers, and she just paints a picture that everybody gets it in 2 minutes, right? Nobody else around you must have your secret sauce. So, when you speak of it, I call it secret sauce, right?”*

P5: *"Breaking into a male-dominated industry has been tough... but personal branding helped me stand out."*

P11: *“I've been told being innovative and being a trailblazer OK yeah and being brave thank you.”*

5.3.1.4 Theme: Authenticity

Participants highlighted the importance of personal branding, especially when it is authentic and attributed that a sense of self-awareness must be present. Additionally, participants mentioned that their personal brand must hold true to the promises it holds, as this ultimately contributes to your reputation and the perception that others hold of you. The researcher noted authenticity as a foundational element of effective personal branding, which had a recurring theme throughout the discussion. Some participants viewed personal branding as having the ability to "make or break" an individual, which further emphasized the importance of presenting themselves genuinely. Participant 3 shared that authenticity and alignment with organizational values were crucial, particularly as a woman in leadership; they stressed that a brand must reflect one’s true self and align with core principles. Participant 9 highlighted that authenticity was critical for a successful

personal brand and cautioned against mimicking others as it undermined credibility, as people recognized when a brand was not true to the individual.

P1: *"Personal branding is actually very important. It literally... will make you or break you."*

P3: *"Being a woman in leadership requires authenticity... we need to be true to who we are. It becomes very difficult. I cannot stay with a brand that I don't associate with at core. So, when you put the values together and you say we are this like for example, I'm going to use doctors because they have people, right? If they say first thing is to do no harm and then. They go out and in their personal life, you know, every weekend we have a rummage, and I don't care if somebody's bleeding or something like that. It's not aligned so for me in my career."*

P9: *"Personal branding is important when it's authentic... if you're mimicking others, people can tell it's not who you are."*

P10: *"Well, branding all together is important. You must be very clear on your personal brand promise which I think we can expand on it in a while because that consists of many things often. But the one thing that you that everyone will find every time they have contact. Personal branding helps build a lasting reputation in your field."*

To provide insights into the values that guide in their personal brand and whether these were aligned to their organisational values and how they influenced their decision-making in relation to their career progression. The women were asked:

- "What core values drive your personal brand and how do they align to your organisational values? And in what ways have they shaped your decision-making in relation to your career progression?"

5.3.1.6 Theme: Values

In response to the above, some participants referred to values that shaped their personal brands including authenticity, integrity, honesty, resilience, work ethic, humility, assertiveness and building relationships. The women also echoed that their values were often aligned to organisational values, with participant 10 mentioning that although her

personal relationship may not be the same to the organisational values, they do overlap. Participant 2 expressed the significance of assertiveness as a core value, but only, when necessary, which demonstrated respect in interactions. Participant 5 identified inclusiveness, integrity, and commitment as the key values which guided their career and personal brand, alongside a strong work ethic.

Ethics emerged strongly in the discussion about underlying values for participant values. Participant 6 described the importance of maintaining ethical standards, especially in challenging situations, and elaborated that doing what is “right” was essential to their brand. Participant 9 also shared this sentiment, and stated that honesty and integrity shaped their interactions, even when faced with difficulties. Other participants, such as Participant 7 and Participant 12, highlighted values like resilience, humility, and relationship-building, noting that these principles have been instrumental throughout their careers, from junior roles to executive positions. Participant 10 summarized that while personal and professional values may have not always been identical, they often overlapped, and consistent behaviours rooted in these values were essential to living out an authentic brand. Together, participants demonstrated that a values-based approach not only strengthened their personal branding but also built trust, alignment, and positive relationships within their peers and organizations.

P1: “*Personal branding is about delivering on what you promise. I was saying that a big part of what I do is based on forming good relationships. I mean that's market related that's marketing related. You know those sort of soft skills you actually learn from studying a degree like marketing you know. So those things you sort of take it for granted because your title is not.*

P2: “And you know, being assertive when I need to, but I don't go into a room with wanting to pitch on someone unless I had to do it to prove a point.”

P5: “So I think the core values is and it's very similar to the lower values is inclusiveness, integrity and commitment. And I think those are the three things in in essence has also. Linked into my, you know, career planning is always being committed to well committed to any task really. But committed to it. Integrity and inclusiveness. Very important that I also sought to make sure that we did have an inclusive organization. My work ethic is a big part of my personal branding... people know me as someone who gets things done."

P6: *“So I think for me, ethics matter a lot. You got to be ethical, especially in a world that we live in, where these temptations, every corner and there's always, I mean, listen in any situation, you can always find a work around solution. For me, I've always cantered everything that I do on the ethics. Is this ethical, right? Is it right that is important? Always do the right thing. Sometimes the right thing is not. What is deemed to be the correct thing at that time? But what is right is right and if you put that to the forefront of everything. Growing up on a farm taught me hard work and resilience... you get knocked down, but you get back up again. But for me, I mean, for me it's humility.”*

P7: “At my workplace they get very excited about stuff and that aligns with who I am massively.
I don't like to talk about things. I just want to get it done.”

P8: ”I think you know, humble yourself. Act like every new role is the first time you're in it so you can get a lay of the land of how things are done.

P9: I think I think I tried to be as honest to myself and to the people around me as I can be.
Which then speaks to my integrity, I guess. In some, in some instances it had has gotten me into trouble, but I think the right trouble. For example, like I have very deep issues with female leaders that don't kind of help up and coming leaders and rather like bash them and laugh at them or whatever where there's an opportunity for you to actually teach them because maybe they didn't.

P10: *“Your values, both personally and operationally, which again your work values and your personal values might not be identical, but I do overlap. And what behaviours do these values indicate? Because I think many people have lists of values. But what? How do they need to behave to live that value?*

P12: “My point is hard work you're always striving for the best right and yeah also we're just building good relationships and being a person of integrity and honesty in those places is very important yeah and how it played out from my present work from junior positions into management is that there is no point in time when I didn't like my base and there's been no point in time with my you know umm I've gotten into and there is something that

is you know identified as the lack of integrity from my part umm or you know a deficit in a deficit in order to do so but it also made it easier for me to relate to my colleagues as well as management. The values of trying to be honest and hold my head up even in places where he walked away I probably been good relationships."

5.3.2 Role of Personal Branding in Career Advancement

In an attempt to discover the role that personal branding played in the career advancement of female executives, the following question was asked:

- How do you perceive the role that personal branding has played in your career advancement? And was it used in isolation, or does it form part of a bigger strategy plan to advance your career i.e. Mentoring ?

Three key themes emerged from the participants answers, some mentioned that personal branding positively contributed to their progression, while most participants attributed their success to luck. Mentorship was also highlighted by some participants as playing a role in their career progression, while one participant mentioned that it was the lack of mentorship that influenced her career path the most. In addition, participants highlighted that their underlying self0belef was a positive contributor to their career advancement.

Table 4: Career Advancement Themes

THEME	CODE
Luck	• Luck • Right Place Right Time • Referral • Networking • Fortune
Mentorship	• Mentor Influence • Female Influence • Guidance • Advocate • Peer Networks
Challenges	

	• Barriers on Career Advancement • Glass Ceiling • Education Barrier • Women Barriers • Pay Disparity • Fear
Self-Belief	• Self-awareness • Resilience • Inner Drive • Ambition • Bravery • Willingness to Learn • Resourcefulness
Relationships	• Relationship • Peer Networks • Networking • Female Influence • Helpful • Safe Space •

5.3.3.2 Theme: Luck

Participants reflected on the role of luck played as an influential factor in their career advancements, many participants attributed their achievements to a combination of fortunate circumstances and readiness. Participant 2 shared that while their personal brand played a role by making them a preferred colleague and leading to recommendations, much of their success was attributed to being in the "right place, right time" with the appropriate skills. Participant 5 explained that their career path was not meticulously planned; rather, positions of leadership came naturally as they progressed, without a deliberate branding strategy. Participant 8 attributed their entry into the industry partly to luck, noting that they joined at a time when there was a specific demand for Black professionals in their field, which facilitated their career start. Participant 11 similarly remarked that their commitment to serving others led to positions and titles "falling into their lap." These participant accounts highlighted that while personal branding and skill

were crucial, the element of luck was a notable factor in opening doors and shaping career paths, especially when combined with readiness to capitalize on opportunities.

P2: *I think it has. It definitely has, but I'm not sure if it was intentional. More than probably right place, right time with the right skills. But the yeah, personal branding does mean that other people recommend you because you're not a pain to work with. So that definitely goes a long way. A lot of my board recommendations came from friends.*

P5: *Just my perception is I don't think I necessarily I planned when I got out of university what I wanted to do. I want to become a chartered accountant. I never necessarily planned to say I wanted to be the FD or I wanted to be the MD, and in fact I was actually going through this right now. People said you need to, you need to create your own brands. You know for something. I just never did that. They came naturally in terms of what I was doing, except for my when I would.*

P8: "*Hey, I was lucky in the sense that the time I entered the industry. There was a need for black entrance and so they were, you know, willing to just take black entrance as, as and when the South African television and film industry is always. Screaming that they don't have enough production accountants or people who want to work in the accounting department, whether it's on productions or even if they work in house full time as employees for production accountants, a lot of the producers and owners are saying that they don't have you. The quality. So I was lucky enough to."*

P11: "I think I just love serving people - oh wow positions and titles just happened to fall in my lap and I'm always struck the natural work that I do that we've done has been consistent that's phenomenal that that's really phenomenal"

5.3.3.2 Theme: Mentorship

Participants found mentorship played a role in shaping their careers and personal branding. Participant 2 noted that mentorship helped them understand the importance of strategic career positioning, while Participant 3 and Participant 4 highlighted how mentors provided guidance in navigating underrepresented spaces and building personal brands. Participant 9 reflected on the impact of initially lacking supportive mentors, which motivated them to become a positive leader for others. Similarly, Participant 11 shared

that mentorship was instrumental in their leadership journey and aided in the development of their personal brand. Together, these perspectives revealed that mentorship was a key factor in both professional growth.

P2: *"Mentorship has helped me understand the importance of positioning myself strategically in my career."*

P3: *"I had mentors who shaped my career, even though most of them were male... they guided me on how to navigate spaces where women were underrepresented."*

P4*: "I would say mentorship also played a critical role in my personal branding journey, because then you meet other individuals, whether male or female, that have walked the path."*

P9: "So I think initially it was first of having really bad leaders. In a time that I actually needed somebody, specifically a black female, to help me out. And then I kind of made a promise to myself that I'll never be that kind of leader to anyone. And then it kind of it did become a strategy, to be honest. Strategy is a weird word because it's almost like you're planning your life like I don't know how to explain it . It makes sense when you say strategy like because you want this job. You want this, but like when you talk about life..."

P11: *"Guidance from mentors was instrumental in my leadership journey, helping me build my personal brand."*

Delving deeper into the journey of the participants, questions were asked about the challenges that they faced while climbing the corporate ladder, and whether their personal brand assisted them in overcoming the challenges.

- *What is your understanding of the 'glass ceiling'? What challenges and barriers, including gender stereotypes and biases, organizational structures have you faced on your journey to executive role?*

5.3.3.3 **Theme: Challenges**

The participants shared that their career advancement was not a linear process, and there were challenges that they encountered along the way. The key challenges were barriers from organisation structure, other women, themselves through imposter syndrome and gender or race biases. Participants described various challenges they faced as women in executive roles, particularly highlighting the impact of the glass ceiling and the complex dynamics within corporate environments. Participant 2 shared that as a Black woman, entering organizations often meant navigating spaces where some people may not support their growth or presence, despite occasional advocacy. Participant 3 discussed that part of the glass ceiling was self-imposed, while the other half was reinforced by others, including some women in leadership who felt reluctant to support others due to their own struggles. Participant 7 described being overlooked for a promotion despite strong performance, indicating biases that are not reflective of work quality.

Participant 8 shared that the glass ceiling was more tangible, describing it as a position still occupied by others who prevented advancement. Participant 10 provided a contrasting view, noting that while some may perceive the glass ceiling as an excuse, as biases and limitations do exist subtly in leadership perceptions. Participant 11 highlighted the compounded challenges of being young, female, and Black, and spoke about how that often required them to work significantly harder to be acknowledged on par with male counterparts. Together, these perspectives revealed to the Researched that the challenges faced by women in corporate organisations are multifaceted and persistent in nature and further highlighted the ongoing need for structural and cultural change.

P2: *“I hear a lot about the glass ceiling. I don’t know, especially coming in as a black woman into these organizations. The journey will be slightly different because you know some people don’t want you there. Some people want you there, but they’re not really going to help you grow. And you know, once in a while you’ll find someone who will be your advocate.”*

P3: *“So there’s half of the ceiling is our own ceiling. And the other half is the ceiling. I’ve been in environments where women have said to me, but I refer to the woman, you know, I’ve been in this business for 30 years. It took me 30 years to get here. I’m not going to make it easy for anybody else.”*

P7: *“100%. When I left there, I was an associate partner the year before at promotion time, I had been overlooked for the associate partner role. And someone else had been given the role. It was no reflection on my work.”*

P8: “*The glass ceiling is not a glass ceiling. There’s this white, old woman who’s still sitting in this chair that I should be sitting in.”*

P10: . *“I think women often use it as an excuse. As an explanation why they didn’t make it, if it wasn’t for the glass ceiling, I would have been there. And I think there is a there becomes a point in your career that men think perhaps that is how far women should be going. But I find that listen, listen, now. I I find when I work with a group of leaders. That the men are so open and so sensitive and so in touch with themselves. Now which of course is not true.”*

P11: *“Oh definitely I think being female being young and being black will experience all of them umm and I think some of business perspective it gets worse because men will literally close you out in the same room that you’re sitting with them and you have to speak twice as loud as you know you have to work 10 times harder woman to get the same deal.”*

With the challenges that the women have faced along their journey to executive roles, it was important to know how they were able to overcome these challenges?

- How did you overcome these challenges, and navigate society norms and identity categorizations? And did your personal branding assist you in overcoming challenges presented by glass ceilings?

5.3.3.4 Theme: Relationships

When it came to how the women overcame challenges they faced while climbing the corporate ladder, the women had varied answers. Some highlighted that relationships within their organisations served as a vital tool in rendering support that assisted them in facing their challenges. A realisation that a change in industry or lateral job role was also mentioned as an alternative way of overcoming career navigation challenges. Support from other females in the form of mentorship and family support was also mentioned as being instrumental in assisting some women overcome challenges. Self-belief also came

out strongly as their inner conviction was the anchor that they leant into to help them gain victory in their professional battles.

P1: *“I absolutely have, and I mean what I'm seeing is that, you know, and that's why I keep pointing out this whole relationship thing. You know, I mean, what I've noticed is that looking previously at the organizations that I've worked for, I just figured the trick is actually it. Terms of what I do is forming these relationships, you know, and now you're a woman.”*

P4: *“P4: “You have to be personable like you have to wake up in the morning and just say I want to be great because for me attitude and that is how I hire people in my team. You cannot teach someone attitude. You cannot some people. Aligning my work ethic with the values of the company has helped me gain credibility”*

P5: *“I must admit my experience in in this company has not been for people not wanting to share knowledge. I have a very. There's a female executive who actually helped me get to where I am and has been my advocate when I actually even was to say that I'm capable of doing the being an executive or more. So, I've had advocates both in the industry and in the logo that have advocated for my ability to become more than what I was and has seen the potential in me.”*

P10: “I've got a dad who, when I go home, notices that I'm so sad, even though I don't say anything that he thinks that he needs to send me a bunch of flowers in my office the next day. And that was. Another one of those, like turning points in my career, I was just like. None of this is important. Without that family and that balance, and that, I would, I would throw it all away to have a dad that loves me as much as my dad does.

5.3.3.5 Theme: Self-belief

In overcoming challenges, Participants shared the importance of also having self-belief. Participant 2 noted that breaking the glass ceiling required boldness, pointing out that women needed to move beyond simply completing their tasks and not be afraid to assert themselves. Participant 3 offered the conditioning that women often experienced, where they waited for promotions or recognition rather than proactively pursuing their goals. This mindset, according to Participant 3, could lead women to undervalue their unique "secret sauce" and limit their own potential. Participant 7 highlighted the importance of

vulnerability and encouraged women to embrace their imperfections as a source of strength, which could inspire others rather than adhering to a facade of flawlessness. Participant 9 shared a perspective rooted in perseverance and suggested that when a path is met with resistance, it could be a sign to rather push forward than give up. Collectively, these views informed the Researcher of the importance of self-belief to overcome challenges and suggested that confidence and a proactive mindset were essential ingredients for women aiming to break barriers and realize their full potential in leadership.

P2*: "You can start thinking about how would I break this class ceiling? Yeah. And then and a lot of it, you can't be shy. When that which I feel like a lot of women just want to do their jobs and go home, you can't be shy."*

P3: "We are so conditioned that somebody must give us a promotion. Somebody must give. We must be recipients of things that we don't go for it. We don't craft that element that fits with us, you know, and it's the reason why many give the secret source away because of the ceiling that they create on top of themselves."

P7: "*Then the females who come beneath us think that they're not allowed to have any cracks either. And that's nonsense. Like they are fully alert and in fact I believe that that's what makes them stronger. But they've got to have those, like, cracks in the armour that they've got to be able to be vulnerable. I mean that."*

P9*: "If it's something that you think about, or if it's something that you put as a goal. Like what? If you believe in God, the universe? Whatever. Put it in there because it's possible. Umm so whatever it is that you're seeing that goes against that you've put down. It's actually more of a sign to push through it than to stop. 'Cause. Yeah. And it's also something that on my voice is like, as soon as devil starts working with you, you know that you're almost there."*

5.4 Research Question 2:

5.4 Results: Research Question 2

How do female executives develop and use their personal brand personality and brand image to influence perceptions in the workplace and advance their careers?

5.4.1 Brand Personality

This research question explored how female executives develop and leverage their personal brand image and personality to influence workplace perceptions and propel their careers forward. Given the unique challenges that women faced in leadership, understanding these strategies could reveal how personal branding served as a tool for overcoming biases and enhancing visibility. The researcher wanted to better understand how brand personality particularly in female executives, was used to shape perceptions and establish a unique professional identity. Understanding how female executives developed and projected their brand personality could reveal its impact on credibility, influence, and career progression.

- How would you describe your brand personality and what are the traits or characteristics that define it?

The following brand personality themes were common amongst the Participants interviewed, authenticity; ethics; ambition, and relationships and networking.

Table 5: Brand Personality Themes

Authenticity	• Authenticity • Accepted Flaws • Humanness • Vulnerable • Honest • Transparent • Consistency • Openness
Ethics	• Ethics • Integrity • Honesty • Trust • Values

	• Respect, • Humility • Inclusive • Care • Empower Others
Ambition	• Ambitious • Strength • Standing Out • Focus on Big Picture • Catalyst • Assertive • Adaptable • Survivor • Toughness
Relationship & Networking	• Relationships • Connection to Others • Empathy • Thoughtful, • Good Listener • Supportive • Trust • Word of Mouth • Networking

5.4.1.1 Theme: Authenticity

Participants mentioned authenticity, once again, as a central aspect of their brand personality. Participant 5 described authenticity as being true to themselves, even when it involved expressing unpopular truths, which allowed others to clearly understand their intentions. Participant 7 also identified authenticity as their greatest strength, portraying themselves as a “what you see is what you get” leader who valued transparency and fairness. Participant 9 added that leaders should avoid leaving parts of themselves “on the other side of the door,” noting that bringing one’s full, honest self into leadership can have a powerful impact. Collectively, the Researcher noted that these perspectives suggested that authenticity was integral to a strong brand personality, empowering leaders to connect with others and build genuine influence.

P5: “*I also feel like a little bit of an imposter and that's just coming from a very authentic space. I have that very authentic side to me . I always prefer that when I talk to people,*

I'm saying it how it is - It might not be how you want to hear it, but this is my intention. So, I always say that way so that it, it allows people to understand where I'm coming from and that for me is the authenticity.

P7: *Authenticity. So like where I am, an authentic leader and that is my strength as a leader is that I I'm real and I'm like what you see is what you get and there's no like, there's no favouritism. I'm not pretending to be something I'm not. And I think that there is an extraordinary amount of strength as a leader that comes out of being authentic. And yeah, so if I'm good at one thing, it's being authentic.*

P9: *"As a person, you can't go into oh, you shouldn't. Rather, because a lot of people do. You shouldn't go into any kind of leadership role and leave certain parts of you on the other side of the door. Sometimes we leave parts of ourselves or the honesty that we might be bringing to the table, that could actually be extremely impactful, but because we're scared of what people might think, we leave it on the other side of the door. The reality is to be just honest."*

5.4.1.2 Theme: Ethics and Value

The role of ethics and values were once again noted as foundational elements in the brand personalities of participants, shaping how they lead and made decisions. Participant 5 shared that aligning with their personal value system was important to them. Participant 8 highlighted the importance of upholding ethical principles in their work, particularly in accounting, and noted that a leader's core values naturally reflected in their brand persona. Participant 11 linked their leadership style and personality to their Christian values. These perspectives informed the Researcher that ethics and values were integral to brand personalities and provided a moral foundation that reinforced trust and consistency in the leadership of women executives.

P5: *"Part of my branding is that I've decided that didn't actually match my value system and I decided to leave because it wasn't conducive and I wasn't willing to put other people through it as well because as a leader, you're going to have to say you. Know standing in front of people and saying something. Then you have in other areas where you have conflicting information being presented and you're like, you know, this is not me and I'm*

being forced to stand up for people where I don't believe that that's the right thing."

P8: *"I am unwavering with the fundamental rules of accounting. Of what is just morally and ethically correct to do so you know, I'd have a really hard time. I guess like your innate values and your innate personality will then shine through in your brand persona."*

P11: *"My personal leadership style I mean again goes back to my Christian values right and the Bible says you want to otherwise would have been doing to you and that's what I am promoting my decision with how I so in terms of leadership I believe the compassionate leadership style."*

5.4.1.3 Theme: Ambition

Participants conveyed ambition as being a defining element of their personal brand personality often linked with being proactive, adaptable, and confident. Participant 1 mentioned the importance of being proactive and viewed it as a key contribution to them. Participant 4 described themselves as highly ambitious and strategic, maintaining flexibility in their plans to be adapted as needed. Participant 8 emphasized the value of proactivity, especially within contexts where confidence could be affected by societal challenges, while expressing pride in their assertiveness and comfort in diverse settings. Participant 9 and Participant 10 hinted at ambition through their multifaceted abilities and strategic thinking and mentioned the diverse strengths they brought to through their leadership personality. These insights highlighted to the Researcher that ambition was a driving force for brand personality, which enabled participants to approach their careers with confidence, adaptability, and a forward-thinking mindset.

P1*: "So you know the whole thing of being proactive, you know, is a big part of playing of, of what we bring to the table."*

P4: *"I would say highly ambitious a planner, but not fixated cause I could change my mind."*

P8: "*There's nothing like being proactive guys. I think we underestimate the. The ability to be proactive and unfortunately, with black people, especially within this country or people who have just been oppressed, he's got a cash. It would mean that. You know, it's got to*

do with confidence, so. Just because I speak a certain way, I have a certain level of confidence. And I'm not shy around certain races groups."

P9: "*I feel like I'm very multifaceted.*

P10: *"Second day through, I don't want to say intelligence, but the thinking.".*

5.4.1.4 Theme: Relationships and Networking

Another central theme to Participants brand personality was relationships and networks, emphasizing the value they placed on genuine connections and mutual support. Participant 2 shared that an inclusive approach was central to their personality, which included building friendships across all levels of the organization, from directors to receptionists, and appreciating personal connections beyond formal hierarchies. Participant 4 described themselves as a "people's person" with a strong desire to see others succeed, likening their professional relationships to family structures where mutual support and helping others win was essential. Participant 8 noted that their interpersonal style at work was sometimes perceived as "old school," which suggested a straightforward or traditional approach to relationships. These insights reflected that fostering authentic relationships and supporting others were core elements of the Participants' brand personality.

P2: "So I'm, you know, and I'm friends with everyone because I don't need the director to be my best friend. My best friend could be one of the receptionists, another analyst you know. Let's hang out. Let's make it personal."

P4: *" Yeah, I would say I'm a people's person because I really love seeing other people win as much as people think that. I would say very family oriented. I love my family. I love my structure, my support structure. I actually want everyone to win if I if someone helped me to win, I want to help someone else win because that's just how it that's just how it is. We supposed to help each other and support each other so."*

P8: "*At interpersonal relationships in at the office, I don't think. People find me very abrasive. People find me. What's the word? Like old school, you know?"*

5.4.2 Brand Image

Building from the brand personality of the participants, was to discover how the participants viewed their brand image and whether they felt it played a crucial role in their career advancement.

- How would you describe the current image of your brand in your industry and what are the key factors that contributed to shaping or refining this image?

The themes tabled in Table 6 stood out as the prominent themes for how Participants understood their brand image:

Table 6: Brand Image Themes

Themes	Codes
Perception of Other People	• Colleague perspective • Client Perspective • Leadership Presence
Appearance and Reputation	• Evolved image • Corporate Appearance • Perception • Distinguishing Oneself • Standing out • Beauty • Femininity • Brand Personality
Professional Competence and Work Ethic	• Quality of work • Ambitious • Accountability • Dependability • Continuous learning • Trust • Time competence • Strength • Resilience • Not lazy

	• Curious • Continuous Learning • Fresh Thinking
Relationship and Networking	• Communication • Connection to others • Care • Collaborative • Empathy • Humility • Good Listener • Supportive • Empower others • Kindness • Thoughtful • Sensitive • Relationships • Vocal • Word of mouth
Communication Style	• Communication • Connection to others • Care • Collaborative • Empathy • Humility • Good Listener • Supportive • Empower others • Kindness • Thoughtful • Sensitive • Relationships • Vocal • Word of mouth

5.4.2.1 Theme: Perception of other people

Participants spoke about the importance of brand image as shaped by other people's perceptions, acknowledging that it reflected how they were viewed by colleagues, clients, and industry peers played an important role in their personal branding. Participant 1 highlighted the value of understanding their image from a client's perspective, and that their industry reputation was essential. Participant 3 shared a commitment to treating everyone equally, from executives to support staff, as part of their personal brand image. Participant 5 connected their brand image with their leadership presence, noting that it encompassed how various stakeholders perceived them within the organization. Participant 7 described brand image as the way people saw them and associated it with both professional accolades and personal characteristics that defined them in the workplace. Participant 8 pointed out how early perceptions framed them as "eager to learn" and a hard worker, a positive image that has persisted without negative associations throughout their career. The findings broadened the Researcher's understanding of the participants' awareness of brand image as a reflection of how others perceive their character, competence, and leadership qualities, shaping their overall influence and reputation.

P1: " *You know how they sort of shape it, how they want it viewed as well, from the client's perspective as well. It's very, very good to know how you're viewed. It's very, very important how we're seen in the industry.*

P3: *"Whether you are the cleaning lady or whether you are double CEO or BPO ever I give you the same treatment you know you are human being that requires my ears."*

P5: *"Like so for me, personal branding is also then your leadership presence is how do people perceive you in the organization amongst a wider range of stakeholders?"*

P7: "*I think when people see me like I'm quite a together and like, got the ducks in a row, but I'm actually not like that at all. Image often has a lot to do with your accolades, right? So, like I think with me, I'm like, I have a lot of that titles behind me. I think for me, my understanding of it is my brand Image is like who do people see me as? Like how do I*

show up? What kind of person am I at work? Like what kind of adjectives would they assign to me as a leader?"

P8: *So, in the beginning it was more like, oh, she's eager to learn. And so therefore I feel like. The perception of me was OK, great. She's cheap labour. She works hard. And at the end of the day, nobody really has much of a negative thing to say about me.*

5.4.2.2 Theme: Appearance and Reputation

The significance of appearance and reputation in building a strong personal brand image, was evident in participants' answers. Participant 5 noted that a personal brand image should be so powerful that it "speaks for itself," creating an immediate recognition and respect that reinforces one's reputation. Participant 9 shared advice from their father about dressing for the role they aspire to, noting that maintaining a polished, corporate appearance has led others to perceive them as occupying high-level positions even before reaching leadership roles. Participant 10 added that their brand image was partly embodied through their appearance, suggesting that their physical presentation aligned with the professional image they want to convey. Findings show that appearance and reputation are key components of brand image of participants as they contributed to how others perceived their authority, professionalism, and ambition**.**

P5: *"That is why your personal branding has to be that strong, that it speaks for itself. That's why people have to put up with name and then everyone knows exactly. This is what you're talking about. We're not playing here."*

P9: "*I think that and it's funny because when I think about it, it goes back to kind of my dad and some of his teachings. He always said to me, walk into a room. Dressed like who you want to be, not who you are. So for a very long time I've worn like super, super corporate clothes, even when I wasn't in a leadership position. You know what I mean? And my whole career, like people always would always be like, why are you so dressed up? And I was like, my dad's been telling me this for years, which now in hindsight, it means a lot of people thought I was in really big positions for a very long time*.

P10: "*I think my brand is embodied firstly through the beauty thing."*

5.4.2.2 Theme: Work ethic and Professional Competence

Another association that participants shared that was aligned with their brand image was work ethic and professional competence. Participant 1 shared that their proactive approach to tasks and going beyond basic efforts to achieve quality outcomes was how they were viewed in their organisation. Participant 4 noted that their reputation for hard work and dedication to both team and clients contributed to their promotion to a leadership role, highlighting that consistent performance and care for others shaped their professional image. Participant 5 expressed pride in their reliability, explaining that being known as someone who will “get it done” reflected positively on their brand image. Participant 8 shared that their commitment to thorough research and problem-solving built them a reputation of competence and positioned them as someone who was well-prepared and knowledgeable. These insights suggested that professional competence and a diligent work ethic were fundamental to participants' brand image, establishing them as reliable and capable leaders respected by their peers and stakeholders.

P1: ” We are not lazy in terms of how we find candidates. We don't just put out an ad.”

P4: *“I was able to then be looked at as an individual that can actually run a team. And that is what also got me my product head role because I think when. They looked back at. She works hard, she's been promoted. She cares about the team. She cares about the company. She cares about her clients, because for me, as much as yes, I cared about the client, my, my, my team, the clients.”*

P5: *“One thing I do not doubt is this. Put a piece of work in front of her and she will get done. That's what he said and that for me speaks volumes when somebody else tells you that it doesn't matter where I am, I will ensure to get it done, but you know that's simple for me.”*

P8: *“I would like to think that people think of me as somebody who knows what they're doing. Also it's about like the value of hard work. So literally just sitting for hours at a time Googling. Going to the library if you know if it wasn't on Google to just try and find solutions so that by the time somebody asked you for whatever that task was, you've already come through with. Like I've looked at this, I looked at this. I've looked at this”*

5.4.2.3 Relationships and Networking

Participants shared that being viewed as trustworthy and reliable were important aspects of their brand image, particularly in building and maintaining their relationships and networks. Participant 3 emphasized their straightforward, dependable nature, portraying themselves as someone others could count on without pretence, formed part of their brand image. Participant 5 expressed the importance of being a person of their word, explaining that trust and follow-through were essential to how their formed professional relationships. Participant 8 noted that as they demonstrated reliability, they were entrusted with greater responsibilities, reinforcing their image as a dependable and capable in their professional networks. These Participant perspectives revealed that a reputation for trustworthiness and commitment strengthened their relationships and networks, and enhanced their influence and credibility through their brand image in professional settings.

P3: *I'm tough. I'm not fake. I'm someone you can count on, you know.*

P5: *"When someone can say, put whatever you know, position, she'll do whatever, you know it is that. She needs to do so. For me, that is, that is very important. Trust. You know, being trustworthy. You know, being a person of your word, you know, if you're going to do something.*"

P8: *"We trust it to do more than just be somebody's given, you know? And so the more responsibilities that I was given."*

5.4.2.3 Communication Style

Participants described their communication style as another component of their brand image, highlighting its evolution and adaptability based on their professional growth and audience. Participant 2 shared the importance of connecting with people on both professional and personal levels, adapting their communication to be appropriate for each context and ensuring it reinforces reliability and honesty as their image. They also noted that there was a shift in their approach, moving away from a "cutesy" style to a more assertive, mature communication that aligned with their leadership role. Participant 4 shared that initially, they were hesitant to speak up, feeling self-conscious about articulating their thoughts, but have since embraced a more confident style, accepted their imperfections and showing up authentically as part of their image. These insights

demonstrated that communication style not only reflects personal growth in participants but also shaped their brand image as reliable, authentic, and adaptive leaders.

P2: "*It's about being able to to connect with people professionally on a personal level and making sure that you, I suppose your your brand is one that is sustainable. You really need to be reliable, honest and all those good things. So, depending on who you where you are with whom, it just needs to be appropriate."*

P2: *"A lot of the guys that go in for quick wins, but it's not that type of industry.* So, the earlier part of my career, I suppose it was very cutesy - I'm just a girl. And by about five years ago, I was like, no, no, no, no - That's over. It kind of goes with growth in leadership."

P4: " *I think prior to this, I probably never wanted to say anything. I would be like what am I saying? Like no one cares to listen. Or I can't articulate. You know, I'm just like, let me just sit back. Let me hide. No one will notice me, but in the recent years I found that I've accepted my flaws the way that they are, and I just show up regardless of if you think I can't do this, I can't do that."*

5.4.3 Personal Brand image as a catalyst for Career Advancement

The researcher wanted to get a deeper understanding of how personal brand image was a catalyst for Career Advancement and asked participants:

- Can you please share how your personal brand image played a crucial role in achieving a career milestone and impacted your career advancement?

5.4.3 Brand Image Positioning

Participants shared that brand positioning was a strategic approach and factor to advancing their careers, describing how they actively shaped their professional image to stand out and achieve career goals. Participant 1 discussed the importance of proactively marketing their brand based on the quality of their work and positioning themselves through strategic visibility. Participant 4 highlighted the need for competitiveness,

especially as a woman in a male-dominated environment, noting that they consciously adopted a more assertive stance to leverage their strengths and establish their presence. Participant 6 reflected on transitioning from the shadow of a well-known mentor, recognizing the importance of building their unique reputation while maintaining foundational relationships to solidify their brand position. The researcher noted how the Participants used their brand positioning is a deliberate effort, with participants adapting their approach to enhance visibility, assertiveness, and relationship-building to support their career advancement.

P1: *In terms of strategizing for your business and you know sort of shaping your actual brand based on the work that we have actually gone out there and done. As going out there and actually sort of, I would say sort of marketing their brand*

P4: *The approaches is that I can also be, you know, we talk about competitiveness. It's for me as a female. I found that we are very shy. We don't want to get into the competition because it's mostly male dominated. Aggressiveness is not, you know, part of the female, you know, brand or whatever. But I can be competitive. So yeah, I I can say I can be just as aggressive. In approach. That I've taken is to pretty much observe and see where my strengths are in that situation and play through those strains because."*

P5: *My personal branding. Is actually what gets me into rooms that I'm not right. Let's start the so I am where I am largely because of that. I had what my personal branding was, you know, and I've capped that out, so it gets me in those kind of rooms and I think it's also important to understand that. And as much as one is there to do the work, but there's also the other side that gets into rooms that speaks for you when you're not there. That is, that is very important. I get it influences decisions that others make of you."*

5.5 Results: Research Question 3

Is Personal branding used in isolation, or does it form part of a bigger strategy plan of female executives to advance their careers i.e. Mentoring ?

5.5.1 Other Strategies Employed by Females for Career Advancement

5.5.1.1 Other Strategies

Noting that participants used varying methods to advance their careers, a follow up question emerged which sought to understand alternative strategies used by female executives to advance their career.

Table 7: Other Career Advancement Strategy Themes

Themes	Codes
Other Strategies for Career Advancement	• Mentoring • Coaching • Sponsors and mentors • Referrals • Emulating others

Theme: Professional Coaching, Sponsors

Participants described a range of strategies beyond personal branding that supported their career advancement. Participant 2 shared the importance of surrounding themselves with like-minded women, preferring to build connections with those who created a sense of community and mutual support. Participant 3 highlighted the value of long-term mentorship, noting that guidance from experienced mentors provided essential insights and accountability, even when the advice was tough. Additionally, Participant 3 acknowledged the role of structured training and development programs as helpful resources, especially for newer generations looking to build skills. Participant 9 shared that many of their career advancements resulted from recommendations and referrals, underlining the role of sponsorship in securing new opportunities. Participant 10 emphasized the need for kindness and solidarity among women, pointing out that having allies on one's journey is critical. The Participants perspectives showed that mentorship,

professional coaching, and sponsorship were key strategies that complemented personal branding, and enabled participant to navigate career paths with stronger support systems.

P2: *But then you must emulate people that resonate with you, and not just because everyone you know. Like the lady I spoke about like I was like you know, this is amazing. It's like one of my dreams that I'm here interviewing you. Where are the other ladies? And I'm just like, no, no, no, that's not my type of girl - if she's not a girl's girl. And I can always tell. Yeah, I like building community with other girls."*

P3: "*So #1 it's it you #2 is the input that you get around you, you know. Whether that is from mentoring and coaching etcetera and not, not everybody knows how to be a coach. Not everybody knows how to be a mentor. I have a mentor that I've had for 20 more than 20 years. He's very he's old and he's very tough on me.*"

P3: "*But when younger generations come in and they look at these leaders as mentors, as coaches only to build, I'm not gonna help you, right? I tried to do that for you. Training and development is gonna do that for you."*

P9: *"I first, I applied for my first two roles when I was in my early 20s. Sure, I said it like I'm old and I'm really not. But after that it's always been somebody that's recommended me. Somebody that said shows and he I really think you'd be good for this role. Or somebody just DMS me on LinkedIn, like hey, can we please chat? There's something that I think you'd be interested in."*

P10: " *Yeah, I think they're not kind enough to one another. And you need someone on your side on the way up and then they're not there for one another."*

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

The results from the analysis of data collected from semi-structed interviews was presented in the previous chapter. Three research questions were posed to 12 women from various South African private sector industries. This aim of this research was to gain insights into whether personal branding positively impacts the career advancement of female executives and to identify specific strategies that can be adopted by aspiring women seeking executive positions.

The results are compared to existing literature in an effort to highlight insights discovered through the research process.

6.2 Discussion: Research Question 1

> Research Question 1:
> What are the perspectives of female executives on the importance of personal branding in their career advancement, its role in progressing their careers, and which factors hold the most influence on women's career progression?

The first research question explored the perspectives of female executives on the importance of personal branding in advancing their career, the role personal branding played in progressing their careers, and which factors hold the most influence on women's career progression.

6.2.1 Role of Personal Branding in Career Advancement

In order to identify the role of personal branding in career advancement of the female executives, the perceived definition of personal branding by the women in a professional setting, needed to be investigated.

6.2.1.1 Definition of Personal Branding

According to Scheidt et al. (2020) personal branding is an interdisciplinary concern. Personal branding can conceptually be approached through three key pillars – the contribution of the branded individual through their skills, competencies, expertise and experience; the perception of the induvial held by target audience, and the outcomes from

the branding process, which distinguish the individual from their peers. Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova (2019) argue that personal branding has developed into an area of fragmented research with a diversity of definitions and conceptual boundaries. Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova (2019) identified clearly defined personal branding as a strategic process of creating, positioning, and sustaining a positive impression of oneself , based on a unique combination of individual characteristics that convey a specific promise to a targeted audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery.

The participants highlighted personal branding as a crucial factor in their professional success, describing it as a unique differentiator in competitive environments. The view personal branding as the perception others holds of them, shaped largely by how they present themselves in the workplace. Many participants noted that personal branding is an evolving process, developing progressively as they advance through their careers. For many of the female executives interviewed, their personal branding stood out as influencing their leadership style and reinforced their authenticity, positively affecting their engagement with colleagues and fostering trust. Furthermore, participants view personal branding as a source of value, contributing to their credibility and aligning their purpose with their professional objectives.

6.2.1.2 The Importance of Personal Branding for Female Executives

In recent years, the significance of personal branding has grown for professionals in executive roles. Cunningham (2021;1) argues that branding is a business practice of strategically targeting, positioning, aligning, and executing a portfolio, product, or service in a way that benefits society. Taking this view into account, a brand must be authentic, add value, and create meaningful experiences that foster a long-term relationship (Beverland 2021:134).

Consistent with Cunningham's (2021) view, the response from female executives highlighted that they considered personal branding an important aspect of their professional success. Some participants emphasized the importance of personal branding as being something that could make or break one's career. This remark further reenforces the argument made by Cunningham's (2021) that the concept of branding is a strategic practice that can directly influence how a brand is received and in turn significantly impact professional credibility and advancement.

The importance of authenticity was another key insight that participants shared in their responses to the importance of personal branding for female executives. The participants referenced authenticity as being the golden thread in all their actions and how they connected with other people in their organisations, which ultimately added value and depth to their relationships. This aligned with the view held by Beverland (2021:134) on the authenticity of brand that is required to add value and create meaningful experiences that foster long-term relationships.

The perspective of Cunningham's (2021) on brands being used for strategic positioning along with alignment was evident when some participants were forthcoming with noting that a person needed to be clear about their brand promise and what they stood for. They contributed their brand promise to enhancing their reputation amongst their stakeholders and industry peers. This aligned with the findings on the importance of having a clear personal brand, which ultimately contributes to fostering long-term relationships as stated by Beverland (2021:134).

6.2.1.3 Values driving Personal Branding and Career Advancement Decision-Making

Considering Gorbatov et al. (2019) defined personal branding as a set of an individual characteristics (attributes, values, beliefs etc) shaped into a differentiated narrative and image aimed at creating a competitive advantage in the minds of the targeted audience. Participants shared the values that contributed to their personal branding, notably mentioning authenticity, integrity, honesty, resilience, work ethic, humility, assertiveness and building relationships as being biggest value-drivers to their personal branding. It is important to note that women the women's values were often aligned to organisational values.

Authenticity once again was the common value-driver amongst most women and seen as impacting their leadership styles. This amplified the alignment between personal values and the personal brands held by women and its importance on maintaining an authentic brand. Remaining honest to self and others was a mentioned as also speaking to their integrity.

Integrity as a contributor to building trust in the professional setting emerged as another value-6driver for personal branding of female executives. The women spoke about integrity as being part of their core values and noted that it played a significant role in both their approach to personal branding and career planning. Having integrity was mentioned in conjunction with not only how the women interacted with others and carried out their job responsibilities, but also the drive in their agency for inclusiveness in the organisations. Integrity was also seen as being an important factor in ethical decision-making, with some women noting that in the line of their duties, this did not always come with ease as it sometimes conflicted with popular opinion. However, by being ethical, the women added that it bult on their credibility.

Assertiveness stood out as being an being a characteristic which some women have had to learn as they navigated the corporate landscape. This was necessary in their line of duty and the difficult decisions that they sometimes had to make as they led team and made strategic decisions to influence business direction.

Overall, a strong work ethic emerged as a foundational trait among the women who have successfully built impactful personal brands. The women attributed their work ethic to being a differentiator and driving force behind their professional personas. Some women mentioned doing the jobs that no one wanted to do or be proactive with taking on tasks, as some of the things that set them apart from their peers. Their consistency, commitment to high standards and going the extra mile were some of the traits that reinforced their credibility, trust, reliability and reputation for producing quality work. A strong work ethic with ethical standards has played a pivotal role in the career trajectories of the women interviewed.

6.2.2 Role of Personal Branding in Career Advancement

In exploring role that personal branding played in the career advancement of female executives, the following question was asked:

- How do you perceive the role that personal branding has played in your career advancement? And was it used in isolation, or does it form part of a bigger strategy plan to advance your career i.e. Mentoring ?

Three key themes emerged from the participants answers, some mentioned that personal branding positively contributed to their progression as discussed in the earlier section of this research, while other participants attributed an unpredictable force, luck, as playing a role in their career success. Mentorship was also highlighted by some participants as playing a role in their career progression, while one participant, interestingly, mentioned that it was the lack of mentorship that influenced her career path the most as it left her with the responsibility to make a success of their career in the absence of having others to lean on.

6.2.2.1 Luck

Luck played a significantly surprising role in the success of women in their careers. Some participants spoke about being in the tight place at the right time or unexpected encounters which would lead to them connecting with influential figures, and propelling their careers to new heights. Datta et al., (2021) defines luck as an event or occurrence that involves chance, is consequential (either beneficial or harmful), and is at least partially outside the control of the person or people affected by it. Women have been able to capitalize on their chance encounters, whether unexpected projects or positioning in networks and leveraged these events as stepping stones. It should be observed that the women were not only open in their mindsets to the possibilities that these events presented, but they were also prudent in their approach, by taking calculated risks in exploring them.

6.2.2.2 Mentorship

A more structured and well-researched method to career advancement was mentorship, which some women noted as contributing to their career advancement. Mentoring has been studied as playing a vital interpersonal role by providing a less experience individual (mentee) a relationship with a more experienced individual (mentor), who offers career-related support and psychosocial functions (Bagdadli & Gianecchini, 2019). This has led to predicted compensation and career outcomes as mentors often provide insights into organisational culture, protocols, expectations and guidance to equip the mentee with additional support and skills that can make a substantial difference in their career recognition and success (Bagdadli & Gianecchini, 2019)

The above contributors to career advancement have been used at different points in the women's careers and can also be used interchangeably as strategic tools to explore opportunities that contribute to the preparedness of women as they navigate their careers.

6.2.3 Role of Personal Branding in Overcoming Career Challenges

A discussion on the journey of female executives required addressing some of the challenges that these women faced along the way. Despite some progress being made to include more women in the workforce, women encounter challenges that add complexity to their career advancement. These challenges range from subtle biases that exist to structural barriers that limit their career growth. Due to traditional roles and differing priorities, career advancement looks different for women and men. Women are expected to prioritize their family lives, while balancing work responsibilities, and men often focus on their career progression as primary earners (Verma, 2020). For women in the workforce, there are three barriers that have been examined as illuminating the challenges faced by women. These are the glass-ceiling effect, work-life conflict, and organizational culture (Marina et al., 2020).

In carving a professional identity for themselves, the women interviewed highlighted how their personal brand traits exhibited through their unique strengths, self-belief, reputations, work ethic, visibility, assertiveness and networks – assisted them with their career advancement despite the obstacles they faced. To create a more inclusive and diverse work environment, recognizing and addressing these challenges was essential to better create a more equitable work environment and lasting career success.

6.3 Discussion: Research Question 2

Research Question 2 How do female executives develop and use their personal brand personality and image to influence perceptions in the workplace and advance their careers?

6.3.1 Brand Personality

Brand personality plays a key role in personal branding as it reflects one's unique combination of values, strengths, style and professional attributes. Personal brand personality as argued by Rup et al., (2018) is essential as it embodies a fundamental collection of human characteristics linked with brands. Aaker (1997) highlighted the importance of the brand personality, which he defined as "the human characteristics associated with a brand.

In relation to this research topic, the participants described their brand personalities with characteristics that include authenticity, ethics, ambition, relationships, communication style, appearance and promise. These characteristics were noted as contributing to creating their distinct presence and deepening their engagements with others in the professional settings.

6.3.1.1 Authenticity

Perception of a person's authenticity is driven by behaviour that is unique to that person and is stable over time (Scheidt et al., 2020). Credibility and authenticity have been recognized as some of the essential qualities for human brands. Authenticity is noted as positively influencing the attitude towards a branded individual and plays a critical role in how consumer judgements and decisions are made (Scheidt et al., 2020). Individuals who are perceived to be authentic as favoured as they uphold a consistent promise of value. Originality, discernment, aspects of talent and clarity are some of the attributes that enhance authenticity and are closely related to differentiation, which is a key element to personal branding (Scheidt et al., 2020). Authenticity also represents an individual's true self and delivers a genuine and reliable presence (Scheidt et al., 2020).

Participants noted their authenticity as a preference to how they communicate with people. They also mentioned their authenticity as a strength of theirs which played a positive influence in their leadership style. It was noted that bringing oneself in an honest manner can create greater impact in the environments that the women work. Authenticity has allowed the individuals to convey their genuine selves in professional settings, which sometimes attracted like minded professionals and opportunities which were aligned with their professional goals.

Authenticity allows individuals an opportunity to genuinely resonate with their audience by reflecting their true values and consistent behaviours. This leads to lasting relationships being formed and credibility being built. Authenticity also allows for individuals to align with their core missions, which can smoothen the career journey.

6.3.1.2 Ethics

The perceived ethicality of a brand plays a significant role along with the brand experience as it influences both brand passion and brand commitment (Das et al., 2019). Applied to personal branding, the perceived ethical integrity of a person's brand significantly enhances the impact of the professional experience of an individual on how it cultivates their brand passion and commitment from their audience. When people are seen as ethical, this creates stronger connections as others feel more drawn to their brand. Ethics establish trust and positions individuals as being principled and reliable, which further enhances their credibility.

The participants spoke of the strong alignment of their ethics to their value system and the integral part it plays in their personality. They also added integrity as being part of their innate personality which shone through in their personality. Their leadership style and decisions were also influenced by their value systems, including being guided by their religious convictions. This also contributed to their compassion and principles which made them trustworthy and respectful of others. These shared values of the participants were contributors to their ethical brand and added to their value within their networks.

6.3.1.3 Ambition

Mission, vision, and purpose are ambitious elements of a brand and have been outlined as a vision of a brand's future or desired state that requires growth and transformation. This, however, is dependent on various factors, history and heritage, values, personality and character which shapes this perception (Keller, 2023). Ambition in employees makes them attractive as it signals visionaries and shapes the perception of them to their audience.

Participants identified themselves as being ambitious and proactive in what they brought to the table in their roles. Their upbringing highlighted strong female presence, in the form of their mothers or grandmother, who influenced their characters and in turn their drive

and ambition. They also described themselves as being multifaceted and constantly evolving in their thinking, which contributed to their transformation over the years.

6.3.1.4 Relationships

A central theme in participants' brand personality was their emphasis on relationships and networks, which reflected a strong value placed on them creating genuine connections and mutual support. Participants described their approach, ability to build friendships across all organizational levels, from directors to receptionists, as adding value to their personal connections beyond formal hierarchies. Participants also described themselves as a “people’s person” who prioritized seeing others succeed, likening their professional relationships to a family structure where mutual support and helping others were essential. Some participants took a straightforward, perhaps traditional, approach to relationships. It was evident that genuine connection and building relationships were integral to how participants engaged and lead in the workplace. Personifying brands is regarded as a powerful strategy that is essential for success, significantly influencing consumer-brand relationships, brand associations, and consumer preference and choice (Japutra & Molinillo, 2019).

6.3.2 Brand Image

In personal branding, brand image is often utilized as a strategic to build credibility, which is encompassed in competence, completeness, persuasion, being ethical, honesty, being impressive, promises, and reliability (Hussain et al., 2020).

Key themes emerged when the executive interviewed discussed their brand image – this included appearance, promise, work ethic and professional competence, communication, relationships.

6.3.2.1 Promise/Perception

Promises take many forms. Most commonly, promises to take the form of an utterance, certain acts that generate an obligation (i.e. ordering food in a restaurant creates an obligation to pay for the bill at the end of the meal). Just as promises generate a moral obligation to satisfy the expectations expressed through the promise, brands are also as ethically akin to promises, which is to say, brands are governed by the same moral

principle that governs the ethics of promises (Bhargava & Bedi, 2022). Brand promise can also be seen as a commitment to consistently delivering quality, which reinforces trust and expectation.

When examining the perception of the respondents personal branding, a recurring theme was the importance of keeping one's promise and how that shaped the perception of how they were viewed in their industries and organisations. Participant one emphasized how her external image played a role in her professional reputation to having high standards within her industry and clients' expectations. Another respondent mentioned being known for treating everyone the same, regardless of their position in the organisation, and this created a consistent perception of the person being approachable and respectful to all. The same respect and equality in the respondent's approach, further highlights their positive brand promise, which is rooted in integrity and humility.

Another respondent spoke about her leadership presence and the stakeholder perception held, which influenced her leadership effectiveness. This reiterated that a leader's brand is also inherently tied to their visibility and the impressions left in their organisation.

Although there was a respondent who noted that she felt a disconnection between her external image and internal reality, which was how her brand is perceived to be someone as who has her ducks in a row, she did not always feel it to be the case. However, she mentioned that she has always been a hard worker and achieved many accolades along the way, which may indicate the perception held by others based on her professional achievements and visible accomplishments. She did, however, earlier in the interview, mention that she has always been a hard worker – a promise to her work ethic.

When a brand keeps its promise, it inevitably builds a reputation for reliability and fosters loyalty, crucial for both consumer confidence and professional credibility.

6.3.2.2 Appearance

In personal branding, appearance refers to visual cues that help form a first impression. Appearance is shaped by self-care, personal style, wardrobe choices, and grooming, which all contribute to constructing a professional image in the workplace. (Khedher, 2019).

Deska et al., (2022) found that appearance can influence the judgements of not just an individual but also the things associated with them in their environment. While appearance is often understated, it plays a crucial role in brand personality. According to Scheidt et al., (2020) women are expected to reach for the top, while also looking feminine, and while paying attention to their appearance. Additionally, women are expected to also be there for their children and husbands, as well as routinely taking on the role of caretaker at work.

The participants described their appearance as being part of their personality, and the care that they took into how they dressed and looked in the work environment. One participant referenced their personality being embodied in beauty and how that carried through everything that they did. While another spoke about how her father had always stressed the importance of dressing for the job you want, and how over the years throughout her career, she always dressed impeccably, which gave the impression to others that she was more senior that her current roles at the time. Having strong presence was also a common theme that came out when appearance was discussed, and the surety of knowing who you are and what you stand for, which can be communicated in how you show up at work.

Khedher, (2019) discovered four strategies that women use to work their appearance, these include diet and sport practices, hygienic and aesthetic practices, planning of dress best suited to different business situations, and a way in which they an individual presents their work, values and standards. Having a polished and intentional appearance has been observed as supporting the brand's promise of professionalism and reliability, leaving a lasting impression (Khedher, 2019).

6.3.2.3 Work Ethic and Professional Competence

Gorbatov (2019 et al) studied that there are virtual values that advance one's career and benefit an organization and the individual equally, which includes having a formidable work ethic that positively shapes their personal brand.

Work ethics are a common value that respondents held close to their identity, but it is also a foundational force in their reputation and how they are viewed in their industries and organization. The participants spoke about how having a strong work ethic reflected their values of being reliable, accountable and dedicated, which contributed to a positive brand

image that others respected and trusted. Their work ethic also spoke to their intrinsic motivation and discipline, which included being proactive and dependable. This created reputation that positioned them as people who could effective contribute to their organizations and leadership roles. According to Kervyn et al., (2022) perceptions of competence were positively associated with admiration and negatively associated with feelings of contempt and pity. Bringing it to human brand, Kervyn et al., (2022) also observed that admired brands exhibited traits of warmth and competence, which were traceable to employee and management behaviour.

6.3.2.4 Communication Style

Brands are used to communicate with consumers in a non-interactive and one-way manner and the implementation of certain communication style can be an expression of positioning, which is likely to have an impact on consumer's brand perception (Hegner et al., 2021). Communication style whether direct, empathetic or persuasive defines a brand's personality and shapes how people interact and perceive the brand.

Participants shared their approach to their communication style and how they interact with others to foster engagement within their network, with one stressing the importance of adjusting their communication style to effectively communicate with different stakeholders in their business. It was noted that this did not dilute their authenticity as they remained the same person, only altering the way they communicated their messages to better fit their audience. A communication style is a basic component of a brand's personality. It is defined as a human characteristic that is attributed to the brand to enhance the communication of its physical elements and attributes in a way that resonates with the consumer. (Glińska & Rudolf, 2019).

6.4 Discussion: Research Question 3

Research Question 3 Is Personal branding used in isolation, or does it form part of a bigger strategy plan of female executives to advance their careers i.e. Mentoring ?

In exploring the career journey of the female executives, respondents identified a range of alternative strategies that they used in their professional growth which veered from traditional methods of career progression. Respondents mentioned a range of alternative strategies such as mentoring, professional coaching, sponsorship and investing in training and development to enhance their skillset. These strategies were credited with offering alternative avenues of support, guidance and valuable connections within their organisations. Some respondents also noted that they emulated other successful industry role models to gain best practices and insights on how to effectively navigate their career paths and shape their behaviours.

6.4.1 Professional Coaching

Professional coaching has been attributed as an alternative strategy for career development, which happens intermittently when a coach, usually more experienced in the industry or sector, assists a lesser experienced employee with performance tips and feedback to upskill them. Coaching has been seen as an effective tool to improve employee performance and positively contribute toward their career development. According to Seehusen et al., (2021) coaching is generally an iterative process, which involves cyclical “observe, provide feedback, reobserve” from the coach’s perspective. And for the individual being coached, this is “perform, received feedback, reperform” with the primary aim of enhancing their performance on work-related tasks, skills or activities. Coaching has been effective in developing skills as it allows a focused measurable process to gauge improvement over time.

Some women attested to the success of receiving coaching in positively contributing and accelerating their careers. They mentioned that under guidance of a coach, their skills sharpened, they gained clearer insights and were able to build on their strengths, which improved their capabilities. Through the support of a coach, they we able to improve their performance and position for professional growth and advancement.

6.4.2 Sponsorship

Sponsorship has gained traction over the years as another alternative strategy that can be explored for the advancement of careers. Sponsors generally are focused on speaking for and positioning a sponsored individual for opportunities that propel their careers forward in an industry or organisation. The sponsor is usually someone who also has influence and ability to advocate for the advancement of the individual's career. Sponsors are able to recommend individuals for leadership roles, prestigious awards, or high-profile speaking engagements.

Through sponsorship, a protégé is actively put forward by a sponsor for high-visibility, career-advancing opportunities .A sponsor's endorsements can help the protégé gain recognition and accelerate their career progression Ayyala et al., (2019).

The participants advocated the necessity of having someone on their side to speak up for them when they are not there, emphasizing that a sponsor's support can enhance their visibility in organisations and provide career endorsement. This has led to opportunities for them and additional responsibilities being assigned, which helped their career advancement.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This study followed an inductive qualitative approach to explore the influence of personal branding on career advancement for female executives. Th influence of personal branding on career advancement for female executives, was explored throughout this research and an investigation was carried out on how personal branding strategies shape workplace perceptions and support professional growth for female executives. This study was significant as inclusivity and representation is becoming increasingly topical in local and global corporate organisations. According to Choi, (2019), women remain significantly underrepresented in executive positions, despite a notable increase in their presence being observed in the workforce. Females constitute 26.5% of top management positions in the workforce, compared to 73.5% of males in South Africa (DOL, 2023). Examining personal branding's potential to enhance visibility, credibility, and influence, there is an opportunity for the study to contribute to existing body of work that highlights the strategic importance of self-representation in career development. Zacher et al., (2019) posits the importance of self-efficacy in career development. In conjunction to this study, the journey of female executives navigating corporate environments needed to be studied, which included looking into some of the barriers that they encountered along the way. Organisational focus for leadership roles is primarily focused on cultivating the required skills, with little focus being given on invisible barriers, including, bias-centred, structural-centred, and cultural-centred factors that exist (Griffith et al., 2019). Further investigation was required to examine whether personal branding can be an effective tool for overcoming these challenges and advancing the careers of female executives.

This chapter represents the finds from research; discussion of their implications for academic theory and business; presents a personal branding framework for career advancement, and underlines the limitations in this research, as well as suggesting key areas for future research.

7.2 Research Findings

The representation of women in the workforce has risen notably in recent years, yet women remain underrepresented in executive leadership roles (Choi, 2019). In South Africa, women hold only 26.5% of top management positions, compared to 73.5% held by men (DOL, 2023). According to *The Leadership Quarterly* (2022), the strategic leadership team, comprising CEOs, top management teams, and board members, shares a responsibility for achieving organizational outcomes such as performance, strategic decision-making, social and ethical governance, stakeholder engagement, and fostering innovation. While many organizations prioritize succession planning and leadership development, these efforts typically centre on skill cultivation for leadership roles (Griffith et al., 2019). However, the persistent gap in gender representation at the executive level suggests the need for a more comprehensive approach to leadership development that addresses the unique challenges women face in advancing to these roles.

Studies have shown that women often contend with implicit biases and stereotypes that can limit access to leadership roles. Little focus is given to the invisible barriers that prevent women from reaching the upper echelons of leadership, also metaphorically known as the “glass ceiling” (Choi, 2019). Given this context, personal branding can be particularly relevant for women, as it allows them to assert a professional identity that aligns with their career goals while challenging conventional gender norms (Goffee & Jones, 2006). By addressing these barriers within the context of corporate advancement, this study highlights how personal branding can act as a tool for empowerment and visibility, enabling female executives to navigate biases and position themselves favourably in the competitive landscape of leadership (Shepherd, 2005).

This chapter presents the research finding through a qualitative research study which answered the focal research question through three sub-questions.

7.2.1 The Importance of Personal Branding in Female Executives' Career Advancement

The findings indicated that there is a significant role that personal branding plays in the career advancement of female executives. The study found that personal branding contributed to enhanced visibility, recognition, and driving influence of female executives within their organizations. The participants noted that through their personal brands, it was

able to facilitate credibility and positions for them as industry leaders. Female executives use personal branding strategies to drive career advancement, challenge biases, and increase visibility, positioning themselves for leadership roles (Heriberta et al. (2024). This highlighted personal branding as a strategic tool for promoting and communicating success within an organization. Beyond intentional self-presentation and continuous self-assessment, personal branding empowers women to embody key values and enhance their visibility, ultimately supporting their ascent to leadership positions (Heriberta et al., 2024). Findings from this research confirmed findings from literature on how female executives developed and leveraged their personal brand for career advancement. These themes included differentiator, perception, evolving process, authenticity, relationship, and values.

The concept of differentiation was a recurring theme among the female executives who were interviewed. The women shared the role that their personal branding played to establish their unique professional identity. The participants expanded on how they created their multidimensional identities through their unique skills, pioneering, and outperformance. This allowed them to differentiate themselves and strengthen their personal branding .The executives emphasized that their unique competencies were demonstrated through their personal branding, which contributed to their value in their organisations and set them apart from their peers. Presenting themselves as pioneers signalled innovation and boundary-pushing, which the women found impactful in underrepresented fields, to have established themselves as forward-thinking leaders. Demonstrating a consistent record of outperformance reinforced their reliability and excellence and was instrumental in countering biases and affirming the participant's qualifications for leadership roles. Together, these attributes showcased women as capable, innovative, and high-achieving professionals. The value of individuals and the uniqueness of their growth stem from their Personal Brand Alonso-Gonzalez et al., (2019).

Perception emerged as a central theme in personal branding, emphasizing the importance of how executives are regarded within their workplace and broader industry context. The executives used their personal branding to communicate their strengths, address misconceptions, and align others' perceptions with their professional image. Themes like "reputation," "acknowledgement," and "feedback" reinforced the importance that self-awareness played a pivotal role in managing external impressions .The perception of the branded person by target groups or audience was one of the three pillars that were conceptually used to approach personal branding (Scheidt et al. 2020).

The investigation into how female executives construct their personal brands, revealed that participants characterized the process of personal brand building was a continuous journey involving ongoing personal growth and adaptation. Participants described that their personal brands evolved over time, along with a growth mindset. Spiritual grounding was identified as a factor that enabled some participants to maintain a sense of self-connection throughout their developmental journey. The findings indicated that personal branding was not static but instead evolved over time to reflect one's experiences and lessons. This evolution allowed female executives to sustain their relevance, adapt to emerging challenges, and demonstrated resilience and commitment within their roles.

A commonality that emerged through discussions with participants was authenticity as a significant contributor to personal branding. Participants described their authenticity as them being trustworthy, maintaining openness and consistency, and that their self-awareness underscored the importance of staying genuine. The females further reflected the need for trustworthiness and alignment between their inner values and outward brand. They also shared that authenticity was the foundation of their personal brands, as it builds their credibility and fosters genuine relationships within the organization. This observation that authenticity was an important factor in personal brand of participants, aligns the findings by Beverland, (2021, p. 134) that brands should be authentic, provide value, and create impactful experiences that cultivate lasting relationships

Relationships, networking, and peer support came up as essential elements in the personal branding journey of female executives and evident in the findings of how personal branding impacted female executives. They expressed that they saw personal branding as a relational tool that helped forge connections within their peer networks and establish strong, mutual support and collaboration. The peer networks created, and relationships built as a result of their personal branding reflected the importance of building supportive professional communities. Each branding element—identity, personality, positioning, and image—represents an interconnected cycle that forms a purposeful personal brand essential for career development. Shaping a positive personal brand through authenticity, networking, hard work, and a strong work ethic is crucial. These

values are fundamental to career advancement, offering equal benefits to both the individual and the organization (Gorbatov et al., 2019).

The research set out to determine the values that underline personal branding, and values such as ethics, purpose, commitment, and responsibility were seen as the foundation of the executive's personal brand. By aligning their brand with core values, executives shared that it created a solid base that resonated with others. This alignment helped to foster a respectful, purposeful personal brand that was both trustworthy and influential in their careers. In creating a meaningful presence that will stand out in the marketplace, brand identity has been instrumental for up taking one's mission, vision, and values to create an authentic brand (Cunningham, 2021).

Career Advancement

Whilst the women interviewed credited their success and ability to overcome obstacles to their personal agency, effort, and hard work. Many also highlighted mentoring and networking as key career facilitators. Mentoring has been found to be a catalyst to career advancement, particularly among younger women (Coleman, 2020). The influence and guidance of the women's mentors was attributed as playing a role int their career advancement. The women found that mentors offered guidance and advocated for them in their industries - this reflected the role that mentors can play by providing support, advice, and encouragement to their mentees. Female executives also viewed mentorship as a key element in personal branding, as it aided in building their confidence, navigating career paths, and opening doors to new opportunities.

Participants also recognized sponsorship as positively contributing to their career advancement. Alongside mentorship, sponsorship is essential for successful career advancement. Mentors and sponsors are instrumental in providing access to networks, guidance, and advocacy (Allen et al. 2004). The integration of personal branding with these supportive strategies demonstrated that female executives use a comprehensive approach to overcome obstacles, leveraging both self-presentation and organizational support to advance their careers.

A surprising finding during the research process was that many female executives acknowledged that "luck" played a role in their career progression. They mentioned that

being at the “right place, right time” and “referrals” positioned to connect with influential figures and propelled their careers to advance. This suggested that external factors, often beyond one’s control, can play a significant role. Luck is defined as an event or occurrence that involves chance, is consequential (either beneficial or harmful), and is at least partially outside the control of the person or people affected by it (Datta et al., 2021). However, the participants also recognized that networking and visibility increased the likelihood of such fortunate opportunities.

While it was noted that the career journey had its challenges in the form of the glass ceiling, pay disparity, and other gender-related barriers that posed challenges for women’s career advancement. Some women also indicated that their own fears and educational barriers were limitations that female executives often faced. This underlined the necessity of personal branding to counteract biases and help women present themselves as capable leaders despite systemic obstacles. Most organizations emphasize succession planning and leadership development, primarily focusing on cultivating skills for leadership roles (Griffith et al., 2019). However, there is minimal attention to the invisible barriers, often referred to as the "glass ceiling," that hinder women from advancing to the highest levels of leadership.

The research indicated that women who successfully navigated career challenges did so by leveraging self-belief, resilience, and ambition, which collectively empowered them to surmount obstacles encountered in their professional trajectories. The inner drive of these female executives and willingness to learn, as well as their resourcefulness, reflected the importance of the women’s confidence and perseverance. A theory that is embedded in personal branding is seen as a means of amplifying this self-belief, portraying a strong, driven image that resonates with colleagues and leaders. A fundamental theory of personal branding is the self-determination theory (Scheidt et al., 2020). Self-Determination Theory posits that intrinsic motivation is a fundamental aspect of human nature, and is seen in the behaviours driven by curiosity, exploration of new perspectives, and the pursuit of optimal challenges (Gilal et al., 2019).

The findings from Research Question 1 on the importance of personal branding to advance the careers of female executives, suggest that female executives develop and leverage their personal brand when navigating their careers. The insights gathered

contribute to understanding personal branding as a multifaceted tool that extends beyond individual strategies, supporting an integrated approach to career progression. This leads to the findings for Research Question 2 to be discussed in the next section.

7.2.2 Development and Use of Personal Brand Personality and Brand Image by Female Executives to Influence Perceptions in the Workplace and Advance their Careers

Researching the use of personal brand personality among female executives, Research Question 2 was answered through identifying the characteristics that female executives identified in their personal brand personalities. Brand personality refers to the human traits or characteristics tied to an individual's personal brand. In personal branding, brand personality is conveyed through interactions with others, communication style, and overall behavior within various environments (Paul, 2024). The females identified authenticity, ethics, ambition, and relationships as being central to their professional identity and career advancement. These elements in their brand personality were also contributors to shaping their brand image, which resonates and distinguishes itself in the competitive, often male-dominated corporate environments

Authenticity was an essential trait in the brand personality of the female executives, and they emphasized the need to always present a genuine self that closely aligned their values with their professional identity. Maintaing consistency, practicing self-awareness, and being realistic, were important characteristics of the authenticity that the female executives used in establishing credibility and building lasting relationships. Trust is fostered among peers and stakeholders, through their authenticity, allowing the executives to demonstrate that their professional contributions are anchored in a genuine commitment to their roles and values. Authenticity is one of the six elements encompassed in personal branding (Khedher, 2019). Additionally, a strong brand personality in personal branding enables individuals to convey their authenticity, relatability, and trustworthiness, which are essential in building a reputable personal brand (Gorbatov et al., 2019).

Having ethical standards was also observed as a vital component of brand personality, particularly as female executives navigated their leadership roles. Their values, ethics, and being responsible, indicate that upholding ethical principles at all times is important to

establishing a trustworthy brand for the female executives. By consistently demonstrating ethical behaviour, executives not only build respect but also create a brand that others view as principled and dependable. Having clearly defined set of an individual characteristics (attributes, values, beliefs etc) shaped personal brand of individuals into a differentiated narrative and image aimed at creating a competitive advantage in the minds of the targeted audience (Gorbatov et al. (2019). Having ethics in their brand personality fosters a positive image that resonates with an audience seeking leadership rooted in fairness and accountability. This also makes it a powerful factor in the career advancement of female executives and the influence they carry into their organisations.

Ambition stood out as being integral to the brand personality of the women. The women likened their ambition to having inner drive, commitment, and a growth mindset. This demonstrated how ambition shaped their identity as motivated them female leaders. The ambition of career success is the most significant predictor for engagement in personal branding, and a positive correlation has been observed between career self-efficacy and personal branding (Gorbatov et al., 2019). Ambition in brand personality projects an image of proactive leadership for the women and positions them as being forward-thinking and resilient. Combining this ambition with authenticity and ethics, creates a balanced brand that is both inspiring and credible, signaling to others that these executive women are dedicated to achieving meaningful career milestones.

Central to is brand personality was relationship-building, as being enabler for female executives to create meaningful connections and support systems. The women identified being collaborative, having empathy, and remaining supportive as the personality traits that made them approachable and respected within their networks and was a tool in their relationship management. Female executives understood that building strong relationships within their spaces and beyond their organizations, enhanced their visibility and influence, as well as contributed to their personal and professional support. By prioritizing relationships, the women demonstrated that they value and engage with others collaboratively. The alignment of individual and brand traits can help foster and strengthen relationships between customers and brands (Sundar & Noseworthy, 2016). When brand personality is applied to personal branding, it represents how an individual's traits, values, and behaviours come together to create a distinctive, humanized persona that others can relate to.

Social Identity Theory proposes that social identity comprises two core components: personal identity, representing individual characteristics, and social identity, which reflects the collective identity associated with the groups to which one belongs (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social Identity Theory offers a framework to understand how employees identify with their roles, teams, or organizations. According to Hogg (2001) and van Knippenberg and Hogg (2003), leadership occurs within the context of shared group membership between leaders and followers, encompassing individuals from the same team, department, business unit, or organization. This shared identity influences followers' responses to their leader and shapes perceptions of leadership effectiveness. Followers are more likely to view leaders positively and consider them effective when they perceive them as genuine members of their group.

For female executives, their brand image involved creating and identity that aligned with their professional roles and personal characteristics. Distinguishing themselves through their appearance reflected their intentional development of their brand image that positions their professionalism with their individuality. The concept of femininity and beauty were also intertwined with their brand image, which highlighted the nuanced ways in which women present themselves in traditionally male-dominated corporate environments. The implementation of a brand communication strategy is integral to the branding process and overall brand development (Wijaya, 2013). Key components of strategic brand management include developing, measuring, and overseeing a brand image (Plumeyer et al., 2019). Brand image relates to the brand's reputation and credibility, serving as a "guideline" for consumers in deciding whether to try or use a product or service. It reflects the overall perception shaped by information and knowledge about the brand, deeply connected to attitudes and beliefs that ultimately drives brand preference (Plumeyer et al., 2019). In personal branding, brand image is strategically used to build credibility, encompassing elements such as competence, completeness, persuasiveness, ethics, honesty, impressiveness, promises, and reliability (Hussain et al., 2020).

A strong work ethic was identified as an essential quality in the brand image of women executives. Being accountable, dependable and continuously learning indicated the competence and strong work ethic of the women. Executives believed that demonstrating high-quality work and a commitment to growth strengthened their brand image, which established trust and respect among their colleagues. Shaping a positive personal brand through authenticity, networking, hard work, and a strong work ethic is vital. These values

are essential for career advancement and offer mutual benefits to both the individual and the organization (Gorbatov et al., 2019).

Relationships and networking were also integral to the successful brand image that enabled female executives to create valuable connections within and beyond their organizations. Being collaborative, empathic, and supportive to others, demonstrated that networking and relationship management were central to building a brand that was both respected and approachable. Networking is a valuable asset that contributes to career advancement, offering equal benefits to both the individual and the organization (Gorbatov et al., 2019).

Effective communication was important for female executive to manage their perceptions and engage their audience. Being a good listener, vocal and open to collaboration revealed that female executives used communication to establish trust, foster mutual understanding, and convey the professional identity of female executives. The personal brand of women involved a thoughtful approach to communication that aligned with their overall brand message. The implementation of a brand communication strategy forms part of branding activity and brand development process (Wijaya, 2013). Developing, measuring, and managing brand image have become essential components of strategic brand management (Plumeyer et al., 2019). Brand image is often strategically used to build credibility, encompassing elements such as competence, completeness, persuasiveness, ethics, honesty, impressiveness, promises, and reliability (Hussain et al., 2020).

While personal branding was valuable, many female executives have integrated it with other career advancement strategies as discussed in Research Question 3.

7.3 Other Strategies for Career Advancement

Female participants in this study credited professional coaching as a key factor in their career advancement. They recognized that under the guidance of a coach, coaching allowed them to sharpen their skills, gain insights into their strengths and enhanced their overall capabilities. as an effective strategy for career development, particularly through its structured approach to enhancing performance and skill-building. Coaching typically involved a more experienced industry professional guiding a less experienced employee

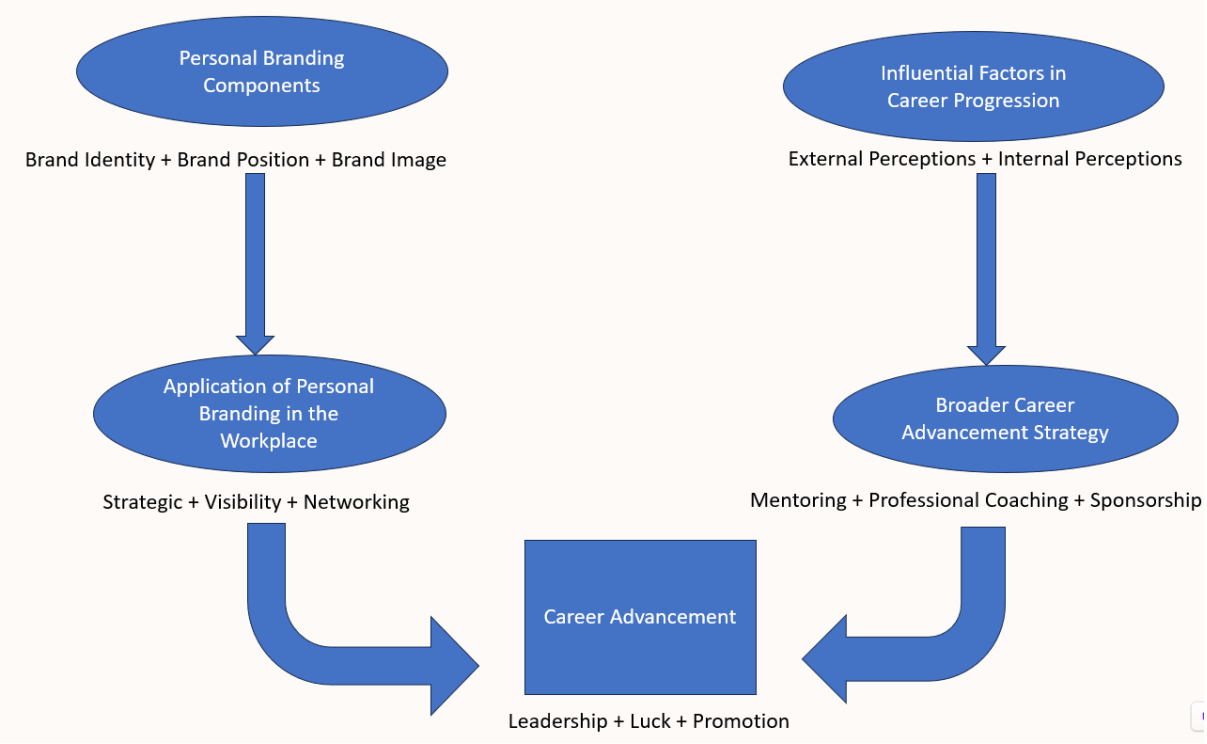
by providing performance feedback, strategic advice, and targeted skill development. Coaching is often an iterative process, with a cycle of “observe, provide feedback, reobserve” for the coach and a “perform, receive feedback, reperform” cycle for the induvial being coached. This focused process enables individuals to develop specific skills by setting measurable benchmarks and tracking improvements over time (Seehusen et al. 2021). Participants reported that there was significant improvement in their work performance, which they viewed as positioning them for
Professional growth.

Sponsorship emerged as a powerful career advancement strategy, focusing on positioning and advocating for individuals to help them access opportunities and visibility within their organization or industry. Unlike coaching, which primarily centres on skill development, sponsorship involved a senior figure actively endorsing and speaking for the sponsored individual, thereby enhancing their visibility and positioning them for career-propelling opportunities. Participants in this study emphasized that sponsorship played in advancing their careers. Many of the women highlighted that having a sponsor “on their side” who could advocate for them in decision-making spaces was invaluable, as it allowed them to gain recognition and be considered for additional responsibilities. Additionally, through their sponsors’ endorsements, participants noted increased visibility within their organizations, which contributed to career advancement by opening opportunities they might not have accessed otherwise. Sponsors typically hold influential positions, enabling them to recommend their protégés for leadership roles, prestigious awards, or high-profile speaking engagements. According to Ayyala et al. (2019), Sponsorship, therefore, emerged as a key strategy that not only provides exposure but also serves as a career endorsement that directly supports professional growth and leadership aspirations.

7.4 Proposed Framework

Based on the findings from the research, the researched proposed a new framework as shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Proposed Framework on the Influence of Personal Branding for Career Advancement



The conceptual framework diagram illustrates the influence that personal branding has on career advancement for female executives, detailing the key elements that contribute to professional growth. The key components of personal branding, including brand identity, image, and interplay of brand positioning form the foundational aspects of how female executives shape their professional presence. Influential factors such as external perceptions from colleagues and internal motivators like self-confidence and resilience further impact how these executives are perceived in the workplace. The application of personal branding within the organizational context is expressed through strategic visibility and networking, which are essential for building recognition and credibility among peers and superiors. Additionally, broader career advancement strategies, including mentoring, professional coaching and sponsorship, complement the use of personal branding by providing guidance and advocacy that can accelerate career progression. The culmination of these elements contributes to significant career advancement outcomes, such as increased leadership opportunities and promotions, with luck also playing a formidable role. This framework thus highlights the interconnectedness of personal branding with other career strategies, providing a comprehensive understanding of how female executives can leverage their brand to achieve long-term career success.

7.5 Implications for Business

The findings from this research offered some insights into how female executives have built their personal brands and successfully navigated their careers. The findings from the study suggest several business implications for organizations, which are aimed at supporting an equitable business environment that is both inclusive of female leaders and leverage the diversity of its workforce to create a progressive business environment.

Professional Development Programs

Results from this study have shown the immense value that personal branding contributed to the career trajectories of female executives. Companies can take learnings from this study by prioritizing professional development programs tailored to include personal branding and leadership skills. By equipping women with the tools to build and communicate their personal brand effectively, organizations enable them to navigate workplace challenges more confidently, improving retention and satisfaction among talented female employees.

Organizational Policies

Furthermore, the study has reiterated the importance of female representation across organizational levels. The establishment of clear organizational policies on diversity and inclusion is essential for organizations that would like to create an environment where female leaders feel empowered and valued. Companies that actively promote an inclusive culture would not only be supporting women in authentically expressing their leadership style but also create a workforce that is more engaged, innovative, and adaptable. This inclusive approach could benefit businesses and their sustainable competitiveness as future-focused organizations.

Mentor, Professional Coaching and Sponsor Networks

The research highlighted the importance of additional support in the form of mentors, professional coaches and sponsors to guide and provide advocacy for women in business environments. Businesses should consider creating environments that make it plausible for these networks to be built and thrive as additional pathway to navigating their environment and challenges presented. Ultimately, the research has shown that investing in diversity, inclusive policies, and personal branding resources is not just a social

responsibility but a strategic advantage that strengthens the organization’s talent pipeline and enhances its overall performance.

7.6 Limitations

As an exploratory qualitative research study, this research has limitations regarding the generalizability of its findings. Additionally, the study's cross-sectional design presents a limitation in terms of time horizon, as the behaviours and perceptions of participants may change over time. Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on female participants, thereby excluding male perspectives, which could provide additional insights into the influence of personal branding across genders. The study was also only limited to the private sector, leaving out insights from the public sector, which may present different dynamics and challenges in personal branding and career advancement.

7.7 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could expand on this study by exploring several key areas:

1. Inclusion of Male Perspectives
   Future studies could include male participants to provide a comparative analysis of how personal branding influences career advancement and the application of personal branding strategies across genders.
2. Longitudinal Approach
   A deeper understanding on personal branding strategies and their impact on career advancement could be achieved by Conducting longitudinal studies. This would allow researchers to observe subjects over a longer time frame.
3. Public Sector Analysis
   Expanding research to include government institutions could reveal how personal branding and career progression differ between private and public sectors. This could also provide additional insights into the unique structures, cultures, and challenges within government institutions.
4. Digital Personal Branding

As online presence becomes increasingly important, future studies could examine the role of digital personal branding, including social media, in career progression and reputation management, particularly for executives.

5. Impact of Organizational Culture on Personal Branding
   Future research could investigate how different types of organizational cultures (e.g., hierarchical vs. flat structures, competitive vs. collaborative environments) influence personal branding strategies and effectiveness, providing more nuanced guidance for individuals navigating diverse workplace settings.

7.8 Conclusion

The findings suggest the study, support that female executives use personal branding not only as a self-promotion tool but as part of a larger career advancement strategy. The finding analysed different perspectives to compare and analyse the influence of personal branding on the career advancement of female executives. Themes such as differentiation, authenticity, relationships, and values emerged as being central to building a strong personal brand that enhances visibility, credibility, and influence in the workplace. Integrating personal branding with mentorship, professional coaching and sponsorship, enables female executives to navigate challenges and create a sustainable path to leadership. The findings were combined to design a proposed personal branding framework for the career advancement for female executives.

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APPENDIX 1 : CONSISTENCY MATRIX

	LITERATURE REVIEW	DATA COLLECTION TOOL	ANALYSIS
Research Question 1 What are the perspectives of female executives on the importance of personal branding in their career advancement, its role in their careers, and which factors hold the most influence on women's career progression?	(Gorbatov et al., 2019).	Interview question 2, 3, 4	Thematic analysis of semi-structed interview questions to gain understanding of the personal branding perspective from female executives
Research Question 2 How do female executives develop and use their personal brand personality and brand image to influence perceptions in the workplace and advance their careers?	Coleman, M. (2020)	Interview question 5 & 6	Thematic analysis of semi-structed interview questions to note identify the trend and categories of challenges faced by female executives
Research Question 3 Is Personal branding used in isolation or does it form part of a bigger strategy plan of female executives to advance their careers i.e. Mentoring ?	Gorbatov et al., (2019)	Interview question 9	Thematic analysis of semi-structed interview questions to identify whether personal branding alone can be used as a strategy for career advancement of females

APPENDIX 2: ETHICAL CLEARANCE

Masters Research <MastersResearch@gibs.co.za> 3 September 2024 at 13:55
To: "23036321@mygibs.co.za" <23036321@mygibs.co.za>
Cc: Masters Research <MastersResearch@gibs.co.za>

Gordon Institute of Business Science
University of Pretoria

Ethical Clearance Approved

Dear Lesego Mogale,

Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.
You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.
We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

Ethical Clearance Form

Kind Regards

Appendix 3: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Preliminaries

1. Welcome and thank person for attending the interview
2. Explain the purpose of the research
3. Ask permission to interview and record the session, and store content in a safe location
4. Ask participant to sign consent form

General considerations questions

1) What is your position and role at the company?
2) How many years have you worked for the company?
3) How many years' experiences do you have in the industry or sector where you work?
4) How would you best describe your background (i.e upbringing) and current lifestlye?

Personal Branding Perspective

1) What is your understanding of personal branding?
2) What is your perspective, as a female executive, on the importance of personal branding?
3) What core values drive your personal brand and how do they align to your orgnisational values? And in what ways have they shaped your decison-making in relation to your career progression?
4) How do you perceive the role that personal branding has played in your career advancement? And was it used in isolation or does it form part of a bigger strategy plan to advance your career i.e. Mentoring ?
5) Which other factors have had the most influence on your career progression to executive level?

Brand Image

1) How would you describe the current image of your brand in your industry and what are the key factors that contributed to shaping or refining this image?
2) How has your brand image evolved throughout your career?
3) In the competitive job landscape, what approaches have you used to position your personal brand and effectively communicate it across different platforms?
4) Can you please share how your personal brand image played a crucial role in achieving a career milestone and impacted your career advancement?

Brand Personality

1) What is your understanding of the term “brand personality”?
2) How would you describe your brand personality and what are the traits or charecteristics that define it?
3) Can you share how your brand personality has shaped your leadership style and the infulence it has on the way you are percieved in your workplace?
4) How do you maintain the authenticity of your brand personality while adapting to different organisational cultures?

Challenges and Barriers

1) What is your understanding of the ‘glass ceiling’?
2) What challenges and barriers, including gender stereotypes and biases, organizational structures have you faced on your journey to executive role?
3) How did you overcome these challenges, and navigate society norms and identity categorizations? And did your personal branding assist you in overcoming challenges presented by glass ceilings?
4) Do you have any tips you would like to share with aspirant female employees who also wish to occupy an exectuive role in future?

   Is Personal branding

Appendix 4: Consent Form

Consent form for participation in a research study

Researcher: Lesego Mogale

Institution: Gordon Institute of Business Sciences (GIBS)

Study Title: Influence of Personal Branding on Career Advancement for Female Executives

Dear participant,

I am currently a student at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), completing my research in partial fulfilment of a Master of Business Administration (MBA). For this reason, I would like to invite you to participate in an interview by responding to the questions I have prepared to better understand how personal branding influences career advance for female executives.

Procedures: If you agree to participate, I will lead this interview based on questions that I have prepared. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted either face-to-face, telephonically, or using online technology tools, depending on your preference. The meeting will be recorded for transcript purposes and analysis to save time during the interviews. All names will be withheld in the report, and only pseudo names will be used. You will be asked questions about your experiences, perceptions and your opinions on the influence of personal branding on career advancement for female executives.

Consent: Your participation in the interview is voluntary and anonymous, only aggregated data and results will be reported on. You can withdraw from the interview at any time without any recourse or penalty. All data will be kept confidential. No company names or individual data will be revealed. By participating in the interview and signing the consent form, you indicate that you voluntarily participate in the research. Please acknowledge that you have read and understood the information provided and consent to participate in this study under the conditions outlined above.

Contact information: If you have any questions or concerns about the study or your participation, please contact me as indicated below.

Researcher: Lesego Mogale Supervisor: Dr Sonja Fourie

Email: 23036321@mygibs.co.za
sonja@customersciencelab.com

Phone: 060 656 4145

Email:

Phone: 079 514 0622

Signature of the Participant _____

Date _____

Signature of the Researcher _____

Date: _____