The Don Draper complex: Consuming work, productive leisure and marketer boundary work

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Abstract Although the identities of brands and consumers have been extensively explored, less is understood about the subjectivity of marketers themselves. In the ambiguous and dynamic exchange process of marketing, the articulation of identities is fundamental to demarcate the activities and actions that take place between market actors. In recent times, growing importance has been placed on a different breed of marketer in these exchanges – the cultural intermediary. For these marketing practitioners, knowledge about the interplay between culture and economy generates the cultural capital that legitimises their expertise and value. Yet, this simultaneously gives rise to the difficult navigation and accomplishment of boundaries between their work and pleasure. Through a case study of two coolhunting agencies, this paper examines how marketers discursively perform boundary work in the construction of their identities. The findings show that, for coolhunters, a tension exists in drawing on discourses of renegadism and professionalism to construct their identities, resulting in their engagement in chameleon-like identity work. The research proposes that the tensions pervading the construction of boundaries and identities for marketers can be usefully understood through a paradox lens, and offers the metaphor of the nomad as a theoretical representation of interwoven identity conflicts for marketers.

Keywords marketing practitioners; identity; boundary work; cultural intermediaries; coolhunting; discourse analysis

Draper? Who knows anything about that guy? No one’s ever lifted that rock. He could be Batman for all we know. (Harry Crane, Mad Men, Season 1, Episode 3: ‘Marriage of Figaro’)¹

Despite decades of research into their activities, outputs, and relationships, the subjectivity of marketing practitioners remains little understood. This stands in contrast to the extensive investigations of brand and consumer identities in extant marketing research. In recent times, an emerging body of research has turned to the question of ‘who is the marketer?’, taking an ‘inside view’ of marketing.

¹ For all quotes from Mad Men, see Weiner (2007).
practitioners (Cook, 2006). For example, Bennett (2010) argues that what ‘makes a marketer’ is strongly determined by the ways an individual is systematically managed and controlled by an organisation, pointing to the case of UK marketing graduates whose identities were shaped through training and development, job and task design, duties completed, and mentoring. The complex interplay between the identities of marketers and their practices has been considered by Sender (2004), who explored how gay marketing professionals reproduce dominant, narrow, and stereotypical representations of ‘recognisable gayness’ to generate market visibility. And the ways marketing practitioners use ‘knowledge’ to frame power dynamics and bolster identities was investigated by Cronin (2004), who found that utility not validity directed the use of market research by brand managers to manage clients and garner peer recognition.

Alongside these academic considerations, growing cultural ruminations on the identity work of marketers have surfaced, as evidenced in television dramas such as *Mad Men*, films like *Fast Food Nation*, and documentaries such as *The Merchants of Cool*. In these popular-culture vehicles, the marketer is generally represented in two ways – a charismatic, charming, yet enigmatic (male) professional or a Kleinian gold-toothed, greedy, and exploitative force bent on manipulating consumers to maximise profits. Such representations point to the complexities involved with interrogating and problematising the marketer. So, why is identity an important issue for marketers? In the ambiguous and dynamic exchange process of marketing, the articulation of identities is fundamental to demarcate the activities and actions that take place between market actors. As the marketing profession has come to involve both culture and economy, with a growing pool of cultural intermediaries mediating its fringes, the margins between marketers and consumers have become increasingly blurred. Consequently, unravelling the identity work of marketers is imperative if we are to understand better the relationship between production and consumption as it plays out within the marketplace.

This paper continues the emergent tradition of investigating marketer subjectivity, exploring how cultural intermediaries discursively construct their identities through a case study of two coolhunting agencies. Given their liminal status in producer–consumer relations (Smith Maguire, 2010), the cultural intermediary provides a rich site to understand how boundary work is performed and inhibited in the construction of identities for marketers. The paper is structured as follows: first, extant literature on cultural intermediaries, identity construction, and boundary work is reviewed to situate the research theoretically. Second, a background of the coolhunting industry is provided, before the study and chosen methods are outlined. Third, the findings are presented, illustrating that, for coolhunters, a tension exists in drawing on discourses of renegadism and professionalism, rendering their identity work chameleon-like. Fourth, paradox theory is proposed as a lens for understanding the tensions that pervade the construction of boundaries and identities for marketers. Finally, the research concludes by offering the metaphor of marketer as nomad to advance future investigations of marketer subjectivity conceived as complex, multiple, contradictory, liminal, and shifting. To bring this metaphor to life further, the research proposes that marketer subjectivity can be considered a ‘Don Draper complex’, inspired by the fictional protagonist of *Mad Men* whose work and personal selves become increasingly inseparable as the series evolves, leading to moments of intense identity crisis.
Cultural intermediaries

You are the product. You feeling something. That’s what sells . . . they can’t do what we do. (Don Draper, Mad Men, Season 2, Episode 1: ‘For Those Who Think Young’)

Cultural intermediaries have come to play an increasingly important role in marketing, as the divisions between culture and economy become progressively nebulous. Comprising a diverse mix of individuals and institutions, cultural intermediaries represent the ‘new petite bourgeoisie’, a new social class with distinctive tastes and cultural practices that comprise ‘all the occupations involving presentation and representation . . . and all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 359). Cultural intermediaries mediate the production and consumption of cultural goods and experiences in the marketplace, promulgate the legitimisation of cultural identities and lifestyles through consumption practices, circulate meanings throughout the cultural production system, and mobilise actors to participate in the reproduction of consumer culture (Featherstone, 1991; Negus, 1992; Venkatesh & Meamber, 2006). Through these processes, cultural intermediaries’ concern with self-presentation and the stylisation of life becomes enacted (Nancarrow, Nancarrow, & Page, 2002).

As reflexive producers/consumers, the commercial value of cultural intermediaries resides in their specialised cultural capital, which is drawn on to proselytise consumers to take up lifestyles of consumption commensurate with their own (Soar, 2000). By embodying what they endorse, cultural intermediaries play an instrumental and highly persuasive role as ‘need merchants’ in the marketplace (Bourdieu, 1984). This further legitimises the value and status associated with the goods and experiences with which they are involved, leading some critics to connect cultural intermediaries with a ‘morality of pleasure as a duty’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 367). Cultural intermediaries in numerous fields have been studied in recent years, including advertising (Nixon, 2003), brand consulting (Moor, 2008), magazine publishing (Crewe, 2003), music (Negus, 1999), retailing (Pettinger, 2004; Wright, 2005), personal training (Smith Maguire, 2008), and fashion (Skov, 2002). Although extant research of the ‘cultural economy’ (du Gay & Pryke, 2002) has attended to the practices and mediating roles played by cultural intermediaries, less forthcoming are examinations of the identity work of cultural intermediaries themselves (Smith Maguire, 2008). Yet, before turning to this empirical question, what exactly do we mean by identity?

Identity work and identity construction

I don’t think anyone wants to be one of a hundred colours in a box. (Peggy Olsen, Mad Men, Season 1, Episode 6: ‘Babylon’)

Identity relates to individuals’ attempts to answer the question ‘who am I?’ through linguistic and social means (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). This paper adopts a discursive approach to identity, whereby identity is conceived as socially constructed through discourse, as ‘reified views of identity do not help researchers capture the fluidity of social life’ (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 52). By studying the ways language is used to shape actors’ understandings of activities and actions, which
in turn serve to pattern selves, researchers are better able to generate insights about the dynamic and contested context of marketing exchanges, how relations construct the marketplace, and the positions of actors within or outside it (Ellis, Jack, Hopkinson, & O’Reilly, 2010). A discursive view of identity began to be shaped towards the end of the twentieth century, when identity was conceived in an anti-essentialist sense as sociocultural and sociohistorical (Benwell & Stockoe, 2006). During this ‘linguistic turn’, language was conceived as having no essence, serving a multiplicity of social functions and constructing rather than reflecting or reporting on social reality (Wittgenstein, 1967). This instability of language rendered the subject multidimensional and decentred, with discursive identity construction conceived as a process of ‘becoming’ that is processual, unstable, open, and without beginning or end (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004).

In grappling with issues of identity, individuals are conceived as engaged in ‘identity work’, namely the ‘forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 626). This is achieved through individuals drawing on memories, desires, and cultural resources they are exposed to in their everyday lives, namely texts (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). A discursive perspective frames identity as constituted through the situated practices of talking and writing (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004). However, embodied and symbolic expressions also play an important role (Ybema et al., 2009). Through the production, distribution, and consumption of texts, individuals are able to draw on different available discourses, with the meanings people produce in interaction with texts becoming part of their identity projects (Maguire & Hardy, 2006). By constructing social meanings, discourses create the means through which actors understand the world and relate to each other (Grant & Hardy, 2004). However, meanings are not ‘out there’ waiting to be accessed and neutral; rather, the signifying practice of language structures what meanings can and cannot be articulated by subjects, thus structuring the social space of actors in particular ways that may privilege some at the expense of others. Discourse thus provides a constrained set of identities for actors, who may engage with or resist those identities by drawing on available discourses in particular ways. The appropriation of certain discourses and the rejection of others is central to identity construction (Musson & Duberley, 2007). However, as this may be undertaken in convergent or contradictory ways, it may lead to a sense of ‘identity struggle’. This is because the vast number of available discourses may be difficult to ‘choose’ between, rendering identity construction precarious and ongoing. Such moments of instability are critical in studies of identity as they may indicate more challenging instances of identity work where one’s sense of self is threatened (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Questions about sameness and difference are integral to studies of identity (Jenkins, 2004). This ‘discursive positioning’ (Garcia & Hardy, 2007), in which a separation of self from other in everyday discourse is undertaken, illustrates how ‘the process by which we come to understand who we are is intimately connected to notions of who we are not and, by implication, who others are (and are not)’ (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 306). The construction of arbitrary boundaries and oppositions in identity construction is often used to cast others as not simply different but less acceptable (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004). By locating boundaries through constructions of sameness and difference, identity construction is framed by judgements, interests, and emotions and marked by efforts to legitimise selves and
marginalise others (Ybema et al., 2009). Market actors positioned across discourses, audiences, and notional boundaries of organisations and marketplaces are more likely to undergo intense boundary/identity work (Ellis et al., 2010). As boundary spanners (Wharton, 1999) who mediate firms and consumers and negotiate roles as both symbolic producers and taste-leading consumers, cultural intermediaries provide a rich site for examining the complex interplay of boundary work and identity construction (Smith Maguire 2010). Contributing to the emerging interest in discourse in marketing (e.g. Ellis & Ybema, 2010), this paper explores the subjectivity of cultural intermediaries to generate insights about the discursive construction of boundaries and identities in the marketplace.

Studying coolhunters

To facilitate this investigation, a comparative case study of two Australian coolhunting agencies was designed. Coolhunters are specialist marketing practitioners that act as go-betweens in the worlds of culture and business by discovering and interpreting emerging trends and connecting organisations with consumers who have social influence or cool knowledge. Coolhunters argue that a brand can only be cool if individuals considered cool adopt and display it (Gladwell, 1997). Dee Dee Gordon, regarded as a pioneering coolhunter, claims that coolhunting gives:

> . . . information to companies on how they can speak to consumers and make them interested enough to try a product . . . I work with marketers and people who can’t leave their offices, and I bring a little of the outside world in to them. (Rasmusson, 1998, p. 23)

Coolhunting initially did not rely on traditional business techniques, such as market research, but the prized gut instincts and cultural knowledge of its coolhunters (Southgate, 2003). A coolhunter needed to be fully abreast of nascent trends within society, with a typical cultural diet being 10 to 20 CDs per week, dozens of magazines per month, and going out every evening (Gladwell, 1997). However, this interpretive approach came to be criticised by business practitioners for its perceived lack of reliability, investment in gambles that did not always pay off, and inherent subjectivity (Nancarrow, 2001).

In response, the industry began to focus less on micro-level trend insights and more on connecting businesses with cool people – conceiving cool to be a ‘trickle down’ phenomenon that segments a market of consumers into innovators, early adopters, early and late masses, and laggards (Rogers, 1995). Coolhunters claim that once laggards – or the least cool consumers – finally adopt a trend, they will render it uncool, whereby the ‘act of discovering what’s cool is what causes cool to move on’ (Gladwell, 1997, p. 79). In bringing cool from the cutting edge to the mainstream, coolhunting speeds up the cycle of cool, necessitating coolhunters to track down the next big thing quickly. To facilitate this, coolhunting agencies began to assemble wide networks of trend-spotters – generally young hipsters who frequent cutting-edge cultural haunts of major cities, have social influence, and possess desirable levels of cultural capital. It is their knowledge about cool trends and commodities and ability to influence less cool consumers that makes these individuals desirable to coolhunters (Thornton, 1995). In addition to representing a database of cool people that could be pitched to clients for research purposes and events, trend-spotters are sent out ‘into
the field’ to the coolest places to scout cool people aged 14–30 and collect lifestyle information which is compiled into volumes of reports sold to corporate clients for approximately US$20,000 per year (Grossman, 2003). Coolhunters also use these networks to generate instant feedback about the ‘cool potential’ of products, gain insights into the cultural appetites of cool consumers, and use consumers as ‘cultural sneezers’ who can spread the germs of cool by word of mouth to others. To be credible, coolhunters must be young and stylish, and to engage the participation of cool consumers, all marketing techniques must incorporate aesthetics and emphasise the use of events and promotions over advertising (Nancarrow et al., 2002).

However, cool youths began to regard coolhunters as the ‘enemies of cool’ because of their intervention in and commodification of the cycle of cool. In response, coolhunters began to market cool in a less obvious fashion by trying to make brands appear cool themselves through the use of ‘under the radar’ or stealth marketing techniques (Goodman, Dretzin, & Goodman, 2001). These techniques sought to involve a brand fully in the culture of its consumers, for example hiring cool youths to host/attend parties for a brand or making them brand ambassadors. This resulted in the coolhunting industry changing in composition. Whilst previously market research agencies dominated the industry, from the turn of the century onwards, three additional practices emerged. First, top-of-town management consulting firms undertook a slightly modified version of coolhunting that involved rigorous trend analysis for the purpose of forecasting and creating futurist reports. Second, creative communication consultancies that utilised stealth marketing and ethnographic techniques arose and began to dominate the industry. These agencies tended to focus on connecting businesses with cool consumers as opposed to the identification of trends. Finally, more recently, there has been an explosion of coolhunting or trend-spotting websites. These websites are not affiliated with agencies but instead are sustained by networks of webloggers who research trends and submit them online. Most online trend-spotters contribute purely for the credibility that comes from spotting a trend first and are not remunerated.

This study focuses on the second type of coolhunter in the guise of two specialist youth communication agencies located in Melbourne and Sydney. As discourses cannot be studied directly – only through the texts that constitute them (Phillips & Hardy, 2002) – a combination of data-collection methods were employed to generate the texts needed for the discourse analysis. This multifaceted approach was also informed by Sveningsson and Alvesson’s (2003) claim that identity cannot be effectively captured in questionnaires or single interviews nor be measured and counted due to its substantiveness, imprecision, and ambiguity. Multiple in-depth interviews with coolhunters Dimitri and Adrian,² both respective heads of their agencies, and visual data related to the coolhunters’ working lives generated during observations made over the course of six months are presented to convey a rich, thick, nuanced, and intensive appreciation of identity work and its complexities. These understandings are also informed by interviews, informal discussions, and interactions with junior coolhunters, four collaborative partners, and two clients of the agencies. Such an approach to data collection facilitates the empirical depth needed when investigating more developmental concepts (Costas & Fleming, 2009; Watson, 2008), as is the case with the subjectivity of marketing practitioners. The

² Pseudonyms.
corollary of this is that the study does not attempt to generalise more broadly about the phenomena under investigation.

Having outlined the empirical context, the paper now turns to the research findings, exploring the discourses drawn on by coolhunters to construct and legitimise their identities through a combination of symbolic resources and language. First, coolhunters drew on discourses of renegadism to construct themselves as corporate rebels, untraditional in conducting both business and their career. They conveyed themselves as unconventional, individual, entrepreneurial, and ‘having gone native’ or cool themselves. Second, despite their emphasis on non-conformity, the coolhunters sought to construct themselves as credible business experts through discourses of professionalism. They drew heavily on the language and techniques of management consultancy, associated themselves with traditional professional symbols, and differentiated themselves from the ‘other’ identity of a trend-spotter.

**Discourses of renegadism**

Sterling Cooper has more failed artists and intellectuals than the Third Reich. (Don Draper, *Mad Men*, Season 1, Episode 4: ‘New Amsterdam’)

In the narratives of their backgrounds, the coolhunters spoke of their disinterest in pursuing a conventional path. An air of rebellion fuelled their identity work and set the stage for the pursuit of a career highly juxtaposed to the rational, bureaucratic, and conformist image of Organisation Man (Whyte, 1956):

*Dimitri*: Working through university I wasn’t the greatest academic. It all seemed a little bit unreal to me . . . Couldn’t deal with company x, y, z dealing in widgets. It made no sense to me.

The coolhunters emphasised the importance of preserving their individuality. This was achieved through affirming their entrepreneurial spirit and seeking to pave their own way in the corporate world. In the case of Dimitri, he likened himself to Jerry Maguire, a film character who claimed autonomy by subverting the dehumanising effects of institutional power and domination and refusing to construct his identity in market terms. This involved Dimitri rebelliously exploiting opportunities unrealised by big business in the nexus of culture and commerce:

*Dimitri*: One of our friends was skating the world and being paid to do it at the age of 18/19 but felt that the terms of his agreement weren’t in line with what he was actually doing for them . . . so we started up a business of sports management, a marketing business for extreme sports and we did that for a few years and got some terrific sponsors and travelled the world with the guys and really sort of lived and breathed the culture and saw there to be more opportunities just than athlete management . . . so I started to build another sort of business on the side which was a media vehicle to help promote the industry and the culture – the fashion, the music, the videos games and movies . . . there was a multi-billion dollar industry and an opportunity.

The appeal of coolhunting lay in the untraditional approaches to conducting business that characterised the enterprise. The coolhunters spoke about the specialist, ambiguous, and intangible nature of their work that was conducted ‘backstage’
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(Goffman, 1959) – it was hard to specify exactly what its ‘macro base’ involved and how it could be evaluated (Alvesson, 1994). Rather than this uncertainty leading to identity confusion, the precarious nature of coolhunting was considered a source of freedom, with its emphasis on nonconformity fostering opportunities for innovative constructions of identity:

Adrian: We’re a new wave communications agency that doesn’t make anything so we can just focus on solving the client’s problem, whatever problem that is, and then once we know what the solution to the problem is, then we’ll work out how to make it rather than having a pre-determined thing to sell . . . not having anything – not making anything – liberates us.

The need to possess particular personal characteristics analogous to the perceived nature of coolhunting work was also emphasised. Coolhunters constructed themselves as analytical, creative, individual, and self-aware with a relentless hunger for the new and different that required an almost hedonistic pursuit of life unshackled by societal constraints. This construction of the coolhunter, reminiscent of Mailer’s (1957) White Negro or Hipster, was again a stark juxtaposition to the conformist Organisation Man:

Dimitri: You’ve got to be the sort of person that isn’t taking on too many responsibilities so you’re quite free in the mind to observe . . . It’s a unique person that can almost see things that others can’t, so your ability is very analytical, it’s very creative . . . You can’t just live in Melbourne, Australia and call yourself a trendhunter or a coolhunter. You need to get out there, you need to experience everything . . . that’s why I look to commercialise my lifestyle through a business that plays on sport, music, travel, fashion and entertainment – all fun things.

The perceived necessity of possessing these qualities was reflected in talk about the recruitment of coolhunters within the agencies. A strong emphasis was placed on the cultural capital, leisure interests, and lifestyle of a potential employee, namely their socially defined ‘taste’ (Bourdieu, 1984), as indicative of their potential ‘coolness’. The coolhunters spoke about the unusual, creative employment they engaged in throughout the early stages of their careers. These jobs had a bohemian and unconventional flair and involved immersion in varying cultural realms. For instance, a newly recruited coolhunter to Dimitri’s agency formerly worked in advertising, managed bands, and ran the largest free music festival in Melbourne and the largest short film festival in Australia. This reflected the talk of more senior coolhunters who emphasised their ‘school of life’ backgrounds as opposed to formal qualifications as being of primary importance:

Dimitri: It’s very much a lifestyle recruitment process and one that we look to cultural references . . . it’s important that they’re skilled, absolutely. You know you’re not going to hire someone just because they look good or they hang out in the right places, but at the same time that’s not completely unimportant . . . Your people are number one, so not only do they need to be good at what they do, they also need to be good at representing your business outside of hours.

In this way, knowledge claims – informed by practices traditionally ascribed as leisure – played an integral role in the identity work of the coolhunters, providing a shared language through which they were able to relate to one another and persuade others of their expertise and legitimacy (Alvesson, 2001; Sender, 2004).
Reinforcing this, employees of both agencies engaged in ongoing efforts to be different and stand out amongst the sea of faceless Organisation Men through acts of resistance that dis-identified them from traditional corporate identities. The coolhunters peppered their speech with youth vernacular and colloquialisms such as ‘you know’, ‘totally’, ‘freaky’, ‘dial up’, and ‘full on’ and heavily used profanity in professional contexts. In addition, the coolhunters sought to differentiate themselves from their ‘mainstream’ corporate clients who they constructed as constitutive ‘others’ (e.g. Meyer, 1996). Dimitri uses the metaphor of a ‘battle’ to characterise his agency’s relationship with clients, recounting struggles with having to ‘bring people up to speed with why and how’ because they ‘often did not get it’. By othering their clients in these ways, the coolhunters sought to reinforce how they were different from everyday Organisation Men. By communicating their clients’ lack of understanding about the coolhunting process, the coolhunters moreover sought to construct themselves as possessing unique competences (Smith Maguire, 2010).

Although coolhunters constructed themselves as corporate rebels endowed with unique knowledge and skills, the ambiguity of their labour meant their identity work needed to be carefully managed (Alvesson, 2001). This was undertaken through the linguistic means discussed, as well as carefully crafted performances accomplished through the selective consumption and display of symbolic resources (Deighton, 1992). The sign value of the visible world – such as dress and spatial arrangements – is an important signal of social and cultural standing in contemporary consumer society (Baudrillard, 1988). For Adrian, being a coolhunter means you have to be an ‘authentic chameleon’ with a ‘lot of front and a lot of bottle’. To achieve this, impression management (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980) was conducted through identity work that drew on various symbolic resources used in ‘front stage’ encounters (Goffman, 1959) to construct the coolhunters as renegade. First, like fashion retail assistants (Pettinger, 2004) or personal trainers (Smith Maguire, 2008), the ‘aesthetic labour’ (Nickson, Warhurst, Witz, & Cullen, 2001) of the coolhunters, as conveyed through self-presentation, played an important role in presenting an image that was both ‘correct’ for the agency and conveyed their cool capital. The coolhunters appeared youthful, attractive, physically fit, and rejected corporate attire in favour of minimalistic, cutting-edge fashion by labels such as Comme des Garçons, Ksubi, and Dsquared that also functioned as their evening and weekend wardrobes. These symbols constructed the coolhunters as stylised dandies – socially desirable, sartorially astute, possessing ‘good’ taste, individual, and free from the ‘seriousness’ of the trappings of societal and bureaucratic conventions:

**Dimitri:** A lot of my friends who are lawyers and doctors and stockbrokers and you know, suit and tie, would consider me to be cool because I get to go to work in jeans and a blazer and white shoes... it’s important to maintain our edge and credibility.

In resisting the business suit, the coolhunters rejected the meanings it confers, such as conformity, loyalty, and seriousness (Breward, 1999), reinforcing their rebellion. For cool consumers, these stylistic cues functioned to construct a sense of solidarity between themselves and the coolhunters. For clients, they served to construct the coolhunters as aspirational, youthful, different, and cutting edge – sources of distinction that reinforced their cultural capital.

Second, the design templates used for reports and presentations to clients (Figures 1 and 2) constructed the coolhunters as creative, rebellious, cultural connoisseurs. As Latour (1987, 1993, 1999) notes, within organisations, symbols
fabricate ‘inscriptions’, which spread ideas that can become translated into accepted facts. For instance, images and charts in financial reports can inscribe understandings of success and growth (e.g. David, 2001). The templates featured warm colour tones, particularly the use of red, functioning to grab attention, signify authority, and express energy and intensity. Ironic imagery was featured, such as in Figure 1 where an antique golden gilt frame connoted class, taste, and expense as reinforced by the ‘House of’ emblem. Whilst this imagery drew on desirable characteristics of the art world, such as creativity and originality, it also sought to construct an incongruous and playful setting for the presentation of cutting-edge coolhunting material. The design visuals also functioned to communicate the cultural capital of the agencies, such as in Figure 2 where the imagery depicted draws on references to youth culture, such as urban alleyways, street posters, and graffiti. For clients, these symbols differentiated the coolhunters whilst simultaneously legitimising their cool credibility, noting how they reinforced a ‘very interesting perspective on how to develop communication’ and a ‘non-traditional way of delivering creative strategy’.
Finally, the renegadism of the coolhunters was also communicated through interior decoration. The aesthetic elements of organisations have recently come to the attention of researchers (e.g. Taylor & Hansen, 2005; Warren, 2008), with sensory encounters informing perceptions and judgements about organisational life, rendering spatiality an important ‘vehicle of meaning’ (Klotz, 1992, p. 235). The ‘work self’ is extended through possessions both brought into the workplace and supplied by the organisation (Tian & Belk, 2005), whereby organisational interiors serve important affective and symbolic roles beyond their decorative function (Warren, 2006), acting as advertisements for the ‘type’ of firm they represent and the skill and creativity of the workers within (Baldry, 1997, 1999). The coolhunters engaged in acts of bricolage (Hebdige, 1981), appropriating everyday symbols as acts of resistance to dominant corporate ideals. Unique ‘dramaturgical props’, such as a surfboard, candelabras, and wallpaper that simulated a library, were used to manipulate the physical setting and create the impression of an atypical corporate environment (Figures 3 and 4). Clients recounted their initial impressions of the agencies, whereby they felt they were ‘taken somewhere different and unique’ and transported from ‘traditional ways of advertising and marketing’. As Dimitri observed, the interior design of his workplace ‘means that we’re not sort of pigeon-holed into anything’ and demonstrated that the agency were ‘keen to do things differently’.

The open-plan designs of the agencies (Figure 5) symbolically communicated the anti-bureaucracy integral to the renegade spirit of the coolhunters. In ‘tearing down the walls’ that could separate employees, a sense of equality, openness, and spontaneity was constructed as characterising their working ethos. However, such a structure also lined up individual employees, exposing them to surveillance and the panopticon gaze (Hofbauer, 2000; Sewell, 1998), contrasting with the individuality the coolhunters sought out in their identity work.

The renegade nature of the coolhunters was also communicated through the ‘fun spaces’ within the offices, such as chill-out areas, games tables, and bars (Figure 6). The autonomy and hedonism associated with such spaces, available at any time to the employees, reinforced the construction of the coolhunters as rebels who dispensed with the traditional rules of business and signified the privileging of culture

Figure 3 Meeting room.
and lifestyle. These symbolic spaces communicated a message of youthfulness, an important signifier for clients aiming to connect with younger consumers. Yet, by importing home signifiers into the office, the implication is made that working life can offer the same pleasures as non-working life – a trend that began with the Silicon Valley IT houses of the 1980s (Baldry & Hallier, 2010).

The spaces were also heavily gendered, with highly masculine meanings connoted by the design choices – the interiors of one agency were strongly reminiscent of an elitist gentlemen’s club with its heavy woods, taxidermy, portraits, and traditional furnishings; whilst the stark minimalist choices, lack of decoration, geometric shapes, and exposed brick surfaces of the other agency referenced a contemporary bachelor pad. In making these allusions, the interior cues were suggestive of places in which men could escape from their responsibilities and luxuriate in activities of pleasure – such as relaxing with a drink – rather than engage in the daily grind of work. Moreover, these established symbols were used in unexpected ways so that their meanings became contested and invested with new meanings, thereby constructing
the coolhunters as unlike typical Organisation Men. The bounding of these forms of pleasure at work in heterosexual masculinity creates an interesting tension with the fashion consciousness of the coolhunters, further highlighting how the construction of their identities is organised around competing, paradoxical identifications that give rise to chameleonism. Nevertheless, the confluence of spatial references and an under-representation of female coolhunters at both agencies gave rise to workplace cultures that marginalised femininity. Moreover, where femininity was visible – such as communications for and of coolhunting events – it was highly stereotyped, with women depicted as passive, sexualised, and idealised.

Yet ‘fun’ at work can promote the idea that work is play, obfuscating the line between home and work and subsuming an employee’s identity within an overarching organisational identity (Fleming & Spicer, 2004). Workers in both agencies noted that the long hours invested in coolhunting meant little time is left for leisure – hence, the incorporation of it into their working lives is considered necessary to provide ‘balance’. For this reason, coolhunters frequently wind down in these ‘fun spaces’ before leaving for coolhunting events to which they also invite friends and family. This further served to blur the perceived boundaries between the coolhunters’ personal and working lives. Consequently, the coolhunters’ workplaces came to resemble a ‘total institution’ (Goffman, 1968), whereby the encouragement of leisure activities within a space that bore little resemblance to a conventional workspace impeded the experience of a differing social reality. The ‘freedom’ of the spaces as a means to express non-worker identities thus becomes an opportunity for normative control to secure engagement and commitment to the organisation (Baldry, 1997, 1999). Yet, these same symbols were paradoxically also used to augment talk about their identities as rebellious and individual and signal their cultural capital, constructing the coolhunters as ‘having gone native’ or cool themselves.

**Discourses of professionalism**

Pick a job, then become the person who does it. [Bobbi Barrett, *Mad Men*, Season 2, Episode 5: ‘The New Girl’]
Coolhunters spoke about cool as something mercurial and hard to define, and this subjectivity being a potential liability when dealing with clients and consumers. Consequently, they avoided using the word ‘cool’ at all costs when undertaking a client project:

Adrian: We don’t really talk about cool at all. It gets used as a word but then only ever kind of used with a nervous quiver. As soon as people start to say ‘we want to make this cool’ you start to feel now the people really don’t know what they’re talking about. So people avoid saying that. You see it kind of feels like it’s a very cheap stamp and really, if somebody says that we have to really define what the problem is a lot more.

By constructing their work as specialist, creative, and intangible, the weak material basis of their ‘product’ of cool was further magnified. This was augmented by the slippages between work and leisure that characterised the profession. As a result, difficulties in demonstrating competence, performance, and professionalism in identity work arose, making demonstrations of the right impression crucial (Alvesson, 2001). In response, coolhunters managed their identities through linguistic and symbolic means to construct themselves as credible professionals. First, they drew heavily on the language and techniques of management consultancy. In doing so, the perceived rigour and expertise associated with the institutionalised attributes and practices of the management consultancy profession assisted to legitimise coolhunting. In examples of project reports from each agency, various models, diagrams, plans, and charts were evident (e.g. Figure 7). While these functioned to assist in communicating relevant content, they also acted as symbols of knowledge and expertise specific to the agencies (e.g. Gagliardi, 1990). These devices drew on representations of management consulting as idea and innovation factories,

Figure 7 Coolhunting report.
equipping coolhunters with professional and authoritative symbols that constructed them as knowledge brokers.

As ‘merchants of meaning’ (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988), the coolhunters spoke about the in-house strategy planning tools developed to conduct coolhunting work. These ‘innovations’ aided problem-solving tasks, constructing a perceived methodological rigor to client projects (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). Such tools and devices are the bread and butter of management consulting and assist in constructing the work as credible and the consultant as authoritative. Consequently, talk about such innovations in coolhunting sought to legitimise the work:

*Dimitri*: We take the components of the brief, so the brand; the expectation, whether it’s a brand campaign, a sales campaign; what the call of action is; all the sort of components of a marketing strategy and we put them into this strategic planning tool that we have that helps guide what sort of options a brand has in terms of outcomes whether it’s an event; whether it’s an outdoor initiative; whether it’s a creative initiative. It helps us come up with the right sort of idea.

Similarly, the coolhunters spoke about research data collected by the agencies that provided analytical insights into consumer markets for clients. Armed with these ‘scientific facts’, the coolhunters constructed themselves as bona fide gurus and their knowledge work took on a more material basis. The necessity of evidence in problem solving is fundamental to the management-consulting profession (e.g. Kipping & Engwall, 2002), and in making these parallels, coolhunting work was in turn constructed as more rigorous and credible:

*Dimitri*: We have very, very detailed information and insights on the 16 to 30 year old market . . . We understood everything there is to know about what this market values; what their attitudes are; what their behaviours are; what their core interest groups are – sport, music, travel, fashion, entertainment; what their financial positions are; education; communication; finance; sex; health; wellbeing; self-concept . . . we had qualitative and quantitative research on this market to support the ideas that we would actually come out with. So that puts us in more of a dominating position.

Other symbols that conveyed widespread, collective understandings of professionalism were used to construct beliefs about the credibility of the coolhunters (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001). Job titles commonly found in professional service firms, such as Partner and Chief Executive Officer, were used at the upper levels of the agencies’ hierarchy. However, less serious job titles were evident at lower and non-client facing levels, such as an office manager’s title of ‘Head of Internal Affairs’. Talk about various industry awards won by the agencies also sought to construct the coolhunters as recognised experts and credible professionals, with dedicated areas in the offices displaying these recognitions. Reception and waiting areas were also evident in both agencies (Figure 8), functioning as visual cues to suggest a corporate environment, albeit of a funkier nature. Through these symbols, coolhunters sought to construct themselves in a likeminded fashion to other business professionals. By being perceived as the same as others, coolhunters strove to legitimise their profession. This was particularly important given that even their clients perceived coolhunting to be a new profession that was relatively opaque to outsiders, one noting that ‘it was a picture on a piece of paper that was pitched to start with . . . I still really have no idea how all of those ideas came together to make this event’.
Although the terms are often used synonymously in marketing, coolhunters also sought to construct themselves as credible professionals by differentiating themselves from trend-spotters. They claimed confusion between the identities stemmed from developments that had taken place in the industry. Originally, coolhunting focused on trend forecasting. However, continued problems with time lags in the commodification of trends, coupled with the fast rate of their appropriation in the marketplace, created obstacles for clients, diminishing its perceived value. Also, some trends did not live up to the zeal that had been forecast. As a consequence, coolhunters began to focus on connecting organisations with influential consumers and using trend research to inform client projects. In contrast, trend-spotting was constructed as the ‘failed’ version of coolhunting due to its myopic focus on being at the forefront of cultural innovations:

Dimitri: I look at that as qualifying what we do. We’re not forecasting or predicting trends as much as we are documenting and detailing their values. There are differences because trends are you’ll be here today and gone tomorrow . . . whereas values are more foundation. And if you can as a brand, understand the values and tap into the values then you have a much deeper relationship with the audience so that when trends do come and go and you jump on to them your market already respects you from a value perspective and therefore will trust your judgement.

The trend-spotter identity was othered for its perceived irrelevance and lack of rigour. For Dimitri, the emphasis trend-spotters placed on aesthetics as opposed to strategic insights and analysis rendered their identity little more than a ‘shop window’ – they ‘enable you access enough to talk about it, but not do anything about it’. Similar claims by other coolhunters in the agencies constructed trend-spotting as superficial, indulgent, and lacking ‘real world’ applicability and by association framed trend-spotters as inappropriately skilled or resourced to participate properly in the business context – ‘they’re just out there while we’re out there scoping, then
we’re interpreting, then we’re briefing, and then we’re responding’. Compounding this was the virtual environment in which trend-spotters worked, as opposed to the bricks-and-mortar space and ‘real life’ human interaction offered by the coolhunters. Combined, these claims sought to problematise trend-spotting as a serious, commercially viable profession:

*Adrian*: They’re people who’re just looking for the latest aesthetic kind of style and then put it on a blog or put it on a website . . . it’s just a cool retail shop basically, it’s somebody who’s collecting cool stuff and putting it on display . . . I don’t think these people are trying to understand cool at all. There’s no analytics involved, it’s the equivalent of picking out shiny things.

Through this discursive positioning, coolhunters augmented their identity construction as professional, credible, and expert. However, the coolhunters despaired that the key stumbling block to the legitimacy of their professionalism was not being confused with trend-spotters, but the very term that informed their identity – the title of ‘coolhunter’:

*Adrian*: You used to be able to say coolhunter and not feel too cringey, now you just can’t say it at all. So I’m wondering if actually the term is dying as well because it really got a bit fanatical there . . . I think the term of coolhunting’s been bastardised.

The coolhunters claimed that although an industry of coolhunting certainly existed, those who participated in it no longer embraced the term. To this end, the two agencies investigated in this study were formally referred to as ‘strategic youth communication agencies’ despite the fact it was informally acknowledged that coolhunters worked within their walls. As such, the identity struggles for coolhunters began with the very term that signified who they were to the world around them. For this reason, drawing on language and symbols to validate their professionalism became fundamental to their livelihood in a marketplace where coolhunting was considered opaque at best, or on the nose at worst. However, this veneer of slick and professionalism was vastly at odds with the renegade, anti-corporate spirit they also invoked, illustrating again how their identity work was organised around competing, paradoxical identifications.

**Discussion and conclusions**

I can’t decide . . . if you have everything . . . or nothing. ([Don Draper, *Mad Men*, Season 1, Episode 2: ‘Ladies Room’])

By examining coolhunting as a case study of cultural intermediaries, this paper illustrates how tensions arise in identity construction and boundary work. For coolhunters, a conflict between reconciling being renegade and professional arose. They engaged in chameleon-like identity work – one moment seeking to present themselves as creative and original rebels of commerce, the next striving to construct themselves as rigorous professionals. In doing so, they echoed Ellis et al.’s (2010) observations that market actors construct their selves across a perceived boundary between ‘internal’ ideas and desires and ‘external’ images and evaluations. The coolhunters’ identity work involved them engaging with, resisting, negotiating,
modifying, and refusing identity positions provided by discourses (Thomas & Davies, 2005). Within this space, as reflexive producers/consumers navigating economy/culture, categories of work and leisure become increasingly blurred, and this instability forced coolhunters to undergo more challenging instances of identity work due to the destabilisation of self that transpired (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Work and pleasure have traditionally been viewed as structural opposites (Turner, 2001), with leisure associated with freedom, release, fun, and choice, and work with compulsion, routine, and restriction (Guerrier & Adib, 2003). However, the boundary between work and leisure is becoming less oppositional, and this is particularly the case for cultural intermediaries (McRobbie, 2003). For coolhunters, this ‘weisure’ (Conley, 2009) means that the ‘time off’ from work normally reserved for leisure is often marked by productive activities developing their cool capital. The confusing implications of this can be observed in the identity work of coolhunters, for whom the pleasurable aspects of their work that dis-identifies them from mainstream identities also provokes the anxiety of not being taken seriously in a professional capacity. Moreover, even when coolhunters use aesthetic elements to construct themselves as ‘uncorporate’, they simultaneously invoke masculine and classist symbols to safeguard their professional identity. Such slippages have important implications for the identity work of cultural intermediaries that render it complex and difficult to disentangle.

Extant research examining cultural intermediaries’ identities has signalled their hybrid, liminal, and paradoxical nature (e.g. DeFillippi, Grabher, & Jones, 2007; Hackley & Kover, 2007; Nixon & Crewe, 2004). Missing, however, is a path forward in understanding the struggles that pervade the discursive construction of boundaries and identities for cultural intermediaries (Smith Maguire, 2010). This paper contends that paradox theory offers such direction. Paradox is ‘constructed by individuals when oppositional tendencies are brought into recognizable proximity through reflection or interaction’ (Ford & Backoff, 1988, p. 89). In the case of coolhunters, a tension between renegadism and professionalism manifests in their interwoven work and leisure practices, permeating their identity work in contradictory ways. Research has highlighted the utility of a paradox lens for understanding divergent and disruptive experiences and managing contradictions and their associated outcomes (Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis, & Ingram, 2010; Ofori-Dankwa & Julian, 2004). For a concept like identity, which is characterised by ambiguity and contradiction (Knights & Wilmott, 1999), a paradox lens provides particular value. This paper proposes that paradox theory can be effectively leveraged in research seeking to unpack the decentralised, multiple, and shifting identities of marketers that can be experienced in contradictory ways. Lewis (2000) emphasises that the polarities of paradoxical tensions must be identified and understood, as favouring one pole can trigger and perpetuate reinforcing cycles with negative dynamics. She argues that these tensions can moreover be managed to create distinctions and enable synergy. In this way, a paradox lens is helpful in reframing identity tensions and enabling a more accepting, holistic, and fluid understanding of them – seeing seemingly opposing identity positions as two sides of the same coin instead of polarised conflicts (Gotsi et al., 2010). By accommodating these tensions, individuals are better able to leverage paradox effectively, embracing contradictory identities as mutually enabling and co-existing.

Lewis (2000) identifies three ways of representing paradox – mapping, theorising, and conceptualising. As noted, various field studies have identified the paradoxes
evident in cultural intermediaries’ identity work, and this paper further contributes to this mapping of paradox by highlighting the polarities of coolhunters’ identities. Less work, however, has been conducted in theorising (Lewis, 2000; Quinn & Cameron, 1988) and conceptualising (Ofori-Dankwa & Julian, 2004) paradox. This paper seeks to contribute to theorising on paradox by offering the metaphor of the nomad as a way of interrogating polarities as both/and as opposed to either/or choices. This reflects Lewis’s (2000) assertion that paradoxical tensions may not be possible to resolve nor it desirable to do so, with paradox instead offering inventive ways of considering phenomena. This research proffers the metaphor of the nomadic subject as an insightful path forward in interrogating marketer subjectivity and representing interwoven identity tensions, such as production/consumption, culture/economy, and work/leisure. Metaphor provides a vivid way of understanding complex and abstract phenomena (Grant & Oswick, 1996; Tsoukas, 1991) by creating subtle connections and functioning as a communicative tool (Ritchie, 2004). For example, Morgan’s (1986) metaphorical schema of organisations, such as ‘organisation as machine’ and ‘organisation as brain’, prompted a reconsideration of how organisations are understood. Expressing abstract experiences such as identity work through metaphor provides a way for individuals with different experiences to use imagination and symbols grounded in the way they talk and think to understand phenomena more intuitively (Inkson, 2004).

The nomadic metaphor has been used by a variety of researchers in theories of subjectivity (e.g. Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Braidotti, 1994; Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). Primarily, the nomad functions as a way of expressing contradiction, fluid boundaries, and a constant state of being ‘in process’ and ‘becoming’ – ‘the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire or nostalgia for fixity’ (Braidotti, 1994, p. 22). Not only does this framing suit conceptions of identity that dispense with a unitary self, it also accommodates emerging understandings of marketer subjectivity marked by flux and ambiguity (e.g. Smith Maguire, 2010). Marketers are constantly on the move, looking for new expressions, both economic and cultural, to appeal to and persuade fragmented and ever-changing audiences. As the case of the coolhunter demonstrates, this requires the marketer to inhabit a variety of spheres in which leisure time increasingly becomes productive, engaged in a hive of activity that crosses the boundaries of personal and working lives in which they must always be available, flexible, creative, adaptable, innovative, and mobile. This mirrors conceptions of the nomad, whereby:

What is relevant is to be always pursuing some sort of activity, never to be without a project, without ideas, to be always looking forward to, and preparing for, something along with other persons, who are brought together by the same drive for activity [Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002, p. 192]

The nomad moves through a series of networks, rootless and without fixed territory. Such a conception corresponds with extant understandings of the role of marketing within organisations as something fluid and changing that pervades all aspects of the organisation as a philosophy or orientation (Holbrook & Hulbert, 2002; Woodall, 2007). Correspondingly, the marketer operates in transforming conditions where they must exploit the continuous possibilities entailed by their changing and multiple activities. The nomadic metaphor for the marketer enables it to be simultaneously conceived as complex, contradictory, dynamic, liminal, situated in shifting contexts, and without fixed destination. To bring this metaphor further to life, the research
proposes that marketer subjectivity can be represented as a kind of ‘Don Draper complex’, inspired by the fictional protagonist of *Mad Men*. Don Draper is the ultimate nomad – a man so uncomfortable in his own skin he takes on another identity to form a new life for himself. Yet, despite its veneer of ‘perfection’, even that proves to become something else from which he must escape – whether through work, drinking, infidelities, or abandoning his responsibilities in New York for the pleasures of California. As the series evolves, Don’s work and personal selves become increasingly inseparable, leading to moments of intense identity crisis in which he takes on new and different personas. Although Draper represents some obvious stereotypes, he nevertheless provides an illuminating figure in conceiving the marketer as nomad.

Guided by this framing, future research should more fully explore how marketer identities are produced and regulated. This may relate to how the marketer seeks sovereignty and autonomy through a liberatory self-identity (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). For instance, in spite of the tensions, the coolhunters perceived that their overlapping work and leisure aided the construction of a more coherent sense of personal authenticity. Future research could also develop the implications of paradoxical tensions in terms of identity regulation, exploring whether this process is empowering or controlling. The ways in which marketers manage these tensions is also of interest, such as generating resistance through cynical detachment, irony, humour, or image manipulation (Collinson, 1994; Costas & Fleming, 2009). For instance, the coolhunters managed tensions by using observable displays of conspicuous consumption produced in their working lives as markers of cultural capital and social advantage – although its accomplishment through allusions to masculinity highlighted gender issues.

This research has examined the subjectivities of a marketing cultural intermediary group that researchers have historically found difficult to penetrate (Nancarrow, Nancarrow, & Page, 2002). It offers three contributions to understandings of marketer identity construction – the metaphor of marketer as nomad; paradox theory as a lens for understanding the tensions that pervade boundary and identity construction for marketers; and the use of thick description to offer nuanced understandings of the complexities of identity work. In doing so, this research hopes to stimulate further debate and explorations of the subjectivities of marketing practitioners and the ways they navigate and accomplish boundaries in economic and cultural life, work and leisure, and production and consumption. For if they are as complex as *Mad Men*’s protagonist Don Draper, we certainly have our work cut out.

**References**


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**About the author**

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