PERSONAL BRANDING FOR VISUAL ARTISTS

The importance of a brand identity for amassing brand equity

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Abstract

This literature review examines how visual artists may increase their brand equity as professionals via personal branding. There exists a romanticized stereotype of the starving artist who uses their talents and social and cultural capital only to satisfy aesthetic or intellectual needs, rejecting, at least partially, a capitalist society. However, artists also accrue symbolic capital, which can be used for economic gain in the world of business. To understand the multiple factors that play into an artist’s brand, a brief explanation of the dynamics of the art market is provided.

When discussing the notion of personal branding for visual artists, special attention is brought to the importance of creating a strong brand identity as it acts as the cornerstone upon which the rest of the brand is created. The notion of a brand identity is examined both through Aaker’s brand identity model as well as through Kapferer’s brand identity prism. While these models have originally been conceived for corporational purposes, they can be adapted to work in favour of a visual artist, as visual artists operate in an entrepreneurial manner.

To explore how an artist’s brand identity can be used to amass brand equity, both Aaker’s brand equity model and Keller’s customer-based brand equity model are utilised. Since however, the artist’s brand is manifested in their unique artworks of volatile and socially agreed prices that depend on tastes and attitudes, Keller’s customer-based approach emphasizing emotional attachment, is preferred as a primary framework for analysis in this thesis.

The meaning of authenticity for an artist’s brand is also examined briefly, as consumers nowadays are in search of authenticity in regard to the brands they associate with. The various forms of authenticity that affect artists’ brands to better understand what it even means for artists to be “authentic”.

For artists to succeed they must have a positive level of brand equity to ensure that customers (art buyers) will choose their brand. Strong brand identity and favourable brand positioning are prerequisites for accruing brand equity. This brand identity must be integrated into the overall marketing efforts, and it is conveyed to create true touchpoints with the target audience. Here the brand essence of an artist which is linked to the authenticity of an artist plays an important role.

So far there has been a lack of research into the marketing of artists in general. For this reason, frameworks that have been originally created to be used by corporations are adapted to fit the subject of this thesis. Further research into the branding of entrepreneurial individuals who work in a networked manner would be therefore beneficial. As successful artists possess a certain level of celebrity, more research into the creation of celebrity brands is necessary. So far, most marketing-related research regarding celebrities discusses brand endorsements. The few research papers that do discuss celebrity brands have done so via case studies, that don’t allow for nuanced generalisable deductions.

Keywords Branding, Brand equity, Brand identity, Personal branding, Art market
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1 Introduction

Visual arts is a wide and vague concept including several types of artworks, such as paintings and drawings executed in different techniques, sculpture, pottery, photographs, video installations and conceptual art. Also, architecture, crafts and applied arts, like fashion design, are often counted in visual arts. Two dichotomies can be identified to characterize different types of visual artworks. One is the uniqueness of the work and the other is the utility value of the work. If uniqueness is required, mass-produced artworks fall into a different category than those made by hand. Similarly, artworks having utility value fall into a different category than those created just for aesthetic purposes. By applying these two dichotomies simultaneously, it is possible to arrive at a narrow definition of visual artworks: They are unique products that are appreciated primarily or solely for their aesthetic or thought-provoking content.

The creators of the “narrowly defined” artworks – artists – operate in the node of the art world and the world of business. Traditionally, their profession has been romanticized as if artists were using their social and cultural capital and artistic talent only for the sake of aesthetic or intellectual satisfaction. However, artists also endeavour to accrue symbolic capital, namely recognition among peers and a wider audience. It can be used as an asset in the world of business to generate economic gain (Rodney and Kerrigan, 2014). Successful inflation and exploitation of symbolic capital require skills to devise strong brand identity and personal brand strategies for an artist. This has become increasingly vital in the era of mass-produced artworks and social media, where entrepreneurial artists compete with offerings of corporations on the one hand, and social media influencers can significantly shape artists’ brands beyond their control on the other hand (Rodney and Kerrigan, 2014; Kucharska and Mikolajczak, 2018).

Artists as person brands have received limited attention in branding literature. For the most part, the topic has been discussed via case studies of artists who have achieved a celebrity status (Kerrigan et al., 2011; Schroeder, 1997; Lee and Park, 2019; Cowen and Tabarrok, 2000). Less attention has been paid to the personal branding of artists in general. This thesis aims at shedding light on the issues of visual artists’ personal branding by use of the existing literature. Hence, the means of an artist to strengthen a personal brand, and eventually, increase brand equity are at the centre of this thesis. Especially, the constituents of an artist’s brand identity (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000:44; Kapferer, 2008:183) are explored, since they relate to the...
aspects of brand recognition that is a pivotal building block for brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2003). As artists are also expected to display a certain level of authenticity with both their work and brand, how the perceived authenticity contributes to the artist’s brand will also be looked into in further detail.

Consequently, the primary research question of this study is:

How can visual artists utilise elements of brand identity to strengthen their personal brand and accumulate their brand equity?

Additionally, the following research question is examined to support the primary question:

What is the meaning of authenticity to an artist’s brand?

Before resuming the topics related to the research questions, it is worthwhile to set the scene and briefly introduce some basic factors of the art market in Chapter II. The thesis then sets out to discuss aspects of artists’ personal branding and elements of brand identity in Chapter III. Two theoretical brand identity models (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Kapferer, 2008) constitute the background for this research. The notion of brand equity and how artists can accrue it are examined in Chapter IV, based on research of Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993, 2003). Some specific issues related to perceived authenticity and its influence on an artist’s personal brand will be treated in Chapter V. Key findings are discussed critically in Chapter VI, and finally, Chapter VII gives a short recapitulation of the study.

2 Dynamics of the art market

The visual art market has been described as “a market where people spend significant amounts of money to buy objects whose value, they cannot be sure of, and where people spend significant amounts of time to make commodities which few people are willing to buy” (Plattner, 1998). Notwithstanding, the global art market was estimated to value at 50 billion U.S. dollars in 2020, experiencing a 14 billion dollars’ decrease to the previous year that can be attributed to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the global economy (Statista, 2021). Hence, the art market, having amounted to 60 billion U.S. dollars on average over the past 14 years (Statista, 2021), equals the revenue of a large international corporation (Forbes, 2021).
Artists seldom act alone in the art market, but several other players participate in the process of establishing their brand and brand identity. In fact, artists do not even judge by themselves what is considered as art – meaning that not only their brand but their whole artistic identity can be questioned by others. This becomes evident when examining the valorization of artworks in the art market. Their prices are socially determined, and they are subject to price heterogeneity and lack of price transparency. The price of an artwork can be influenced by factors related to the artist, like the degree of diversification in an artist's production, or the artist’s degree of fame (Castellani, Pattitoni and Scurcu, 2012). On the other hand, the price can also be affected by artist-independent factors, like the place where the artwork is sold, e.g., in New York or Helsinki, or the status of the seller, e.g., a renowned or less known auction house (Prieto-Rodriques and Vecco, 2021). Furthermore, if an artist’s brand is strong, their artworks can sometimes behave like Veblen goods – they are seen as signals of wealth, like luxuries, and their demand can increase as their prices increase (Codignola, 2003).

The system that affects the development of artists’ brands and their positioning in the art market is generally referred to as the art world, a notion introduced by American philosopher A.C. Danto (1964). He describes it as a community of art professionals, such as art historians, critics, curators, art dealers and collectors, who determine what is considered art. The institutional theory of art, presented by Dickie (1974), suggests that an artwork must have “the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution” (Dickie, 1974:431). Hence, he highlights that the art professionals judging what is art should have an affiliation to galleries, museums, auction houses, art fairs, distinguished art magazines and established artistic events, like biennales. Becker (1982) accentuates the interplay between different art world actors even further. He suggests that artworks are “not the products of individual makers, “artists” who possess a rare and special gift. They are, rather, joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world’s characteristic conventions” (Becker, 1982:35).

In the light of these sociological studies, the chaotically operating art market, described by Plattner (1996), becomes clearer. It manifests itself as a structured system of interlinked actors who collaborate closely, as depicted in Figure 1. Tomiuc (2015) gives a comprehensive review of the roles of different players in the art market, by leaning on earlier studies of French art sociologist Raymonde Moulin (2009). According to their reflections, artists and museums form the extreme fringes of the system: While artists can be considered as triggers for the art market,
museums represent endpoints of the circulation of artworks in the market, as artworks are very seldom sold from museum collections.

Figure 1. Actors of the art world and art market. The art market forms a circular system where artworks are supplied. The art world is a wider notion that includes actors who operate outside the actual market but influence artists’ brand and valorisation of artworks.

Art dealers and galleries are crucial engines that accelerate the dynamics of the art market. They are powerful in selecting optimal promotion and branding strategies for artists they represent. Tomiuc (2015) pays attention to Moulin’s (2009) observation on strategies that galleries use to maximize their profits. Today, galleries favour short-term promotion strategies and quick price elevation, which means that they constantly seek new offerings and promising
new artists. From an artist’s point of view, this kind of “continuous innovation swirl” (Moulin, 2009: 47) requires the ability to create and regenerate in a focused manner, for which conscious and deliberately managed brand identity can offer the necessary backbone.

Also, collectors can stimulate the art market significantly. They are individuals who invest considerable amounts of financial capital in art, following some pre-decided strategy or based on their individual tastes. The most prominent collectors operate on an international level, and they can even open private museums. As collectors typically are the first buyers and they buy large quantities of artworks, their choices tend to lead to new artistic trends and raise into spotlight those artists that the collectors find interesting and relevant. According to Moulin (2009: 56) in Tomiuc (2015), “they have a decisive influence on selected artists and on the development of their careers”. Hence, the boost to artists’ recognition and valorisation in the market can be tremendous if the artist’s brand speaks to collectors.

Art fairs and auctions represent the secondary art market where art dealers and collectors discover and form trends through their purchase behaviours (Tomiuc, 2015). Art auctions are also places where artists’ popularity is gauged. Big auction houses and art fairs invest a lot into the promotion of their offering (also internationally) and they aim at as high prices as possible. Admission into a catalogue of a prestigious auction house or art fairs means that an artist gets highly professional support for brand narratives via curation force. While auctions and art fairs can boost artists’ transformation to celebrities, they may also have an adverse effect on artists’ brands if bids don’t achieve the floor price.

Finally, art critics, curators, art magazines and art-related social media networks belong to the art world and influence the art market, while not being primary parts of the market. Their opinions and tastes mould artists’ general recognition and appreciation among a wider audience, and in fact, they can position the artist as a “market leader” (Preece and Kerrigan, 2015). These actors of the art world typically arbitrarily affect an artist’s brand, but occasionally, they can also work along with the artists. One example comes from the painters of the impressionist movement – they crafted the brand name of their art movement together with art dealers and critics (Wijnberg and Gemser, 2000).
3 Artists as person brands

While the notion of visual arts has diverse interpretations, marketing literature offers several definitions of what a brand is (Maurya and Mishra, 2012). In short, brands encapsulate all elements that make products, services, companies, and even cities or individuals recognizable and memorable (Kotler and Armstrong, 2018: 255). It is about how a product, service, company, or individual is perceived and experienced. Visual artists can be considered as brands themselves because their creativity and social and cultural capital (Rodney and Kerrigan, 2014) cannot be separated from their production (Sjöholm and Pasquinelli, 2014). Before examining more profoundly what constitutes an artist’s brand, it is useful to lay the groundwork by briefly discussing the notion of personal branding in general terms.

3.1 Personal branding

The concept of marketing persons was first introduced by Kotler and Levy (1969), who argued that theories concerning the marketing of companies and products could be directly applied to what they called “personal marketing”. The term “personal branding” was ultimately coined by Tom Peters in his article for Fast Company (1997). While Peters’ article is far from academic and includes guru-like jargon, meant to appeal to the masses, its influence on academic literature of personal branding cannot be denied. His article popularised the term “personal branding” and created further interest among academics on the prospects of branding individuals, especially in the context of employer attractiveness (Harris and Rae, 2011; Ward and Yates, 2013; Jacobson, 2020; Lair et al., 2005, Petrucă, 2016).

The terminology used to describe the marketing and branding of individuals has had many forms in the past decades. Close et al. (2010) talk about human brands when they refer to “the persona, well-known or emerging, who are the subject of marketing”. Also, Moulard et al. (2014) adopt the term human brand in their research. In this thesis, the term personal branding will be used to describe the branding of an individual, as it is the most widely accepted term nowadays. The term self-marketing will also be used to describe the marketing of one’s own individual talents and attributes, as opposed to personal marketing, which has the connotation of marketing of individuals by others (Shepherd, 2005).
Popular literature surrounding personal branding has brought on that it is not always seen as a business tactic but just a self-improvement method. Lair et al. (2005) compare personal branding to self-help movements. However, instead of looking into how the self could be improved upon, Lair et al. (2005) note that personal branding explores how the self should be “packaged”. They argue that internal sets of skills and motivations are secondary for successful personal branding. Instead, the way how these attributes are arranged, crystallised, and labelled takes precedence. Hence, Lair et al. (2005) take a similar approach defining personal branding as Kotler and Levy (1969). They also suggest that the concepts of product development and promotion can be applied to marketing persons.

Khedher (2014) distinguishes the process of creating a personal brand into three distinct phases: establishing a brand identity, developing the brand’s positioning, and assessment of the brand. The creation of a brand identity is done by cataloguing the various attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences that one uses to define themselves and create a role. These various traits are then analysed, compared, and rearranged to match with the expectations and needs of the target audience. This self-analysis requires one to have an objective and comprehensive view of themselves, but also of the market in which they operate. The creation of a personal brand can be seen as an inside-out process where one utilises their unique traits and strengths to create interest and demand in their target market (Shepherd, 2005).

The second phase of the personal branding process is brand positioning (Khedher, 2014). Individuals should highlight their positive traits, which are of value to their target audience while simultaneously differentiating themselves from their competitors. Positioning of personal branding takes effect via self-presentation, nonverbal cues, verbal disclosures, and actions. These idiosyncrasies shape others’ perceptions of one’s competence, character, and ability to meet cultural standards. The final phase of the personal brand creation process, according to Khedher (2014), highlights that a personal brand shouldn’t be static. A perfect brand is rarely created from the get-go. Brands need to evolve to adapt and to satisfy the ever-changing market and zeitgeist. Therefore, market feedback must be taken into account when reassessing a brand. To have a successful brand, the proclaimed goals and outsider views must match – otherwise, branding fails.

Jacobson (2020) defines personal branding “as the process of developing, harnessing and classifying personal information and providing a comprehensive narrative for others to easily
understand one’s identity”. Brand identity is the most important facet of the brand (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000) as, without a brand identity, nothing can be communicated to the target audience. Brand identity enables a brand to be lasting and send unified messages (Kapferer 2008:91-92). Hence, the rest of this chapter studies the elements of brand identity and how they can be used to leverage an artist’s brand.

3.2 Brand identity structure

Creating a strong brand requires genuine knowledge about one’s brand identity (Kapferer, 2008: 93). One of the first theories describing the nature of brand identity is attributed to David Aaker (1996). He defines a brand identity structure consisting of a core identity and an extended identity. While the core represents stable elements of the brand identity – “the core that remains after you peel away the layers of an onion or the leaves of an artichoke” (Aaker, 1996:145) – the extended identity consists of elements that react and adapt to the needs of customers. This adaptation can happen, for example, by varying product attributes, enlarging the marketing area, nurturing brand-customer relationships, and changing brand communication styles and means (Aaker, 1996: 138). In this way, the application of Aaker’s brand identity structure (1996) can facilitate brand management.

In his further work with Erich Joachimsthaler, Aaker elaborates the research of brand identity and shifts the viewpoint from brand management to brand leadership (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000:7). In the brand leadership model, brand identity is seen as a tool for managing market complexities and leveraging market opportunities, in other words, it drives the strategy. In addition, a new element, brand essence, is incorporated into the brand identity structure (Figure 2). Brand essence is “a single thought that captures the soul of the brand” (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000: 45). It does not always exist in a visible or auditory form, but it stays stable over time and inspires the brand’s stakeholders. Thus, brand essence is different from the brand identity core that contains fixed and prioritized parameters (like vision). They differentiate the brand from parallel brands in the market and help customers to identify the brand. The elements of the extended sphere, on the other hand, represent various manifestations of the brand. They are dynamic over time helping the brand to penetrate into a market and to flourish there. Hence, while brand essence and core emphasize the distinguishing characteristics of the brand, the extended brand identity elements facilitate the positioning of the brand in the changing markets.
Although the leadership-oriented brand identity structure (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000: 43) is primarily discussing the branding of products, services, and organisations, it is also applicable to the strategizing of a person brand. Close et al. (2010) note that person brand perceptions are influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic brand cues akin to product and corporate brands. Regarding a visual artist’s brand identity, brand essence can be thought to refer to the basic values and deep-rooted cultural connections of the artist, which reflect as a unique handprint in the artworks of the artist. Thus, the artist’s brand essence can become visible in those subtle differences of brushstrokes that distinguish an authentic artwork from a forgery.

Core elements of an artist’s brand identity refer to conscious and relative fixed choices that provide direct evidence of the characteristics and quality of the artworks, as determined by the art world both in monetary value and value as cultural artefacts. Hence, core elements of an artist’s brand identity can include choices like which art movement the artist represents or which artistic expression methods they primarily use. As for extended elements of an artist’s brand identity, they refer to extrinsic cues (Close et al., 2010) providing indirect legitimacy of the artist’s quality. For example, they tell who is included in the artist’s dealership network. Is the artist paired with respected galleries? Are the most prominent collectors interested in the artist’s work?
The brand identity, as proposed by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), has been considered of being somewhat limited (Kapferer, 2008; Silveira, 2013; Csaba and Bengtsson, 2006: 118-35), mostly because it does not reflect on the mutual influencing and dialogue between the brand and its market. Therefore, a more comprehensive tool for studying the brand identity, namely brand identity prism, will be presented in the next section and the artist’s brand identity is discussed through it.

3.3 Constituents of artist’s brand identity

Kapferer (2008) suggests an alternative and more multifaceted framework for discussing constituents of brand identity. It is encapsulated in six faces of a hexagonal prism, presented in Figure 3. The prism can be viewed from the sender’s point of view, meaning the artist’s point of view in the context of this study. It can also be looked at from the viewpoint of the receiver, who can, in this context, be an art dealer, gallery visitor, art magazine journalist or anyone who is in contact with the artist, either in person or indirectly through the artwork of the artist. The sender can also build, and the receiver can observe the brand by paying attention to both external and internal cues.

The first facet of the prism is the brand physique. It is the backbone of the brand, according to Kapferer: “If the brand is a flower, its physique is the stem. Without the stem, the flower dies” (Kapferer, 2008: 182). The physique conveys the physical aspect of the brand: how does it look like and how does it behave? Regarding visual artists, the brand physique is a combination of the artist’s personal appearance and tangible and physical added value of the artworks, because the creativity of the artist cannot be separated from the outcome of that creativity, namely the artwork (Sjöholm and Pasquinelli, 2014). If the artist has a celebrity status, their person can dominate the brand physique, while with less known artists the brand physique leans more on the quality of their artwork.
The second sender-related (artist-related) facet is the brand personality. It is different from the customer reflected image that is a portrayal of the receiver (Kapferer, 2008: 184). Artist as a person brand is an instant manifestation of the brand personality that can be associated with different qualities and attributes (e.g., sophisticated, conceptual, exciting, complex, etc.). But similarly, to the physique, artists’ brand personality is also present in their artworks that aim to speak to and resonate with the audience. Hence, the facet of brand personality can be connected with the concepts of brand essence and brand core of Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000), while the brand physique can be linked to extended elements of the brand identity structure (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000:43).

Culture plays an important role in building a strong brand identity as “it refers to the basic principles governing the brand in its outward signs” (Kapferer, 2008: 184). An artwork is not only a concrete manifestation of the cultural capital from which the artist draws their inspiration (Kerrigan and Sullivan, 2014). It can also be a powerful means of communication. Hence, the brand culture can be an essential differentiating factor, but also an embodiment of the artist’s values and ethics. An artist can use this facet to even pass political messages, like the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has done (Preece, 2015).
The fourth facet, brand relationships, is considered vital for the service sector (for example, banks) where the customership is based on the psychological trust and feeling about being greeted well (Kapferer, 2008: 185). Brand relationships are equally crucial to an artist who can benefit significantly from the strong bonds to the art world actors who can boost and support the artist’s brand. However, brand relationships evolve over time, and they need to be continually nurtured and adapted to the changing conditions. Today, social media challenges the traditional art world networks since it can function as an artist’s fast lane of building direct relationships with the art buyers (Kang et al., 2019).

The facet of reflection refers to the perceptions of customers and other stakeholders about the brand, after getting experience with it. In the art world, the brand reflection represents the considerations of the art buyers and other players of the art world about the quality, relevance and positioning of the artist. Artist’s brand physique and brand personality that find expression in intrinsic and extrinsic brand cues (Close et al., 2010) link to brand reflection. Also, artists’ favourable relationships with prominent art world actors can much influence brand reflection of artist’s brand and consequently, valorisation of the artworks (Prieto-Rodriques and Vecco, 2021).

The last facet, self-image, is about the pleasure that the brand is able to create in the customer’s mind. Buying art can simply satisfy a person’s home decoration desires but owning an artwork of an artist with a highly esteemed brand can also be an intrinsic value for a buyer (Kapferer, 2008: 186). As artworks are appreciated primarily for their aesthetic content or because they elevate buyers’ perception of themselves, it is important that the artist’s brand identity speaks to customers and is able to create a strong tie with them.

In a strong personal brand for an artist, the facets of the brand identity prism must be balanced so that the artist’s brand is able to communicate with its stakeholders. The sender side of the prism (brand physique and brand personality) is not enough to form a strong brand identity. It needs to be supplemented by an analysis of the brand reflection and self-image, which helps determine the recipient side expectations and motivations. The facets of relationships and culture can then bridge the two sides. The different facets of the prism also emphasize the importance of brand identity for positioning. “Identity is the source of brand positioning” (Kapferer, 2008: 171). Artist’s characteristics and choices related to brand physique, brand
personality and brand culture determine how they are received in the art world and how the art world positions them. On the other hand, advantageous brand relations can speed up auspicious positioning. Favourable positioning is a necessity for accruing brand equity that is a strategic effort made by brands. Therefore, the next chapter turns to discuss the dimensions of brand equity and how a visual artist can succeed in the accumulation of brand equity.

4 Brand equity

In today’s marketing literature, a brand is viewed as an asset that has equity (Farquhar, 1989; Aaker, 1991; Keller 1993, 2003; Wood, 2000). This equity can be analyzed from the perspective of either customer or brand owner (Shocker and Weitz, 1988). For example, Erdem and Swait (1998) and Wood (2000) give comprehensive presentations about different approaches.

One of the earliest definitions of brand equity is attributed to Prof. David Aaker who states that it is “a set of brand assets or liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or detract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers” (Aaker, 1991:15). In the centre of this definition are brand characteristics (assets and liabilities), meaning that it regards recognition and identifiability as key constituents of brand equity. Keller (1993) takes a slightly different viewpoint in defining brand equity. He suggests that brand equity is “the differential effect of the brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand”. Thus, he considers the customer’s emotional stance towards the brand as an important element contributing to brand equity. More recently, Raggio and Leone (2007) have supported Keller’s view by proposing that brand equity reflects customers’ desire that a brand will meet a promise of benefits. Despite slightly different flavours, the majority of definitions of brand equity demonstrate that it is associated with the value of the brand to customers (Wood, 2000). In this sense, brand equity is different from the concept of brand value that represents the financial worth of a brand to the brand owner.

Before discussing what brand equity means for visual artist and how they can enhance it, two widely accepted models presenting the components of brand equity are introduced. The models are Aaker’s brand equity model (Aaker, 1991) and Keller’s customer-based brand equity model (Keller, 1993, 2003). The sources of brand equity for an artist are then discussed in light of these models.
4.1 Aaker’s brand equity model

Aaker (1991) identifies five factors that contribute to the brand equity of a product, service, company or individual (Figure 4). The first of them, Brand awareness, is associated with the strength of engrams that a brand leaves in the minds of customers. If the engrams are strong, a brand becomes familiar and is easy to single out from other brands. Aaker himself defines brand awareness as “the ability of the potential buyer to recognize and recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category” (Aaker, 1991:61). Hence, he emphasizes that a brand is a tool to discover a product among other competitive products. Brand awareness does not take a stand on positive or negative feelings that a brand may evoke. This dimension is related to the second factor of brand equity, namely brand association. It reflects the overall image of the brand and the attributes that a customer connects with the brand. Positive engrams and experiences about the brand can feed customers’ advocacy, endorsement, and commitment to the brand. This can yield brand loyalty, which Aaker identifies as another source of brand equity. Brand loyalty refers to a customer’s deep-rooted commitment to rebuy a product, regardless of marketing activities of competitive products (Oliver, 1997).

![Figure 4. Elements of Aaker’s brand equity model adapted from Aaker (1991:270).](image)

Performed quality, also contributing to brand equity according to Aaker (1991:270), refers to the quality perceived by the customer, as opposed to the quality requirements defined by industry standards or by the company itself. High-performed quality implies a good reputation of the brand, and it can affect a customer’s buying decision. The customer can even be willing
to pay a premium for a high-quality brand. Kirmani and Rao (2000) note that to improve performed quality, and hence brand equity, it is important to dispel the uncertainty that customers may have on unobservable quality. Several visual elements of the brand, like design, packaging and advertisements can be used to help to inform customers about them. Finally, Aaker’s model takes into account other proprietary assets, like patents, trademarks and other forms of intellectual property that are related to a brand. Such assets can increase the performed quality of a brand as they tell customers about the credibility and reliability of the brand.

4.2 Customer-based brand equity model

While Aaker’s model already takes the customer point of view on focus and discusses the value that a customer associates with a brand, Keller (1993, 2003) studies customers’ perception and reaction to a brand even further. He defines brand equity as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (Keller, 1993). By brand knowledge, Keller refers to both brand awareness and brand image. Brand awareness is related to customers’ ability to recognize the brand among other brands and their ability to recall the brand. Thus, Keller’s interpretation of brand awareness seems to approach that of Aaker. Brand image, however, is about brand associations, as well as the strength, favourability, and uniqueness of these associations. While Keller (1993) does not discuss performed quality or brand loyalty as such, unlike Aaker (1991), strongly held and favourably evaluated associations that are unique to a brand suggest customers’ positive attitude and attachment to the brand.

Keller elaborates further on the elements of brand equity in a comprehensive customer-based brand equity model (CBBE) attributed to him (Keller, 2003). It introduces a pyramid of four layers and six components, presented in Figure 5. The foundation of the pyramid, brand salience, refers to recognition and memorability of the brand in general, but it also entails the requirement of depicting the brand consistently and authentically. Hence, brand salience goes beyond the concept of brand awareness. Apart from a customer being able to retrieve the brand name, the brand should also evoke some sense of assurance that ensures that the customer considers the brand as a buying option (Romaniuk and Sharp, 2004). Thus, brand salience emphasizes the importance of building a solid brand identity that portrays the right kind of image to the customer.
The second layer of Keller’s CBBE model, brand meaning, introduces two components, brand performance and Brand imagery, that concern how the brand replies to customers’ needs. Performance refers to actual features of the brand, for example, to what extent the brand satisfies customers’ utilitarian, aesthetic, and economic needs. Imagery, on the other hand, refers to more intangible aspects of the brand, that is, how well the brand resonates with customers' needs on a social and psychological level (Keller, 2003). Hence, the components of brand meaning return to the discussion of different dimensions of brand association. Keller (1993) categorizes brand associations into product-related associations, originating from the actual attributes of the product, and non-product related associations, originating from attributes influencing the buying decision, for example, price. Camiciottoli and al. (2014) suggest a third category, designer identity, as a source of creating a distinctive brand association. This third category can help brand differentiation and contribute to strong, positive, and unique associations that reinforce the brand.

Customer’s judgements and feelings about the brand, that is brand response, link to customer’s predisposition to buy. Keller (2003) describes these elements as coming “from the ‘head’ or the ‘heart’”, respectively. Judgements are customers’ opinions about a brand’s quality, credibility, consideration (or relevance) and superiority, while feelings refer to customers’ emotional reactions to the brand. Hence, brand response encapsulates the functional, emotional, and self-expressive benefits of the brand (Kuhn and al., 2008).
The pinnacle of the pyramid, brand resonance, can be achieved only if the lower layers are successfully attained. Keller (2003) breaks it into four elements: behavioural loyalty, attitudinal attachment, sense of community and active engagement. It means a strong social and psychological connection with the customer, suggesting that the customer is willing to make regular purchases and advocacy for the brand.

4.3 Brand equity for visual artists

Both Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993, 2003) present a general model for describing the elements of brand equity. The models have been probed in several empirical studies (Yoo and al., 2000; Ailavadi and Keller, 2004; Pappu and al., 2005). While the B2C perspective is dominant in these studies, a few attempts have also been made to conceptualise Keller’s CBBE model in the B2B context (Kuhn and al, 2008; Jensen and Klastrup, 2008; Ćorić and Jelić, 2015; Steenkamp, 2019). Regarding personal branding, the notion of brand equity has drawn less attention – it has mainly been explored in the context of young professionals’ career development aspirations. For example, Vitberg (2010) examines the importance of personal brand equity among accountants, while Zhou et al. (2019) discuss the impact of famous athletes’ personal brands on global brand equity. Gorbatov et al. (2021) seek to reconceptualise the definition of personal brand equity, following Keller’s (1993) studies. They present a three-dimensional structure for measuring personal brand equity that aims to predict career success among students and employed adults.

As the perspective of this thesis now turns to brand equity of visual artists, Aaker’s (1991) and Keller’s (2003) theories are used as frameworks to analyse what are the roles of the art world actors in building artists’ brand equity, and more specifically, to distil what artists can do to increase their brand equity. An artist, as an entrepreneurial creator, can be compared to a company owning the brand, while other actors of the art world form an intricate network of partners. This suggests that the general models of Aaker (1991) and Keller (2003) are applicable. However, artists should also be considered as person brands, as discussed in Chapter III, which requires a critical approach in adapting Aaker’s and Keller’s theories. The profile of a potential customer for artworks is not clear-cut either – it can vary from private individuals and collectors to corporate purchasers and government or private art museums (Stegemann and Thompson, 2005). Thus, both B2C and B2B selling options are possible for artworks.
Since the artist’s brand is manifested in their unique artworks of volatile and socially agreed prices that depend on tastes and attitudes, Keller’s customer-based approach (2003), emphasizing emotional attachment, is preferred as a primary framework for analysis in this thesis. However, some elements of Aaker’s model (1991) are also discussed to complement the picture.

a) Brand salience

Traditionally, visual artworks are made accessible to potential customers in art galleries, exhibitions and auctions. Online sales of artworks and antiques in the global art market have, however, been slowly increasing and it witnessed a drastic growth in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 6). Online marketing and sales multiply the visibility of artworks and offer visual artists outstanding opportunities to bring their brand forward. However, Lee (2005) points out that artists seldom adopt effective marketing techniques. Successful marketing is consumer-focused, while an artist typically focuses on the product, the artwork. Because of this conflict and pure need for marketing power, building strong brand awareness and brand salience requires seamless interplay between the artist and art world actors, especially with galleries, art dealers, art fairs, auction houses, and their curators (Stegemann and Thompson, 2005; Tomiuc, 2015). These actors possess both financial capital and cultural reputation to bring an artist into prominence and elevate theirs even to a celebrity status (Tomiuc, 2015).

Figure 6. Total online sales of the art and antique market worldwide from 2013 to 2020 (in billion U.S. dollars). Source: Statista 2021.
Besides establishing good relations with art brokers, the artist’s role in building brand salience is to display something that speaks to customers. Customers must be intrigued by aesthetic, thought-provoking or other momentous characteristics that help them to single out the artist. Hence, the artist has a key role in shaping identifiable and appealing brand identity. Examples of especially strong brand identities are celebrity artists, like Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol, who were skilful with engineering an authentic brand identity that is recognized well beyond the art lovers (Muñiz and al. 2014; Schroeder, 2005).

\[b\) Brand meaning\]

Aaker (1996:58) describes a brand as “packaged meaning”. With this metaphor, he refers to visible elements of a brand, such as a name and a logo. The metaphor suits well for an artist, too, as a visual artist’s name and signature often carry the meaning to the customer. The artist’s signature is their logo that verifies that artworks of different styles, techniques and creative periods are authentic.

Brand meaning can be examined from a rational viewpoint and an emotional viewpoint (Steenkamp, 2019). Building the rational part of an artist’s brand meaning, namely the brand performance, requires deliberate decision-making from both artist and art world actors. The artists choose the style and designs they want to practise in their artistic expression. The artists also choose the materials and techniques that determine, for example, the durability of the artwork. With these choices, the visual artists demonstrate their skill and productivity. On the other hand, galleries, art dealers and auction houses affect brand performance by determining the price range for the artist’s works. In the same way, the emotional part of an artist’s brand meaning, namely the brand imagery, is a result of a collaboration of the artist and art world actors. For example, galleries and auction houses shape customers’ associations in purchasing situations – they have pivotal roles in decisions on how artworks, and thereby artist’s brand, are displayed and how the artist’s exhibitions are curated (Tomiu, 2015). The artist, however, needs to touch the customer at a psychological level and imbue their values or message into artworks. Hence, the artist can stimulate meaningful associations with their brand. By performance and imagery related choices, the artist can mould their brand identity and engage and maintain customers’ attention.
c) **Brand response**

Brand response, founded on brand meaning, is also composed of two elements. Judgments reflect the rational part and feelings the emotional part (Steenkamp, 2019). Brand judgments involve how the customer conflates the different performance and imagery associations. Hence, Keller’s concept of brand judgment (Keller, 2003) approaches Aaker’s notion of performed quality of a brand (Aaker, 1991).

Art world actors have an essential role in shaping customers’ judgments and feelings on an artist’s brand (Tomiuc, 2015). Customers form an opinion about the artist’s overall quality, credibility, relevance, and superiority, based on facts like which galleries the artist is linked to, have their artworks been sold to museums or other renowned collections, are they visible in media, etc. Art world actors also vouch for the authenticity of the artworks they exhibit. Hence, they can admit certificates of authenticity that are one form of “other proprietary assets”, as described by Aaker (1991). Furthermore, curators affiliated with galleries, museums, art exhibitions and auction houses are key players in creating compelling narratives about the artists who they represent. These narratives can evoke sympathetic, reserved, or other feelings towards the artist. Preece and Kerrigan (2015) argue that “to be successful on the market, artists must have strong brand narratives”. While these narratives support individual artists’ brands, they also develop and nurture the collective social and cultural capital of the art world (Rodner and Kerrigan, 2014; Preece and Kerrigan, 2015).

An artist’s contribution to their brand response can vary. Novice artists are often busy creating their brand identity and they have less negotiation power in the art market. Successful artists, on the other hand, can become genuine managers of their own brands (Schroder, 2005). Thus, they can act in a more influential role in decision-making affecting their brand response.

d) **Brand loyalty**

The pinnacle of Keller’s brand equity model, brand loyalty, can be born only if brand salience, brand meaning, and brand resonance co-exist in a propitious way (Keller, 2003). It is highly dependent on the depth of the psychological bond of the customer with the artist’s brand. Brand loyalty can be active, for example, when a collector buys artists’ works frequently. But brand
loyalty can also manifest in a more subtle form, for example, when an artist is advocated by social media followers who have no need or opportunity to buy but still endorse the artist.

The discussion on brand equity for visual artists shows that successful artist branding requires the active participation of both artists and the art world. According to Vitberg (2010), “personal brand equity combines thought leadership and relationship building”, meaning that all facets of Kapferer’s brand identity prism (2008) must be balanced so that all dimensions of Keller’s brand equity model (2003) could score high. As an artist’s brand is exhibited in their unique artworks and they are inextricably linked to their personality, it is important that the artist finds a recognisable style and clear messages and values that they want to convey in their artistic production. These elements are important building blocks to what can be called an artist’s perceived authenticity. Its significance to the artist’s person brand is briefly explored in the next chapter.

5 Perceived authenticity for an artist

The word authentic refers to something being genuine or true (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In today’s commercialised mass-production world, consumers are in search of authenticity, also in brands (Brown et al., 2003; Morhart et al., 2015). In consequence, perceived brand authenticity has raised increased interest in the marketing literature (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Thomson et al., 2006; Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). Gilmore and Pine (2007:5) note that “authenticity has overtaken quality as the prevailing purchasing criterion”. For an artist, this emphasizes the importance of making sense and elucidating one’s thoughts of what is the ultimate essence in the artist’s brand and artistic creation.

Grayson and Martinec (2004) divide the meaning of authenticity into two distinct types – indexical authenticity and iconic authenticity. Indexical authenticity relates to a piece (an artwork) that is deemed the “original one”, whereas recreations of the said piece are forgeries. For example, a replica of Mark Rothko’s painting Elegy was sold in 2012 at the price of 8.3 million US dollars, but it is now deemed worthless by its feigned indexical authenticity. Whether or not the forgery is in better condition or displays better mastery of the medium is irrelevant to the art world and those looking to purchase a piece of authentic art (Dutton, 2004: 258-274). Iconic authenticity, on the other hand, relates to how well an object (an artwork) reflects something else (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). The level of authenticity is formed by
the evaluators’ (for example, art curators) preconceived schemata about what the object is representing. For example, when evaluating African art, one will evaluate its iconic authenticity, based on what one expects an authentic artwork of African origin to look like - which may sometimes differ from reality (Kasfir, 1992).

While both indexical and iconic authenticity are relevant to the art market, Moulard et al. (2014) add a third dimension, called artist authenticity. This type of authenticity is defined by the act of “being true to one’s artistic self” (Dutton, 2004). Those who are not “true” but considered to pander to art dealers or society by large, might be labelled fraudsters, and therefore being inauthentic (Marshall and Forrest, 2011). Moulard et al. (2014) also discover a correlation between artistic authenticity and the valuation of art. However, this only applies when the background of the artist is known. This tally with signaling theory that states that brands signal their quality through extrinsic cues (Rao et al., 1999). The knowledge of the artist’s persona works as such an extrinsic cue that helps customers to judge their work. Furthermore, Newman and Bloom (2011) suggest that as artists physically touch their artwork, customers may by contagion transfer positive associations to them. These examples showcase how artists must be managed as brands, as their products, their art, isn’t the only thing being evaluated by customers (Moulard et al., 2014).

6 Discussion

The literature-based analysis, presented in the preceding chapters, displays the importance of establishing a well-managed personal brand for a visual artist in order to carve out a successful career. While a lot of literature on personal branding looks towards the branding of the employees, who may use personal branding as a way to gain employment or move up the corporate ladder, attributes of personal branding have another kind of significance when discussing artists. An employee can find a fair career success while maintaining a degree of anonymity, whereas an artist inevitably needs a certain level of celebrity to be considered successful by the art world. Artist’s name and person are made public via gallery shows, art sales, art fairs and art magazines, meaning that an artist can often be considered at least a local celebrity. While part of celebrity branding literature addresses issues of celebrity endorsement (for example, Spry et al., 2011), a few research papers take the personal branding point of view – often through case studies. Hence, it can be suggested that both employee branding literature
In order to be distinguishable and arouse interest, an artist’s brand must be clear-cut and its desired positioning in the art market must be well-thought-out. A recent study by Shafee et al. (2020) explores brand positioning from the viewpoint of personal branding. Based on a statistical analysis of responses from 200 branding experts, the authors deduce that talent and relevant capabilities in one’s professional field do not automatically result in successful personal branding. A flourishing personal brand also requires self-competition, differentiation, proper relations, and suitable interaction with the target market (Shafee et al., 2020). This supports Kapferer’s (2008) research on the significance of a well-established brand identity that combines all elements that make the brand recognisable and interesting, and furthermore, contribute to how the brand communicates with its stakeholders and is positioned in the market. The findings of Shafee et al. (2020) also accentuate a balanced analysis of all facets of Kapferer’s brand identity prism (2008: 183), as means to create a favourable brand identity and brand positioning. With the help of them, an attractive value proposition (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000: 51), and in consequence, a strong personal brand can be created for an artist.

Strong brand identity and favourable brand positioning are prerequisites for accruing brand equity. Keller (1993) notes that building brand equity requires internal brand identity efforts, on the one hand, and integration of brand identity into the overall marketing efforts, on the other hand. This suggests that building brand equity is highly dependent on marketing communications activities and its success to create true touchpoints with the target audience. For an artist’s brand, this implies the importance of conveying the artist’s brand essence (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000) in such a way that it finds resonance within the art world actors. Brand essence, according to Brown et al. (2003), is highly related to an artist’s authenticity. Hence, an artist who can display both indexical, iconic and artist authenticity (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Moulard et al., 2014) within their brand is prone to be perceived as genuine, which in turn, is a critical determinant for amassing brand equity. The level of brand equity, on the other hand, influences significantly on customers’ (art buyers) decisions to choose the (artist’s) brand (Lu et al., 2015; Barrio-García and Belén Prados-Peña, 2019).
The prevailing marketing approach emphasises a customer-focused perspective. This approach clashes, to some extent, with prevalent personal branding theory, which often advises individuals – in fear of losing authenticity – to “work with what they got” (Shepherd, 2005), instead of adapting themselves to forms that would appeal to customers. This dichotomy between the two disciplines creates a paradox where one is expected to simultaneously cater to their customers and remain “truthful” to themselves.

In the case of artists’ branding, the balancing between art buyers’ tastes and artists’ poetic licence can cause challenges. During their career, artists can purposely change their style, reinvent themselves and challenge the art market – like, for example, Picasso did while shifting from “blue period” to “African period” and then to cubism and surrealism. On the other hand, also art lovers and art buyers can cause unintended shifts in artists’ creative work, without concerted action, when they interact with one another and share opinions about artists, their brands and art world phenomena in general, for example, via social media platforms (Kang et al., 2019). Dolbec and Fischer (2015) and Scaraboto and Fischer (2013) have studied these kinds of shifts, triggered from non-coordinated and cumulative consumer engagement, in the field of fashion and the online fashion arena, especially. While both of these studies focus on market-level shifts, it can be suggested that the same general principles of influencing apply to an artist’s personal brand. While an artist’s brand can mould customers’ taste, it is also susceptible to their tastes, and hence, the artist’s brand can change over time in the dialogue with customers.

7 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have examined the elements that constitute a personal brand for a visual artist, and how they could be utilised and balanced to amass brand equity. Although artists as person brands have received limited attention in academic discourse, a comprehensive literature review and some desk research revealed that the fundamental branding models (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000; Kapferer, 2008, Aaker, 1991, Keller, 2003), planned for a company or product branding purposes, are applicable also for discussing artist’s personal branding issues. However, artists, as entrepreneurial creators, differ to some extent from professionals and employees who are the subject of study in several pieces of personal branding research. While a well-established and balanced brand identity forms a basis for a favourable brand positioning
and the prerequisites for accruing brand equity for both artists and others, it was found that perceived authenticity also plays an important role in artist branding.

This research also disclosed some gaps in marketing and branding literature, as regards the topic of the thesis. Further research on the personal branding of entrepreneurial individuals working in a networked manner would be beneficial. Also, the significance of perceived authenticity for personal branding is inadequately covered in today’s marketing literature, especially when different aspects of authenticity contribute to a celebrity brand. Finally, the current celebrity branding literature focuses primarily on brand endorsement, or it offers case studies that are useful as such but do not allow deductions. Hence, generalizable inferences on how a celebrity brand for an artist can be built remain to be found.
References


Philadelphia.


