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Discovering the Extended Personal Identity

Re:collection

Re:flection

Re:curation

Discovering the Extended Personal Identity

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Abstract

A *brand* is commonly used to connote an identity or image that is made to be perceived and experienced by people. Often, it is used by companies to mould their public image to add value to their business. More recently, with the advent of social media, individuals are turning to their own brands.

Being your authentic self while becoming a personal brand is counterintuitive. On one hand, a brand is a formulation of commercial values and meanings that people project on a company, product, or service. It is fundamentally corporate and profit-oriented and must strategically align with a target market while differentiating from competitors. On the other hand, being genuine, truly oneself, is personal, complex, and inward. This contradiction is the *personal brand paradox*—as one pursues becoming a brand, it takes away the earnest nuances of one's self and humanity.¹

How can we then develop a personal brand or identity that can show a part of our actual selves, aiming for genuine self-expression while differentiating ourselves commercially from others in our field of work?

This practice-led research examines this paradox, the boundaries between the self and the personal brand, and those aspects which can be revealed, curated, and hidden. The exploration aims to create an *extended personal identity*—an extension of the self that interconnects with others: an identity that is more attuned to the self, not necessarily for commercial gain but for self-expression and self-distinction.

The research is conducted in three parts: re:collection, re:reflection, and re:curation, through reflective autoethnography and a heuristic methodology. This allows me to examine my memories and collect specific instances with which I can identify. Reflecting on these uncovers my values, biases, and tendencies. The introspected and catalogued moments are recorded through my final artefact, the *Memory Card Library*. This personal collection of *memory cards* can then be used to inform and create my *extended personal identity*.

From an inward perspective, this examination studies the creation of extended identities, potentially providing individuals and commercial brands with an avenue to be more honest, genuine, and personal.

1. Debbie Millman, "The Personal Brand Paradox," WePresent, January 16, 2023, <https://wepresent.wetransfer.com/stories/personal-brand-paradox-debbie-millman>.

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To my beloved wife, Verns, my heart can never thank you enough for all the support and love you have given me. Our lovely memories fill my memory card library with joy and beauty.

Finally, I would like to thank God for making all things possible.

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the Acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

John Borrás Tan
18th June 2024

Introduction

A brand, by definition, is “a name, term, sign, symbol, design, or combination of them, intended to identify goods or services of one seller or a group of sellers to differentiate them from those of competitors.”² Developing and managing that identity is called branding, “a deliberate differentiation ... a disciplined process used to build awareness, attract new customers, and extend customer loyalty.”³

In today’s highly competitive market, people create their own brands to stand out and use them as leverage for their careers. Social media influencers, thought leaders, and corporate managers construct calculated identities to cater to their target audience. Personal brands use the same strategies as commercial brands to create their image and reputation in a planned self-marketing process.⁴

Debbie Millman suggests that people who utilise branding on a personal level lose their actual selves in the process. This, to her, is the *personal brand paradox*.⁵ What people perceive is just a well-planned and polished facade for commercial value, subject to the market’s demands.

2. Philip Kotler and Kevin Lane Keller, *Marketing Management*, 14th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2012), 241.

3. Alina Wheeler and Debbie Millman, *Designing Brand Identity: An Essential Guide for the Whole Branding Team* (Somerset, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 6, ProQuest Ebook Central.

4. Wioleta Kucharska and Piotr Mikołajczak, “Personal Branding of Artists and Art-Designers: Necessity or Desire?” *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 27, no. 3 (2018): 249-61, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-01-2017-1391>.

5. Millman, “The Personal Brand Paradox.”

With this contradiction, how can we create a personal identity that reflects a part of our true selves, fostering genuine self-expression while distinguishing ourselves commercially from others?

To investigate Millman's paradox, this research steps away from the term *brand*, since its definition is already skewed towards profit-oriented corporate infrastructures. What this research aims to create is an *extended personal identity* (see fig. 1). Rather than constructing one's identity for commercial gain, the extended personal identity is more attuned to the self, putting one's authenticity at the highest value.

In contrast to commercial branding, this research takes a personal approach to ensure genuine self-expression and self-distinction⁶ of the extended personal identity, the methodology of this research takes a reflective autoethnographic approach via re:collection, re:reflection, and re:curation. Firstly, I recollect and collect parts of my extended self or memory marker objects.⁷ Secondly, I reflect on these possessions and distinguish elements that I identify with. Thirdly, I curate particular aspects to represent my identity in a cohesive narrative, by implementing a heuristic approach⁸ to my methods of making.

6. Philip Kotler and Kevin Lane Keller, *Marketing Management*, 12th ed. (Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), quoted in Kucharska and Mikołajczak, "Personal Branding of Artists and Art-Designers." Self-brand expression: A form of affirmation of someone's self to boost their extended self-concept and image. Self-brand distinction: Self-identification as unique and superior, based on self-esteem, personal advantages, and values.

7. Russell W. Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," *Journal of Consumer Research* 15, no. 2 (1988): 139-68; Russell W. Belk, "The Role of Possessions In Constructing and Maintaining A Sense of Past," *Advances in Consumer Research* 17, no. 1 (January 1990): 669-76, quoted in Russell W. Belk, "Extended Self in a Digital World," *Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 3 (2013): 478, <https://doi.org/10.1086/671052>. Memory marker objects are possessions of the extended self that serve as cues for others to form impressions about us. They are also prompts for recollecting experiences, connections to other people, and our previous selves.

8. Clark Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications* (Newbury Park: SAGE, 1990), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995641>.

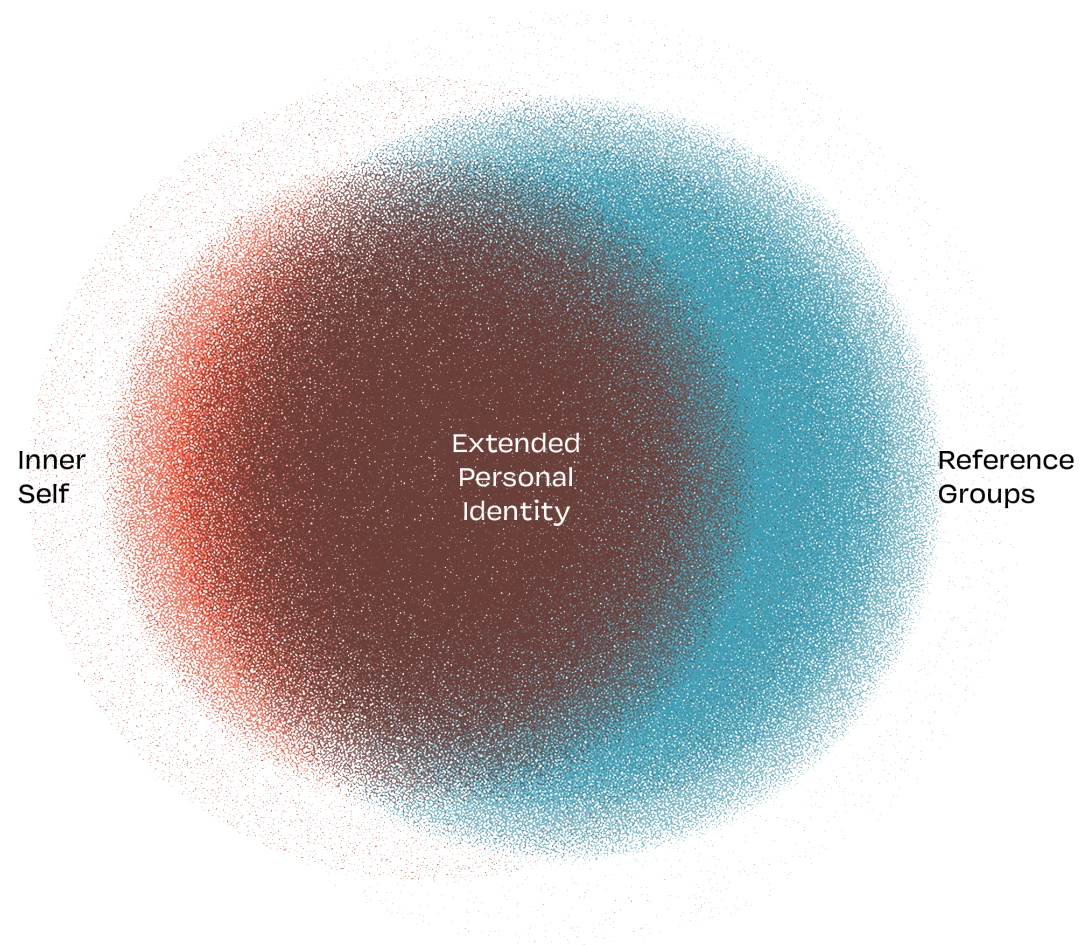


Figure 1. Extended personal identity. A person's identity that interconnects one's inner self with reference groups. It is an extension of one's identity that shares more personal aspects of oneself with their social circles. Diagram by author.

The result of my autoethnographic and heuristic methods is recorded through an introspected catalogue of personal memories, which I call the Memory Card Library. Each memory card is a tangible representation of a specific aspect of my identity throughout my lifetime. This personal library of cards can then be used as a reference to create my extended personal identity or even possibly my personal brand.

As a designer and researcher, I dissect different facets of my life, consciously studying my inner self juxtaposed with my identity as a designer and visual artist. Creating my extended identity in this research allows me to investigate alternative ways of sharing oneself through an in-depth and personal approach. This enables me to understand and present myself better and, hopefully, help others develop a solution for creating their own extended personal identity.

It is important to note that the limitations of my autoethnographic approach only apply to my personal experience in this research. Further tests could be conducted to unlock the potential for commercial brand development using this research methodology.

Positioning of the Researcher

As a communication designer specialising in corporate branding and design for many years, I have been questioning the very nature of branding and how this could be applied on a more personal level. My design practice primarily deals with strategy and development, mainly from client project briefs needing effective branding and marketing design solutions. Hence, my personal style, design biases, and artistic expressions take a back seat. Exercising my creative self-expression and acknowledging my identity has been challenging, especially as most of my time is devoted to client work. Embarking on this research lets me explore and express my identity as a designer and researcher, as well as other personal aspects of myself.

To contextualise my identity, I need to discuss my home country's complex socio-cultural history and study how it influenced and continues to affect my life today.

Complex Socio-Cultural History of The Philippines

The Philippines, although in Southeast Asia, is unlike any Asian country.⁹ The archipelago endured almost 400 years of colonisation and foreign rule under three different powers—more than three hundred years of the Spanish empire, three decades under the American commonwealth, and three years of Japanese control during the Second World War.¹⁰

The Philippines did not exist as the nation we know today before the Spanish first arrived in 1521.¹¹ Pre-colonisation, the Philippines did not have a national identity.¹² The country's 7,107 islands are inhabited by over a hundred ethnolinguistic Indigenous groups, and, although fragmented, these regional groups closely interacted with one another, socially and culturally. When Chinese and Malay influences from neighbouring countries are taken into account, the archipelago's cultural diversity becomes more extensive.¹³

Spanish was the official language of the Philippines during the colonial period but wasn't widely spread among Filipinos. As a result, regional languages were still commonly used. Baybayin, the pre-Spanish writing system,¹⁴ survives to this day but is not widely used and taught. In contrast to the Spanish, subsequent American occupiers strongly enforced the teaching of English and the Americanisation of culture in the islands. As a result, English is commonly used around the country.¹⁵

The regional cultures of the pre-colonial Philippines were fused with different foreign influences with varying weights of colonial impact. Being subjugated for almost four centuries, most aspects of our lives are heavily influenced by Western cultures. What we know and experience now as our Filipino values, beliefs, culture, and languages are deeply integrated with Spanish, American, Chinese, and Malay influences.¹⁶

The Philippines' complex socio-cultural history has always been discussed, and questions about Filipino identity have always been raised.¹⁷ This theme is entangled with my extended personal identity, and my position has always been to acknowledge and embrace the convoluted dimensions of the cultures I personally live and experience. My Filipino-Chinese identity is an amalgamation of different and inseparable cultures throughout my country's history. As Bernad suggests in his article, "Philippine Culture and the Filipino Identity," "unity, not uniformity, should be the goal."¹⁸

9. Irene Villaescusa Illán, *Transcultural Nationalism in Hispano-Filipino Literature* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 28, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51599-7>.

10. Teresita See, "The Case of the Chinese in the Philippines," in *The State, Development and Identity in Multi-Ethnic Societies: Ethnicity, Equity and the Nation*, ed. Nicholas Tarling and Edmund Terence Gomez (London: Routledge, 2008), 154; Villaescusa Illán, *Transcultural Nationalism*, 27; Princess Orig, "Kayumanggi Versus Maputi: 100 Years of America's White Aesthetics in Philippine Literature," in *Mixed Blessing: The Impact of American Colonial Experience on Politics and Society in the Philippines*, ed. Hazel M. McFerson, 2nd ed. (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2011), 107.vol. 2 (Diliman, Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2011).

11. Miguel A. Bernad, "Philippine Culture and the Filipino Identity," *Philippine Studies* 19, no. 4 (1971): 577; Onofre Corpuz, *The Roots of the Filipino Nation*, vol. 1 (University of the Philippines Press, 2005), 11.

12. Bernad, "Philippine Culture," 577. Bernad describes national identity as a united sovereign state that may include multiple ethnolinguistic groups and cultures.

13. Corpuz, *The Roots of the Filipino Nation*, 11; See, "The Case of the Chinese," 154.

14. Corpuz, *The Roots of the Filipino Nation*, 27.

15. Bernad, "Philippine Culture," 583; Princess Orig, "Kayumanggi versus Maputi," 118-9; Ariane Borlongan, *Philippine English: Development, Structure, and Sociology of English in the Philippines* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 15.

16. See, "The Case of the Chinese," 154.

17. Villaescusa Illán, *Transcultural Nationalism*, 28.

18. Bernad, "Philippine Culture," 585.

Personal Context

I am of Filipino-Chinese heritage. Likewise, my father has a mixed lineage, which is predominantly Chinese. Born and raised in Quezon province, he was raised with his father's Chinese traditions and the local Filipino culture. My mother, with entirely Filipino roots, grew up in the province of Bicol, a 10-hour drive away from my father's place of birth. Both of their families moved to Manila during their university years and eventually settled and started our family in the city.



Figure 2. Saint Jude Catholic School facade. A mix of Filipino, Chinese, and Catholic missionary cultures and traditions, combined into an educational institution. Photograph by author, 2018.

I grew up in a largely Filipino household. At home, we would mainly talk in colloquial Filipino or *Taglish*, a combination of English and *Tagalog*. *Bicolano*, the provincial language my mother grew up with, was also often used in the family. Raised Catholic, my family regularly attended Mass every Sunday. My upbringing was coupled with various Chinese customs from my father's family. Through them, I can understand and speak some *Hokkien*¹⁹ language, and as part of these traditions, my grandfather gave me a Chinese name, 陳健中.²⁰ I studied at Saint Jude Catholic School, a Filipino-Chinese Catholic institution, from kindergarten to high school (fig. 2). There, I formally learned the Chinese Mandarin language and studied Chinese literature and history. Our Chinese education worked in tandem with the standard English curriculum, all while guided by Filipino-Chinese Catholic values and principles. I eventually took a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts, majoring in Information Design, at Ateneo de Manila University: a Jesuit-run university founded in 1859, known for emphasising philosophy, theology, and the humanities.

19. *Hokkien* is a variety of Southern Min Chinese language.

20. Pronunciation: Chén Jiàn Zhōng
Translation: 陳 is my surname, Tan. The characters 健中 mean strength and centre.



Figure 3. The last days of Hontra Arts before closing down. The Tan family's screen printing shop, located at the basement of the family house. Photograph by author, 2021.

Looking back, I see that this struggle between art or design and personal or commercial has roots in my family. My grandfather on my father's side ran a screen-printing shop, Hontra Arts²¹ (see fig. 3). On my mother's side, my family once owned a furniture shop called Tuklas²² (see fig. 4). I am a designer today because of my family's artistic and creative inclinations. Even though my relatives were in the creative field, they treated their crafts as a business. The screen-printing shop mass-produced election paraphernalia and corporate merchandise. The furniture shop catered to the most prominent mall in the Philippines; unfortunately, the retail conglomerate's predatory business practices led to the shop's demise.

21. *Hontra* is the short, compounded name of the Tan family's first business, Hondagua Trading. Hondagua is the town where my father grew up.

22. In Filipino, *Tuklas* means discover.

The generations before me had no choice but to think about business and pursue profits. They are proud of their work and what they have built, but the idea of screen printing and furniture-making as art forms may have been too far-fetched for them during their time. It was not their fault, as they were only focused on keeping the enterprises and family afloat. Due to their hard work and sacrifice, I have the privilege of exploring the creative spaces they did not have the chance to explore.



Figure 4. A photograph of me posing in the Tuklas showroom. Photograph by Amy Tan, 1994.

Contextual Review

Brand, Brand Identity, and Personal Brands

Brand is the construct of values and symbolism people project onto and perceive about a company, person, product, or service. It is intended to identify and differentiate from other competitors.²³ Following this definition, *brand identity* is a tangible extension that materialises the brand's story, context, and essence in a manner that best connects with the audience.²⁴ *Branding* is the act of creating a brand and realising its distinction.²⁵

23. Kotler and Keller, *Marketing Management*, 241; Wheeler and Millman, *Designing Brand Identity*, 6.

24. Wheeler and Millman, *Designing Brand Identity*, 7.

25. Karl Moore and Susan Reid, "The Birth of Brand: 4000 Years of Branding: Business History," *Business History* 50, no. 4 (July 2008): 421, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00076790802106299>.

Personal branding emerged out of the idea of using commercial branding methods for people. The term became mainstream when Tom Peters wrote "The Brand Called You" for *Fast Company*, in 1997. In this article, he argues that the modern and highly competitive job marketplace necessitates individuals to create their corporate selves.²⁶ This requires people to develop their own image by adapting business strategies to polish their self-presentation and shape the public's perspective.²⁷ With globalisation and the rise of social platforms on the internet, what started as a tool to stand out in the office is now almost necessary for people to use.²⁸

26. Tom Peters, "The Brand Called You," *Fast Company*, August 31, 1997, <https://www.fastcompany.com/28905/brand-called-you>, quoted in Alison Hearn, "'Meat, Mask, Burden': Probing the Contours of the Branded 'Self'", *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8, no. 2 (July 1, 2008): 197-217, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540508090086>.

27. Millman, "The Personal Brand Paradox."

28. Talaya Waller, *Personal Brand Management: Marketing Human Value, Management for Professionals* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43744-2>.

An individual's reputation, the collective perception of their self, is their personal brand, whether they are aware of it or not.²⁹ "The idea of personal branding is trying to take control of this process in the best way each person can. Personal branding responds to the need for building one's reputation."³⁰ Whether to achieve commercial success or manage one's reputation, self-expression and self-distinction are at the core of personal branding.

29. A. John Peter and Savilene Julia Gomez, "Building Your Personal Brand: A Tool for Employability," *IUP Journal of Soft Skills* 13, no. 2 (June 2019): 8.

30. Kucharska and Mikołajczak, "Personal Branding of Artists and Art-Designers," 251.

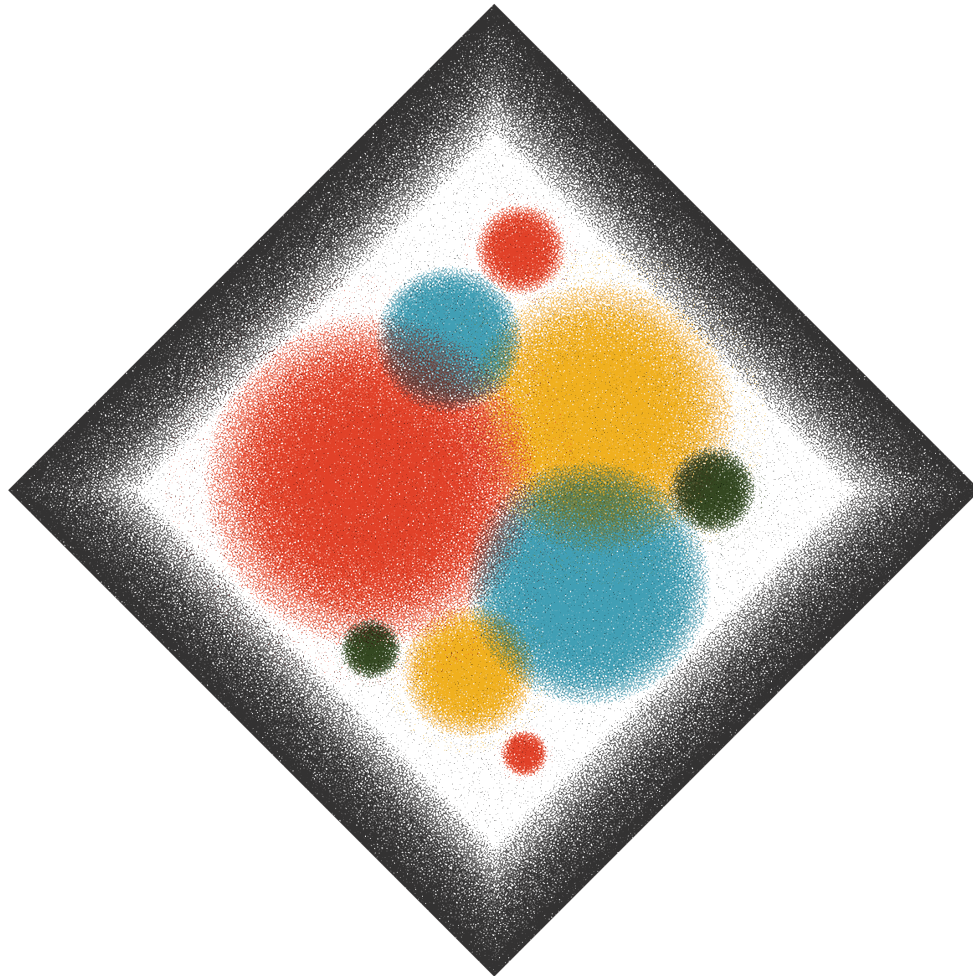


Figure 5. Personal brand paradox. The complexity of branding oneself while trying to be authentic and self-expressive. The diagram shows how the complicated yet colourful aspects of oneself can be boxed in and made monotonous by personal branding. Diagram by author.

Personal Brand Paradox

Millman's "The Personal Brand Paradox"³¹ provides the boundaries of this research and area of inquiry—the intrinsic qualities of being a genuine person compared to a brand and how they are fundamentally opposites.

The more you try to define and manage your brand, the more contrived and conflicted you may feel about yourself. The challenge of being authentic and honest with yourself arises. It can feel like boxing in and restraining all the colourful complexities of yourself. (see fig.5 for my visual representation of this psychological tension)

"When a person aspires to be a brand, they forfeit everything that is truly glorious about being human."³²

As Millman points out, we are continuously developing beings—complicated, messy, and inconsistent.³³ We can be swayed and influenced by our environment and social circles. We can develop various tastes and biases depending on who or what we are exposed to. More importantly, we have the autonomy to choose and decide for ourselves.³⁴

31. Millman, "The Personal Brand Paradox."

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Michael H. Kernis and Brian M. Goldman, "A Multicomponent Conceptualization of Authenticity: Theory and Research," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 38, ed. Mark P. Zanna (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 2006), 291-292, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(06\)38006-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(06)38006-9).

In contrast, Millman asserts that commercial brands are manufactured meanings.³⁵ They are human constructs that differentiate and communicate certain beliefs and affiliations.³⁶ Companies cannot directly feel and connect with people, so brand designers, such as myself, try to imbue personalities and stories into a brand. This may be an effective strategy, but, as long as the business is required to uphold its financial responsibility, consumers can see through the curtain of fabricated persona. Thus, as Millman argues in her article,

When we position ourselves as a brand, we are forced to project an image of what we believe most people will approve of and admire and buy into. The moment we cater our creativity to popular opinion is the precise moment we lose our freedom and autonomy.³⁷

The small nuances, mistakes, and unfiltered parts of our self-development make our lives more distinct and beautiful. Through our choices, we write our identity narratives.³⁸

35. Millman, "The Personal Brand Paradox."

36. Wheeler and Millman, *Designing Brand Identity*.

37. Millman, "The Personal Brand Paradox."

38. Ann K. Brooks and Chinedu Anumudu, "Identity Development in Personal Branding Instruction: Social Narratives and Online Brand Management in a Global Economy," *Adult Learning* 27, no. 1 (February 1, 2016): 23-29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1045159515616968>; Dan P. McAdams and Kate C. McLean, "Narrative Identity," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 3 (2013): 233-38.

Extended Self and Social Interactions

The view of this research on the self and self-formation is developed from a symbolic interactionist perspective. This approach explores how the self shapes, and is shaped by, the society and environment in which an individual interacts. A person's actions are based on the subjective interpretation of their interactions.³⁹ Memories, experiences, environments, culture, families, friends, and all social interactions make up the self. From the same symbolic interactionist perspective, Belk describes the *extended self*:

the major categories of extended self [are our] body, internal, processes, ideas, and experiences, and those persons, places, and things to which one feels attached. Of these categories, the last three appear to be the most clearly extended. However, given the difficulties in separating mind and body in philosophies and psychologies of the self . . . objects in all of these categories will be treated as . . . parts of the extended self.⁴⁰

The possessions and experiences we collect from different situations and social groups form our extended selves. Kucharska and Mikołajczak define the extended self as the intersection of the inner self and its reference groups.⁴¹

39. Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 2.

40. Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," 141-2.

41. Kucharska and Mikołajczak, "Personal Branding of Artists and Art-Designers," 252.

Belk further explains that the extended self has particular memory marker objects that act as social cues for one's identity to be recognized.⁴² These mementoes carry prior experiences, emotions, relationships, and even our previous selves. Through these possessions, we share a collective memory, experience, and meaning with specific groups of people in which we share a particular extended self. Millman mentions Goffman's idea of self-presentation⁴³—how a person can control other people's perceptions by carefully curating how they present themselves to the public.⁴⁴ Goffman's self-presentation neatly ties to Belk's extended self. According to Goffman, our social interactions can be seen as theatre. We are all actors playing distinct roles in different performances and scenes. As actors, we act consciously in front of an audience. The viewers' expectations of our performance influence our behaviour and presentation. In contrast, actors backstage can relax and be more of their private selves. Goffman posits that, in our social interactions, we manage impressions to avoid disrupting a norm.⁴⁵

42. Belk, "Extended Self in a Digital World," 478.

43. Millman, "The Personal Brand Paradox."

44. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 7.

45. Ibid.

Using Goffman's dramaturgical metaphors, Belk's memory marker objects are a part of the performance (see fig. 6 for my visual representation of this combination). These objects can supplement the actor's identity, emotion, narrative, or, in this case, the extended self. It is worth noting that the props, costumes, and set production can only be effective identity cues to a particular audience who are familiar with or share the same collective memories with the extended self. Both Goffman's and Belk's ideas of the self and its social interactions sound simple on an individual level, especially in the context of a specific social group or performance. They become more complex as we see ourselves at the centre of multiple social groups, performing various roles, and using different props to tell distinct stories. Figure 7 presents the intersection through multiple interconnected groups. Managing multiple identities across different platforms and social groups becomes increasingly challenging and complicated as we get more intertwined in the digital world.⁴⁶

46. Belk, "Extended Self in a Digital World," 491.



Figure 6. Combination of Belk's extended self through Goffman's dramaturgical approach. The diagram follows a theater layout wherein the extended self is the artist who performs on stage, the reference groups are the audience interacting with the performance, and the inner self is at the backstage where the actor can be private with oneself. Diagram by author.

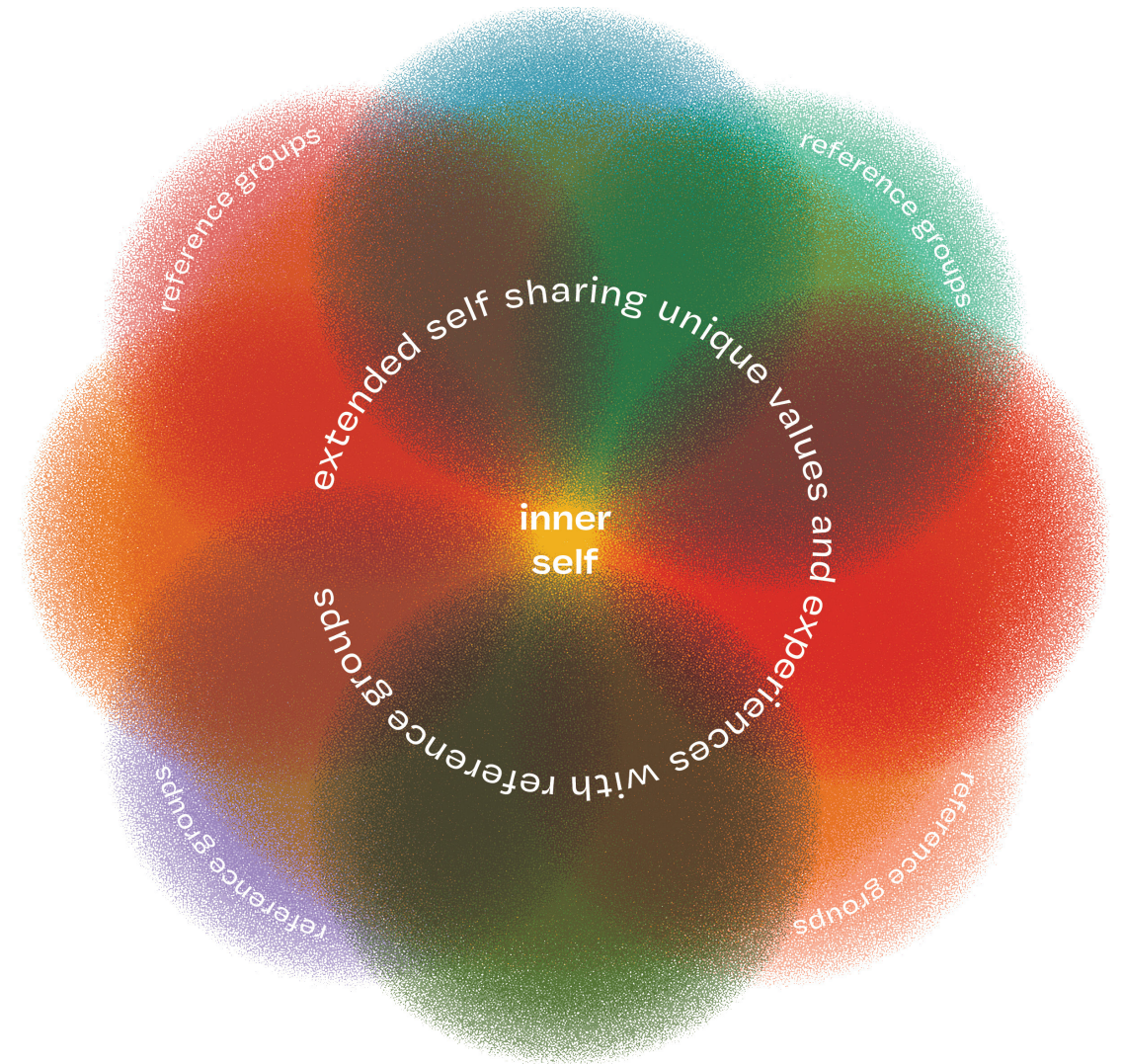


Figure 7. The intersection of the inner self with multiple reference groups forms a complex extended self. The common values the inner self shares with one's reference group gets complicated considering a person has multiple social groups, each interconnection being unique. Diagram by author.

Practitioner Review

The advent of globalised social media has produced a trend in personal branding services and frameworks. While most of them are for corporate image and reputation management, based on commercial branding practices, some offer reflective approaches that tap deep into the personal self.

In her workshop, *Reinventing You*, Millman proposes a technique in which people can veer away from aiming to be a brand and instead live by a good reputation that can stand out.⁴⁷ She challenges us to reinvent ourselves more self-reflectively through her *Personality Pyramid* framework. Here, she wants us to focus on our attributes, benefit statement, and mission statement (fig. 8). Finding these out for ourselves requires deep introspection on our personalities, talents, and goals. All the obviously appealing and common traits, or *tablestakes*, as Millman calls them, are purposefully excluded in the process to force us to differentiate and reflect more extensively. Millman's approach is beneficial for shaping one's reputation and writing one's narrative but lacks the tangible aspects of an identity.

47. Debbie Millman, "Reinventing You with Debbie Millman: Personal Branding and Your Personal Pyramid," April 28, 2022, LinkedIn Learning video, <https://www.linkedin.com/learning/reinventing-you-with-debbie-millman/personal-branding-and-your-personal-pyramid>.

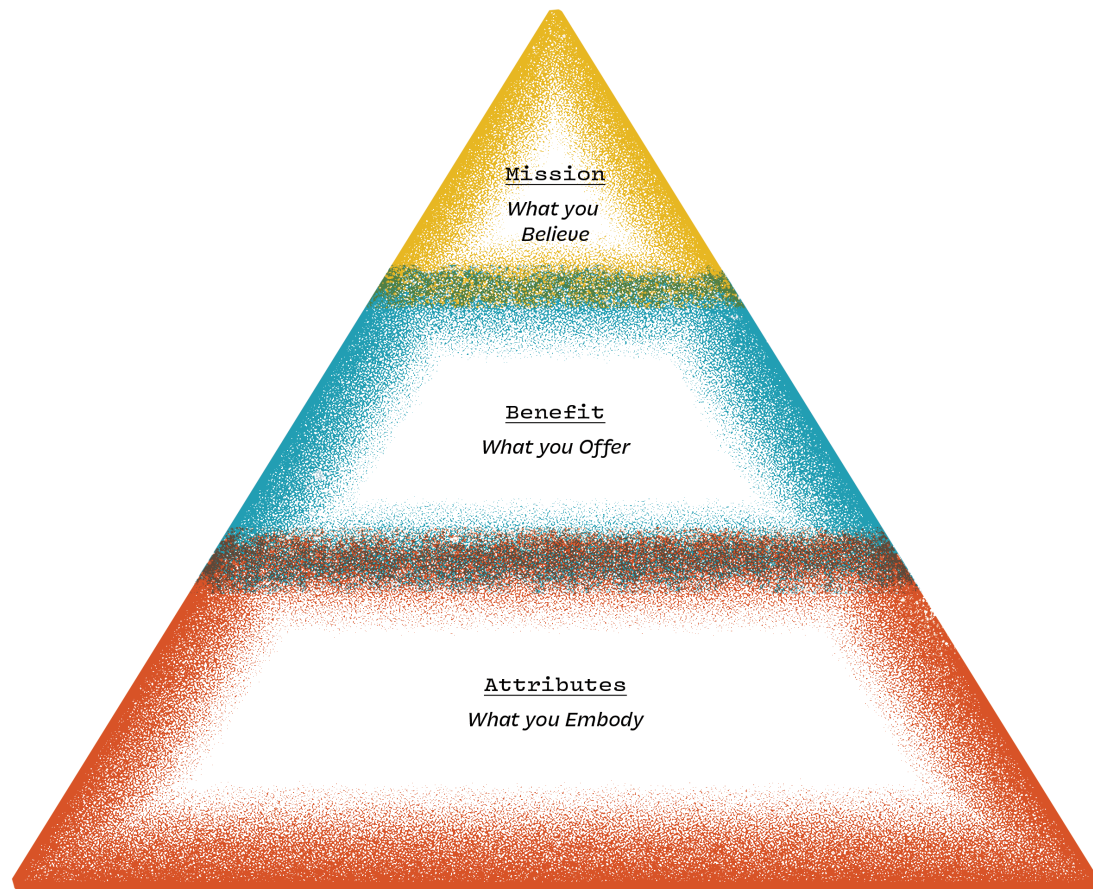


Figure 8. Adapted from Debbie Millman's Personality Pyramid for her LinkedIn Learning workshop, *Reinventing You*. Diagram by author.

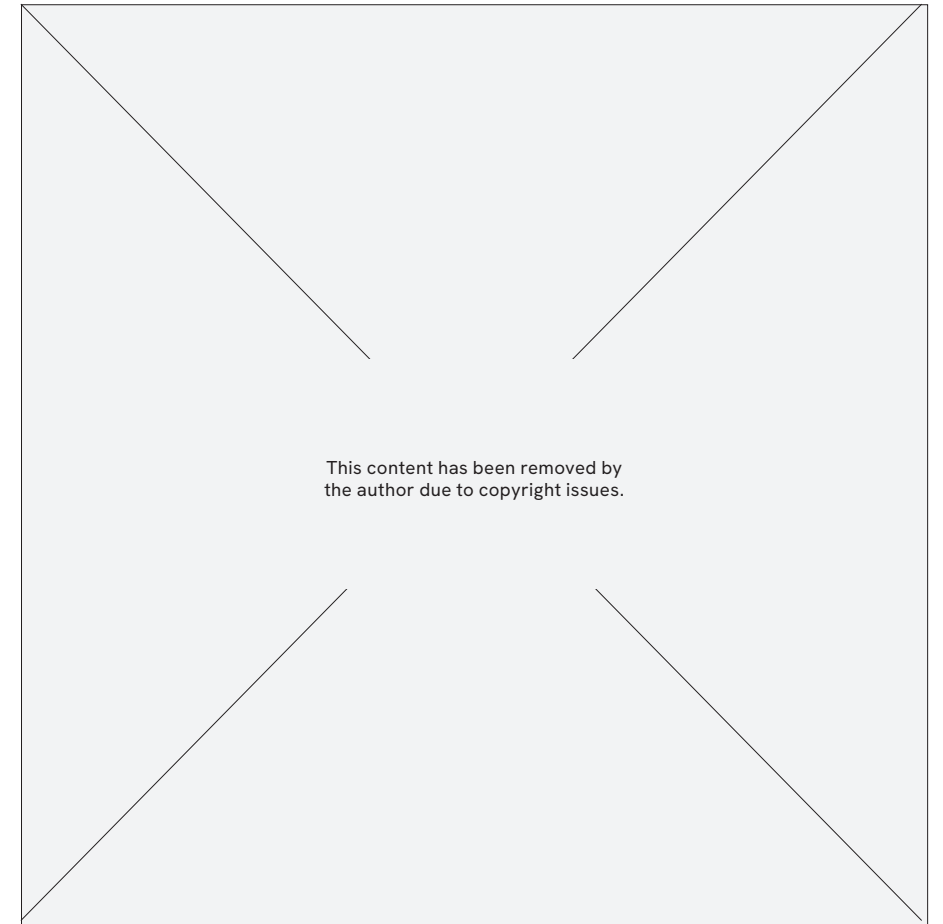


Figure 9. Images from Bruce Vansteenwinkel's 2018 project, *buitengewoon*. Reproduced from Rebecca Irvin, "Bruce Vansteenwinkel's Graphic Design Revolves around Personal Identity and Experience," *It's Nice That*, July 26, 2019, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/bruce-vansteenwinkel-birds-of-a-feather-buitengewoon-graphic-design-260719>.



Figure 10. Images from Bruce Vansteenwinkel's 2018 project, *buitengewoon*. Reproduced from Rebecca Irvin, "Bruce Vansteenwinkel's Graphic Design Revolves around Personal Identity and Experience," *It's Nice That*, July 26, 2019, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/bruce-vansteenwinkel-birds-of-a-feather-buitengewoon-graphic-design-260719>.

In contrast to Millman's approach, Bruce Vansteenwinkel's 2018 project, *buitengewoon*, takes the personal brand quite literally (see fig. 9 and fig. 10). Drawing on his commercial branding experience and his research on human interest and identity, Vansteenwinkel experiments and imagines a world where everyone is a brand with their own brand guidelines. Bruce details, "In this universe, the only things you see, eat, drink, do, watch or read are determined by your specific branding."⁴⁸ He does this almost sarcastically, by exaggerating visual branding methods to a person. In his project, he seems to highlight how the standard branding practices make a person seem robotic and non-human, locked up in their own guidelines.

Vansteenwinkel's visual identity project could have been complementary to Millman's intimate approach to personality building strategy, but, instead, his work highlighted and only exaggerated Millman's problematic issues with personal branding. This leaves room to explore how this research can develop an identity that can align Millman's methods. The following examples shed more light on other practices that can visually explore and express oneself more earnestly.

48. . Rebecca Irvin, "Bruce Vansteenwinkel's Graphic Design Revolves around Personal Identity and Experience," *It's Nice That*, July 26, 2019, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/bruce-vansteenwinkel-birds-of-a-feather-buitengewoon-graphic-design-260719>.



Figure 11. Handwritten diary entries by Stefan Sagmeister. Reproduced from Stefan Sagmeister, *Sagmeister: Made You Look* (New York: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2001). Photograph by author.

Stefan Sagmeister, arguably one of the most influential designers of our time, radically embeds his personal identity and history into his design practice. In his first monograph, *Sagmeister: Made You Look*, he intentionally included his family and personal history as a context for how he eventually became a designer.⁴⁹ He incorporated his handwritten diary entries to let the reader peek into his insights and personal life (see fig. 11). Accompanying the presentation of his client projects are his business diary entries. In addition to those, he also added works that did not get the final approval. His honest and transparent approach to his design practice showcased his identity, works, processes, successes, and even mistakes.

49. Stefan Sagmeister and Peter Hall, *Sagmeister: Made You Look* (New York: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2001).

In his book *Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far*, he wrote about his creative practice as a designer, beyond his usual branding work.⁵⁰ He generated experimental projects without briefs, creating personal and truly worthwhile designs.⁵¹ The 15-pamphlet boxed book shares his personal learnings through captivating photographs of designed and handmade typographic works. The design work is complemented with short anecdotes that allude to his learnings (see fig. 12).

Sagmeister's practice has long been a combination of client work and design research, a juggle between art and design, but always and consistently personal. For the most part, he can express his feelings and opinions in his works. His approach to graphic design is a testament that it can be done without client briefs and without the intention of selling or promotion.



50. Stefan Sagmeister, *Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far*, ed. Steven Heller, Daniel Nettle, and Nancy Spector (New York: Abrams, 2008).

51. Oliver Bennett, "Graphic Design: Beyond Branding," *Design Week*, April 3, 2008, <https://www.designweek.co.uk/issues/3-april-2008/beyond-branding/>.

Figure 12. Typographic works and anecdotes, reproduced from Stefan Sagmeister, *Things I Have Learned in My Life So Far*, ed. Steven Heller, Daniel Nettle, and Nancy Spector (New York: Abrams, 2008). Photograph by author.



Figure 13. William Yang, *Joe*, 1979, ink on gelatin silver photograph, Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia, <https://www.mca.com.au/collection/artworks/1999.2/>

Photography is another visual practice that can be used to explore one's self. William Yang, a photographer who captures issues on cultural and sexual identity, carries his camera everywhere to document social moments with immediacy. Later in his career, he started to reinterpret his photographs autobiographically by inscribing handwritten annotations and reflections on them (fig. 13). By revisiting his archive of snapshots, his photojournalistic approach turns into poetic reminiscences that retell and shed light on his past in a different and more intimate way.⁵²

52. "William Yang," Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, accessed March 21, 2024, <https://www.mca.com.au/collection/artists/william-yang/>.



Figure 14. Journaling prompts, reproduced from Geloy Concepcion, "Things You Wanted to Say but Never Did,". Photograph by author.

Similarly to Yang, Geloy Concepcion, a Filipino-born contemporary photographer and visual artist, documents and reflects on his life as a new migrant in San Francisco. In his introspective book, *I Take Pictures So I Can Remember*, he shows the readers his life from his early days as a photographer to before he migrated to the United States. With a handwritten title and introduction, he makes the book feel like a journal, a visual diary.⁵³ Exploring deeper into self-reflection, his social media photography project and eventual book, *Things You Wanted to Say But Never Did*, turns his photographic journaling outward.⁵⁴ He invites people to submit a note expressing the things they have always wanted to say but never had the courage to. He then digs and looks through his film archive to find a perfect image that will match a submitted note. His project aims to alleviate the feeling of loneliness by connecting people going through similar experiences.

His successful online project later became a published book, including journaling exercises and prompts (see fig. 14) that would help the reader reflect on their life, feelings, and experiences through his printed photographs. In his own way, he is able to share the introspective practice that helped him cope with his struggles migrating to the United States.

53. Geloy Concepcion, *I Take Pictures So I Can Remember* (San Francisco: Clamshell Press, 2021).

54. Geloy Concepcion, "Things You Wanted to Say but Never Did," accessed March 4, 2024, <https://www.geloyconcepcion.com/things-you-wanted-to-say-but-never-did>.

Methodology

It is only fitting for this practice-led research, which aims to develop a more genuine personal identity, to use reflective autoethnography and heuristics as its methodological framework. Autoethnography's defining approach is the reflective narrative analysis of the researcher's experience.⁵⁵ It acknowledges and embraces subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on the subject matter.⁵⁶ This inward approach ties in with this research's aims to prioritise one's self-expression and self-distinction. Applying autoethnography, I recollect my memories and experiences and utilise them as contexts for my making. This method also brings my culture and social relationships to light. "When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity."⁵⁷

55. Peter McIlveen, "Autoethnography as a Method for Reflexive Research and Practice in Vocational Psychology," *Australian Journal of Career Development* 17 (2008), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/103841620801700204>.

56. Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research / Qualitative Sozialforschung* 12, no. 1 (January 2011): 2.

57. Ibid.

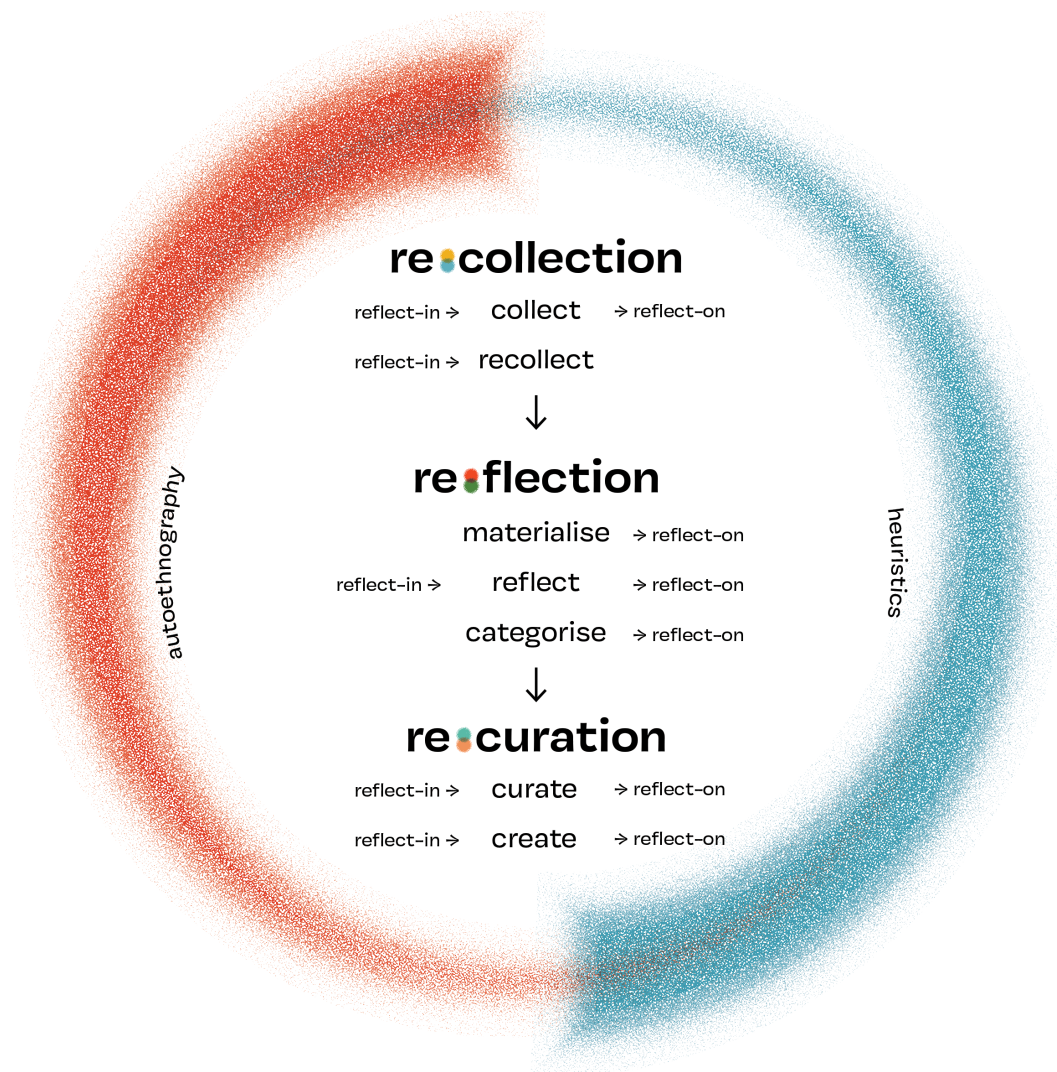


Figure 15. Diagram of research methodology and related methods. Re:collection phase is heavy on the autoethnographic approach. This then feeds my heuristic way of making and designing in the Re:curation phase. The reflective practice encompasses both methodologies. Diagram by author.

To complement autoethnography, heuristics guide my making. This qualitative approach to discovering a solution without a pre-established formula requires me to use my informed subjectivity and tacit knowledge to find answers through self-dialogue, reflection, and insightful decision-making.⁵⁸ This method of discovering oneself requires me to be honest, open, and attuned to all facets of myself, recognising both logic and intuition in the same space of inquiry.⁵⁹ "At the heart of heuristics lies an emphasis on opening the self as a way of facilitating disclosure from others—a response to the tacit dimension within oneself sparks a similar call from others."⁶⁰ Through my tacit knowledge as a designer, my intuitive sense of what is suitable for my extended personal identity provides clear direction.

58. Welby Ings, "Managing Heuristics as a Method of Inquiry in Autobiographical Graphic Design Theses," *International Journal of Art & Design Education* 30, no. 2 (2011): 3-4, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1476-8070.2011.01699.x>.

59. Moustakas, *Heuristic Research*, 3.

60. Bruce G. Douglass and Clark Moustakas, "Heuristic Inquiry: The Internal Search to Know," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 25, no. 3 (1985): 50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167885253004>.

Donald Schön's reflective practice⁶¹ is implemented to further deepen the introspective aspect of autoethnography and heuristics. On one hand, Schön's *reflection-in-action* requires me to reflect actively on what is being created or done. I actively reflect on my own experiences to see if they are appropriate to be part of my extended personal identity. On the other hand, *reflection-on-action* is when I deliberate about the action afterwards. This allows me to consider whether the autoethnographic elements I chose and the designs I create make sense to the research's framing and aims.

The first phase of the research relies heavily on autoethnography. In this stage, most of the reflections are towards my memories and how they are intrinsic to my self-development. Reminiscing about my past experiences is done objectively, with delicate consideration for emotional and social contexts. Pertinent aspects of myself are collected in preparation for the heuristics phase of the research. Through heuristic experimentations and introspection, design decisions are led by my personal intuition coupled with my analytical design experience. This approach is supported by reflecting-in and reflecting-on the entire creative process, ensuring the steps and creations are meaningful to me and resonate well with others.

This constantly repeating cycle of autoethnography and heuristics, all while being guided by a reflective practice (see fig. 15), ensures that I am being critical about this self-exploration.

61. Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

Research and Design Methods

Defining Extended Personal Identity

Kucharska and Mikołajczak describe personal branding as managing one's extended self (see fig. 16).⁶² With this definition, I choose to veer away from the term *personal brand* and instead focus on the *extended self*. Specifically, this research uses the term *extended personal identity* to establish a focus on the extension of one's inner self to others and on the idea that this extended identity is just an aspect of one's complete self.

The extended personal identity, which is not tied to any profit-oriented factors, is more open than the industry definition of a *personal brand*. It is an identity that highlights the overlaps of the inner self with other social groups that share similar values, beliefs, experiences, and tastes.⁶³ Given that it is introspected by and comes from the inner self, the extended personal identity is inherently beneficial for self-expression and self-distinction (see fig. 17).

For this research, my extended identity stretches out my inner self and the personal aspects of my life to my practice as a designer and visual artist, which includes the art and design communities I interact with and am inspired by. It also encompasses significant social groups, such as my family and friends.

62. Kucharska and Mikołajczak, "Personal Branding of Artists and Art-Designers," 251.

63. Ibid.

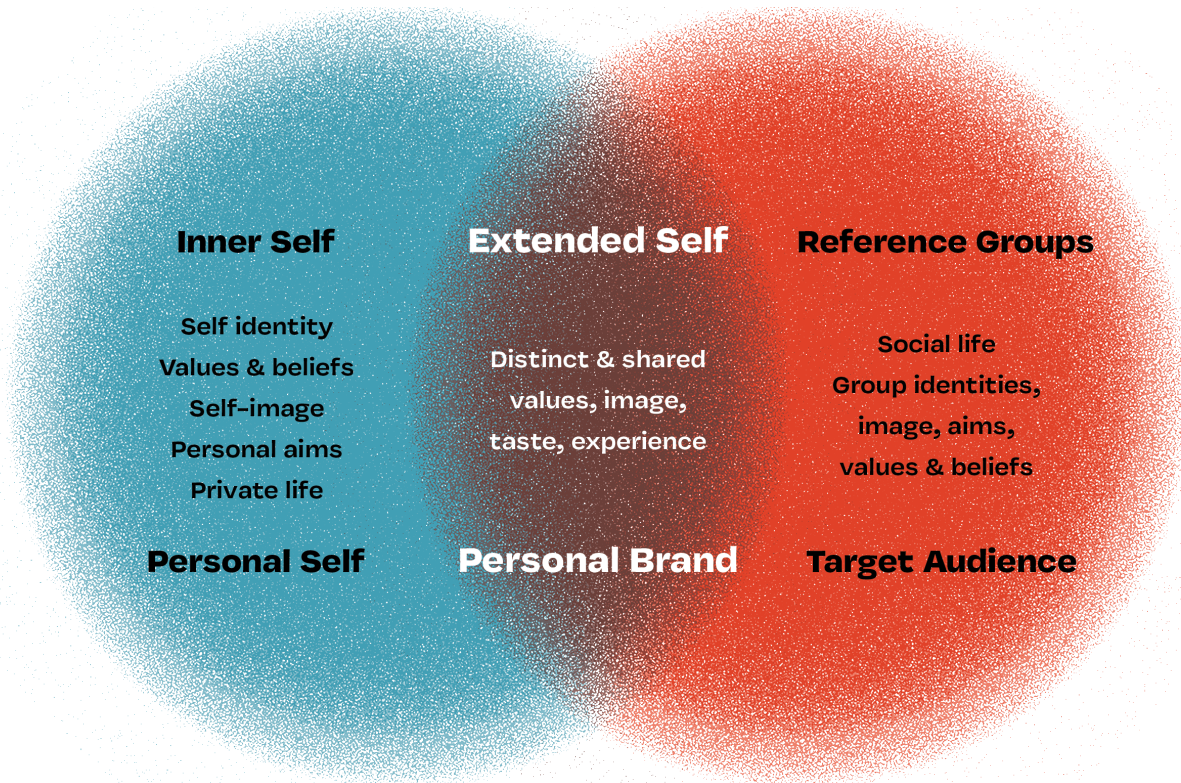


Figure 16. Diagram of Kucharska and Mikołajczak's (2018) description of the extended self. This shows the similarities of the terms extended self and personal brand. Diagram by author.

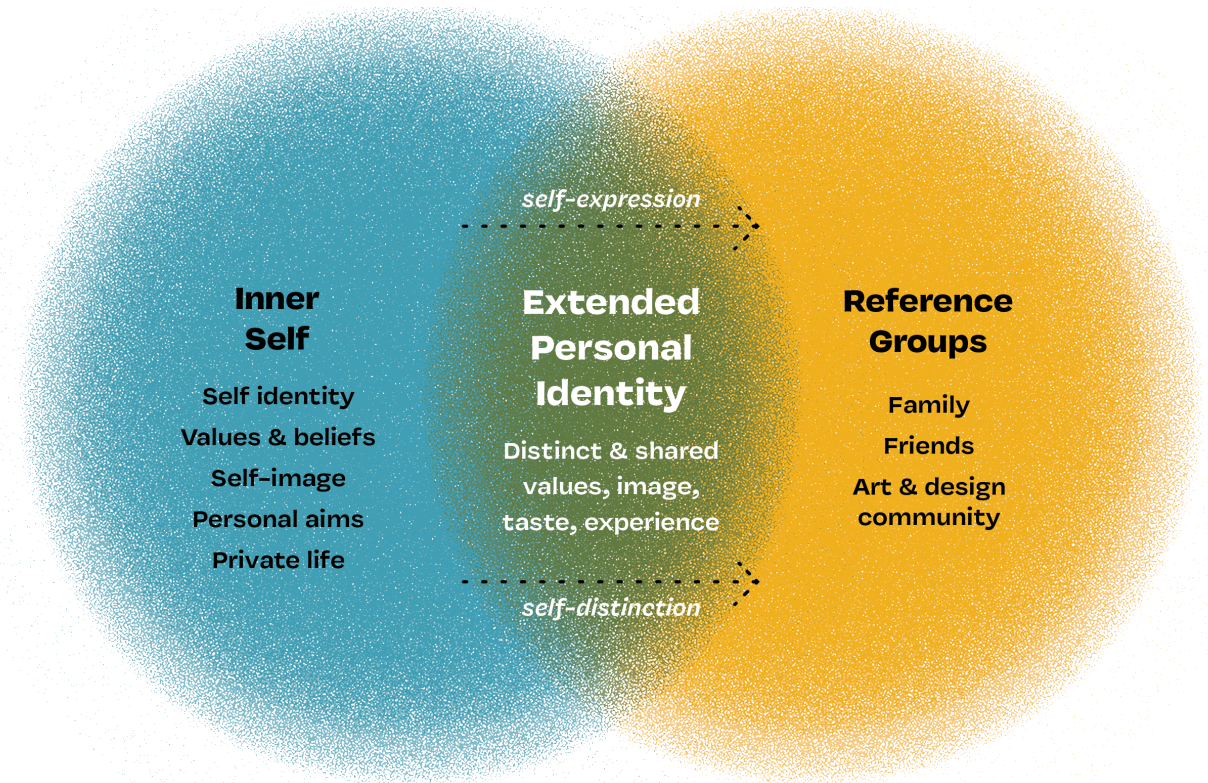
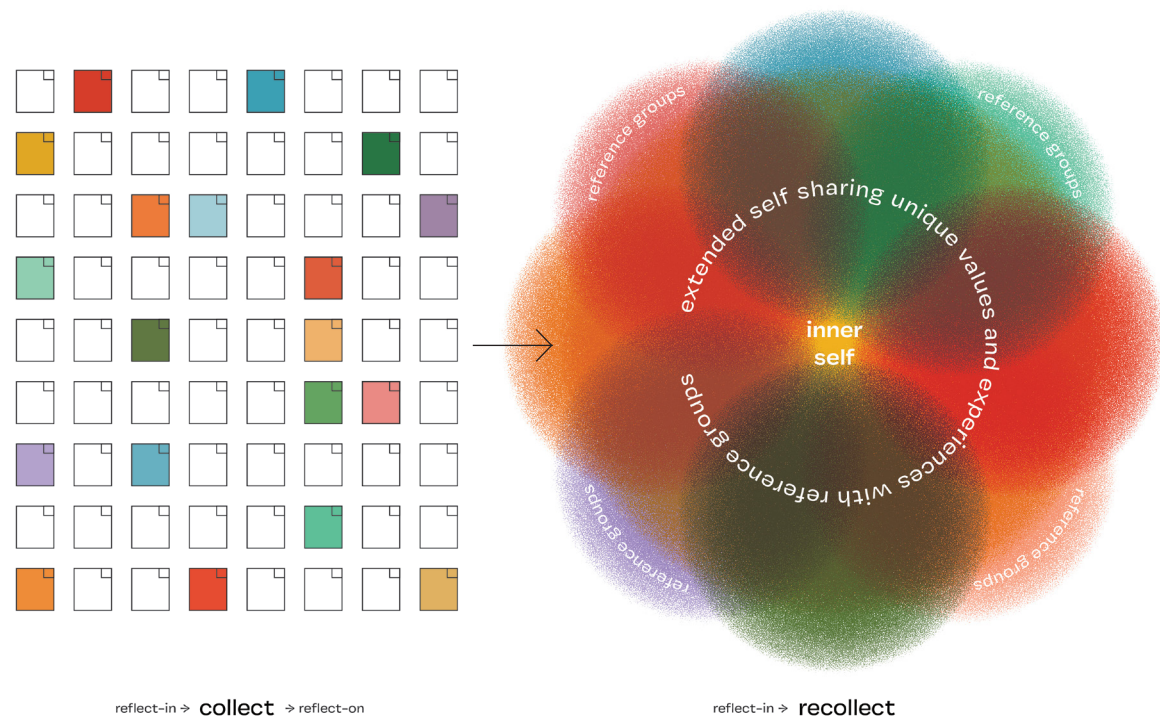


Figure 17. Diagram of this research's extended personal identity. Diagram by author.



Re:collection

This largely autoethnographic phase demonstrates the two definitions of the word *recollection*. Re:collection recalls my past while gathering instances I can deeply connect with (see fig. 18). My extended identity collects these memories and, once they are reflected on, highlights parts of my life that were once taken for granted. As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner expound, these epiphanies, whether life-transforming or mundane, can “reveal ways a person could negotiate *intense situations and effects that linger*—recollections, memories, images, feelings—long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished.”⁶⁴

Figure 18. Diagram of the Re:collection phase. Parts of my extended self are sifted through to choose only the ones I can identify with. Diagram by author.

64. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” 3.

There are several ways to look back into our lives. Belk's definition of the extended self sets the groundwork for my autoethnography, and allows it to be more specific and analytical.

In his updated article, "Extended Self in the Digital World," Belk acknowledges and includes digital possessions, such as, but not limited to, photos, music, videos, maps, cards, and artwork, as parts of our extended self.⁶⁵ Belk notes that these digital and physical possessions serve as cues to form impressions about us; markers for our individual and collective memory.⁶⁶ These memory marker objects prompt reminiscence of our past experiences, connections to other people, and our previous selves.

Establishing that definition, my re:collection makes use of the objects I possess, including personal belongings, digital photos, video, and other media files from 2017 to 2023. The physical possessions covered in my research are mostly the significant things I brought with me when I migrated to New Zealand. The fact that I chose these items to remind me of home and my old self in the Philippines makes them an intrinsic part of my self-extension.⁶⁷

65. Belk, "Extended Self in a Digital World," 478.

66. Ibid.

67. Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self."

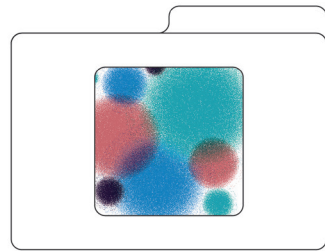
The majority of digital media I use comes from my online photo library in Google Photos which I started using back in 2017. Besides being technologically convenient, this resource is diverse and rich with memories. This includes my smartphone photographs, videos, screenshots, conversations, saved images, and other types of files. These photographs and videos vary significantly in my life, from mundane daily activities to momentous milestones. The collection shows how I captured my daily life through the years.

Given the large pool of digital material, I only collect the ones I can truly identify with. These two questions help me quickly distinguish meaningful memories:

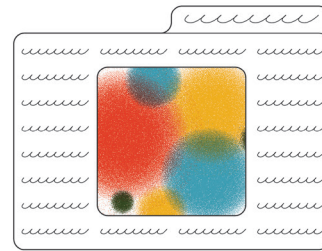
Can I identify myself in this image?

Are there any tangible elements or certain core memories in this image that I can identify with?

Memory Cards

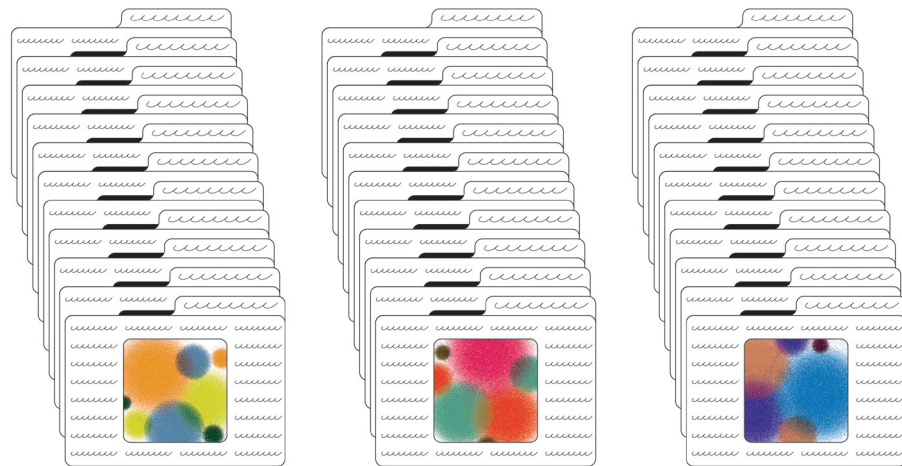


materialise → reflect-on



reflect-in → **reflect** → reflect-on

Memory Card Library



categorise → reflect-on

Re:reflection

Though considered a part of the extended self, digital possessions are not regarded as valuable as physical mementos.⁶⁸ Having them in the virtual space removes the tactile connection for these keepsakes. Our essence cannot be embedded in these files. The replicability of virtual possessions makes it difficult to regard them as perfect and one-of-a-kind. When stored online, there is also the uncertainty of control and ownership of these digital items. Belk states, "Such assessments suggest that, while digital possessions can be objects of self-extension, they may not be as effective as material possessions. They may also operate within a different realm."⁶⁹

Investing prolonged amounts of time to carefully archive, store, and curate digital media can ritually transform them into meaningful possessions.⁷⁰ This curatorial ritual practice can then be pushed further by producing the images in a physical printed format.

68. Belk, "Extended Self in a Digital World," 481.

69. Ibid.

70. Janice Denegri-Knott, Rebecca Mardon, and Joseph Wood, "Transforming Digital Virtual Goods into Meaningful Possessions," in *Digital Virtual Consumption* ed. Mike Molesworth and Janice Denegri Knott (New York: Routledge, 2012), 76-91, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203114834>; Belk, "Extended Self in a Digital World."

Figure 19. Diagram of the re:reflection phase. Diagram by author.

Collecting the images from the digital archive allows me to reflect on their significance on the surface level, but printing them out and keeping them safe evokes another deep sense of introspection. The chosen printouts are inserted in a holder, similar to the way museums archive and catalogue their collection (see fig. 19). Making a selected memory tangible adds another layer to its value. Keeping it safe, organised, and catalogued provides a deeper understanding of myself. The printed memory neatly kept in the holder is what I call a *memory card*, a collection of them is my *Memory Card Library*. This personal collection of cards is the outcome and a recoding of my introspective cataloguing methods.

“The possessions in our extended self also give us a personal archive or museum that allows us to reflect on our histories and how we have changed.”⁷¹

To deepen my reflections on my memory cards, I examine them from two perspectives—through my personal self and myself as a designer. As my personal self, I reflect on these photographs and objects as an experience. The following are the questions I ask myself.

Who was I with? What was happening in this photo?

Where and when was this captured?

Is this a core memory that turned my life around?

What lessons did I learn from this experience?

71. Belk, “Possessions and the Extended Self.”

This set of questions guide a deeper introspection into the photograph compared to the re:collection phase. Here, I relive each card and scrutinise the memory to the best of my ability. The trivial questions of who, when, where, what, and how turn into a series of *whys*. The emotions and profound feelings entangled with the moment of recording start to emerge.

Why am I feeling this emotion as I remember?

Why and how did I get to that situation?

Why is this important to me?

Why did I capture this moment?

Inquiries under this perspective provide me with a more transparent personal narrative.⁷² They paint a picture of who I am and how I am evolving. Reflections from this perspective put forward insights into my life story, core values, beliefs, and personality traits.

72. McAdams and McLean, “Narrative Identity.”

The other perspective for my reflection comes from my position as a designer and researcher. I think about the visual and tangible aspects of the image. The memory cards reflect how I capture the moments of my life. They literally show how I see the world through my own lens. The following are some of the questions that help me visually analyse the picture.

What am I wearing?

What colours or patterns are apparent?

How did I compose the shot?

Is there any typography?

Am I capturing the concept or the aesthetics?

With these observations, I recognise my biases, tendencies, and tastes. They slowly reveal my visual language as I go through each photo.

It is important to note that all the reflections are handwritten on each memory card holder. Writing the contemplations does not need to be journal or diary-like. Jotting only the most important words from my stream of consciousness makes my thoughts wander deeper, as my handwriting does not need to catch up with my flowing thoughts.



Figure 20. Diagram of Re:curation phase. Selected memory cards are further reflected and studied. Diagram by author.

Re:curation

Instead of finding inspiration from other sources, my personal library of memories provides an introspected view of the outside through my social interactions and experiences. The archive lays out personal preferences in a well-ordered manner. Using the keywords and tags, a set of carefully curated memory cards can shed more light on my authentic self.

The memory card library provides a systematic means for this self-audit. Whether I'm following a specific workshop, such as Millman's *Reinventing You*,⁷³ or modifying existing identity design methods, such as Alina Wheeler's *Designing Brand Identity*,⁷⁴ by using my memory card library as the primary resource, the outcome will be more self-expressive and genuine.

As a part of my extended identity, for this research I highlight my values and beliefs by referring to my library. By picking out memory cards tagged with *values*, they can show certain virtues and principles I live by. Studying the set of cards provides me insights into my own self, showing patterns, similarities, and differences (see fig. 20).

The curated collection allows me to materialise an aspect of my extended identity and, in my own way, create a recording and capture this introspective practice through photography and visual journaling. At the same time, this exercise opens me for others to connect with.

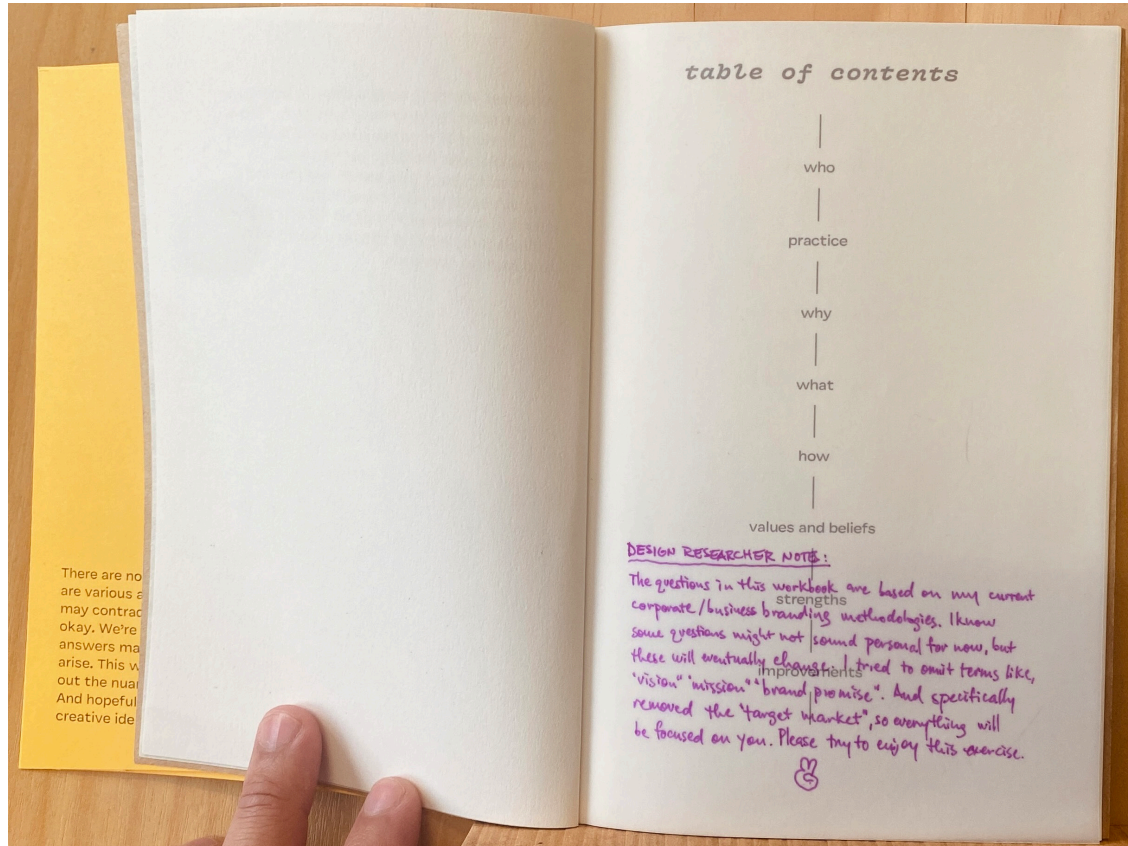
73. Millman, "Reinventing You with Debbie Millman."

74. Wheeler and Millman, *Designing Brand Identity*.

Discussion of Practice with Critical Commentary



Figure 21. Creative Identity Workbook. First prototype for exploring ways to create a more genuine personal brand. Photograph by author.



To start off my research, I immediately tried to solve the personal brand paradox by leaning into my intuition as a designer. I worked with the familiar first, to create an identity toolkit (see fig. 21) based on Alina Wheeler’s process,⁷⁵ similar to the toolkits I use for client work. This is a good starting point because it covers all the crucial aspects of developing a commercial identity. Making the toolkit more personal is the objective.

Interestingly, I notice two aspects of myself here—the design researcher asking questions and my personal self answering. Each one has its own level of reflection, as well. For the design researcher, the challenge is to make the toolkit more sincere. For my personal self, the difficulty is unpacking and dissecting my identity. The questioning, answering, and reflecting creates a feedback loop that improves the process.⁷⁶

The first adjustment for the toolkit, to make it more personal, was to remove the corporate-sounding terms like *vision*, *mission*, and *brand promise* (see fig. 22). Instead, I turned these statements into direct questions. I also purposefully omitted sections regarding target markets, as I wanted to focus only on myself.

Figure 22. Table of contents for the Creative Identity Workbook including design researcher’s notes for the reader. Photograph by author.

75. Wheeler and Millman, *Designing Brand Identity*.

76. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner*.

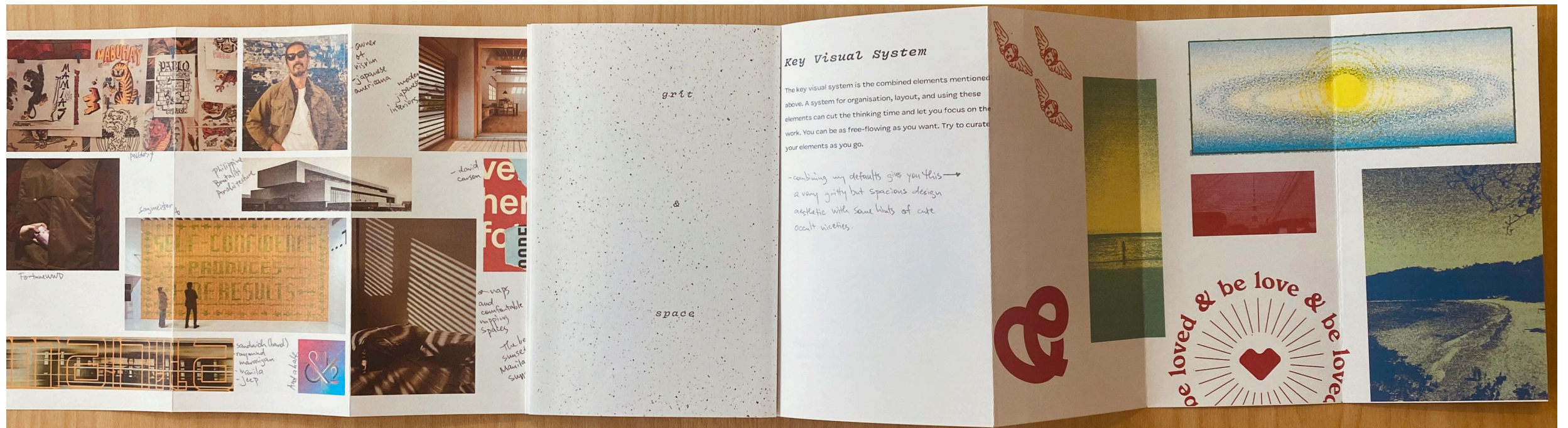


Figure 23. Inspiration, Key Visual Systems, and Portfolio sections for the Creative Identity Workbook. Photograph by author.



Figure 24. Design Practice and Why? Section of Creative Identity Workbook. Each project I worked on is somehow connected or inspired my social interactions. Photograph by author.

Honestly, these questions hadn't crossed my mind until I began addressing them. Unfolding and unpacking details about myself was arduous because I carefully considered every aspect. Additionally, what made this worrisome was the act of writing down the answers and the feeling of finality it created. My responses have a level of certainty at the moment of recording, but, as a person, I am constantly growing and evolving. What I feel is the fear of locking myself in a particular cage I create.

"Humans, on the other hand, are complicated and messy and inconsistent."⁷⁷

Going through my toolkit made me realise the complexities of my identity. They seem messy and all over the place, but by collecting all these things about me, I could see how my present self came to be (see fig. 23).

This exercise led me to a symbolic interactionist perspective of the self.⁷⁸ I saw that all my answers were somehow connected to my social interactions—milestones and houses I share with my family, experiences and objects I share with my friends, and spaces and culture I share with my community (see fig. 24).

77. Millman, "The Personal Brand Paradox."

78. Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*.



Figure 25. Inside spreads of *Discovering the Self*. Each spread has a reversed page orientation, comparing the similarities between New Zealand and the Philippines. Photographs by author.



Figure 26. Reversed cover sleeves of *Discovering the Self*. Photographs by author.

This initial test conveyed insights into how I could proceed with the research. Firstly, following a branding framework does not make the process feel personal. My reflections are limited to the rigid structure of the branding process. Secondly, photographs can unpack many aspects of ourselves. Although not always straightforward, they carry memories that lead to parts of ourselves we take for granted or have long forgotten.

After the first experiment, I focused on an aspect I was unfamiliar with. Using my phone’s photo library, it seemed only fitting to look into my life in the Philippines, as I start a new one here in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Looking through the captured moments, I saw similarities between the two places (see fig. 25). I soon realised that it is not that the two countries look and feel the same. Instead, the resemblance is a by-product of my photography. I capture what I want and love—silhouettes, nature, architecture, specific colours and patterns, my tendencies.

I placed these memories in a book with different and reversed cover sleeves: red sleeve for the Philippines and blue for Aotearoa (see fig. 26). The book flows the same way as the starting cover, making the inside spreads display images in reverse. The window on the cover shows my *beloved* logo. The publication is bound by a yellow thread, making a red, blue, yellow, and white combination alluding to the Philippine flag.

Working against my design tendencies, it was my first time creating a layout by hand. My handcrafting demonstrates how I put myself into the work. As the collages were layered and took shape, memories flooded back to me. My experiences were recreated piece by piece on every page. Doing the cutting by hand made the photo editing experience more intimate and up close. Collage-making literally made me take out and keep aspects of myself (see fig. 27).

My reflections were handwritten on each page to supplement the collage work: black ink for reflections, red ink for observations. It is a dialogue between me, the designer, and my personal self. The reflections help me see through myself and my experiences, while the observations show me my visual inclinations and biases.

Writing my reflections on every page is a free-flowing, stream-of-consciousness process. It helps me become more particular and observant about the details of the photo—considering not just the visual details, but the context of the photograph. The layout of the handwriting depends on the image or collage composition (see fig. 28). I notice that keywords, visual elements, and adjectives keep on repeating. I start to see some semblance of patterns of myself surface.

Unlike the first toolkit, this booklet does not have an explanation or context about the content. The ambiguity, combined with the collage work and handwritten reflections, makes the booklet look more personal, somewhere in between a personal journal, a designer’s workbook, or a zine.



Figure 27. City spread of Discovering the Self. Collaged cities of Metro Manila and Auckland City. Photographs by author.



Figure 28. Sea composition spread of Discovering the Self. Reflections are handwritten around the photo framing each composition, while visual observations in red frame the spread. Photograph by author.



Figure 29. Original beloved logo screen printed on canvas. Photograph by author.

Interestingly, this deeply personal work resonated well with others. The book was recognised as a Finalist for The Designers Institute of New Zealand's 2023 Best Awards, while a zine copy of the original sold well at the 2023 Auckland Zinefest. I think the honesty, unpretentious handcrafting, and going against the grain of commercial design methods earned this positive outcome.

While exploring the potential of photographs for curating aspects of myself, I also investigated a logo's function for representing an identity. I do have one for my personal projects, which I have been using since 2017. The *beloved* logo (see fig. 29) is a short form of my social media handle, *johnthebeloved*. The name itself was one of my first attempts to differentiate my extremely common name, John Tan. Although I have a unique childhood nickname, *Bitay*,⁷⁹ my mother disapproved of its negative meaning. She emphasised that names are sacred and reflect who you are as a person. At that moment, I used *johnthebeloved* as a way to respect my parents and, at the same time, remind myself to be a kind and loving person.

79. *Bitay* in Filipino means execution by hanging (capital punishment).

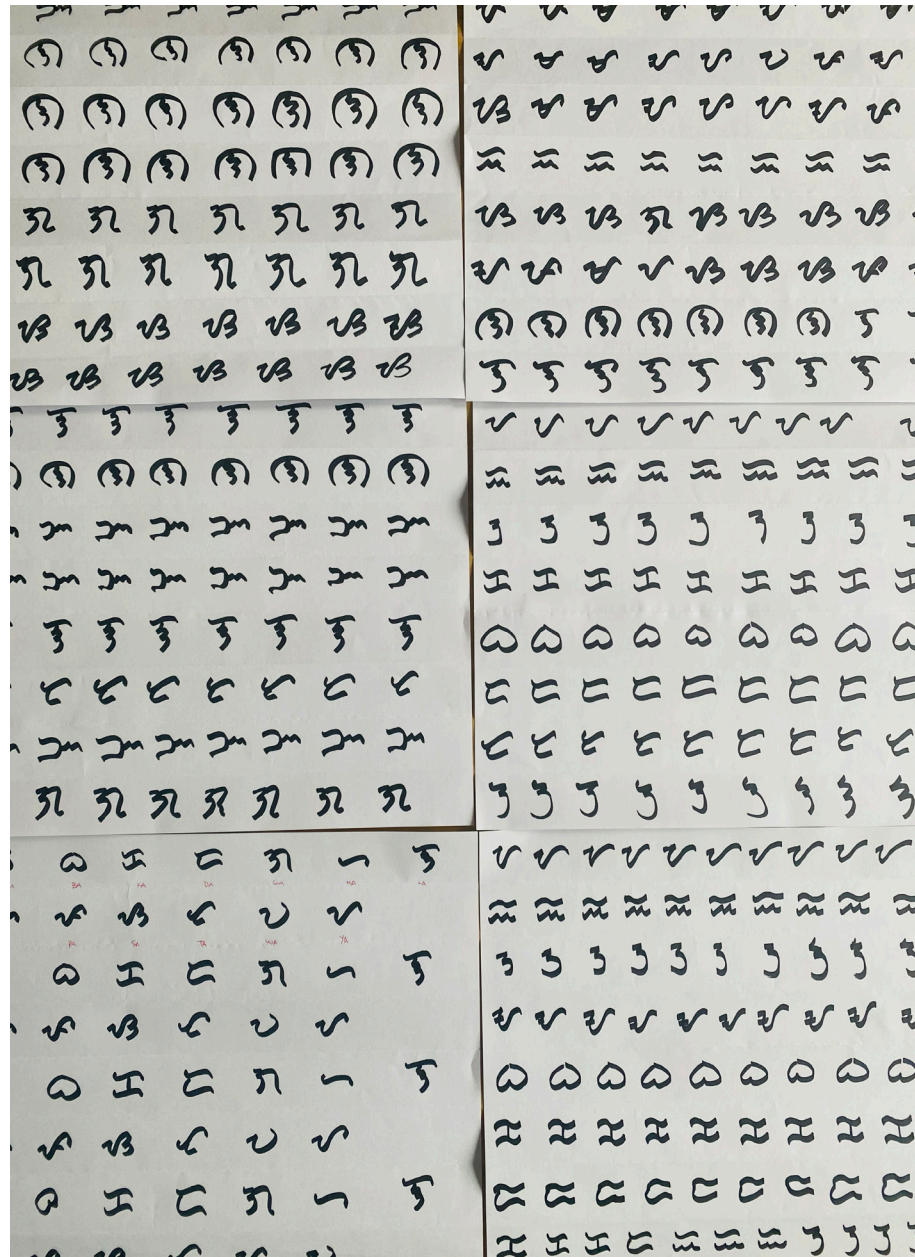


Figure 30. Beloved logo experiments—linocut, debossing using laser cut template. Photographs by author.

Using my existing *beloved* logo, I tried different ways to reinterpret the mark. I rekindled my childhood memories of helping in my grandfather’s print shop, through screen printing. I tried embossing, debossing, and linocut techniques to produce my logo. These printing techniques are special within commercial design and are usually reserved to show perfection and luxury (see fig. 30 and fig. 31). My takeaway from my beginner experiments was the opposite; the more inconsistent the output is, the more I feel closer to the print. The mistakes of these analogue processes make the logo more personal to me. Each unique quirk somehow represents a characteristic of me.



Figure 31. Small card holder notebooks with debossed beloved logo. Photograph by author.



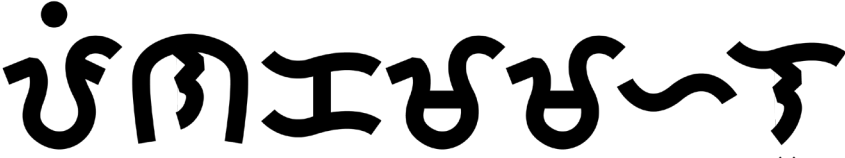

 PINAKAMAMAHAL



Figure 32. Baybayin writing practice. Photograph by author.

Figure 33. Beloved translated to Filipino as 'pinakamamahal,' (directly translates as 'most loved'). Images by author.

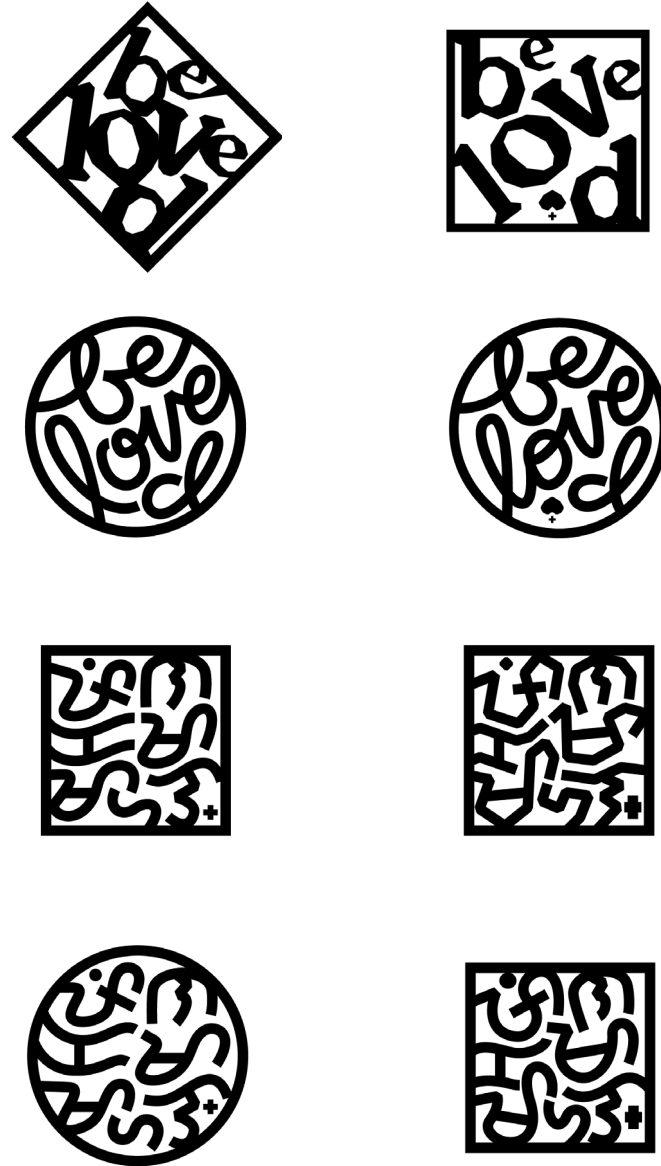


Figure 34. Multiple logo studies of the Beloved logo. Images by author.

With these new insights, I wanted to check if I could draw more from my culture. I reworked the logo and explored different shapes and typefaces. Going back to my roots, I tried to translate the word *beloved* to Filipino, *pinakamamahal* (see fig. 33). I learned how to write in *Baybayin*, the almost-lost Filipino writing system⁸⁰ (see fig. 32). Using the new glyphs, I kept the shape container format as an homage to my Chinese heritage of red signature stamps (see fig. 34).

This exercise helps me rethink my complex Filipino-Chinese heritage and the functions of logos. Firstly, *Baybayin* was not part of my upbringing until this moment. Without proper knowledge and guidance, using it only now seems disingenuous. Secondly, I choose *beloved* because of its familiarity. The word *love* is nearly universal. My complex cultural background should not overshadow how people can easily connect with me.

Lastly, logos are not the be-all and end-all for identities, whether used for commercial or personal brands. A single logo can never encapsulate the entirety of an individual or company. It is a good marker and a symbol to represent someone or something, but most identity-building is done outside the logo. The logo only serves as the carrier of those experiences and perceptions.⁸¹

80. Corpuz, *The Roots of the Filipino Nation*, 27.

81. Royce Yuen, *Decoding Branding: A Complete Guide to Building and Revamping Brands in the Age of Disruption* (Milton: Taylor & Francis, 2021), 169, ProQuest Ebook Central.

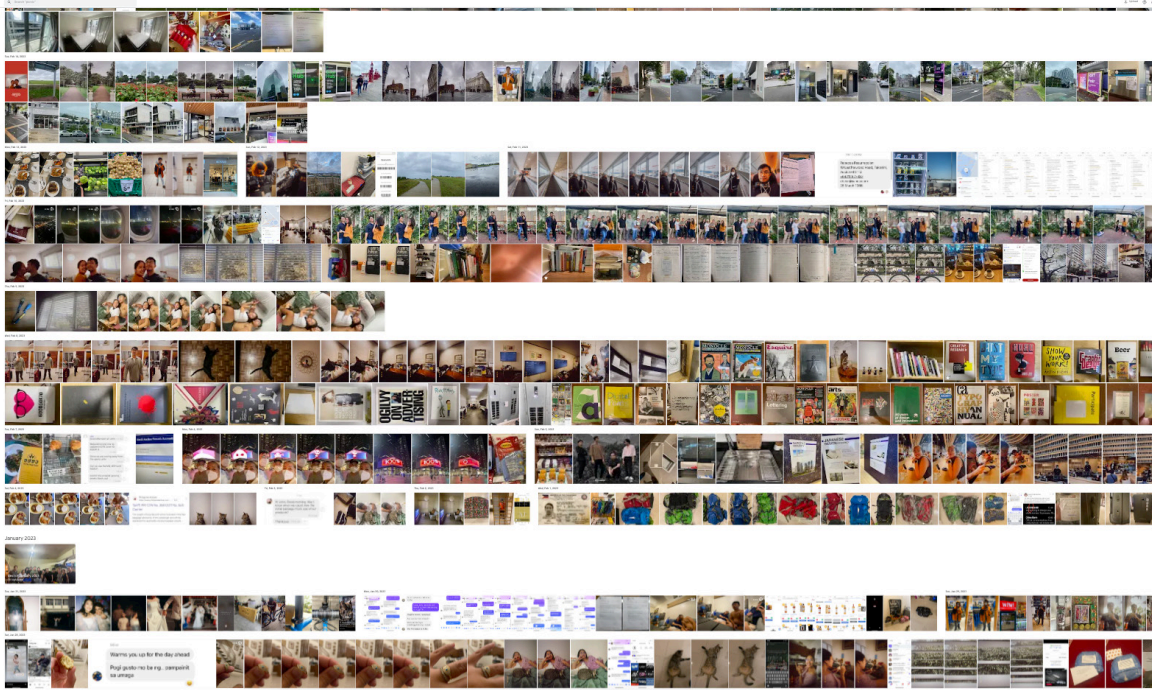


Figure 35. Zoomed out screenshot of a portion of my Google Photos library, 2023.

After the previously discussed tests, photographs become an intrinsic part of my reflection process. Using my digital photo library in my Google account, I scrolled through my everyday life since 2017 (see fig. 35). Going through 34 gigabytes of media meant I needed to sift through a lot of assorted and unfiltered recordings of my life. From milestones, to events, to random mundane captures, there was always an image that could, more or less, represent my day.

Google's photo library provides technological features (facial, location, and object recognition) for cataloguing and keeping memories. The digital assistance is helpful for categorisation but does not replicate the feeling of reminiscing. Looking through my timeline row by row, photo by photo, allows me to remember my past memories and emotions profoundly. In this tedious process, I feel nostalgia, but not in the sense of longing. Instead, I feel a warm rekindling of what has gone by. I am simply happy and contented to be able to review the series of events, situations, and mundanity that led me to where I am now.

Going through tens of thousands of photographs and videos, my first selection criteria answered the following questions:

- Can I identify myself in this image?*
- Are there any tangible elements or certain core memories in this image that I can identify with?*

These two questions may seem simple, but they were reliable primary filters for my selection process. As I slowly went through the collection, I understood the question more precisely and picked photos more confidently. My intuition about my identity allowed me to choose photos with more certainty, as I went through this exercise.

There were about 2,400 photos in my initial selection. I used Adobe Lightroom to help organise and print the images out. With Lightroom's Library feature, I chose specific photos to be printed for presentation (see fig. 36). Not being printed did not demote or exclude items from my memory card library. It was economical to prioritise and print only the cards to be used for the re:curation phase. This consideration led me to acknowledge that printed memory cards hold more value and meaning.

Another advantage of using Lightroom to organise the collection was the keywording feature. With this, I tested out keywords and tags to be used later on in the re:reflection phase. At the macro level, I can already observe patterns of my personality and visual tendencies. Some of my initial takeaways are as follows:

I like to take photos of nature and the sublime.

I try to capture compelling design wherever and whenever I can.

I don't hesitate to capture, and probably will never get tired of capturing, sunsets and sunrises or simply a beautiful sky in general.

I love to record textures, especially grit and noise.

I like to take selfies from random reflective and textured surfaces I find in the street.

Using this initial selection of photographs, I implemented different printing techniques to make these memories tangible. I tested various designs to include my reflections in the photographs as well.

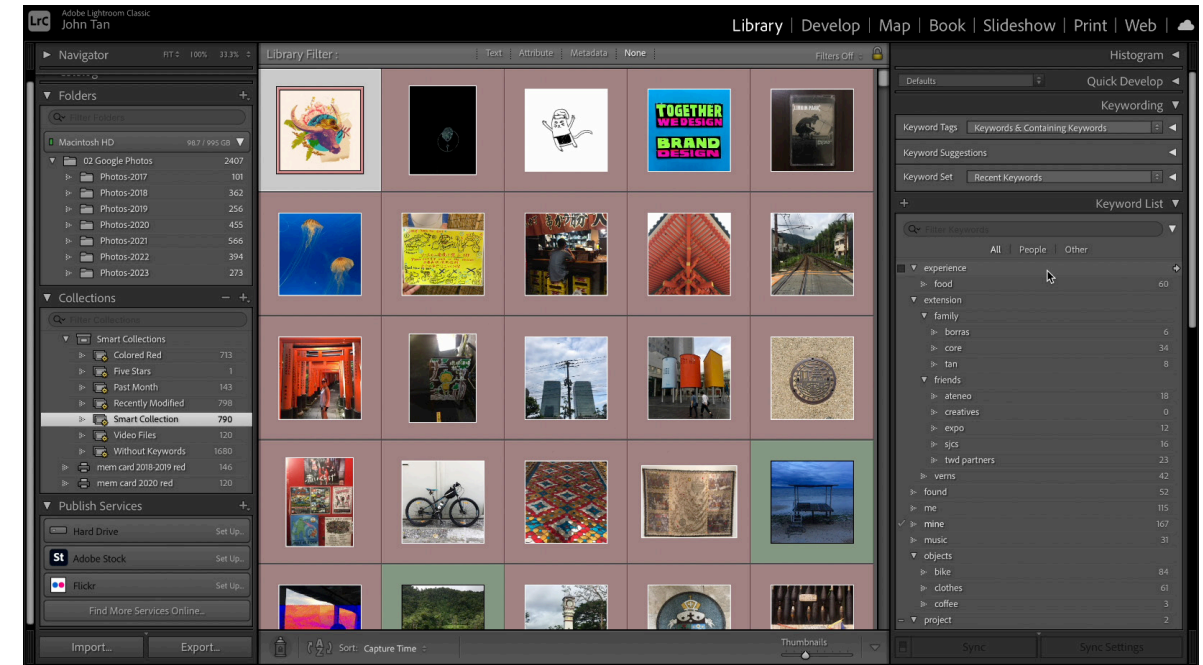


Figure 36. Screenshot of selected photos organised and categorised in Adobe Lightroom Library, 2023.



Figure 37. Single Screen Memories experimenting on gradient skies as background for the postcards. Images by author.



Sifting through my memories digitally, I noticed a lack of depth and attachment to the process. The convenience removes the time for reflection and the tactile connection with photographed memories. Unlike my handwritten musings (see fig. 28), Lightroom keywords are not reflections that can be embedded into the image.

This missing connection caused me to push the photographs' materiality and see if an image's impact would change if it was reproduced, not in the exact way it was captured. Returning to screen printing, I started *Single Screen Memories*. Screen printing photos into postcards, the constraint was to only use one screen. This means other colours depend on the paper stock and background colour. I tried to manually mix colours to pull a gradient of the sky as a background (see fig. 37).

Screen printing allows the freedom to edit and change the image's meaning in a potentially uncontrolled manner. Each pull of the squeegee gives a slightly different colour, resulting in a slightly different feeling and possibly evoking unexpected memories linked to the original (see fig. 38).

Figure 38. Single photo printed in different colours. Images by author.



To gain more control over the outcomes of my printing experiments, I learned to develop and print my film photographs. I came here to Aotearoa carrying an old Nikon AF LF35 film camera. I take photographs whenever I can, carefully choosing which shots to take. The numerous limitations of an old film camera restrict me from capturing every candid moment. Lighting, weather, number of shots, battery life, distance, and the cost of developing and printing are just some of the details I need to consider before even taking out the camera.

Shooting photos in black and white, I learnt the intricate science and fragility of film processing. Developing and printing the exact image can be done through a series of careful processes, but a tiny uncontrolled light can change the results dramatically and lose its accuracy (see fig. 39).

Figure 39. Developing and printing my own black and white film rolls.
Photographs by author.

Photos in monochrome evoke a distinct feeling and show a unique perspective about the subject. Instead of figuring out the real-life colours, my mind goes into the aspects of the image that are not even in the frame. The lack of colour provides more room for our minds to wander. The film grain reduces the sterility of the

photograph and provides another layer of dimension and texture to the picture. This layer of subtle noise makes the image look more like a distant memory rather than a clean and exact representation of what happened (see fig. 40).



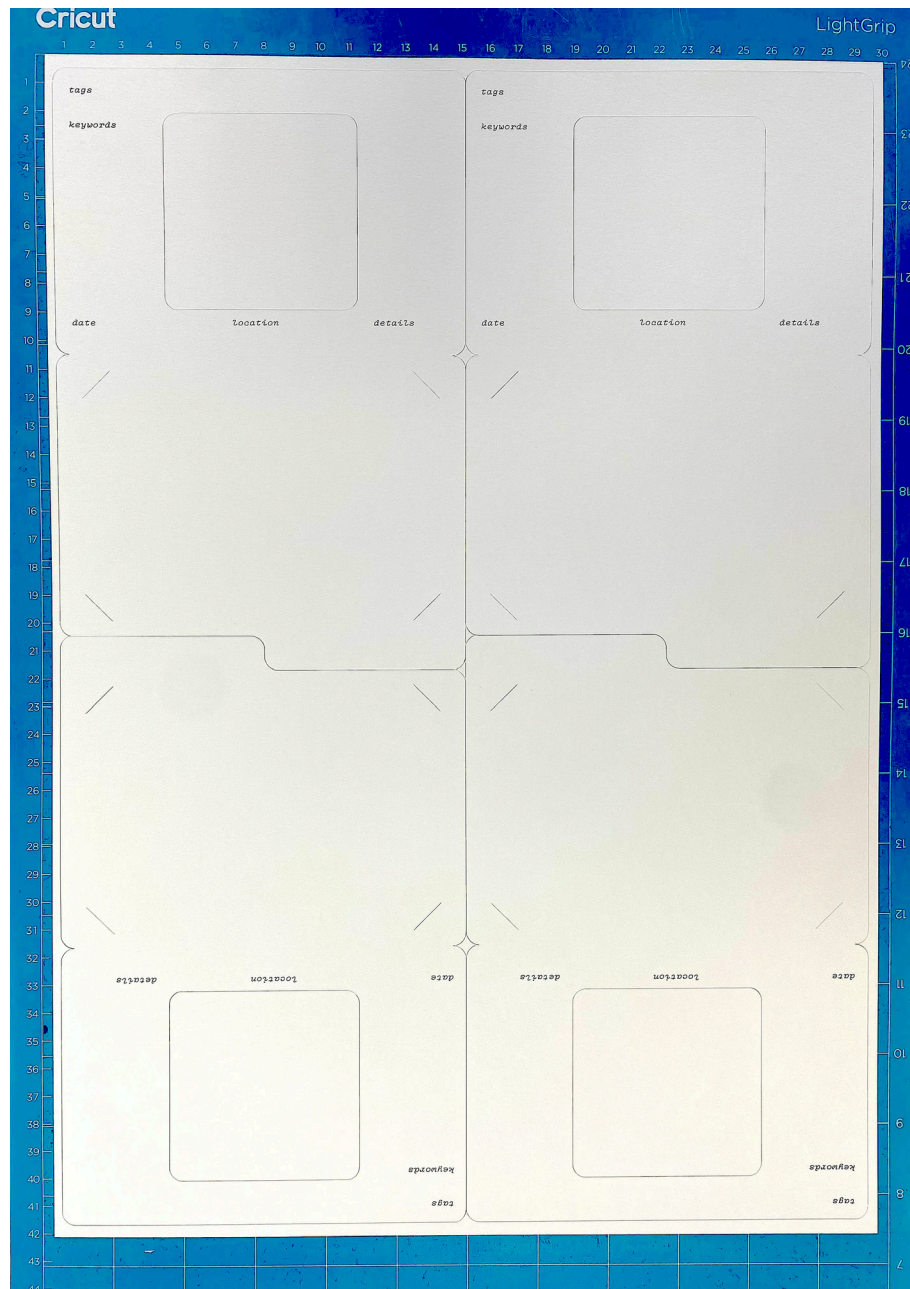
Figure 40. Drying a printed black and white photograph. Photograph by author.



After several tests of the holder layout, the horizontal format proved to be the most efficient. Collecting, reading, and using the cards was more intuitive this way. Like using a library card catalogue, the eyes and fingers can sift through the cards, reading the title while peering at the photo.

A window is cut at the centre of the holder to show the inserted photo (fig. 42). This will accommodate most photographs regardless of their format: square, landscape, or portrait. Outside, the holder has labels for what to write and reflect on—title, tags, keywords, date, location, and details. The labels come from learning about my previous reflective writings. These are the recurring subjects or categories of information I usually record. It is worth noting that these tags and keywords may vary according to the person writing the reflections. Similar to library card indexes, the prompts are printed on the holder to keep the documentation consistent across the whole library and, at the same time, become a guide for when others adapt or read my record keeping.

Figure 42. Prototype of the memory card holder. Photographs by author.



The cards are purposefully designed to be economical and produce minimal waste (see fig. 43). With 4 holders in an A3 card stock, the folded size of the card is almost the same as an index card (76.2mm x 127mm). The insert slits can also carry the standard 3R photo size (89mm x 127mm), used for old film prints. Given the standard size, existing catalogue drawers or index card boxes can be utilised to keep the memory card library.

Figure 43. Cricut dieline for the memory card holder. Photograph by author.

Handwriting my reflections into the memory card holder was the most tedious and personal phase of the process (see fig. 44). As my personal self, I reflected on each photo to reminisce and relive the moments. At a surface level, the recollection was informational. It answered the Who? What? Where? When? questions. As I introspected deeper, the How? and Why? questions arose. This made me ponder about the photograph while thoughts and other memories began to branch out.

- How did I end up here?*
- How was this possible?*
- How was I able to create it?*
- Why did I take this photo?*
- Why did this happen?*
- Why did this photo bring up certain emotions?*

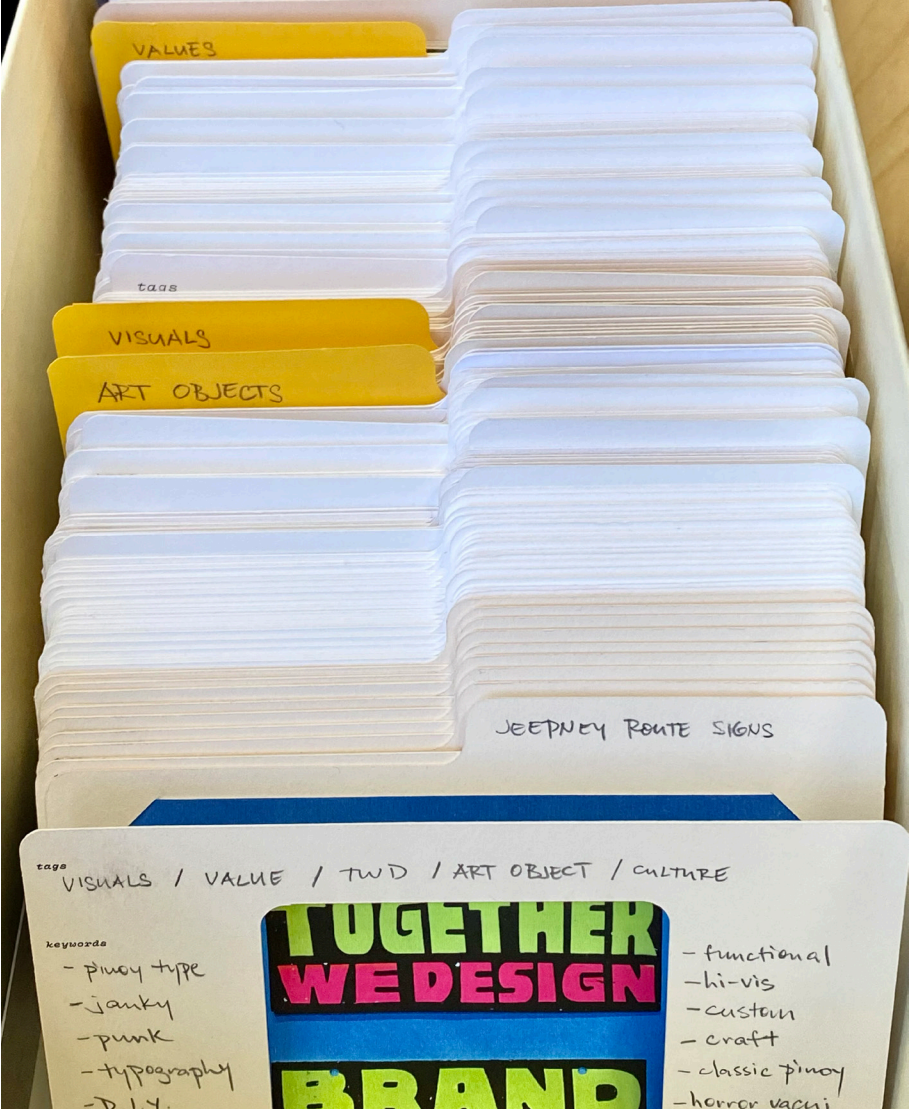


Figure 44. Collection of memory cards while testing a tag system. Photograph by author.



Figure 45. Memory cards are kept in a vintage index card drawer. Photograph by author.

As a designer and researcher, I reflect on particular aspects or visual elements of the photo I can identify with. I observe and think about *composition, subject, colours, typography, imagery, texture, patterns, style, values and beliefs, and personality*. My background and experience in branding allow me to use my tacit knowledge and pinpoint such aspects of myself intuitively.

All my reflections are written as words, or short phrases at the most, to record my free-flowing introspection. This method also allows me to categorise and organise the memory cards in various ways. For some photos that I feel need extra reflective writing, the inside and back parts of the memory card holder have enough space.

Currently, my library contains 250 memory cards. Each card is kept safely in a drawer for future reference and reflection (see fig. 45).

The memory card library is a catalogue of various aspects and parts of myself. I use my memory cards to highlight particular facets of my extended personal identity. This library can be used as a resource for this research, as I investigate and focus on my identity's values and beliefs. These are the things and principles I believe in, childhood lessons from my parents, learnings from my mistakes, or sayings I live by.

Working with my memory cards is like a ritual.⁸⁵ It takes a proper mindset and a good setting to reflect deeply and think about myself. With the library drawer by my side, a memory card mat is set on the table as a reflection area (see fig. 46). Sifting through my collection, I search for cards tagged with *values*. In case the card has not yet been reflected upon, I ask the following questions as I review the collection:

Does this image bring me memories of learning?

What value or virtue did I learn from this experience?

Is there a saying that struck me from this memory?

What words or phrases I live by were conjured up from this image?

Selected and reflected upon cards are neatly placed on the card mat. The chosen cards are carefully observed, introspected, and analysed. The following questions are asked to identify any patterns, connections, and differences.

What are my values and beliefs?

What patterns do I see?

Is there a theme?

Can I consolidate some ideas?

Is there something that I want to highlight?

Do I hide anything?

Is there something that stands out?

The cards are rearranged according to their links and relationships. Notes and reflections are written in a notebook for future reference. The exercise brings to the surface and captures my most significant values and beliefs.

85. . Denegri-Knott, Mardon, and Wood, "Transforming Digital Virtual Goods."



Figure 46. Sample setup for the Re:curation phase. Photograph by author.

Part of the re:curation phase is the documentation of this practice. Using a photo of the laid-out cards, further annotations can be added either digitally or manually (see fig. 47). A snapshot of this re:curation exercise is then inserted into the re:cordings notebook (see fig. 48). The notebook being in the same format as the memory cards allows this set of cards to be re:curated back into the library. Reorganising the cards this way allows for future introspection into the topic, and potentially be a reference for future projects (see fig. 49).



Figure 47. Curated memory cards laid on a card mat for further reflection and observation. Photograph by author



Figure 48. Re:cordings notebook can be used to record reflections and re:creation practices.

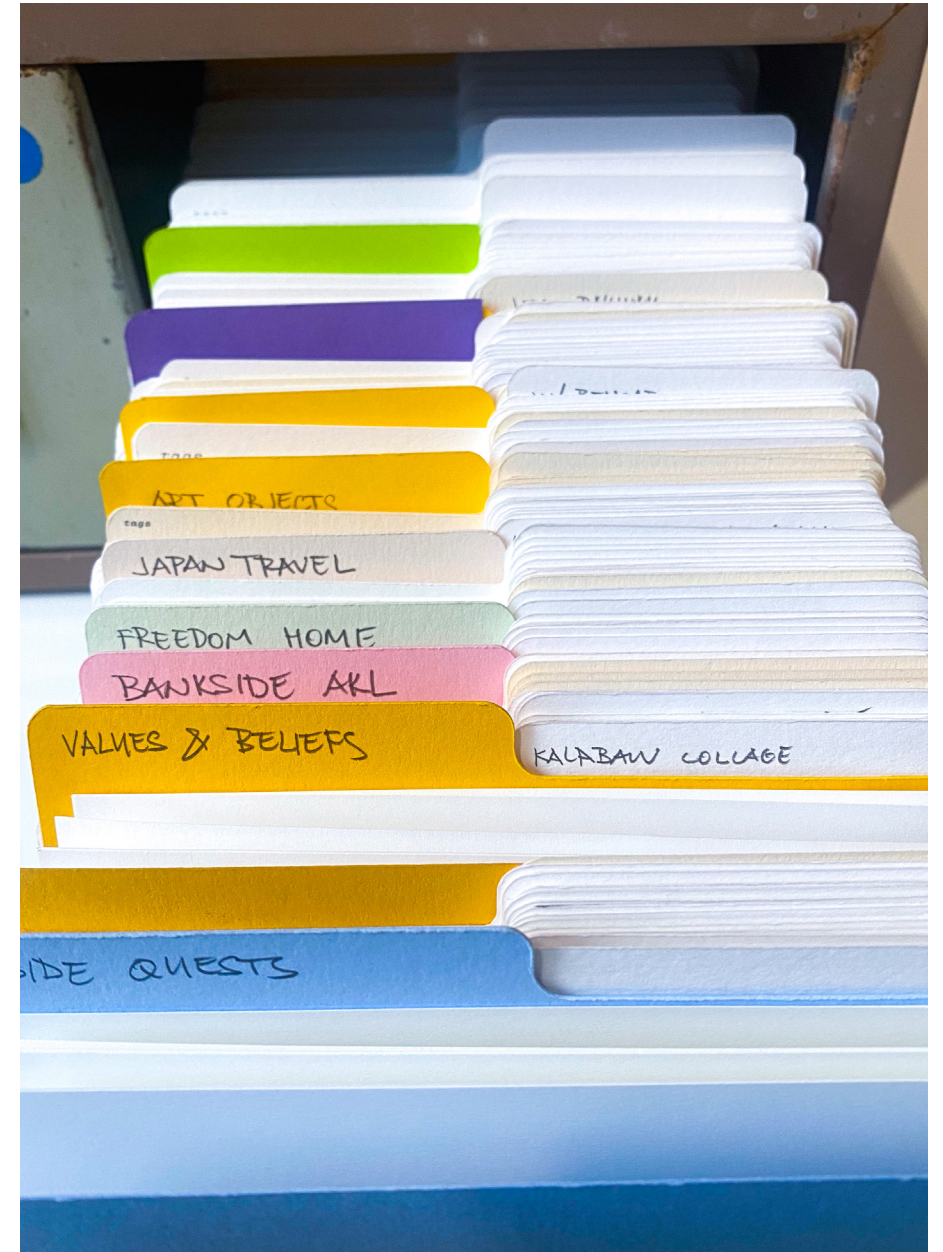


Figure 49. Re:cordings notebook can be used to organise and re:curate cards in the memory card library.

To document the methods of this exercise I designed a simple guide on how to create and use the memory card library (see fig. 50). This can then be shared as a handbook for others to try my reflective exercise.

As I prepare for the exhibition, both the memory card design and my methods of re:collection, re:flection, and re:curation are refined. The result of these improvements can be seen in the Appendix section.

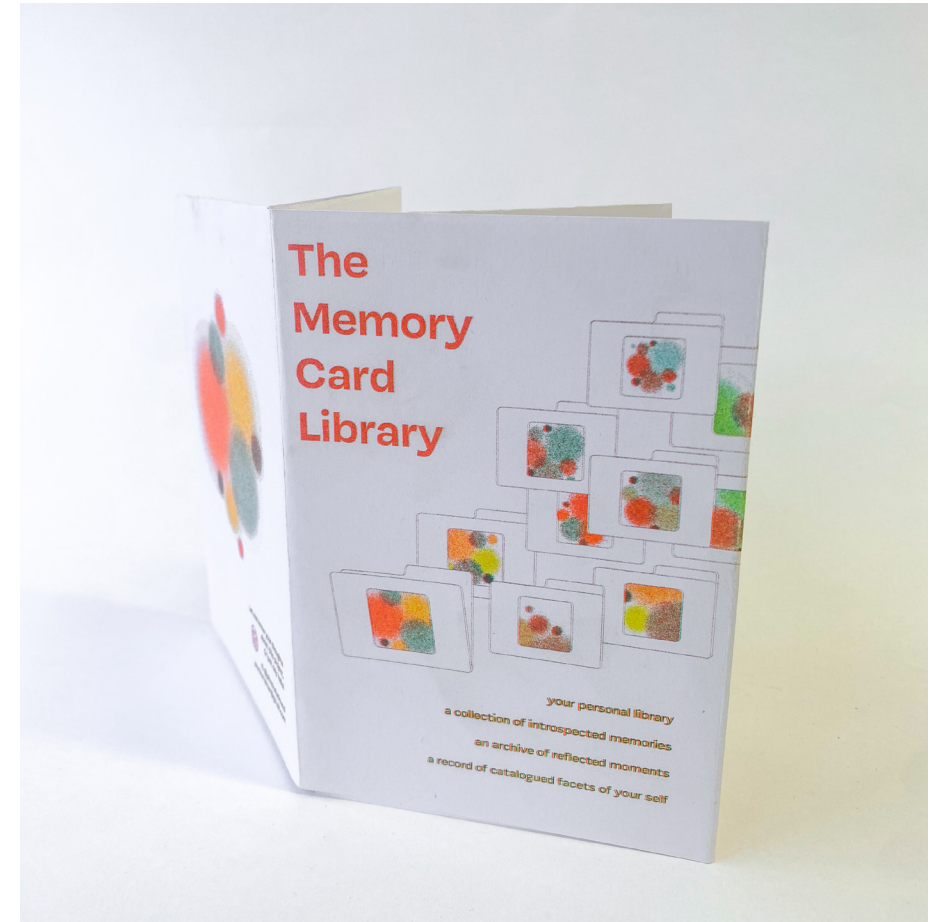


Figure 50. Prototype guide for using the memory card library. It is designed to be the same size as the memory cards for convenient storage.

Conclusion

This research investigated the contradictions of the personal brand paradox by reflecting on my autoethnographic and heuristic design approaches. By experiencing and examining the opposite ends of the spectrum—the authentic self and the commercial brand—the inquiry looked into different approaches to navigating the paradox.

To begin with, it is necessary to acknowledge that the word *brand* has a well-established, commercially oriented definition. As revealed in my first experiment, to develop a more self-attuned personal identity, it was necessary to step away from the term itself, as well as rigid branding frameworks. Instead, the focus should be towards ourselves, in order to extend our personal identities to others.

Rather than prioritising perception and market demands, this research looked inward via autoethnographic investigations to emphasise our self-distinction from others. By re:collecting, re:reflecting, and re:curating, I have created a system that organised parts of my extended self. The repeated process of collecting, introspecting, and curating my past memories through archived photographs led me to develop my own memory card library.

This thoughtfully catalogued personal library serve as a resource to further curate and highlight facets of my identity that are worth sharing and celebrating. Leaning on my design and making intuitions through heuristics, I was able to create a recording of this curatorial ritual practice. At the same time, a guide for making and using the memory card library was developed.

The memory card library systematises and makes sense of the complex components of one's identity. Reflecting on a set of thoughtfully curated cards further enables a more authentic sharing of one's personal narrative. This opens a potential for this library to be used as a resource for genuine self-expression and personalisation.

Returning to branding, one such possibility is the integration of the memory card library into existing methodologies to highlight more of the brand owner's personality or narrative. Combining established branding frameworks with this research's memory card library system as a resource tool has potential for future research.

As a practising designer, I see how the memory cards could act as creative prompts. Randomly choosing a set of cards might be a good challenge to create a personal project. Observing and analysing the patterns and connections of unplanned groupings could lead to unfamiliar but interesting territory within design and making.

In this study, I learned how reflecting and designing through autoethnographic and heuristic approaches can lead to rich discoveries, both in my research and in myself. This approach is made possible by experimenting and encountering the shortcomings of conventional branding frameworks and notions. The established structures and concepts of branding, such as logos and brand books, cannot encompass one's unique self. As a brand designer, exploring my inner self to initiate design was an unusual method, yet, by reflecting on my previous experiences through archived photographs, I was able to uncover an abundant resource for extending and presenting myself to others. Interestingly, by introspecting, the opportunity to connect outwards seems to follow naturally, the memories gathered within these cards are core experiences we share with our close social circles.

This research shows that by being introspective and honest with ourselves and our pasts, we can create memory card libraries to be more attuned with ourselves, and share with others the seemingly messy, yet beautifully human parts of us.

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Appendix

In preparation for my exhibition, I needed to pay more attention to how I would present my autoethnographic process. As I practiced the exercise of re:collection, re:reflection, and re:curation, I began to see design details in the memory card library that needed refinement for others to understand and follow my process fully.

Memory Cards

A few revisions were made to make the cards more convenient and reduce paper waste. Insert slots for the memory cards were widened to accommodate thicker photo papers. This lets the card fit old photos or professional prints. To further minimize the production waste, the square offcut of each memory card (see fig. 43) was made into foldable memory card stands (see fig. 51) by cutting a 'V' shaped insert slot.

Memory Card Library Starter Set

The exhibition was the perfect time to share my process and findings. The Memory Card Library Starter Set served as an introduction to my methods and was available to anyone interested in giving my cards a try. Each set contained a guidebook, a re:cordings notebook, and four blank memory cards with foldable stands (see fig. 54-55). The guidebook took the dimension of the notebook to keep the format consistent for all the materials (see figs. 53-55). The notebooks also came in different colour options as a way to colour-code cards and cater to different personal preferences. When bundled together, the sets created a colourful and welcoming stack of memory cards.

Memory Boxes

Instead of using the old index card drawer (see fig. 46), I created a new memory box to complement the designed look and format of my memory card library. The memory boxes were custom-made with birch plywood to keep and organise the cards (see fig. 58). The boxes had 2 sizes and were stackable for convenient storage. The box covers matched the colours of the notebooks as well.

For the exhibition, the shelf-strips and table were designed to present the memory cards in two different ways. The shelf-strip organised my cards neatly in rows to allow the exhibition guests to read and explore my photos and reflections. In contrast, the table displayed my cards in a slightly disorganised manner. This provided an authentic glimpse into my process of using the memory cards. I wanted others to see that the exercise can be a heart-warming mess.

The uniformity in the design, from the cards, to the colours, and the plywood, provided a system for the methods to be easily followed by others. The subtlety of the material design focused the attention on the memories and written reflections (see Fig. 52). The minimal design also allowed space for creativity and personalisation for the user.

Exhibition Reflections

It took a lot of iterations to design an autoethnographic process for others to understand and try out for themselves. By minimising some design elements, the memory card library and its system opened up to accommodate other people's reflective intentions and approaches. This only marks the beginning of future improvements and studying other potential applications.



Figure 51. A memory card of the Master of Design Exhibition that also serves as an invite for the exhibition opening.



Figure 52. Exhibition overview. Artefacts include my personal memory cards displayed on custom shelf strips; memory boxes, memory card library starter sets, and personal cards on top of a custom table.



Figure 53. The final handbook for *Re:collection, Re:flection, Re:curation* guides the reader about the methods and how they can create their own memory card library.



Figure 54. The memory card starter set includes a guidebook, four blank memory cards with foldable stands, and a notebook.

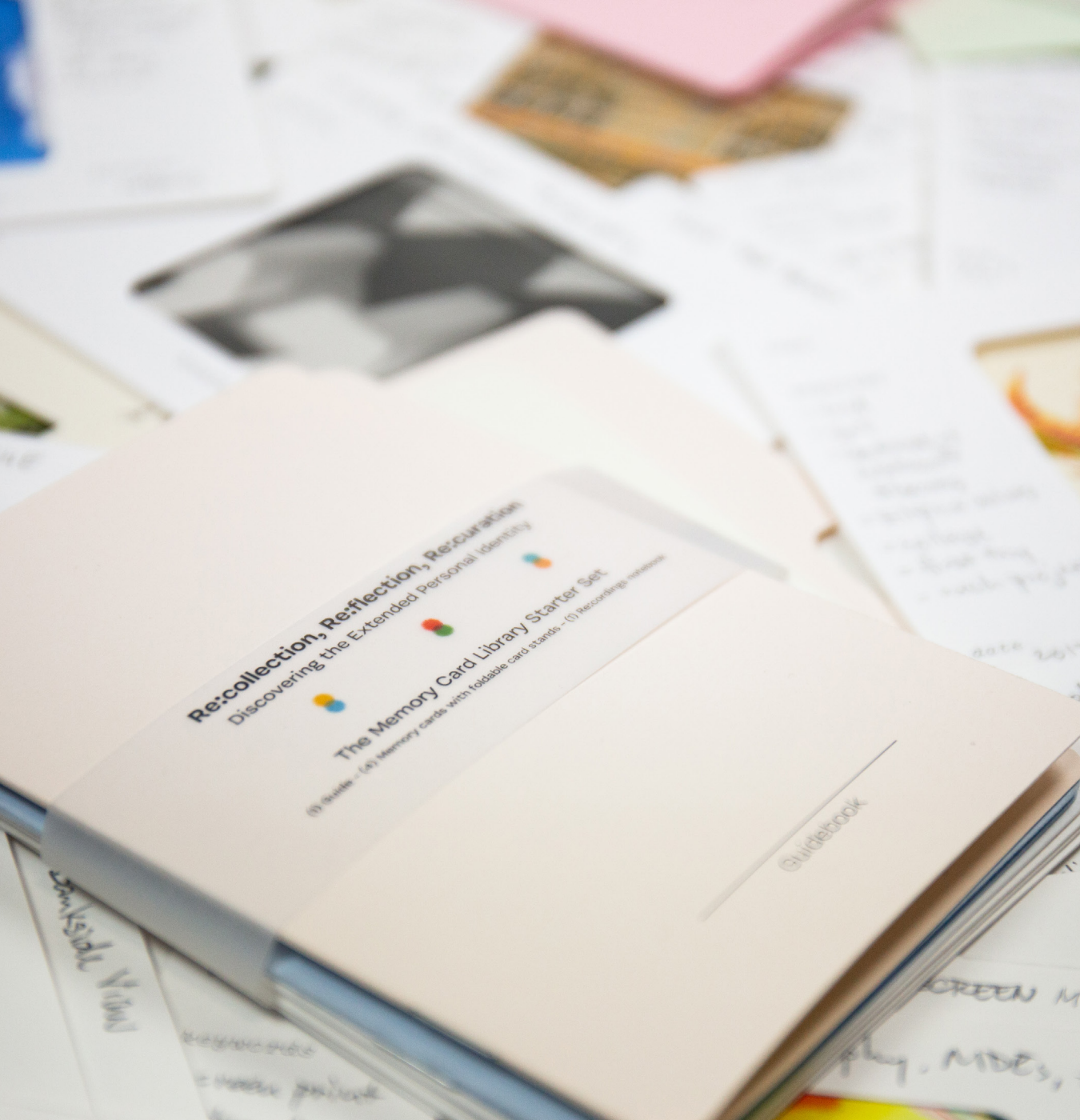


Figure 55. The memory card library starter set. This set can be taken by interested exhibition guests.



Figure 56. Personal notebook for the memory cards grouped under my values and beliefs.



Figure 57. My memory cards displayed on a custom birch shelving.



Figure 58. Custom stackable memory boxes with cover colours matching the notebooks.



Figure 59. Guidebook with memory cards.

Re:collection

Re:flection

Re:curation

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