Why is There a Lack of Digital Marketing Client-Agency Trust? An Inductive Thematic Analysis of the Contemporary Challenges Facing Client-Agency Trust Relationships.

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Abstract

This study examines the contemporary challenges facing client-agency trust relationships in a digital marketing setting. The digital marketing industry is currently struggling with a crisis of client-agency trust. Research has identified that client trust in digital marketing agencies is declining. However, current scholarly debate has stalled, where inquiry into client-agency trust relationships in contemporary and digitised environments is lacking. The current study is the first of its kind to illuminate client-agency trust issues derived from a black box digital marketing *ecosystem,* dominated by an omnipotent *Internet Oligopoly (IO).* The *IO* comprise online media and advertising platforms, such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple and Microsoft.

Findings derive from the inductive thematic analysis of 32 in-depth interviews with multiple digital marketing stakeholders, undertaken between 2016-2018. They comprise 12 clients, 11 agents, 3 training providers, 3 procurement specialists, 1 trade association, 1 lawyer and 1 recruitment agent.

The current study makes the claim that the *IO* and their volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous *ecosystem*, have the power to negatively influence client-agency performance outcomes. More specifically, it is found that unknown and unknowable top-down influences impair the ability to *attribute* digital marketing activity to performance data with any great confidence. A threat of unconscious and conscious opportunism within the client-agency relationship emerges, where poor performance may be blamed upon the perceived influence of the *IO,* against the better knowledge of the client, and often, the agent. Questions over *accountability* for outcomes are raised. Furthermore, it is found that digital marketing *knowledge* may be constructed from *misattributed* performance data resulting in weak-form evidence. Such fallible evidence may be used by agents in order to support claims to trustworthiness and *benchmarks* for best practice.

An original contribution to knowledge is made where empirical findings challenge dominant rationalist and relational assumptions of client-agency trust in contemporary digital marketing settings. An original *BAAKE* framework (*Benchmark, Attribution, Accountability, Knowledge, Ecosystem*) is created, in order to represent such contemporary challenges to client-agency trust, along the client-agency lifecycle.

"the history of every dead and dying 'growth' industry shows a self-deceiving cycle of bountiful expansion and undetected decay."

Harvard Professor of Marketing, Theodore Levitt (1960: 47)

1 Chapter One: Introduction

This study focuses upon client-agency trust within a digital marketing context. Despite the exponential growth of the digital marketing industry over the previous three decades (Quinn et al., 2016), extant research indicates that trust between clients and their digital marketing agents is at an all time low (Mortimer and Laurie, 2017). Despite this, client-agency trust within a digital marketing context has been a neglected phenomenon to date (Keegan et al., 2017). Current debates within the field are embryonic, with little advancement of theory, despite significant digital advances within the field (Taylor, 2017). Most notably, industry and academia are failing to establish *why* a lack of client-agency trust is perceived to exist within a digital marketing context. This is what the current study aims to address. Further detailed rationale for conducting the current study is outlined within the following sub-section.

1.1 Rationale for Study

The current sub-section provides a conceptual definition of digital marketing, establishing its place and research significance within academia (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). A client-agency trust problem in digital marketing is introduced (Wisker, 2007), in order to support an argument for further empirical inquiry within the digital marketing field (Rojon and Saunders, 2012; Flick, 2015). Specific characteristics and traits of the digital marketing industry, as a research setting, are contextualised, relative to its more traditional marketing counterpart (Wallimam, 2011). The rationale also outlines how the current study aligns with the researchers' interests, ethos and personal background (Malterud, 2001). A clear delimitation of the current studies research scope is provided (Verzuh, 2011). Finally, the research aim and research questions, as well as the overall thesis structure, are introduced. This marks the beginning of the current studies research plan (Silverman, 2013).

1.1.1 The Digital Marketing Industry Significance

This sub-section examines the importance and fruitfulness of the digital marketing industry, as an emergent field of academic research. However, before the current studies research problem is explored in greater detail, the use of the terms *digital marketing* and *marketing* require further clarification.

Within the field-related literatures, many marketing researchers and practitioners view digital marketing as an extension of marketing (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014). Whilst some Marketers,

such as Lee (2012), challenge this approach, much of the contemporary scholarship identified within the current study uses both terms interchangeably (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016; Ryan, 2014). However, in order to make the focus of the study clearer, key differences identified within wider literatures are outlined within Table 1.

Traits	Traditional Marketing	Digital Marketing
Purpose	Researching, creating and delivering value to a target audience	Researching, creating and delivering value to an online target audience
Media	Broadcast, Television, Radio, Billboard, Print Collateral	Social Media, Websites, Apps, Search Engines, Display Ads, Pay-per-click (PPC) Ads
Services	Services Marketing, International Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Strategic Marketing	Content Marketing, Mobile Marketing, Paid Advertising, Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), Social Media Marketing
Communication	Unilateral	Multilateral
Audience	Demographic	Behavioural
Tracking	Minimal	Extensive
Response	Longer-term	Shorter-term
Key Performance Indicators	Awareness, Reach, Footfall, Listeners, Viewers, Sales, Readership, Subscriptions	Web Traffic, Conversions, Cost Per Click, Click Through Rates, Engagement, Interactions, Sales
Age	Longer established	Contemporary (emergence in 1990s)

Table 1. Key differences between traditional marketing and digital marketing

Despite introducing a comparative table of both digital marketing and marketing, it would be naïve to suggest that they are entirely distinct from one another. Both share the same purpose of encouraging positive action or change within a target audience. Similarly, more traditional conceptions of marketing have evolved over time, incorporating digital marketing techniques, tactics and strategies into its tactical and strategic repertoire. Therefore, within the current

study, it is acknowledged that digital marketing is complicit within the broader marketing field. However, in order to align with common and current trends in academic scholarship and trade research, the term *digital marketing* is adopted as a core focus. This allows for further inquiry to be situated in parallel with discussion of digital technologies important to the field (Gijic et al., 2014).

With this in mind, a fundamental distinction between both marketing and digital marketing includes the respective offline and online media that underpin marketing (i.e. print and broadcast), and digital marketing (i.e. social media, websites, apps) (Patti et al., 2017). In its primary form, digital marketing is considered to be the promotion of a brands messages, services or products via online communications channels and digital media (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014). Digital marketing is also regularly depicted as a composite group of services and skillsets, comprised of, but not limited to, content marketing, mobile marketing, paid advertising, search engine optimisation (SEO) and social media marketing (Ryan, 2014). From a strategic perspective, digital marketing considers how digital technologies, online media and various digital content formats may be leveraged in order to improve consumer experience and engagement (Kannan and Li, 2017). Technologies and media include smartphones, tablets and varying communications platforms such as social media (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Digital content formats include video, audio, photographs, amongst many others (Marino, 2019). Together, content, technology and media comprise a growing number of digital touch points and opportunities for brands to engage with consumers (Bughin, 2015).

However, the current study finds that a defining, but commonly overlooked characteristic of digital marketing, involves a deeper analysis of the digital platforms that comprise the digital marketing landscape. Digital platforms are web-based platforms that host useful, informative and engaging content for their users (Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). They include social media, such as Facebook, and Search Engines, such as Google. Users typically engage with such platforms as part of their online research and decision making processes. In Tandon and Kaur's (2018) review of the *Impact of Digital Market[s] On Consumer Buying Behaviour,* they find that consumers are more satisfied with their online experience than with traditional media, due to increased perceptions of safety and ease of comparison via such platforms. Here, platforms bring a sense of order and accessibility to the vast amounts of digital information on the internet. In doing this, platforms enlist a number of powerful and sophisticated algorithms in order to make sense of what appropriate content should be displayed to the end user (Digital

Marketing Institute, 2018; Fishkin, 2018; Pasquale, 2015). The Digital Marketing Institute (2018: para. 4) defines an algorithm as:

> *"a mathematical set of rules specifying how a group of data behaves…algorithms help maintain order, and assists in ranking search results and advertisements"*

This is most easily explained through Googles ranking systems, comprised of multiple search algorithms. From what is known of such algorithms, hundreds of ranking elements assess the quality of digital content and determine where it should rank within Googles search engine results pages. Weighting is given to the relevance and importance of digital content (Google, 2020), as well as its *"expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness (E-A-T)"* (Google Quality Raters, 2019). Those who abide by the algorithms "rules" are in a stronger position to gain more visibility at the top of Googles search engine results pages, relative to a search engine users search query. As well as Google, various other platforms are underpinned by algorithms. For example, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, amongst other popular platforms, all have their own algorithms with their own rules (Cheney-Lippold, 2018). Failing to abide by such rules means that the content provider/webmaster/brand may lose visibility upon such platforms.

Despite algorithms being such a significant deciding factor of a brands success or failure on a particular platform, platforms do not share details of their algorithms publically. This is to reduce the possibility of ranking manipulation. Because of this, Pasquale (2015: 65) depicts a "*methodological secrecy*" on behalf of such platforms, positioning them as a *black box*. This makes digital marketing quite unlike traditional conceptions of marketing, which are less constrained by such secretive "rules". For example, an unpredictable change to a search engine algorithm may incapacitate a websites ability to rank within a major search engine, should the website not be optimised in line with the search algorithms rules (Gilliland, 2019). In early 2019, a major online news publisher announced a 50 percent drop in its organic web traffic following a believed update of Googles search engine algorithm, however specific reasons for this drop were unknown (Schwartz, 2019a). By comparison, the traditional marketer would likely not have their print advert published should it be non-compliant with publisher or advertising guidelines (Advertising Standards Authority, 2020). However, in this scenario, the traditional marketer would be made aware of the necessary changes to be made to the content,

a luxury that is rarely granted to content providers, marketers, webmasters etc. by online platforms (Naughton, 2016).

It is speculated that there are over 200 ranking factors that comprise Googles search engine algorithms alone (Dean, 2020). Approximately, 3234 improvements were believed to have been made to Googles search algorithms over 2018 (Meyers, 2019), punctuated by a broad series of significant core algorithm updates (Webmaster Central Blog, 2019). Approximately 350-400 changes to the algorithm were made over 2009 (Schwartz, 2019), indicating how much the algorithms have advanced over the course of a decade. Such changes and updates are released within little to no warning and with limited detail. Many changes to platform algorithms are unknown. Figure 1. offers a screenshot of Moz's algorithm update history log (a leading Search Engine Optimisation resource), which demonstrates the ambiguity surrounding such updates.

2018 Updates

Unnamed Update — November 29, 2018	Unconfirmed

MozCast hit 103.1°F, and webmaster chatter and other tracking tools indicated high algorithm flux. Google did not confirm.

- Google Search Algorithm Update Hits Friday November 30th? (SER)

Unnamed Update — October 15, 2018	Unconfirmed

Tracking tools and webmaster chatter indicated heavy algorithm flux, and MozCast spiked to 109.7°F. No confirmation from Google.

- October 16, 2018 Google Search Algorithm Update (SER)

Unnamed Update — September 10, 2018	Unconfirmed

MozCast temperatures hit 107.6°F, and webmaster chatter around an update spiked, but Google would not confirm any significant changes.

Figure 1. Unknown algorithm updates (Moz.com)

With this in mind, the unique opacity of such algorithms are frequently discussed. For example, the Institute of Mathematics (2017: para. 23) states that:

> *"Nowhere is commerce using opaque machine-learning algorithms more than in the Internet itself: algorithms determine what search engines return, what advertisements are shown to human beings, what advertisements are shown next to which content."*

It is therefore most surprising that digital platforms, their unassailable power (Miguel de Bustos and Izquierdo-Castillo, 2019) and the unique ecosystem they create, are given such little attention within the wider client-agency trust literatures and broader marketing field in academia.

Emphasising the importance of the online setting of digital marketing is still championed by prominent marketing scholars such as Royle and Laing (2014) and Keegan et al. (2017), however. They contend that the convolution of omnipotent and unpredictable technology offers an exciting and underexplored research area in academia. Similarly, eminent Trust Philosopher, Onora O'Neill (2018: 299) espouses that an *"increased reliance on digital communications technologies"* has made trust research more complex and in need of further exploration. As such, a deeper epistemological and ontological discussion of client-agency trust phenomena within the digital marketing domain is assumed within the current study. Contributions to the overall marketing field are inferred throughout the thesis, however.

As can be ascertained, the traditional and digital marketer's role has changed significantly as a result of continually emerging and updating technologies and media. Collaborative, automated and self-learning media and technologies have opened up a host of new opportunities for digital marketers to engage with their audiences online (Gijic et al., 2014). Supporting web analytics tools and tracking software grant the digital marketer greater visibility upon the consumer's behaviour and online journey (Dziubaniauk, 2015). However, the contemporary challenges this poses to the marketer are not well documented within the extant literatures (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016). A more general narrative considers how digital marketers must contend with the additional pressure of a rapidly advancing internet landscape and a resulting data deluge (Royle and Laing, 2014). With this in mind, the digital marketing industries exponential growth is a regular feature of the client-agency trust debate within the literatures and is addressed within the following sub-section.

1.1.2 Digital Marketing Growth

Since its first formal mention in the 1990s (Smith, 2018), digital marketing has regularly been depicted as being in a continual state of growth and evolution (Quinn et al., 2016). An industry audit undertaken by Tech City (2015), positioned digital marketing as one of the fastest growing digital sectors within the United Kingdom, second to software development. At this time, the UK's digital marketing industry was valued at an estimated £3.9billion, a 13.4% increase from 2014 (Tech Nation, 2016). The digital fee income, from UK digital marketing agencies alone, grew to over £1.1bn in 2015 (The Drum Digital Census, 2015). More recent reports released by Econsultancy (2019) suggest that the top 100 digital marketing agencies within the UK now have a total fee income of £3.2 billion as of 2019. This is linked to a growth trajectory of 90% in agency income over 2015 to 2019.

Over 2018, the United Kingdom's (UK) Digital Marketing industry was reported to be in its eighth successive year of economic growth (Advertising Association / WARC, 2018). When considering the UK's digital advertising spend alone (IAB, 2013; IAB, 2014; IAB 2015; IAB, 2016; IAB, 2017; IAB, 2018), allocation has increased by an average of 29.3% year-on-year. Figure 2. provides an overview of UK digital ad spend since 2003 where prior to this, UK digital ad spend was less that £100m per year (Meadows-Klue, 2009). In 2018, growth trends for the digital marketing industry slowed for the first time in two decades. According to Sweney (2019: para 1), this is because brands have attempted to pursue a "*risk-free*" marketing space and minimise their online spending until the climate for trust improves.
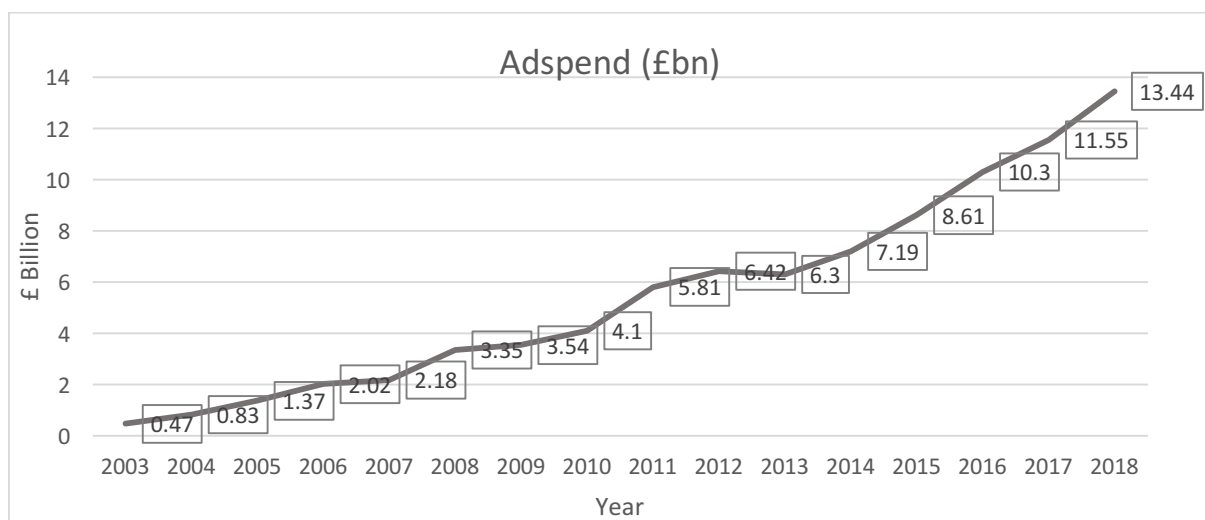
Figure 2. IAB UK Ad Spend Data (Various Sources: IAB)

The perceived importance of digital marketing, to any company, regardless of industry, is addressed as a key basis for digital marketing growth within the academic literatures (Royle and Laing, 2014). Similarly, a third of UK CMO's digital marketing spend is predicted to account for an average 75% of their company budget over the next five years (Janabi, 2016). This signifies an average 20% increase in marketing spend, of a companies total budget, since 2014 (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014). It is also a prominently held view that the integration of offline and online media has allowed for traditional streams of marketing and advertising to become more effective, thus propelling the uptake of key digital marketing services (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016).

As the industry experiences impressive growth and popularity, an increasing demand for digital marketing services has required the digital marketer to respond quickly to the complexity of new practices and processes (Durkin, 2013). Exponential growth of the digital marketing industry continues to introduce increasingly challenging conditions, with the power to undermine marketer confidence and capability (Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). A misalignment of up to date and relevant digital marketing skill bases in line with industry changes is observable (Stone, 2014). Royle and Laing (2014) establish an empirically grounded *digital marketing skills gap* where industry is moving too quickly for knowledge bases to keep up.

However, whilst it seems that the UKs digital marketing industry is experiencing seemingly *relentless* growth (Hammett, 2018), research highlights that trust within this domain is declining (Farey-Jones, 2018). It seems that the industry is trapped in its own digital marketing myopia (Durkin, 2013), harking back to Harvard Marketing Professor, Theodore Levitt's (1960: 47) widely recited quote:

> "*the history of every dead and dying 'growth' industry shows a self-deceiving cycle of bountiful expansion and undetected decay.*"

At the time, Levitt (1960) argued that the marketing industry failed to address client and consumer centricity, much to its own detriment and threat of obsolescence. However, it seems that historical trends are quickly forgotten, as Levitt (1960: 47) predicted: "*memories are short*".

1.1.3 Digital Marketing – An Industry in Crisis

Extant marketing research tells us that trust in digital marketing is at an all time low (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019). Perennial debates indicate a crisis of trust in digital marketing knowledge (Pedeliento et al., 2017); data (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016); and media-fraud (Benes, 2019). A spate of mainstream examples denote a lack of trust in the digital proliferation of misinformation (Lazer et al., 2017); untrustworthy advertising statistics (Peterson, 2016); and multi-billion-euro antitrust accusations against major search engines (Pop and Schechner, 2018). A recent lawsuit against Facebook's cavalier use of millions of its users' data, in conjunction with the Cambridge Analytica scandal in early 2018 (Common, 2018), has only served to perpetuate a lack of trust in and around the industry. Scrutiny has been placed upon Facebook, after admitting it overstated its video advertising metrics to businesses by 80%, over 2014 to 2016 (Vranica and Marshall, 2016). Global bot traffic reports also state that artificially generated traffic comprised 42.2% of total web traffic over 2017 (Labrovic, 2018). In 2017, the FBI responded to their largest global ad fraud scheme, scaling close to 5000 counterfeit websites and 60,000 fake ad accounts created via a major ad fraud operation (The Hunt for 3ve, 2018).

Googles Product Manager, Scott Spencer (2018: para. 29), argues that such events have brought "*instability and mistrust to the entire ecosystem*", with inevitable repercussions for its stakeholders. Extant literatures depict a "*crisis of trust*" (Ramsey, 2018: para. 1) in digital marketing, at a business, community, media and industry scale, with one well known Marketing Professor suggesting, "*it's clear that clients are correct to aim their distrust at almost every level of the media supply chain*" (Ritson, 2017). With this in mind, the practices of agencies within the digital marketing industry are placed under additional scrutiny (Graham, 2018), reinforcing the client-agency trust focus of the current thesis.

1.1.4 Client Agency Trust Issues in Digital Marketing

Over the past few years, contemporary failures of client-agency trust have garnered much mainstream attention, including Honda and MediaVest Spark (Oster, 2017); Toyota and Dentsu (Doland, 2016); and most notably, the retaliative legal battle between Uber and Fetch (Bovich and Haimovici, 2017). Whilst not the catalyst for the current study, the Uber-Fetch case has given prominence to the importance of trust within the client-agent dyadic. More detail is provided within Table 2. From this example alone, important trust constructs such as contract

law, goodwill, fiduciary care, expertise, transparency and professionalism are apparent. Such diversity of constructs introduces the complexity of the trust concept.

In September 2017, US company Uber Technologies Inc., a location based private-driver service and app, formally accused their UK-based digital marketing agency Fetch, of gross misconduct (Bovich and Haimovici, 2017). A subsequent lawsuit was opened against Fetch, where Uber sought $40 million in compensation for perceived wrong-doing. According to Ubers lawsuit, filed in September 2017, allegations consisted of misrepresentation and claims of a lack of quality control. More specifically, Uber blamed Fetch for presenting fraudulent data relative to Uber's adspend, reaching millions of dollars per week (Bovich and Haimovici, 2017).

A more thorough analysis of the lawsuit filed against Fetch indicated that Uber accused Fetch of the following: breach of contract; breach of the covenant of good faith and fair dealing; breach of fiduciary duties; committing constructive fraud; misrepresentation of brand in a negligent manner; negligence in an overall professional capacity and finally, taking advantage of Ubers trust (Bovich and Haimovici, 2017). They contended that, *"Fetch held itself out to be an expert in the mobile advertising industry, and because Fetch was in a position of trust as Uber's advertising agent, Fetch's omissions and misstatements induced Uber to continue its relationship with Fetch, and, foreseeably, to increase spending on mobile advertising to millions of dollars per week" (*Bovich and Haimovici, 2017: 20). They claim such activity invalidated their agreement to just treatment and transparency. However, as of December 2017, Uber voluntarily dismissed their lawsuit in favour of pursuing a state court claim. In retaliation, in December 2017, Fetch opened a counter lawsuit against Uber, seeking compensation for $19m dollars worth of unpaid bills and claims of "*incorrect contract theories*" (Olivar et al., 2018: 2). Most pertinent to the current study, Fetch formally accused Uber of being a "*faithless business partner*" (Stempel, 2018: para. 14).

Table 2. Uber-Fetch Case Study

Recent trends have illuminated clients' intolerance for current norms and standards within digital marketing client-agency settings (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar, 2015). This is increasingly significant where industry research has suggested that trust is perceived to be an essential quality between client and agency partners (Symon, 2019). However, just 15% of

agencies believe that they deliver on trust (MarketingWeek, 2016). Similarly, Hunt (2014) highlights that 78% of digital marketing clients do not trust their Digital Marketing agencies claims to expertise. More recent research, undertaken by the Association of National Advertisers, suggests that only 9% of practitioners believe their agency partners to be trustworthy (Rittenhouse, 2018). A more up to date report released by the ANA in 2019 (ANA, 2019a), depicts significant client-agency trust issues with: *fraudulent and invalid data; determining appropriate rebates; a lack of transparency in agency processes; and issues with measurement and data integrity.*

Because of this there has been a marked response from industry, though it seems this has not been entirely impartial or effective. In attempting to tackle mistrust in digital marketing, a number of initiatives have been introduced including: *transparency guidelines*; *calls for auditing of agency practices and contract frameworks; relevant trade associations*; *changes to client-agency models and remuneration*; *a greater emphasis from the Government; improvements to client-agency education; the introduction of intermediaries*. They are outlined in greater detail within the following sub-section.

1.1.4.1   Current attempts to address distrust in Digital Marketing

At this point it is important to highlight that this thesis does not attempt to demonise the digital marketing industry or any stakeholder groups within it. The study takes into consideration the varying initiatives, agendas and attempts to address perceived client-agency trust issues within the digital marketing industry. Indeed, there are long-standing associations, such as the Data and Marketing Association (DMA) as well as the Association of National Advertisers (ANA), that represent digital marketing practice within the UK. They have been very influential in the client-agency trust statistics examined thus far. However, such groups are largely concerned with the appropriate self-governance of paid advertising and the impact this has upon the consumer. For example, the regulatory action over privacy issues regarding consumer data or the dissemination of information regarding the legalities of consumer safety and advertising online. Figure 3. offers a timeline of initiatives highlighting a distinct shift towards client-agency trust agendas as of 2016 onwards.

2012
JICWEBS Digital Trading Standards Created

2013
Google Partners Programme Established

2014
DMA study finds 78% of clients distrust their agents

2016
ISBA calls for better media auditing

2016
ISBA releases a client contract template. This is poorly received

2017
TAG established

2017
ANA release a state of client-agency trust report. Transparency is a core issue

2017
MRC created

2018
ISBA and IPA calls for greater media auditing

2018
Number of brand bringing agency work in-house doubles

2018
WFA launches Global Media Charter

2018
DCMS launch investigation into FAANGs transparency

2018
ID Comms Global Media Transparency report highlights lack of client trust

2018
ANA launch inquiry into failed remuneration models

2018
Guardian Changing Media Summit takes place

2018
Contract Template inc. Code of conduct created by ANA

2018
ISCA re-release their contract framework.

2019
IAB Gold Standard Qualification Launched

2019
JICWEBS Best Practice Principles created

2019
ANA Trust Consortium established

2019
Government manifesto into public sector trust and FAANGs

2019
IPA release one day client-agency trust course

2019
ISBA 2019 conference discusses the importance of client-agency trust

Figure 3. Timeline of Client-Agency Trust Initiatives (Source: Various)

1.1.4.1.1 Transparency Guidelines within Client-Agency Contracts

A bi-yearly Media Transparency Report released by the Association of National Advertisers in 2017 (Liodice and Wood, 2017) suggested that a lack of transparency in agency spending was core to perceived mistrust between clients and their agents. The report highlighted that agents did not feel appropriately compensated for their work whilst clients were concerned with a lack of transparency in the management of their budget.

In response, the ANA released a recommended contract template and a guide to encourage greater transparency between clients and agents regarding their spend and duties (ANA, 2018a). Such guidelines incorporated a uniform code of conduct in order to *"guide the client/agency relationship, and restore trust"* (ANA, 2018: para.16). The code of conduct covered best practice for reporting, approval processes and data management.

Earlier attempts at a recommended contract framework in 2016, and later again in 2018 by ISBA (the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers), a UK-based sister company of ANA, were met with contempt by sister institutions such as the IPA, as well as practitioners within the industry (Spanier, 2018a). The framework was viewed as having the potential to undermine trust in agents, rather than repair it (Spanier, 2018a). At the time, Director of Legal and Public Affairs at the IPA, Richard Lindsay also criticised the framework, arguing that it would result in "*protracted contractual negotiations with agencies, which is not good for either party*" (Smiley, 2018a: para. 8).

1.1.4.1.2 Auditing

The auditing of agencies against predefined standards and codes of practice was first recommended by ISBA in 2016 (Wootton, 2016). ISBA raised the need for auditing again in 2018, this time in affiliation with the IPA. This would include an impartial review of price and the suitability of agency recommendations. However, auditing has since been widely criticised within the digital marketing industry for being ineffective in quick changing environments (Joseph, 2019).

1.1.4.1.3 Trade Associations

In 2017, a series of trade associations were established such as the Trustworthy Accountability Group (TAG) and Joint Industry Committee for Web Standards (JICWEBS), as well as the Media Rating Council (MRC) (an advertising metrics auditing company). TAG in particular, comprised of the IAB and ANA, in conjunction with the JICWEBS, sought to *"clean up the digital advertising supply chain"*, promoting brand safety and transparency in buying, in an attempt to improve the *"effectiveness of the digital ecosystem"* (Stewart, 2019: para. 3). The partnerships suggested that they would also attempt to tackle transparency and trust issues between clients and agents by introducing more standards for online trading. Similarly, the Association of National Advertisers (2019: para. 3), established a Trust Consortium in 2019, in order to *"create white papers on best practices and key issues, FAQs, templates, and industry standards for marketers, agencies and suppliers"*. However, they outlined that such access would only be privy to paying members of the ANA. The first ANA Trust Consortium Summit took place in the US in May 2019. Though, this was swiftly criticised for its lack of tangible action (Schreurs, 2019).

1.1.4.1.4 Trends in Global Leaders moving agency work in-house

In a report by the ANA (2018b), it was found that the number of companies bringing their agency work in-house had nearly doubled, from 42% to 78%, over the course of a decade. Similarly, the Society of Digital Agencies (SoDA) (2017) found that 60% of companies had felt benefit from moving their agency work in-house. Benefits were perceived to be cost savings, greater transparency and deeper internal knowledge. A spate of well-known brands followed suit, including Telecoms conglomerate Vodafone, who brought two thirds of its digital investment in-house, to the approximate sum of £200 million per year (Spanier, 2018). Key motivations for doing so were comprised of a perception of greater control over personal data, quicker turnaround times, and optimised efficiencies. Other industry research by Vizard (2017), showed that 72% of Chief Marketing Officers were looking to bring more marketing in-house, subverting client-agency relationships altogether. For example, Procter and Gamble cut their agency spending by $750m over 2018, until they perceived that the climate for trust had improved (Garrahan, 2018).

1.1.4.1.5 Government Agendas - Spotlight on FAANGs

In 2019, the Government introduced its *Year of Marketing* agenda (Government Communication Service, 2019), which focussed upon digital marketing's various data, platform, channel and trust opportunities. Executive Director of Government Communication, Alex Aiken (2019: para. 5) called the Manifesto a "*thought-piece*", suggesting that recommendations were made without empirical evidence. In it, a manifesto for addressing trust between institutions and the quintet of FAANGs (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google (FAANGs) (Rogers, 2019) was raised. However, the initiative would only be introduced within the public sector (Government Communication Service, 2019b). Such government trust initiatives were largely aimed at dominant media companies such as Google and Facebook in particular. A WARC global Advertising Trends Report suggested that Googles share (including YouTube) and Facebooks share (including Instagram) of the online ad market alone was at 61.4% at the beginning of 2020 (McDonald, 2019).

In 2018, the House of Lords (UK) Digital, Culture Media and Sport (DCMS, 2018) Committee, launched an investigation into the *dysfunctional, opaque,* and *murky* digital market. Committee chairman of DCMS, Damian Collins, argued that media giants such as Facebook were taking advantage of their dominant market share and resulting power, in a way that negated duty of care to its users: "*We need a radical shift in the balance of power between the platforms and the people.*" The report would condemn large media companies for their role in the circulation of misleading and fraudulent ads based upon a misuse of consumer data. Ultimately, their 2019 report recommended the need for a code of ethics, tighter regulation, and greater accountability of media companies. This was a view shared by the World Federation of Advertisers, who released a Global Media Charter in 2018 in order to address the impact of Walled Gardens upon client-agency adspend. Duggan (2017: para. 1) defines walled gardens as a "*platform where the carrier or service provider has control over applications, content, and media, and restricts convenient access to non-approved applications or content*". However, the charter would only consider paid advertising.

Over the duration of 2010 to 2020, ongoing Antitrust accusations were launched by the European Union (EU) against Google (Pop and Schechner, 2018). The EU

investigations attempted to target Google and their monopolistic dominance within search, advertising, tech and software markets.

Such antitrust challenges against "Big Tech" are not new, however. Both echo prominent IBM and Microsoft antitrust cases from the 80s and 90s, where accusations of software bundling (i.e. brands tying their own software to software or software to hardware by default) were made (Fisher, 2000). Indeed, similarities with certain antitrust accusations against Google are apparent. Namely their "*requirement that every android installation come with the Google Search App and Chrome pre-installed*" (Fishkin, 2019: para. 6). This was the target of one antitrust accusation against Google in 2018 (European Commission, 2018). However, other anti-trust accusations have also alluded to significant issues with Googles search algorithm. More specifically, the EU has argued that Googles algorithm prioritises itself and preferred brands over competitors (European Commission, 2017). In order to prove this, the EU has aimed to gain greater visibility upon the way in which Googles ranking algorithm(s) function. Ultimately, the EU sought to develop policy upon "*the governance of algorithmic accountability and transparency*" of search engines (European Commission, 2019: 1). However, Google has been able to preserve the privacy and secrecy of their algorithms, resulting in multiple billion dollar antitrust fines.

In striking similarity, as of 2020, Google has been involved in an eight-year lawsuit with vertical search and price comparison search engine Foundem. Upon believing that Google deliberately dropped their search engine ranking for being a direct competitor, Foundem requested access to Googles algorithm, from the High Court, so that a SEO practitioner could review its ranking processes. Foundem argued that "*the details of Google's search algorithm would be too technical for lawyers to understand*" (Southern, 2020: para. 28). However, Google defended their view of withholding access by arguing that:

> "*The integrity of Google's ranking processes relies upon all webmasters or website owners having the same degree of access to information about Google's ranking… This will no longer be the case if information of this kind is made available to some individuals offering commercial services to assist companies to improve their Search ranking.*" (Corfield, 2020: para. 9)

1.1.4.1.6 Introduction of targeted training materials

Despite being perceived as Walled Gardens, major media companies such as Google, have created key Google product training resources and client-facing support services. Key initiatives have included the Google Digital Garage and Google Partners Programme, established in 2015 and 2013 respectively. In addition, annual conferences such as the Guardian's Global Media Summit and ISBA's Annual Conference, aim to share digital marketing knowledge and raise awareness of client-agency trust issues in digital marketing.

An IAB gold standard qualification was also launched in 2017. The IAB suggested that companies certifiable for their gold standard could demonstrate their knowledge regarding paid advertising fraud, brand safety and brand experience online. Those who qualified would become signatories of the JICWEBS Digital Trading Standards Group (DTSG) Brand Safety and Best Practice Principles (JICWEBS, 2019). However, low uptake of the IAB Gold Standard Qualification was reported as being poor and a "*sad indictment*" to UK digital marketing agencies (Trust, 2018).

1.1.4.1.7 Intermediaries and Testimony

A number of digital marketing agency review sites such as the Drums Recommended Agency Register and GlassDoor have emerged. Such reputation based management systems offer publics, namely clients and employees, an intermediary platform for their agency testimony. However, such unregulated review systems came under significant scrutiny by the European Parliament in 2015, for playing host to misleading or fake reviews under the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (European Parliament, 2015).

1.1.4.1.8 Transparency in Remuneration Models

Recommendations for fairer and more transparent remuneration models have generated much disagreement within the client-agency trust debate (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019). Historically, retainer and time-based fees (Denford and Indo, 2010) were popular amongst agency clients, where the client could pay an agreed upon flat-fee every month. A resurgence in incentive based remuneration models also emerged, where agents could be paid based upon their performance (Levin et al., 2017; Neill and

Schauster, 2018; Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). However, such models were widely criticised by digital marketing stakeholders, suggesting that compensation models "*do not improve agency performance*" (WARC, 2017: para. 5), and often prove ineffective. Likewise, a risk of overcharging made clients wary of retainer options (Monllos, 2019). An investigation by McKinsey and Company in 2018 (Farmer, 2019: np), examined the outcome of the ANAs inquiry into remuneration models, noting that "*nothing has changed*" over the past three years where a "*return to trust*" had not been achieved. McKinsey and Company also criticised the lack of rigour in the ANAs original report suggesting that the problem was ill-founded and without "*tangible proof*" (Neff, 2018: para. 21).

Whilst such initiatives have shone a light upon the current state of trust within the digital marketing industry, it seems that they have not been well received. Key criticisms of the programmes comprise their lack of uptake, meaningful action and value to other digital media outside of paid advertising. Current attempts to address client-agency trust issues also appear to adopt an overtly *rationalist* stance grounded in frameworks, qualifications, standards and codes of conduct. However, key assumptions behind such positions in industry are not evident within the industry-based literature. Over the same timeframe such initiatives have been launched, client-agency trust is perceived to have declined (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019). Baroness Onora O'Neill (2018) also argues that recommendations for greater transparency are a limited or perfunctory remedy in complex, technologically-bound environments with much deeper epistemic issues. However, her insights derive from a position piece without empirical evidence, as common within the trust literatures.

A wider review of scholarly marketing literature indicates that client-agency trust issues are much deeper than transparency and paid advertising issues alone. Current scholarly debate presents a digital marketing system in crisis, eroding perceptions of marketer credibility, knowledge and value (Dziubaniauk, 2015; Quinn et al., 2016). Many clients are being left open to relationship vulnerabilities such as manipulation, opportunism and deceptive practice (Chohan et al., 2019; Gudivada and Rao, 2015). Others contend that wider stakeholder welfare is at threat due to unresolved client-agency trust issues (Mamlouk and Sergard, 2014). Most alarmingly, Quinn et al. (2016) note an industry on the cusp of disciplinary collapse. Consequently, a renewed agenda for exploring client-agency trust in digital marketing is in much demand by major advertising and marketing academic journals (Taylor, 2017). However,

response has been fairly limited in relevant academic circles as the following sub-section shows.

1.1.4.2 Client-Agency Trust as a neglected phenomenon in the field of digital marketing

Extant scholarly research comprises a number of paradigmatic assumptions, theories and constructs related to marketing client-agency issues (Keegan et al., 2017; Laurie and Mortimer, 2019). Wider research also indicates that analogous industries such as Public Relations and Advertising are also facing a significant client-agency trust issue. Despite this, theoretical advancement in client-agency trust research has stalled where researchers have been dependent upon traditional assumptions of client-agency trust, despite notions of a continually evolving digital marketing landscape. Prominent theories within the literatures include Signalling theory (Pedeliento et al., 2017), Knowledge-sharing theory (Mola et al., 2017) and Social Exchange Theory (Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014), as elaborated upon within the Chapter Two, Literature Review. However, it seems, few have examined contemporary client-agency trust phenomena in a digital marketing context or with a more radical viewpoint in mind. Such gaps underpin a need for further inquiry, in order to: 1) explore the new and increasingly complex challenges facing contemporary client-agency relationships; 2) challenge current assumptions and theoretical perspectives related to client-agency trust within the domain specific literature (Alvesson and Sandburg, 2011). The following sub-section addresses the current studies research scope in order to clearly outline the parameters for further inquiry.

1.1.5 Research Scope

Through the adoption of academic and industry perspectives, the previous sub-sections have developed a narrative that supports the significance of the research context. In particular, four key areas are considered: *Digital Marketing; Clients and Agencies; United Kingdom; Trust.* Such areas inform the current studies research scope, delimiting boundaries for the depth and breadth of research (Verzuh, 2011). They are outlined further within the following sub-sections. This also denotes the primary target fields and audiences for the current study.

1.1.5.1 Digital Marketing

As the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR, 2019) celebrates its 20th annual meeting, specific academic journals in digital marketing are found to be as old, if not younger. Examples include the Journal of Digital and Social Media Marketing, with a

record of publication since 2013. Digital marketing research and literatures are in their relative infancy when compared to wider bodies of marketing literature. That being said, research topics related to digital marketing have become more popular as much longer-established Marketing journals, such as the Journal of Marketing or the Journal of Marketing Research, look to consider the impact of digitised communications methods upon marketing practice. As such, the current study contributes to both marketing and digital marketing field-related literatures.

Justification for selecting the digital marketing industry derive more specifically from its increasing popularity and significance within a business paradigm, yet its insufficient exploration within academic research (Crittenden and Crittenden, 2015). However, the size of the digital marketing industry within the United Kingdom, which spans multiple channels, technologies and sub-industries, poses a challenge to focussed inquiry. For example, whilst the current study could have benefitted from a more focussed research setting (Luse, et al., 2012), a broader view of the digital marketing industry is adopted. This decision was made in order to ensure the sustainability of the study, given the rate of change within industry (Royle and Laing, 2014). For example, should the study have considered Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), there was a threat that the industry, and resulting research setting, could have changed too much over the duration of the study period (Foerster, 2018).

Future recommendations for research could perhaps explore more specific digital marketing services (i.e. paid advertising, search engine optimisation, social media marketing etc.). However, the decision to focus upon digital marketing in its entirety within the current study is two fold: 1) integrated digital marketing is emphasised within the literature (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019); 2) trust between digital marketing agencies and their clients is an overlooked and underexplored area (Keegan et al., 2017).

1.1.5.2   Clients and Agencies

The primary focus of the thesis considers the trust perceptions, attitudes and experiences of clients and digital marketing agents, due to the emphasis upon both groups within the problem building literature. Throughout the thesis, clients and agents

are referred to as *client-agency* or *client-agents*. This terminology is popularised in extant client-agency literature (Bachnik et al., 2017). The current study adopts the terms agent and agency interchangeably though it could be argued that trust changes when directed towards an individual (agent) versus a group (agency) (Domenicucci and Holton, 2017). Within the context of the current study, digital marketing agents are representative of the agency and its various processes, systems and practices.

There is freedom to consider the impact of client-consultancy relationship under this dyadic also. For example, when using the same systematic literature review techniques as with client-agency studies (i.e. client-consultancy studies with reference to trust, digital, marketing etc.) a number of similar findings are returned. There is need for more: trust, active communication and information sharing (Belkhodja et al. 2012); signaling ability (Nikolova et al., 2015); perception of expertise, shared values, information sharing (Solomonson, 2012); interpersonal relationships (Mauerer, 2018); and quality criteria (Nissen, Seifert and Blumenstein, 2018). A deeper review of such themes is assumed in Chapter Two's, Literature Review. However, due to the greater emphasis upon client-agency trust issues in wider reputed academic journals (Keegan et al., 2017; Taylor, 2017), the client-agency focus is assumed. There is still opportunity for transferability of findings to client-consultant audiences, however. This is due to notions of clients reaching out to consultants for their field related knowledge, much like clients to agents (Solomonson, 2012). However, given the nature of consultants (consultancy only) versus agents (consultancy and implementation), there is a broader argument to be made about resource, skill and notions of risk transfer. This would make for an interesting comparative case study research project in future.

Client-agency trust comprises a wide field of research outside of the digital marketing paradigm also (Keegan et al., 2017). Other analogous industries typified by their client-agency relationships include Public Relations (Neill and Schauster, 2018) and Advertising (Hand et al., 2014). A broader review of literature indicates that they have existed for much longer than that of the digital marketing setting under inquiry. Earliest depictions of client-agency relationships are highlighted by Keegan et al. (2017), who provide a particularly comprehensive systematic literature review of client-agency trust research over a period of decades. Thus, client-agency trust is not a new issue. However, whilst offering a particularly wonderful example of a chronological review

of client-agency trust phenomena to date, their analysis stops before aspects of the digital marketing setting are reached. They note a dearth of client-agency trust research studying the influence of emergent digital media and technologies upon client-agency trust in contemporary settings (Keegan et al., 2017). As such, digital marketing client-agency relationships are emphasised within the current study as this setting is best placed to explore the impact of new media and technology upon the client-agency trust dyadic and debate.

Because of this, notions of broader digital marketing stakeholder systems and their impact upon client-agency trust phenomenon are also considered. Extant literatures defined within Chapter One already suggest that this includes participants from varying stakeholder groups i.e. trade associations, regulatory bodies, amongst others.

Ryan's (1990) popular definition of a stakeholder is adopted, which describes a stakeholder as an individual or group with some stake within a business undertaking or relationship (client-agency). Further reasoning for adopting a multi-stakeholder perspective also derives from a significant gap in empirical research, which rarely moves beyond the perspectives of a singular group, either clients or, predominantly, agents (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017). In doing so, the phenomenon becomes protracted or asymmetric to the unilateral views of a subset of individuals. More recent client-agency studies have attempted to gather empirical data from a more inclusive sample, however (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019).

1.1.5.3 *United Kingdom*

The United Kingdom is defined as the geographical area of focus. The United Kingdom is recognised as the strongest digital economy globally (Holloway, 2015). Many industry reports suggest that the UK has the largest internet economy in the world, where it is "*the second biggest economic contributor behind property*" within the UK (Tech City UK 2015, para: 2). Other reports confirm this, outlining that the digital economy has propelled economic growth ahead of both the manufacturing industry and retail industry within the UK (Stewart, 2016). The DMA propose that this may be due to the £6 return for the UK economy, on every £1 spent within the industry (DMA, 2017). A key point to be made here, is that digital marketing is perceived to have no

particular geographical boundary due to it being a virtual service. This means that the client-agency trust issue is potentially boundless. However, it is necessary to delimit the geographic boundary due to UK-specific political, economic, social and legal factors that the current study has considered thus far i.e. client-agency trust initiatives by the IAB, ISBA and DMCS. Other client-agency trust studies do examine the client-agency trust issue in a variety of different countries outside of the UK. For example, Reyes (2015) examines digital marketing regulation in America. As such, phenomena are comparable in some respects, though the geographical setting of some of the studies are addressed as a limitation within the Literature Review.

1.1.5.4   Trust

Trust literatures present varying interpretations of trust that are far reaching and often contradictory (Metlay, 1999). The construct is frequently cited as being incredibly difficult to study (Gambetta, 1988). For example, when considering specific definitions of trust within contemporary client-agency contexts, trust has a multitude of meanings: *a response to perceived risk; an attitude; a responsibility on behalf of the agent; the fulfilment of a task; a response to uncertainty; commitment; cooperation; reciprocal expectation* (Kuzheleva-Sagan and Suchkova, 2016; Dziubaniuk, 2015). However, as the current study adopts interpretivist methodology, inquiry subscribes to a relativist doctrine that welcomes the possibility of exploring varying views and belief systems regarding trust (Ryan, 2018).

As a binary opposite to trust, the study also considers the importance of distrust (or mistrust) as a research area. McKnight and Chervany (2001) argue that distrust has been an under researched area, when compared to conceptualisations of trust. Widely cited trust philosopher, Hardin (2002) resolves that distrust is just as credible an avenue to follow as trust, due to the meaningful assessment of what it takes to lose trust versus what it takes to gain trust. As such, both trust and distrust are terms adopted throughout the current study.

After outlining the current studies research scope, further motivation for the adopted area of focus within the current study is outlined in greater detail within the following sub-section.

1.1.6 Motivation and Professional Background

This sub-section provides an overview of the researchers professional, academic and social background in order to shine a light upon the impetus for the current study (Malterud, 2001). As such, the researcher's relational perspective to the research problem and participants is established. This is so that issues of subjectivity can be addressed early on within the current study (Hennink et al., 2010).

1.1.6.1 Personal Background

Due to the critically reflective nature of the Researcher Background sub-section, I will be writing in first person. The adoption of first person accounts are common in qualitative and reflective writing in order to avoid a detached or vague writing style (Gilgun, 2005). Wertz et al. (2011) finds that first person pronouns give weight to interpretive methodology, as with the current study, and highlights the close proximity of the researcher to the data.

Since 2015, I have taught Digital Marketing at an Undergraduate and Postgraduate level within the University of Salford, Liverpool Hope University and Manchester Metropolitan University. Prior to this, I worked in three marketing agencies, with six years spent in a digital marketing agency setting specifically. There, I developed a particular specialism in Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). Beyond this, I worked in-house for a client brand, with responsibility for identifying and managing appropriate outsourced agency partners. Having identified as an agent, client, educator and researcher within the digital marketing industry, a close affinity to the research setting is perceived to be unavoidable.

During my time within a digital marketing agency, I worked closely with a number of clients who believed that they had been mistreated or neglected by their agency partner. Having been given the responsibility to audit client accounts as part of their onboarding process, many clients had received a perceivably poor service with or without their knowledge. Common client complaints regarding their service received would include: their agency not hitting set targets; the time it took to see campaign results; their difficulty in assessing the value of agency output; their lack of understanding of digital marketing processes; a lack of agency communication; the frequency of changes to industry and the impact this had upon their planned digital marketing strategy. It was those experiences that prompted my interest in undertaking further relevant inquiry, in order to understand: 1) why such perceptions were

perceived to be so common; 2) whether meaningful change to digital marketing client-agency practice could be achieved.

By drawing the readers' attention to my motivations, it is hoped that a clearer view of the impetus for the current study is clearly communicated. Following this, a clear overview of the current studies research aim, objectives and research questions is provided. In order to suspend reflective prose, a third person account is resumed.

1.2 Research Aim

Through the adoption of interpretivist methodology and multi-stakeholder empirical approaches, the current study aims to explore contemporary challenges to client-agency trust within the digital marketing industry within the UK. In doing so, the current study seeks to challenge fundamental assumptions of client-agency trust within dominant discourse and generate client-agency trust theory suitable for contemporary digital marketing contexts.

1.3 Research Questions and Contribution to Knowledge

This sub-section outlines how the current study intends to make an original contribution to knowledge and advance client-agency trust research within the field of marketing. In claiming an academic contribution to knowledge within the marketing field, Nicholson et al. (2018) contends that there are a number of different types and strategies. They define a contribution as a *"deliberate form of rhetorical approach used by authors to communicate the distinctive value of their written works to an audience"* (Nicholson et al., 2018: 1). Their systematic review of wider marketing studies claims that a significant contribution to knowledge can be achieved through a *revelatory* contribution. They adopt, Corley and Giola's (2011: 201) definition of a *revelatory* contribution where "*theory reveals what we otherwise had not seen, known, or conceived*".

Under a revelatory contribution, the current study intends to challenge fundamental assumptions of client-agency trust within dominant discourse in order to generate client-agency trust theory suitable for digital marketing contexts. Nicholson et al. (2018) contend that this is achievable through *problematisation* strategies and methodology, a term lent from Alvesson and Sandberg (2011). In their piece, *Generating Research Questions Through Problematization,* Alvesson and Sandberg (2011), argue that original contributions to

knowledge are created through problematisation, which aims to identify and challenge assumptions that underpin existing theory within a field. They introduce five core typologies of assumptions that exist, advising that one assumption type should be challenged for more deliberate and systematic inquiry. Key assumption typologies are outlined within Table 3.

Assumption Typology	Overview
In-House	Shared and unproblematic assumptions within a particular school of thought.
Root Metaphor	Assumptions regarding broader images and cultural frames of meaning.
Paradigm	Ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions.
Ideology	Assumptions regarding broader values and belief systems.
Field	Assumptions regarding a specific subject matter but debated through various, often antagonistic, schools of thought.

Table 3. Alvesson and Sandbergs (2011) typology of assumptions

A systematic review of contemporary client-agency literature in Chapter Two indicates that there are shared and prevalent in-house assumptions where client-agency trust is *relational* and founded upon *rationality* and *epistemic rationality*. This is due to a dependency upon knowledge sharing theory (Mola et al. 2017), signalling theory (Pedeliento et al., 2017) and social exchange theories (Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014), between the client and agent. Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) note the deliberative and systematic process of challenging extant in-house assumptions by *exposing* them and making *alternative* assumptions in a meaningful way to an audience. This is so that interesting research questions may be created in order to guide the research contribution. Key stages of this process, adopted within the current study, are highlighted in Table 4.

Stage of Problematisation (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011: 260)	Evidence within the current study
Identify a domain of literature - Sourcing and analysing a delimited and narrower body of relevant, recent	A systematic literature review of client-agency trust studies from Marketing, Digital Marketing, Public Relations, Advertising and Business-related

and influential studies within the domain. This should be supplemented by broader theoretical reading.	fields is undertaken in Chapter Two. Broader trust philosophy literatures are also consulted.
Identifying and articulating assumptions – i.e. *What in-house assumptions exist? Who are prevalent authors?* Hermeneutical and in-depth reading is required in order to understand why assumptions are worthy of further problematisation.	Dominant assumptions of client-agency trust within the extant literatures indicate that client-agency trust is *relational* despite Chapter One highlighting that other parties are involved within the client-agency trust issue. In-house assumptions regarding client-agency trust show it to be grounded in *rationalism*. Contemporary client agency research does not consider the contextual richness of the digital marketing setting in any great detail. A systematic literature review in Chapter Two identifies that theory has not advanced with advances in the digitisation of the field. More general sociological theory is routinely adopted i.e. *Knowledge-sharing theory* (Mola et al., 2017); *Signalling theory* (Pedeliento et al. 2017); *Social Exchange Theory* (Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014).
Evaluating articulated assumptions - Are assumptions worthy of being challenged?	Key client-agency trust authors such as Keegan et al. (2017) and Taylor (2017) note a dearth of client-agency trust literature considering digital marketing: "*Future research also needs to reflect the changing nature of marketing communications, particularly with the advent of digital, social media and mobile marketing*" (Keegan et al., 2017: 14).
Develop alternative assumptions (against relevant audiences) - Consult alternative data sources. Use them creatively. Identify the unexpected.	Problem building literature in Chapter One highlights the idiosyncratic importance of the digital marketing setting and indicates that traditional client-agency trust mechanisms are not working or well-received within the industry.

	However, assumptions behind the latter are not explored or advanced. The importance of client-agency trust in digital marketing settings needs to be emphasised and advanced.
Relate assumptions to an audience - Define the major audiences that hold challenged assumptions.	Research shows a proclivity towards agent-only empirical accounts. In-house assumptions are *relational* and consider challenges to client-agency trust as internal to the dyadic. However, Chapter One indicates that there is wider stakeholder involvement i.e. trade associations, educators etc. with an interest in standardisation through *rationalist* mechanisms, though this is not reflected in academia.
Evaluate an alternative assumption ground – the alternative assumption ground is interesting and provocative. New assumptions differ from in-house assumptions but are still meaningfully connected. Reveals what was not previously conceivable, known or seen.	The thesis aims to advance understanding of client-agency trust within digital marketing settings by adopting an interpretive and inductive stance to challenge in-house assumptions found within the extant literatures. More specifically, the current study seeks to challenge current rationalist thinking within industry and wider academic field.

Table 4. Problematisation Strategy (Adapted from Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011)

In order to make an original contribution to knowledge, the current study first asks: *How are existing in-house client-agency trust assumptions challenged?* In following Alvesson and Sandbergs (2011) problematisation strategy, a series of dominant assumptions emerge. Dominant discourse suggests that client-agency trust issues derive from knowledge-asymmetry and value assessment issues between the client and agent. This is examined under the multiple lenses of knowledge and social exchange theories (Mola et al., 2017; Jansen Van Rensburg 2014) as well as signalling theory (Pedeliento et al. 2017). Rarely is any consideration granted to the interrelationships between the digital marketing context and the in-house assumptions behind such theories. As such, the current study aims to explore the following: *In what ways*

has the changing nature of the digital marketing landscape influenced perceptions of client-agency mistrust? In order to address this question, in compliance with interpretivist and inductive inquiry, it is pertinent that the research goes behind current assumptions of client-agency trust in order to identify key sources of *digital* marketing client-agency mistrust. As such, the following core question emerges: ***Why is there a perceived lack of digital-marketing client-agency trust?*** This also forms the current studies title and is comprised of the following research questions:

- *What are the key challenges to digital marketing client-agency trust?*
- *Who is contributing to the challenges to digital marketing client-agency trust?*
- *What are the contextual challenges to digital marketing client-agency trust?*

In answering the current studies research questions, an original theoretical contribution to knowledge can be made in three distinct ways. *First*, the current study will add to the body of client-agency trust research by challenging in-house assumptions present within client-agency literature. Here, dominant *rationalist* and *relational* assumptions of client-agency trust are challenged, when framed against the distinctive volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous characteristics of the digital marketing *ecosystem*. Second, the current study makes an original claim to knowledge by placing the power of an *Internet Oligopoly* (*IO*) upon the digital marketing ecosystem (*IO-dominated ecosystem*) and client-agency trust relationship. Here, the current study argues that the presence of an *IO* challenges trust in digital marketing *knowledge*, *benchmarks*, *attribution* and *accountability*, with wider ramifications upon perceptions of client-agency trust. Finally, by interrelating findings from each of the research questions, an original *BAAKE* conceptual framework is developed, outlined in Figure 4.
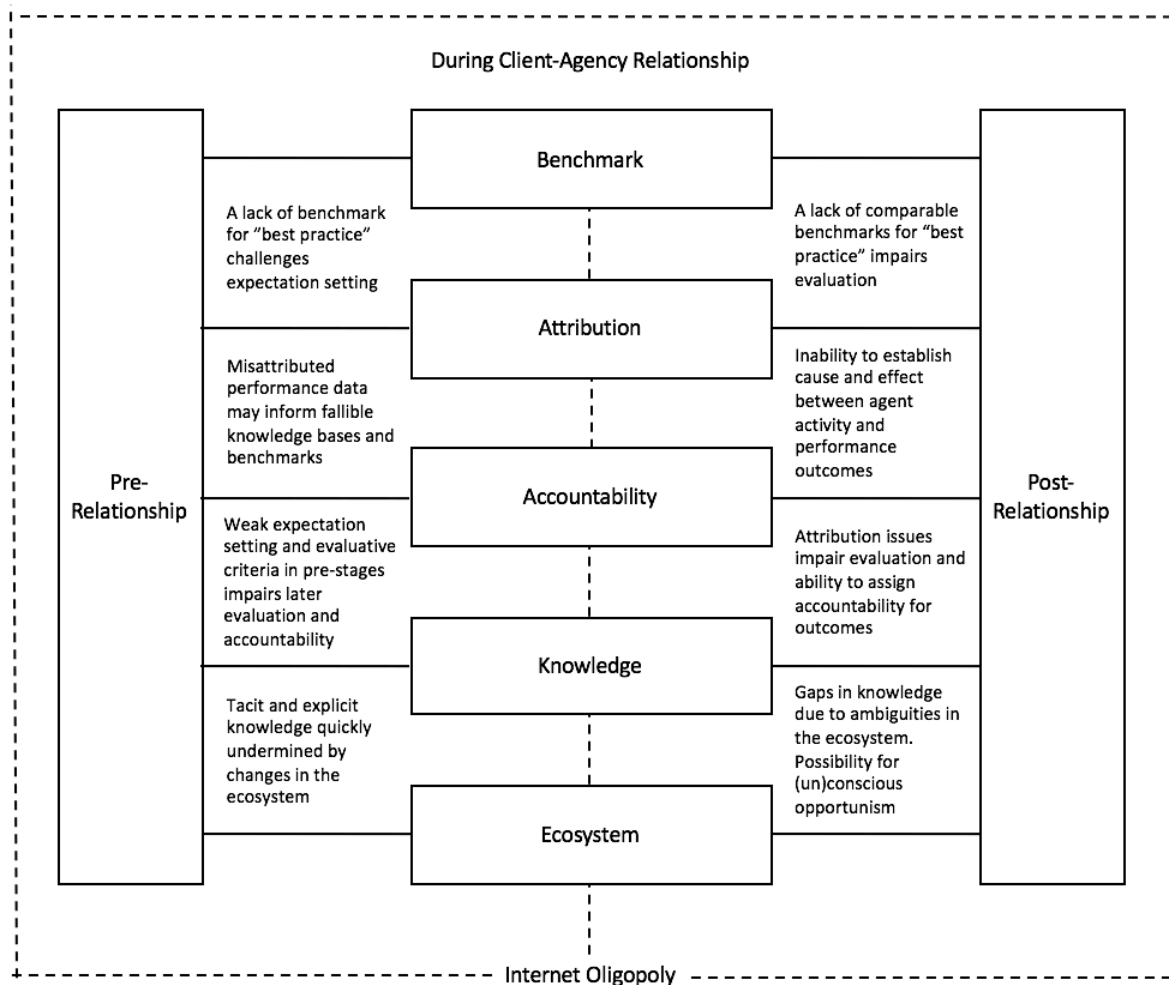
Figure 4. BAAKE Conceptual Framework

The thesis and framework aim to shine a light upon contemporary client-agency trust issues across the client-agency relationship lifecycle. A unique approach to collecting empirical data, (comprising various stakeholders within the digital marketing context, such as educators, trainers, lawyers and procurement managers, amongst others), suggests that the framework has applicability to them and their importance across differing stages of the client-agency relationship lifecycle. Findings are pertinent for client-agency relationships within a digital marketing context but also for those analogous client-agency sectors becoming more dependent upon online communications. Such industries include traditional Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations.

Reference to the research questions will be carried through each of the chapters in order to remain close to the context of the current study and its research problem. A brief summary of each chapter within the thesis is outlined within the following sub-section.

1.4   Thesis Structure

Chapter One has provided an overview of the research context and phenomenon as well as the overarching research aim, objectives and questions. In order to introduce additional structure to the current study (Paltridge, 2002), a clear breakdown of each chapter is provided:

Chapter 2 – *Literature Review.* Split into two parts, part one provides a brief definition of the trust concept derived from trust philosophy literature. Part-two details secondary findings and assumptions within the client-agency trust debate, derived from contemporary client-agency trust research. This is undertaken through the adoption of a systematic literature review strategy. Key constructs derived from the literature include *knowledge asymmetry; knowledge sharing; value assessments; evaluative criteria.*

Chapter 3 – *Methodology.* An evaluation of core philosophical paradigms most suitable to the current studies research phenomenon is provided. This is followed by a discussion of research methods and data collection tools most suitable for exploring the current studies research questions. A critical appraisal and detailed defence of interpretivist approaches are made.

Chapter 4 – *Research Implementation*. A detailed overview of the implementation of the key methods and tools outlined within the Methodology, Chapter Three. Key limitations of implementation are addressed. Step-by-step details of the inductive thematic data analysis process is also provided. Key insights into the specificities of coding are made. Limitations encountered during the coding process are appraised.

Chapter 5 – *Findings.* An overview of the thematic categories that emerged from the data relative to the current studies research questions are presented. Key empirical evidence is integrated within the chapter, comprised of participant quotes. Key thematic categories emerged from participant accounts include *Knowledge, Benchmark, Internet Oligopoly, Ecosystem, Attribution, Accountability* and *Perception Gap.*

Chapter 6 – *Discussion of Findings.* Literature sourced via a systematic literature review in Chapter Two is revisited in order to align empirical findings from the current study with current assumptions and understanding of client-agency trust within the wider field of knowledge.

Chapter 7 – *Conclusions.* A detailed reflection upon the current studies original contribution to knowledge is made. An original BAAKE conceptual framework is presented. Limitations of the overall study and recommendations for future research are are also offered.

2 Chapter Two: Literature Review

Thus far, problem framing literature in Chapter One, has highlighted an issue with client-agency trust within a digital marketing context (Ramsey, 2018). The current chapter offers a review of relevant academic client-agency trust literature in order to theoretically sensitise and situate the phenomenon in wider research.

The literature review assumes four key objectives: 1) to establish a research strategy pertaining to effective investigation of secondary data (Johnston, 2014); 2) to demonstrate that a wide range of relevant literature and resulting themes have been critically evaluated (Hart, 1998); 3) to identify gaps in current understanding within a body of knowledge (Muller-bloch and Kranz, 2015); 4) to problematise key assumptions within the extant literatures (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). Such literature is defined as:

> "*available documents (both published and unpublished) on the topic, which contain information, ideas, data and evidence from a particular standpoint to fulfil certain aims or express certain views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated*" (Hart, 1998: 13).

Before the preliminary literature review can progress, further justification regarding the current studies literature review strategy is discussed within the following sub-section.

2.1 The Literature Review Strategy

In order to make the literature review process more intelligible and transparent to the reader, Grant and Booth (2009) suggest that there are varying typologies of literature review strategies that can be adopted for clearer exculpation of literature review findings. An illustrative list of seven common qualitative approaches identified within business research methods literature, is identified in Table 5.

Qualitative Reviews	Advantages	Disadvantages
Meta-ethnography	Determining interrelationships between studies. Translating concepts into other homogeneous	Attempts to homogenise insights may make for limited debate.

	concepts, in order to interpret new meaning. Meta-ethnography attempts to resolve any contradictions within the secondary data.	
(Britten et al., 2002)		
Thematic Synthesis (Thomas and Harden, 2008).	Identifying recurring and salient themes through systematic coding of data and analytical themes within the secondary data.	Thematic processes can often be overly descriptive.
Narrative Review (Demiris, et al. 2019)	Synthesis of both quantitative and qualitative research, offering a comprehensive overview of the field related literature. Seeks to identify a gap within the literatures.	The process is not entirely rigorous as criteria for inclusion of studies are not required to be specified. The process is open to bias.
Meta-synthesis (Walsh and Downe, 2005)	Reinterprets insights from many qualitative studies in order to generate new meaning.	Only qualitative studies are sourced and analysed. Limitations are imposed by a lack of methodological integration within the early stages of a research project.
Scoping Review (Pham et al., 2014)	Preliminary review in order to map all studies related to a particular topic. Aims to identify the extent of what is known within a particularly large and diverse field.	There is a risk of a high level analysis of extant literature.
Systematic Review (Robinson and Lowe, 2015)	The scope is identified before the literature review commences, where research questions are often used as guidance. Seeks rigour and can be replicated. Best suited to examining multiple research questions.	Considered to be too objective at times. Discussion of criteria is open to bias without appropriate justification. Clear inclusion/exclusion criteria have the potential to restrict studies. Narrowly defined research

		questions can offer narrowly defined insights.
Argumentative Review (Acob et al., 2019)	Selective review of literature in order to refute specific arguments within the field.	Requires the author to have an established argument prior to entering into a review of literature. There may be lots of assumption on behalf of the author, where a potential for bias is high.

Table 5. Differing Qualitative Literature Review Strategies

Within *Trust and Distrust Definitions: One Bite at a Time*, Information Scientists and trust researchers, McKnight and Chervany (2001: 30), find that trust is a broad and unitary construct, comprised of a "*multiplex of concepts*". Because of this, the SLR approach lends itself well as a literature review methodology, in order to systematically work through a multitude of insights from a number of studies. Elements of thematic analysis are adopted throughout the coding process of secondary data.

Indeed, there is a potential conflict between the qualitative underpinnings of the current study and the adoption of an SLR with positivist roots. However, according to Tranfield et al., (2003) there is still a level of subjective decision making that takes place within the selection of the studies for review. Additionally, they contend that a thorough description of the decision making process and the justification behind exclusion choices must be clear to the reader. As such, a full breakdown of the SLR methodology adopted within the current study is provided in Appendix 2. Due to the varying and complex nature of the trust construct, further discussion of the literature review structure is required, within the following sub-section.

2.2   Literature Review Structure

A number of contemporary client-agency trust studies within digital marketing focus upon traditional conceptualisations of trust and its varying definitions (Dziubaniuk, 2015; Kuzheleva-Sagan and Suchkova, 2016). However, the assumptions behind such borrowed definitions are rarely addressed. A wider review of broader trust philosophy literature suggests

that the concept is nuanced and changeable dependent upon the trust authors school of thought. As such, criticisms of the contemporary client-agency trust literature are raised from the off-set where key assumptions of trust are either contradictory or without real grounding. With this in mind, it is important to go behind the assumptions of client-agency trust and examine the broader trust concept for more meaningful debate. As such, the current chapter is split into two parts as outlined in Figure 5.

Part One: Trust Philosophy Literature

- Trust is an attitude
- Trust is an assessment of claims to being trustworthy i.e. rational, calculative, affective
- Trust is relational
- Trust is future-oriented (fulfilment optional)

Part Two: Contemporary Client-Agency Trust Literature

- Dominant rationalist assumptions i.e. trust is a knowledge asymmetry issue remedied through knowledge exchange and evidence (epistemic rationality)

Figure 5. Part One and Two of the Systematic Literature Review

Part One of the SLR attempts to define the trust concept, considering its broader epistemological and ontological underpinnings. For example, a common and ongoing debate is the difference in trust, dependent upon its rational, calculative or affective properties. This is explored in greater detail within the following sub-sections. Here, a dominant argument considers whether trust is based upon: *evidence* (rational) (Faulkner and Simpson, 2017); a *measured assessment* of another's claims to trust (calculative) (Barbalet, 2005); or simply an *emotional response* to the desired goodwill of another (affective) (Jones, 1996).

Trust definitions derive from prominent trust philosophers such as Hardin (2002), Baier (1986) and Gambetta (2000) amongst other notable trust philosophy authors (80+ notable trust papers

and position pieces were reviewed for part one of the literature review). An SLR of commonly cited trust philosophy literatures present the following themes for further consideration: *trust as a relational construct; trust as an attitude; claims to trust; assessing claims to trust; context for trust.* At this point, a pertinent observation is made about the lack of empirical insight within the trust philosophy literature (Cohen and Dienhart, 2013). As such, part one of the SLR is a useful exercise in building broader trust definitions and identifying assumptions. However, this raises the importance of studying empirically-based client-agency trust research in part two.

Part Two examines the contemporary perspectives of client-agency trust within a digital marketing setting. Insights are also gathered from other analogous fields of research such as Marketing (Chen et al., 2017), Public Relations (Kuzheleva-Sagan and Suchkova, 2016), Business (Bachnik et al., 2017) and Advertising (Neill and Schauster, 2018). However, it is stipulated within the SLR that selected studies should make reference to digital, media or technology in order to align them with the *digital* marketing scope of the current study. Key findings within Part Two suggest that client-agency trust issues are derived from: knowledge asymmetry issues between the client and agent (Chen et al., 2017; Chowdhury et al., 2016; Pedeliento et al., 2017); as well as an inability to assess value, presenting a need for appropriate evaluative criteria (Beachboard, 2017; Dziubaniuk, 2015). With this in mind, contemporary client-agency trust assumptions are heavily grounded in *epistemic rationality*. This is a fundamental part of rationalism, which places evidence and proof at the centre of dominant client-agency discourse. Epistemic rationality is outlined in greater detail in part one of the literature review, which commences in the following sub-section.

2.3   Part One: Trust Philosophy

Due to its perceived social embeddedness in various types of relationships, trust is an extensively debated paradigm within extant literature (Faulkner and Simpson, 2017). Key fields, such as sociology (Fukuyama, 2001), nursing (Goold, 2002) and more recently, organisational behaviour (Cohen and Dienhart, 2013), examine the construct in great detail. Recent debates surrounding General Data Protection Regulation have also reprioritised trust research in contemporary settings (Beke et al., 2018). Because of this, a number of scholarly positions upon the trust concept are found within the literature making it infamously hard to define.

An extensive literature review indicates that trust can have a clustering of meanings, dependent upon its context. For example, Personality Theorists address trust as a positive cognitive state or feeling based upon the goodwill or benevolence of another actor (Cook and Wall, 1980; Whitener et al., 1998). Affective or moralistic undertones are complicit within this view, and commonplace within the trust philosophy literature (Faulkner, 2014). In contrast, Organisational Behaviourists align trust with evidence of expertise, competency or credibility (Ellonen et al., 2008). Arguments relative to the rationality of trust and its functional value in relationships are acknowledged under this view (Goldman, 2001). Because of this, a lack of conceptual clarity or confusion regarding the trust construct is common (Rousseau et al., 1998). Giffin (1967: 104) notes that trust:

> *"has been viewed as a somewhat mystical and intangible factor, probably defying careful definition."*

Widely cited trust philosopher, Gambetta (1988: i) echoes this sentiment with his "*elusive notion of trust*", as well as Metlay's (1999) view of trust as a *conceptual quagmire*. As a result, perceived dissonance between scholars attempting to define the construct is observed within the trust philosophy literature (Seligman, 2000). Conceptualisations of trust vary so extensively that deeper interpretation of each trust definition often shows them to be conflictual or having very little in common. However, through the adoption of a SLR, a composite view of varying trust definitions and assumptions is established. The following important themes are identified: *trust as a relational construct*; *trust as an attitude*; *making the decision to trust*; *claims to trust*; *trust as an assessment*; *context for trust.* They give structure to the following sub-sections.

2.3.1 Trust as a relational construct

In order to examine and explain the concepts more clearly, an uncomplicated trust definition still requires further clarity. Therefore, an uncontroversial but simplifying assumption that, *"A trusts B to do X"* (Cohen and Dienhart, 2013: 2) is adopted. This relational view of trust between two individuals, underpins the majority of the trust definitions within the literatures (Baier, 1986; Cohen and Dienhart, 2013; Mcleod, 1999). *A* is the trustor, *B* is the trustee and *X* is the desired task to be fulfilled (Cohen and Dienhart, 2013). As with other marketing research examining trust, it is useful to adopt the terms "*trustor*" and "*trustee*" when describing parties involved within the trust relationship (Castaldo, 2007: 233). Bachmann and Zaheer (2006: 236)

suggests that *"Designation of the trustor answers the question 'Who trusts?' Designation of the trustee answers the question 'Who is trusted*?'"*.

Whilst not a dominant trust paradigm, other philosophers support the notion of trust as a broader multi-stakeholder issue, where trust perceptions may be influenced by a wider network of actors (Baier, 1986). For example, a number of trust philosophers consider the influence of Institutions and institutional trust (Luhmann, 1979; Ackerman, 2001). However, according to Hardin (2002), in his seminal book *Trust and Trustworthiness,* institutions create a non-relational concept too far removed from the trust relationship under study. In a later work, Hardin (2013) also argues that the study of trust in institutions is not appropriate as an institution is considered to be a faceless system. However, as per the problem building literature outlined within Chapter One, varying trust initiatives introduced by trade associations and regulatory bodies, have extended the trust debate to such institutions. As contended by Hardwig (1991: 707), institutions are not "*people proof*" and suffer the same inalienable trust issues as other relationships. Fundamentally, it is not the trust in the institution that is debated per se, but the what the institution stands for (institutionalised rules, norms and codes of conduct), and its influence upon the construction of trust between *A* and *B*. The same meaning can be inferred upon an agent or an agency. Therefore, under this reasoning, *B* could represent an individual or group.

As such, "*A trusts B to do X"* (Cohen and Dienhart, 2013: 2) is a valuable grounding definition for the themes, ideas and assumptions synthesised within the literature and current chapter. Insights are better visualised within Figure 6. Here, codes abstracted from secondary data analysis are placed against the simplified definition in order to show how the varying perspectives of the trust relationship change dependent upon the philosophical position adopted. Such paradigmatic assumptions and constructs are explored within the following sub-sections.
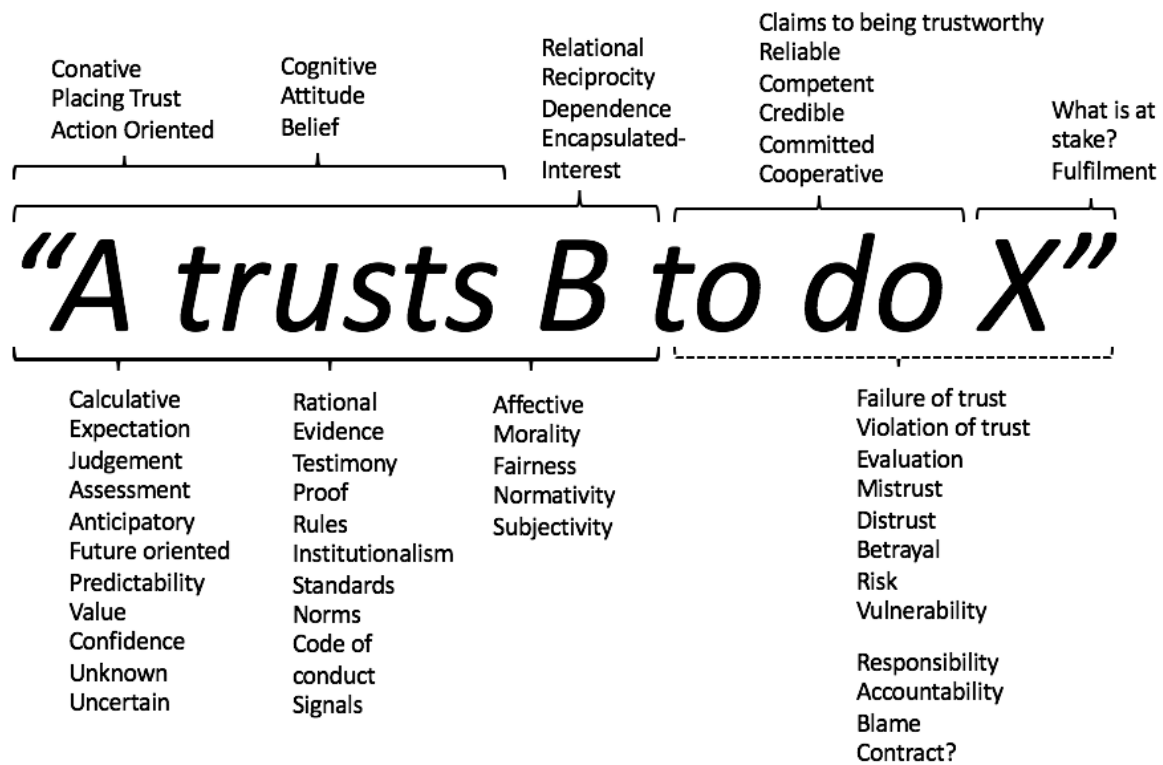
Figure 6. Trust Definition - A trusts B to do X (Sources: Various)

2.3.2 Trust as an Attitude

A fundamental view of trust within the literature is that it is an attitude or cognitive belief evoked within the trustor (Becker, 1996). Thus, trust is a powerful system of values, assumptions and ideas about *B* and their perceived likelihood of being able to fulfil *X* (Washington, 2013). Trust philosophers, such as Karen Jones (1996) note the emotional response harboured within Trustor *A*, thus positioning trust as an affective attitude or feeling (Jones, 1996). Whilst much time has been spent debating this within the literature, a more meaningful interpretation of trust considers not only what trust *is* i.e. an emotion or cognitive state, but what influences its construction or dissolution. In other words, *why does A trust B to do X?* and *what contributes to A's decision to trust or not trust B?* The comprehensive SLR identifies that trust beliefs or expectations are informed by *Bs* claims to being worthy of *A's* trust (O'Neill, 2018), and *A*'s assessment of *B*'s claims (Goldman, 2001). Both themes are explored within the following sub-sections.

2.3.3 Claims to Trust

A common topic of discussion within the trust philosophy literature is the key difference between trust and trustworthiness (Mcleod, 2015). In an important piece by Trust Philosopher,

Onora Oneill (2018), *Linking Trust to Trustworthiness,* she espouses that the study of trust is only valuable when directed at those who are deemed trustworthy. This offers a certain criticality to the way in which *A* constructs trust perceptions of *B*. Most importantly, it gives credence to the conative decision making process regarding another's trustworthiness, and whether trust can be intelligently placed. In other words, *what contributing factors make B worthy of trust?* O'Neill (2018) highlights the important step of understanding *trust claims*.

Key themes derived from the SLR highlight a number of claims to trustworthiness. In *Trust and Belief: A preemptive Reasons Account*, Keren (2014: 2609) contends that beliefs regarding another's trustworthiness are attuned to claims of "*relevant competence, goodwill, and responsiveness*". For example, *A* trusts *B* if they believe that *B* possesses the relevant competency to fulfil *X*. Similarly, O'Neill (2018: 293) links trustworthiness to claims of "*honesty, competency and reliability*". This also shows how trust is not generally agreed to be one particular thing, but that it is hugely dependent upon what is important to trustor *A*.

Prominent authors, such as Hardin (2002) address the importance of trust claims as a basis for making appropriate trust assessments and judgements of *B* and their ability to fulfil *X*. Interpretation of trust claims give credence to understanding trust as a three-part relation, emphasising the *X* element of "*A trusts B to do X*" (Cohen and Dienhart, 2013: 2). In other words, is *B* perceived to be competent (Cogley, 2012)/credible (Dasgupta, 2000)/expert (Goldman, 2001), enough to fulfil *X?*

Upon recognising the importance of trust claims, a key narrative shared across much of the trust literature is that trust is dependent upon the capacity for *A* to "*form judgements or assessments of others and their future actions*" (Barbalet, 2005: 9). With this in mind, some disagreement emerges regarding the temporal nature of trust. For example, Barbalet (2005) argues that it is only possible to know if *A* was right to trust *B* by determining whether trustee, *B,* fulfilled their claims to trustworthiness and trustor, *A's*, expectation. Under this view "*if S acts as A expects, S will have proved trustworthy*" (Faulkner, 2014: 16). As such, trust becomes a future-bound expectation based upon available evidence to support assessments. Conversely, Friedrich and Southwood (2011) suggests that trust is something you place in someone to fulfil a desired outcome, therefore it is something that is constructed prior to the completion of a task. Whilst seemingly at the opposing end of a timeline (as something predictive or something confirmed), both trust conceptions can be better understood under the epistemological concept

of assessment. In other words, trust is a judgement of another before, during or after a trust relationship. This prevalent concept is explored within the following sub-sections.

2.3.4 Assessing Trust Claims

A lack of congruence between *A's* ability to assess and judge *B's* claims to trustworthiness reflects a long held phenomenon within the literature (Dougherty, 2014). A fundamental issue with trustworthiness and the ability to trust, is that claims to trust are not easily assessed, often rendering trust judgement fallible or unreliable (O'Neill, 2018). As such, in assessing the trustworthiness of *B,* there is a need to investigate how trust is measured. However, due to the subjective and complex nature of trust there is no reliable measurement or metric for trust (Castelfranchi and Falcone, 2000). Indeed, there are more empirical observations to trust, such as someone's willingness to act on their trust assessment and forge a relationship or cooperate with another. With this in mind, trust is considered to be founded upon an assessment or subjective probability of another's claim to trust (Gambetta, 2000). In other words, it is important to consider how *A* may subjectively measure the reliability of *B's* claims to trust i.e for *A* to trust that *B* is an expert, the expert construct in *B's* claim of expertise would need investigating. *A* may question *what it means to be an expert? How A can measure B's expertise?*

The SLR of trust philosophy literature denotes that trust assessments differ depending upon the paradigmatic assumptions adopted by the trustor. In particular three key approaches to judging trustworthiness emerge, as explored within the following sub-sections: *Rational Assessments* (Faulkner and Simpson, 2017); *Calculative Assessments* (Barbalet: 2005); *Affective Assessments* (Faulkner, 2007). Such assessments are incredibly important to the current study as they comprise the broader in-house assumptions and schools of thought that underpin pertinent studies within contemporary client-agency trust literature in part two of the current chapter.

2.3.4.1 Rational Trust

Rational assessments of trust appear to be the most common type of assessment throughout the trust philosophy literature (Simpson, 2012; Cohen and Dienhart, 2013; Wanderer and Townsend, 2013). For example, Faulkner and Simpson (2017) address the rationalist trust debate, suggesting that trust is often based upon epistemic rationality and plausible evidence

(Kolodny, 2005). Under this view, proof gives trustors rational justification to believe or act upon the trustees claims to trustworthiness (Faulkner and Simpson, 2017; Ackerman, 2001).

The defining aspect of rationalist assessment within the literature is *evidence* (Cohen and Dienhart, 2013). McMyler (2017, in Faulkner and Simpson, 2017: 9) calls this the "*evidentialist constraint*", where "*it is rational for A to trust B to φ [X] only if, on A's total evidence, it is likely that B will φ [X]*". Rationalist views of trust are positioned under the doctrine of evidentialism, which considers a "*primary set of norms governing the rational propriety of cognitive attitudes*" (Wanderer and Townsend, 2013: 2). Evidence within the trust philosophy literature is often referenced as *grounds, signals* or *bases* of trust (Barbalet, 2005). They are often comprised of rules and norms derived from voluntary affiliation with a number of social systems, such as accreditation and qualification, amongst many others. It is theorised that perceptions of trust improve by way of the trustees association with such systems. i.e *A trusts B's competency because B has formally passed a minimum standard of competency*.

Criticisms of the evidentialist view are common within the trust philosophy literature, however. For example, Barbalet (2005) criticises the evidentialist view as being a form of fabricated rationality, which lures the trustee into believing that evidence is suitable for predicting future outcomes. Barbalets (2005) argument is founded upon the view that the future is never certain so evidence from past events is not appropriate for future-oriented trust. Despite this, it is reckoned that some evidence is still preferable to no evidence at all (O'Neill, 2018).

Additionally, an evidentialist ideal is raised by Wanderer and Townsend (2013) where it is assumed that actors are capable of rational thinking; in possession of the right evidence; and in a secure enough position to engage with continual review of available evidence. This suggests that the trustee is skilled and knowledgeable enough to discern appropriate evidence from inappropriate evidence in order to make necessary assessments (Cohen and Dienhart, 2013). Therefore, Dougherty (2014) argues that evidentialism is not about the objectivity of the evidence available but the constitutive logic and reasoning of the trustor. In other words, is the trustor able to think rationally enough to feel justified in their "*epistemically appropriate belief*" (Dougherty, 2014: 99)? Because trust assessments are often made in asymmetric environments where appropriate information is not always available, onus is placed upon the subjective calculative capabilities of the trustor (Dougherty (2014). Calculative trust is examined further within the following sub-section.

2.3.4.2 Calculative Trust

Calculative trust is regarded as the process by which the trustee makes an assessment of the potential benefits and losses of deciding to trust or not trust another (Barbalet, 2005). Such calculations may be based upon perceived levels of risk (Barbalet, 2005) or expected economic return (Cohen and Dienhart, 2013). This is regularly discussed under the construct of subjective probability within extant trust literatures (Gambetta, 1988; Hardin, 2002). Gambetta, 1988: 217) define subjective probability as the process by which:

> *"an agent assesses that another agent or group of agents will perform a particular action, both before he can monitor such action (or independently of his capacity ever to be able to monitor it) and in a context in which it affects his own action."*

In Gambetta's (2000: 216) seminal piece *Can we Trust Trust?,* he argues that the notion of a subjective probability imposes a *"particular level"* of trustworthiness one should be aware of. This is also referred to as a *"standard estimate"* of trustworthiness by Coleman (1990: 104) or a *"threshold level"* of epistemic trust by Daukas (2006: 110). However, such thresholds are often unknown or not addressed within trust philosophy literatures (Barbalet, 2005). This is likely because trust metrics are hard to find within trust literatures (Castelfranchi and Falcone, 2000). More affirmative measures of trust do not exist within the literatures analysed within the SLR, beyond that of subjective probability.

Criticisms of subjective probability derive from the perspective that the trustor may not always possess the ability of good judgement (Baier, 1986). D'Cruz (2018: 248) extends this idea, positioning trust as an assessment of competency and reliability but also the *"the reliability of the trustee's self-assessments"*. Thus, parallels between rational and calculative trust assessments are made. Silvers and Francis (2005) criticise calculative assessments of trust questioning whether this view suggests that trustors without the ability to make calculative assessments are not capable of trusting. A wider review of the trust literature shows that the decision to trust is sometimes without a calculative or rational reason (Barbalet, 2005). This opens up the debate to affective trust, explored within the following sub-section.

2.3.4.3 *Affective Trust*

Varying perspectives of trust assessments within the trust philosophy literature, point towards assessments of anothers trustworthiness, as being based upon emotion (Aitken et al., 2016). This is typically discussed in direct opposition of calculative and rational assessments of trust (Coeckelbergh, 2012). For example, Faulkner (2007: 314) positions affective assessments of trust as non-empirical or without the need for evidence. Renowned affective Trust Philosopher Karen Jones (1996) criticises attempts to reconcile trust with rationalist views, suggesting that we are often abject to trust others based upon the view that people are largely positive about anothers good will. Under this view, Jones (1996) assumes that trustees are moved by the trust placed in them and thus willing to put their trustors interest above their own. This reflects a common view of trust within the trust philosophy literature called *encapsulated-interest* (Hardin, 2002). Here, the trustor and trustee attempt to align interests as a mutual show of commitment towards an end goal. However, Mcleod (2015) argues that such as view is overly ideological where personal interests of the trustor and trustee may be asymmetric. Jones (1996: 4) view of affective trust is most commonly cited when defining affective trust:

> "*the expectation that the one trusted will be directly and favourably moved by the thought that we are counting on her.*"

This view of trust is often depicted as being based upon involuntary emotions or feelings of positivity, confidence and a general trusting disposition. As such, it is important to highlight the subjectivity of the affective concept. Because of this, critics of this view contest affective assessments of gut-feel or overly normative beliefs and heuristics, which are often irrational or unfounded (Mcleod, 2015). Cogley (2012: 31) finds that such conceptions are more suitable to normatively constituted *"relationships like friendship, romantic partnerships, and parenting"*. Thus, the affective trust argument is arguably more suitable to the study of interpersonal relationships and not necessarily business-to-business relationships, as with the current study. This raises the important but often overlooked conditions and context for trust (D'Cruz, 2018), examined within the following sub-section.

2.3.5   Context for Trust

The SLR identifies that extant trust philosophy literatures offer little attention to the context in which client-agency trust relationships are constructed. That being said, some of the newer

trust philosophy research places precedence upon the domain in which the trust-relation exists. For example, Dietz and Den Hartog (2006) identify the environments in which trust relationships take place, as being a critical influence upon the trustor and trustee relationship. D'Cruz (2015) is one of few to discuss the importance of understanding the system in which trust is studied and how this may influence trust judgements and decisions to trust. They emphasise a domain view of the three-part relation in order to address the importance of context at a more fundamental level:

> "*context dependency is what we should expect when we reflect on the essential purposes that trust serves for finite beings. Trust extends agency and affords reassurance in the relevant domain. The fundamental notion of trust is 'X trusts Y in domain of interaction D.*" (D'Cruz, 2018: 243)

Attempts to define the trust phenomenon in a digital marketing domain more clearly, introduce a gap between traditional conceptualisations of trust and contemporary trust issues. In her piece, *Defining Trust and e-Trust*, Taddeo (2011: 2), discusses the chasm between "*the old problems of trust*" relative to the emergence of new trust problems in contemporary digitised environments. Particularly within the field of digital marketing, scholars have struggled to find a *"single trust model that could be applied to various areas of marketing*" (Doligalski, 2015: 108). Such a notion has become more problematic in a digital marketing landscape characterised by its fragmented "*context, firm size, the nature of the customer base and the type of strategic or tactical projects"* (Quinn et al., 2016: 2124). As such, the trust concept within this domain demands further critical inquiry in part two of the literature review chapter.

2.4   Part Two: Client-Agency Trust in Digital Marketing

Beyond the philosophical underpinnings of trust, the construct of client-agency trust is explored more specifically, throughout part two of the literature review. Insights are derived from contextually relevant and contemporary client-agency trust studies, as part of a systematic review of literature. This is so that weight can be given to the domain specific concept of client-agency trust and the ways in which the phenomenon is approached from an empirical standpoint. Key paradigmatic assumptions and definitions raised within part one of the literature review are adopted, in order to give meaning to broader client-agency trust arguments

and schools-of-thought within extant research. This serves to highlight how diverse, and sometimes ill-founded, current debate is.

The systematic review of contemporary client-agency trust research within part two, has been undertaken with a prerequisite that all studies address digital, media and/or technology. A total of 40 studies focussing upon client-agency trust in contemporary and digitised environments were sourced. A summary of findings from all 40 studies is provided in Appendix 1. Figure 7. provides a high level overview of the SLR process. A detailed overview of the SLR process adopted is found in Appendix 2. From a thorough analysis of literature within Nvivo (a preferred computer-assisted qualitative analysis software), 908 analytical codes were identified, with 1330 references within the literature. Codes make reference to the various interpretations, ideas, theories, assumptions and ideologies within the literatures (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011).
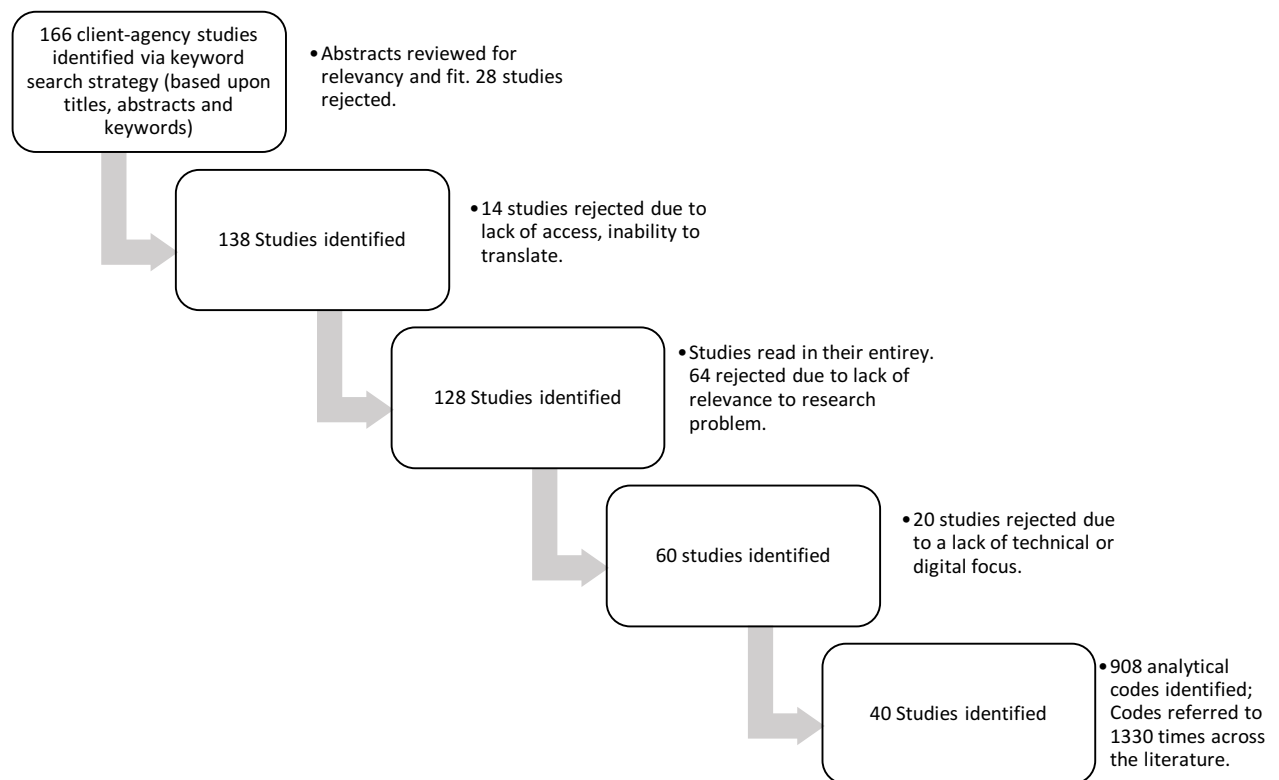
Figure 7. Part Two Literature Review study selection.

Findings from the SLR are grouped into two core themes with an invariable cross over. They include client-agency trust problems derived from: *knowledge asymmetry* and *evaluation issues.* They are connected because at some point in the debate, clients are unable to assess the value of client-agency knowledge exchange; where evaluation is perceived to be impaired, due to a lack of evaluative criteria and appropriate evidence.

Under *knowledge asymmetry* issues, there is a general agreement that the contemporary client-agency relationship is becoming more complex in light of advances in industry (Gijic, Dimitrijevic and Jovic, 2014; Reyes, 2015; Sanchez and Fernandez-Cavia, 2018). As such, recommendations for greater knowledge exchange are prevalent in debate (Chen, Chen and Wu, 2017; Geneste and Galvin, 2013; Kolbjørnsrud, 2017; Ots and Nyilasy, 2015; Parasarathy and Forlani, 2016). With this in mind, a common solution is greater co-creation, collaboration, cooperation and co-innovation between the client and agent (Chowdhury, Gruber and Zolkiewski, 2016; Gambetti, Biraghi, Schultz and Graffigna, 2016; Laurie and Mortimer, 2019; Masiello, Marasco, Izzo and Amato, 2014; Neill and Schauster, 2018; Ponder, Holloway and Hansen, 2016). However, Part Two also considers possible barriers to this including *the problem with self-serving biases; siloed work practices;* and *a lack of resource,* plus many others.

Another prevalent theme considers client-agency *evaluation issues* as a key contributor to client-agency mistrust. Here, it is argued that clients are unable to make appropriate trust assessments of their agency and so struggle to see their value (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar, 2015). Within the literatures, perceived value is a broad term, which comprises the clients assessment of the agents reputation, credibility, quality, accountability and expertise, amongst many other trust claims (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, Zabkar and Diamantopoulos, 2019; Bachnik, Nowacki and Szopinski, 2017; Dornas, Carvalho de Mesquita and Patrocinio, 2014; Levin, Thaichon and Quach, 2016; Levin, Thaichon, Quach and Lobo, 2017). Key barriers to effective evaluation derive from difficulty in measurement, assessment and weak metrics (Hand, Samra-Fredericks and Pick, 2014; Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016; Keegan, Rowley and Tonge, 2017; Moraru, 2017; O'Connor, Koslow, Kilgour and Sasser, 2016; Vercic, Tench and Vercic, 2018). Additionally, a prevalent argument considers a lack of best practice criteria, signals and evaluation criteria (Beachboard, 2017; Dziubaniuk, 2015; Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014; Pedeliento, Andreini, Bergamaschi and Klobas, 2017; Seres-Huszarik, Jozsa and Toth, 2017). It is believed that this has wider ramifications upon objective setting and evaluation

throughout the client-agency relationship (Patti, Hartley, Van Dessel and Baac, 2017; Turnbull, 2016). This comprises a dominant and more compelling argument within contemporary debate, which suggests that contemporary client-agency relationships are heavily dependent upon rationalist trust mechanisms in order to make appropriate trust assessments.

The remainder of part two considers contextual factors of the digital marketing client-agency relationship, which comprises themes of multi-stakeholder trust (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017; Strauss, 2018) beyond the client-agency dyadic, as well as the richer spatial and temporal factors of the client-agency trust issue. More specifically, the SLR finds that the digital environment, comprised of rapidly evolving and opaque abstract internet systems, is making the client-agency trust relationship more complex (Gijic, Dimitrijevic and Jovic, 2014; Reyes, 2015; Sanchez and Fernandez-Cavia, 2018).

Findings are discussed in greater detail in the following sub-sections, commencing with a deeper examination of knowledge asymmetry issues.

2.4.1.1   *Knowledge Asymmetry as a key contributor to client-agency mistrust*

A deeper analysis of the client-agency trust literature reinforces the importance and value of digital marketing knowledge to the client-agency trust debate (Geneste and Galvin, 2013; Chen et al., 2017). Digital marketing is presented as a *knowledge intensive business service* where digital marketing knowledge is a scarce and valued commodity (Lessard and Okaku, 2016; Masiello et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2017). As defined by Boudreau et al. (2007: 1128) knowledge scarcity is "*the extent to which the knowledge required to accomplish a transaction is rare*". Interestingly, Reyes (2015) challenges this notion suggesting that there is an abundance of publicly available information to clients, on public domains, that discusses digital marketing best practice. As such, it is useful to distinguish between two different types of digital marketing knowledge (Lessard and Okakwu, 2016). In their study of *Trust and knowledge acquisition by small and medium-sized firms in weak client–firm exchange relationships*, Geneste and Galvin (2013) contend that there are two core knowledge types within client-agency settings: *tacit* knowledge, where knowledge is embedded in learnt and experienced processes; and *explicit* knowledge, where knowledge is publicly available to the client. They argue that "*weak client–firm exchange relationships are capable only of transferring explicit knowledge*" (Geneste and Galvin, 2013: 282).

Generally, tacit knowledge is discussed as being scarce because it is *specialist* or *expert* digital marketing knowledge, thus, a desirable attribute of an agent (Chen et al., 2017). Expert knowledge is something that can be communicated by agents, to clients, as a claim to trustworthiness (Dziubaniuk, 2015; Reyes, 2015). Likewise, demonstration of expert knowledge implies a certain competency within a specialist area (Levin et al., 2017; Bachnik et al., 2017). More specific references to tacit knowledge also include knowledge of creative processes (Hand et al., 2014) and performance data (Patti et al., 2017). Thus, key constructs of digital marketing expertise and competence are tied into conceptualisations of client-agency trust.

Such knowledge is considered to be incredibly hard to transfer between clients and agents where knowledge is embedded in intangible process (Geneste and Galvin, 2013). Reference to the intangibility of tacit knowledge is often addressed throughout the literature as with Lessard and Okakwu (2016), Mola et al. (2017) and Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar (2015). Pedeliento et al. (2017) adopt the term *credence* as a naming convention for intangible marketing services. They argue that knowledge is a core resource of credence services, often encoded in complex activity and information, which can be difficult for a client to "*understand and evaluate*" (Pedeliento et al. 2017: 1084). This gives way to a compounding client-agency trust issue within the literatures, which suggests that a core client-agency trust issue derives from a knowledge asymmetry between the client and agent (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017; Pedeliento et al., 2017; Mortimer and Laurie, 2017; Chowdhury et al., 2016). A client-agency trust issue emerges where pertinent knowledge is not shared between clients and agents upon entering into a relationship.

According to Chen et al. (2017), asymmetric knowledge relationships indicate that there is an unequal balance of power and relationship benefits between the client and agent. Such understanding regarding knowledge asymmetry is uncontroversial within the contemporary literature. There is much agreement that asymmetry can result in opportunistic behaviours in client-agent relationships (Chowdhury et al.,2016). Examples of opportunism include practitioners encouraging clients to opt for services, which are unnecessary and against their better knowledge (Schauster and Neill, 2017). As such, researchers have spent a significant amount of time studying how asymmetries may be reduced for a more amicable and trusting client-agency relationship. A dominant view within the contemporary literatures, suggests that

trust may be built or repaired through information or knowledge exchange (Lessard and Okakwu, 2016; Milan et al., 2015; Mola et al., 2017; Mortimer and Laurie, 2017). However, findings within the SLR findings suggest that this is increasingly hard to do in client-agency settings as outlined within the following sub-section.

2.4.1.2 *Challenges to Knowledge Exchange between the client-agent*

Knowledge exchange is a commonly recommended remedy for addressing asymmetry and improving client-agency trust within near all of the literature (Kolbjornsud, 2017; Mortimer and Laurie, 2017; Pedeliento et al., 2017; Mola et al., 2017). The concept is also referred to as *knowledge transfer* or *knowledge sharing* within some studies, with Mola et al. (2017: 1285), introducing a specific "*knowledge sharing theory*". However, little attention is granted to the theory within their study. Instead the theory is discussed on a more conceptual level as with Neill and Schauster (2018: 145), who define knowledge sharing as the "*sharing of ideas or resources*". For the most part, knowledge and information sharing are aligned with more affective concepts of reciprocity (Kolbjornsud, 2017), mutuality (Levin et al., 2016) as well as constructs of collaboration, cooperation, communication and co-innovation (Chowdhury et al., 2016; Gambetti et al., 2016; Laurie and Mortimer, 2019; Masiello et al., 2014; Neill and Schauster, 2018; Ponder, et al., 2016).

Dziubaniuk (2015) contends that knowledge sharing also includes the mutual sharing of expectations, values and risk. The benefits of which are perceived to be increases in competitive advantage, lowered transaction costs, increased investment and shared trade insights (Chen et al., 2017). Geneste and Galvin (2013) also discuss the value of knowledge as a resource, or something to be relinquished and exchanged as a symbolic show of trust between clients and agents. However, it seems simply suggesting more knowledge exchange as a remedy to knowledge asymmetry is not without its challenges when considering relational challenges to the client-agency relationship. They include: *siloed work practices; self-serving biases; the view that too much knowledge is counterproductive; the view that exchange may not be possible despite the best efforts of the client and agent; the problem with exchanging tacit knowledge; the problem where perceived value of exchange may be low.* They are explored in greater detail throughout the current sub-section.

In Neill and Schausters (2018) ethnographic study of clients and agents within communications industries, distrust is derived from a lack of communication between clients and agents. They identify that clients and agencies often *work in silo* without sharing important information, ideas or resources. Similar observations are found across other contemporary studies (Gambetti et al., 2016; Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). This may be intentional, as argued in Mortimer and Lauries (2017) qualitative study, *Partner or supplier: An examination of client/agency relationships in an IMC context.* Here, they identify that clients and agents may not choose to be symmetric in their exchange of power and information, therefore resulting in distrust (Mortimer and Laurie, 2017). A more recent work by Mortimer and Laurie (2019), evolves this view, where clients perceive agencies to be their suppliers in place of their business partner, and express reluctance to sharing important information about their brand. This suggests that clients intentionally withhold important information to the detriment of the client-agency relationship.

Whilst Mortimer and Laurie (2019) adopt a more deliberate view of the client-agency trust issue (where the client intentionally and knowingly withholds key information), Ots and Nyilasy (2015) argue knowledge asymmetries are likely unintentional. They espouse that reduction of knowledge asymmetries between clients and agents is a normative ideal, where divergent synergies between both parties are unavoidable. According to Ots and Nyilasy (2015), clients and agents possess an invariable and non-malicious self-serving interest, which considers personal value maximisation as a business priority. They note the following four discrepancies between clients and agents, which often result in communication breakdowns: "*divergent units of analysis, incommensurability, self-serving biases, and abstractness*" (Ots and Nyilasy (2015: 132). They argue that divergent units of analysis and incommensurability may naturally derive from two very different business models, the clients and agents, coming together to work as one. Abstractness indicates that the client or agent rarely reflects upon possible source of conflicts, thus letting their problems escalate. A mental model theory is introduced, which supposes that clients and agents naturally have opposing views and approaches to business (Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). However, questions over the accuracy of their findings and methodology are raised, where they adopt Straussian grounded theory with a predefined theory in mind. This is atypical of grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014).

Like Ots and Nyilasy (2015), *client-agency self serving biases* are also addressed by Mortimer and Laurie (2017). However, they adopt a duel theoretical focus of agency theory in line with social power theory. Here, agency theory is "*based on the premise that both the client and the*

agency are more interested in their own individual goals than each other's and therefore the client needs to control and monitor the agency to minimise agency opportunism" (Mortimer and Laurie, 2017: 3). Social power theory supposes that where divergent needs exist, the more powerful party has greater authority and control within a relationship. They find that clients have asymmetric coercive monetary power over the agency, whereas, the agency has power over the client through their expert knowledge. Like Ots and Nyilasy (2015), other client-agency studies address the value of examining client-agency trust under the economic lens of agency theory (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017; Keegan et al., 2017). However, the economic behavioural principals of agency theory are not suitable under the sociological assumptions that underpin the interpretivist paradigm, adopted within the current study (Wiseman et al., 2012).

Adopting an entirely different stance upon the knowledge sharing debate are O'Connor et al. (2016: 150), who note the *perils of too much client involvement* in the exchange process. Their study finds that clients may overwhelm their agency in a conscious or unconscious "*negative interpersonal dynamic*". More specifically, they hypothesise that client knowledge can conflict with agency knowledge, making the agent reluctant to share their strategic recommendations. However, their hypothesis proves inconclusive. Building upon this narrative further, Chowdhury et al. (2016), espouse that a very close relationship between clients and agents can lead to weak opportunism where communication becomes too informal. Here, the ability to hold each other to account diminishes, for fear of disrupting harmony within the client-agency relationship. Whilst offering a balanced view of the phenomenon, their findings do not address this view further.

A core and compelling interpretation of the exchange debate within client-agency trust literatures derives from Jansen Van Rensburg (2014) under *social exchange theory*. They find that clients will respond proportionately to their expected value from the client-agency relationship (Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014). This ascribes a calculative value to the process of knowledge exchange. More specifically, it is believed that both client and agency parties calculate the perceived value of their exchange and if it is worth their time, resource or perceived return on investment. However, a much broader problem within the contemporary client-agency literatures indicates that clients are struggling with value assessments of their agency (Hand et al., 2014; Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016; Keegan et al., 2017; Moraru, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2016; Vercic et al., 2018). Where clients do not perceive value for money, trust in their agency diminishes (Chen et al., 2017).

Despite this, Laurie and Mortimer (2019) and Masiello et al. (2014) find that clients are being given more responsibility to make assessments of their agency. For example, Masiello et al. (2014) identify three key stages of exchange throughout the client-agency relationship, which are all dependent upon the clients ability to guide and evaluate each stage of the exchange. First, clients are given responsibility to set the direction of a campaign or strategy. Second, clients are required to resource the agency over the course of the relationship, including budget, research and their own time. Third and finally, clients are responsible for evaluating their agencies activity. Similarly, (O'connor et al., 2016: 147) argue that "*clients should give direction to, provide resources for, and evaluate their agencies appropriately*". At a presuppositional level, this assumes that the client has the required awareness and knowledge to fulfil such stages. However, Pedeliento et al. (2017: 1084) challenge this view, attesting to a lack of reliable information to form assessments on behalf of the client. They argue that the opacity of available information makes it difficult for "*non-professionals*" Pedeliento et al. (2017: 1084) to undertake exchange with certainty, particularly during the early stages of the client-agency relationship:

> "*Consumers of services typically have little pre-purchase experience, perceive high risk and seek pre-purchase information*"

As such, the importance of evaluation and assessment is raised and examined within the following sub-section.

2.4.1.3 Issues with Assessment and Evaluation of Agency Partners

A dominant theme within the contemporary client-agency trust literatures comprises *assessment*. Here, clients make trust assessments of their agency based upon their perceived value (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar, 2015). Perceived value is a broad term, which typically comprises the clients assessment of the agents reputation, credibility, quality, accountability and expertise (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al., 2019; Bachnik et al., 2017; Dornas et al., 2014; Levin et al., 2016; Levin et al., 2017). As such, perceived value is found to be a core aspect of the client-agency trust debate within contemporary literature (Dornas et al., 2014; Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar, 2015). Such assumptions align closely with calculative trust assumptions, as explored within Part One of the literature review. It is believed

that an increase in perceived value, whatever value is considered to be to the client-agent, aligns closely with an increase in perceived client-agency trust (Chen et al., 2017). Likewise, destruction of perceived value aligns closely with a loss of trust (Chowdhury et al., 2016). Often, value is depicted as the agent's attainment of competitive advantage (Dornas et al., 2014) or positive return on investment (Levin et al., 2016), on behalf of the client.

However, an important interpretation of the varying depictions of value within the client-agency trust literature is not necessarily *what* value is perceived to be, but *how* value is *assess*ed (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016). For example, within their quantitative study, *The Relationship between Trust, Value and Loyalty in the Internet Era,* Dornas et al. (2014), adopt Rust, Ziethaml and Lemons (2001: 64), popular definition of value as an:

> "*objective assessment made by the customer [client], for the utility of a brand, based on perceptions of what is given in return for what is received*"

Attention to key assumptions and ideas inherent in objective assessments are not elaborated upon further within Dornas et al.'s (2014) study. This gap in understanding is somewhat addressed within other studies, however. According to Seres-Huszárik, et. al (2017: 68), clients make value assessments based upon available *data* in order to determine whether they have received value for money, or "*a sustainable competitive advantage resulting in solid financial performance*". The measurement of a solid return on investment is linked with increases in client-agency trust (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al. 2019). However, Gambetti et al. (2016: 98) argue that service output and agency performance is "*still uncertain and very difficult to evaluate*" due to a number of conflicting mental models between the client and agency, though no specific mental models or frameworks are included within their study. When revisiting a study by Ots and Nyilasy (2015), they too employ the Theory of Mental Models. They adopt Prahalad and Bettis, (2004: 76) definition of the theoretical framework of mental models, where an individual may "*categorise an event, assess its consequences, and consider appropriate responses*". A psychology theory at its root, the adoption of mental model theory highlights that clients and agents lack alignment in their assessment and evaluation of efficiency, effectiveness, quality and impact (Ots and Nyialsy, 2015). However, as argued by Levin et al. (2017), clients and agents do not possess the expertise or intuition required to interpret such data, in order to assess why something has or has not happened. They find that

clients may not be able to assess the quality of their agency where objective measurements of creative, strategic and technical outputs are not always assessable to the client.

Where Levin et al. (2017) question the clients lack of expertise in assessing output, Hanssens and Pauwels (2016) consider the strength of the performance data used in such assessments. According to them, incorrect market assumptions based upon weak performance data, are a key barrier to effective evaluation (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016). They argue that effective assessment is affected by the concept of planning variance, or "*incorrect market response assumptions*" (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016: 182). Their quantitative study indicates that issues with assessment impact objective setting; evaluating the efficacy of relationships and campaigns; forecasting; demonstrating value; and perceptions of market uncertainty. More specifically, they cite issues with a deluge of fragmented digital marketing data; comprehension of right or wrong performance metrics; and issues with the availability of "*good data*" (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016: 180). However, objective evaluative expressions such as good, best, right, wrong, adopted frequently in their position piece, are not addressed.

In response to client's difficulty in assessment and evaluation, other dominant perspectives also consider the usefulness of evaluative criteria in order to address this gap in understanding. This comprises evidence for best practice criteria, trust signals and agency selection criteria (Beachboard, 2017; Dziubaniuk, 2015; Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014; Pedeliento et al., 2017; Seres-Huszarik, et al., 2017). This is a particularly significant argument within the extant literatures, comprising assumptions of epistemic rationality, which combines knowledge and evaluation issues. This is explored in greater detail within the following sub-section.

2.4.1.4 *Lack of evaluative criteria*

A deeper analysis of contemporary literature denotes a core barrier to assessment, as the lack of access to evaluative criteria. Pedeliento et al. (2017: 1082) argue that "*valuation of professional service providers has long been based on a set of criteria not readily understood by non-professionals*". *Evaluative criteria* are understood to be the evaluative *dimensions* (Masiello et al., 2014) and evaluative *factors* (Bachnik et al., 2017) consulted by clients and agents. Masiello et al. (2014: 5) adopt Duhan and Sanvicks (2009) evaluative dimensions when assessing agency value, which detail "*the creative output; the account service quality; the value for money; the campaign performance; the usefulness; the client satisfaction with agency*

performance". Other criteria include a certain level of demonstrable creativity (Levin et al., 2017); positive campaign impact (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016); the accomplishment of budget and time oriented targets (Dziubaniuk, 2015); ensuring projects are completed to a sufficient quality (Levin et al., 2017); accountability for marketing outcomes (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al., 2019: 167); and the effectiveness of communication (Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). It could be argued that such criteria are client-agent trust metrics on their own. This is particularly so in Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al's (2019) study of *The unobserved signaling ability of marketing accountability.* Here, they conflate marketing metrics such as "*sales/revenues/profit…campaign success…web metrics…profitability*" (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al., 2019: 169) with signals for accountability and thus trust. However, many of the studies fail to address *how* such criteria should be evaluated or to *what* extent. This is a view shared by Levin et al. (2017) who argue that clients find evaluation challenging when faced with the assessment of complex constructs. They conclude that clients and agents should improve their evaluative capabilities (Levin et al., 2017). However, such recommendations are not entirely revelatory or grounded in empirical bases.

Whilst some studies attempt to define what evaluative criteria should be, other studies raise questions over the clients *awareness* of evaluative criteria (Bachnik et al., 2017). Bachnik et al. (2017: 2) highlight that clients lack awareness of value antecedents and *"proper selection criteria*". This can result in a distinct inability to determine the quality or capability of an agency. They suggest that prospective clients should research "*case histories*" or prepare "*checklists*" in order to establish their own personal client-agency relationship expectations (Bachnik et al., 2017: 3). However, little context and or insight into how this should be achieved is provided. Questions over the empirical validity of Bachnik et al.'s (2017) recommendations are also raised. Within their quantitative study, they gather data through a questionnaire depicting twenty-six evaluative criteria that clients should consult in order to assess the perceived value of a prospective agency (provided in Table 6).

1. Direct cooperation with representatives of agencies
2. Level of creativity of advertising ideas
3. Use of innovative solutions in the field of applied media, agents and advertising media
4. Level of overall advertising strategy

5. Possibility of obtaining favorable prices when buying airtime and advertising space
6. Good knowledge of a particular market segment/needs and behavior of consumers/product category
7. Individual approach to each client and problem/understanding of the needs and expectations
8. Autonomy in solving realization problems
9. Observance of the rules of professional ethics
10. Offering strategic and long-term solutions
11. Cooperation in solving marketing problems
12. Direct relationship between the agency and the amount of sales
13. The implementation of services in a short time
14. Good reputation among people of the industry
15. Level of conducted by the agency research and analysis
16. High level of competence and knowledge of employees
17. Experience in a particular industry
18. Openness to suggestions of the client/not imposing own solutions
19. Ability to provide the agency confidential data about strategy and sales results without worrying about their "leakage"
20. Clear and detailed information on the issue of budget
21. Ratio of price to quality of services
22. Ability to provide services on a limited budget
23. Wide range of services
24. Local character of the agency resulting in better knowledge of the realities of specific market
25. Belonging to an international network
26. Possession of quality certificates

Table 6. Evaluative criteria (Bachnik et al. 2017: 5)

Whilst a novel and practical contribution, the survey considers many diverse criteria from a range of secondary literatures, without justification for their adoption. Assumptions behind "levels of…" and "good…" of certain criteria are not addressed. Furthermore, a core issue with

the sample of the questionnaire is identified, where Bachnik et al. (2017) approaches two distinct sample groups: client managers who have used agency services before, versus, prospective client managers who are yet to use agency services. In selecting such a sample, authenticity of responses from managers yet to use agency services are questionable, as criteria within the questionnaire may have never been part of their cognition had they not seen the questionnaire.

In a similar qualitative study by Dziubaniuk (2015: 381), this time comprising email interviews with individuals from 12 different client-agency case studies, a list of "*attributes of trustworthiness expression*", are collated. The list comprises expressions of trust derived from evidence based "*explanatory information*" (Dziubaniuk, 2015: 381), such as client case studies, as well as document based information such as agency qualifications and contracts. Ultimately, Dziubaniuk (2015) argues that trust attributes aid clients evaluation process, whilst also improving perceptions of credibility on behalf of the agent, thus overall perceptions of trust. Questions over the accuracy of her approach are raised, however. For example, her primary data collection is based upon a set of predetermined questions (Dziubaniuk, 2015), though she maintains she has undertaken an in-depth and inductive approach to data collection. As such, a potentially skewed view of the problem is presented. Beyond Dziubaniuk's (2015: 381) study, which positions evaluative criteria as "*referential units*" or "*attributes*", Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar (2015: 103) calls important evaluative criteria "*signals*". They argue that:

> "*clients are not able to assess the skill level of professional service providers, this is why, different intangible signals are used for evaluation*".

Further clarity regarding a perceived *level* of skill is not provided by the authors, however. Despite this, they adopt *Signaling Theory* in order to determine how agencies and institutions may demonstrate their intangible credibility, competency and expertise to prospective clients (Arslanagic-kalajdzic and Zabkar, 2015; 2019). Originally a theory derived from evolutionary biology, signaling theory supposes that species will communicate specific traits in order to display their ability or to signal readiness for a mate. In business literature, signaling theory is the notion that a potential trustee (agent) will signal to a prospective trustor (client) that they are trustworthy via relevant signals (Dunham, 2011). Signals are considered to be qualifications, affiliation with a particular institution or a particular professional code of conduct within Bachnik et al.'s (2017) study. Such trust signals are viewed as a type of currency

for competency, credibility and expertise. The client then makes an evaluation of the agencies potential trustworthiness based upon such signals. Thus, linkages between the epistemic rationalist assumptions behind proof and claims to trustworthiness in Part One of the literature review are made.

Within Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkars (2015: 109) empirical study, they suggest that clients also base trust decisions regarding their prospective agency, upon intangible antecedents including *"agency reputation, agency credibility and relationship quality"*. Such signals can be used as a frame of reference for expectations or to give some form of confidence in future outcomes. With this in mind, evaluative criteria are considered to be future-oriented, though hard to comprehend within the early stages of a client-agency relationship (Pedeliento et al., 2017). They suggest that the agency should demonstrate that they are *good, strong* and *reliable,* thus able to fulfil future outcomes (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar, 2015). However, this view is dependent upon the client understanding the value of signals, though this is not explored within their study. For example, simply asking who is perceived to be a *good* or *reliable* agent is vague, particularly when no theoretical evidence is provided for its inclusion within their survey.

Similar insights are shared by Pedeliento et al. (2017) in their study of *Trust, information asymmetry and professional service online referral agents*. They argue that signalling theory is most important in the early stages of the client-agency relationship in particular:

> "*When market interactions are characterised by low customer knowledge, consumers use signals of quality to inform their purchasing choices*" (Pedeliento et al., 2017: 1087).

The theory is not readdressed again within their study. However, they do contend that signals such as website quality are beneficial in determining who a capable agent is (Pedeliento et al., 2017). This strategy is advocated by Strauss (2018) and Dziubaniuk (2015) who note that regular public relations activity through publication of informative blogs could help to build perceptions of trustworthiness in clients with low-levels of market knowledge. After all, this is what many contemporary advertisers and marketers profess to being able to produce on behalf of their clients (Beachboard, 2017).

More specific trust signals via agency websites are examined by Beachboard (2017: 201) in their study of how agencies can demonstrate "*best practice*" principals via their own websites. Already their study makes the assumption that clients understand what best practice is when searching for a prospective agency. Despite this, they espouse that indicators of agency expertise and credibility can be assessed via the perceived best practice and quality of the information provided by the agencies website. Such indicators include perceived content quality and key message targeting (Beachboard, 2017). However, the reliability of the best practice construct is questionable within their study. Namely, they do not address positivist assumptions inherent in the use of *best*. Instead, their study methodology adopts an aggregated list of best practice criteria collected from a number of popular digital marketing blogs and websites. Because of this, doubt is raised over the validity of such evaluative criteria. First, Beachboard's (2017) criteria are extracted from non-peer-reviewed popular content. Second, there is little justification for the criteria that are arrived upon. For example, why does criteria such as "*contact information*" or "*uniqueness*" equate to perceived agency trustworthiness? This is not addressed. Additionally, the way in which such criteria is tested within the study is perceived to be problematic. The study adopts a content analysis of 42 agency websites against the collated best practice criteria via the interpretation of two entry-level Coders. However, this assessment of websites is ultimately based upon the subjective interpretation of the assessors or in this case the entry-level Coders. Furthermore, Beachboards (2017) study aims to understand how clients perceive potential agents. As such, selecting coders to assess the quality of agency websites based, upon their perception, may have different meaning to clients. Thus far, other studies have suggested that clients do not possess the ability to evaluate quality due to a lack of appropriate knowledge. Finally, in executing this methodology, Beachboard (2017) suggests that the study offers a practical application of *informing science theory* but deeper explication of the theory is not provided.

Other studies, such as Reyes (2015) and Schauster and Neill (2017) also address best practice guidelines as useful evaluative criteria or signals. Such guidelines are either specific to certain software or platforms such as search engines (Reyes, 2015) or relative to ethical codes of conduct provided by industry associations (Schauster and Neill, 2017). Within Schauster and Neill's (2017) study of *Ethics in Advertising and Public Relations Agencies,* they argue that actors must behave in a morally virtuous and transparent way, which involves following ethical policies, codes of ethics, ethical institutions and ethical standards. However, they note the minimal availability of such guidelines and codes, in context. They discuss the normativity of

such guidelines, where agents have been unable to agree upon formal guidelines and codes of conduct to date.

Beyond this, Reyes (2015) argues that just because guidelines are made available to clients or agents, it does not mean that they are considered to be useful or valuable. More specifically, Reyes (2015) contends that criteria or signals derived from publically available information, such as guidelines may be overwhelming, unfamiliar and burdensome, to the client in particular. As such, he challenges the usefulness and value of them from a client perspective. Interestingly, his position piece on the legalities of not following digital marketing best practice suggests that clients "*should not have to bear the responsibility of familiarising themselves*" (Reyes, 2015: 1128) with evaluative measures or wider digital marketing knowledge. He adds that this is the reason clients seek the expertise of practitioners, in order to fill their knowledge gap. However, the study does not adopt empirical evidence to support such statements.

In their study of *Factors Determining the Development of Business Relationships in the Advertising Market,* Seres-Huszarik et al. (2017: 70) pay particular attention to factors that are evaluated early in the client-agency relationship. As a result, they create a series of *factors* that influence agency selection. Their study finds that clients and agents prioritise and evaluate each factor differently and at different points throughout their relationship. However, findings are derived from a sample of agencies and their clients who are already in pre-existing relationships. Therefore, it could be argued that perspectives are not true to the selection phase as participants are already in client-agency relationships. For example, clients and agents may have come to realise what factors are of a priority only after experiencing them. As such, answers provided by participants may not be reflective of their attitudes or perceptions pre-client-agency relationship.

Through addressing evaluative criteria, the client-agency trust debate is opened out to wider stakeholders beyond the client and agent. For example, who is behind the construction of relevant qualifications, guidelines, codes of conduct? Key studies note the importance of considering the multi-stakeholder environment with this in mind (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017; Strauss, 2018). As such, the following sub-section delves deeper into *who* is perceived to be part of the client-agency trust issue.

2.4.2 Who is contributing to the client-agency trust issue?

Specific attention to who is involved in the client-agency trust debate warrants its own sub-section relative to the current studies *who?* research question. In particular, wider analysis during the SLR highlights the importance of the client-agency dyadic and trust beyond this traditional dyadic.

2.4.2.1 *The Client-Agency Dyadic*

Many of the relevant digital marketing studies, commonly refer to the interpersonal nature of client-agency trust constructed between the client and agency (Gambetti et al., 2016; Keegan et al., 2017; Turnbull, 2016). Chowdhury et al. (2016: 98) refer to the business-to-business client-agency relationship as a *"dyadic"*. This is common across the client-agency literature (Mola et al., 2017). Other iterations consist of terms indicative of a two-way relationship including "*interdependence*" (Chen et al., 2017: 458) with "*relational*" (Ponder et al., 2016: 76) assumptions. As such, exploring *who* is part of the client-agency trust relationship has important theoretical and conceptual value (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar, 2015).

However, beyond the traditional client-agency trust dyadic, a number of studies consider the influence of other actors, parties and stakeholders upon the client-agency relationship. In particular, additional emphasis is placed upon the role institutions play in the trust debate (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017). Similarly, a select number of contemporary studies explore client-agency trust in a multi-stakeholder paradigm (Strauss, 2018; Gambetti et al., 2016). The latter is particularly important to the study as it is argued that client-agency research studies have not sufficiently represented the wider complex network of stakeholders within the contemporary marketing setting (Geneste and Galvin, 2013; Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). This makes for a swift departure from the client-agency trust literature where client-agency trust issues are largely studied between two people or two groups.

2.4.2.2 *Trust beyond the client-agency dyadic*

Kolbjørnsrud (2017) is one of few contemporary client-agency trust authors to consider trust as something multileveled, comprising multiple actors within the context of digital marketing. Their multiple-case study investigates digital marketing communities, under a the lens of a multiple-agency problem. Here, trust beyond a traditional client-agency dyadic is studied, suggesting the client-agency phenomenon is comprised of multiple stakeholders

(Kolbjørnsrud, 2017). Such stakeholders include collaborative knowledge sharing networks, forums and online communities. However, the rigour of Kolbjørnsrud (2017) findings are questioned where there are discernible issues with the case study sample. Four very different case studies from different sectors, comprising different characteristics and purposes are adopted. For example, each study is set in a different geographical location and comprised of heterogeneous industries (i.e. pharmaceutical versus digital marketing). The assumptions and limitations behind such a decision are not addressed. As such, questions are raised over the protocol adopted for each case study and how a comparative view of each case study could be achieved. Despite this, the study finds that collaborative communities of practice within the digital marketing industry are ineffective where there is no formal governance in place. Formal governance includes peer-review and incentive models, in order to encourage the sharing of purpose and values in specific communities (Kolbjornsrud, 2017). However, it is found that multiple-agency theory, like traditional agency theory, is not conceptually aligned with the sociological perspectives within the current study.

Another notable author considering trust beyond the client-agency dyadic includes Strauss (2018). Strauss (2018) suggests that business-to-business relationships must incorporate three different types of trust, including psychological (affective), economic (calculative) and sociological (institutional). They suggest that psychological trust occurs on a micro or interpersonal level, whilst economic and sociological occurs on a macro or systemic level. As such, Strauss (2018: 6) considers the concept of "*systemic trust*". The concept supposes that individuals who trust agents, also trust in the agents wider field and overall system or industry. She proposes the following definition of systemic trust, where client-agency trust: *"involve interactions with various individual actors, groups of people, organisations, institutions and systems."* Thus, Strauss (2018) signifies that trust may occur between individuals (i.e. client and agent); across organisations (i.e. client and agent trust in institutions); as well as an overall disciplinary basis (i.e trust in digital marketing): *"people who trust in the system tautologically trust the people that constitute the system (e.g. experts, scientists)"* (Strauss, 2018: 6). Thus, she conceives that a number of exogenous influences at a macro scale have the possibility to influence client-agency relationships on a micro scale (Strauss, 2018). This reflects key problem building literature within Chapter One. However, her literature review study only supposes the fruitfulness of the systemic analysis of trust in a client-agency marketing context but she does not study this from an empirical standpoint.

Such a paradigmatic shift towards a multi-stakeholder view of the client-agency trust issue is an emergent debate within the contemporary literatures, where an internal view of the client agency problem is favoured. In particular, this is demonstrated through the data collection and sampling efforts of a number of the empirical studies that collect data from agencies, with rare consideration granted to clients or clients and agents. In opposition of this, Kolbjørnsrud (2017) note the value of exploring network phenomena, extending concepts of collaboration and cooperation beyond the client-agency boundary. In doing so they champion Network Theory, in order to explore systemic symmetric and asymmetric relationships. However, upon wider review of the network theory literature, limitations are observed within a sociological setting. Whilst network theory allows for an impressive overview of the varying clusterings of relationships within a system, it is closely aligned with graph theory (Spier, 2017). A mathematical theory at heart, a key objective of graph theory is to visualise the key relationships between properties, thus making interactions within a network clear. However, its application within a client-agency trust paradigm is limited where deeper epistemological discussions regarding such relationships are required.

When considering trust and broader networks beyond the client-agency dyadic in contemporary digital marketing settings, Kuzheleva-Sagan and Suchkova (2016) also consider the impact of internet-based systems upon the client-agency relationship. In doing so, they put forward the notion that such systems, are created by people:

> *"when we trust the Internet in general, and the Internet services (as abstract systems) in particular, it implies that we trust their creators: programmers, Web site managers, and moderators."* (Kuzheleva-Sagen and Suchkova, 2016: 384)

Therefore, a distinct paradigmatic shift from traditional assumptions of interpersonal relationships is observed. Under this view, clients and agents are situated within a wider online supply chain of people and systems, which have the power to influence perceptions of client-agency trust. Whilst defending the view that trust is constructed between people, they also argue that the internet may transcend object or human oriented arguments of trust, making it worthy of its own classification of trust. As such, they raise whether or not trust is the most appropriate construct for exploring trust between people and more abstract systems such as the internet. However, this idea is not advanced further, suggesting a fruitful and underexplored area of future client-agency research.

What this does raise is the importance of the digital marketing industry as a theoretically rich setting and its influence upon perceptions of client-agency trust. According to Gijic et al. (2014), Reyes (2015) and Sanchez and Fernandez-Cavia (2018), the digital landscape, comprised of rapidly evolving and opaque abstract internet systems, can make the client-agency trust relationship more complex. This is explored within the following sub-section.

2.4.3 Where is the client-agency trust issue? A spotlight upon the Digital Marketing Industry

Within her study, Dziubaniuk (2015) upholds the importance of analysing digital marketing client-agency trust within a contextually relevant online business environment. She, like other scholars, note the theoretical possibilities of contemporary and digitised environments relative to traditional notions of client-agency trust. Here, relevant theoretical and empirical knowledge relative to such environments is lacking. Dziubaniuk (2015: 381), highlights the increasing uncertainty, vagueness and intangibility of the digital marketing industry, characterising it as a *"low-trust business environment"*. However, the concept of *low-trust* is not elucidated further.

Converse to this view, Levin et al. (2017) argues that the complexities of the contemporary industry in which client-agency relationships exist, are too difficult to comprehend and study. They suggest that *"project outcomes are vulnerable to the influences and forces of external factors which are beyond the control of the client and their advertising agency"* (Levin et al., 2017: 4). However, external influences are not detailed and specific links between a perceivably uncontrollable external environment and the client-agency trust relationship are not explored.

Whilst previous sub-sections have outlined the credence characteristics of the knowledge intensive service that is digital marketing (Lessard and Okakwu, 2016), other characteristics include its perceived velocity and volatility (Gijic et al., 2014). Most prevalently, the unpredictability and perceived uncertainty of the environment is a common feature within the debate (Kuzheleva-Sagan and Suchkova, 2016). Many of these characteristics centre around omnipotent and omnipresent technology and media present within the digital marketing mix (Patti et al., 2017). Such characteristics emphasise the distinctness of the industry as well as the challenges they pose to client and agents. Less common are the theoretical and empirical

implications of said characteristics, however. As such, a gap in understanding within this area is observed.

In the meantime, Chowdhury et al. (2016: 97) argue that client-agency value has a "*dark side*" yet to be sufficiently explored within the context of ambiguous internet-based services. Kuzheleva-Sagan and Suchkova (2016) also outline the subjective nature of value and trust within abstract online systems. Their study depicts a duality of non-transparency and transparency within internet services, described as a metaphorical "*black hole*" (Kuzheleva-Sagan and Suchkova, 2016: 382). Thus, contemporary perspectives indicate that interpretations of value in contemporary trust relationships have become more ontologically and epistemologically nebulous in line with advances in technology (Chowdhury et al., 2016; Kuzheleva-Sagan and Suchkova, 2016). As such, the impact of digital marketing technology and media upon the environment in which trust relationships occur, warrants greater analysis within the following sub-section.

2.4.3.1 *Complex and Multi-Platform Environments*

Contemporary client-agency literatures often outline the benefits of contemporary and digitised society upon digital marketing practice. This includes the advantages of automation (Gijic et al., 2014) and the improved accessibility of data (Seres-Huszárik et al., 2017). However, ever pervasive and changing technologies are also depicted as creating unfamiliar terrain for many businesses (Mola et al., 2017). Chen et al., (2017) state that the internet has become more complex where knowledge is codified and embedded within ambiguous and technologically determined systems and infrastructures. Mortimer and Laurie (2017: 2) characterise the digital marketing industry as a "*complex multi-platform*" environment. Such is the perceived unfamiliarity, that many clients and agents struggle with digital marketing uncertainty and the implications this has upon determining value further down the supply chain (Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). Thus, contemporary researchers argue that traditional knowledge cultivation and exchange between clients and agents, as explored within previous sub-sections, has become even more complex (Parthasarathy and Forlani, 2016).

Further to this, extant literature has also shown that rapidly advancing technology is having significant spatial ramifications upon trust within client-agency relationships (Kuzheleva-Sagan and Suchkova, 2016). For example, notions of a *digital marketing skills gap* (Royle and

Laing, 2014) emerge as a result of rapid changes in industry. However, Royle and Laings (2014) study largely considers the view point of traditional marketers struggling to keep up with digitisation of their practice. A distinct gap in the empirical viewpoints of digital marketing agents, more specifically, is observed across studies sourced throughout the systematic literature review.

According to Mola et al. (2017), digital technologies have influenced near all aspects of the client-agency supply chain. Their analysis of four digital marketing agency case studies within the fashion niche suggests that new technologies introduce challenges to the client-agency relationship, such as confusion over strategic decision making or uncertainty over the allocation of resources. They make a connection between changes in technology and the need for knowledge to continuously transform and adapt to ever-changing environments (Mola et al., 2017). However, their findings are specific to the fashion industry, perhaps suggesting an environmental niche too far.

Broader stances upon emerging and established digital technologies, relative to the client-agency trust debate are divided within the literature. More specifically, certain researchers champion the possibilities that new technologies bring to the digital marketing mix (Seres-Huszarik et al., 2017; Dornas et al., 2014; Gijic et al. 2014; Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016), whilst others perceive new technologies as contributors to additional complexity (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019). For example, Hand et al. (2014) argue that agencies are measured upon their technological innovation rather than their creativity. This is also found by Gambetti et al. (2016: 92) who note that the rapid advances in technology have accelerated a "*present-day crisis*" where digital marketing campaigns are struggling to generate expected results. However, relative insights are not developed any further.

In other studies, rapidly advancing technologies are often conflated with an increased perception of fragmentation of resource and budget (Sanchez and Fernandez-Cavia, 2018). Sanchez and Fernandez-Cavia (2018: 3), argue that some agencies may not be in a position to keep up with the demands of the environment with potentially "*slow, rigid business structures that oppose deep change*". Thus, the internal client-agency business model is often blamed for not keeping up with advances. Likewise, Schauster and Neill's (2017) qualitative study also finds that the continual emergence of new technology and media increases the multiplicity of players involved in the client-agency trust debate. They find that characteristics of the digital

marketing environment increase opportunities and temptation to behave in opportunistic ways. Examples provided include:

> "*questionable practice of paying bloggers that mandates disclosure, the blurring of paid and earned media that decreases the audiences' ability to discern content's source, an increase in social sharing making it difficult for message creators and disseminators to control the message, native advertising with its ability to mislead audiences, and the ubiquitous and digital nature of consumer–advertiser interaction that elevates the concern for transparency.*"
> (Schauster and Neill, 2017: 56)

Their study contends that ethical standards may remedy potential opportunism where ambiguity within the industry exists as a result of powerful technologies. However, their argument is quickly undermined by alternative perspectives from Hand (2014) and Dziubaniuk (2015) who find that ethical normative pressures do not necessarily apply in instances where rules and norms are undermined by unpredictable and rapidly advancing technology.

The unpredictability of the contemporary digital marketing landscape is prevalent within dominant discourse (Bachnik et al., 2017). Notions of unpredictability and trust are explored by Kuzheleva-Sagen and Suchkova (2015) in their study of *Designing Trust in Internet Services*. They argue that contemporary client agency relationships are often played out in a virtual environment where consequences are unpredictable, unexpected, unreliable and difficult to verify:

> "*amalgamation of the technical and the natural environments, the confusing of virtual and real, and dependence on other people and complicated ''expert systems'' make modern people's life more and more unpredictable, full of unexpected consequences and outcomes*" (Kuzheleva-Sagen and Suchkova, 2015: 383)

They note that a lack of transparency or predictability in virtual systems creates anxiety and mistrust in its clients (Kuzheleva-Sagen and Suchkova, 2016). However, their study possesses no discernible empirical evidence to support such claims.

Gambetti et al., (2016) observe that both clients and agents struggle to readjust their strategies in line with the unpredictability of rapid advances in industry changes. It is believed that even minor changes to scope can have a substantial impact upon time and budget and thus trust (Levin et al., 2017). In Levin et al.'s, (2017) study of routes to enhancing quality in creative client-agency services, they find that the resource required to make changes to a strategy may be mitigated where final outcomes and impact can be assessed (Levin et al., 2017). However, previous sub-sections have raised issue with the client's ability to assess and evaluate outcomes. Within this in mind, the debate demonstrates its temporal significance, which is explored within the following sub-section.

2.4.4   When is the client-agency trust issue most apparent?

Within much of the contemporary marketing research there is some emphasis upon the client-agency lifecycle theory (Keegan et al., 2017; Turnbull, 2016; Seres-Huszarik et al., 2017). The client-agency lifecycle is typically defined as a series of stages that depict key milestones over the course of a business-to-business relationship (Turnbull, 2016). According to Seres-Huszarik et al., (2017) understanding the conceptual lifecycle framework in business-to-business marketing relationships, aids with the understanding of when the concept of client-agency trust is most critical. Likewise, where there is a formation of trust, there is arguably chance for a dissolution of trust (Parthasarathy and Forlani, 2016). Parthasarathy and Forlani (2016) identify that a dissolution of trust often results in termination of the client-agency relationship. This emphasises the importance of understanding *when* trust may be destroyed.

The importance of assessing the client-agency lifecycle is also supported by Turnbull (2016) who notes that the client-agency relationship has become shorter than ever, when compared to historical client-agency marketing relationships. In her critical review of client-agency marketing literature, Turnbull (2016) argues that the average duration of the current client-agency lifecycle is expected to last no longer than three years. This is also a statistic raised by Bachnik et al. (2017) and Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkhar (2015). However, evidence for this duration is not provided in any study. Additionally, the studies do not elaborate as to whether a three-year relationship is damaging or not to the construction of trust.

Wider reasoning for studying the client-agency lifecycle and its impact upon trust is raised by Keegan et al. (2017: 13) who espouses that a better understanding of the lifecycle can generate

"good practice knowledge". However, the concept of *good practice* is not elucidated further. Keegan et al. (2017: 7) cite Wackman et al.'s (1986) four stage client-agency lifecycle model consisting of *"pre-relationship, development, maintenance, and termination"*. Studies referencing lifecycle stages often cite Wackman et al.'s (1986) model, such as Turnbull (2016) who extends Wackman et al.'s (1986) original model. Turnbulls (2016) study focusses specifically upon the client-agency lifecycle, offering a descriptive framework of the key stages of the client-agency lifecycle, as illustrated in Figure 8.
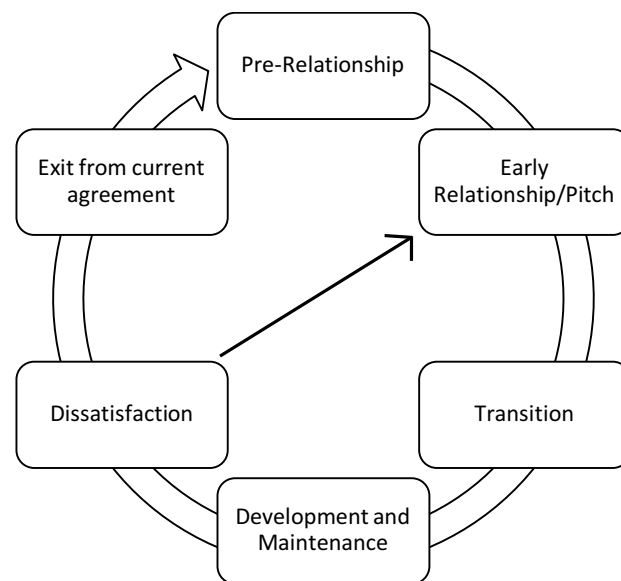
Figure 8. Turnbulls (2016) Relationship Lifecycle Framework

In a complementary work by Turnbull and Wheeler (2016), critical importance of the construction of trust is also illuminated within the *pre-relationship* stage. Their study highlights the interrelatedness of various stages of the client-agency lifecycle, suggesting that the termination of a client-agency relationship is largely due to expectations outlined within the pre-relationship stage not being fulfilled. They call this eventuality *dissatisfaction (*Turnbull and Wheeler, 2016), and suggest that such dissatisfaction is a root cause of client-agency relationship dissonance. Therefore, emphasis upon the *pre* and *post* stages of the client-agency relationship are emphasised. However, key reasons for dissatisfaction are not examined in great detail.

Seres-Huszarik et al. (2017: 70) also adopt *"agency-client life cycle theory"* in order to better understand where issues relating to client-agency trust are most apparent. They hypothesise

that the beginning phase of the client-agency relationship is most important to the type of client-agency trust relationship that will ensue. More specifically, they refer to early relationship stages as the agency selection phase. Within their survey, they identify a number of important factors relative to the agency selection process including but not limited to: exactitude (business growth and management style); experience (skills and capabilities); and interpersonal relationships (compatibility). Thus, links to the importance of evaluative criteria within the early stages of the client-agency relationship are made. Whilst useful, findings are derived from a small sample within their study. Furthermore, the sample is comprised of clients and agents already in a relationship suggesting that motivations and outlooks may have changed since entering into a relationship. Fundamentally, Seres-Huszarik et al. (2017) survey is predefined from a 2008 Agency-Client Relationship Factor study, which is not entirely fitting for contemporary environments.

A review of other contemporary studies addressing key stages of the client agency lifecycle depict something of an issue with expectation setting within the early stages of a client-agency relationship, particularly when compared to the later evaluation stages of a relationship. In their study of *Demonstrating the Value of Marketing*, Hanssens and Pauwels (2016) suggest that clients are becoming more and more frustrated with the gap between what is being delivered and what is promised to them. Findings from the SLR highlight that the ability to set expectations effectively is particularly difficult within contemporary marketing environments (Patti et al., 2017). They highlight the possible impact this has upon the latter stages of the client-agency relationship when determining success:

> "*The lack of clear, specific, and complete objectives will very likely lead to results that are unexpected and probably distant from the desired outcome*" (Patti et al. 2017: 364).

Patti et al. (2017: 359) contend that key challenges derive from a lack of understanding of the objective setting process and what "*good*" objectives are. They examine the importance of objective components of knowing the quantifiable effects of the "*communication task…target market audience…time period…degree of change*". However, they raise that there are significant issues with client and agency judgement when constructing objectives, as well as issues with determining cause an effect during the evaluation of objectives. Reasons for the latter are not addressed in any great detail. However, this echoes earlier findings from within

the value assessment sub-section. A tenuous link between a lack of evaluative criteria within the early stages of a client-agency lifecycle and an inability to set appropriate objectives is made.

Whilst a useful theory, the lifecycle theory offers a very broad view of the sequential stages of a generic client-agency relationship, without specific recognition of key issues at each stage of the digital marketing client-agency lifecycle. A such further understanding of key challenges to client-agency trust across the client-agency lifecycle is required.

2.4.5   Summary

The current chapter provides a preliminary overview of key studies, theories and paradigmatic assumptions inherent in the current debate surrounding client-agency trust within digital marketing. Thus far, findings suggest that there is a distinct epistemic issue regarding asymmetries in knowledge, challenges to value assessments, and problems with pertinent evidence for agent trustworthiness. Echoing key sentiments within the problem building literature within Chapter One, the SLR identifies issues with client and agents ability to assess or evaluate trustworthiness within the digital marketing field. Both terms consider the process of forming a judgement based upon data, evidence and trust signals. With this in mind, assumptions of epistemic rationalism and evidentialism are dominant within the literature, as identified within Part One of the literature review. A particular narrative identifies an evaluation problem, where clients and agents do not know what to evaluate when making trust judgements or how to evaluate. Key findings derive from: an inability to assess value; a perceived lack of evaluative criteria, as well as a gap between client expectation and evaluation. Cursory attention is given to the contextual and theoretical richness of the digital marketing setting. Fundamentally, the SLR presents a number of emergent findings, offering a platform for further inductive inquiry, as outlined in greater detail within the following Methodology Chapter.

3 Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter offered a review of current scholarly perspectives of the client-agency trust debate, within the digital marketing field. Two key arguments emerged, suggesting client-agency trust issues derived from: 1) knowledge asymmetry issues and barriers to knowledge exchange; 2) evaluation issues and a lack of appropriate evaluative criteria. Additional weight was granted to the contextual factors related to the digital marketing industry as well as the key stages of the client-agency relationship lifecycle where mistrust was perceived to be most apparent.

In order to study such themes, scholars have adopted varying research approaches and data collection methods. A full breakdown of methodologies adopted by contemporary client-agency trust researchers is found in Appendix 1. Of the 40 studies identified during the SLR, a quantitative methods approach is favoured over qualitative methods (Vercic et al., 2018; Dornas et al., 2014; Geneste and Galvin, 2013). Furthermore, digital marketing research also reveals an empirical proclivity towards a sample of participants not directly related to the conditions under observation. For example, surveying digital marketing practitioners about client-agency trust issues without consulting clients also (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019). Such gaps in empirical evidence are addressed within the current chapter, which is structured as such: initial considerations are given to the purpose of a research methodology; research philosophy including popular trust and marketing paradigms are analysed; justification for the client-agency trust phenomenon to be studied under the interpretivist paradigm, comprising relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology is made; further suitable data collection and analysis methods under inductive inquiry are examined. Key methodological limitations are addressed throughout.

3.2 Defining the Research Methodology

A research methodology is defined as a rigorous and systematic scheme for data collection and analysis (Kara, 2015). Important decisions related to the methodology are founded upon the researchers philosophical and axiological standing, as well as the methodologies appropriateness to phenomenon under study (Saunders et al., 2015).

At this stage it is important to highlight that there is no one perfect research methodology for the phenomenon under study (Garson, 2001). As such, a balanced review of possible methodological approaches gives weight to each suitable option before discounting all others, in favour of a core methodology (Kothari, 2004). However, in order to avoid what Baker et al. (1992) calls *method slurring*, where varying methodological approaches are adopted that infringe upon one another, a clear overview of the current studies research methodology is illustrated in Figure 9. This is inspired by Saunders et al. (2015: 122) commonly referenced *"Research Onion"*. As, the current study seeks to acquire deep sociological *"understanding of the meaning a set of actions has"*, to both the client and agent in a digital marketing context, the process of **verstehen** is adopted (Johnson and Duberley, 2000: 34). As such, the current study adopts an **interpretivist paradigm,** comprised of **relativist ontology**, and **subjectivist epistemology**, in conjunction with the **qualitative method of in-depth interviewing**. An **inductive thematic approach to inquiry and analysis** is adopted. This decision is made after much deliberation and critique of alternative options, across each layer of the methodology. Such layers give structure to the following sub-sections.
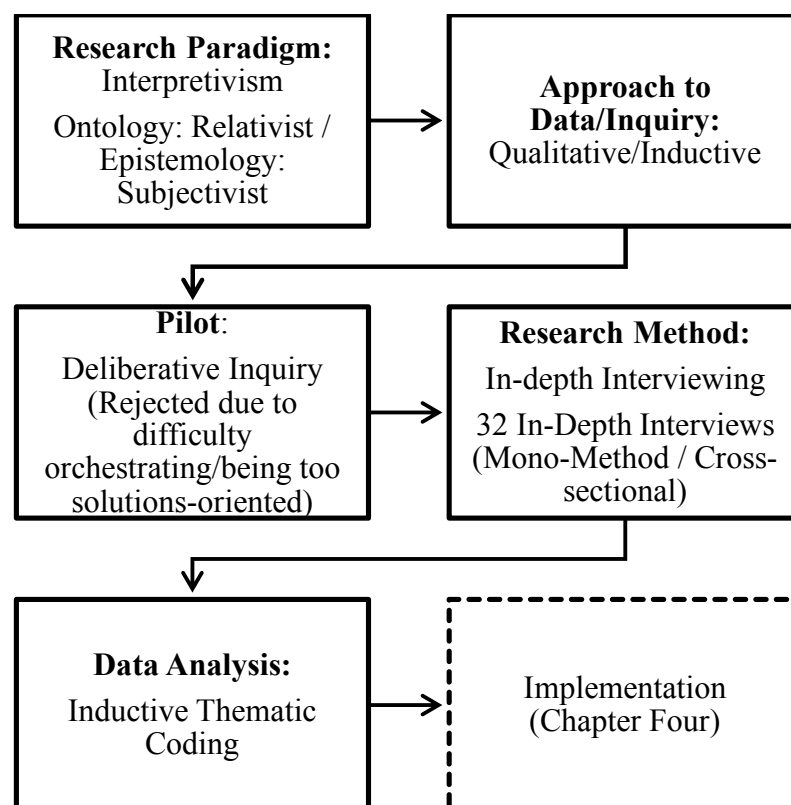
Figure 9. Conceptual Overview of the chosen Research Methodology.

3.2.1 Research Philosophy

The current sub-section explores important philosophical discussions and paradigmatic implications of the current study and wider research field. This is so that methodological approaches best suited to fulfilling the research questions can be defined. The importance of doing so is alluded to by Denzin and Lincoln (2017) in their *Handbook of Qualitative Research.* They suggest that defining philosophical and paradigmatic approaches at the beginning of a research project can guide ongoing inquiry. In other words, the methodology and its paradigmatic assumptions influence the construction and evolution of each chapter, not just the methodology chapter onwards. According to Philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1977: 23), a research paradigm is defined as:

> "*an integrated cluster of substantive concepts, variables and problems attached with corresponding methodological approaches and tools.*"

Smith (2013) also defines research paradigms as the assumptions, views and values of research phenomena. Within the business research literature, paradigms are characterised by their ontological assumptions (the "*study of being… what kind of world we are investigating, with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such*" (Crotty, 2003: 10), epistemological beliefs ("*a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know*" (Crotty, 2003: 3) and methodological expectations (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Examination of research paradigms show them to be deeply rooted in a system of critical assumptions regarding the researchers world view (Shah and Al-Bargi, 2013). Based upon the celebrated taxonomy of the *worldview*, or *Weltanschauung*, the researcher may then be positioned at the "*cognitive and moral centre*" (Naugle, 2002: 59) of the reality in which knowledge is generated.

3.2.1.1 Marketing Research Paradigms

It is important to note that whilst marketing theory research has evolved, no one paradigm is considered to be more superior than the other within the marketing context (Heron, 1996). Rather, each paradigm possesses its own stance upon reality and view of knowledge (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997). This is a view supported by Kuhn and Hacking (2012: 109), who state that:

"each paradigm will be shown to satisfy more or less the criteria that it dictates for itself and to fall short of a few of those dictated by its opponent".

That being said, Mackenzie and Lutz (1989) recommend that marketing scholars must remain mindful of the philosophical conventions entrenched in their research. As determined during the preliminary literature review, marketing and trust research appears to be non-symptomatic of a particular world-view. Due to the extensive number of surveys adopted in extant client-agency trust studies, it could be argued that extant digital marketing researchers align more closely with positivist or pragmatic assumptions of the client-agency trust issue. However, this is never explicitly substantiated by contemporary client-agency trust authors. On a broader scale, discussions of paradigms are also limited within the traditional trust philosophy literature. This is explored within the following sub-section.

3.2.1.2 Trust Research Paradigms

Whilst paradigmatic discussions are perceived to be of critical importance to the current study, within his book, *The Problem of Trust,* Seligman (2000) lambasts the overly philosophical nature of trust. He argues that the adoption of trust within extant literature is too broad, resulting in the alienation of social analytical inquiry (Seligman, 2000). Advocating the avoidance of *"abstract moralising of philosophy",* Seligman (2000: 7) also criticises a perceived apotheosizing of trust philosophy, in favour of a more analytical and empirical trust debate.

A number of other scholars such as Schwandt (2000), also question the necessity of categorising paradigms, where they argue that their deliberation seeks to divide and distract from deep human inquiry. Interestingly, Schwandt's (2000: 210) argument is founded upon the notion that *"all research is interpretive"* given the level of involvement from researchers within a study. This idea is advanced by Gummesson (2003) also. However, he stresses that paradigmatic decisions need to be made in order to resolve the pseudo-conflict that occurs between different approaches (Gummesson, 2003). This is true of the current study where a systematic review of research paradigms, including their accepted terminology and significant differences, has helped to frame the current studies research questions and resulting data collection and analysis processes. A cross-comparison of appropriate research paradigms is provided within the following sub-section.

3.2.2 A cross comparison of appropriate research paradigms

The importance of cross-comparing research paradigms is addressed by organisational Philosopher and Professor of Business, Edward Freeman. He suggests that there are issues with selecting a particular research paradigm without examining other options (Freeman et al., 2010). Simply selecting a research paradigm that is *anti-* to a particular paradigm is perceived to invert problems and generate new difficulties (Freeman et al., 2010) i.e. *I do not identify with positivism so I will adopt interpretivism.* Conversely, Atkinson (1995) argues that raising the distinct differences between paradigms polarises related thinking and knowledge creation. Despite this threat, Guba and Lincoln (1994), suggest that there are basic belief systems that must be considered, including positivism, interpretivism and constructivism. Within the current study, such paradigms are explored in conjunction with other relevant paradigms including Pragmatism, Social Constructivism, Constructivism and Critical Realism. They are selected for their social grounding, which places participant experience at the centre of the phenomenon under study. For clarity of comparison, Table 7 is created. This is founded upon Crottys (1998) framework of paradigmatic assumptions, including an overview of ontology, epistemology, methodological characteristics and research methods.

Assumptions	Positivism	Interpretivism	Pragmatism	Critical Realism	Social Constructivism	Constructivism
Ontology	Single objective reality independent of the individual.	Subjective reality relative to the individual. Perceived realities can be multiple.	There may or may not be an objective reality.	Notion of a reality independent to the individual but reality is unobservable.	Reality is socially constructed by multiple actors, through their interaction.	Reality is constructed and is relative to the individual. Multiple realities exist.
Epistemology	Objective truth exists and knowledge is value-free.	Knowledge is subjective. Many perceived truths can exist.	Knowledge is discovered in what ever way is necessary to answer research questions.	Epistemology is not as important as ontology.	Knowledge is derived from relational processes. Subjective.	Knowledge is subjective, value laden, perceived to be irreducible and often co-created with the researcher.
Logic	Deductive.	Inductive.	Deductive and/or Inductive. Abductive.	Deductive and/or Inductive. Abductive.	Inductive.	Inductive.
Typical Research Methods	Quantitative i.e. Survey.	Qualitative i.e Semi-structured and In-depth Interviews.	Mixed-Method i.e. multiple techniques/methods.	Qualitative and/or Quantitative i.e. Action Research.	Qualitative i.e. Deliberative Inquiry.	Qualitative i.e. In-depth Interviews.
Key Author(s)	Comte (1858)	Lincoln and Guba (1985)	Dewey (1908)	Bhaskar (1998)	Vygotsky (1986)	Piaget (1970)

Table 7. Comparison of Paradigms

3.2.2.1 Positivism

Originally introduced by Auguste Comte (1858), positivism assumes knowledge is rooted in logic, rationalism and experimentation. Common fields that adopt positivism include natural science and medicine (Tavakol and Zeinaloo, 2004). The positivist doctrine supposes that knowledge has statistical significance with quantifiable findings, generalisable to a larger population. Because of this, notable characteristics of positivism include its objective and value-free data collection processes, derived from large samples (Kicaid, 2007).

The positivist process is considered to be predictive and often deterministic (Bonell et al., 2018), due to its hypo-deductive logic. Resulting knowledge is often descriptive, causal or explanatory (Kim, 1994). Literature highlights that positivists believe in logic, fact and truth, regularity and repeatability. However, this raises criticisms of positivism, including the view that positivist studies support the status quo by testing existing theory or concepts (Alakwe, 2017). Further scrutiny is placed upon positivism when studying complex sociological situations, where positivism can offer an overly reductionist view of socially complex research problems (Bullock and Trombley, 2000).

Despite this, a number of the studies within the contemporary client-agency trust research adopt positivism and related data collection approaches, such as surveys (Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014; Pedeliento et al., 2017). However, as it is deemed that there are many intersubjective meanings and interpretations of client-agency trust within the extant literature, the interpretivist paradigm is explored within the following sub-section.

3.2.2.2 Interpretivism

Within the philosophy literature, interpretivism is often depicted as a movement against positivism (Goldkuhl, 2017). Key characteristics of the interpretivist doctrine, include its epistemology, which views that knowledge is subjectively and socially constructed (Thanh and Thanh, 2014). Within the contemporary client agency literature, Hand et al. (2014: 1) adopt interpretivism in order to *"explore how institutions are being shaped and arguably changed by social actors"*. As such, the researchers role is to find

meaning in the interpretation of participant attitudes, feeling, ideas, experiences, language or behaviours.

Common data collection methods adopted by interpretivists include qualitative approaches such as interviews, focus groups, case studies and ethnographic qualitative instruments. With this in mind, research approaches under the interpretivist doctrine require a smaller sample size, with an aim to acquire a deep narrative understanding (Russell-Black, 2006). This is achieved through inductive reasoning, where a conclusion most fitting for the explanation of participant experiences is arrived upon (Leitch, 2009). Much of the interpretation of participant experience is dependent upon the interpretive capabilities of the researcher (Chowdhury, 2014), who may have some knowledge of the field or phenomenon under study (Hand et al., 2014). Interpretivists commonly reject objectivist notions of value-free knowledge (Rivas, 2010). As such, the doctrine has long been scrutinised for its perceived lack of rigour and potential for bias (Kaptchuk, 2003).

Ontologically relativist (Scotland, 2012), the interpretivist paradigm supposes that *weltschung* is comprised of multiple realities. Conceptualisations of an obdurate reality are introduced, which acknowledges that participant realities are multiple. A defining feature of relativist ontology derives from the importance it places upon context and domain and the relevance of perceived truth within such a domain:

> *"The view that "truth and falsity, right and wrong, standards of reasoning, and procedures of justification are products of differing conventions and frameworks of assessment and that their authority is confined to the context giving rise to them."* (Baghramian and Carter, 2018: para. 1).

As such, value is placed upon the contextual, spatial and temporal elements of interpretation also. This is particularly important to the current study, which defines its scope and context within the digital marketing industry.

Understanding of multiple realities often makes the paradigm comparable to constructivism. However, a key difference between both interpretivist and

constructivist paradigms is interpretivisms' concern with *what* meaning is perceived to be, whereas constructivism considers the *way* in which meaning is constructed (Wadsworth, 1989). More specifically, constructivism places great emphasis upon the learning and inquiry process (Piaget, 1970). Furthermore, according to Chowdhury (2014: 433), interpretivists "*look for the presence or absence of a causal relationship*" between constructs, thus creating a more meaningful, empirical interpretation of phenomena. Alternatively, constructivism does not require that interrelationships are established between constructs (Charmaz, 2014). This and other key differences are examined within the following sub-section examining constructivism.

3.2.2.3 *Constructivism*

Constructivism is concerned with continuous meaning making through "*interpretation, multiplicity, context, depth, and local knowledge*" (Ramey and Grubb, 2009: 80). Its relativist ontology acknowledges that multiple interpretations of reality exist, derived from the cognitive constructions of the individual under inquiry (Schwandt, 2000). As such, it is believed that epistemic truth is relative to each and every individual, making one individuals truth no less valid than anothers. Baghramian and Carter (2018) contend that this makes an individual justified in their own view of right or wrong. Because of this there is no obligation to determine interrelationships between emergent constructs, as this is considered to be too reductionist. Such plurality of truths often make scholars feel uncomfortable when faced with the possibility of a multiplicity of conflicting perspectives (Thornberg, 2012).

Instead, emphasis is placed upon the process by which perceptions of reality are constructed and not necessarily the determination of what reality is considered to be (Charmaz, 2006). From an ontological perspective, constructivism "*addresses the participants' ecology and the meanings participants confer on their realities*" (Scott and Howell, 2008: 3). Thus, knowledge is not waiting to be discovered (Jonassen, 1991). This view is supported by Fosnot (2005: ix) who positions constructivism as:

> "*emergent, developmental, non-objective, viable constructed explanations by humans engaged in meaning-making*".

Knowledge is inductively generated and *"mediated by ideas and assumptions"* (Ormston et al., 2013: 12). As such, the paradigm is often chastised for a perceived lack of rigour and accuracy (Lauckner et al., 2012). Other criticisms derive from the possibility of bias or the researchers influence over participant accounts. In contrast, Adams (2007) champions the process of mutual meaning-making, where learning is a collaborative process. This is a particularly suitable paradigm where much of the contemporary client-agency research advocates greater knowledge sharing and collaboration (Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014). Other paradigms, such as social constructivism champion the notion of collaborative meaning making, which is highlighted within the following sub-section.

3.2.2.4 *Social Constructivism*

Originally established upon Vygotsky's (1986) social learning theory, social constructivism depicts an unknowable reality where knowledge is mutuality constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In the literatures, similarities to constructivism are observed (Campbell, 1998), where multiple realities exist, dependent upon each individual actors worldview (Charmaz, 2006). However, according to O'Leary and Wright (2005), assumptions regarding knowledge are mutually agreed upon in a social and cultural meaning making process, thus adding the *social* view of knowledge construction. Therefore, social constructivism explores the context in which communities and groups learn, as well as the intersubjective and collaborative nature of knowledge construction in such contexts (Kim, 2001). With this in mind, social constructivism pertains to an underlying multi-actor epistemology (Woo and Reeves, 2007), of great importance to the current study. The importance of acknowledging wider systems is also a core aspect of critical realism, examined further within the following sub-section.

3.2.2.5 **Critical Realism**

To allow for the pluralistic perspectives of complex social phenomenon, client-agency trust researchers Lessard and Okakwu (2016) advocate for the adoption of critical realism. First adopted by Roy Bhaskar, its emergence derives from the opposition of positivist-empiricism (directly observable causal laws) and constructivist idealism (accepting the possibility of an external reality but one which may not be observed)

(Mingers, 2006). Bhaskar (1998) argues that both are without structure or substance. However, links to social constructivism are evident within critical realism, given its analysis of social structures and the human activity and agency within such social structures (Whittington, 1988). This results in some scholars positioning critical realism as a weaker version of constructivism (Sayer, 2000). In response, Bhaskar (1998) challenges the need for epistemological debate, emphasising the importance of realities that exist independently of epistemology. As a research philosophy, critical realism places great emphasis upon ontology, ascribing special importance to the reality and context in which stakeholders operate. It is this view of epistemology and the deprioritised way in which knowledge is constructed within this environment, which challenges its value within the context of the current study. Within Chapter Two's literature review, it is found that knowledge, asymmetry, exchange and asymmetry is a key feature of the debate.

Critical realism supposes that there may be multiple layers to reality, observed or examined through experimentation, in order to determine objective causality (Chakravartty, 2005). This assumption allows researchers to study complex, ambiguous and often unpredictable structures and the impact they have upon social relationships or situations (Sayer, 2000). Critical realists espouse that there are certain elements and structures within reality that hold great power but are also unknowable or incomprehensible (Easton, 2010; Just and Latzer, 2016). As such, they perceive a reality composed of:

> *"(irreducible) structures and mechanisms, powers and tendencies, etc. that, although not directly observable, nevertheless underlie actual events that we experience and govern"* (Lawson, 1994: 262)

Therefore, critical realism is considered to be appropriate for assessing the intransitive element (structure and agency) of digital marketing systems and the transitive meaning ascribed to them (subjective perspectives and human choice) (Pozzebon and Montreal, 2004; Friedman and Mile, 2006). Both perspectives resonate with the current study, as core assumptions inherent in the phenomenon suggest that digital marketing practice may be influenced by external and unpredictable forces. However, Bhaskars (1998) critical realist approach does not allow enough critical epistemological discussions,

which the current studies research questions require. Due to a lack of emphasis upon epistemology, data collection methods under critical realism may be inductive, deductive or abductive. As such, distinct similarities are shared with Pragmatism, as explored within the following sub-section.

3.2.2.6 *Pragmatism*

Pragmatism is positioned as a philosophical tradition, which tackles a research problem in a way that suits its conditions, rather than committing to a particular school of thought. Its adoption as a paradigm has commonly been driven by a preoccupation with finding the most valuable output to a research question, in place of stricter systems of philosophy (Biesta and Burbules, 2004).

Pragmatism, as a general philosophy, emerges from original pragmatists such John Dewey (1908), who recognise:

> "*that there are many different ways of interpreting the world and undertaking research, that no single point of view can ever give the entire picture and that there may be multiple realities*" (Saunders et al., 2012: 151).

Previously described as a 'genre' of theories with an ethical philosophy at heart (Freeman et al., 2010), pragmatism asks *will it make our lives better?* Pragmatism is often depicted as being comprised of multiple epistemologies, typically subjective and objective (Saunders et al., 2012). As such, pragmatism is atypical of either inductive or deductive research methods. Instead, pragmatism places emphasis upon experimentation (Hookway, 2016), which advocates the testing of initial findings. This view supports an element of measurement and the necessity for *abduction*, which moves between the duality of induction and deduction. Further discussion of inductive, deductive and abductive reasoning is provided later in the current chapter. Pragmatism therefore relies upon a series of data collection methods and instruments, if it is believed that they will deliver the most appropriate findings. In their review of 2166 marketing articles within nine prominent marketing journals, Harrison and Reilly (2011) observe

the popularity of mixed method research designs utilising methods of abductive reasoning.

More contemporary pragmatists such as Richard Rorty (1980), have revitalised the discussion of pragmatism, highlighting a new ontological inference called *New Pragmatism* (Hall, 1994). Rorty's view of new pragmatism delivers a nominalist outlook suggesting that knowledge creation is centreless and without philosophical underpinnings (Hall, 1994). When contextualising this within digital marketing research more specifically, French and Gordon (2014) also suggest that adopting a dominant epistemology should be avoided. However, a lack of insight as to why this should be so, is not communicated. The importance of specifying a research paradigm is justified within the beginning of the current Chapter, however. As such, the following sub-section identifies the current studies chosen paradigm.

3.2.2.7 *Paradigm Choice*

The first part of the current chapter identifies a number of core paradigms, deliberating their related philosophical assumptions and methodological attributes. The key characteristics and suitability of each paradigm are examined in relation to the needs of the current study, as well as its relative merits and challenges. The potential suitability of critical realism as a contemporary research philosophy is acknowledged. Under this doctrine the notion of unobservable power structures within reality are explored (Bhaskar, 1998). However, the critical realist approach fails to give appropriate weight to epistemology. Whilst the current study acknowledges the importance of digital marketing and its complex environment (by examining the contextual factors of the client-agency trust issues in contemporary settings), this is not only a study of context. Instead, the research questions ask more interpretive and exploratory questions such as *why?* As such, subjective epistemology is considered to be more appropriate. This rejects positivist approaches, considered to be overly prescriptive. Instead, the current study requires a paradigm, which allows for the integration of the multiplicity of perspectives and contextual factors upon the client-agency trust phenomenon. Therefore, interpretivism is adopted within the current study. Appropriate interpretivist inquiry methods are elaborated upon within the following sub-sections.

3.2.3 Approach to Inquiry and Data

Thus far, the current study has adopted secondary data insights from findings generated via the SLR, within Chapter Two. Secondary data is defined as data collected and analysed by someone else (Johnston, 2014). However, in aiming for an original contribution, marketing researchers, Hanssens and Pauwels (2016) uphold the importance of gathering primary data. Hox and Boeije (2006: 593) define primary data as:

> "*the data that are collected for the specific research problem at hand, using procedures that fit the research problem best. On every occasion that primary data are collected, new data are added to the existing store of social knowledge*"

An overview of primary data types, quantitative or qualitative, is assumed within the following sub-sections. Before this, broader insight into the selected methods of reasoning and inquiry, either inductive, abductive or deductive, is assumed.

3.2.3.1 *Inductive vs Deductive vs Abductive Inquiry*

In order to address a research problem and construct valid theory during the social scientific process, researchers are encouraged to explore the key differences between inductive, deductive and abductive inquiry (Saunders et al., 2019). Each approach has its own rules and principals regarding the way that knowledge is inferred throughout the research process. They are cross compared in Figure 10.
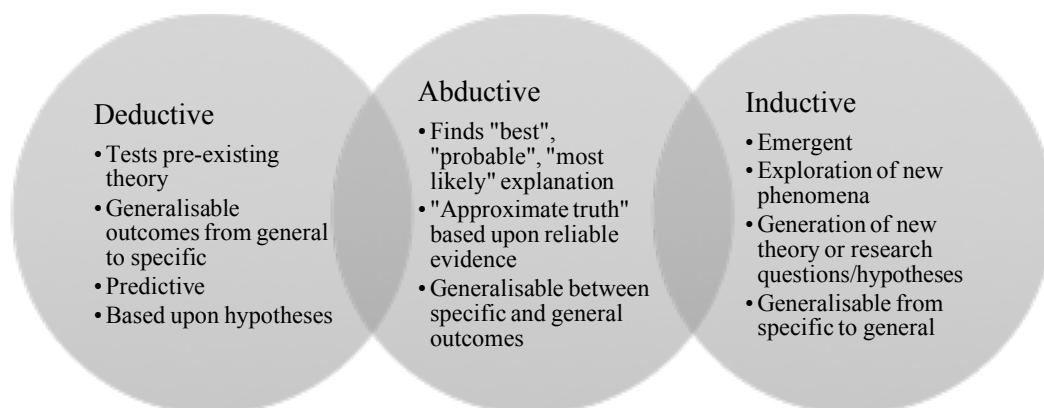
Figure 10. Comparison of Inductive, Deductive, Abductive Logic (adapted from Saunders et al., 2019)

For the purpose of the current study, inductive reasoning and logic is adopted throughout inquiry. In order to move beyond current assumptions within the client-agency trust literature, new and emergent insights are required (Neill and Schauster, 2018). Within the client-agency trust literature, inductive reasoning is typically inferred from qualitative data types (Mola et al., 2017). However, for posterities sake, further deliberation between qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection is considered within the following sub-section.

3.2.3.2 *Qualitative vs Quantitative Data Types*

Gill et al. (2008) note the varying data types available to the social scientist, throughout the research process. Of overarching importance to the current study is the essential discussion of quantitative and qualitative data (Ritchie, et al., 2013). In deciding the paradigm choice and research method, the data types are normally indicative of said decisions. For example, the positivist paradigm is often linked within objectivist approaches and quantitative traditions (Thanh and Thanh, 2015). Conversely, the interpretivist paradigm is synonymous with subjective and qualitative data collection methods. A combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods may also be adopted under pragmatist convention.

Historically, qualitative and quantitative methods are defined as having a distinct difference in their purpose and value to a study, as suggested by Reichardt and Cook (1979: 19):

> "*quantitative methods were purposely developed for the task of verifying or confirming theories and ... qualitative methods were purposely developed for the task of discovering or generating theories*"

Before quantitative and qualitative data is discussed in greater detail a clear definition and distinction between both approaches is needed. Whilst quantitative data is much easier to define, finding an overarching definition of qualitative research is not as easy. However, a commonly adopted definition of qualitative research and related data collection methods is:

> "*a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn into a series of representation, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to self...qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings,*

attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings
*people bring to them" (*Denzin and Lincoln, 2008: 4)*.*

Converse to this, quantitative data is typically expressed in numerical form, utilised in various different types of statistical terms or units of measurement (Blaikie, 2003). As suggested by Kim et al. (2014), there has been a long held dominance of quantitative methods within marketing research. Assessment of field related literature highlights a number of notable studies, underpinned by both types of research methods (Levin et al., 2016). Key differences between both approaches are synthesised in Table 8.

Criteria	Qualitative	Quantitative
Purpose	To understand and explore the rich and subjective accounts and interaction of individuals or multiple actors.	To test preconceived hypotheses or make objective predictions.
Sample	Small and focussed. Individuals or small groups.	Large samples with high confidence in accuracy of sample size relative to population.
Type of data	Open ended. Text, narrative accounts, images, video.	Precise statistics and numbers.
Data collection process	Inductive.	Deductive.
Data collection methods	Interviews, focus groups, observations.	Surveys, experiments.
Data Analysis	Thematic, narrative.	Statistical.
Role of research	Subjective, co-creator.	Objective, removed.
Findings	Local, contextually rich, transferable.	Generalisable.
Limitations	Harder to transfer resulting insights. Threat of bias prevalent (Rahman, 2017).	Can result in a superficial data set. Does not allow for deeper exploration. Can be unnatural (Atieno, 2009).

Table 8. Quantitative vs Qualitative Comparative Table

A number of scholars of business research methods champion the importance of qualitative research methods for exploration of human behaviours and experience (James and Busher, 2009). Goulding (2017: 69) espouse that such methods are of particular importance to advertising, marketing and new media fields that seek to explore "softer" subjects such as the "*key questions of ethics and accountability*". The latter is considered to be a trust construct within the contemporary client-agency setting suggesting qualitative research methods and data types are of most value to the current study.

3.2.3.3   Selecting a data type

From a marketing research context, a qualitative research method is selected due to its perceived affinity with the "*creativity, spontaneity, adaptability and individual insight that often characterise successful marketing practices*" (Brown, 1993: 28). According to Dziubaniuk (2015), the digital marketing industry is compounded in complex and ambiguous variable phenomenon, requiring a more interpretive and qualitative approach to data collection. Qualitative data collection methods are explored in greater detail within the following sub-section.

3.2.4   Research Methods

Before a discussion of research methods can take place, differentiation between the terms *method* and *methodology* is required for clarity of concept (Crotty, 1998). Within Katz (2015) study of *A Theory of Qualitative Methodology: The Social System of Analytic Fieldwork,* a research method is defined as an instrument or tool for data collection. Conversely, methodology is posited to be the process of solving a problem, which considers the paradigmatic assumptions behind a research process (Bryman, 2008).

Research methods, also known as research strategies, research plan or research design, provide the "*overall plan for conducting a research study*" (Johannesson and Perjon, 2014: 39). Mouton (1996) suggest that a research plan seeks to add structure to the data collection process, whilst Yin (1994: 135) notes:

> "*colloquially a research design is an action plan for getting from here to there, where 'here' may be defined as the initial set of questions to be answered and 'there' is some set of (conclusions) answers*"

In order to highlight the current studies research plan, the current sub-section constructs an overview of possible research methods and strategies deemed to be most appropriate for the current studies chosen paradigm and fulfilment of its research questions. Due to their paradigmatic underpinnings the following notable methods are considered: *Deliberative Inquiry (pilot study); Action Research; Grounded Theory;* and *Qualitative Interviewing.* Deliberative Inquiry was adopted as an original data collection method within the early stages of the current study. As such, the following sub-section also examines the outcomes and value of this.

3.2.4.1 Pilot Study

As suggested by Prescott and Soeken (1989: 60), pilot studies are "*underdiscussed, underused and underreported*". As such, the current section outlines the pilot study adopted within the current study, as well as the researchers response to limitations experienced during the pilot study phase. The pilot study offers some insight into the researchers original social constructivist paradigmatic orientation and why this was not necessarily the most appropriate paradigmatic choice.

Despite their discreet undertaking within social scientific research, pilot studies are recommended in order to determine the feasibility of future research projects (Polit et al. 2001). This is before time and resource is placed into a particular research process or approach (Baker, 1994). As espoused by, Thabane et al. (2010: 1), the benefit of pilot studies, is that they help the researcher to:

> "*avoid potential disastrous consequences of embarking on a large study, which could potentially 'drown' the whole research effor*t".

When considering qualitative research studies, a number of scholars suggest that there is no real requirement for a pilot study. This is because subsequent studies, to the first, are deemed to be a more advanced and progressive version of the initial data collected (De Vaus, 1991). However, according to Teijlingen and Hundley (2001), in their study of *The importance of Pilot Studies,* in social scientific research, researchers should adopt a pilot study so that research instruments and data collection tools may be tested prior to conducting the final

research project. This is especially true in the context of the current study where a clearly defined pilot study allowed for focussed critical reflection upon the data collection process and a clear decision about future research methods. The pilot study trialled the rarely utilised data collection method of Deliberative Inquiry (Sprain and Carcasson, 2013).

3.2.4.2 Deliberative Inquiry

As research phenomena are perceived to be situated within an ambiguous digital marketing environment (Chowdhury et al., 2016), the phenomena is arguably "*admit of multiple interpretations…[where] there is no one underlying "truth""* (Freeman, 2010: 76). As such, pluralistic data collection instruments are considered useful, allowing for a multi-perspective view (Bohman, 2000). Additionally, contemporary client-agency trust studies identify a greater need for cooperation, co-creation and co-innovation in order to address client-agency trust issues (Mortimer and Laurie, 2017). As such, collaborative data collection methods are considered suitable for exploring the phenomenon.

With its democratic roots, Deliberative Inquiry demonstrates the inclusivity of, and sensitivity towards, diverse stakeholder groups and their multiplicity of opinions and relationships (Kakabadse et al., 2011). Original deliberative inquirers, Savin-Baden and Major (2013: 266) suggest that the aim of deliberative inquiry is to "*change policy and practice through consultation between people*". In other words, varying stakeholders come together to deliberate solutions to a mutual problem. Dewey and Rogers (2012: 5) highlight the Deliberative Inquiries *"ethics of democracy",* championing the integrity of equivocality and community. Due-to the perceived asymmetry in client-agency knowledge and power within the contemporary literature (Pedeliento et al., 2017), Deliberative Inquiry is deemed important, in order to allow participants a neutral and mediated platform from which to deliberate client-agency trust issues (Sprain and Carcasson, 2013).

From an operational standing, the Deliberative Inquiry process is comprised of a larger group setting in the form of research conferences or events with a representative sample of stakeholders (Carcasson and Sprain, 2015). The method does not call for a specific sample size, as a participatory research method, and literature that establishes this is limited.

Working in a cyclical nature, over a longitudinal timeframe, a number of deliberative conferences are held until an appropriate and actionable outcome is agreed upon by stakeholders (Carcasson and Sprain, 2015). Figure 11. outlines Carcassons (2012: 86) cyclical Deliberative Inquiry process.
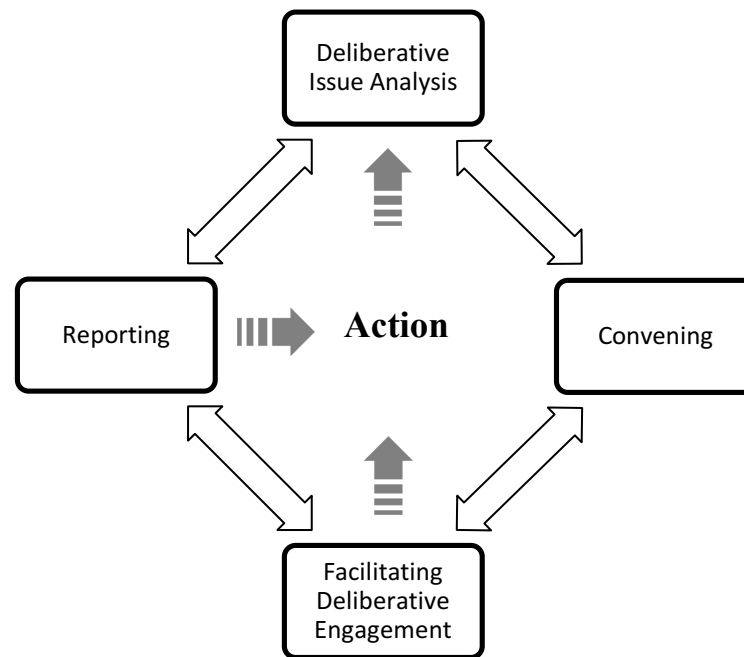
Figure 11. Deliberative Inquiry Cycle (Carcasson, 2012: 86)

3.2.4.3 Deliberative Inquiry Limitations

Whilst the notion of a collaborative method is deemed to be an appropriate approach for the needs of the current study, the process was abandoned when adopted during the pilot study. This was largely due to the difficulties that arose from attempting to orchestrate an initial meeting of five participants. The most significant challenge derived from attempts to align the schedules of each participant on a regular basis. The challenges were even more apparent when a minimum of one deliberative conference was required per month over the duration of the data collection period. Further to this, the notion of *deliberative* inquiry, considers the requirement for community-problem solving. However, it was found that too little was known about the "problem" in context. For example, an original question asked during the deliberative inquiry, was whether or not the digital marketing industry could be professionalised. However, without a reason for *why* it needed to be professionalised, professionalisation as a solution was too premature. In response, other similar research methods were considered. They include: *Action*

Research; Grounded Theory Methodology; and *Qualitative Interviewing.* A detailed critique of each is provided within the following sub-sections.

3.2.4.4   Action Research

Stringer (2007) define Action Research as a community-based and participative method, enacted in order to enable a more democratic, equitable, liberating and life-enhancing environment for all those involved. First established by Kurt Lewin (1946), Action Research is considered to be a landmark method for its ability to assess elements of integrated social science, such as intergroup relations and change development.

Further reconceptualisations of Action Research are established by various other Scholars such as Donald Schon and Chris Argyris (1974). Over time, the research method gains understanding of *"organisations, markets and customers…(usually to make an operation more efficient)"* (Perry and Gummeson, 2004: 310). Further to this, Action Research is described as an intellectual movement of self-monitoring and self-reflection where practitioners can improve their effectiveness through meaningful iterative action (Raelin, 2006). As such, Action Research provides an opportunity to generate new knowledge about a social group, whilst implementing concurrent change. This is evaluated under the notion of theory in practice (Elden and Chisholm, 1993).

The method allows practitioners and researchers to understand the conceptual contours of practitioner self-development (Denscombe, 2014). Cohen et al. (2007) supports an introspective view of Action Research, advocating small scale interventions in real world cases. In the context of the current study, this could be changes to the way a digital marketing agency interacts with their clients in order to better understand how client-agency trust is impacted. However, as challenged by Gummesson (2000: 105), in his book *Qualitative Methods in Management Research,* Marketing is part of a wider system external to the firm:

> *"In marketing, the companies external environment is always more important than the internal. The real decisions are made in the world outside-among consumers, middlemen, competitors, politicians, legislators, and trade organisations. The external environment is neither particularly knowledgeable nor interested in the company and its development"*

Gummessons (2000) observation is grounded in personal reflection, without empirical evidence, following his time within the marketing industry. However, he does raise the importance of the dynamic external environment, as an influential variable of the research phenomenon, not easily captured within an organisational setting. This is observed within Action Research studies where a common characteristic is that the research problem is confined to a finite group, or locale such as classroom (Elliott, 1991; Goswami and Stillman, 1987).

Due to the current studies research problem, which considers a broader digital marketing industry, the use of Action Research is rendered too localised (Herr and Anderson, 2015). It is felt that delimiting parameters for the digital marketing context under study is too restrictive when considering it as a continually changing and evolving industry. Additionally, attempting to delineate the parameters of the client-agency trust issue is too prescriptive. As such, methods that allow for the emergence of theory are considered within the following sub-section.

3.2.4.5 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is described as an analytical method with a focus upon generating new theoretical ideas from primary data (Charmaz, 2014). This is in place of adopting pre-existing theories prior to data collection. When exploring grounded theory literature, multiple variations of Grounded Theory are identified (Evans, 2013). The current sub-section will navigate through the historical development and philosophical origins of Grounded Theory, towards a more appropriate Grounded Theory paradigm most suitable to the needs of the current study.

Grounded Theory is acknowledged for its broad philosophical tradition, from its more positivist roots (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), to its contemporary constructivist counterpart (Charmaz, 2006). Originally born from a desire to add more structure and reliability to social scientific research, Grounded Theory Methodology offers an innovative approach to developing and verifying qualitative data within a social scientific paradigm (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The aim of the methodology is to generate new theory via systematic coding and idiosyncratic analytical processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A prerequisite of the methodology is that theory should not be adopted before entering into a study (Ng and Hase, 2008), thus rejecting deductive logic.

Beyond Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original theory, significant differences between Glaser's (1967) and Strauss's (1987) epistemological understanding of grounded theory emerge. A synthesised view of seminal Grounded Theorists and their preferred stance towards the methodology is compounded in Table 9.

Year and Author	Paradigmatic assumptions
1965 – Glaser and Strauss (Awareness of dying)	Positivist
1967 – Glaser and Strauss (Discovery of Grounded Theory)	Positivist
1987 – Glaser (Theoretical Sensitivity)	Positivist
1987 – Straussian Grounded Theory	Not clearly specified
1990 – Strauss and Corbin Basics of Qualitative research	Not clearly specified
1992 – Glaser (Basics of Grounded Theory analysis: Emergency vs forcing)	Positivist
1995 – Glaserian Grounded Theory	Positivist
1998 – Glaser (Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussion)	Positivist
2000 – Kathy Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory	Pragmatist/Relativist
2008 – Corbin and Strauss	Not clearly specified

Table 9. Chronological overview of Grounded Theorists

3.2.4.5.1 Glaserian

Glaserian Grounded Theory offers a systematic and robust approach to the analysis of qualitative data and the *discovery* of theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Originally created in order to bring more rigour to qualitative research, the method grants a significant amount of structure upon qualitative data collection and analysis. For example, Glaser (1992) rejects the notion of researcher involvement within the research process. Because of this, traditional Glaserian theory is posited to have more objectivist roots. However, Glaser contends that his method is stanceless as he believes that this has the latent possibility of influencing the development of new theory. Whilst adding rigour to the qualitative data collection and analysis process, the methodology has still

been chastised for its difficulty. In response, Straussian grounded theory considers the systematisation of grounded theory as examined within the following sub-section.

3.2.4.5.2 Straussian

In order to address perceived gaps in Glaserian Grounded Theory, *Straussian Grounded Theory* introduces predefined coding frameworks and families. However, Straussian grounded theory is often criticised for being too strict and complicated due to its prescriptiveness. Glaser (1992) argues that this forces concepts into coding families that are not entirely appropriate for developing new theory. Other grounded theorists such as Charmaz (2000) liken the coding procedures to rules that make the methodology too positivist. No specific reference to Strauss and Corbins (1990) specific philosophical position can be found within the literature, however. In response, Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory offers a complete departure from the prescriptive or value-free approaches to grounded theory, as explored within the following sub-section.

3.2.4.5.3 Constructivist Grounded Theory

Charmaz (2006) rejects Glasers value-free approach and Strauss and Corbins (1990) preconceived coding frameworks. Instead, a more reflexive and pragmatic approach to grounded theory is championed (Charmaz, 2006).

A defining feature of Charmaz's (2014) method is the researchers interaction with the participant, resulting in a co-construction of data. The method recognises the researcher as something of an expert (Charmaz, 2008), valuing the input of the researchers' experience and priori knowledge. However, the method is often criticised for the possibility of bias within findings (Glaser, 2005). Glaser (2002) rejects constructivist grounded theory for not remaining pure to his original view of the Grounded Theory method, where the researcher is removed from the process.

"Ontologically relativist and epistemologically subjectivist" (Mills et al., 2006: 6), Constructivist Grounded Theory accepts the notion of multiple social realities, each holding their own truth. The epistemological stance rejects a singular, universal reality that is "*objective, true, and external*" (Charmaz, 2000: 575). Kenny and Fourie (2015)

also align Charmaz's (2014) approach under the constructivist paradigm with elements of interpretivism. It is therefore the researchers role to construct a narrative view of reality that considers multiple participant experiences, attitudes and perceptions. Constructivist grounded theory emphasises the importance of participant experiences and how such experiences contribute to the way in which participants come to understand their experience (Charmaz, 2006). As such, constructivist grounded theory transcends paradigmatic rigidities, rendering it closer to pragmatist assumptions.

Whilst each of the grounded theorists offer a distinct stance upon their respective approaches to their version of the methodology, there are unifying features between all three. Namely, little to no reviews of literature before commencing with a study; rigorous coding practices; iterative and reflexive data collection; and interviewing (Charmaz, 2006). Whilst grounded theory is considered to be a promising method, a significant and systematic literature review has been adopted within the current study, long before the collection of primary data. Whilst Charmaz (2014) is less militant about the review of literature prior to grounded theory data collection, prior reading to data collection is begrudged under the methodology. However, key elements of the grounded theory methodology, such as in-depth interviewing, offer a valuable research method to be explored in greater detail within the following sub-section.

3.2.4.6 Qualitative Interviewing

A common research method and data collection tool referred to within the qualitative research methods literature is that of the one-to-one interview (Foley and Timonen, 2015). Within the relevant field-related, empirical literature synthesised within the preliminary literature review, notable studies such as Leeflang et al. (2014), Quinn et al. (2016) and Royle and Laing (2014: np) discuss the "*elicit detailed, rich responses*" such interviews can engender.

A wider review of qualitative interviewing literature outlines varying types of interviews, consisting of semi-structured, unstructured interviews and structured interviews (Wimpenny and Gass, 2000). Due to the similarities that exist between each method a comparative table of characteristics and possible limitations is provided in Table 10.

Criteria	Structured Interviews	Semi-structured Interviews	In-depth Interviews
Flexibility	Inflexible.	Flexible with some structure.	Very flexible.
Protocol	Predetermined list of questions with opportunity for open ended answers.	List of predetermined and broad open ended questions typically used as a prompt sheet.	No questions (possibly a small list of prompts to keep conversation moving).
Sample size	Small.	Small.	Small.
Advantages	Structured questions make for easier analysis of clearly defined participant responses.	More detailed answers with the benefit of some structure, in order to keep interviews on topic.	Very detailed and in-depth answers. Reduced chance of imposing preconceived ideas onto the questioning process.
Limitations	Can be too restrictive.	Can be too restrictive or lose focus.	Can lose focus and create a significant amount of irrelevant data.

Table 10. Interview Type Comparison Table

In the context of the current study where phenomenon are unclear and ambiguous, semi-structured or unstructured interviews are considered to be most beneficial for exploring the phenomenon. As advocated by Guest et al. (2013), the use of open ended questions is always advisable in order to ensure that the participant is not be led by the researcher or their preconceived questions. Indeed, a number of possible limitations come with this approach such as a prone to bias and the large amount of raw data that derives from the required sample (Austin and Sutton, 2014).

However, DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) advocate that unstructured interviews offer an open environment for participants to talk freely about the research topic without formulaic questioning. In doing so, the interview is treated as if it were a natural conversation (Burgess (1984). In order to achieve this naturally, Engel and Schutt (2012) believe that the interviewer must have a deep and extensive understanding of the setting in which the researcher operates. Such an interviewing process corresponds well with the researchers industry experience.

3.2.4.7 *Chosen Research Method – In-depth Interviews*

Following deliberation of appropriate data collection methods, one-to-one, in-depth interviewing is adopted as the current studies research method. This decision follows the pilot study, which discounts the use of collaborative or deliberative methods. The decision also follows careful deliberation of a variety of qualitative data collection methods. The advantages of qualitative in-depth interviews are deemed appropriate to the nature of the research problem, which is complex, ambiguous and socially oriented. Indeed, grounded theory offers similar benefits. However, restrictions upon the role of literature within the methodology make it incompatible with the current study. As in-depth interviewing is a suitable method for allowing unrestricted narrative accounts from participants, the next stage in the research methodology examines how such participant accounts can be best analysed.

3.2.5 Analysis

An important element of in-depth interviews is how they are transcribed in order to give meaning to participant accounts. As such, it is necessary to deliberate possible qualitative data analysis techniques suitable to the interpretivist and inductive paradigm. A wider review of qualitative research methods literature has indicated a number of suitable analysis techniques. They are critiqued in Table 11, followed by a sub-section detailing the chosen data analysis technique and its justification.

Data Analysis Technique	Advantages	Disadvantages
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Pringle et al., 2011)	The analysis of a specific experience, adopting a smaller homogeneous sample. It is essential participants are similar as IPA analyses trends in participant accounts regarding specific experiences i.e. emotions towards a specific event. As such, IPA emphasises the idiographic with a core focus in mind. In other	There is no defined or rigorous way of coding. IPA stipulates a specific and shared experience. However, what if the experience is not known or without a clearer cognitive beginning from which to begin interpretive data collection and analysis? Possibly not suitable for

	words, *a* phenomenon experienced by participants.	larger multi-stakeholder samples.
Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)	The analytical process of identifying themes and recurrent trends and patterns of said themes within data. Themes are given codes via open coding, then categorised into themes.	End themes can be a little descriptive and reductionist if key interrelationships between themes are not considered.
Grounded Theory Analysis (Charmaz, 2014)	A tool for rigorous coding and analysis rather than a methodology (modified grounded theory means using elements of GT). Aims for an explanatory outcome.	The grounded theory methodology needs to be consistently used throughout the study for most trustworthy and rigorous results.
Narrative Analysis (Gilbert, 2008)	Analysis through storytelling, giving onus to cultural, psychological and historical influence upon participant experience. Sees the researcher summarise experiences, reflect upon them, and present back insights to the reader.	Does this stay as close to the participants experience as it could, or should, if the researcher is required to "represent" the participants narrative?
Discourse Analysis (Gill, 2000)	Analyses the structure of language and use of terminology. Close to traditional conceptions of hermeneutics. Looks at the way participants express themselves. Attempts to find statements of fact or truth in discourse.	More appropriate for the analysis of text and linguistics, than deeper interpretation of participant accounts.

Table 11. Comparison of qualitative data analysis techniques

3.2.5.1 Chosen Data Analysis Techniques

The chosen data analysis technique for the current study is thematic analysis. Indeed, when thematic analysis is compared to other qualitative analysis techniques, such as content analysis or grounded theory analysis, there does not seem as deep a tradition or set of supporting assumptions inherent in the approach. As such, thematic analysis is often considered to be a broader analytical method with this in mind (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, wider reading of the thematic analysis literatures suggest that thematic analysis has its own framework and varying different assumptions within the method. Within thematic analysis alone there are two distinct approaches. They are inductive thematic analysis and deductive thematic analysis (Alhojailan, 2012). Dependent upon the mode of inquiry adopted, inductive or deductive assumptions pertain to different approaches of analysis of the raw data. Inductive indicates something of a bottom up, emergent approach (similar to grounded theory) where there is no prescribed coding family, allowing for deeper, contextual and emergent understanding. Alternatively, deductive approaches to thematic analysis are top down, driven by a specific theoretical interest and specific research questions in mind. Braun and Clarke (2006) contest the notion of emergence within thematic analysis, where themes emerge from the raw data. They argue that this minimises the role of the researcher within the analytical process. However, this view may also minimise the role of the participant and the possibility for in-vivo themes, know as the practice of "*assigning a label to a section of data, such as an interview transcript, using a word or short phrase taken from the section of the data*" (Given, 2008: 472). This is very much a process the current study is open to due to the revelatory contribution the current study intends to make.

Other justification for the suitability of the thematic analysis approach derives from its adoption within the contemporary client-agency trust literatures in Chapter Two's Systematic Literature Review. Elements of thematic analysis are adopted by Gambetti et al. (2016), Keegan et al. (2017) and Mortimer and Laurie (2017). Mortimer and Laurie (2017: 10-11) note the value of thematic analysis in "*bring[ing] out some of the concerns being expressed by both sides of the industry which were not being captured elsewhere*". Such a stance coincides well with the current studies multi-stakeholder sample, examined within Chapter Four, Research Implementation. However, it must be noted that Mortimer and Laurie (2017) adopt a predefined, prescriptive list of priori codes for their thematic analysis suggesting they have adopted deductive thematic analytical methods. Conversely, Keegan et al. (2016) adopt a stance similar to that of the current study, calling for an inductive approach to thematic analysis.

In doing so they adopt Braun and Clarkes (2006) coding framework. The implementation of this framework within the current study, with key considerations to its varying stages, limitations and rigour, is examined in greater detail within the following Chapter, Research Implementation.

3.2.6   Summary

The current chapter provides rationale for a preferred methodology founded upon the deliberation of various paradigms and possible research methods. An interpretivist methodology is selected as the most appropriate route to fulfilling the current studies research questions. Further to this, in-depth interviewing is deemed to be a suitable method for collecting data-rich insights from participants. Evidence of a pilot study is provided in order to demonstrate how paradigmatic assumptions and related methods have been explored and refined. Additionally, a series of possible limitations of the research design and routes to addressing each is outlined. Finally, carefully considered data analysis techniques are deliberated, where inductive thematic analysis is arrived upon. The following Chapter provides a detailed overview of the implementation of such methods and processes defined in the current chapter, with specific emphasis upon the interviewing process, research setting, participant outreach processes, and the specific data analysis process employed.

4 Chapter Four: Research Implementation

4.1 Introduction

So far, the thesis has established the research context, covering key conceptualisations of client-agency trust within a systematic literature review. Additionally, a rationale for an interpretivist methodology, consisting of in-depth interviews and qualitative-inductive analytical approaches is made. Denzin and Lincoln (2008: 14) suggest that the term qualitative implies "*an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings*". As such, the current chapter aims to fulfil this ethos and deliver a detailed overview of the research inquiry processes adopted within the current study. Methodological discussions from the previous Chapter are extended, in order to advance the readers understanding of key research processes undertaken.

Explicit practical guidelines as to how interpretivist methodology should be implemented, documented and written-up are limited within relevant digital marketing studies, however. As such, a number of qualitative and interpretivist literatures are called upon in order to give structure to the research implementation Chapter. First, the current studies units of analysis are established, followed by a detailed overview of the sampling and participant recruitment process. A comprehensive overview of the data collection and analysis process is provided, closing in a review of criteria for high quality research.

4.2 Establishing the Unit of analysis

Whilst not frequently stressed within business research methods literature, establishing *units of analysis,* is considered to be critical to the current study. This is so that the data collection process can avoid progressing down an unfocussed path. Furthermore, clarifying units of analysis early within the research implementation phase, helps to align the research process with the current studies research questions and scope. Within qualitative studies, a unit of analysis is defined as an entity where analysis is focused (Chenail, 2012). A more specific definition of a unit of analysis is established by Neuman (2011: 69):

> "*The units, cases, or parts of social life that are under consideration. They are key to developing concepts, empirically measuring or observing concepts, and using data analyses*."

However, Bengtsson (2016) contend that established *criteria* for defining the unit of analysis is limited i.e. size of units, number of units etc. Additionally, in their book *Collecting and Analyzing Qualitative Data: Hermeneutic Principles, Methods and Case Examples,* Patterson and Williams (2002) argue that there are no accepted *rules* or routes to establishing a unit of analysis. As such, a certain subjective assessment is required on behalf of the researcher. Therefore, so that the current studies major units of analysis may be clearly defined, the current sub-section discusses the *who* and *what* units of analysis adopted. The three most notable areas to be discussed in more detail, include units of analysis as *themes* (Braun and Clarke, 2006); *stakeholders* (Freeman et al., 2010); and *text* (Elo et at, 2014).

4.2.1 Units of analysis as Themes

Vaismoradi and Snelgrove (2019: para. 1) stipulate that units of analysis within studies adopting in-depth interviews and inductive thematic analysis, are specifically the participants subjective interpretation of the '*realities of the phenomenon*". From a more literal perspective, they are also the themes generated through the analytical coding process. Such themes as units of analysis ask: *What does the research problem mean to a participant*? Kumar (2018) argues that many studies that adopt inductive thematic analysis fail to address themes as units of analysis. This has the power to undermine theory generation from the beginning of the analytical process. Within the context of the current study, themes encompass the emergent concepts, contextual factors, ideas generated by participants and the researcher (Thomas and Harden, 2008). Fundamentally, Braun and Clarke (2006: 10) posit that "*a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question*". As such, themes are constructed in a continuous and iterative process of emergent coding against the overarching research questions.

4.2.2 Units of analysis as Text

Alternative perspectives regarding the unit of analysis within qualitative studies are explored by Elo et al. (2014) and Willig (2013). They advocate that lines of text, transcribed during the data collection and analysis process, are considered to be a unit of analysis. Data from interview transcripts are used to track "*critical episodes of underlying learning*" (Mcniff and Whitehead, 2011: 136). Furthermore, text as units of analysis acknowledge a traditional interpretation of hermeneutics, as outlined by Byrne (2001) in her review of *Hermeneutics as a methodology for textual analysis.* The doctrine of the Hermeneutic Circle is adopted as a method within the

current study, further deliberation of which is provided later in this Chapter. Within his review of qualitative units of analysis, Chenail (2012) warns that it is important to be mindful of the process of isolating segments of text, where the researcher can either over-size or under-size text units. This poses the threat of misidentification of meaning. As complicit with inductive thematic analysis coding techniques, Thomas and Harden (2008) recommend that a line-by-line, paragraph-by-paragraph analysis of text is adopted. A deeper and more detailed overview of the stages of coding and analysis adopted within the current study, is provided later within the chapter.

4.2.3   Units of analysis as Stakeholders

As the current studies research questions make a point of questioning *who?* is contributing to client-agency trust issues*, a key analytical element of the research phenomenon is perceived to be its varying stakeholders. Such stakeholder types are deemed to be a unit of analysis within their own right. In adopting such a unit of analysis, Werhane (2008) advocates a systemic and emergent approach to enumerating stakeholders. The importance of which is also raised by Kolbjørnsrud (2017) within the current studies literature review Chapter, through their commendation of Network theory. The intention of network theory is to map out interrelationships and clusters between key stakeholders pertinent to a phenomenon. However, this particular technique is discounted for its positivist roots in mathematical graph theory. Within the context of the current study, notable stakeholder groups, identified within participant accounts, are used to inform the ongoing purposive sampling strategy. This is elaborated upon further within the following sub-section, which outlines the sampling process, sampling criteria and participant recruitment strategy adopted within the current study.

4.3   Sampling Process

A review of the field-related literature denotes various types of suitable qualitative non-probability sampling techniques. In other words, those sampling techniques not required to be generalisable to a wider population (Smith, 2009). They include *judgement sampling* (Chowdhury et al., 2016), *snowball sampling* (Neill and Schauster, 2018) and *purposive sampling* (Laurie and Mortier, 2019). Wider analysis of qualitative research method texts, in particular, inductive thematic texts, reinforce non-probability sampling techniques also (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As each have their own merits and place within the current qualitative study,

the main approaches to each sampling technique, are critically analysed within the current sub-section.

Qualitative studies that have adopted quota sampling include Mortimer and Laurie (2017) and later, Laurie and Mortimer (2019). They define quota sampling as a process of ensuring "*contributions from both the client and the agency side of the industry*" (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019: 238) are sourced. This perspective resonates with the multi-stakeholder view of the current study, which requires something of a representative sample of the digital marketing industry. However, the technique borders somewhat with quantified sampling techniques such as stratified sampling, which requires a proportionate target number of representative participants (Lavrakas, 2008a). This is not the objective of the current studies sampling process. That being said, the ethos of a representative sampling approach is considered during the process of purposive sampling, also referred to as judgement sampling. Here, subjective methods are adopted by the researcher in order to define the sample of interest relative to the research problem (Levin et al., 2017). Schauster and Neill (2017: 50), who also adopt the sampling technique, give some insight into the purposeful nature of the approach by making the sampling criteria for their study clear. For example, in their qualitative study of advertising and public relations agencies, "*only participants who had worked in agencies for at least 4 years were eligible to participate.*" Within the thematic inductive texts, Walsh et al., (2019), indicate the purposive sampling is non-random and reliant upon researcher interpretation with regards to the research question. However, because the *Who*?, research question within the current study is purposefully left open and without defined parameters, purposive sampling becomes harder to undertake. Similarly, a particular limitation with the purposive sampling method within the context of the current study is its requirement to seek those with "*expert knowledge*" (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019: 238). Fundamentally, the current study posits that the expert construct is problematic within digital marketing contexts. With this quandary in mind, Chowdhury et al. (2016) highlight the importance of purposively sampling participants with *experience* of a phenomenon.

Within the context of the current study, the chosen sampling technique is purposive sampling. In order to increase perceived trustworthiness in the purposive sampling process adopted, Elo et al. (2014) highlight that researchers adopting the technique must provide a detailed description of its implementation. This is made clear within the following sub-section.

4.3.1 Implementation of Purposive Sampling

Based upon participant experiences and responses within the data collected, the researcher adopted subjective judgement in order to determine the most appropriate sample. A particular type of purposive sampling was adopted*: the Maximum Variation/Heterogeneous purposive sample*. This is defined as the process of identifying a wide range of perspectives, regarding a shared topic, with an aim to identify "*important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity*" (Patton, 2002: 235). Under this view, a diverse range of participants are selected relative to the client-agency trust phenomenon, unlike its counterpart, homogeneous sampling, which seeks participants with shared or similar characteristics.

Though less prevalent within the contemporary literature, varying other stakeholders are addressed beyond the client-agent dyadic. They include institutions such as trade associations, or educational establishments (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017). This presents and empirical gap where contemporary client-agency trust studies do not adopt a multi-stakeholder sampling strategy. Within the current study, heterogeneous purposive sampling was adopted in order to collect a variety of rich and robust insights beyond that of the client and agent, whilst still maintaining focus upon the research problem. Potential participants emerged from an iterative and emergent process of stakeholder identification, with each new in-depth interview (Robinson, 2014).

The process of allowing participants to recommend prospective participants, makes the process very similar to snowball sampling techniques, where participants are asked to refer and often directly recruit suitable participants (Johnson, 2014). A number of studies within Chapter Twos SLR, adopt this sampling technique, such as Neill and Schauster (2018), Chowdhury et al. (2016) and Laurie and Mortimer (2019). Whilst this specific sampling technique is not directly adopted within the current study; certain elements of the technique were carried through to the current studies approach to purposive sampling. More specifically, in place of asking the participant for referral recommendations directly, sampling opportunities were naturally derived from participant accounts. In other words, if the participant naturally mentioned "*procurement*" within their personal account, this was coded as a participant of interest and further verified against the secondary data for their suitability. This went some way to mitigating perceived bias that comes within purposive sampling (Noble and Smith, 2015).

Further consideration of minimising bias and upholding rigorous sampling processes is provided within the following sub-section.

4.3.2   Ensuring Rigorous Sampling Processes

The first stage of ensuring rigour within the sampling process includes the clear deliberation of the varying suitable sampling processes under the qualitative tradition. Beyond this, the sampling process is required to be carefully critiqued in order to determine any possible limitations. Varying qualitative studies, as well as texts depicting purposive sampling techniques, are examined, in order to highlight various measures for rigorous sample design. They are collated in Table 12. This table indicates how sampling rigour was achieved within the current study.

Criteria for Rigour	Description and Evidence
Sample Size	The notion of an appropriate sample size is an often discussed but contentious issue within the wider qualitative research (Boddy, 2016). Unlike non-probability sampling techniques such as quota sampling, purposive sampling does not require the researcher to have a set number of participants in mind. However, less than 50 participants is usually recommended (Van Rijnsoever, 2017). Instead, sampling is undertaken in a continuous and iterative process until saturation is perceived to have been reached (Vasileiou et al., 2018). A total of 32 participants were recruited for the current studies sample.
Sample Saturation	Sufficiency in sample size saturation is a frequently suggested "*guarantee of qualitative rigor*" (Morse, 2015, para. 1). Here, no new or significant theoretical insights emerge, no matter how many new participants are introduced to the sample. Sample saturation is very much governed by saturation in themes, or narratives, where sufficient insight is gathered in order to "answer" a studies research questions. In other words, the research identifies "*similar instances over and over again [until] the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated...[the researcher] goes out of [their] way to look for groups that stretch diversity of data as far as*

	possible, just to make certain that saturation is based on the widest possible range of data on the category." (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 61). With this in mind, the sampling and coding process are very much bound. Because of this, further insights into data saturation are explored in greater detail, later within the current chapter.
Appropriate amount of evidence per participant	Polit and Beck (2008) suggest that sample adequacy is determined via the sufficient level of detail acquired from each participant within the sample. In other words, rigour is achieved through thick and information-rich participant accounts without "*thin spots*" (Polit and Beck, 2008: 360). Within the context of the current study, participants who could maintain in-depth dialogue for the duration of the interview were considered to be an appropriate participant choice. Furthermore, if the participant could raise a number of rich experiences and points of interest (thus key themes) relative to the research problem, they were considered to be an appropriate choice. Further participants from similar stakeholder groups were then sourced.
Diverse Opinion	Gerassi et al., (2016) note the value of capturing a wide variability of insights from diverse stakeholders relative to a research problem. Within the context of the current study a variety of perspectives from different stakeholder groups were considered to be more representative of the client-agency trust issue.
Sampling Criteria	According to Polit and Beck (2008: 360), the researcher should include an "*adequately thick description of the sample*". Within the current study, a loose framework for sampling criteria relative to the needs and objectives of the current study was established. The following section provides insight into the sampling criteria adopted within the current study.

Table 12. Rigour in Purposive Sampling

4.3.3 Sampling Criteria

Previous sub-sections have established the importance of a multi-perspective view of the research phenomenon. For example, the systematic review of literature, in Chapter Two, highlights that a majority of relevant academic and industry studies are prone to exploring client-agency phenomenon from the perspective of the digital marketing agent (Royle and Laing, 2014; Quinn et al., 2016). Whilst this gives insight into phenomenon from perceived "experts" within their field, a wider exploration of central issues beyond the agent is either dismissed or yet to occur. Similarly, throughout the data collection within the current study, it quickly became clear that participants were uncomfortable with the notion of an expert in a digital marketing context.

Despite an observable empirical imbalance in the extant literatures, in favour of the agent perspective, a number of studies make note of the "*various external stakeholders*" that comprise the digital marketing industry (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019: 231). However, the current study argues that prior inquiry has failed to represent key stakeholder perspectives, prematurely categorising the phenomenon without understanding the wider perspectives of stakeholders disaffected by current practice. Therefore, it is deemed critical to the current study that a sample more reflective of the research problem is acquired. As advocated by Flick (2002: 41), it is the:

> "*relevance to the research topic rather than their [participant] representativeness, which determines the way in which the people to be studied are selected*"

Table 13. offers an accurate representation of the current studies participants in the order in which they were interviewed. This does not reflect a prioritised view of participants. The following sub-sections provide a succinct description of each of the representative stakeholder groups consulted. The table also incudes their anonymised reference, which is adopted throughout Chapter Fives presentation of findings.

Interview No.	Stakeholder Group	Anonymised Reference
1	Digital Marketing Trade Association	TA001
2	Client – Electronics	CL001
3	Digital Marketing Trainer	TR001
4	Digital Marketing Trainer	TR002
5	Digital Marketing Agent – Managing Director	AG001
6	Digital Marketing Agent – Account Manager	AG002
7	Digital Marketing Agent – Head of Digital	AG003
8	Digital Marketing Agent – Managing Director	AG004
9	Recruitment – Managing Director	RC001
10	Digital Marketing Agent - Manager	AG005
11	Lawyer	LR001
12	Digital Marketing Agent – Marketing Director	AG006
13	Digital Marketing Trainer	TR003
14	Digital Marketing Agent – Managing Director	AG007
15	Client – Managing Director Events Company	CL002
16	Client – Experiential Products	CL003
17	Client - Property	CL004
18	Digital Marketing Agent - CEO	AG008
19	Client - Finance	CL005
20	Digital Marketing Agent – Managing Director	AG009
21	Digital Marketing Agent – Managing Director	AG010
22	Client - Human Resources	CL006
23	Client - Charity	CL007
24	Client - Education	CL008
25	Procurement	PR001
26	Procurement	PR002
27	Client - Property	CL009
28	Procurement	PR003
29	Digital Marketing Agent - Director	AG011
30	Client - Lifestyle	CL010
31	Client – Business Development	CL011
32	Digital Marketing Client - Finance	CL012

Table 13. Overview of Participants

4.3.3.1 Agents

All Agents interviewed for the current study were required to have been in a digital marketing agency role, or have worked in an agency role close to the time of the interview. The majority of those interviewed were required to have held senior positions including, Digital Marketing Agency Owners, Managing Directors and Chief Executives. Within Laurie and Mortimers (2019) study, a similar strategy is adopted, where they recruit a number of senior marketing practitioners for their expertise and experience.

However, according to O'Neill (2018), the notion of the expert construct within contemporary environments is problematic. Criteria regarding what it means to be an expert in a digital marketing context is limited within the literature. As such, the amount of time the agent has practiced within the digital marketing industry became core to the sampling criteria. For example, all agents selected were required to have worked within the industry for a minimum of three years. Three years was deemed to be an appropriate number as varying studies within the contemporary literature review identify three years to be the average lifespan of a client-agency relationship (Turnbull, 2016). As such, experience over expertise, was valued. Many of the agents suggested that they had a broad spectrum of digital marketing skills, whilst others specialised in particular areas such as search engine optimisation or paid marketing. In total, eleven digital marketing practitioners participated in the current study. Additionally, some agents had also been digital marketing clients; members of a relevant industry trade association; digital marketing trainers, offering an even richer account of client-agency trust.

4.3.3.2 Clients

Clients were predominantly small to medium enterprise (SME) owners who had worked with a digital marketing agency for a minimum of 1 year, the typical duration of a client-agency contract. Clients who were, or had been, the agency point of contact were sourced. This would provide interesting discussion points for clients who believed that they had received a perceivably poor experience and/or those that had decided to terminate their client-agency relationship. Prospective clients in the process of searching for an agency partner were also consulted, in order to address clients within

the early stages of their client-agency relationship (Turnbull, 2016). This was considered to be an important feature of the sampling criteria due to the contextual and temporal value of the current studies research questions. Industries in which the client businesses were situated varied from Events Management to Property Development to Finance. Likewise, the digital marketing services sought by clients from their agencies varied. For example, one client had received predominantly search engine optimisation services, whilst others discussed their experiences of social media marketing and paid marketing. It was felt that considering one particular service, such as SEO or PPC, in silo, would have the potential to protract the debate. Particularly, when current trends within industry dictate that an integrated approach to digital marketing is favoured (Royle and Laing, 2014). As such, sampling criteria was required to reflect this. Instead, the unifying factor between all client participants was that they had an online presence and a company objective to raise awareness of their brand, or promote and sell products and/or services, online. A total of twelve clients were interviewed as part of the data collection.

4.3.3.3   Training Providers

Ongoing professional development was a prevalent theme within participant accounts. In particular, digital marketing trainers were frequently mentioned. They would include outsourced freelance trainers, who acted as consultants to agents, or those who produced explicit training materials for courses or industry-related blogs. Two of the trainers interviewed worked for some of the largest digital marketing and media training companies within the United Kingdom. All training providers had worked directly with clients and agents or had been clients or agents themselves. As such, a knowledgeable view of both client and practitioner perspectives could be obtained. Three training providers contributed their experiences and insights to the current study.

4.3.3.4   Intermediaries

Issues with the pre-relationship stage of the client-agency lifecycle were frequently referenced by participants. In particular, the need for a trustworthy intermediary was desired by many clients. This would be an impartial third-party who could guide a clients decision-making processes. A wider review of literature suggests that the appropriate intermediary services prospective clients seek is that of Procurement

specialists (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019). Procurement specialists were perceived to have experience of sourcing digital marketing agencies for prospective clients. A total of three procurement specialists were consulted as part of the current study.

4.3.3.5 Governing Bodies

Representatives of major governing and regulatory bodies, with insight into the digital marketing industry, were interviewed as part of the current study, as per their involvement outlined in Chapter One. Whilst a number of prevalent bodies within the industry were consulted, many suggested that their purpose was not to support clients or lobby for their needs. Rather many of the responsibilities of such bodies were to deliver guidance upon the type of content that could be shared online and to what audiences. For example, regulating what content should and should not be promoted towards children and where. At the time of undertaking the current study, the digital marketing industry did not have a formal client-agency trade association, governing body or regulatory group to oversee client-agency conduct. Insights from one major governing body were gathered as a result.

4.3.3.6 Recruiters

Recruiters within the digital marketing industry were considered to be important to the data collection process, due to their view of stakeholders across the digital marketing supply chain. However, whilst valuable to the discussion, insights regarding client-agency trust issues were limited where depth of digital marketing client-agency relationship understanding was required. Only one digital marketing recruiter was consulted.

4.3.3.7 Lawyers

Emergence of the constructs of recourse, fiduciary duties and accountability for poor treatment emerged over the course of data collection. This gave weight to the importance of the client-agency post-relationship stages. As such, insight from lawyers with a vested interest in digital marketing were sought. However, only one lawyer was consulted as part of the analysis as it was suggested that there were no specific regulatory laws in place relative to the digital marketing industry client-agency relationship. Additionally, the participant recruitment process was particularly difficult

within this area as lawyers, with specific insight or experience with digital marketing client-agency issues, were lacking. Experiences and insights gained from one lawyer interviewed as part of the current study were useful in order to understand this. However, it also indicated that following a legal avenue regarding contract law was a critical but much larger research area beyond the scope of the current study.

4.3.3.8 *Limitations of Sampling process and profiling*

Due to the required level of researcher judgement throughout the purposive sampling process, a significant threat lies with the vulnerability of bias in the researchers subjective judgement (Kolb, 2012). As argued by, Oppong (2013) bias can unnaturally impact data selection and influence the overall data collection process. Similarly, within Tucketts (2004: 9) study of Qualitative Research Bias, a construct called "*Sample Frame Bias*", is identified where the researcher can become overly enamoured with a particular sample or participant type. Within the current studies relevant field of literature, authors are found to favour client and agent perspectives (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019) or that solely of the agent perspective (Moraru, 2017). In order to diversify the sample frame within the current study, future participant recommendations were made by participants and demonstrated the importance of a multi-stakeholder view. Therefore, it became difficult to become too enamoured with a particular sub-set of the sample.

Broader critiques of a lack of generalisability of findings from purposive sampling are also raised (Etikan, 2016). Such a perspective derives from a common paradigmatic argument between non-probability and probability techniques where sampling comprises a statistically generalisable and positivistic approach (Eichelberger, 1989). Contrary to the positivist assumptions of representativeness, the current studies ontologically relativist stance upholds the view that demographic generalisability of the sample is not an imperative (Higginbottom and Lauridsen, 2014). Instead, the rigour of the sampling recruitment process is considered to be more important to the construction of thematic categories, which will be explored in greater detail within the following sub-sections.

4.3.4 Participant Recruitment Process

The importance of the participant recruitment process is upheld by Newington and Metcalfe (2014) who advocate the need for a systematic approach to constructing a participant

recruitment strategy. This is particularly important where a variety of participant recruitment approaches are adopted. Within the current study two participant recruitment approaches were adopted: 1) outreach via social media (Gu et al., 2016); 2) outreach via networking at field-related events and conferences (Newington and Metcalfe, 2014). Justification for each method, including their limitations, are explored within the following sub-sections.

4.3.4.1 *Social Media as Participant Outreach*

Within their study examining the use of social media as a participant recruitment tool, Gu et al. (2016) state that the use of web-based recruitment processes have become more commonplace in contemporary research. This is largely due to the uptake of digital communications methods by wider contemporary society (Stern et al., 2016). Within the current study, social media platforms, Twitter and LinkedIn, were utilised throughout the recruitment process. Recruiting participants through web-based mediums felt natural to the study, due to their perceived embeddedness within digital marketing (Kazmer and Xie, 2008).

A key benefit of social media recruitment is also proposed by Sikkens et al. (2017) who suggest that participant details can be closely examined prior to outreach in order to accurately determine the appropriateness of their contribution. For example, LinkedIn profiles of prospective participants highlight a number of defining attributes such as current role details, professional history, as well as insights into personal values. This allows for a more targeted approach to participant selection (Temple and Brown, 2011).

Whilst the benefits of participant recruitment via social media have become more prolific within qualitative research (Close et al., 2013), the ethical limitations of the process must be addressed. One of the key challenges posed by contacting participants via social media, regards their privacy. To expand upon this further, Ganda (2014) argues that social media profiles are considered to be an extension of the profile owners identity and as such, unsolicited contact may be considered to be an invasion of privacy. In order to counteract this within the current study, participants were only contacted if their personal details were readily available within a public domain. Additionally, the researcher only requested support with prospective participants if an existing connection had already been established. Establishing an online relationship is

identified as a unique challenge to the online recruitment process by Temple and Brown (2011). However, outreach was personalised and courteous to the participant.

Palys and Atchinson (2012: 357) also suggest that the researcher should consider their own online identity as "*the doors to the Internet opens both ways*". As such, the researcher ensured that important contact details could be easily accessed via personal online profiles. Examples of social media recruitment and outreach are found in Figure 12.
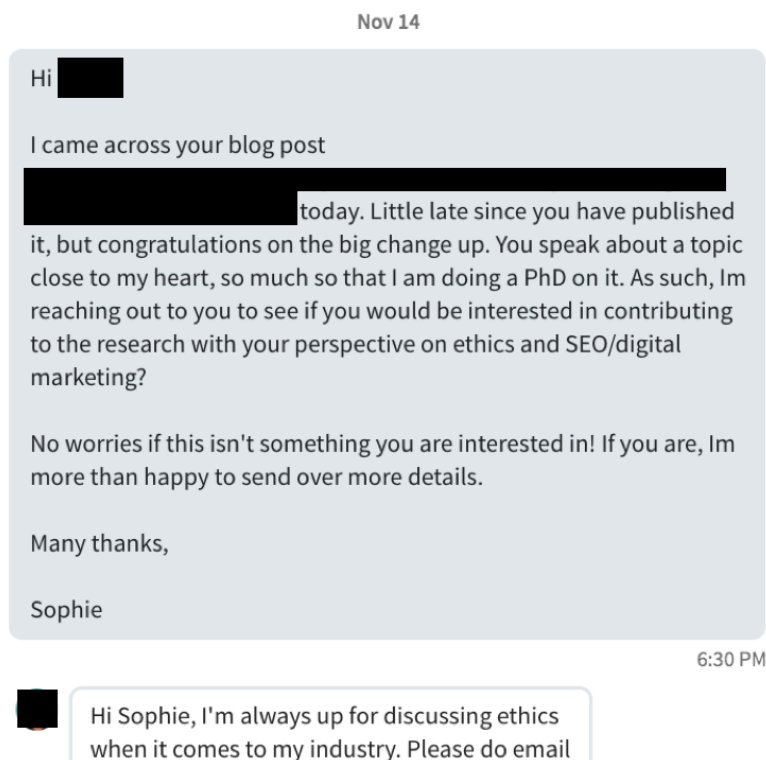
Figure 12. Example screenshot of participant outreach via social media

A total of thirty participants were recruited via social media, out of 120 prospects contacted. Beyond this, Bauermeister et al. (2012) advise that face-to-face participant recruitment strategies should be adopted so that risks of non-contact via online mediums may be offset. As such, the following sub-section gives insight into the face-to-face participant recruitment strategy adopted.

4.3.4.2 *Face-to-face participant recruitment via Digital Conferences and Events*

Another key route to direct outreach with potential participants was via industry related digital marketing conferences. In their study of *Factors influencing recruitment to research,* Newington and Metcalfe (2014), suggest that social events are beneficial for engendering participant support. However, little detail as to how appropriate events can be identified is provided. Within the current study it was perceived that digital marketing conferences, open to small businesses, clients, practitioners, amongst other stakeholders, were fruitful opportunities for participant recruitment. In total, the researcher attended five digital marketing conferences.

Opdenakker et al. (2006) note the benefit of personal, face-to-face contact in the recruitment process, suggesting that the approach can yield successful response rates. In order to improve the success rate of confirmed participants the researcher adopted MacDougall and Fudges (2001: 124) *Sampling and Recruiting Strategy,* which discusses the importance of "*follow up*" in order to maintain relationships. From the five conferences attended, two participants were recruited for the current study. Whilst the success rate seems low, such participants were incredibly valuable to the research process, due to their connected position within industry.

4.3.5   Rigour and the participant recruitment process

In order to encourage rigour during participant recruitment, a clear description of the participant recruitment process is encouraged (Wu et al., 2016; Carlsen and Glenton, 2011). This is outlined within the previous sub-sections. According, to Dejonckheere and Vaughn (2019), rigour within participant recruitment is also achieved through minimising preconceived notions about the recruitment process within the mind of the participant. Here, the researcher makes sure to minimise sharing of details of the research focus, prior to participant outreach. However, it is still important to clarify why participants have been recruited for the study (Moorley and Cathala, 2018). Within the current study, this was best encapsulated through an invitation to participate (Appendix 3), which offered a broad but still informative overview of the current study.

Avoiding selection of participants with pre-established relationships, is also considered to be important to the rigour of the recruitment process. According to Atkinson et al. (2004), an over

familiarity with some participants can unnaturally influence data outcomes. In opposition of this, Roulston (2010) contends that a closer relationship with the participant is more beneficial to data collection than reaching out to unknown individuals. Within the context of the current study members of the researcher's indirect peer network were recruited. In other words, participants were not personal or collegial to the researcher, but were part of a wider online peer network (Hoffman, 2013). Whilst it is important to be extremely thorough and careful throughout the participant recruitment process, reflection upon participant recruitment adopted within the current study, highlighted some limitations. They are addressed within the following sub-section.

4.3.6   Limitations of Recruitment Processes

Throughout the current studies participant recruitment process, a series of overall limitations are acknowledged, including: 1) researcher proclivity towards specific sub-sectors within the digital marketing field; 2) sustaining relationship building with those perceived to be most approachable and responsive; 3) giving preference to participants within a close geographical proximity to the researcher; 4) selecting participants with knowledge, where emergent theory suggests that a lack of knowledge is a key issue within the digital marketing industry. Each limitation, as well as attempts towards their mitigation, is outlined within the sub-sections below.

4.3.6.1   *Proclivity Towards Sub-sectors within Digital Marketing*

Due to the researchers' industry background in Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), participants within this field comprised a large portion of the researchers online social network. This was especially evident within the initial stages of data collection, with potential selection bias towards particular sub-disciplines within the digital marketing industry. According to Royle and Laing (2014), a perceived issue with leaning towards a particular sub-sector within digital marketing is the threat of feeding the phenomenon of a siloed digital marketing industry. With this mind, a more representative sample of the wider digital marketing industry was sourced. More specifically, a number of digital marketing agents were sourced who had worked across a number of varying sub-sectors.

4.3.6.2   Speaking with Participants Deemed to be Most Approachable

Within qualitative research, a certain openness to self-disclosure and personal reflection is required on behalf of the participants (Mills et al., 2010). As such, the researcher within the current study, proactively nurtured relationships with those participants deemed to be most forthcoming to the experience of critical reflection and open discussion. However, this very act could suggest that confirmation bias is present during the recruitment process as the researcher became intent on picking more expressive participants, deemed to be trustworthy. As such, it could be argued that the researcher may have inadvertently represented the viewpoints of only trustworthy actor accounts. A truly representative sample of the phenomenon, which perpetuates trustworthy and untrustworthy actors, may not have been selected. However, as there are no clear indicators of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness from which to determine who a trustworthy participant is considered to be, this became less of a limitation. Additionally, presuppositions of the participants benevolence were suspended in favour of their perceived experience within the field and willingness to support the research project.

4.3.6.3   Geographical Location of Participants

Geographically oriented sampling bias presents the risk of recruiting participants experiencing particular localised issues irrelevant to a wider sample. This possibility was evident during participant outreach via social events and conferences within the current study. All but one of the five digital marketing conferences attended for participant recruitment within the current study, were based within the North West of England. However, because participants were perceived to operate within an online sphere, the critical importance of the geographical proximity and representativeness of participants was deprioritised. Fundamentally, participant recruitment was not limited to a specific location due to the unrestrictive capabilities that web-based data collection allowed.

4.3.6.4   Sourcing participants without knowledge

As purposive sampling progressed and thematic categories became more refined, a particular need to source clients yet to enter into a client-agency relationship emerged. A particular challenge with this participant type was that they may not have been able

to discuss their requirements, needs or beliefs, relative to the digital marketing industry without priori knowledge. For example, some clients struggled to articulate their experiences, whether through incomplete knowledge or an unconscious lack of knowledge. Whilst it could be viewed that such participants were not in a position to contribute a great deal to the current study, ultimately, it was this insight that enriched the current studies contribution to knowledge. Further explanation is provided within Chapter Six's Discussion chapter.

4.3.7   Ethical Considerations of the Recruitment Process

By identifying possible risks and threats to the welfare of the participant, appropriate routes to mitigating risk can be determined (Markham et al, 2012). A full and in-depth review of ethical considerations is explored, within a supporting ethical approval document. Ethical confirmation number SBSR1617-02 is assigned. Unfortunately, the risks and challenges associated with online data collection are not as widely documented as its offline equivalent. However, ethical considerations of in-depth interviewing may still be applied within the context. For example, ethical considerations still consider the all important process of gaining informed consent as well as ensuring participant privacy and confidentiality (Allmark et al., 2009). Beyond this, the following sub-sections examine the ethical considerations of the online interview setting more specifically i.e. enacting data security in online environments.

4.3.7.1   Informed Consent

An ethical imperative in all qualitative research, is the process of gaining participant consent (Kraut et al., 2004). Throughout the duration of the current study, the researcher was incumbent to ensure informed consent was gained from each participant, prior to data collection. In doing so, this ensured the research progressed with the participants right to "*self-determination, privacy, anonymity or confidentiality, fair treatment and protection from discomfort and harm*" (Byrne, 2001b: 401).

So that participants were informed throughout the participant recruitment and data collection process, the current study adopted the following approaches: 1) informally outlining participant rights within the initial outreach process via email or face-to-face discussion; 2) formally documenting participant rights within an informed consent form; 3) informally reminding the participant of their rights at the beginning of each

interview. Regularly updating participants about informed consent is recommended by Markham, Buchanan and Ess (2010), who suggest that requirements of informed consent may change over the duration of an inductive data collection process. Reference to the informed consent document can be found in Appendix 4 (which also stipulates the participants right to withdraw from the study). As advised by Wiles et al. (2005), the form should contain important information relevant to the researcher, the research project, the use of participant data and further details about the participants voluntary involvement or withdrawal.

Whilst the researcher might act in the best interests of the participant, Wiles et al. (2007) criticise a lack of enforcement of stipulations within informed consent documents. However, for additional security, the current study is compliant with the institutional ethics of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) as well as the University of Salfords research committee. Additionally, the researcher also aimed to engage with research participants in a morally responsible and ethical way (Webster et al., 2013).

4.3.7.2 *Participant Privacy and Confidentiality*

As per Allmark et al's (2009) study of *Ethical issues in the use of in-depth interviews literature review and discussion,* privacy and confidentiality of participant data and personal details are paramount to their safety. Additionally, assurance of privacy and confidentiality is suggested to make for a more conducive and open discussion. Within the context of the current study, participant privacy and confidentiality was achieved through codifying participant names and removing any defining features of the participant that would make them identifiable to peers i.e. place of work; location etc. Further to this, no details were shared amongst other participants. All data including transcripts and video recordings were stored on a password protected profile, on a password protected computer, within a locked room at the researchers' place of residence.

Following elucidation of the research sampling and outreach process, a clear overview of the actual data collection process is provided in the following section, commencing with a discussion of the research setting.

4.4   Research Setting

The research setting is defined as the location in which data collection takes place (Fern, 2001). When providing an overview of the research process, Schultz and Avital (2011) recommend that a rich and thick description of contextually relevant details related to the research setting is provided. This is so that a thorough overview of participant accounts and the events observed during the data collection process can be documented (Polit et al., 2011). The following sub-sections are divided into an overview of both the online interview setting and face-to-face interview settings. As argued by Qu and Dumay (2011), there is no correct or incorrect approach to establishing the interviewing setting. However, emphasis should be given to critical reflection and monitoring in order to ensure that compromising features of the research setting can be addressed with each interview. This is incorporated within the following subsections, which also critically reflect upon the setting limitations and latent ethical issues of each setting.

4.4.1.1   Online Interview Setting

Thus far, the current study has established how the digital marketing industry is comprised of a multiplicity of digital communications technologies (Weller, 2017). Internet-based data collection is considered to be appropriate for research problems affiliated with internet or online related topics (Kazmer and Xie, 2008). Quinton (2015: 302) espouses that marketers and researchers "*should inhabit the same spaces, virtual or physical*" as their research participants. As such, online settings, namely video conferencing software were deemed appropriate for the needs of the study.

Within the current study, an assumed familiarity with such tools, on behalf of the digital marketing practitioner's contacted, opened up new possibilities to leverage such digital communication channels for data collection purposes. Many of the practitioners purposively sampled as part of the current study were Managing Directors, CEO's, Trainers for large Media Companies. Other stakeholders including clients, procurement, and educators were also comfortable with online settings. However, alternative face-to-face options were also offered for those not comfortable with online settings.

A wider review of studies adopting online interviewing methods as a core research setting, suggest that the benefits are many. Saumure and Given (2010) note the geographical flexibility

of video conferencing tools, where participants are not required to be in a set geographical location. Seitz (2015) also suggest that online interviews benefit individuals who may be shy or slightly introverted. This was of particular benefit to specific participants who were a little more reserved about their experiences.

Specific details of the research setting were similar across each interview conducted. The researcher sent a pre-scheduled video conferencing link to the participant, via email, with details of how it may be accessed. Upon entering the online setting, participants had a brief introductory conversation. The beginning portion of the interview was not recorded in order to allow for more informal rapport building. Here the participant was reminded of why they had been selected, their role within the study, and what would happen to their data. Participants were also asked if they were happy to progress with the interview. Granting some time at the beginning of the interview allowed for initial testing of the online interview tool. Here audio, visibility and connectivity were tested before entering into the interview process. Upon the participants' confirmation to do so, the online interviews were then recorded. Participants were often within their home setting or in a quiet office, as was the researcher.

Upon reflection the research-setting was relatively straightforward and without real limitation, requiring little refinement with each round of interviews. However, it would be the selection of appropriate video conferencing tools which would require greater deliberation. This is addressed within the following sub-section.

4.4.1.1.1 Selecting an appropriate Video Conferencing Programme

At the time of data collection within the current study, primary video conferencing tools included FaceTime, Skype or Google Hangouts. FaceTime was immediately disregarded due to its prominence on Apple Inc. products, which eliminated Android device users. As such, Skype and Google Hangouts became prominent choices.

Within the online interviewing literatures, Skype is more commonly addressed as a primary online-interviewing tool. However, a number of ethical issues relative to the use of Skype emerge. The primary limitation being their "*right to record your conversations*" (Sullivan, 2012: 58), although Skype does not make this clear when you sign up for an account. Within their study, *Skype: An appropriate Method of Data Collection for Qualitative Interviews,*

Sullivan (2012) suggest that Skypes' recording issue may be mitigated by warning the participant of such a possibility. They also recommend setting up a dummy Skype account on behalf of the participant so there is no onus upon the participant to share their personal details with Skype. However, within the current study it was believed that this very action could in fact breed mistrust in the platform and the interview process.

On the other hand, with a platform such as Google Hangouts, the user is not required to set up a Google Hangout account, and may be invited to a private discussion as an external user. Such an approach reduces commitment and work on behalf the client. Other issues with Skype include its lack of built-in recording functionality (Weller, 2015). In order to record the online interview via Skype, a secondary platform is required. Not only does the introduction of further platforms introduce the threat of more technical difficulties, it also introduces another data security issue. In other words, more platforms invite more third-party privacy issues.

Of the online interviews that were undertaken via internet video conferencing platforms, Google Hangouts was utilised. Google Hangouts is a two-way video conferencing service with the ability to record audio, as well as video simultaneously (https://hangouts.google.com/). The ability to record and securely store interviews is built into the chosen platform (Google Hangouts), requiring no additional recording software or equipment. Recorded videos were made private from the public and search engine. Videos were then downloaded into an MP4 format, which was then stored on the researchers password protected computer. Whilst seemingly straightforward the overall online interview process and setting is not without is broader limitations, however. They are examined within the following sub-section.

4.4.1.2   Online Interview Setting Limitations

The use of video conferencing tools and other digital communications channels for in-depth interviewing is not a new research process (Deakin and Wakefield, 2013). Despite this, there is limited qualitative research, which discusses the process as a route to effective data collection (Iacono et al., 2016). Typically, research discussing internet based data collection, situates the discussion in the same category as telephone interviews (Quinton, 2015). However, Iacono et al. (2016) argue that such grouping is ill-conceived as video conferencing technologies are unique to other communications channels, warranting their own deliberation of ethics, benefits and limitations.

Surprisingly, a core body of research into the appropriate and ethical conduct of online interviewing is quite limited. This introduces an ethical dilemma in itself where appropriate and accepted guidelines are hard to find. As such, a number of peer-reviewed studies, that have adopted online interviewing techniques, are consulted for their perspective upon ethical online interviewing. A number of issues and limitations are addressed including: *rapport building in online settings; the quality of raw online data; the naturalness of interviewing processes; the potential challenges to co-presence; the potential for a skewed online identity; the potential to miss body language cues; an overreliance upon technology despite its potential to fail; data privacy and security.* Such challenges are examined in greater detail throughout the current sub-section.

A key point of contention with the internet-based approach to data collection, is observed by Iacono et al. (2016) who highlight that trust and researcher-participant rapport may be constricted, when comparing online processes to offline interviews. As Friedman et al., (2000: 36) note "*People trust people, not technology*". However, such a statement is arguably outdated given the social acceptance of communications technology. That being said, more contemporary studies such as Janghorban et al. (2014) argue that digital means of communication stunt the ability to establish rapport between the researcher and participant.

However, in the experience of Deakin and Wakefield (2014: 610), "*more responsive[ity] and rapport was built quicker than in a number of face-to-face interviews*", when adopting virtual communications methods. In digital and internet based data collection, the impersonal nature of video interviews is suggested to have lessened as the quality of such mediums has improved (Sullivan, 2012). This perspective is supported by Nehls et al., (2014: 142) who state that video calls have a "*high degree of naturalness since it is taking place in real-time, as synchronous communication*".

In their critically reflective piece on Skype interviewing as qualitative data collection, Deakin and Wakefield (2014) note the logistical benefits for both the interviewer and participant. In particular, they find that a video call takes less time than face-to-face interviews and is generally more comfortable for participants. This is because a call can be made from the familiarity of the participants own home or office space. Hanna (2012) raises the importance of the participants feeling of safety, when speaking with the researcher from their own familiar

environment. This was important to the data collection phase, within the current study, which sought to explore complex and sometimes emotional constructs.

In her study of digital data collection, Rettie (2009: 426) argues that the researcher and participant do not have to be physically present, advocating the notion of "*copresence*". In Weller's (2017: 618) study of participant perspectives towards Skype interviews, he too notes that there is "*less of a pressure of presence*". In other words, removing the formality of face-to-face interviews still makes for authentic discussion. Other researchers challenge this view arguing that participants and researchers may not present their authentic self, as the concept of speaking to a camera may feel alien to them (James and Busher, 2016). However, in adopting Goffmans (1990) *presentation of self* concept, it is clear that this is a risk with online or face-to-face settings:

> "*the presentation of an authentic self or an accurate presentation of the self are both difficult to gauge in both face-to-face and online interactions*" (Sullivan, 2012: 56)

Whilst online interviews are viewed as being close to face-to-face interviews, critics of online interviewing espouse that the richness of participant experiences can not be captured due to the artificial setting in which the research-participant interview takes place (Oltmann, 2016). As with much of the literature that challenges online interviewing techniques, arguments are grounded in the tangibility of insights gathered during the data collection process (Janghorban et al., 2014). In her study on overcoming obstacles in qualitative interviews via Skype, Seitz (2015) notes that the efficacy of data collection may be hindered by a lack of subtler cues such as: 1) an inability to read body language on behalf of both the participant and interviewer or; 2) an inability to make direct eye contact. In this same vein, Opdenakker (2006) believes that face-to-face interviews can provide the researcher with more depth of information from non-verbal cues. Objections to this view indicate that observations derived from body language can be inherently subjective where researchers may unnaturally skew data from assumed body language cues (Burnard, 1994). Ultimately, abstracting observations is a threat to any qualitative data collection and analysis, which researchers are warned to be vigilant about (Oltmann, 2016). Encouragingly, Hanna (2012: 241) advise that non-verbal cues are still observable through the "*visual element"* offered by video conferencing tools.

Another prevalent limitation, experienced during the data collection process, derives from an over-reliance upon digital technology. Adopting an online medium as the only data collection process is considered problematic due to the risk of technical difficulties (Iacono et al., 2016). During the current research process two technical obstacles were experienced: 1) poor internet connection; 2) incompatibility of Google Hangouts software with the participants computer system. In order to mitigate this, all interviews, were recorded on a secondary device should one system fail. Additionally, where video conferencing could not take place, face-to-face interviews were arranged. This happened on thirteen out of thirty-two occasions. Details of the current studies face-to-face interviews are explored later within the chapter.

Another aspect of online interviewing that requires further discussion is the security of the data collected during the online interview process. This is pertinent when considering that the encryption of some online video conferencing platforms is not guaranteed (Hewson et al., 2013). As with any qualitative data collection method, data security is critical. However, Seymour (2001) note that the discussion is especially acute when undertaking data collection online. This is a view upheld by Redlich-Amirav and Higginbottom (2014), who find that online conversations of unencrypted end-to-end mediums can be breached by malicious users. Whilst an unlikely eventuality, the current study acknowledged this as a possibility. External to discussions of qualitative data collection and management are wider debates surrounding the encryption of electronic communications within the UK (Hern, 2017), which prove to be an ongoing challenge to any online data collection method.

As the online in-depth interviewing process generates a large volume of online data, it is vital that legal and regulatory standards for "*collection, storage and transfer of research data*" (Webster et al., 2013: 102), are followed. Holloway and Galvin (2016) advocate that research should be undertaken in compliance with the UK Data Protection Act 1998. So that data can be safely stored, Flick (2015) suggests that data, including personal details of participants, are kept in a password protected, locked area and destroyed after a maximum of two years. Likewise, of the digital data generated via online interviews, Webster et al., (2013) advise that video interviews are downloaded into an MP4 format and stored in a password protected computer folder. This was the adopted process within the current study.

Fundamentally, the most ethical response to perceived limitations of online interviewing, was to offer the participant the option to undertake an interview in a face-to-face setting. The face-

to-face interview setting adopted within the current study is explored in greater detail within the following sub-section.

4.4.1.3   Face-to-Face Interview Setting

As advocated by Janghorban et al. (2014), face-to-face interviews should be supplemental to online interviews and vice versa. Throughout the data collection process, face-to-face interviews were adopted as an ancillary method to online data collection, but only under the following two conditions: 1) where there were technical difficulties with online interviews, meaning online communication methods were not appropriate; 2) where the participant explicitly stated that they would prefer to have a face-to-face meeting.

The settings for the face-to-face interviews were not consistent as they were selected by the participant. Of the thirteen interviews that were conducted face-to-face, both were in quiet environments, namely, the participants place of work or quiet coffee shops. In both instances the face-to-face interviews lasted for a longer duration when compared to the online interviews, which was likely due to the higher personable nature of the face-to-face encounters. Further to this, all of the face-to-face interviews were held during the day within the participants working hours, in comparison to near all of the online interviews, which were conducted out of business hours or close to the end of a working day. It was ascertained that this was likely due to the smaller amount of time and effort an online interview was perceived to take, versus the greater imposition of a face-to-face meeting. Additionally, online interviews extended the number of hours in the day that participants were willing to communicate in, where many could speak from the comfort of their own home.

Whilst face-to-face interviews were considered to be beneficial to some participants, as they offered a more conventional and naturalistic setting (Cohen et al., 2007), the process was not without its disadvantages. This is explored in greater detail within the following sub-section.

4.4.1.4   Face-to-face interview Setting limitations

Though the face-to-face interview technique is widely advocated by qualitative and social researchers (Lavrakas, 2008), its adoption is not without limitations (Opdenakker, 2006). On a practical level, Oltmann (2016) recommend that assessment of the time and expense associated with in-person interviews should be considered in order to ensure that interviews are feasible.

Within the current study, the researcher opted to speak with participants from the North West of England due to their close geographical proximity. Limitations of which are elaborated upon within the *Sampling* section earlier within the chapter. Fundamentally, as the phenomenon is perceived to have no discernible geographical location, physical representativeness was deemed redundant. Therefore, resource was not considered to be a problem.

Other practical limitations of the face-to-face interview setting are addressed by Opdenakker (2006) who warn of the technical difficulties faced when recording an interview session. Much like online technical difficulties with video conferencing, the inclusion of technical recording systems in face-to-face settings is not without its threat of failure. As such, each interview was recorded on two devices at any one time should one system fail.

Less tangible limitations relevant to the face-to-face interview also include potential power imbalances between the researcher and participant (Allmark et al., 2009). Wilson et al. (1998) argue that the formality of the face-to-face research setting harbours associational social expectation where participants believe they should speak or act in a certain way. Mealer and Jones (2014) muse that this could be due to a perceived power imbalance between the researcher and participant. Other reasons for this are speculated by Karniele-Miller (2009) within their article *Power Relations in Qualitative Research,* where they introduce a hierarchal power relationship between the participant and researcher, due to the perceived formalities of methodological processes. However, nearly all of the participants consulted within the current study were in a senior position and comfortable in face-to-face settings meaning perceived power imbalances were ameliorated. Additionally, participants were the most knowledgeable of the personal experience, meaning the "power" rested with the participant.

Limitations discussed thus far have considered the possible challenges to gathering the best quality data, under the most rigorous conditions. The following sub-sections offer a more detailed account of how the in-depth interviews were undertaken.

4.5   Data Collection Overview

So far, the current study has developed a detailed rationale for the data collection methods adopted under the use of interpretivist methodology (Chapter Three). However, in order to provide the reader with a more detailed overview of the implementation of the studies data

collection methods, a deeper and more descriptive overview of the in-depth interviewing process is provided within the following sub-section. At this stage it must be noted that the interview scenario described within the following sub-section was not always the same with every single interview conducted. Rather, aspects such as scheduling or location may have deviated slightly. As such, the implementation description offers a higher level abstraction of key phases of the process. In order to convey ownership of such actions, a first person narrative is adopted.

4.5.1 In-depth Interviews

Following confirmation of participation via social media or face-to-face networking, all participants were given the option to be interviewed either online or in-person. After ascertaining that the participants were happy to proceed, a mutually appropriate date and time was agreed upon by both the participant and myself. It was at this point that participants were sent a copy of the consent form for their perusal and electronic signature. No one day throughout the working week was preferred by participants. However, many requested a meeting time directly after work or towards the end of the working day. This typically meant that I would speak with the participants from their office or home-office in the majority of cases. Likewise, during in-person interviews, I made sure to visit participants place of work or chosen location, in order to encourage a feeling of safety and familiarity for the participant.

Upon commencing with the interview, I would formally introduce myself and remind the participant of the overarching purpose of the study, as well as reiterating the use and storage of data beyond the interview process. I made sure to encourage the participant to talk about themselves for a little while before the interview commenced, in order to put the participant at ease and gradually work up to a more formal interview process. Such conversation was not recorded. However, I made sure to double check with participants that they were happy to be recorded. Upon participant sign off, participants were made aware of when the recording of the session had commenced.

In all instances, I opened the interview with the overarching question from the current study. This was as a broad question that I could ask all participants in order to trigger the interview process relative to the research phenomena under study. For example, *"What are your views of client-agency trust within Digital Marketing contexts?"*. From here, the conversation flowed

naturally and in a conversational, often informal, tone. Participants were asked open-ended questions from a high level prompt sheet. Whilst pre-prepared questions are not typically recommended within in-depth interviewing (Jamshed, 2014), questions were structured in a way that reflected the analytical nature of the current studies research questions, *who?, what?, why?, where?, when?* and *how?* This was a particularly useful crutch should conversation have ever stalled or strayed too far. Due to the unstructured nature of the interview method selected, the potential for both the participant and I to lose focus was a threat. Therefore, for any interviews that felt protracted or like they were deviating, the participant and discussion were refocused (Jamshed, 2014). This was achieved by revisiting points of interest that may have emerged throughout the interview. Beyond the prompt sheet, interview questioning was very organic and responsive to the participants accounts.

As a number of differing stakeholder representatives were interviewed, including Digital Marketing Practitioners, Clients and Trainers, it was important that each participant was approached with sensitivity towards their perceived place within the phenomenon. For example, though I have had experience as an agent within the digital marketing industry, it was important that the client felt at ease discussing their overall perceptions of agents. Any questions deemed to have the potential to prompt a biased response were respectfully addressed throughout the interview.

In most cases, the interviews lasted for an average of one and a half hours (the shortest being one hour and the longest being three hours). Upon closing the interview, I made sure to allow the participant time ask any further questions that they may have had of me or the research process. It was at this point I gave a debrief of the research topic, if it had not been naturally broached within the interview process. Participants were thanked for their contribution and were also reminded that they had the opportunity to withdraw from the study beyond the interview process should they not be happy with some of the topics discussed.

Due to the in-depth interviewing process being a one-to-one data collection process, careful consideration of the researcher's role within the in-depth interview requires further consideration.

4.6 Role of Researcher

As interpretivist methodology adopts an emic approach to the construction of data (Hallebone and Priest, 2008), it is important to reiterate the open nature of the researchers role within the data collection process. This sees the researcher and participant work together in a process of mutual meaning making, whilst still emphasising the participants experiences and perspectives as central to the discussion. As stated by Uskoković (2011), the researcher and participant work together in the co-creation of knowledge leading to a more interpersonal relationship with the participant. Fundamentally, the researchers involvement was considered to be of particular importance to the current study due to the researchers extensive history within the digital marketing industry. The ability to utilise tacit knowledge in order to guide possible avenues for questioning throughout the data collection and analysis stages ultimately enriched the process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). However, as warned by Ramalho et al. (2015), it is critical that the researcher remains reflective throughout in order to avoid bias. In order to remain reflexive and aware of the researchers own bias, a process of memoing was adopted. This is explored within the following sub-section.

4.6.1.1 Memoing

Whilst having a principal association with Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006), memo writing was adopted throughout the current study. Charmaz (1990: 1169) defines memo writing as the process of "*breaking the categories into components and elaborating the codes*". The process allows for data observations and ideas to be articulated and documented more clearly (Holton, 2008). Other notable grounded theorists such as Corbin and Strauss (1990) argue that memos must be driven by theory and not merely ideas or hunches, therefore naming the process theoretical memoing. This is so that theoretical and critical arguments can be constructed and developed.

Within the current study, memos were useful when exploring possible theoretical avenues, as well as rich descriptions and deeper interpretations of meaning in participant accounts. The memos also allowed for a reflection upon the researchers own potential attitudes, beliefs and potential biases. Whilst it is increasingly important to consider the perspective that no researcher is completely objective (Mahbub, 2017), memos were incredibly valuable as a reflexive tool (Saillard, 2011). The process of memoing allowed for an awareness of self, through important "*considerations and junctures*" of the research (Mahbub 2017: 236).

Konstantoni and Kustatscher (2015: 230) calls this the researchers own "*Internal dialogue, and constant (and intensive) scrutiny of what we know as researchers and how we have come to know it*".

With regards to how the memo-writing process should be undertaken, qualitative research method literature highlights that there is no one recommended route to properly constructed memos (Charmaz, 2014). However, in a particularly thorough overview of the memo process, Alemu et al. (2015: 535) highlight three types of memos: "*project journal, descriptive and analytical*". Project journal memos offer a documented account of the research journey, whilst descriptive memos describe interviews, where analytical memos conceptualise the content. However, within the context of the current study, such an approach felt too fragmented as each type of memo specified by Alemu et al. (2015) invariably overlapped. Likewise, focussing too much on each type of memo individually made the descriptive memo-writing feel devoid of conceptual development. Instead, an inclusive memo-writing style was adopted, a sample of which can be found in Figure 13. Within the context of the current study, interpretation of the memos is built directly into the writing within the findings chapter.
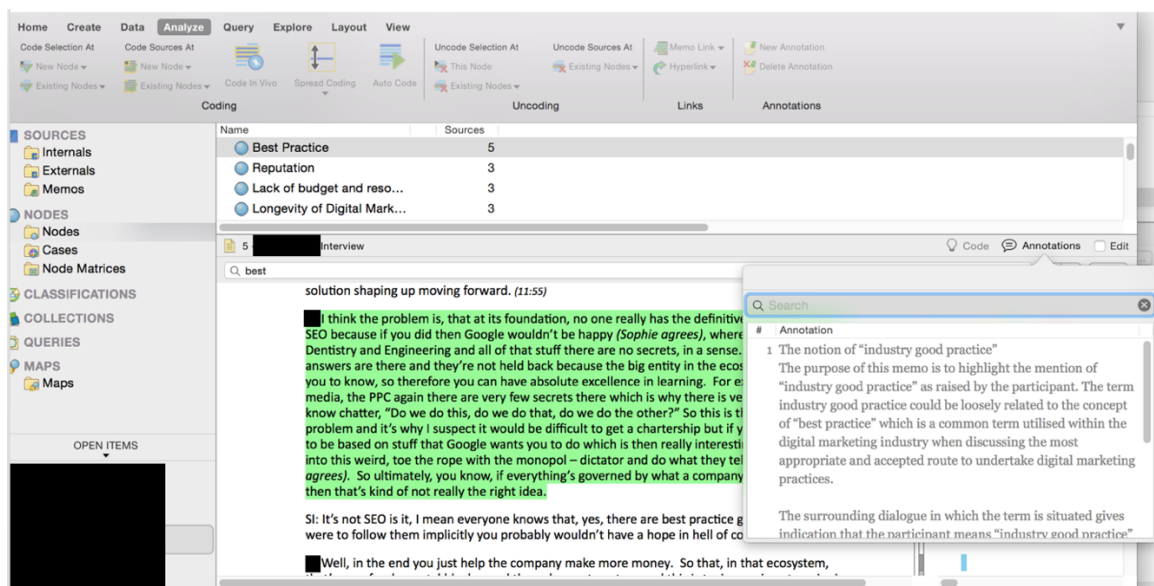

Figure 13. Example Screenshot of Memo writing in Nvivo

The memo within Figure 13. also introduces the current studies adoption of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Wong (2008) recommends the use of memo-writing in conjunction with the use of Nvivo, in order to ensure that the researcher is close to

the analysis process. This also allows for the organisation and storage of memos against codes in one central location. The following sub-section details the adoption of CAQDAS within the current study more clearly.

4.6.1.2 *Coding via Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software*

Due to the large amounts of qualitative data produced throughout the coding process, a slightly more automated way of managing the current studies large data sets was needed (Zamawe, 2015). As such, the use of popular Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) was adopted. Common CAQDAS include NVivo or newer platforms such as Quirkos. Though the researcher undertook Quirkos training, NVivo was considered to be more suitable to the needs of the researcher and the study, helping the researcher to work more methodically and efficiently.

Working with CAQDAS was still something of a manual process. However, it was incredibly beneficial when handling large amounts of data (John and Johnson, 2000). In particular, the search function and saved nodes (coded text) were of distinct value where reference to similar codes could be easily pulled and recalled from different uploaded transcripts. This was particularly useful when iteratively moving between the analysis of interview transcripts as new insights emerged with each new interview.

Though there are an evident number of benefits associated with Nvivo, John and Johnson (2000) also note the potential pitfalls of Nvivo suggesting that the introduction of technological methods within the data analysis process can make for an overly deterministic approach to the coding process. In particular, they argue that CAQDAS has the potential to turn qualitative research into a rigid automated process that neglects the role of human interpretation and reflection. Fortunately, this was not the case within the current study, where interpretation was very much central to the analytical process. The next three sections will provide a more in-depth overview of the data analysis and data management process adopted.

4.7 Data Analysis and Management

Due to the interpretive nature of the data analysis process under inductive thematic analysis, a finer overview of the current studies analytical procedures is required. The current study adopts an inductive thematic analysis approach with rigorous coding methods. Detailed explication of

such analytical procedures are considered to be critical to the current study in order to offer *"clarity around process and practice of [the] method"* (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 7). In doing so, greater transparency and credibility in the resulting thematic categories can be achieved. As such, the thematic coding process adopted within the current study, underpinned by Braun and Clarkes (2006) thematic coding framework, is examined in greater detail within the following sub-section. This includes a detailed description of the current studies inductive thematic analysis coding framework, coding stages, as well as the discussion of further qualitative analytical tools such as messy conceptual mapping (Clarke, 2005). Evidence from each coding stage is also provided as well as consideration of limitations at each stage.

4.7.1   Data Analysis Framework

Because of the multileveled nature of the adopted data collection and inductive thematic analysis process, a clear analytical framework outlining each stage of the inductive thematic analysis process is provided in Figure 14. It must be noted that the framework offers a refined view of each stage employed during the data analysis process, giving structure to what is deemed to be an inherently messy process (Goulding, 2017). The framework also indicates how latent ideas and assumptions identified within the raw data, were sensitised against the extant literature in order to *"theorise the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications"* (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 13).

Stage 1: Familiarising Yourself with the Data	Stage 2: Generating Initial Codes
• Immersion and repeat reading of the raw data.	• Identifying points of interest or salience. Applying codes to text in order to label phenomena. Line-by-line and paragraph-by-paragraph.

Stage 3: Searching for Themes	Stage 4: Reviewing Themes
• Sorting initial codes into themes. Using tables or mindmaps in order to organise themes.	• Refinement and collapsing of themes through the deconstruction and reconstruction of themes. Cohered themes must have meaningful links. Some recoding takes place.

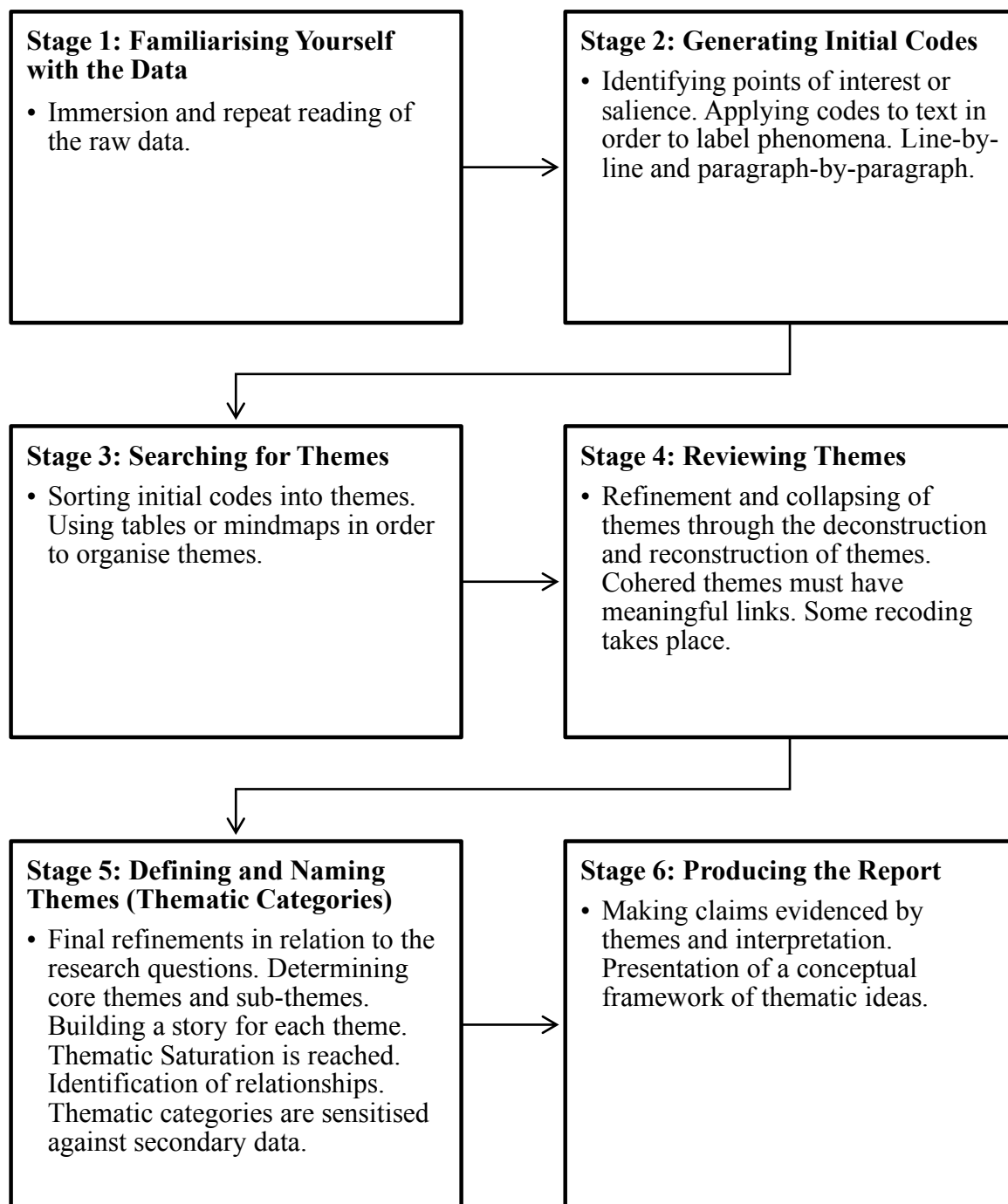| Stage 5: Defining and Naming Themes (Thematic Categories)	Stage 6: Producing the Report
• Final refinements in relation to the research questions. Determining core themes and sub-themes. Building a story for each theme. Thematic Saturation is reached. Identification of relationships. Thematic categories are sensitised against secondary data.	• Making claims evidenced by themes and interpretation. Presentation of a conceptual framework of thematic ideas.

Figure 14. Summary of Inductive Thematic Analysis Process

4.7.1.1   *Initial Codes*

Within the inductive thematic data analysis process, the initial coding phase aims to break down the raw data into preliminary fragmented "*words, lines, segments, and incidents*" (Mertens, 2010: 426). Nowell et al., (2017) espouses that this stage should be purposefully

quite broad where the underlying assumptions of the participants subjective accounts are analysed. Here, the researcher must be open to new concepts and ideas.

Within each line, notable phrases, terms and statements are identified and highlighted as nodes. Nodes are defined as codes that give names and thus representation to events, people and places (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Often nodes are interpreted by the researcher in order to make sense of a participants experience under more familiar terminology. This is unlike deductive initial coding, which is dependent upon a predefined codebook derived from secondary insights (Nowell et al., 2017). The process of inductive thematic coding allows for emergence of new codes without any predefined or prescriptive codes in mind. Sometimes, initial codes also derive directly from the participant, which require no amendment from this researcher. This is referred to as an "*in-vivo*" code (Manning, 2017: para. 1). Evidence of the initial coding process is provided in Figure 15.
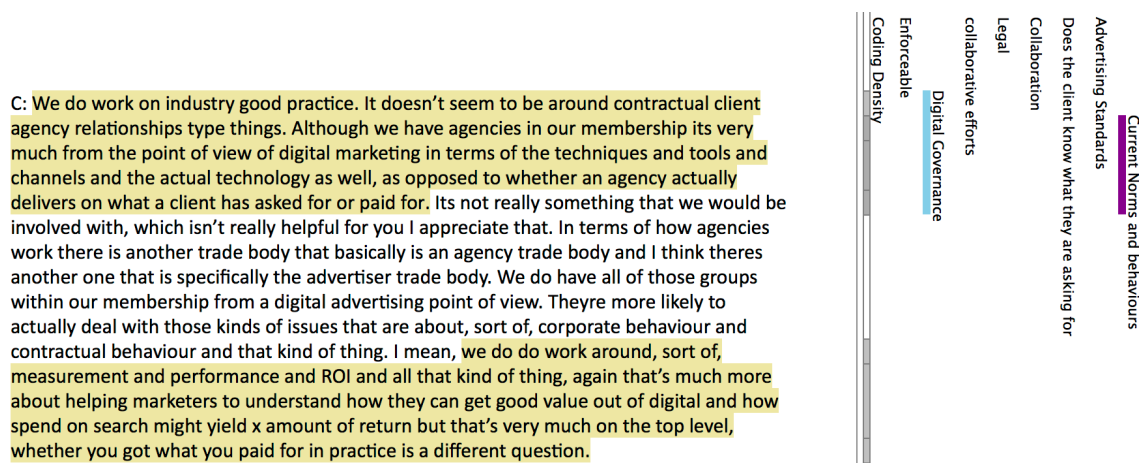
Figure 15. Initial Coding in Nvivo

Holton (2010) note that the initial coding process can become repetitive quite quickly. However, they also suggest that the researcher must remain patient throughout the process. This sees the researcher work in continuous iterative action in order to homogenise constructs into more meaningful themes and concepts. The researcher should be continually questioning the data, allowing for the integration of secondary theoretical insights in order to avoid overly descriptive analysis, which can quickly overwhelm the process.

Braun and Clarke (2006) also recommend that the coding process remains purposefully open without premature identification of themes. Additionally, they suggest that the researcher should "*work systematically through the entire data set, giving full and equal attention to each data item*" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 18). Because of this, the inexperienced researcher may feel overwhelmed with the mass amount of data that emerges. This was a very real threat to the current study where significant amounts of initial codes were created. Across the 32 interviews, transcribed and analysed, a total of 1840 different nodes were created. Such codes were used 2618 times in total during the analysis process.

Upon reflection there was a threat that the codes adopted were too granular in their description. For example, instead of the four nodes *"codes" "codes of ethics" "codes of conduct" "codes of practice"*, perhaps a singular node of "*Codes*" would have been sufficient. However, it was felt that codes needed to be as descriptive as possible so that complex attributes of participant experiences were not reduced down to higher level themes too prematurely. It would be the next stage of coding, which would allow for the mass number of nodes to be synthesised down into more meaningful incidences of participant experiences. This was undertaken through the process of grouping and regrouping initial codes until more refined themes emerged. This is explained in greater detail within the following sub-section.

4.7.1.2 Thematic Codes

Within the current study, thematic coding acted as a tool within the data analysis phase that helped the researcher to organise multiple initial codes into more succinct and meaningful thematic codes. The current sub-section collapses two stages of Braun and Clarkes (2006) thematic coding framework: *searching for themes* and *reviewing themes*. This process happened in parallel within the current study.

Throughout this process, significant or meaningful codes are compared against other initial codes, so that meaningful themes can emerge. Braun and Clarke (2006) refers to this process as testing possible themes for their thematic and conceptual fit. Thematic codes are then used as a benchmark code from which to continually compare other codes relevancy or appropriateness. This statement corresponds with the hermeneutic approach adopted, where individual parts are recognised by their whole (Koch, 1996). A more detailed overview of the

hermeneutic dialectic approach to analysis, adopted within in the current study, is visited later in the current chapter.

A key threat throughout the thematic coding stage derives from the premature disclosure of initial and thematic codes, confining future inquiry to pre-established codes and themes. This is problematic where thematic codes are oft to change as more initial coding occurs. Whilst this process appears to be quite linear, the process is often quite iterative with each new interview undertaken (Cassol et al., 2018). The researcher is encouraged to be in a continual, process of producing themes. However, often such themes are deconstructed and reconstructed in light of continually emerging codes and themes. Throughout this process, some themes without any theoretical value may also be deprioritised and disregarded.

With regards to organising thematic codes the construction of a thematic map is often recommended (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, due to the significant number of initial codes (1840 initial codes), and resulting thematic codes, the process was best managed through excel. Such an approach made for easy filtering of columns that did not require the deconstruction and reconstruction of a thematic map with each new round of analysis and interpretation. This table is demonstrated in Figure 16.

Stage 1			Stage 2			Stage 3	Research Questions	
Initial Codes	Sources	References	Thematic Coding 1 >>	Thematic Coding 2	Thematic Coding 3	Thematic Category	RQ 1 >>	RQ2
Accountability	8	12	Accountability			Accountability	What/Why	When
Algorithmic Accountability	4	5	Algorithm	Accountability		Accountability	What/Why	When
Hiring practitioners transfers accountability	3	3	Transferral	Accountability		Accountability	Who	When
Practitioner accountable for changes in industry	2	6	Accountability	Change	Industry	Accountability	Who	When
who is accountable for industry changes	2	6	Accountability	Change	Industry	Accountability	Who	When
Who is truly accountable in digital	2	3	Accountability			Accountability	Who	When
Accountability for Time	2	2	Accountability	Time		Accountability	What/Why	When
Are Media Gatekeepers Accountable	2	3	Media Gatekeeper	Accountability		Accountability	Who	When
What should the practitioner be accountable for	1	1	Accountability			Accountability	What/Why	When
Who is accountable for digital marketing	1	1	Accountability			Accountability	Who	When
Who is accountable for the client	1	1	Accountability			Accountability	Who	When
How accountable are the clients	1	1	Accountability			Accountability	Who	When
What should the client be accountable for	1	1	Accountability			Accountability	What/Why	When
Who is accountable for risk	1	1	Accountability	Risk		Accountability	Who	When
Where should blame be placed	1	1	Blame			Accountability	Who	When
Blaming time it takes to see results	1	1	Blame	Time	Results	Accountability	What/Why	When
who should take credit	1	1	Credit			Accountability	Who	When
Hiding behind time	1	1	Hide	Time		Accountability	What/Why	When
Reliability = Trust	1	1	Reliabilty			Accountability	What/Why	When
If risk is inherent in industry who is accountable	1	1	Risk	Accountability	Inherent	Accountability	Who	When
Alignment of goals	4	5	Alignment	Goals		Alignment	What/Why	When/Where
Misalignment of outcomes	1	1	Alignment	Results		Alignment	What/Why	When/Where
Who is responsible for alignment	1	1	Responsibility	Alignment		Alignment	Who	
Ambiguity	4	5	Ambiguity			Ambiguity	What/Why	
Fear of overgeneralisation of response (nebulous & vague)	3	5	Vague			Ambiguity	What/Why	
Hidden processes	2	2	Hidden			Ambiguity	What/Why	
Enforcing mechanisms upon invisible structures	1	2	Enforcement	Invisible	Trust Mechanisms	Ambiguity	What/Why	
smoke and mirrors	1	1	Non-transparent			Ambiguity	What/Why	
Secretive	1	1	Secretive			Ambiguity	What/Why	
Vague	1	1	Vague			Ambiguity	What/Why	
information asymmetry	11	20	Information	Asymmetry		Asymmetry	What/Why	
Information Asymmetry - on part of Media Gatekeepers	9	15	Information	Asymmetry	Media Gatekeeper	Asymmetry	What/Why	Who
lack of alignment	6	8	Alignment			Asymmetry	What/Why	
Information accessibility	4	4	Information	Accessibility		Asymmetry	What/Why	
Reluctance to share	4	6	Share	Reluctance		Asymmetry	What/Why	

Figure 16. Refinement of nodes into codes, themes and categories

Throughout the process of collapsing initial and thematic codes, the threat of reductionism became apparent. Within the current study, it was often felt that the unique relativist positions

of each participants' experience may be potentially overlooked in pursuit of refining thematic codes. When consulting the wider literature, little guidance is offered with regards to how this should be mitigated. However, the ability to communicate the data and make findings communicable, understandable and accessible to others is an important objective of inductive thematic analysis. With this in mind it is an accepted limitation that synthesis of initial codes into thematic coding could be perceived as minimising the complexity of the research problem.

It was also viewed that the relationships between the emergent themes should be considered in an attempt to evidence why certain themes and codes had been minimised. As defined by Thornberg (2012), it is the interconnections between codes that make interesting content for further exploration and not just the codes themselves. It is recommended that this process is achieved through more informal mapping techniques (Nowell et al., 2017). This is explored within the following sub-section.

4.7.1.2.1 Thematic Mapping

As defined by Clarke (2005), an appropriate method of displaying early relationships between concepts is through a *messy situational map*. The technique helps to identify clustering's of meaning through visualised links between codes. Nowell et al. (2017) support the use of illustrations and diagrams in order to identify patterns and relationships within the initial codes. Under this method, Clarke (2005) advocates that the possible links between actors and their symbolic, temporal and spatial elements are also considered. This allowed another avenue for the current studies research questions to be integrated within the analytical process. An example of this process is provided in Figure 17.
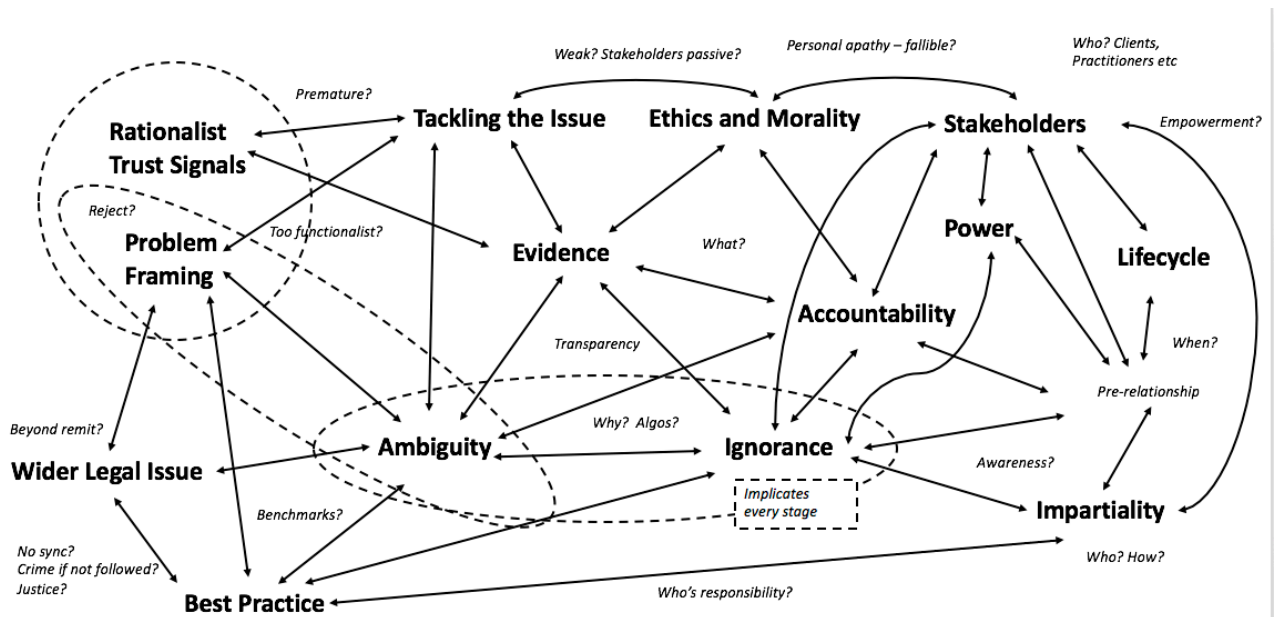
Figure 17. Messy Map

Figure 17. represents one of many messy maps that would be worked and reworked multiple times over as new data and thematic codes emerged from the messy map. This was often changed and redrawn with each interviews' resulting insights, until a narrative within the map was arrived upon. Limitations of this process comprised its "messiness", as the name indicates. Other approaches to refining thematic codes also include the process of refining thematic codes into thematic categories. A more detailed overview of this is provided within the sub-sections below.

4.7.1.3 Defining and Naming Themes (Thematic Categories)

The process of defining and naming themes, sees the researcher refine thematic codes further, into a more finite set of themes with their own meaningful "*essence*" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 22). However, in order to refer to this process under a more succinct title, particularly during the final write up stage, the output from this process is called *thematic categories*. Within the inductive thematic analytical literature, refinement of themes into thematic categories is deemed to be the final stage of the coding process. Much like the initial coding to thematic coding process, thematic codes are refined into thematic categories. Thus, the emergence of thematic categories are dependent upon the codes that precede it. The process was also undertaken in relation to research questions. This was achieved by adding on another column into the coding spreadsheet (Figure 16.).

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Whilst not addressed within Braun and Clarkes (2006) original guide to inductive thematic coding, the current study also undertook inductive thematic analysis in conjunction with a hermeneutic approach (Gadamer, 2008). This was until a consummate set of themes, that represented a more "complete" answer to the current studies research questions was achieved. The benefits of this approach are examined within the following subsection

4.7.1.3.1 Inductive Thematic Analysis and Hermeneutics

In *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism; Science, Hermeneutics and Practice*, philosopher Richard Bernstein (2011: 133) define the hermeneutic circle as:

> "*A type of understanding that constantly moves back and forth between 'parts' and the 'whole' that we seek to understand.*"

Within the literature, understanding of *parts* has shifted over the years, from the interpretation of written dialogue and texts (Byrne, 2001), to a deeper interpretation of all forms of subjective meaning, such as the experiences of participants (Regan, 2012). Regardless of objects in focus or units of analysis, the general sentiment still stands that hermeneutics, in particular, the hermeneutic circle, is an exercise in contextualisation (Gadamer, 1989). Bernstein (2011) further elaborate upon the hermeneutic circle, referring to its ability to contextualise particularised interpretations of understanding within a broader and more generalised view of the research setting and theory, and vice versa. Within the current study its use evoked a state of conscious awareness, of seeking meaning and understanding (Gummesson, 2003). Gadamer (2008) argues that understanding is gained through a continual interplay of the researchers own judgement and meaning derived from the data.

As such, hermeneutics is very much an interpretive and subjective process. Because of this, hermeneutics has engendered much criticism, such as Metselaar (2016) who note that the interpretive nature of hermeneutics has the potential to introduce bias within the analytical process. They suggest that this could result in divergent or misrepresented constructions at the hands of the researcher. However, when drawing upon marketing theory, Thompson et al. (1994: 433) argue that:

"Interpretation is taken to be a necessary and inevitable aspect of scientific understanding…preconceptions provide a necessary frame of reference rather than act as distorting 'biases' that hinder understanding"

As a consequence, hermeneutics recognises that the researcher should attribute significance or importance to emergent findings without inflicting their own assumptions (Gardiner, 1999). Advancing this idea further, Unger (2005) argue that prejudice should not be removed from the social science research process. Rather, pre-existing prejudices should be tackled head on in a recursive and iterative nature until they are accepted, challenged or removed.

In order to achieve this, the researcher adopted an advanced version of hermeneutics called *hermeneutic dialectics.* Originally popularised by Lincoln and Guba (1985), hermeneutic dialectics considers two key areas: how constituent parts of participant experiences comprise a whole (hermeneutics); how constituent parts of participant experiences diverge to create contradictory meaning worthy of further exploration (dialectics). Fundamentally, the hermeneutic approach became an important analytical tool, which allowed for time to pause and reflect upon possible gaps within the data. This was also achieved through the adoption of memo writing, which supported the reflective and interpretive process.

However, in adopting the hermeneutic circle, its application is indefinite, where the interpretive researcher will always find new ways of digging deeper into the data. As such, knowing when to "end" data collection becomes problematic. Thatchenkery (2001: 118) recommends that engagement in analysis and with the hermeneutic circle can cease when a "*coherent interpretation that is free of apparent contradictions has been obtained*". They call this the point of saturation, which is discussed in greater detail within the following sub-section.

4.7.1.4   Data Saturation

Despite offering a widely cited thematic analysis framework of required coding stages, Braun and Clarke (2006) provide little guidance upon when the coding process should "finish", noting the importance of the researchers subjective assessment of the completion of analysis, but little else. Other studies that have adopted the analytical process indicate that their thematic coding and categorisation finishes when perceived data saturation has been achieved (Gambetti et al., 2016). As defined by Ando et al. (2014: para. 1) "*reaching a saturation point in thematic*

analysis is important to validity in qualitative studies". However, they argue that knowing when saturation point is reached can be an ambiguous and uncertain process. As data analysis under inductive thematic methods is defined as the process of finding "*repeat patterns of meaning*" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 15) within the primary data, it could be contended that saturation is reached when no new patterns of meaning are identified. This coincides with Padgett's (2008: 171) view that saturation is "*the point at which no additional data collection is needed, no new codes are developed, and themes and subthemes have been fleshed out*". This perspective gives insight into there being a subjective assessment of the amount of evidence per thematic category. In other words, can the researcher say with confidence that there is enough salience and fullness to the theme in participant accounts (Palinkas, 2014). Additionally, any new data gathered cannot impact, undermine or alter the emergent thematic categories. Whilst not mentioned in other inductive thematic analysis studies, data collection and analysis ceased where thematic categories could be compared to wider extant literatures and in-house assumptions could be challenged whilst still contributing to the field (Nicholson et al., 2017). Finally, saturation was reached where the researcher could confidently fulfil Braun and Clarkes (2006) 15-point checklist for good thematic analysis. This is evidenced in Table 14.

Process	No.	Criteria	Evidence within the current study
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against against the tapes for accuracy.	Each recorded video was manually transcribed and time stamped. Each transcript was compared against the recorded video interview.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.	The current study adopted a line-by-line coding approach which ensured that data was thoroughly analysed.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been	Codes and themes that were adopted by multiple participants were given prominence when reviewing and refining themes.

			thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.	
	4	All relevant extracts for each theme have been collated.	All relevant extracts were coded and organised under each node (initial code) within Nvivo.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.	A hermeneutic approach to the data was adopted, which meant that all themes were compared against one another. Initial codes were reused where possible in order to ensure consistency within the coding process.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.	Initial codes were grouped together with codes of similar meaning. Any overlaps between initial codes and thematic codes were removed by recoding data or collapsing thematic codes.
Analysis	7	Data have been analysed - interpreted, made sense of - rather than just paraphrased or described.	Chapter Five, Findings, offers an in-depth and interpretive analysis of excerpts from participant accounts.
	8	Analysis and data match each other - the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.	Participant excerpts within Chapter Five, Findings, also show which analytical codes were applied to the data, meaning there is a clear link between the coding process and resulting theme.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic.	Analysis is convincing as a number of participant excerpts are adopted per key claim made within Chapter Five, Findings.

				More often than not, excerpts are more than two sentences long indicating that sentences have not been cherry-picked.
	10	A good balance between analytics narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.		Each thematic category is introduced, contextualised, evidenced and interpreted within Chapter Five, Findings. Efforts to link themes to other notable themes are made.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately without rushing a phase or giving it a one-over-lightly.		Each stage has been evidenced within Chapter Four, Implementation. Data was systematically collected and analysed over a two-year period.
Written Report	12	The assumptions about, a specific approach to thematic analysis are clearly explicated.		Various approaches to thematic analysis are addressed towards the end of Chapter Three, Methodology, and critiqued throughout Chapter Four, Implementation.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done - i.e. described method and reported analysis are consistent.		Each stage of the coding process has been evidence in Chapter Four, through the use of screenshots and widely accepted inductive thematic coding frameworks. Initial codes have also been applied to each excerpt under each thematic category in Chapter Five, Findings.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with		Language and research processes adopted throughout the current report are aligned

		the epistemological position of the analysis.	with the Interpretivist Paradigm. Positivist language and approaches to analysis have been avoided.
	15	The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just "emerge".	Under inductive thematic analysis there has been some room for emergence (i.e. no predefined coding framework). However, the researcher actively coded 1840 initial codes suggesting a closeness to the data analysis process.

Table 14. Braun and Clarke (2006) 15-point checklist for good thematic analysis

In addressing Braun and Clarkes (2006) criteria for good quality thematic coding and analysis, this also raised the importance of adhering to broader criteria for high quality qualitative research, such as reliability, validity and transferability. This is addressed within the following sub-section.

4.7.2   Establishing criteria for High Quality Research

Within the extant literatures there is no shortage of criteria for judging the quality of qualitative research. Bryman, Becker and Sempik (2008) argue that this is likely due to the long held perception that qualitative research is not as rigorous as its quantitative counterpart. As such qualitative researchers have typically made a distinct point of evaluating the high quality criteria of their research. Rather than applying more common quantitative measures for evaluation such as generalizability, the current study considers a variety of more commonly accepted qualitative criteria such as *trustworthiness*. This is defined as "*the degree of confidence that the researcher has that their qualitative data and findings are credible, transferable and dependable*" (Andrews and Halcomb, 2009: p. xvii). An evaluation of the trustworthiness of qualitative research is also echoed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) who are commonly cited when discussing evaluation of high quality criteria in qualitative research.

When considering *credibility*, this asks whether or not there is confidence in the truth of the findings (Moon et al., 2016). More specifically this asks the researcher to consider how true they are to participant accounts. In other words, has the researcher remained faithful to participant accounts or moved too far away from their meaning? Within the context of the current study credibility was achieved through: the presentation of a number of quotes relative to thematic categories, where each quote comprised a sizeable excerpt from the raw data; the number of experienced individuals from the industry who comprised the current studies sample; a diverse multi-stakeholder sample empirically representative of the client-agency trust problem; a pilot study that tested the strength of the research questions upon digital marketing clients and agents. The researchers prolonged experience within the Digital Marketing field and first had experience of client-agency trust issues, also encouraged credibility in findings.

Transferability considers the possibility of extrapolating findings across other research settings (Elo et al., 2014). This is not to be confused with generalisability, which considers whether or not research findings can be generalised to a wider population. Instead transferability considers how findings from the current study may have value to other analogous fields. Within Chapter One, the current study identifies that current conditions facing the digital marketing industry are also comparable to other client-agency communications industries such as traditional Marketing, Public Relations and Advertising. Further to this, as part of the SLR within Chapter Two, a number of the contemporary studies, derived from Public Relations, Marketing and Advertising Journals. Rich contextual descriptions of the digital marketing setting have also been provided in Chapter One, Two, Four and Five, meaning the reader is then free to determine transferability of context.

Dependability asks whether or not findings from an inquiry could be replicated if the inquiry was to be repeated under the same conditions (Mandal, 2018). This was achieved through the thorough documentation of the researchers decision making processes and rationale within the current thesis. Additionally, a systematic literature review process was adopted which is outlined in great detail within Appendix 2. The analysis of which was undertaken in CAQDAS, Nvivo. Nvivo was also adopted throughout the coding of the primary data. This software housed all relevant documentation in one place including memos, transcripts and codes for easy access, management and organisation.

Beyond this, other qualitative researchers such as Noble and Smith (2015), also introduce the importance of *validity* and *reliability*: *validity* acknowledges that the researcher recognises their own personal bias and how this may have influenced participant perspectives. Leung (2015) also argue that validity derives from the appropriateness of the selected research questions and research methods. *Reliability* considers the consistency of analytical procedures throughout the data analysis process and their replicability. In order to ensure *validity*, the researcher carefully deliberated a range of appropriate methodologies suitable to the research question. A pilot study was also undertaken in order to verify the paradigm, sample and research questions for further inquiry. Additionally, the researcher also made sure that they were reflexive through the use of reflective memos. In order to encourage *reliability*, the researcher documented each stage of the participant recruitment and interview process in great detail. The use of CAQDAS meant that the researcher was methodical and systematic throughout the inductive thematic analysis of all 32 in-depth interviews. Braun and Clarkes (2006) coding framework and checklist for good quality thematic coding was also adopted.

4.7.3 Summary

The current chapter provides a detailed overview of research method implementation. Key aspects of the discussion include the justification of online methods of data collection and participant outreach. It is deemed that online routes to connecting with and interviewing digital marketing stakeholders are naturalistic methods of outreach and inquiry due to the assumed stakeholder familiarity of such digital approaches. Limitations of the outreach approach and interviewing process are broached and addressed directly with alternative solutions such as the adoption of supplementary face-to-face interviews. A deeper insight into the data analysis process adopted and methods of managing and organising data is also provided. Further to this, consideration is given to the ethical collection of data, with wider acknowledgement of rigour and reflexivity within implementation. The following chapter will present and interpret key thematic categories derived from analytical processes discussed within the current chapter.

5 Chapter Five: Study Findings

5.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters, the current study justified appropriate methodological routes to addressing the research problem, as well as providing an overview of the methods adopted in order to collect and analyse rich data insights. The current chapter presents the research findings generated through such methods and methodologies. A number of theoretical categories emerged including *Knowledge, Benchmark, Internet Oligopoly, Ecosystem, Attribution, Perception Gap.* Each thematic category and its sub-themes, are explored within the following sub-sections. A note upon the presentation of findings is raised prior to this, however.

5.2 Presentation of findings

When seeking guidance on how to present inductive thematic findings, Braun and Clarke (2006: 23) recommend that the data should *"tell the story"* of the data in a convincing way. Additionally, they advocate that the presentation should be coherent, concise, logical and without repetition. Presentation of data must also be convincing through the inclusion of plentiful evidence in the form of vivid data extracts (participant quotes).

Within the current study, a key presentation technique is the use of quotes. Quotes are excerpts from participant interviews, which have been transcribed and analysed. They are untouched apart from the inclusion of descriptors using the following format "[example]". Approximately 2-5 quotes are used per key point of interest within the findings section, by way of demonstrating the significance of the codes, themes and thematic categories identified within participant accounts. Quotes also indicate their related initial codes as identifiable within Nvivo. Key quotes are inset, and in italic in order to indicate the consumers dialogue. Particularly important aspects of the quote are in **bold** to indicate their significance. An example of this is found below.

> *"**risky or not, you just have to do it** because it's just par for the course now...**Everyone else is doing it,** everyone else has got their Facebook page, everyone else has got their presence on Twitter and stuff like that, whatever it might be, so **if we don't, we are going to fall behind**."* - CL009 (pressure to remain competitive, risk)

5.3   Knowledge

Analysis identified "*Knowledge*" as a key dimension of the client-agency trust phenomenon. Under continuous analytical questioning, *knowledge,* became a multifaceted construct, with varying interpretations. Thus, further explication of the thematic category, relative to the research phenomenon is elaborated upon below:

- Knowledge as something that may be attained or comprehended. In other words, what it means to be perceived as *knowledgeable* within the digital marketing field. Where participants perceived there to be a lack of knowledge, perceptions of trust, as well as the justification to trust, diminished. This was particularly important given the knowledge intensive nature of the digital marketing service. Sub-themes include *expertise, competency, capability* and *understanding*.

- Knowledge as something that may be learnt. In other words, the way in which one comes to be knowledgeable, or perceived as knowledgeable. Sub-themes include the *process of inquiry, information gathering* and *knowledge construction*.

- Knowledge as information. In other words, the informational resources consulted in order to gain knowledge. Participant accounts would highlight a variety of informational resources including, but not limited to: *training and educational materials; industry blogs; qualifications and accreditations; institutional advice; regulatory advice; rules and guidelines; awards; testimony via collaborative online communities.*

- Knowledge as evidence. In other words, how one may know, or come to know how someone is knowledgeable. Shared elements of knowledge as information may be consulted as indicators of trust including but, not limited to, qualifications and accreditations, awards, testimony and data. Sub-themes include *proof*.

- Knowledge and a lack of knowledge. Where there was knowledge, there was also a perceived lack of knowledge. Sub-themes include *ignorance, unknowing, non-knowledge* and *knowledge asymmetry*.

Participants were encouraged to question how they believed they would come to know a client-agency partner was worthy of their trust. The question held different meanings to the multiple stakeholders interviewed throughout the current study. For example, client participants would

draw upon their own experiences of attempting to find a trustworthy agency prior to entering into a relationship. Agents would reflect upon the way in which they could communicate their trustworthiness to those seeking their services.

It was this initial line of questioning that emerged from a first interview with CL001, who's biggest challenge was sourcing an agency he could trust. CL001, amongst other clients, struggled with determining who an appropriate choice of digital marketing agency partner was prior to entering into a relationship. His experience suggested that a core challenge was a perceived dearth of appropriate evidence that could be consulted in order to inform his decision making process. This was a common narrative that emerged from client experiences (CL009; CL002). CL001's story would quite quickly move on to his experience with his selected agency and how his assumptions regarding his chosen agency had been wrong. Ultimately, CL001 was left questioning how he could have known whether or not his chosen agency was untrustworthy, before entering into his contractual agreement.

This first discussion with CL001 was a powerful platform for future research, highlighting that clients perceived there to be a lack of access to available information used to inform trust decisions. This was particularly evident within the pre-relationship stage of the client-agency lifecycle. Other similar participant accounts that supported CL001's statement were addressed by CL009 and CL002. At the time of undertaking data collection, CL009 was in the process of searching for a prospective agency partner, having never worked within the digital marketing industry or with a digital marketing agency before. As such, CL009s account offered a particularly valuable contribution to understanding the client's nascent perceptions of trust within the digital marketing industry.

CL009 suggested that where his digital marketing knowledge was lacking, he would seek the help of outsourced agents perceived to be experts within their field: "*because I don't understand the subject **I have to go out and get an expert to fill the gap**" – CL009. CL009 would raise the significance of *qualifications, accreditations* and affiliation with relevant *institutions* as a show of *expertise* and *competency*. However, his experiences suggested that he struggled to source reliable bases for determining who an appropriate digital marketing expert was.

"When I get a Civil Engineer involved in my designs, they have to be chartered and then they have to be part of the relevant Institution and whatnot. And it's the same with the Architects, the same with anybody else to be honest with you. **Digital marketing was one of those more woolly areas because I didn't have any, there aren't any**, *do you know what I mean? And also I consider myself to be quite savvy with things like being able to Google search, being able to investigate things, do my research. I do find I can be quite good at that but there was nothing* **so I'm looking for guidance as to say right okay so if you are part of this, not committee, if you are part of this group, part of this establishment, that means that you have passed some sort of test in competency and you can be called an expert in your field. Very easy with some things, very difficult with digital marketing it just wasn't there**" - CL009 (accreditation, institution, access, availability, evidence, signals)

CL009 would often contextualise his perceptions of the digital marketing industry against other industry's he was more familiar with. He suggested that familiar frames of reference for expertise and competency were lacking, thus impairing his process of inquiry. However, most interestingly, he was still motivated to find an agency partner, despite a perceived lack of available trust signals. This was a view shared by CL001, who still progressed into a client-agency relationship without appropriate evidence. When pushed further, CL009 suggested that he felt compelled to find a digital marketing agent in order to remain competitive:

"we are in a world at the moment where there is so much digital content and everyone is living on their computers and through their phones and things like that, you automatically assume that you have to do it because that's the way that the world is now. So then it becomes a requirement of your projects or a requirement of your developments and things like that so now **there isn't even a choice of do we actually go and enter into this industry, whether it's risky or not, you just have to do it** *because it's just par for the course now…Everyone else is doing it, everyone else has got their Facebook page, everyone else has got their presence on Twitter and stuff like that, whatever it might be, so if we don't, we are going to fall behind"* - CL009 (pressure to remain competitive, risk)

CL009 suggested that he was resigned to enter into a client-agency relationship against his better judgement where appropriate information and evidence was lacking. By comparison, a number of agent accounts would suggest that it was not a question regarding the availability of information or evidence: "***They're [clients are] getting smarter because education is more affordable, more accessible than it ever has been before***" - TR001. Rather, some agents believed there to be too much information for clients to access, but from potentially nebulous sources:

> "*I think certainly from a client perspective being able to have an impartial or certainly trusted source to go to, because obviously if you Google any particular topic people just go**, 'Ahhh, there's so much information', they don't even know where to start or who to trust*"* – AG002 (lack of impartiality, lack of trust in information, overwhelming)

> "***there is so much false information being published online that businesses are following and that's destroying them*** *as well, so there is no structure in place. But I have worked with clients in the finance industry and anything I've written has to go to a board to be assessed and checked before it can even be published because it has to be worded in a certain way, it has to be done. Now that is a perfect scenario because everything has to be put through the board first and authorised before it can be published. But **in our industry anybody can say anything***, but **businesses are actually following these guides**."– TR003 (Misinformation, lack of controls, peer-review, rigour)

AG002's and TR003's position was that a lack of trust in agency partners potentially stemmed from a lack of trust in the information or evidence that indicated the trustworthiness of a potential partner. Questions over information *impartiality* and *rigour* were raised, indicating a theoretical sensitivity to *misinformation*. This would indicate two major problems: 1) that some information was accessible but not necessarily understood by those who consulted it; 2) that some information was available but poor or potentially misleading with the potential to misinform the one consulting it. Both scenarios highlighted where potential gaps in knowledge could emerge as a result. This also indicated trust issues earlier on in the supply chain, even before clients and agents had entered into a relationship. As such, the analytical focus turned

to exploring the quality of the informational resources available to participants as part of their inquiry. In other words, asking *why was information perceived to be so untrustworthy*?

Whilst participant experiences referenced numerous bodies of knowledge, more salient or common knowledge sources included institutional guidance, qualifications and codes of conduct, as well as industry blogs, testimonials and training resources. A summary of the multiple participant experiences of, and attitudes towards such information can be found below:

- Codes of conduct – "*it kind of became clear as day that **it's just a scrap of paper and it's worth nothing** because of the digital technology sitting behind it* "– AG006 (lack of value)

- Awards - **"There's no endorsement from Google and therefore you have to put your trust in people who run agencies that have won awards…***You never find out what agencies lose clients either, you only ever hear the wins, don't you?*"- RC001 (IO, lack of value)

- Qualifications -*"we have that in the guise of things like Google Partner, Google Adverts Partner, so they're all Kitemarks for lack of a better description, you know and it doesn't matter because **anyone can get them and anybody can put the badge right there."** - TR001 (lack of barriers)*

- Guidelines - *"**The Google algorithm has never been written out and said right follow these guidelines** because it's so ambiguous"* – AG011 (IO, ambiguous)

- Regulations – "*at the moment...the governance, the transparency, **the regulation just is individually based**"* – AG003 (Subjective)

- Institutions - "*There are bodies that exist that try and police all that [digital marketing] stuff… but they're all so old-fashioned and traditional and pointless that they really don't even understand the industry themselves, and that's from personally working with them. **They haven't a fucking clue**, excuse my French".* - TR001 *(*out of date, authority lacks authority)

- Industry Resource - "*you could go and learn and read and do say a Moz course, for example. Well done**, you know what you're talking about because you've answered eight out of ten on this quiz?**"* - AG003 (lack of controls, lack of rigour)

It became very apparent that participants viewed available information as something that lacked impartiality, rigour, authority and value (LR001). Thus, participants questioned its place in the construction of trust. A key interrelationship amongst responses was that of *scepticism* towards putative knowledge.

The antagonism or suspicion towards knowledge and information sources that participants regularly displayed, was an interesting basis for further analysis. As well as questioning, *why* participants were so sceptical, it was also important to understand *what* impact this had upon trust relationships. Identification of relationships amongst core constructs within this thematic category suggested that a lack of trustworthy information, knowledge or evidence undermined the concept of the *expert*. This was raised in earlier accounts by CL009 and CL001. However, what made this narrative more complex was when the construct of expertise was framed against non-client accounts. Of particular interest, was a common narrative adopted by agents and trainers, who doubted the concept of the expert in a digital marketing context:

> ***"I suppose that's both the virtue and the vice in the digital industry in that you can set yourself up and be an expert overnight***, *you can simply declare yourself an expert, one way or another and **there's really no way anyone can prove otherwise in truth**."* - TR001 (expert, lack of control, proof)

> ***"Every man and his cat is an expert, but they're all self-proclaimed experts***. *So I don't know. **It's a bit like the word 'best'** in advertising. You can use it, because it's so vague and woolly. So everybody's an expert, everybody's the best…Because using the word 'best, you can't, it's like 'nice', 'best'. It's not measurable"* – AG010 (expert, positivist language, Lack of measurability)

> ***"there is no such thing as an expert*** *in digital marketing"* - AG004 (expert, lack of experts)

> *"I've worked with a lot of agencies and I've seen it so many times where they'll say yes to a client, they'll pitch for work and they'll worry about how they're going to deliver it later. **If they've never done it before, they've no experience in it, they've no expertise in it, they've really got no availability for it, they'll***

just worry about it later. Say yep, yep, yep, up front, get the deal, we'll worry about how we fulfil it later" – TR002 (experience, expertise)

Within participant accounts, the expert was perceived to be an individual with a high level of digital marketing knowledge, in conjunction with prior experience within the field. However, there were three key challenges with this notion based upon analysis: 1) participants perceived there to be a lack of evidence and thus measures for who could be classed as an expert within the industry; 2) suggesting someone believed themselves to be an expert with appropriate evidence, how could one prove the evidence to be trustworthy?; 3) participants did not trust available knowledge bases, namely educational resources, meaning expert knowledge was a problematic construct.

Beyond the client-agency dyadic, institutions such as relevant trade associations and regulatory bodies, were brought into the debate. For example, many of the participants would suggest that the purview of digital marketing expertise and evidence lay with said institutions (CL009; LR001). For example, some participants would reference other industries, with representative institutions, which could uphold and govern industry standards, qualifications, regulations and accountability procedures. This was something participants perceived to be lacking. Reference to some trade associations were made. However, such bodies would be viewed with the same scepticism regarding their authority, expertise and knowledge as other actors within the digital marketing industry.

> *"And don't forget, a lot of the trade bodies or industry bodies, they're just there because they decided to be there and make money themselves, or certainly pay the salaries of the people within those organisations. **They're the experts and they're the voice of reason in the industry because they say they're the voice of reason. Nothing else, you know.**"* – TR002 (lack of controls, responsibility, expert)

> *"Like with ASA, is it CAP as well and really they can get you to pull your ads but beyond that **don't really have that much power**. If, like, they say a fiver is only worth a fiver if you all agree it's a fiver, it's like **they only have power if we all agree they have power.**"* - AG002 (lack of power)

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> *"It's like anybody can join the British Interactive Media Association or the CIPR or the CIM or any of that stuff and just, 'Well I'm a member of the CIPR,' and **although you might say, 'I'm accountable because I've signed up to their rules and regulations and this is how I will behave as a professional', there is no kind of accountability at all.**"* – TR001 (lack of controls, lack accountability)

The sentiment surrounding participant beliefs of expertise would suggest that the term was not held in high regard within the context of digital marketing. This was of particular interest to the current study where it was questioned why this was so? For example, *why were varying digital marketing institutions' scope of influence questioned? Why did participants challenge the authority and expertise of such institutions?* Participants believed that notions of the "expert" had little value within the digital marketing setting where appropriate controls for the construct were lacking:

> *"**you know, you do a course and then you're an expert**. I mean lots of my students will be like, 'Oh I'm a social media expert,' and I'll be like, 'You're not a social media fucking expert. I taught you social media last year. You are not an expert. **There are no checks and balances for that really, with that particular thing.**"* – TR001 (no checks, expert)

Agent adoption of words like *proof, measurable* and *checks and balances* would highlight a distinct relationship between expertise and an inability to evaluate the concept. Such a finding would become more powerful, when comparing client and agent narratives. When revisiting CL009's statement about the need for an expert to fill their gap in understanding, an apparent paradox emerged: where a client would require the expertise of a digital marketing agent but the notion of the expert was perceived to be antithetical by the very agents themselves. Most enlightening was the finding that many clients were not privy to this view. It must be noted that participants did not completely reject the notion of the expert. Rather, the value of the expert construct within the specific digital marketing domain was challenged. Consider the following excerpts from a number of digital marketing agents who questioned the knowledge of their peers:

*"I just went to a network meeting where they do presentations and there was this SEO person, so I'm sat there and **the stuff that was coming out of his mouth was making my blood boil because if anyone actually implemented it, they'd destroy their business** and he's actually going around recommending this rubbish!"* – TR003 (diverging opinions, proliferation of misinformation)

*"**[agents] have got no idea of what's going on. Some of their ideas are ridiculously ill informed** and they will tell clients 'Oh, you are under terrible risk if you do that.' That's wrong, they may be firing a legitimate working tactic"* – AG005 (lack of understanding, proliferation of misinformation, risk, what is wrong? diverging opinions)

*"**I have had people [agents] who aren't fit to lace my shoes in a meeting telling me what the score is** and I'm like oh god."* – AG008 (fitness to practice, diverging opinions)

Diverging opinions regarding appropriate digital marketing knowledge and understanding were prevalent within agent's accounts. This led to something of a discussion regarding *fitness to practice*, and the issue of *proliferation of misinformation* amongst peers. This would be raised by TR002 who argued that the novice client would find it hard to distinguish between right or wrong information and evidence:

*"the difference between real media and fake media is not a lot in the eyes of the public so if you want to be an accredited individual in your category, in your area, then all you have to do is set up the trade association for that and accredit yourself because **nobody knows the difference, nobody checks them out** and I'm not saying this is accepted practice, this is what we should be doing, I'm saying that's how easy it is to get that trust symbol."* - TR002 (knowing right from wrong, misinformation, responsibility, lack of controls)

By all accounts clients were seeking the services of an expert, as outlined earlier within the current sub-section. This identified a potential issue with latent impact later down the supply chain. Further analysis was required to determine what it was that made participants so dubious of experts and expert knowledge within the context of digital marketing. Deeper analysis of

participant accounts highlighted a critical construct of *Ignorance*. Sub-themes of *unknowing, non-knowledge, gaps in knowledge* also emerged. For example, there was a repetitive use of terminology such as "*you don't know*" and "*ignorance*" when discussing agent knowledge, expertise and competency. This may have been through a lack of rigour in education, or an inability to comprehend perceived complexity of available information, as explored earlier within the current *Knowledge* sub-section. This appeared to be the view of participants who were conscious of this or their own lack of knowledge or ignorance.

> *"you'll also get a lot of people that are perceived to be senior that are also ignorant. Either ignorant or suspicious of the more up-to-date methods… **there's so much ignorance** and particularly from people that are actually, scarily, in charge of the budget."* – CL012 (ignorant)

> *"[agents] have got **no idea of what's going on**."* – AG005 (no awareness)

> *"**nobody really knows** what to ask for."* – TR001 (no knowledge)

> *"no one knows, **no one knows at all**."* – AG004 (no knowledge)

Deeper analysis would suggest that a state of ignorance was either conscious or unconscious to the participant. Unconscious ignorance was positioned as participants lack of awareness of their own, or another's lack of knowledge. Where as conscious ignorance was positioned as awareness of their own, or another's lack of knowledge. Interpretation of participant experiences would suggest that a state of conscious unknowing could be problematic in two distinct scenarios: 1) where agents would consciously take advantage of a clients lack of knowledge; and 2) where agents would wilfully progress with delivering a service they had no experience or knowledge of, at potential detriment to the client. As such, recurrent experiences of *deception, opportunism* and *exploitation,* were common. This was often where agents had knowingly mislead the client against their better knowledge, as evidenced below:

> *"The issue you've got is that there's too many people out there that just jumped on a bit of a bandwagon and trying to make a quick buck, but **they don't really know what they're doing.** They're prepared to take a load of shit."* - AG007 (opportunism, no knowledge)

*"you've got some people that will **take advantage** of that [lack of knowledge]"* – AG009 (Ignorance, opportunism, exploitation)

*"the client were brought in and things clients were promised and **no hope in hell of delivery."*** – PR002 (taking advantage, opportunism, deception, fraud)

*"people are taking money and not doing anything or doing the bare minimum with clear **understanding that they're never going to deliver results**."* – AG004 (taking advantage, opportunism, deception, fraud)

"he likes to scare people *about their website not being great for Google and with X amount of errors which all turned out to be rubbish."* – CL001 (taking advantage, opportunism, deception, manipulation)

*"I honestly genuinely thought that **he made it sound like I couldn't do it myself**, I thought it was going to be really, really complicated."* – CL002 (taking advantage, deception, manipulation)

*"Agencies are encouraged in a way to disprove the client so that **the client is constantly kept in the unknown** a little bit."* – TR001 (taking advantage, manipulation)

*"because **some agencies might really enjoy the fact that clients have no idea what they do** and they want to keep it that way so that they don't know what they're spending their money on."* – AG002 (taking advantage, manipulation)

*"That goes back to the client being aware and unfortunately, unfortunately, it is part and parcel that **there are a hell of a lot of cowboys out there** who will quite literally just take your money and don't care whether you succeed or fail. That then becomes the responsibility of the client to be more educated."* – AG004 (taking advantage, manipulation, deception, opportunism, unethical, whos responsibility to become more aware)

AG004 statement offered something of a paradox, whereby responsibility was placed upon a perceivably unknowledgeable client, to be able to identify poor practice through better education. However, earlier statements would suggest that knowledge, education and information were not readily accessible or understood by clients and agents alike.

Participant experience thus far, would indicate that they perceived poor practice, derived from a lack of knowledge, to be of malicious intent. However, what was most illuminating, was the view that poor practice derived from a lack of knowledge, was sometimes not part of the participant's awareness, thus making it unconscious: "***you see how easy it becomes for any organisation, even unconsciously, be only recommending their way of doing it, their way of thinking***" – AG005. Something of an unconscious ignorance was arrived upon on behalf of clients, agents, institutions and educators alike, as evidenced in the following statements.

> "***it's down to people thinking they are doing the right thing through bad education*** *and not taking a moment to think about what they are doing*" - CL003 (What is right?, What is bad?, lack of reflection)

> "***they don't believe they are doing anything wrong***. *So if they don't believe that then they are never going to change their ways, they are going to keep taking people for a ride.*" – CL002 (what is wrong?, awareness, lack of reflection)

> "***Was it a false promise or was that company doing their best of what they understood works***?" - AG005 (what is false? What is best?)

> "*clients are wilfully misled in a lot of instances and* ***maybe sub or unconsciously misled in others***" – TR002 (unconscious, conscious)

Therefore, at the other end of the spectrum, some participants suggested that they believed agent intentions to be innocent but perhaps misguided. For example, some participants suggested that agents may have had the best intentions but without any awareness that they were doing anything wrong. However, the persistent use of the terms such as *"right", "wrong", "bad", "false"*, indicated a much broader problem within the knowledge debate. Regular analytical questioning of such concepts (*what is right?; what is wrong?*) would suggest

that there was no agreed upon meaning for said constructs within the context of digital marketing. This is explored within the following sub-section.

5.4 Benchmark

Participant narratives would often centre around a preoccupation with "right" or "wrong" digital marketing knowledge. *Knowledge*, as outlined in thematic category one, was understood to be a multifaceted concept comprised of information and evidence, inquiry, attainment, expertise and ignorance. However, if participants identified a gap in their own understanding, common questions considered how participants would know what the right knowledge should be to fill said gap. Similarly, how could participants know they were even right in their assumption that they had a gap in their own understanding, if they were even aware at all? Alongside discussions of right and wrong knowledge in digital marketing, participants would discuss appropriate levels of understanding i.e. *What was the right level of knowledge an agent should have before they could practice? What level of knowledge should a client have before they entered into a client-agency relationship*?

Analysis showed that a lack of consensus over right or wrong in digital marketing often made it hard for participants to determine whether they had attained the right knowledge at the right level. This had ramifications at varying points throughout the client-agency relationship, which will be explored within the current sub-section entitled *Benchmark*.

Benchmark was an in-vivo code mentioned by participants when attempting to understand constructs of right or wrong in digital marketing. In particular, participants would argue that they were without an appropriate benchmark from which to cross-compare constructs of right or wrong knowledge or practice. The use of benchmark indicated a perceived standard with connotations of a quantifiable or comparative measure for right or wrong within the digital marketing industry, as well as a target level of perceived quality or attainment. Participants would equate attainment of such a benchmark, with trustworthiness. For example, completing work to a **"competent standard"** - LR001, delivering work to a "*certain standard*" - AG006, and behaving in relation to "*minimum compare standards*" – AG007.

> "*what you need on the outside of it all, like a balance score card for the industry, that it says, "Right, well, **we expect the industry to behave in a series of***

measurables, or minimum compare standards, practical scores, internal personnel scores, for example" – AG007 (expectations, standards)

This became even more evident with the frequent use of positivist language in participant accounts as evidenced within the following sub-section.

5.4.1   Positivist language

When discussing benchmarks, positivist semantics were frequently adopted in-vivo by participants, either consciously or unconsciously. For example, *"best"* – CL006, or *"right"* - RC001, and *"wrong"* - TR003. Participants would often raise the concept of *"best practice"* – PR002, within the industry. Some agents would talk enthusiastically about clients and other agents not getting it *"right"* - PR001. Others would suggest that a lack of trust derived from agents not undertaking digital marketing in the *"right way"* - PR002. Such perspectives were exemplified by AG008 who expressed his difficulty with sourcing *"the right [agency] staff who have got the right morals, the right ethics, they [agents] have got the right intelligence and all of that sort of stuff"*. Likewise, a major regulatory body for the digital marketing industry would advise that clients should be asking the *"right questions"* - TA001, of their agencies in order to improve trust. Due to its brevity in use, the following excerpts highlight the frequency of positivist language in participant accounts.

> *"when you're interviewing you've always got the **best** practice questions that you ask because that shows knowledge. If somebody's not there then you know that you can bring them on and train them, evolve them, give them the **right** knowledge to work with."* – AG003 (best practice, right, what is best?, what is right?)

> *"You get the fundamentals **right**."* – RC001 (right, what is right?)

> *"there's always going to be **best** practice I suppose, from an SEO point of view but you have also got a **best** practice from a marketing point of view as well, then you have got obviously the quick results, no implication, no insight into what impact that might have in the future, so there is definitely a lot of shades of grey in between those but I think from I suppose an aspirational point of view,*

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*there is, **if you do digital marketing right, in the right way, that is basically just doing marketing in the right way***" – PR002 (best practice, what is best?, right, what is right?)

"*So literally the stance was as long as a client is **completely** informed as to what's going on and is not exposed to risk that they're not aware of, it's fair game.*" – AG005 (complete, fair, what is fair?)

"*if they have all of the **facts** in front of them so they understand what is **right** and what's **wrong,** it's a big step ahead.*" – TR003 (right, wrong, fact, what is right?, what is wrong?)

"*I know that's arrogant but like, I've always acted in **best** interests for the Company that we worked for and give **them the right advice**.*" - AG008 (best, right, what is best?, what is right?)

"*I was working on some training resources to train twenty-five different countries, you know staff from different localities coming in so **trying to work with the client to deliver the right level of understanding, the right level of information,** to then give their teams the people so that they can go away, back to their territories and speak to their teams on a more knowledgeable basis.*" – AG003 (right, right level, what is right?, what is right level?)

However, when cross comparing major thematic categories, the use of positivist language was problematic where no perceivable benchmark within the digital marketing industry was perceived to exist. As per the *Knowledge* thematic category, subjectivity, ignorance and misinformation were perceived to be rife within the industry. Thus, certainty regarding right or wrong in digital marketing knowledge was questioned. Despite this, discussions regarding the importance of acquiring the right level of knowledge were commonplace within participant accounts. This is explored in greater detail within the following sub-section.

5.4.2 What is the "Right Level" of Knowledge?

Having the right level of digital marketing knowledge was discussed on multiple occasions by participants, where they conflated a higher level of appropriate knowledge with trustworthiness. For example, clients would discuss how they would seek the services of an agent with a perceivably high level of digital marketing knowledge relative to the clients specific niche (CL009; CL001; CL002). However, questions emerged within thematic category one, *Knowledge,* where it was suggested that many clients were unable to discern what it meant to be knowledgeable within a digital marketing context. As such, knowing the right *level* of knowledge added additional complexity to the client's pre-contract research process.

What was clear from participant accounts was that many believed clients to have little to no knowledge of digital marketing. Many of the participants would raise issue with a lack of client knowledge prior to entering into a transaction with their chosen agency and the implications this would have for the relationship moving forward.

> *"there's **no understanding** of what exactly has been sold so the process needs to start pre-sales."* – TR003 (pre-sales, lack of understanding)

> *"a lot of **people [clients] don't understand** it, so when they go to an agency they're kind of ready to spend money on something, but **they don't understand technically what it's going to give them"** – AG002 (lack of understanding)

> ***"it all goes back to the person [client] that's asking for the thing to be done having no knowledge of it themselves** and I think that's the fundamental."* – CL003 (lack of understanding)

> ***"I think ignorance is still there**, even when you're talking to somebody that's sold. For example, people reach out and **you can tell that they have no idea why they want what we do**, but they've been told that, as far as they're concerned, it's what's necessary right now…you can just tell from talking to them, **they have no idea why there's value in what we do**. They just know other people have bought it and they want to buy it too. It's the latest thing to do. Obviously that has its problems, because you can chat about the value of what you do until you're blue in the face. As much as they might smile and say, 'Thank*

you very much,' do they really get it? Probably not. I think there's a bit of that"
- TR001 (Ignorance, lack of knowledge)

More knowledgeable clients were considered to be more desirable to the agent as it was interpreted that a lack of client knowledge could have potential ramifications upon the amicability of the client-agency relationship. For example, AG010 suggested that a lack of knowledge could warp client expectations where "***They don't understand what's involved.*** *And nothing else is good enough"*. However, participant perceptions and experiences of clients with a perceivably "good" grasp of digital marketing knowledge were limited.

Despite this, participant accounts would suggest that it was the clients' responsibility to attain a minimum threshold level of knowledge, for a more fruitful, and thus trusting relationship: "***there's a certain amount of knowledge you [clients] have to learn"*** *–* TR003. The use of objective and positivist language was common when participants spoke not only of the *right* knowledge but also of an appropriate *level* of knowledge that clients must possess before entering into a client-agency relationship.

> "*If you're going to set out on being an online business and you are going to have to commit to doing digital marketing* ***you should try to get to the very junior level of knowledge of exactly what things mean*** *and at the very least understand that if I am paying someone a fee every month and I am wanting to see an outcome".* – AG004 (level of knowledge, exactness, anticipating outcomes)

> "*if you are going to have an online business and you're going to have a website and that's predominantly where your sales are going to be* ***you absolutely have to educate yourself to a certain degree*** *to have some sort of basic understanding of what someone is telling you isn't a load of rubbish"* – CL001 (level of education, level of understanding)

> "***Really we [agency] want to be talking to people that have enough knowledge*** *to see the value and then we can do good things for them but to sort of trying to convert non-believers is not what we do."* – PR001 (level of knowledge)

Participants believed that a minimum threshold level of knowledge was critical so that poor practice including potentially prohibited, fraudulent or unlawful contractual obligations could be identified and avoided. A general attitude was that this would grant the client more security and power within the client-agency relationship, thus enhancing trust. This was particularly evident in CL005 and TR001s narratives.

> ***"You have people [clients] who are in their infancy, in terms of their knowledge****, signing on to things that are heavily, legally comprehensive and to some extent if you think about it from a legal perspective****, if you're not in your right mind, your contract is null and void truth be told.*** *So you're signing on to something that you don't necessarily understand what you're signing and **it's a curiosity that the courts will hold to, 'Well you've signed this contract.' 'But I didn't understand it,' because ignorance is no defence. But that's what's happening a lot of the time, and it's sad"*** – TR001 (infancy of knowledge, ignorance)

> *"business owners [clients] have the responsibility to get that advice themselves, is the way I see it**. You know, someone is buying a service they know nothing about, about neutral advice they trust. They have themselves to blame if they waste their own money***. So I don't… I feel sorry for people who waste their money when they've signed a contract that says you will get x, and they haven't gotten it. Because, I mean that's just illegal. But someone who's choosing one agency over another and paying them a lot of money, just because they like their sales pitch more, and actually these guys are just bluffers. Well **have they really done their research? Have the asked around the marketplace, what do you think of these guys? You need to understand the product, especially when you're spending tens of thousands of pounds a month."*** CL005 - (responsibility, pre-contract research, testimony, understanding)

AG008 and TR001 would suggest that clients would either consciously or unconsciously feign to source the appropriate information or level of knowledge required to enter into a client-agency relationship. In particular, CL005's account would make a direct reference to the sources of evidence discussed within thematic category one, *Knowledge*. They would include reviews, testimony and pre-relationship research. However, findings from thematic category

one would cast doubt over available evidence and its place in constructing perceptions of trust. This presented a number of lines of questioning: *What if the client had come to believe that they had undertaken an appropriate level of research and exhausted appropriate avenues to determining the right digital marketing agency partner?* Likewise, and most concerning, if *expert knowledge within the context of digital marketing was a potentially fallible construct (as suggested within thematic category one, Knowledge), could the agent have unknowingly presented a contract stipulating potentially unnecessary, incorrect or detrimental digital marketing output? What level of knowledge should the client have in order to be able to identify this, particularly when the agents level of knowledge is also under scrutiny?* Whilst such questioning appeared hypothetical this would reflect a number of experiences of clients.

Relevant participant accounts were continuously coded with the nodes "*level of education*", "*level of understanding*", "*level of knowledge*". However, this quickly gave way to a new line of questioning, of "*what is the right level of education?*", *what is the right level of understanding?*", "*what is the right level of knowledge?*". This was something participants had great difficulty in answering. Ultimately, it became evident that participants would struggle with determining the right level of digital marketing knowledge as there was no agreed upon definition of what an appropriate benchmark was in context: *against what benchmark were clients, agents and various other stakeholders comparing their performance?* Indeed, some agents would suggest that they were performing on behalf of their client but often clients questioned whether they were getting the best service they could. For example, a common scenario amongst clients was their lack of benchmark for pricing structures (versus perceived effectiveness). Without clear or reliable industry benchmarks, clients would perceive digital marketing as a high-risk investment.

> "*I need to feel like the expenditure is as effective as it can be and because I can't de-risk that expenditure, then because **I don't have the benchmark to ensure that it's effective in the same way that I can with other trades**, so 'nervous' is probably the word.*" - CL009 (de-risk, no benchmark, efficacy)

> "*I think it's hard for people to know what to spend in this area, because **it's hard to know, like, have a clear benchmark**.*" - PR003 (ROI, Non benchmark)

*"I don't know how many leads you need to get, to get another £400,000. **We've got no benchmark**" – CL006 (ROI, Non benchmark)*

It would be a particularly candid but influential conversation with TR001 that would highlight how a lack of clear benchmarks could act as a contributor to a perceived lack of trust within a digital marketing context. TR001 offered a particularly interesting juncture between a number of differing perspectives having been a trainer, client, agent, as well as belonging to many other pertinent stakeholder groups (not disclosed for participant anonymity). He would suggest how a lack of benchmark knowledge could be exploited within the digital marketing industry:

> *"I remember when I even had an agency I used to find, you know take real gleeful joy in going into clients and asking them, 'Well what are you doing in social media?' And they'd say, 'Oh we've got Facebook, we've got Twitter, we've got LinkedIn,' and I'd say, 'Well what are you doing on them, what are you doing with them, what is the purpose?' and they'd say, 'Well we've got them and people can like us and follow us and stuff,' and I was like yes, they're not doing anything [closes eyes, thankful hand gesture] and **I could sell them social media management services until I was blue in the face and it would be £4000 or £5000 a month retainer, plus ad spend, and it really would be costing me £50 in truth** really to service out of kind, for lack of a better description… **no one knows what anything costs, even in a world of abundant information, and nobody really knows what to ask for**, they simply know where they want to get, agencies can say, 'We can get you there and we'll do these five hundred different things,' some of which will be totally unnecessary, some of which will be overly expensive and some of which will be ineffective. **But the relationship is such that no one can really question the other"** – TR001 (Gap in what is known versus what is needed, unnecessary, opportunistic)*

TR001s statement would highlight potentially manipulative or opportunistic behaviours, which could take place in lieu of recognised benchmarks. Whilst this may have had an impact upon perceptions of client-agency trust, ultimately, his statement would highlight that there was nothing in place to suggest that this was wrong. In other words, to those aware of TR001s behaviour, whilst he could be viewed as being deceptive, he would not be justifiably wrong. *Against what benchmark was TR001 wrong*? Should someone attempt to prove TR001 wrong,

what leverage would they have? A similar point would be raised by AG011 and TR002. TR002 shared a very similar background to TR001 having worked as a client, agent, trainer, as well as belonging to other pertinent stakeholder groups (details removed for participant privacy).

> *"everybody's got an opinion, you know if you go to like a technical SEO where you speak to these guys **everybody thinks they are right, everyone has got their opinion, because nobody really knows**."* – AG011 (subjectivity, no right or wrong, lack of understanding, diverging opinions)

> *"And the thing that I've found to be most true, with a lot of digital activity actually, not just search engine optimisation or pay per click or any particular discipline, it happens far and wide, but particularly with search engine optimisation is '**in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is King**' and very often these SEO agencies or search specialists, they come in and because they've got the lingo, **because they can use the buzz words and they can talk in a way that, not necessarily confuses the client but kind of baffles them with bullshit, they can get away with so much. And I find that happening so often*** – TR002 (blind, confusing, getting away with)

TR002's interesting use of the *land-of-the-blind* proverb could be interpreted in multiple ways. For example, though the one eyed man could be a powerful king (in the case, the king would be the agent), the king could still be perceived as misguided. This would be a softer way of suggesting that everyone has the same limited capabilities but with some more limited than others. Alternatively, the one-eyed-man (agent) may claim to see, because no one has the power to challenge him for they are blind. Either scenario would suggest that one party would be at a disadvantage, unable to question the other.

Whilst some agents could talk enthusiastically about the importance of right or wrong levels of digital marketing knowledge on behalf of the client, when probed further, it quickly became evident that agents would also struggle with their own understanding of "right" or "wrong" knowledge. For example, the following excerpt provides an outline of such an instance from a conversation with AG010. When asked how she could make sure she was providing her clients with "***correct information***", she would circumvent the question with something of a tautological response:

"I just support everything with some strong evidence, not some crackpot techniques that some spammers are cracking on. It works and it's probably very short-lived, it's just a loophole that they've found which is going to be closed over time anyway. So just making sure-, it's like with anything, you've just got to make sure you provide a lot of strong and good evidence." – AG010 (good, evidence, what is good?)

Ultimately, conversations regarding what was considered right or wrong within the digital marketing industry went in circle, arriving at the same dead-end in questioning. As such, the focus of the of the right level of understanding was reframed in order to explore whether participants could discern right or wrong digital marketing knowledge before a more distinct level could be understood.

5.4.3 What is the "right knowledge"?

At a fundamental level, participants displayed uncertainty in their understanding of right or wrong digital marketing knowledge. Similar questions to AG003's: "**what's right or what's best practice?**", were frequently approached by participants. Interestingly, without a clear benchmark for right or wrong knowledge within the digital marketing context, some participants would also be concerned that they were potentially sharing the wrong knowledge to their peers or clients:

"I didn't get any training and I had to learn myself. But then the new recruits who came in, it was my job to induct them and to train them in how we did things and you know that's, I've not got much benchmark or depth of SEO knowledge to draw upon so I might be training those people the wrong things, which you know leads to them not doing things in the right way or not doing those things in the most effective way." – PR002 (no clear roadmap, no benchmark, wrong knowledge, right knowledge, what is right?, spreading misinformation, what is effective?)

PR002's experience would highlight earlier conversations within the *Knowledge* thematic category, which demonstrated that there were no clear routes to appropriate inquiry. Like

PR002, near all participants would struggle to determine what right or wrong digital marketing knowledge was and therefore, the ability to recognise when right or wrong digital marketing knowledge was presented to them. This was highlighted by procurement specialist PR003.

> *"There are obviously different skill levels when you go to a supplier, and you know, the more expertise, the more you expect to pay. But **I think it's difficult to really know if you're getting the quality resources, with the right expertise**."*
> – PR003 (expertise, what is right?, lack of knowledge)

PR001, a digital marketing procurement specialist like PR003 and PR002, suggested that a lack of understanding of right or wrong digital marketing meant that clients were put in a compromising position at the point of agency selection.

> *"Their clients probably won't know **and I would struggle to spot the difference between the good and bad digital marketing agency** unless I started working with them and this is, you know, the challenge for good agencies and the opportunity for bad agencies."* – PR001 (What is good? What is bad? Experience? Opportunism)

As well as the challenges of understanding what is right and wrong within the digital marketing industry, PR001's, statement linked together constructs of *knowing through experience* and *opportunism. Knowing through experience* became a particularly important construct where it was suggested that participants could establish their own subjective benchmarks through experience or posteriori knowledge. However, this highlighted an increasingly complex scenario where prospective clients, may only come to know appropriate benchmarks for good or bad digital marketing knowledge or practice after signing a legally binding contract.

This would be a particularly a problematic scenario for CL009, a client, during his experience of searching for an agency partner. He would often be provided with evidence such as testimony or previous campaign successes but conceded that they were of little meaning to him: "*I don't know what good looks like, do you know what I mean?*" – CL009. This would place CL009 in a compromising situation where he struggled to know what to ask for and ultimately, how to validate the information he received against a lack of accepted benchmarks for right or wrong. This was echoed by other clients who had shared similar experiences: "*If*

you don't know where to look, you'll never find the answer." – TR002 and "***if you don't know, you don't know***" – RC001. TR001 would raise a particular problem with this where clients were given the responsibility to define a benchmarks for success within the early stages of a campaign.

> "*So I think the difficulty is, at the client end of things, **they don't know what to ask for really in truth**. They are icon focussed, so 'we want the campaign to be good' and the agency is left to decide the metrics to decide whether that campaign is successful or not. At the agency end of things, it's not in their interest to be measurable; it's simply not in their interest to be measurable at all. Equally, even when they measuring something, so say they're measuring the efficacy of an ad words campaign, for instance, and the client says that 'Oh well, it's a good cost for acquisition. I can see that we're getting more money for this than we are spending with our agency,' where **in truth actually they're getting about half of what they should** get on the same basis*" – TR001 (Lack of knowledge, lack of benchmark, measurability, what is good?, what should clients receive, responsibility)

CL009 equated a lack of understanding of right or wrong digital marketing against an inability to calculate risk: "***you don't know what you don't know, you don't even know to ask those sorts of questions then, yeah, I mean, talking about a risky thing to enter into.***" - CL009. CL009's viewpoint quickly moved into a more meta discussion of what an appropriate level of risk was perceived to be within the context of digital marketing without knowing or understanding risk: "*I mean **it's how you define it as risky**, do you know what I mean?*" - CL009. CL009's experience presented something of an epistemic paradox where his desire for evidence or indicators of good and bad digital marketing was futile where he had no benchmark for good or bad in context. The same scenario was applicable to his understanding of risk, where his inability to define risk in context perpetuated his perceptions of risk further. From an agents perspective, AG001, would address this paradox head-on:

> "*so if you're saying you've got a scenario where he is a client and you're going to offer them some kind of insurance that good practice is in play, the only way you can qualify "good practice" [inverted comma fingers] is by qualifying their appetite for risk and **since they don't know what their appetite is unless they***

are knowledgeable they're going to say "I want no risk" therefore good practice for them is just shuffling some keywords around the place...So that's the problem really, it's definition of something that's really hard to define." – AG001 (what is insurance?, what is good?, evaluation, What is knowledge?, What is risk?, hard to define).

AG001 questioned how one may understand both constructs enough in order to be able to ascertain, and avoid, the perceived risks of bad practice. In his experience, you must know good practice in order to be able ascertain bad practice and thus risk. But without comprehension or a benchmark for each, understanding risk became a redundant concept. However, AG001, amongst others, would suggest that risk was incredibly hard to define in digital marketing. Analytical questioning would turn to why this was perceived to be so.

A discussion with TR003 would be incredibly useful. During his account, TR003 would often question the meaning of right or wrong in a digital marketing context, believing that there were no clear parameters for such constructs: "**what is the right passage**? *This is exactly the problem, **there is no right or wrong**.*" or "**There are no standards** *of anything so there are no set rules or no set demographic; nothing to base on what's right or wrong." And finally, "there is no set criteria, **who am I to say that that is good or bad**? So looking at it from that perspective it's just, you know the problem is you can't have, it's impossible*" – TR003.

The way in which TR003 would reframe the following question was of particular significance: "*It's a case of, **who's to say that it is right or wrong?"**.* As a practitioner and a trainer TR003 would contextualise this question in his own experiences of educating others: **"So for me as a trainer, who is it above me making sure that what I am training is correct? There isn't anything**". TR003's statement seemed to suggest that there was another party or stakeholder group of value to the client-agency debate yet to be appropriately addressed. With this in mind, many participants would look outwards to other authorities within the industry. For example, *was it a regulatory body? Was it an institution? Was it a trade association?* However, participant accounts would depict a digital marketing industry lacking any discernible stakeholders with the responsibility to define right and wrong digital marketing practice, particularly within a client-agency context. Indeed, some participants were affiliated with known trade associations or regulatory bodies within the industry. However, by their own admission, such groups had failed to gain traction within their community or were not

concerned with client or agent welfare (AG001; TA001). With this in mind, the importance of analysing the *who?* of the phenomenon was required.

5.5   Internet Oligopoly

As part of the data collection process, a multiplicity of stakeholder views were acquired. Participants were given freedom to discuss potential stakeholders, who they perceived to contribute, in some way, to the client-agency trust phenomenon. Based upon participant responses, a connected network of varying stakeholders pertinent to the discussion were identified. Generally, narratives would centre around clients and agents. However, educators, trainers, procurement specialists, lawyers and various institutions, amongst others, were also prominent in conversation.

Beyond this, and of much original and theoretical significance to the current study, was the prevalence of large tech and media companies in participant experiences. For example, when discussing benchmarks and appropriate digital marketing knowledge, some participants would raise dominance of large technology and media companies, such as Google, Facebook and other similar platforms: "*You know, the **benchmark is always Google**" –* CL006. Such media companies were frequently addressed by participants. An in-vivo code called "*Gatekeepers*" was raised by TR001: "*I think the big tech companies are **gatekeepers** after a fashion*" whilst AG001 would position big tech companies as a "***Monopoly***" or "***Dictatorship***", significant connotations of media companies as possessing or withholding a certain "*truth*" emerged within the debate also (AG001). However, because a monopoly only represents a singular entity, a more appropriate term was interpreted to be oligopoly, in particular an *Internet Oligopoly (IO)*. The IO represented entities such as Google, Facebook and Microsoft amongst other media platforms. During participant reflection regarding theoretical categories of *Knowledge* and *Benchmark*, the IO would often be addressed as part of their narrative. Agent participants would argue that their ability to determine right or wrong digital marketing knowledge would be impacted by the IO. A common perspective was that the IO restricted perceivably important information from other stakeholders within the industry.

> *"there is no such thing as the truth (there is, but we'll never know it because Google will never tell us), there's a big pain point"* – AG001 (truth, third party, restricted view, IO)

*"there is no such thing as an expert in digital marketing...**even [my peers] don't say that they are experts because they have no clue what Google is going to do next** they have no clue at all so no one could actually definitively say. Again it goes back to x, y and z that if you do this you will be successful because no one knows, no one knows at all."* – AG004 (expertise, unpredictability, IO, what is right? What is wrong? Who is responsible? Unknowing)

Agents would suggest that their ability to develop knowledge within the field of digital marketing was impaired by online media and advertising companies. They would make a link between a lack of perceived *expertise*, a lack of *benchmarks* and the influence of the IO. As such, AG004's interpretation would also position the IO as a key contributing factor to the propagation of *ignorance* within the digital marketing industry. The IO were posited to be unpredictable, thus transferring unpredictability and uncertainty further down the supply chain.

AG001 would compare the digital marketing industry to other industries such as Engineering, in order to illustrate how he believed the IO could impair the learning and knowledge building process in a digital marketing context.

*"You know, the answers are there and they're not held back **because the big entity in the ecosystem doesn't want you to know**, so therefore you can't have absolute excellence in learning."* AG001 (restricted, third party, ecosystem, what is excellence? Learning)

AG001's statement would make a direct link to the positivist aspects of *best practice* explored earlier within the chapter. His statement would suggest an objective view of reality, obscured by unknowable structures and systems. His view was that best practice, or rather "*excellence*", could not exist where information was perceived to be incomplete due to forces beyond the client-agency relationship. As such, a theoretical sensitivity to the *Ecosystem* was raised, worthy of its own thematic category and explored later within the chapter. Within this in mind, something of an information asymmetry emerged between the IO and other digital marketing stakeholders.

*"ultimately the only people that have visibility are the, you know, the guys that are working at Facebook, who see the code and see all the metrics. **They're the only guys that have the power**, and I imagine, I don't know, I don't work for Facebook, I imagine that only certain people have access to certain bits of information"* – CL005 (IO, power asymmetry, access)

*"you can invest a huge amount of money **but if Google decides to change the way it looks at links, which it did in October, one day you're a hero and the next day you're a zero"*** – AG004 (blame, responsibility, power asymmetry, unpredictable, velocity of change, loss of money, IO)

"talking about Google being sort of, everybody at Google's sort of power I suppose or under Google's influence" – PR002 (IO, power, influence)

The frequent and often ambiguous updates or refreshes to algorithms and platform features released by the IO would be perceived to be uncontrollable, unreliable and often unknown. Consequently, participants such as AG004 felt that this resulted in a lack of *"control over success or failure"* of their campaigns. This was a sentiment echoed by other participants such as CL001: *"As we learning all the time **Google can make any changes that they want**"*, amongst others participants would often feel at the mercy of the IO.

*"it was powerful and when it worked it really worked and a company I worked for previously were number one for this agency for three years, they built the business from hundreds of thousands to millions of pounds turnover because of it. And **then Google changed its algorithm and now they're on page 50"*** – AG004 (blame, responsibility, unpredictable, velocity of change, IO)

However, it would be AG005s observation that would encapsulate the potential implications this had upon the client-agency relationship.

"**we are at an intersection between the three positions of interest**. *You've got the search engine that's trying to accurately measure that and adapt and display what's out there; you've got the companies that all want to be listed and want everybody to go to them; and you've got the [client] who wants the best that*

*they can get. They want enough choice that the best option is there but not too many options that they end up with that paralysis of choice. And **we are in this position of having to negotiate between the three"** - AG005* (intersection, symmetry, what is best?, IO)

AG005's use of the word *"intersection"* would place the IO directly within his perception of client-agency relationships in a digital marketing context. Wider hermeneutic analysis of the term intersection would suggest an overlap of three independent systems. In this case the client, agent and IO. This statement would have a profound effect upon the way in which participant accounts of client-agency trust had and would be analysed. For example, client-agency trust was often discussed as a dyadic. However, the discussion of an omnipotent Internet Oligopoly, and its direct influence upon the client-agency relationship, would alter this perspective. This would highlight the additional complexities that an agent would face when trying to balance different parties' interests. Like AG005, other agent participants would explain that they would not only need to consider the needs of their client and their wider agency, but also that of omnipotent and omnipresent online media companies.

However, the needs of the IO were often unknown, ambiguous, unpredictable or complex. For example, AG004 would call the IO "***the big variable** in a campaign relationship or website*". The use of the term variable would indicate perceptions of the IO as inconsistent and likely to change. As such, agents would often express their uncertainty towards the IO. At this stage, this could not be interpreted as a lack of trust in the IO. Rather, agents would express their discontent with the IO if they were perceived to have impacted the outcomes of their client's campaign.

Other participants accounts would position the IO at less of an intersection with clients and agents but more of an uncontrollable but ever-present force within the client-agency relationship.

*"So the agency doesn't tell them [client] what they want to hear or they [agency] tell them [client] what they want to hear and then **the client doesn't want to listen to the reality, which is you know we don't own Google, Google is its own entity, we just abide by the rules"** – AG011* (lack of shared info, conflict, ignorance, rules, responsibility, lack of control, IO)

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Sensitivity to perceived power imbalances or asymmetries within this type of relationship were observed within AG011's account. In particular, sub-themes such as *control* and *responsibility* were raised. Most interestingly, AG011's statement would highlight that the IO had the power to influence the client-agency relationship, whether the relationship was amicable or not. AG011's perspective would suggest that the IO had a type of stronghold on the client-agency relationship, with the use of "*rules*". However, playing by said rules would not always have predictable outcomes. As explored within the *Knowledge* thematic category, *rules* were often viewed as being fallible or viewed with great with scepticism.

Converse to this, other agents would argue that the IO's rules were there to be challenged in pursuit of competitive advantage (AG005). For example, AG004 and AG001, would suggest that the IO would release rules or guidelines in order to encourage website owners and thus, agents and clients, to be compliant with the IOs view of best practice. However, they should only be interpreted voluntarily and not necessarily followed explicitly.

> *"SEO is fundamentally anti-establishment so if you, at least it's anti-authority. [Considers word usage] It's more anti-authority than anti-establishment and, the authority being Google, and as an SEOer you're saying, "I don't believe what you tell me, I'm going to work this out for myself and see where your vulnerabilities lie."* – AG001 (anti-authority, competitive advantage, voluntary, IO)

> *"who's Google to decide what's right or wrong? –* AG009 (IO, right, wrong)

> *"If Google said you had to make your website pink so that you would rank, we would wake up tomorrow and find millions of websites will be painted pink. It's the interpretation of that."* AG004 (interpretation, IO)

As such, an outcome of the IO issue was that digital marketing practice was perceived to have become more and more subjective. Ultimately, participants perceived an industry fragmented by the IO, systematically creating unknowns with the power to undermine conditions within perceived reality. Such conditions included accepted norms and practices, knowledge, benchmarks and evidence, thus, connecting previous theoretical categories to the current

category under examination. With this in mind, participants argued that current attempts to improve trust within the digital marketing industry were flawed or futile where a third party ultimately had a stronghold over important information:

> "*I've always liked the idea of a trade association; it's not that it should set rules per se, but if you unionise everyone then that's a group that has force. But **the catch is that it's disparate and fragmented and therefore the governing monopoly, i.e. Google can call the shots completely***." – AG001 (fragmented, monopolised, rules, IO)

> "*Everyone says 'Oh yeah, we'd love a trade body' but it's been like, we do SEO and if you look at it **there are so many different styles, and so many different meanings, and so many different interpretations of what SEO is that actually they've got nothing in common**.*" - AG005 (trade association, fragmented, subjective, clashing, IO)

A certain disparity within the industry was perceived by participants where the ability to work together or cooperate was undermined by powers external to them. As such, discussion and analysis turned towards elements of the digital marketing environment. Whilst an entity on their own, the IO would often be discussed as being indivisible from the environment in which clients and agents operated. Characteristics of the digital marketing environment were believed to have theoretical significance, warranting its own thematic category. As such, the following sub-section discusses the important and idiosyncratic characteristics of the digital marketing ecosystem and the theoretical contributions this posed.

5.6 Ecosystem

Conditions of the digital marketing environment were regularly addressed by participants. An analysis of spatial or systemic features of the digital marketing industry were considered to be inextricably linked to the phenomenon and incredibly important to understanding the contextual richness of the industry. In-vivo coding of the word *"ecosystem"* was adopted in order to name of the current thematic category. However, the term ecosystem was also considered to be an umbrella to the multitude of descriptors participants used to describe said

ecosystem. They include salient themes such as the *velocity of change, fragmentation and unpredictability,* amongst others.

A recurrent and particularly interesting perception of the digital marketing industry, made by multiple participants, was that of the *"wild west"*. Traditional depictions of the wild west metaphor depict the industry as being unlawful or untameable. Within the same thematic vein, participants would also talk about their perception of *"cowboys"*. This was a derogatory term within a digital marketing context, used to describe irresponsible or reckless behaviour, particular in the face of perceived risk.

> *"it's very much the **Wild West** there are a lot of cowboys. It's the same for me as an agency owner that I inherit tarnished relationships and that can be really difficult because the trust is gone."* – AG004 (wild west, ecosystem)

> *"it's like the **Wild West.**"* – CL005 (wild west, ecosystem)

> *"There's no standards whatsoever. It is the **Wild West.**"* – TR002 (wild west, ecosystem, standards)

> *"it is the **Wild West**, it still is the Wild West."* – RC001 (wild west, ecosystem)

> *"equally there are quite **good prospectors** out there as well, **not just cowboys**. Nice cowboys that do a good job, that do support their clients very effectively, that do care about the impact that they have, both on the world and indeed on the bottom line of their client. **But they are relatively few and far between*** – TR001 (cowboys, wild west)

Wider research into the infamous "wild west" era over the mid to late 1800s, otherwise known as the *American Frontier,* presented a time defined by its lawlessness, disorder and chaos. Enmity between outlaws and lawmakers comprised a state of unrestrained, disorderly anarchy seemingly above law enforcement. Indeed, introduction of private arbitration agencies in order to keep order was common, but no legal monopoly, like the government, had the ability to gain control over the fractious and uncontrollable frontier. With this in mind, participants' conceived of an ungovernable and uncontrollable digital marketing ecosystem, without rule or

sanction. Such characteristics of the digital marketing ecosystem are conveyed more broadly throughout the following sub-sections.

5.6.1 Velocity of change

Participants would regularly discuss the rate at which the industry moved as an opportunity for innovation but also a barrier to determining more established bodies of knowledge. Agents would often reflect upon their own ability to keep up with the speed of industry changes and the wider implications this had upon their practice. Participants would align the velocity of change within the industry, with other themes such as complexity and fragmentation.

> *"An industry that is u**nfathomably complex, is wildly varied, and constantly evolving**." - TR001 (complex, change)*

> *"It's **constantly moving forward**." – CL012 (velocity of change)*

> *"it keeps **changing all the time**." – CL003 (velocity of change)*

They would ague that the industry would change at such a rate that "accepted" norms, processes and knowledge were rendered redundant or out of date. The digital marketing industries perceived velocity of change was discussed as a key contributor to the way in which knowledge was constructed or deconstructed. However, participants believed that knowledge and information structures were continuously at threat of being undermined by the velocity of change in industry.

> *"**it's always evolving and even if you do have measures somebody will introduce a new bit of tech that you know undermines it**, maybe that's why its impossible to regulate" – PR001 (regulation, velocity of change)*

> *"that's one of the issues but with an industry that's changing all the time, there can't be because **if you put standards in place this month, next month it might be totally different**." – TR003 (standardisation, velocity of change)*

*"I think with **everything moving so fast all the time** and whether that's, like markets themselves shifting and changing or consumers and their habits and behaviours changing or new channels emerging, like you know it's really difficult to, **you can't stand still and what might have worked one year, thinking about different channels, that can completely change the next year***"
- AG002 (velocity of change)

This was also argued by CL002: "***All of that information we were putting out two years ago is bullshit now, it doesn't even, it's not even the right information.****"* However, as ascertained from earlier findings, the concept of "right information" was particularly problematic within the context of digital marketing. Because of this, participants would suggest that they struggled to keep up to date with new knowledge available to them.

*"**They're [the IO] forever changing their algorithm, I just don't think you could ever work… it would be hard for the industry to keep up with that**; you'd have to be constantly learning and evolving".* – AG003 (velocity of change, falling behind, learning process, IO)

*"it's still like **you feel yourself easily, quickly getting out of touch** and I imagine it's the same for clients."* - AG002 (falling behind)

Thus, constructs of expert knowledge would be challenged or undermined by continually changing media, platforms and algorithms. A link between the issues with *expert knowledge* and the velocity of change within the digital marketing industry was made by a number of participants.

*"I think the faith in the digital industry overall is pretty low. **We're working in a field where everybody's running to catch up, nobody can be really classed as an expert** in a lot of these fields because it's so new, you know we're all still learning."* – TR002 (velocity of change, expertise, infancy, learning process)

*"But it's an everyday learning process I suppose, one way or another and **you're never truly an expert in any marketing channel I don't think because they change so fast."*** - TR001 (velocity of change, expertise, learning process)

*"because the industry moves so quickly. **It can breed insecurity in some people. They don't necessarily feel secure any more. Their area of knowledge is no longer relevant**"* – CL012 (velocity of change, knowledge)

As such, Agents would often reflect upon the perceived infancy of the digital marketing industry (TR001; AG005) and the impact this had upon the way in which is was understood. Participants, mostly agents and trainers, would suggest that they perceived the digital marketing industry to be as old as the technology that underpinned it: "***I mean Google's not been around that long so it's a very, very young industry.***" – AG003. As such, participants likened the infancy of the industry to a relative infancy in digital marketing knowledge. Adding greater complexity to this notion was the view that the digital marketing industry was in a perpetual state of infancy with each new wave of technology or change to a media platforms algorithm. AG005 in particular would highlight how changes to the IO's technology could quickly breed ignorance:

*"My self of three months ago was in that ignorance phase, and six months ago was even more ignorant, and that goes back over twenty plus years. **Everybody is ignorant, we are all learning, it's still such a young field.** Google is changing and learning day by day, Bing is changing and learning day by day, certainly the market has changed by every campaign."* – AG005 (ignorance, velocity of change, infancy of knowledge, IO)

AG005's excerpt about the destabilising nature of changes within the digital marketing industry, would make a natural link between the constructs of *IO* and *ignorance*. It must be noted here that AG005 spoke quite wistfully about the learning opportunities the digital marketing environment offered to him. As if each new cycle presented a welcome challenge. However, this was a point of contention for a number of clients who did not support the learning process in the same way.

An interesting juxtaposition that this theme also highlighted were issues regarding the speed at which the industry was perceived to move, relative to the time it took to see campaign results (CL010). For example, many would suggest that it would take a long time for campaign activity to gain traction or a return on investment, if at all. CL001's interview would highlight this

where he suggested that he was in a relationship with his agency much longer than he wanted to be due to the expectation that he would need to wait to see results. However, only realising that they would never transpire until it was too late. He believed that he had been knowingly strung along by his agency, and that they could use the time it takes to see results, as an excuse. Others, also suggested that the time it took to see results could be used as a thin veil to hide poor practice behind (TR001):

> *"**the problem was that we've been told by everyone that we should be listening to that nothing would happen for six months** because you have to let people all these people do they work so we really don't look at things until months 4 or 5 we weren't looking for a return it on our money but we were looking for improvement nothing is going up, nothing was going up, we gave them the opportunity to do the work we gave them 6 months after 7 months we got out. **We were still 15/16 grand down overall with a new website that never worked, by the time we even had the possibility to get out.**"* – CL001 (time it takes to see results)

> *"**it takes months and months before you start seeing the results**, so buying them more time and then all of a sudden you have been in a 12-month contract, you are no better off than where you were at the start and then you cancel the contract and you go for another agency and I call it a bit of a roundabout of these agencies so you get one and then you get on another one and then it's the same sort of thing"* – AG011 (time it takes to see results)

> *"I'm going to be very honest and say we are only human and we make mistakes but I try to tell people these days our ethos is very much the good, the bad, and the ugly. We won't always have the right answers because in digital you don't; the reality is that you do the very best you can and then there's a little bit of good luck and a bit of hope in there as well so, don't get me wrong, **if you put best laid plans down then you'll go in the right direction but they're always long term. Everything in digital is long term**."* – AG004 (long term, time it takes to see results)

"At what point does the client realise? How much do they spend? How long does that go on before they either cut their losses and run or what? They don't get their money back, they don't... **You don't find out the damage it's done until it's too late.** – CL002 (time it takes to see results, too late, compensation)

The velocity of change was perceived to be an uncontrollable external force within the digital marketing ecosystem, with perceived ramifications upon the construction of knowledge. As ascertained from client accounts this would have the potential to erode notions of expert knowledge. As well as the velocity of change, other elements of the digital marketing industry were perceived to instil a sense of a lack of control, such as its barriers to entry and freedom to practice. Such constructs are explored within the following sub-section.

5.6.1.1 Uncontrollable

A significant response from participants was their perception of a lack of barriers within the digital marketing industry. In other words, the relative freedom agents, and wider institutions had with regards to practicing digital marketing within the United Kingdom. Grievances against agencies being able to set themselves up without having perceivably correct knowledge or appropriate evidence were aired (*"anyone can be anything they want to be."* – PR001). Likewise, some participants would suggest that there were not enough controls against other non-digital agencies, bolting on digital marketing products to their existing service.

"you live in a world when you can see, if you look on places like, I don't know, some of these online courses now 'Become an SEO', set up your SEO agency in 30 days **without knowing anything***."* – CL001 (lack of knowledge, ability to practice, learning process, evidence)

"you know **I can set up a digital agency tomorrow and there is nothing stopping me from doing it"** – AG011 (barriers to entry)

"So **lots of agencies will tack on additional products, an SEO agency, 'Oh, we're an SEO agency and a social media agency.' You're not, you're just not!"** – TR001 (barriers to selling)

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> *"I do think **there are far too many people who have one website themselves, do a bit of luck with it and get ranked, decide they're an SEO and read a few forums and off they go**"* – AG005 (lack of barriers)

However, a point observed by AG005 would make a theoretical link between a lack of perceivable *Benchmark* and a lack of barriers to entering the digital marketing industry. More specifically without a perceivable right or wrong, in an industry with knowledge structures that were continually being undermined by asymmetric but often unknown forces, AG005 asked *"**who are we to say otherwise?**"*. More specifically, in absence of right of wrong, who would have the responsibility to challenge the current status quo of being able to practice digital marketing? Furthermore, and if tried, how could it be proven that the agent was acting in the "wrong" way if there was disagreement over right or wrong within digital marketing?

> *"It's not search marketing maybe because he doesn't have the marketing know-how, he's just got the SEO but if he does optimisation then, yep he's an SEO and he can call himself an SEO and **who are we to say otherwise**?* – AG005 (responsibility, controls)

> *"you know one of the better digital marketing agencies to look at in my region, when I came into the business, really welcoming, they look like they should have an office in Tokyo, New York, London, you know, it's three guys and they are in their first year of business so there's no revenue figures on Companies House and its three University guys that have just come out of Newcastle but they are presenting themselves as this sort of global business and that's the bit that throws me, you know, there's no data to say you know how big it is, you know, who you are, what your credentials are, **anyone can be anything they want to be.**"* – PR001 (evidence, barriers)

In lieu of more formalised controls or barriers to entry, some participants introduced the desire for making the digital marketing industry "policeable" with a need for relative law enforcement. However, it was believed that the industry was effectively "unpoliceable" due to relative characteristics of the digital marketing industry, such as it complexity and velocity of change.

> *"It is so complex, you could really drill into the finer points of some things but I mean it's just example after example after example, with clients being negligible in truth and agencies being relatively shifty, or relatively self-interested. It's just kind of going to exist in perpetuity because **it's not going to be police-able** and like the way you can't police the internet."* – TR001 (complex, policeable)

> *"The industry is growing that much and there are that many new people coming into it, **how do you police?**"* - CL002 (velocity of change, policeable)

Within this in mind, analysis unearthed perspectives upon the themes of law and contract law with a theoretical sensitivity towards enforceable regulation and justice for poor practice. After speaking with CL001, regarding his detailed account of poor practice with his digital marketing agency, he found there to be minimal specialist legal counsel for digital marketing. As such an avenue, he believed, was Trading Standards. However, his experiences suggested that they were not well equipped to handle the complex nature of his case. Similarly, in CL001's experience they required a large amount of evidence. But as ascertained from earlier theoretical categories, evidence was regarded as being particularly contentious.

> *"Trading Standards is the only hope and my god do we have to give them a mountain of evidence to even get them to even consider doing anything and **the only thing that they can do or get involved in is fraud pretty much.**"* – CL001 (Evidence, fraud)

Most controversial to CL001's experience, was that of the contract that CL001 signed into at the beginning of his client-agency relationship. CL001 struggled with his case after it was shown that he had signed a contract, which he would later come to find was perceivably out of date and ineffective (but *by who's standards?*). However, earlier statements from TR001 amongst others would suggest that responsibility would rest upon the client to ensure that ignorance could not be feigned when signing a legally binding document. This was a view shared by AG009:

> *"**He's actually got what he's paid for**, so they've delivered what they agreed to deliver and effectively it's like you commissioning a really awful house and the*

developers showing you the plans, it looks awful, but you get them to build it and then suing them because you've got a really awful house" – AG009 (contract law, tangible)

However, AG009's view would suggest that clients were knowledgeable enough to determine "awful" practice, which previous thematic category, *Benchmark,* could dispute. CL001's argument suggested that he was at a loss to understand what was right or wrong practice, at the time of signing a contract, and so he trusted the judgement of a perceived expert within the field. In retrospect he believed that he did not have the proper avenues available to him in order to be able to make a rational judgement.

"where could I go if I didn't know where to go? ***Where can I go to someone I trust who can look at that and go that's outdated in 10 seconds before I sign with that person****? There's nowhere for me to go as an authority was just another SEO guy or another SEO agency who will probably tell me what I want to hear and try and steal me as a client so how do I do that?"* – CL001 (Intermediary, contract, out of date tactics)

It was CL001's statement of "*where could I go if I didn't know where to go*?", which would highlight a paradox in his situation or something of a wicked problem. For example, he would need to have enough of the right knowledge in order to be able to know to ask the right questions. This was a view echoed by CL002 who shared a similar experience of nebulous and vague contract stipulations.

"if you ended up taking that contract to Court, for example, you are under contract by law, which I know now because obviously we have been through this, there has to be certainty and if there is no certainty you have not got a leg to stand on. ***So if that contract that you have signed is really, really vague, tough, there's nothing you can do about it****?"* - CL002 (contract, legal system, certainty, vague)

In both cases, LR001, a lawyer with some digital marketing insight, suggested that someone in CL001's and CL002s situation would need to prove that work had not been fulfilled to a competent standard.

> *"it's unlikely that they've contracted out being liable to for negligence for when they're negligent. It's unlikely that they've contracted out that, and if they didn't do the work to a reasonable standard they might have breached the contract.* ***He might not know it but he might well have breached the contract if they didn't do a competent standard****."* – LR001 (contract, negligence, competency, standards, knowing)

However, as highlighted by earlier analysis, the constructs of *competency, standards* and *evidence,* were particularly contentious within the context of the digital marketing industry. Here, the client would need to be able to determine a standard level of competency, where broader understanding of competency in a digital marketing context was perceived to be lacking. In order to mitigate this somewhat, others would advocate the use of an "***expert witness"*** - AG010. However, *who was considered to be an expert when the very notion of the expert was not a trusted concept within the digital marketing industry*? What is more, if the agency had been found to offer less than desirable services to the client, the notion of whether the agency had done this consciously and unconsciously was also an issue:

> *"And then you'll also get into policing so many different things.* ***Was it a false promise or was that company doing their best of what they understood works****? Was it poor education their side? Was it poor education on the client's side?* - AG005 (policing, conscious, unconscious, education, responsibility)

It seemed that participants were incumbent to agree who had the right answer, based upon limitations within the industry. Direct links to the *Benchmark* thematic category would be made. Participants would suggest that Trade Associations, or Regulatory Bodies had a role to play, but ultimately faced the same limitations as other stakeholders within a complex and ambiguous IO-dominated environment (TR001). As such, a higher level question was raised by CL006, *"who's going to police it? How do they, you know, yeah* ***who's policing the police?"****.* This was a problematic statement where many participants believed there to be a certain "truth" withheld by the IO, where knowledge of right or wrong practice would reside.

With a lack of faith in systems for policing, regulating, and enforcing controls upon actors and processes within the digital marketing industry, participants suggested that they were adept to

rely upon their own subjective opinion of right or wrong. However, some would argue that other characteristics within the digital marketing industry would impair their ability to do so. In particular, the *intangibility* of the digital marketing industry posed a particular problem. An inability to produce tangible proof of poor practice was a particular challenge for clients when attempting to evidence what they believed was bad service. Often participants would compare the intangibility of the digital marketing industry to tangible services where poor practice was more perceptible:

> *"We're quite used to suing builders and architects who get things wrong if we commission an extension and the extension isn't done properly we would just sue the builder or the architect or whoever we commissioned to do the work."*
> - LR001 (recompense, right, wrong, tangible)

Often participants would juxtapose characteristics of the digital marketing industry against more tangible industries in order to demonstrate a point about their ability to evaluate poor practice. As such, the perceived intangibility of the industry was common place within the debate and addressed within the following sub-section.

5.6.2   Intangibility

The intangibility of the digital marketing service offering was regularly addressed by participants. In particular, clients suggested that they struggled to comprehend digital marketing due to the knowledge intensive nature of the service. For example, participants would talk about their inability to ascribe value to intangible assets such as content, copy, website audits etc. In particular, CL002 felt that digital marketing was something that she did not trust because she would be investing in something she could not feel or touch and thus make rational judgements upon.

> *"Value, it swings quite heavily in the industry's favour because who knows any different, you know? Like with a car if you went, you got it fixed and it were broke, you would take it back. You wouldn't pay for it to be fixed again because you have paid for it once, you know…So why should there be a…**you can't prove, you have got a car that doesn't work, there's your proof, you know**. -* CL002 (knowing, tangible, evidence, proof, responsibility)

CL002's analogy supported an experience where she believed that her agency had made a considerably worse impact upon her website and performance, than had she just left it alone. However, attempting to prove this without appropriate knowledge or evidence was incredibly difficult. Much like CL002's car example, other clients would attempt to contextualise their views in more tangible industries they were familiar with such as Architecture, Construction, and Hardware. Such analogies were adopted in attempts to reconcile the differences between their view of tangible and intangible.

> *"I know that **from an Architect there is a hard, clear deliverable and I know that if I spend X amount I can expect this deliverable back, I don't get that with digital marketing."** – CL009 (tangible, calculable, return)*

> *"if you wanted to set off selling hosting eight years ago, you get a load of clients on a server or servers they are there, aren't they, they are sticky, where like **with marketing and digital you are building on quicksand, you are not actually building anything really are you, you are just building clients revenue and ideas**." – AG008 (metaphysical, intangible)*

> *"I think a lot of people don't know what to ask for as well, you know, 'Show me what you've done,' type thing, 'What work have you done?' **A lot of it is so intangible that you can't see what's been done.** It's not like you've built a house and you can see the house has been built or the pavement's been laid. You can't see any physical progress with a lot of it."* AG009 (intangible)

> *"I think that when it's something that people can't tangibly see, so when you're going and buying some IT that's a piece of hardware, the supplier says, this is how much it costs and this is made up of, this is our intellectual property on the technology, this is the plastic box that it sits in, this is what it costs to deliver it. **Whereas when you're looking at something that's, when you spend on digital marketing it's an intangible thing that people don't necessarily see**, and I suppose marketing's always had that issue."* – PR003 (tangible, calculable, return)

PR003 went on to suggest that it was significantly harder to build trust in something so intangible. This view was shared by CL012 who suggested: "***it's really hard to show tangible results, which can definitely breed the mistrust***". Ultimately, participants would make a connection between *Evidence* and *Intangibility,* where they communicated their unease with the intangible knowledge and information based assets being offered to them. Assessing the value of such intellectual property was increasingly problematic where clients, agents and other stakeholders would suggest that they did not have the required knowledge or appropriate proof to assess their value. As such, a link between the current section and the *Knowledge* thematic category was also made.

> *"**So you might have spent 50 hours on something, you've not got a tangible… you've created a "thing".** Because it's often the case you're working on a site that's already in existence and sometimes you can knock up a site quite quickly, you can knock up a site in an afternoon, but you could spend 50 hours optimising a site and it's a big...if you don't know all of the effort that's gone into that, there's a big difference between those two things, isn't there? If you think you're building a house versus painting the house, but you could actually be spending a lot more time on the finishing of it."* – AG009 (tangible, value, subjective)

Intangible characteristics of the digital marketing industry were linked directly with its perceived opacity, or lack of transparency, explored within the following sub-section.

5.6.3   Transparency

In line with perceptions of intangibility, participants would discuss issues deriving from a perceived lack of transparency within the digital marketing industry. Agents would speak of digital marketing landscapes as a "*black box*" - PR002, "*smoke and mirrors*" - LR001, "*cloak and dagger*" - AG004, the "*land of the blind*" - TR002, or a "*dark art*" - TR001. This suggested an absence of transparency. Essentially, the opacity of the industry was discussed at length, contributing to perceivably "*vague or nebulous*" practice at times, as defined by AG002.

> *"it was very much **hidden process and hidden techniques**"* – PR002 (hidden)

*"it's quantifiable but it **is a fairly dark art in truth** and if we were to be 100% transparent with our clients, a lot of the time, essentially we'd be training them how to do or how to mount that particular campaign or man that particular channel themselves, which of course leaves the danger that they will move it in-house or they will realise that they're being massively overcharged for something that is reasonably simplistic"* – TR001 (opacity, power imbalance, exploitation)

TR001's account would highlight how a lack of transparency had the potential to be exploited for personal gain. Participants would perceive there to be a lack of transparency at a number of different points within the client-agency relationship. This would include a lack of transparency in decisions regarding digital spend (AG006), communication, reporting and data. CL001, would share his experiences of a lack of communication from his agency where he received no reports, updates, or regular contact to reassure him that his money was being used appropriately. It was only until working with another agency, that he realised that such practice was not necessarily appropriate. Beyond this, other participants would talk about a lack of transparency regarding the use of data in strategic decision making. Such transparency issues would be very much focused upon the internal practices and processes of the agency.

However, an interesting statement derived from TR001, who suggested that there was no motivation for transparency within the digital marketing industry. In particular, he criticised the client-agency model where agents encouraged a dependency from their client as a knowledgeable client would render the agency redundant. Whilst a questionably cynical view, he provided a number of examples where this could be so. TR001 would provide a particularly useful example on the client agent scenario, describing how practitioners could take advantage of a lack of transparency and wilfully keep their clients in a state of unknowing. This would encourage dependency or something of a power asymmetry between the client-agency dyadic.

*"this friend of mine runs a big charity and her agency **constantly pulls the wool over her eyes** and they've actually, to be honest it's got to the point that it's really impacted her confidence to lead because she feels she is unable to be strategic and she feels she's unable to really put the agency to task because everything she says, the agency say the opposite. 'Oh no, but…', 'Oh no, but…', 'But you don't understand that, or this, or that…', and frankly **it's a war of***

*attrition in a way. **Agencies are encouraged in a way to disprove the client so that the client is constantly kept in the unknown a little bit.** 'So, why don't we improve this?' 'That's not how it works.' And it may or it may not be how it works and the client might just really want someone to say, 'Okay, we'll talk you through it so you can understand it better,' but that does not happen. That should happen, but does not happen. You'll be talked through the campaign idea and you'll be talked through the outcomes but you'll not really ever have an understanding of anything. **You are encouraged to be in a position where you go, 'I want more of the same.' But you don't know what you're asking for**.*" – TR001 (exploitation, unknown, asymmetry)

Ultimately, TR001 would share his general scepticism towards ongoing calls for greater transparency, when issues regarding a lack of understanding ran much deeper than perceived transparency issues within the environment. He viewed the transparency debate with much contempt, seeing it as a premature solution or effect for a cause yet unknown.

*"It's just very interesting the way the state of things has come and agencies have, **they talk about this idea of accountability and of transparency a lot more than they ever did before. They talk about collaboration, they use all the right words,** they make the right noises; but in truth, agencies are ever more strapped for cash because it's a more competitive landscape than ever before, they're more understaffed because ultimately the overheads are much, much, much higher than they used to be, and they are frankly working with a lot more technology which requires a lot more up front spend, and **they don't necessarily understand themselves what it is they're doing.**"* - TR001 (transparency, ecosystem, understanding)

TR001 suggested that transparency was aspirational and normative but not necessarily a possibility due to information asymmetry and a particular issue of fragmentation within the digital marketing industry.

*"I don't think we're ever going to get there in truth. I don't and that's because the market is fragmented. **The practices of digital marketing, and advertising and marketing broadly, are constantly evolving.** It is global by its very nature*

> *so **it's extremely difficult to legislate for, regulate, or enforce anything**. So it's really, **it is nigh on impossible when the only global bodies that represent marketers and advertisers are Google and Amazon and Microsoft and Baidu"***
> – TR001 (fragmentation, velocity of change, uncontrollable, IO)

As such, transparency issues were also apparent within the wider digital marketing environment, external to the client agency relationship. Fundamentally, participants would raise the issue of a lack of transparency in the way in which the IO would operate and the potential impact this had upon the client agency relationship further down the supply chain. Like TR001, AG011's statement would suggest that a lack of transparency would be propagated by the IO, leaving a distinct gap in knowledge to be filled by individuals who may not have always had the right information.

> *"everybody's got an opinion, you know if you go to like a technical SEO where you speak to these guys **everybody thinks they are right, everyone has got their opinion, because nobody really knows.** The Google algorithm has never been written out and said right follow these guidelines because **it's so ambiguous** that people all have a…so what we are doing, you might speak to another agency and they might go oh god [participants agency], they haven't got a clue what they are doing, it's all about this and it is really weird, it's strange, it's like a mythical thing this Google and it's mental, **it is weird when you listen to people in the industry of you know you go to these shows and stuff and everybody thinking they know and everybody has got their own take on it, it's strange"*** – AG011 (what is right? Subjective? Lack of knowledge, ambiguity, IO)

This would create a direct link between transparency, subjectivity, responsibility and IO themes, whilst introducing the importance of considering trust in a fragmented landscape. This would include proliferation or techniques, channels, media, approaches, opinions, behaviours as observed within the following sub-section.

5.6.4 Fragmented

Fragmentation within the digital marketing industry was a particularly salient theme within participant responses. Participants would talk of fragmenting technologies, online media and channels. Whilst digital marketing was considered to be an all encompassing term for the industry, participant accounts would suggest that specific types of digital marketing possessed their own particular processes and techniques such as Paid Advertising versus Search Engine Optimisation. Participants also shared their views of significant fragmentation of markets, specific industries and international competition. For example, how each digital marketing technique may change relative to the needs, laws and regulations of different industries such as finance, HR or Sales.

> *"**the digital industry is very difficult to define; the government has very much not managed to define it because it's so expansive and digital impacts on nearly everything**. HR, customer services, sales, marketing itself in its purest form, it impacts on everything, so the digital economy is simply the economy, stupid, if you know what I mean, and it's very difficult to, I suppose, build any structures or build any structures into an industry that is unfathomably complex, is wildly varied, and constantly evolving."* - TR001 (poorly defined, fragmented, complex, velocity of change)

> *"it is difficult to know what's best so every client, **it will completely depend on so many different factors.** Not only their individual market and their competitors and their audience, but more and more, I'm kind of clenched in the almost business consulting side of things because you have to understand more about how clients are set up"* - AG002 (fragmented, individual differences)

> *"I don't think you can standardise digital marketing as a whole, **because it's huge, it's so varied**, and you've got people that specialise in conversion rate optimisation, people that specialise in pay per click, you've got programmatic advertising that's growing more and more, and there are a lot of complexities with that. I think it would need to be more specific than just digital marketing, because if you take on a digital marketer and expect them to do the same thing as your other digital marketer, you might focus on completely different-, you might have an email marketer versus an SEO."* – AG009 (fragmented, complex)

Because of this, fragmentation was perceived to make the digital marketing process more complex but also raised questions about the niche or nuanced aspects of digital marketing and what this meant for the client-agency trust debate. In particular, some participants believed it fuelled the multiplicity of fragmented opinions that already existed within the digital marketing domain.

> *"if you look at it there are so many different styles, and so many different meanings, and so many different interpretations…is that **actually they've got nothing in common**." -* AG005 (fragmented, subjective, conflicting)

AG005 went on to suggest that a lack of universally accepted definitions meant he had witnessed small groups of people come together in attempt to define their "*bubble*" of digital marketing resulting in "*hundreds of bubbles*" often with radically different takes upon digital marketing. As such, fragmentation perpetuated conceptualisations of subjectivity explored in previous sub-sections. Most compelling was AG005's perspective that until the industry could be fairly defined, discussions regarding how client-agency trust could be improved would be problematic. However, he noted that current fragmented conditions within the industry meant that "*None of us have the right to define*" digital marketing.

AG009 would reference the industry as a "*bit of a soup*", made up of the varying processes and opinions that comprised it. However, she would suggest that continual proliferation of the industry would make it incredibly unpredictable and uncertain. This was a view shared by a number of participants and will be explored within the following sub-section.

5.6.5   Unpredictability

Unpredictability was a common theme addressed by participants when explaining their perceptions of characteristics of the digital marketing industry. For example, they would suggest that changes to algorithms or media would be unforeseen, unplanned and often unknown. As such, unpredictability in industry would leave stakeholders "*second guessing*" AG011, instilling a sense of uncertainty. This was a view shared by other participants such as CL006, who often felt like his chosen strategies became ineffective through the unpredictable changes in industry.

> *"**It worked and then the world changes** and then you think, wow, you know, we shouldn't have gone down that route."* – AG011 (Unpredictable, retrospection)

Other agents, such as AG005, welcomed unpredictability within the digital marketing industry, reasoning that uncertainty and unpredictability were of tactical benefit with regards to differentiation and competitive advantage:

> *"**We are psychologically wired to need a certain amount of novelty, to need a certain amount of safety and security and predictability and it's playing with those variables, that's where marketing lives in the first place.** To be different enough to get attention and yet the same enough that people can go 'Yeah, I know what that is, I'm familiar with that, I'm comfortable with that."* – AG005 (uncertainty, competitive advantage)

However, the unpredictability of changes in industry was largely met with feelings of apprehension, referenced throughout participant discussions. In particular, unpredictability bread uncertainty in aspects of marketing such as forecasting or the ability to accurately scope marketing campaigns:

> *"**it's obviously quite a challenge to predict** what the uplift would be"* – AG002 (prediction)

> *"**it's difficult to scope,** actually really robustly"* – PR003 (scoping)

AG004 would note the contradiction in a desire to be more measurable against an impaired ability to forecast and commit to key performance indicators (KPI). Such was the environmental uncertainty, that he was never comfortable committing to any form of target. Thus, no guarantee could be given to their client that their investment would result in their desired outcome.

> *"Real KPIs in digital marketing should be performance driven to traffic conversions but **no agency will sign up to that because they know they can't guarantee it**."* – AG004 (Targets, guarantees, non-commitment)

However, clients would state that they expected some form of guarantee for their investment in order to establish trust (CL009). Some clients would suggest that they were unwilling to partner with an agency if they were not given some form guarantee (CL004). With this in mind many participants suggested that trust may be impacted by an inability to commit to certain results within an unpredictable environment.

> *"I suppose why would I enter into that agreement in the first place if I couldn't get down and see – I suppose what is it I want to get out of it and **if I can't get guarantees around that then you know why would I enter into an agreement?**." –* CL009 (guarantee)

In CL009's eyes, a guarantee would be commitment to outcomes or a refund on his initial investment, if an agency had not secured the results owed or promised to him. The same was considered by CL004. CL009 would also perceive a guarantee to be a mechanism to "*de-risk*" his investment. However, without the guarantee that his reward equalled his investment, he perceived the industry to be something he could not de-risk: "*there's no guarantee that your reward equals your investment so from that perspective, yeah, there is a risk, **I can't de-risk it**"* – CL009. As such, CL009, perceived the digital marketing as innately high-risk when considering its unpredictability.

Interestingly, one client participant, CL005 suggested that, if anything, a guarantee or a promise of fulfilment, from an agent should actually be viewed with caution. In other words, a guarantee from an agency in an unpredictable market was counterintuitive to trust in his mind.

> *"if you have someone that says that they can deliver on a market and a product that they don't know anything about, and **they're really, really certain that they can deliver things that are out of the scope that anyone could guarantee, that's a red flag**." –* CL005 (certainty, guarantee, red flag)

Other agents would suggest that in place of guarantees, they could make educated guesses based upon tacit knowledge and heuristics. However, in their experience, such an approach was not well regarded or received by clients.

*"the client didn't go with us because he said you know that might be the result but that might be the result, which is it, well I can't tell you, what's it likely to be? Well you know in your sector, travel/leisure, it could be this or this and the client didn't like it...**you know we can make educated guesses.**"* – PR001 (prediction, guessing)

*"**it's the agency that comes back and says we'll do what we can and do our very best, but clients don't want to hear that.** They want to hear, 'Oh yeah, go with us for six months and everything will be hunky dory,' but that's just not the reality is it."* – AG004 (predictability, what is best?)

However, AG004's perspective would highlight a direct link between unpredictability and the ability to make predictions based upon flawed conceptualisations of "best". Analysis of findings within the thematic category of *Benchmark* would suggest that overly positivist constructs such as "best" were problematic within an inherently ambiguous and unpredictable digital marketing landscape.

When speaking with other agent participants, the general consensus appeared to be that a guarantee was not possible, largely due to the unpredictable conditions of the digital marketing industry:

*"within the industry you've got people that have got opinions on what works and what doesn't, and particularly regarding SEO, **a lot of it is all undercover anyway, and it's changeable and it's not predictable and you can't ever guarantee success.** So you can't actually guarantee what's going to happen and what results you're going to achieve."* – AG009 (Unpredictable, opaque, velocity of change, guarantees, cause and effect)

*"Unfortunately, it always goes back to being how honest the agency is. That mentality understanding The Good The Bad and The Ugly there is no charging past **there is no guaranteed way off if you tick these two boxes then you're going to have success online** that's just not the truth"* – AG004 (guarantee, cause and effect)

Agents and Trainers in particular would raise that they found it difficult to guarantee results where cause and effect was an issue due to the unpredictable nature of the industry. This highlighted the problem with *expectation setting,* with temporal and theoretical significance warranting its own thematic category later in the chapter. Notions of cause and effect also emerged adding complexity to conceptualisations of predictability. Under this view, agents would often contend that their input did not always equate to their desired outcome.

> *"you can't actually guarantee what's going to happen and what results you're going to achieve, because **even if you do deliver the work that you've agreed to deliver, the result of that might not be what you expected**."* – AG009 (guarantee, delivery, unpredictable, expectation, cause and effect)

AG009, like many others, struggled with the construct of predictability and guarantees, where too many other variables, either known or unknown, had the ability to influence the trajectory of a campaign. As such, constructs of predictability quickly gave way to constructs related to cause and effect and attribution, explored within the following sub-section.

5.7   Attribution

Thus far, key aspects of the client-agency trust issue within the context of digital marketing, showed that clients, agents, as well as other notable stakeholder groups, possessed a particular scepticism towards knowledge, evidence, certain actors and benchmarks within the digital marketing industry. Direct links to idiosyncratic characteristics of the digital marketing environment were made. Most notably participants believed that continual shifts within an IO-dominated landscape had the potential to undermine digital marketing knowledge. Ambiguity and uncertainty ensued with wider ramifications upon perceptions of competency and expertise within digital marketing. Beyond this, wider analysis of themes highlighted a key challenge with identifying cause and effect in digital marketer activity and output (performance). An attribution problem emerged, using an in-vivo code of *"Attribution"* (CL006).

On many occasions, many participants would struggle to find causality between marketing activity and marketing outcomes. This was tracked via performance related data in the form of website traffic or conversions via reporting and analytics platforms. Adding to the evidence discussion, highlighted within the first thematic category of *Knowledge,* data was considered

to be a trustworthy form of evidence for clients when affirming their decision to trust their agent (i.e. due to its use in reports, case studies, blogs, awards submissions etc.). However, a key issue emerged with this type of evidence where many clients, and agents, suggested that they did not particularly understand the data when it was presented to them. Arguments regarding *Benchmarks* and right or wrong within digital marketing would reoccur when exploring disparate perspectives of right or wrong types of data and metrics. As such, before notions of attribution could be analysed, a deeper insight into the data itself, was needed.

> "*It's the age old, get the volume of data, versus getting, or getting the volume of visibility out there, versus capturing the data to then market to them. And it is hard.* **I don't think there's an accurate, or best practice to say that one way is better than the other".** – CL006 (What is best?, Data)

A lack of consensus over the "right" metrics would suggest that stakeholders would have the freedom to **"virtually say anything"** - PR001. For example, CL005 would raise his concern over the presence of "*vanity metrics*" or those metrics that looked good to a client but were actually inconsequential to overall campaign performance. This quickly undermined PR001's recommendation for reading the right bits of data in order to determine cause and effect.

> **"from a professional marketing point of view you look for cause and effect and with digital marketing, I think a higher degree of accountability in cause and effect, if you are reading the right, you know, the right bits of data or information"** – PR001 (cause and effect, attribution, accountability, what is right?)

More critically, participants noted their perceived inability to confidently ascertain whether their digital marketing efforts (cause) had generated resulting data (effect). Clients appeared particularly dubious of whether their digital marketing agency was directly responsible for uplifts, as well as drops, in data:

> "*It gets pretty hard to say, "I trust you as a digital marketer," because, you know what, some ads don't work. Some ads do work. It's very hard to prove.*"
> – CL012 (proof, attribution)

*"I've always had issues with identifying "that" lead generated "that" enquiry. You know, and whether PPC have generated it, then emails have happened and then calls and then a SEO click and then that's turned into the purchase. **You know, and your attribution models always been an issue.**" – CL006 (cause and effect, touchpoints, attribution)*

However, and most pertinent to the current sub-section, was the view that some clients would often doubt whether their agency was responsible for the output or performance that they were claiming.

*"[if agents] do get traffic to the site, **can he tell them it's coming directly from the work he's doing** or is not just coming from the fact that they [the client] have got a really good reputation?" – CL002 (responsibility, cause and effect).*

*"**We've got not physical way of saying, A has resulted in B**, with programmatics. It's okay then, you know, A has somehow seen something somewhere that's driven them in to B, but we don't know what that something was, so we can't physically say, right? So when you say like trust things, and in our agency say right, okay programmatics has done really well this month, part of us think**, well okay, it has, but how? How do we know that?** And you do have to trust your agency." – CL006 (cause and effect, knowing, proof)*

Some clients would believe their agency had taken responsibility for performance outcomes and data that may have been unrelated to the agencies campaign activity. This was suggested by CL009 who raised the possibility that other systemic factors may have had some impact upon their digital marketing outcomes.

*"Can you genuinely say that, I mean, **if there are peaks and troughs or if you do get a spike in activity and things like that and I don't know maybe market conditions are, maybe the government?** I mean we are in property development so maybe the government is just releasing new helps about iScheme, something like that and a few weeks later after that, we get a spike in purchases, it might be little bit easier then say well actually no we think it is actually because of this rather than ongoing digital marketing activity, so potential other external*

factors but I don't think you could ever know, which is a risk again." – CL009
(environment, cause and effect)

CL009 went onto suggest that he often questioned whether an agency would be of value and whether he would gain similar results without an agency. Such lines of questioning were not solely derived from the client either. Agents would share experiences of their own doubts regarding inexplicable changes or shifts in data. In AG002's and AG003's examples, clients performance would change but without any discernible reason or plausible explanation.

> ***"I've had accounts before where [hand motions downward trajectory] everything starts slowly going down and everyone starts freaking out*** *and doing loads of investigating trying to figure out what the hell is happening, and then it might start going back up again."* – AG002 (unpredictable, cause and effect, unknown)

> ***"I've got clients like that where year on year is massively [gestures up], even though the industry hasn't changed."*** – AG003 (cause and effect, unknown)

Participants suggested that an inability to fully attribute data, meant that many agents could take advantage of ambiguities within data as a way of obscuring poor practice:

> *"[agents]* ***hide behind the numbers in some cases,*** *and say, right this is what we delivered, and, oh yeah, fantastic, brilliant. But* ***what's happened underneath****?"* – CL006 (deception, hidden practice, attribution)

> *"****its potluck whether you've increased or not and if you haven't they will just give some sort of excuse"*** – AG004 (luck, attribution)

Some participants would perceive complexities in data and tracking, which was not often set up in the correct way, to be key barriers to understanding attribution. AG002's story would highlight how this could be a common issue with clients and their agents:

> *"some of our clients' analytics is screwed up but a previous account I worked on where* ***they were double counting transactions and that had been***

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happening for years and we finally flagged it to the client and they were like, **oh shit!** *And they were like hmm, okay, and they agreed that they weren't going to tell the rest of their colleagues just because they were like 'Leave that with us' and we kept asking what was happening with that because we want to make sure that we're reporting back on our effectiveness and we're confident in the data and they kind of just agreed just to like, let it continue because obviously* **if we fixed it everyone would be like 'What the hell happened to all the transactions?'"** - AG002 (incorrect tracking, attribution)

Where gaps in the understanding of data were perceived to exist, varying examples of participant experiences of deceptive misuse of data were also common. Participants noted occasions where practitioners had knowingly manipulated figures and reports.

"The one [agency] we decided to go with told us that they had worked in our field before not exactly but very similar and that they had got great results and produced all **these results. Also turned out to be fake the whole lot"** – CL001 (deception, fraud)

"I mean I've heard of agencies inflating figures on their reports so they look like traffic's going up every month and when the new agency comes in, they're like, **'Oh my God, they've just been lying to you all this time"** - AG002 (deception)

"But I think if it's set up correctly you trust it but you know there are an awful lot of charlatans out there that will, I think and I don't know this as a fact but I think are capable of doing little tricks to drive traffic, **you think you are getting something and they say well actually conversion is your fault because your web's not, your product's not explaining itself well enough** *but actually it is the wrong type of traffic, so you know you have got to understand it to trust it I suppose."* – PR001 *(*what is correct?, what is wrong? exploitation, deception, responsibility, understanding)

"another thing I can't just can't believe I fell for, getting all these reports and everything. It looked good on paper and then, yeah I don't even know what

made me do it, one day I thought I'm just going to go in the back and have a look at it myself. **He had set up fake profiles within Facebook** *that he was sharing all the content to, through basically talking to himself."* - CL002 (fake, reporting)

"you get these under-economies, these dark economies of SEO that just spring up, because there's money to be made, and they're selling something, selling the dream. They can put a measurement on it. 'Here's this link, it's DA-this or PA-that,' but actually a lot of the time, even those DA and PA figures, **they're just cooked up, because they've got a network of other sites that the same people who are trying to flog you the link have built. So it's all artificial"**. – AG010 (fake, against better knowledge)

The ability to identify potentially deceptive reporting practices was limited in some participants. They believed there to be too many unseen complexities within the data. As such, some participants argued that they did not understand the data enough in order to be able to determine if they were being taken advantage of or not. In particular, some participants expressed difficulty with being able to ascribe activity within the data, to agent, client or environmental activity. For example, *was it the agents digital marketing activity that caused a peak or drop in client traffic or conversions, or something else*? If it was believed to be the Agent, how could the client or agent, ever be sure? Participants would suggest that they could speculate upon the data and formulate hypotheses but ultimately, making inferences with confidence was often problematic.

"If the deliverable is to increase sales or increase revenues by a certain amount then again that's quite hard, **you know, how much of that is the digital marketing, how much of it other factors and other strategies?"** – CL009 (cause, effect, attribution, responsibility)

Other factors and strategies were addressed by other participants on a number of occasions, including: changes in consumer trends (AG002); changes in their specific industries regulation (CL009). A common claim made by agents was that it could take a long time to see results with particular types of digital marketing (TR001; AG009). Other participants would contend

that changes were inexplicable (AG002). This was echoed in a statement by AG009 who addressed the possible unknown and latent implications of digital marketing:

> "*because **so much of digital marketing work has got an indirect consequence,** you can't just change one thing. If you change something over here, it'll have a knock-on effect over here and **it might have a knock-on effect immediately or later down the line**"* – AG009 (latent, unknown, indirect consequence, attribution)

This would open out the importance of exploring the temporal characteristics of the phenomenon explored within the following sub-section.

5.8 Perception Gap

The final thematic category considers the temporal characteristics of the phenomenon under study. Indeed, time-bound elements of the current phenomenon are addressed organically throughout the findings chapter. For example, the *knowledge* thematic category highlights that participants struggle with pre-relationship research, whilst the *attribution* thematic category introduces an evaluation issue throughout the duration of the relationship. Interpretation of interrelationships between both categories indicate how each thematic category may influence the other, thus, two points in time are bridged.

However, under continuous analytical questioning, understanding the *when?* of the client-agency trust phenomenon generated significant findings of its own. In particular, participant experiences denoted a lack of alignment between their initial expectations of their agency, and their later evaluations of their agency. A perception gap emerged where performance outcomes did not match with planned digital marketing activity and agency expectations. A *perception gap* was reflected in in-vivo coding within the literature (AG006). In such circumstances, results were either unexpected or failed to transpire. As such, participant responses gave weight to a perceived gap between initial expectations and their end evaluation. Here clients assessed whether they were right to trust their agency. Often this assessment was oriented towards conceptions of a return on their investment or perceived value:

> "*do I [the client] feel like I have received what I expect to be value from what I've just experienced?*" – AG007 (expectation, evaluation, fulfilment, ROI)

> "*you know people used to sign up, spend 2 or 3 grand a month and not know anything that was going on for that month and at the end of the month they would get a report and that report would be, **you know, "you moved up a couple of places", well? where's my money going?** -* AG011 (value, ROI, attribution)

Whilst called a *gap*, it must be noted that expectation and evaluation did not always concern a pre-relationship/post-relationship comparison. Interpretation of a perception gap would suggest that this could be an indeterminate or uncertain area between two points in time across any stage of the client-agency relationship. Participant accounts would suggest that they were often in a continual process of expectation setting and evaluation throughout the duration of client-agency relationship. As such, a perception gap could be interpreted to mean a more general gap in misunderstanding related to a certain time period. However, more generally, the term, or its other iterations, were nearly always used when discussing comparisons of expectation and evaluation at the beginning and end of a relationship. As well as the term *gap*, other iterations were adopted by participants, in order to highlight a lack of alignment between what was originally promised and what was then delivered. Other phrases included *disconnect, grey area* and *discord* as evidenced through the sample quotes below.

> "*the gaps kind of expand up to, if the customer has been delivered, is that what they thought they were going to get? And that **gap perception** at the end…is what creates unhappy customers?*" – AG006 (delivery, expectation, gap, perception)

> "*that can be a really big problem…people who don't manage expectations, when there's **a disconnect** between what's been sold and what's delivered*" – AG009 (expectation, management, disconnect, beginning, end)

> "*So I find that actually client expectations in relation to agency promises, they **tend not to match up** that well any more, if at all.*" - TR001 (expectations, promises, matching up)

> *"there's that **discord** between what they've been sold and what they get in reality."* - AG010 (discord, reality, beginning, reality)

> *"is sometimes clients and agencies, they don't get on or **expectations and reality are two very different things** and I think that understanding of what can be delivered"* – AG004 (expectations, reality, very different, delivery)

> *"there's a lack of education from the client signing up and then the lack of information that is given to them from the agency and then somewhere, there's like a **grey area** in the middle."* – AG011 (education, beginning, asymmetry, grey area)

When comparing the perception gap concept to other thematic categories, assumed contributors to the perception gap were an inability to fulfil KPIs, if they were even set at all (AG004). A lack of fulfilment comprised the agents: 1) inability to generate a positive influence upon digital traffic or sales (CL001); 2) an inability to confidently attribute cause and effect between agency activity and output (CL006); 3) an inability to keep up with industry trends (AG005). Whilst important to place such client-agency trust issues at the centre of the gap, of critical value to the current study was the wider interpretation of what happened next. In other words, if planned activity had not come to fruition, what was the outcome of this? Sometimes clients would talk about terminating their client-agency relationship (CL001; CL002), thus indicating a complete loss of trust. However, a more interesting interpretation of the perception gap derived from the narrative that there was a distinct inability to assign accountability to said gap. In other words, agents would often discuss that they were not in control of their outcomes despite their best efforts.

> *"**Even if you do deliver the work that you've agreed to deliver, the result of that might not be what you expected**...I think when you're planning a marketing campaign, you plan it to the best of your ability and the best of your experience and your knowledge, with best intentions, but you never know whether that's right. **You never know whether the way you've planned it is going to work"** –* AG009 (best, right, what is best? what is right?, uncertain)

*"people don't know what it can do and it's the responsibility of the agencies to manage the expectations of what it can and can't do and **I think a realistic expectation and the hardest bit...You have got to have results and sometimes that's not within the control of the digital agency**."* – PR001 (Responsibility, expectation, realistic, results, control)

When comparing this interpretation to other thematic categories of *attribution,* where often participants were unable to explain trends in their data (AG002), this would make the thematic category of *accountability* more significant. Further to this, many agents would contend that results were out of control due to the *IO* and the impact IO-dominated *ecosystems,* had on their output. This would also raise questions over whether their planned output had ever been appropriate in the beginning (as challenged by the *Knowledge* and *Benchmark* thematic categories). As such, as wider exploration of accountability was assumed.

5.8.1   Accountability Gap

A critical narrative within participant accounts suggested that the agent often did not have direct control over the outcomes of a service. Indeed, participant accounts would suggest that outcomes were never certain (as per the findings within the *Unpredictability* sub-section within the *Ecosystem* thematic category). However, a particularly enlightening view was the participant perspectives of accountability in relation to IO-dominated ecosystems and their impact upon digital marketing outcomes.

"every result you are going to get is different and every result that we get is determined on a third party." – AG011 (IO, cause, effect, responsibility)

Some agent accounts in particular would highlight a distinct lack of control over digital marketing campaign or strategy performance. Much like AG011, AG004s statement of outcomes being *"out of our hands"* placed some accountability for outcomes upon the *IO*. However, two key problems emerged 1) proving the *IO* had in fact, made changes to their platform i.e. *if the influence the IO could be proven, then who would be accountable in this scenario*?; 2) determining key accountabilities for performance outcomes where proof did not often transpire i.e. *who would be accountable if the influence of the IO was speculated but unproven?* Often trying to prove the specific influence of the *IO* was challenging for clients as

well as agents and other stakeholders. With this in mind, some participants would argue that the *IO* needed to provide more information to its stakeholders, so that appropriate linkages to outcomes could be made (AG003). For example, if Google had decided to update their algorithm, participants desired more visibility over its impact. With this in mind, the *IO* were considered to be key propagators of information asymmetry where some participants believed them to have some responsibility in reducing such asymmetry.

> *"we had to work really hard to figure out why Google said 'You have a penalty' and then when we found out it was a case of cleaning it up, going through all the processes, but **it took a good three months before you start to see any improvement…The compensation element for that is the company could lose millions in that space of time** and if you're not in a financial position you could just end up going under. I think that is a really, really strong argument for regulation I suppose with our so called bodies, being Google etc., that they need to be a bit more… I wouldn't say they need to be more transparent because obviously it's their algorithm, their IP, but giving us more information when something happens, you know **if you were to give a penalty give some indication of why, not just 'here's a penalty, off you go, sort it out'."** – AG003* (information asymmetry, time it takes to see results, lack of information, IO, transparency, attribution, accountability)

Like AG003*, suggesting that there was some certainty as to whether or not the *IO* had influenced change within the ecosystem, with negatively impacted performance outcomes, a question that emerged from participant accounts was where accountability rested? With the client, agent or IO? Who's responsibility was it to refocus and recover the campaign? Who would then have the responsibility to make amends for lost revenue, time, customers etc.?*

> *"**Google could change this tomorrow** so I'm really not sure we should be selling this to clients as a service because we don't own it so there is that risk as well…who **should carry that risk**?" – PR001 (Risk, accountability)*

With this statement, a clearer interpretation of risk within the context of the digital marketing industry derived from the influence of the IO. Interestingly, some participants would argue that

the IO held no accountability to those stakeholders who wished to make use of their platforms as part of a digital marketing strategy.

> "*If you want to change the search engines' attitude, not going to happen, not going to happen; they're a company, they're entitled to make up their own mind,* they're always going to do that and they have big decisions within as to what goes into an algorithm." – AG005 (IO, accountability)

> "*Google of course aren't going to refund* [client name removed]*, or whoever the advertiser was aren't going to refund the money* [to the client] if the money was spent on people's time. I suppose people have professional negligence claims against the agencies." – LR001 (IO, accountability)

However, clients felt very strongly that it was the responsibility of the agency, as a perceived expert within their field, to take accountability for poor outcomes. Often client statements would place accountability directly upon the agent, indicating their expectation of the agent's culpability for less than desirable outcomes. This would come from the view that clients had invested their money in an agent in order to fulfil a service with a desired outcome. Therefore, if the client received a less than desirable outcome then they would hold the agent to account. For the most part, clients believed that they should not be required to contribute any additional digital marketing spend beyond a pre-agreed contractual budget if the *ecosystem* had changed. To a point, this was raised by some agents: "*I would say that the client feels, if they are paying an agency then that agency should know what is what*" – AG011.

> "*if I'm going to experts and I'm paying them money and they are not either delivering or it comes down to a case of it's been really detrimental to the business, then where is that accountability?*...if you are driving round in a 4x4 and something goes wrong with the engine inside, are you going to learn how to rebuild that car? No you are not. So *that's completely off the wall if you ask me, to throw that responsibility back to the client when you are the expert on the field and you are getting paid.*" – CL002 (expectation of outsourced service, expert, responsibility, damage, accountability)

"*You can't penalise us for bringing you in to make something easy when it was always going to be hard anyway. So if* **I had a digital marketing agent turn round to me and say oh sorry the goalposts have been changed, you know, it's "their" [the IO] fault, we would be like well what's your job then if it's not to make my life easier in this world, in the digital marketing space***…I had expected digital marketing to deliver X and if something changes along the road to get to X, it is kind of their [agency] problem*. *It may take them a but more time and that might increase the fee slightly but we* **its still their problem because it's their world, it's their area and they have got to basically deliver against that***…you are paying whatever it is and however you define it, in that transaction* **you are paying them because you don't have the expertise to do it yourself, that's the only reason I pay anyone to do anything it's because I can't do it myself because I don't know how**. *So they need to be able to help me through the process and that's what I'm paying for.*" – CL009 (expectation of outsourced service, expert, responsibility, velocity of change, commitment, accountability, IO)

"when I first got into this I thought it was outsourced I mean I thought that what I can't do I outsource to someone else that's why I'm paying them*"* – CL001 (expectation of outsourced service, expert, responsibility)

Ultimately, CL009 reasoned that an agent who had wilfully decided to practice within the digital marketing industry must know what they are involved in, enough to make precautions for that.

"**If the entire world is at risk of the algorithm changing** *then again I'm paying the [agent] to take that risk on because what we are effectively saying, and what we should be saying, is that yeah* **we know that the goalposts could be changed at any moment** *but what I'm going to do is I'm going to pay you so that you can manage that process and* **you take on the risk and it might change at any moment but then it's your problem** *not mine so you have to fix things, not me.*" – CL009 (risk, shared, unpredictable, accountability)

However, as outlined within *Internet Oligopoly* and *Ecosystem* thematic categories, proving that IO's algorithm had indeed changed was often very problematic. Furthermore, whilst confirming that the IO had directly influenced the success or failure of a campaign was difficult, something more problematic was proving whether or not such gaps in understanding were consciously or unconsciously being exploited against the better knowledge of clients. For example, CL001's experience would indicate that his agency had consciously taken advantage of gaps in understanding and the possible impact of the IO upon the outcome of his campaign: "***it is easy to fake it and to say oh yeah Googles just done an update***". He would claim that his agency had consciously blamed the *IO* for their agencies own poor practice though he could not prove the *IO* had made any significant changes to their platforms or their algorithms. This left him at a loss to try and seek accountability and further recompense. This was a scenario echoed by some agents who suggested that the ability to seek accountability and recompense was particularly challenging for clients. In particular, AG004's statement regarding the ability to legally prove that the *IO* or their IO-dominated *ecosystem* had impacted a campaign, highlighted a contentious issue.

> ***"it wasn't successful because Google decided to change the algorithm*** *which the judge in the court can then go, 'Did they? Oh,'* ***which Google won't admit to,*** *that's why they change it* ***so they can't legally prove why it wasn't successful***" - AG004 (IO, what is success?, proof, responsibility)

AG004's statement would indicate something of a client-agency stalemate that many participants within the participant group were unable to find a solution to. It would also bring together key beliefs about the trustworthiness of *proof* and *evidence* in a digital marketing context, bringing the accountability gap full circle, to the thematic category of *Knowledge*.

5.9   Summary

Due to the knowledge-intensive nature of digital marketing, a knowledgeable agent is perceived to be trustworthy to clients. However, a distinct knowledge problem emerges where, clients, agents and other stakeholders are not confident in determining what, or who, a knowledgeable digital marketing agent is considered to be. Key findings suggest a distinct lack of trust in, and scepticism towards, digital marketing knowledge and information. Key sources of information, such as training materials, resources, certifications, accreditations, as well as

the very awarding bodies and institutions that support them, are viewed with scepticism. Findings indicate that participants perceive a digital marketing industry without benchmarks for good or bad digital marketing practice; good or bad digital marketing knowledge; good or bad digital marketing outcomes; amongst many other benchmarks. Deeper analysis relates a lack of benchmarks to an inability to determine cause and effect between digital marketing activity and performance outcomes. Here, evidence of good or bad practice can not be easily attributed to the digital marketing agent or wider external forces. This also means that clients are often at a loss as to where accountability for outcomes should be placed. Such a scenario becomes more complex where notions of an IO-dominated ecosystem are introduced, with the power to impair attribution, thus accountability. Often the influence of the IO is not known to clients, agents or wider stakeholders, introducing the threat of unconscious and conscious ignorance and opportunism. Such findings have direct ramifications upon the ability to evaluate the trustworthiness of the agent throughout the duration of the campaign and after the termination of the client-agency relationship. However, findings also have a latent impact upon expectation setting early within the client-agency relationship where potentially misattributed, misinformation is being shared amongst peers and used in the construction of expectations. Findings from the current chapter will now be discussed against the wider body of client-agency trust knowledge, within the following chapter.

6 Chapter Six: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the six thematic categories, representing client-agency trust issues in digital marketing settings. The purpose of the current chapter is to discuss how major findings align, extend or challenge existing knowledge and in-house assumptions within the field. A summary of the current studies findings relative to the research questions are provided in Table 15. Thematic categories are also compared against what is already known relative to the research problem and related literatures, in order to show how new knowledge contributes to the field.

Research Question	What was known (Extant Findings)	What is now known (Empirical Findings)
What are the key challenges to digital marketing client-agency trust?	Knowledge asymmetry (expert versus layman). Lack of evaluative criteria. Challenges to value assessments.	**Knowledge:** Internet Oligopoly has a stronghold over information economy (IO-dominated ecosystem), perpetuating knowledge asymmetry. **Benchmark:** Changes to the IO-dominated ecosystem undermine benchmark knowledge (best practice and expert knowledge are easily challenged). **Attribution:** The influence of the IO, challenges attribution of agency activity to performance data. Ambiguities in the IO-dominated ecosystem create higher risk of (un)conscious ignorance and opportunism. Misattributed data may be used for knowledge bases and shared amongst peer networks.

Who is contributing to the challenges to digital marketing client-agency trust?	Trust issues are internal to the client-agent dyadic. Peer networks are important for knowledge exchange.	**Internet Oligopoly (IO)** The agent is at an intersection between the demands of client and IO. Peer networks are suffering the same knowledge asymmetries as the client-agent (authority undermined).
What are the contextual challenges to digital marketing client-agency trust?	Velocity of change in industry is creating a skills gap placing extra pressure upon the client-agency relationship. Pre-relationship stages are critical to expectation setting. Issues with expectation setting and evaluation are evident.	**IO-dominated ecosystem** Client-agents and other stakeholders are operating in a volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous IO-dominated digital marketing ecosystem. **Perception Gap** Attribution issues (due to presence of IO) create significant perception gaps between expectations and evaluation of outcomes. **Accountability** Significant issues with accountability and recompense emerge where the IO *may* have made a change to an algorithm (burden of proof is hard where knowledge is fallible).

Table 15. Evolution of what was known versus what is now known.

6.2 Knowledge

The current thematic category suggests that digital marketing knowledge is central to participant accounts and perceptions of client-agency trust. As such, findings are consistent with epistemic trust problems within the extant client-agency literatures (Geneste and Galvin, 2013; Lessard and Okakwu, 2016). More specifically the current study aligns with the extant literatures through the following findings: *there are significant issues with digital marketing knowledge asymmetries between the client and agent (*Kolbjørnsrud, 2017; Pedeliento et al., 2017; Mortimer and Laurie, 2017; Chowdhury et al., 2016*); pertinent digital marketing knowledge sharing is lacking between the client and agent* (Mola et al., 2017*); knowledge bases as trust signals or evidence to trust (evaluative criteria) are important to the client within their*

pre-relationship research (Bachnik et al., 2017; Dziubaniuk, 201*5); digital marketing knowledge is embedded in complex and digitised systems (*Pedeliento et al., 2017*).*

However, the current study also introduces the following new knowledge issues to the debate: *clients, agents and digital marketing stakeholders* **mistrust available digital marketing knowledge***; they demonstrate* **scepticism** *towards digital marketing knowledge bases; they believe there to be a significant* **attribution constraint** *upon digital marketing knowledge; they are* **conscious of sharing fallible knowledge***; they are* **unconscious to sharing fallible knowledge***; they believe there is an* **ignorance problem** *within the digital marketing industry; digital marketing* **knowledge is perceived to be easily undermined by an Internet Oligopoly (IO) (***such as Google, Facebook and Microsoft);* **there is a knowledge asymmetry issue between clients, agents and the IO***; there are* **limited benchmarks for good or bad digital marketing knowledge;** *the notion of the* **expert** *is problematic in digital marketing settings.*

Such findings comprise a reconceptualisation of the knowledge and knowledge asymmetry problem within a digital marketing context. Here *rationalist* in-house assumptions of *evidentialism* are challenged, where the *IO* and their perceived stronghold over pertinent knowledge and information economy, make it difficult to determine if the "right" or "wrong" knowledge is being shared between clients, agents and wider peers. Empirical findings comprising the thematic category of *Knowledge,* broaden the knowledge asymmetry debate within the client-agency trust literature, beyond the client-agency dyadic, and challenge the value of *knowledge-sharing theory* (Mola et al., 2017) and *signalling theory* (Pedeliento et al., 2017) in context. This is examined in greater detail within the following sub-sections.

6.2.1   Broadening the debate on knowledge asymmetry

The knowledge asymmetry debate is addressed quite prevalently within Chapter Two's systematic literature review of contemporary client-agency studies (Pedeliento et al., 2017). Here, dominant discourse considers the internal imbalance of knowledge between clients and agents, where the client is viewed as a lay person and the agent, an expert. Laurie and Mortimer (2019: 237) define an expert as "*persons with special knowledge about a certain matter and privileged access to that information*". As such, to trust a digital marketing agent is to acknowledge them as knowledgeable within their field. This is particularly so within the digital marketing industry, which is commonly defined as a "*knowledge intensive business service*"

(Lessard and Okakwu, 2016: 1624). In other words, digital marketing is a credence service heavily dependent upon intangible knowledge inputs and outputs.

In recognising their own lack of digital marketing knowledge, the client outsources external digital marketing expertise, comprising "*deep subject-matter expertise, unique knowledge of audiences and proprietary methods*" (Bachnik et al., 2017: 2). Other contemporary studies suggest that digital marketing expertise is comprised of: *domain expertise* (O'Connor et al, 2016); *technical expertise* (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019; Geneste and Galvin, 2013); *strategic planning expertise* (Hand et al., 2014); *creative expertise* (Levin et al., 2017). As such, a number of contemporary studies pertain to the view that the digital marketing agent is an expert within their field, comprising a great deal of domain-specific tacit knowledge and competency (Geneste and Galvin, 2013).

Because of this, a common narrative is that the less knowledgeable client is unevenly dependent upon their agency and often at perceived risk of opportunistic or deceptive behaviour (Chowdhury et al., 2016; Schauster and Neill, 2017). More specifically, the clients lack of knowledge leaves them vulnerable to being taken advantage of, where incongruity in learning styles and knowledge asymmetries within the client-agency relationship are perceived to exist (Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). This is depicted as a key contributor to perceptions of client-agency mistrust within the extant literatures. In order to mitigate this, much of the literature advocates greater *knowledge-sharing* (Mola et al., 2017) and *value co-creation* (Chowdhury et al., 2016). For example, Chen et al. (2017) note the value of *specific asset investments*, such as the agency offering to train the client, in order to improve their digital marketing knowledge and empower them within the relationship. Here the investment is considered to be a show of trust to the client, through the act of relinquishing valuable tacit knowledge to another (Chen et al., 2017). They also note that a more knowledgeable client gives way to a more fruitful and trusting relationship as perceived knowledge asymmetries are reduced (Chen et al., 2017). This is a fairly unproblematic concept and one that is echoed across the client-agency literature.

Because of this, knowledge asymmetries are considered to be an inherently *relational* construct. Like Chowdhury et al. (2016), a common argument within the literatures indicates that knowledge asymmetries are *internal* to the client-agency dyadic (Mortimer and Laurie, 2019; Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). Pedeliento et al. (2017: 1087) depict asymmetry as an "*information gap between clients and professional services providers*", with professional

service providers being the agency in this instance. Additionally, Dornas et al. (2014) note the asymmetric effect of relational exchanges between clients and agents. It is therefore expected that academic debate is centred around the value of collaboration, cooperation and co-creation *between* clients and agents in an attempt to balance asymmetry (Mortimer and Laurie, 2017). Thus, the extant literature perpetuates a relational response for a perceivably relational problem, reinforcing a popular interpersonal view of client-agency trust (Cohen and Dienhart, 2013).

That being said, beyond the more commonly accepted client-agency dyadic, Chowdhury et al., (2016) and Kolbjurnsrud (2017) also discuss the importance of addressing knowledge asymmetries within the wider client-agency network (Chowdhury et al., 2016), or the wider collaborative peer-community of the agent (Kolbjørnsrud 2017). Both studies share similarities with broader learning theories such as Wenger's (2009: 1) communities of practice (CoP) where "*groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.*" Under this view, there must be a shared *domain of interest,* in this instance, *digital marketing*; a shared *community*, in this instance, the digital marketing community via *shared social networks, domain relevant blogs and forums;* a shared *practice*, in this instance, *digital marketing practitioners and agents*. Here communities comprising input from digital marketers, develop their knowledge and practice. Within the current study, empirical accounts of agents indicate that such communities and their knowledge resources are widely leveraged, as part of their digital marketing learning process.

Similarly, Kolbjørnsrud (2017) examines knowledge sharing communities under the lens of *multiple-agency,* defined as situations comprising multiple agents, clients and other relevant actors. However, they find that knowledge asymmetry and the risk of opportunism is still apparent within such communities (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017). Through their multiple case study analysis, they also contend that knowledge asymmetry is apparent in a variety of other industries such as IT and pharmaceuticals. As such, it is important at this stage of the discussion to note that knowledge asymmetry issues are not only resigned to client-agency relationships. Wider reading beyond the client-agency marketing literatures identified within the systematic literature review, indicates that knowledge asymmetry problems are common place across a variety of different management fields and business-to-business settings (Bergh et al., 2018; Steinle et al, 2014). Here, knowledge asymmetries between a more knowledgeable principal and a less knowledgeable agent are discussed.

With all of the above in mind, **it is surprising that contemporary client agency trust literatures have feigned to consider the contextually relevant nature of digital marketing** upon asymmetric knowledge relationships in more detail. An overarching criticism of the contemporary client-agency trust literatures, considering client-agency relationships in digital settings, is that little theoretical attention is granted to the distinctiveness of the digital marketing context upon current understanding of knowledge asymmetries. Indeed, some contemporary authors such as Lessard and Okakwu (2016) and Pedeliento et al. (2017) espouse that knowledge has become more complex, or deeply embedded in digitised knowledge structures, thus contributing to perceptions of knowledge asymmetry. Additionally, trust philosopher, O'Neill (2018), argues that perfect knowledge symmetry is not always possible where relevant knowledge may be incomplete or inaccessible in contemporary and digitised settings. However, further empirical exploration into the key contributing factors of digital marketing upon knowledge asymmetries are not undertaken beyond this.

Instead, more general and traditional views of knowledge asymmetry, regarding perceivable differences in client-agency resource and expertise (Ots and Nyilasy, 2015) or internal communication issues (Neill and Schauster, 2018) between the client-agent, are applied to the digital marketing client-agency setting. Such views are still important to the debate and often echoed within the current studies participant accounts i.e. the discussion of internal issues contributing to perceived information asymmetries. However, a lack of theoretical advancement of the knowledge asymmetry issues in a digital marketing setting is observed. As such, a concerted effort to distinguish the idiosyncratic nature of the digital marketing industry and its impact upon traditional conceptions of client-agency knowledge asymmetries throughout the thesis, introduces a novel contribution to knowledge examined within the following sub-section.

6.2.2 The impact of the Internet Oligopoly upon knowledge and knowledge asymmetries

Based upon empirical findings within participant accounts, the current sub-section makes the claim that knowledge and power asymmetries between the client-agent, and wider peer network, are heavily influenced by an Internet Oligopoly (IO). **The current study is the first within the marketing and client-agency field to empirically place the influence of the *IO***

within the client-agency trust debate. This is primarily achieved through conceptualising the *IO's* impact upon themes of *knowledge* and *knowledge asymmetry*.

A defining feature of the digital marketing context is the strategic use of online media and advertising platforms, which differentiates it from marketing, advertising and other traditional communications industries such as public relations. A detailed overview of the distinct differences between digital marketing and other analogous industries, is made in Chapter One. Indeed, more traditional communications industries are facing similar problems to digital marketing, where there is an expectation of more online communication (Neill and Schauster, 2018). As such, findings from the current study have transferability across other analogous fields. However, in order to avoid deviation from the current studies research scope and problem under inquiry, a primary digital marketing focus is assumed.

In order to give weight to the power of such advertising and media platforms, the label of *Internet Oligopoly (IO)* is borrowed from Nikos Smyrnaios (2018) and their book *Internet Oligopoly: The Corporate Takeover of our Digital World.* Smyrnaios (2018) discusses contemporary internet systems under the analytical framework of political information economy, comprised of large media and advertising platforms such as Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft (GAFAM). Smyrnaios (2018: 55-56) introduces the notion of the *IO,* as propagators of an information economy or, "*a system that organises the means of production and dissemination of knowledge that can be conserved, processed or communicated"*. Under this definition, Symrnaios (2018) contends that the *IO* possess information governance over the internet and wider society. Key characteristics of the *IO* include their: *control of the global digital market; advertising dominance; improbability of regulation; as well as their unpredictable and often disruptive nature.*

Other notable authors within this field, such as Professor Frank Pasquale (2014: 4), also reference large online media and advertising platforms as being at "*the core of information economy*". He introduces the label of "*Black Box"* (Pasquale, 2014: 3)*,* in order to describe organisations such as Google. This derives from his seminal book, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*. Here, *black box* is a metaphor for a "*system who's workings are mysterious; we can observe its inputs and outputs, but we cannot tell how one becomes the other*" (Pasquale, 2014: 3). Pasquale (2014) discusses the notion of an imbalance in information where internet companies such as Google may collect data on

their users but avoid regulation upon sharing such data. This reflects the European Commissions current antitrust accusations against Google, within Chapter One. As such, the current study argues that the *IO* propagate and contribute to knowledge asymmetries between the client and agent, creating scenarios for significant dissolution of trust.

It is pertinent to note that there are other industries, such as finance, where high frequency and unpredictable trading algorithms are prone to volatile fluctuations with repercussions across the wider economy (Wigglesworth, 2019). As such, it is critical to distinguish the *IOs information economy* from algo-trading and *financial economy* (Pasquale, 2015). With such a distinction, Pasquale (2015: 64) argues that platforms comprising the IO are perhaps "*the most instructive case of how black box culture developed*".

With this, and empirical findings from the current study in mind, a number of new challenges to the client-agency trust relationship emerge. Primarily, the current study finds that issues with asymmetric client-agency knowledge become more complex where the *IO* is perceived to have a stronghold over the way in which its algorithms work. For example, where a client and agent may want to gain visibility on particular online media and advertising platforms, the agent is required to be mindful of the "rules" of said platform. However, such rules are often inaccessible or increasingly complex to the client and agent. This links to Chapter Ones view of the IO as "*walled gardens*" (Duggan, 2017: para. 1).

Further to this, and of most significance, are the times where an IO's algorithm changes without warning or insight. Within the current study, agents shared experiences of where they believed changes to the *IO* had caused significant disruption to their clients performance, but they had minimal proof or insight into how the *IO* had changed. In response, clients would be sceptical of their agencies claims regarding the *IO* and their supposed influence upon performance outcomes i.e. *was it the agency or the IO that generated good/bad results?* However, this would be under the assumption that the *IO* had indeed confirmed an update, which popular industry research tells us in not always the case (Schwartz, 2019). This new influence upon the client-agency relationship is visualised in Figure 18.

Dominant Assumption in Extant Literatures

Client

Knowledge Sharing | Knowledge Asymmetry

Agent

Challenging Assumptions in Extant Literatures

Client

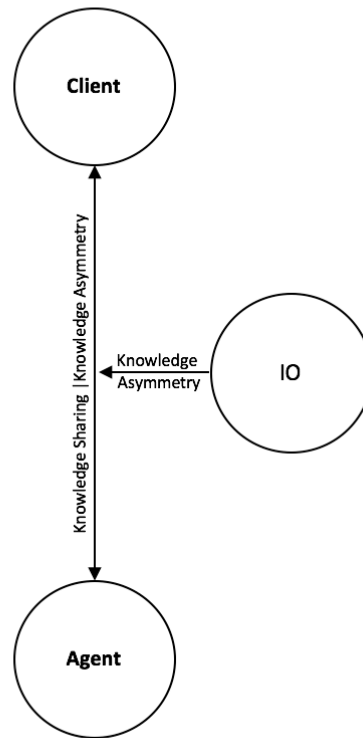Knowledge Sharing | Knowledge Asymmetry

Knowledge Asymmetry

IO

Agent

Figure 18. Challenging dominant assumptions of knowledge asymmetry

Such findings also challenge the relational assumptions (Chen et al., 2017; Geneste and Galvin, (2013) associated with client-agency trust, where the *IO* adds an additional intersection to the client-agency trust relationship. Here the agent must be mindful of the demands of the client but also the *IO*.

However, it would be naïve to argue that knowledge asymmetry problems comprise a *purely* relational issue between the client-agent relationship. For example, there is wide body of knowledge, which contends that various exogenous ambiguities such as, changes to consumer trends, competitor activity or the political and economic climate, may also pose a knowledge asymmetry challenge to any client-agency relationship (Chaffey, 2012). Client-agency relationships in digital marketing contexts must also contend with the same inalienable external factors. However, it is the particularly distinctive and prevalent nature of the *IO*, yet to be addressed as a significant and dominant force within the client-agency trust literature and broader marketing field, that is of pertinent interest to the current study and original value to the field.

Another novel point of theoretical interest within current study, derives from the impact of the *IO* and how it is perceived to *change* digital marketing knowledge with changes to its platforms and algorithms. Under this view, the current study finds known and unknown changes to the *IO* can thrust the agent into a state of ignorance until further learning takes place, that is if a change to the *IO* has indeed occurred. As such, **questions over expert knowledge and how it is constructed and shared in digital marketing contexts are raised.** With each perceivable change to the *IO*, many agents and clients consult insights shared by peers within the wider digital marketing network. However, the current study finds that it is likely that, they too, will have suffered the same inalienable asymmetry issues as the client-agent. In other words, the hegemonic class of the *IO*, creates an overarching asymmetry between the IO and *anyone* who attempts to leverage their platforms for digital marketing purposes. Such insights extend the notion of an *IO*-propagated knowledge asymmetry to wider stakeholder groups beyond the client-agency, such as: regulatory bodies, trade associations, educators and other relevant institutions. This complex and asymmetric relationship beyond the client and agent is visualised within figure 19.
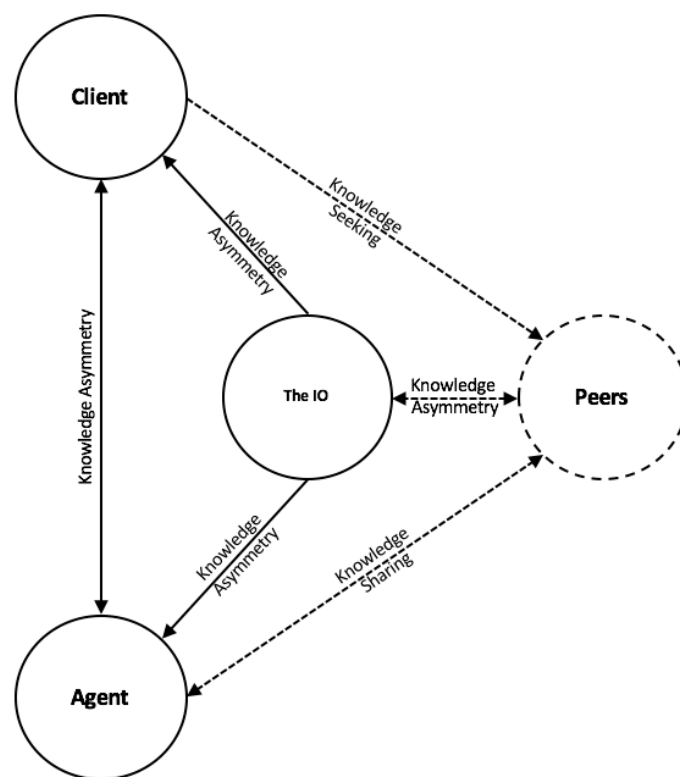

Figure 19. Information Asymmetries beyond the Client-Agent Dyadic

With this in mind, notions of an asymmetric knowledge environment emerge where knowledge asymmetries internal and eternal the client-agency relationship are influenced by the *IO*. This is believed to have implications for client-agency trust along the relationship lifecycle. For example, more explicit knowledge bases and trust signals cultivated by peers (i.e. trade association, industry forums, blogs, regulatory bodies etc.) within the digital marketing network, could be based upon incomplete or asymmetric knowledge assumptions. Such information may then be accessed by agents and clients within the wider peer network, as part of the agents learning process and the client's pre-relationship agency research. This poses a significant threat to peer networks such as communities of practice, which attempt to create their own "*building blocks of the knowledge economy*" (Schenkel and Teigland, 2008: 106). Further detail of incorrect knowledge assumptions derived from attribution problems is provided later within the current chapter.

Within the literatures, the pre-relationship stage of the client-agency relationship is posited to be most critical to the formation of the clients trust expectations (Turnbull, 2016). Throughout the relationship, there is also a threat that insights gained through tacit knowledge are ill-founded when based upon incorrect assumptions of changes, believed to have been made by the *IO*. Pedeliento et al. (2017) note the perils of incorrect market assumptions based upon weak data. However, they feign to suggest how or why incorrect market assumptions are made. With this finding in mind, concluding recommendations for greater knowledge sharing via collaboration, co-creation, cooperation and co-innovation, in order to address knowledge asymmetries internal and external to the client-agency relationship (Chowdhury et al., 2016; Gambetti et al., 2016; Laurie and Mortimer, 2019; Masiello et al, 2014; Neill and Schauster, 2018; Ponder et al., 2016), become resoundingly problematic i.e. *are peer networks at threat of sharing potential fallible knowledge too?* As such, explicit knowledge bases comprising trust signals and evaluative criteria consulted by clients and agents are questioned in the context of digital marketing. Such claims are examined within the following sub-sections, which challenge the rationalist assumptions i.e. *epistemic rationality*, behind knowledge-sharing theory (Mola et al., 2017) and signaling theory (Pedeliento et al., 2017).

6.2.3   Challenges to Knowledge-sharing Theory

Strauss (2018) defines knowledge sharing as the exchange of important information between two or more parties. Such thinking is particularly common amongst contemporary client-

agency studies that consider the aggressive digitisation of the client-agency relationship (Gijic et al., 2014; Lessard and Okakwu, 2016; Pedeliento et al., 2017; Geneste and Galvin, 2013). Here, complex digital marketing knowledge is embedded in hard to understand knowledge systems, not readily understood by a lay person (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar, 2015). A dominant assumption in extant literature advocates that resulting knowledge asymmetries may then be remedied through greater knowledge-sharing between the digital marketing agent and the client (Mola et al., 2017). However, under this assumption, contemporary studies have feigned to consider the nature of digital marketing knowledge before advocating its exchange. The current study finds that significant changes to the *IO* have the potential to thrust the agent back into a state of unknowing with implications upon the knowledge sharing process. This has the power to undermine perceptions of the agents expertise within the clients mind. However, such a scenario assumes that the influence of the *IO* is known. In scenarios where the impact of the *IO* is unknowable or unknown, there is a greater risk that the agent is sharing potentially fallible or out of date information with the client, against the client and agents better knowledge. The current studies empirical findings contribute an entirely new perspective upon the knowledge sharing problem, namely, a lack of trust and scepticism towards digital marketing knowledge. This is because of *the perceived impact of the Internet Oligopoly,* and its destabilising nature with each change to its algorithm and perceived stronghold over important information. As such, a knowledge sharing remedy to knowledge asymmetry is found to be perfunctory with the potential to perpetuate client-agency trust issues further. With this in mind, extant findings challenge in-house assumptions of signalling theory (Pedeliento et al., 2017) also. This is explored in greater detail within the following sub-section.

6.2.4   Challenging the value of Signalling Theory in Digital Marketing Contexts

Much of the extant literature upholds the epistemic importance of appropriate knowledge and evaluative criteria when constructing trust beliefs (Levin et al., 2017). Here a belief is justified if there is appropriate evidence to support it. McMyler (2011) argues that those who subscribe to evidentialist thinking are essentially seeking truth in their assumptions so that they may be epistemically justified in believing that a trustee can fulfil a desired outcome. For example, a prospective client may consult available evidence and informational resources in order to support their trust assessment of their potential agency partner, during their pre-relationship research. Participant accounts within the current study suggest that evidence comprises educational resources, guidance from institutions or insights from industry blogs. This reflects

rationalist trust signals within the extant literatures (Dziubaniuk, 2015) and the more explicit knowledge bases communicated by Geneste and Galvin (2013).

Within the contemporary client-agency literature, this is explained through signalling theory, which pertains to the view that one party (agency) can communicate claims of trustworthiness via trust signals, to another party (client) (Pedeliento et al., 2017; Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al., 2019). Contemporary client-agency trust researchers note the importance of signalling for reducing knowledge asymmetries within the early stages of a client-agency relationship. Extant literature explores this concept under a number of different naming conventions, such as: *signals* (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al., 2019: 170), *dimensions* (Masiello et al., 2014), *expertise indicators (*Beachboard, 2017) and *referential units* (Dziubaniuk, 2015). Signals are comprised of evidence and indicators for trustworthiness pertaining to another's expertise or other common claims to trustworthiness (competency, capability, professionalism etc) (Beachboard, 2017; Dziubaniuk, 2015). Throughout the literature, signals are considered to be qualifications, affiliation with a particular institution or a particular professional code of conduct (Bachnik et al., 2017). Such trust signals are viewed as a type of currency for competency, credibility and expertise. The client then makes an evaluation of the agent's potential trustworthiness based upon the evidence available to them.

However, the current study challenges the value of signalling theory in a digital marketing context, arguing that the direct and latent influence of the *IO* gives rise to potentially fallible knowledge that informs such signals. This has wider theoretical implications for the theories value in constructing appropriate trust assessments and expectations. A particular scenario considers the way in which clients leverage knowledge bases in order to make trust assessments of their prospective agency. This typical scenario suggests that clients, will consult explicit knowledge bases within the wider digital marketing network, in order to determine an appropriate agency for their needs (assuming the client knows what they require from their digital marketing agent). Here the client makes assessments upon available information and evaluative criteria. Such criteria may also be leveraged by an agent in order to support their claim to being an expert/competent/skilled etc. Upon aligning client expectations and agent expertise, a client-agency relationship is established where the client trusts their agents claims to expertise. However, the continually changing nature of the *IO* creates uncertainty within the digital marketing ecosystem, undermining existing knowledge structures, thus claims to trust. For example, an agency may make a claim to being an expert within digital marketing.

However, continual evolutions of the *IO* may change the technical and tacit knowledge that comprise the expert construct. What is more, evidence of expertise may be founded upon potentially fallible information, undermined by the *IO.*

However, the concept of fallible knowledge becomes increasingly problematic where there is no clear benchmark for fallible, "good" or "bad" digital marketing knowledge. For example, Royle and Laing (2014: 71) recommend greater attention to the identification of *"evidence-based guidance on best practice",* in order to address perceived gaps in digital marketing knowledge. However, by what or who's standard is *best practice* in context? Under continuous analytical questioning of participant accounts, it quickly becomes clear that there is limited agreement over right, best, wrong, knowledge, competencies, expertise etc. within the digital marketing field. As such, the thematic category of *benchmarking* is examined in greater detail within the following sub-section.

6.3   Benchmarks

Empirical findings from the current study contribute to the claim that **changes within the IO-dominated digital marketing ecosystem have the power to undermine popular notions of "best practice" in digital marketing contexts**. Findings from the current study indicate that participants equate *benchmarks* with a standard point of reference from which "best", "good" or "bad" digital marketing practice (i.e. planned activity, key performance indicators, performance, expertise, skill, competency etc.) may be compared. For example, a client may ask who a "good" digital marketing agent is considered to be during their pre-relationship research? They may also question whether or not they received value for money from their digital marketing agency? However, a discernible lack of benchmarks and ability to establish benchmarks on a broader industry scale is observed. In particular, this, challenges the rationalist trust mechanisms introduced within Chapter One.

Within Dornas et al.'s (2014: 810) study *The Relationship between Trust, Value and Loyalty in the Internet Era,* they conclude that clients *"feel that the service providers [agent] should possess [a] standard of excellence of practice and management"*. Conversely, within their study of *The dark side of value co-creation in B2B service networks,* Chowdhury et al. (2016), recommend the potential for a minimum threshold for weak performance in client-agency marketing settings. Such a threshold comprises a baseline for opportunistic behaviours that are

not tolerated within the client-agency relationship. However, both studies do not address what such a level of excellence or weakness is, or what excellence or weakness is in context. This is indicative of a problem within the wider contemporary client-agency trust literatures.

Findings from the current study suggest that clients, agents and other digital marketing stakeholders are unable to answer such questions with confidence. Instead, participant accounts allude to a digital marketing industry without appropriate benchmarks from which to construct appropriate expectations and evaluate practice. Three key problems emerge from this core finding: 1) without benchmarks, clients are unsure if their inquiry is oriented towards those agents deemed to be most trustworthy i.e. evidence of good or bad agents; 2) Clients are unable to determine if they have received value or the best possible outcome for their investment i.e. good or bad performance; 3) clients are unable to challenge their agents if understanding of poor practice is not readily known or understood i.e. from who's benchmark are claims of poor practice being made? The latter has wider repercussions upon the clients perception of *accountability* of their digital marketing agent, explored later in the current chapter. Such problems are key contributors to client-agency mistrust.

For example, participant accounts highlight a specific lack of benchmarks for fair or appropriate digital marketing service quality, price, return on investment or timeframes, amongst others. Indeed, participant accounts suggest that benchmarks may be established on a case-by-case, subjective basis dependent upon what is agreed within the early stages of a client-agency relationship (Levin et al., 2017; Dornas et al., 2014). However, without benchmarks clients suggest that they are left to make personal evaluations of their agent, which is often dependent upon the limited knowledge of the client. A lack of understanding of what "good" looks like in context, instils a cognitive dissonance within the client upon commencing with the client-agency relationship, where they question if they were "right" to trust their agent. However, this becomes increasingly complex where notions of "good" may change across the duration of the client-agency relationship in line with perceived changes to the *IO-dominated ecosystem,*. With this in mind, perceptions of "good" digital marketing knowledge versus "bad" digital marketing knowledge become increasingly complex.

Indeed, extant perspectives within the literature raise issue with establishing formalised measurement systems. For example, Gambetti et al., (2016) argue that this can restrict creativity and innovation. In fact, benchmarks are considered to have the potential to be

counterintuitive, where complying with benchmarks can lead someone down the "wrong" digital marketing route, or stifle creativity. Thus, benchmarks are not well received within the client-agency literature: *"formalized systems of measurement only serve to alienate creatives and further distance them from others in their organisation."* (Hand et al., 2014: 4). Particularly within, Hand et al.'s (2014) study, it is found that the introduction of more rigid benchmarks can move digital marketing into the realms of reward and punishment relative to said benchmark. Such a view is problematic in an IO-dominated digital marketing ecosystem that is continually shifting. What may be "right" one month may be "wrong" in another month.

To make this scenario more complex, the current study finds that *agents, trainers* and other stakeholders often do not know whether they are sharing the right digital marketing knowledge to their peers, without appropriate benchmarks. For example, some agent participants responsible for training their clients and peers do so without every really knowing if what they are delivering is appropriate. Suggesting that agents, trainers institutions etc. do feel that they are sharing the "right" knowledge, evidence or information, this can be quickly undermined or challenged where no digital marketing benchmark exists. For example, an SEO agent may communicate that optimisation of certain on-page elements is best practice for a particular client, where another SEO agent may completely disagree with their view. However, both would be justified in their thinking without an accepted benchmark of understanding of "right" and "wrong" in context.

Because of this, a significant contribution yet to be considered within the extant literature is the view that clients within the digital marketing industry, are rarely in a position to challenge the views of the agent without an appropriate benchmark. For example, suggesting that a client believes they have received a poor service and performance from their agent, there is often great difficulty in being able to prove what poor service is because there is no accepted benchmark for "poor". This is considered to be a significant contributor to client-agency mistrust. Despite a lack of clarity over accepted definitions and benchmarks for "poor" practice, objective notions of best, right, wrong etc. are rife within the extant literatures. This is explored within the following sub-section.

6.3.1 Challenging objectivist language within the digital marketing context

Relevant benchmarking or assessment theories are lacking within the client-agency literatures. However, there is no shortage of reference to *best practice, standards* or other positivist laden terminology. For example, a number of traditional scholars and contemporary researchers argue that client-agency trust is linked to the notion of a certain *level* of excellence (Bachnik et al., 2017), performance (Beachboard, 2017) or competence (Pedeliento et al., 2017). Similar terminology, such as appropriate *standards* (Levin et al., 2017) or *thresholds* (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016), are sometimes introduced but rarely examined further (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016). Table 16. synthesises similar terminology in order to demonstrate the prevalence of positivist language throughout extant client-agency trust literature. For the most part, scholars view that agency services should be delivered to an excellent level, in order to cultivate and sustain client-agency trust. With this in mind, claims to trustworthiness take on a calculative dimension that can be objectively and rationally quantified (Barbalet, 2005; Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al., 2019). However, no such quantifiable measure of trust for digital marketing is provided within the literatures.

Author	Description
Dornas et al. (2014: 810)	Outline a "*standard of excellence*" and a "*high standard of quality*" that adapt to changes within the environment.
Levin et al. (2017: 3; 5)	Discuss an appropriate "*level of creative performance*" and clients desire for a high level of "*creative excellence*".
Hand et al. (2014: 5)	Raise the concept of "*good practice*" and "*good professional practice*".
Bachnik et al. (2017: 1-2)	Services are required to be delivered to a "*predictable level*" of reliability, creative competency and satisfaction. They address that a "*key issue for companies is to ensure that they receive appropriate quality*" of service.
Levin et al. (2016: 275)	Suggest that clients should evaluate their "*agencies level of creative performance*" and question whether they are receiving "*good value*".
Jansen van Rensburg (2014: 8)	Clients assess their agents "*level of creativity*" and service outputs including "*integrity*", "*empathy*" and "*quality*".
Beachboard (2017: 198)	Suggests that there is "*best practice*" criteria.

Chen et al. (2017: 459)	A high "*level of trust*" must be achieved.
Hanssens and Pauwels (2016: 177)	A "*certain threshold*" must be achieved.
Ponder et al. (2016: 84)	There is a perceived level of "*relationalism*" needed for intimacy in client-agency relationships.
Pedeliento et al. (2017: 1087)	Clients should assess the "*level of competence and experience of their service providers*".
Reyes (2014: 1128)	Discuss value of "*best practices*".
Schauster and Neill (2017: 54)	Discuss the concept of "*best ethical practice*".

Table 16. Table defining positivist assumptions in literature.

Such objective language is rife within the extant client-agency literature. However, not one study or position piece addresses what an appropriate level or interpretation of "best" practice is, or should be. For example, extant studies such as Beachboard (2017) suggest that clients make assessments regarding the trustworthiness of their agent based upon the best practice qualities of the agency website. Within their study they collate multiple interpretations of best practice from a number of industry blogs and use this as a list of trust indicators. However, their list comes from non peer-reviewed websites, comprised of a number of industry blogs. Earlier findings regarding the propagation of misinformation across industry blogs is of pertinent value here. Interestingly, Bachnik et al. (2017) argues that determining levels of quality in advertising services are ambiguous but they do not suggest why.

Conversely, the current study finds that perceptions of "best practice" vary significantly from participant-to-participant. As such, this gives weight to the interpretivist assumptions of the current studies research methodology. Here, each view of best is epistemologically admissible in its own right. With this in mind, a study by Kolbjørnsrud (2017) advocates the use of peer review as a means of creating a community-led benchmark. However, as suggested by participants within the current study, if all stakeholders within a digital marketing network are implicated by an ever changing digital marketing ecosystem and the *IO,* who is to say that the right digital marketing information is being shared by said community?

Building upon the narrative from the thematic category of *Knowledge*, and assumptions of epistemic rationality, suggesting an agent makes a claim to being an expert, by who or what standard is an expert is context? Upon what benchmark is this claim based? Wider literature denotes that such constructs of digital marketing expertise are grounded upon evaluative criteria (Pedeliento et al., 2017; Masiello et al., 2014; Bachnik et al., 2017), echoing distinct similarities with signalling theory (Pedeliento et al., 2017). Key evaluative dimensions within client-agency trust studies consider "*the creative output; the account service quality; the value for money; the campaign performance; the usefulness; the client satisfaction with agency performance*" (Masiello et al., 2014: 5). Other criteria include a certain level of demonstrable creativity (Levin et al., 2017); positive campaign impact (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016); the accomplishment of budget and time oriented targets (Dziubaniuk, 2015); ensuring projects are completed to a sufficient quality (Levin et al., 2017); accountability for marketing outcomes (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al. 2019); and the effectiveness of communication (Ots and Nyilasy, 2015). However, clients amongst other stakeholders suggest that they are often unable to ascertain appropriate levels for each criterion. Fundamentally, if an agent wants to claim that they are an expert, creative, high-quality, value for money, competent, skilled etc. there is nothing to suggest otherwise. This poses a significant issue for the prospective clients pre-relationship research. Furthermore, if another agent, institution, client etc. wanted to challenge another agents claims, in order to stop them from promoting themselves as an expert, proficient or competent in SEO etc. from who's benchmark is such an assertion made? Extensive complexities and ambiguities within the IO-dominated ecosystem suggest that such benchmarks cannot be created, meaning arguments like this will likely exist in perpetuity. Sentiments of the *Wild West* are echoed here, which are explored later within the chapter.

The current study argues that the perceived impact of changes to the *IO* can quickly undermine weaker forms of digital marketing benchmarks such as "best practice" within the industry. For example, with every update to an online advertising platform's algorithm, what is considered to be "right" before the update, can quite quickly change. Benchmarks for best practice are then required to change with each update. However, if changes are not known, benchmarks for re-establishing "best" practice become much harder to define. With this in mind, certain digital marketers may be practicing arguably poor, techniques and tactics against their better knowledge. In such an event, would the agent be held liable for damage to a clients online presence and performance? Would this make the agent untrustworthy? This is an argument not considered within the wider client-agency trust literatures. Additionally, certain

agents may be aware that they are adopting arguably poor or out of date techniques. However, without a benchmark for poor practice, this would be increasingly hard to challenge and prove, as found within the current study.

Despite issues with a lack of recognised benchmarks, as identified within the current sub-section, notions of value assessments are still common place within a digital marketing context. The current sub-section reintroduces and challenges social exchange theory (Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014) in light of the current studies findings.

6.3.2 Challenges to Social Exchange Theory and Value Assessments

Within the context of the current study, client participants suggest that they struggle to assess the prospective value of their agencies digital marketing activity or evaluate their agencies performance without an appropriate benchmark. Indeed, case-by-case benchmarks are evident in participant accounts, however clients struggle to determine if such benchmarks are indicative of a wider industry standard for good practice. Therefore, clients struggle to evaluate if they are, or were, right to place their trust in their agent. i.e. *will I receive the best service? Did I receive the right service?* Nonetheless, Jansen Van Rensburg (2014) explore the importance of trust assessments within client-agency relationships under social exchange theory. Social exchange theory espouses that clients and agents enter into a client-agency relationship only when a personal cost-benefit assessment it undertaken. Here the client, and agent, make an assessment of the perceived risks and benefits of entering into a client-agency relationship. However, **participants within the current study argue that there are no appropriate benchmarks for benefits or risks in context, due to the conditions of the *IO*-dominated digital marketing ecosystem**. This can lead to great difficulty in making appropriate assessments and judgements of risk. Indeed, more discernible benefits and risks are available for assessment, such as the desire for a communicative and cooperative relationship or the avoidance of opportunism (Chen et al., 2017). However, the current study really seeks to make clear the unique risks relative to the digital marketing client-agency relationship, as a consequence of the *IO.*

Outside of the *IO,* the current study finds that there are few stakeholders with the right to say what good or bad practice is on behalf of a wider digital marketing community. As such, some participants allude to the view that best practice rests with the *IO,* who are believed

to have the most comprehensive overview of right or wrong digital marketing for performing well on their platforms. However, where some value the guidance provided by the *IO,* others raise doubt over the impartiality of the *IO's* views of "best". As such, the self-interest of said *IO* is questioned. With this in mind, a much needed theoretical discussion upon the influence of the *IO* is adopted within the following sub-section.

6.4   Internet Oligopoly

The previous two sub-sections, *Knowledge* and *Benchmark* present complex thematic categories relative to participant perceptions of client-agency trust. Here, participants share a general scepticism towards available digital marketing knowledge and evidence. Benchmarks for right or wrong digital marketing knowledge are also viewed with great scepticism by participants. This is because both thematic categories are linked by the perceived impact of an omnipotent and omnipresent *Internet Oligopoly (IO).* Within the current study, the *IO* is defined as the collection of large online media and advertising platforms, such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft. Key characteristics of the *IO* suggest that it is comprised of rapidly evolving, volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous algorithms. Such algorithms discern what content is featured and where, based upon a number of secretive quality indicators and measurements. As such, the success of the client-agency trust relationship is quite heavily dependent upon the ambiguous decisions made by such algorithms. Therefore, **the current study makes the claim that agents are placed at *intersection* between the demands of the client and the demands of the *IO,* making the *IO* incredibly important to client-agency trust outcomes.** However, this has been overlooked in relevant academic circles until now.

An interesting point to discuss here, is the concept of the *IO* and its place under the analytical question of *who*? Interestingly, there is argument to suggest that the *IO* should not be considered under *who?* but *what?* due to the inanimate nature of its advertising and media platforms. This debate is addressed in Kuzheleva-Sagen and Suchkova's (2015) study *Designing Trust in Internet Services.* They contend that "*it can be questionable whether it is appropriate to use the word "trust""* (*Kuzheleva-Sagen and Suchkovas, 2015: 384*), when orienting discussion towards internet systems. Under this view, there is a risk of anthropomorphising an abstract system too far. Broader arguments within the trust philosophy literature indicate that trust philosophers have spent much time distinguishing between trust

and reliance when considering trust in people versus trust in technology (Hollis, 1998; Holton, 1994). For example, if a person we trust fails us, we feel betrayed (trust), where as, if technology fails we may only feel disappointed (reliance). However, Kuzheleva-Sagen and Suchkova (2015) resolve that whilst the internet is an abstract system, trust may still be oriented towards the *IO* as there are human decision makers behind them. This raises interesting notions of accountability, discussed later in the current chapter.

Despite the significance of this finding to the current study, extant client-agency trust researchers rarely look beyond the client-agency dyadic. The popularity of agency theory and the notion of a principal-agent problem within the extant client-agency trust literatures indicates this (Mortimer and Laurie, 2017). However, a key problem with agency theory within a digital marketing client-agency context is that it is "*one of the leading economic theories on governance and offers an explanation for why governance problems arise and how to mitigate them*" (Kolbjørnsrud (2017: 144). Arguments made within the current study contend that the perceived volatility, unpredictability, turbulence, complexity and ambiguity of the IO, are beyond the locus of control of those seeking to govern the digital marketing ecosystem. Evidence of which is made clear within Chapter One, with the European Commissions antitrust accusations against Google.

Beyond the client-agency dyadic other notable stakeholders do exist within the literatures such as: *Intermediaries* (Pedeliento et al., 2017); *Procurement* (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019); *Educators and Trainers* (Chen et al., 2017); *Governing Bodies* (Schauster and Neill, 2017); *Lawyers* (Reyes, 2015); amongst many others. Such groups are also consulted throughout the current studies primary data collection. The literatures indicate that such groups hold significant value within the construction of client-agency trust, where they may reduce perceptions of knowledge asymmetry (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017), thus increasing perceptions of client-agency trust. However, the current study claims that the omnipotence and omniscience of the *IO* becomes something of an equaliser to stakeholder groups across the digital marketing ecosystem, where, in reality, **no one group has more authority than another to say what is right or wrong in a IO-dominated digital marketing context**. Again, this challenges current rationalist intervention from governments, regulatory bodies and trade associations introduced in Chapter One.

When considering the broader digital marketing ecosystem, the current study also makes the claim that the *IO* is indistinguishable from the broader environment in which clients and agents operate, thus reinforcing the view of an *IO*-dominated *Ecosystem*. The contextual and theoretical richness of the digital marketing ecosystem as a context and contributor to client-agency trust issues is addressed in greater detail within the following sub-section.

6.5 Digital Marketing Ecosystem

The current sub-section addresses perspectives of top-down influences upon client-agency trust relationships. The ecosystem is the environment or setting in which client-agency trust relationships exist (Sanchez and Fernandez-Cavia, 2018). The digital marketing ecosystem is perceived to be of great value to the client-agency relationship where the "*internet and its technological advances have significantly increased marketing opportunities and transformed relationships between companies and their customers*" (Seres-Huszarik et al., 2017: 69).

However, findings from the *Ecosystem* Thematic Category indicate that participants struggle to access, assess and understand claims to trustworthiness (*Knowledge* and evidence) due to the perceived influence of powerful environmental factors. Such factors include the velocity at which the industry is believed to move, as well as its perceived unpredictability, uncertainty, proliferation, intangibility and ambiguity. This complements a narrative within the extant digital marketing literatures where clients, agents and other stakeholders must be in a continual state of responding to changes in their environment (Dornas et al., 2014; Gijic et al., 2014). Participants within the current study make a direct link between the ecosystem and fallible knowledge bases, which may be quickly undermined by changes within the *Ecosystem*. This often leaves participants feeling vulnerable or open to new and high-risk situations. Adding additional complexity to this finding is the view that such changes are not always known to participants. As such, continuous cycles of change within the *Ecosystem* give rise to a perceived ignorance problem. The conceptual and theoretical impact of this upon explicit and tacit knowledge bases and benchmarks is made throughout the current chapter.

When cross comparing participant insights with extant literatures, specific theory discussing the digital marketing ecosystem relative to client-agency trust, is lacking. Instead, spatial characteristics and descriptors of the digital marketing landscape are adopted, though a direct link to perceived client-agency trust issues is never made. This presents a gap in theoretical

and conceptual development for the current study. For example, Keegan et al. (2017) argue that greater emphasis should be granted to the digital marketing context in future client-agency trust studies.

As such, it is necessary to unpack the complex ontology of the digital marketing ecosystem, and its impact upon epistemological constructs of knowledge and benchmarks. Key top-down challenges to the contemporary client-agency relationship, reflected in the extant literatures, include its perceived ambiguity, unpredictability, volatility and opacity. In line with this view are varying contemporary studies, which identify similar environmental characteristics, such as: velocity of change (Dornas et al., 2014); volatility (Turnbull, 2016); fragmentation (Ots and Nyilasy, 2015); opacity (Kuzheleva-Sagen, 2015); intangibility (Pedeliento et al. 2017); and a lack of control (Dziubaniuk, 2015). Contemporary authors give such elements cursory attention relative to client-agency trust issues, however. Key contextual factors of the digital marketing ecosystem identified within the current study relative to extant literature, are addressed below.

- The velocity of change considers the rate at which the industry is believed to move. This is an often adopted characteristic of the digital marketing industry within the extant literatures (Dornas et al. 2014). The velocity of change represents the rapid evolutions of digital marketing technologies, requiring the agency to keep up to date with monitoring of changes to the market environment. Within the context of the current study, participants talk about the feeling of being out of date with new technologies, media or changes within the digital marketing environment. More specifically, they depict knowledge structures within the digital marketing industry as being in a continual state of dissolution, development or transformation with each new technology, media channel or change to an IO's algorithm. However, this is only when changes within the ecosystem are known, which is not always the case as the current study finds. An inability to keep up to date within changes or the possibility of practicing out of date digital marketing techniques has ramifications upon perceptions of client-agency trust. **This is the first study to place notions of complex and black box algorithms and their impact, within the client-agency trust debate.**
- Fragmentation of media and resulting knowledge is often depicted within contemporary client-agency research (Gambetti et al., 2016; Mortimer and Laurie, 2017; Sanchez and Fernandez-Cavia, 2018; Turnbull, 2016). However, such literatures do not make a link

between such environmental characteristics and client-agency trust. Within the current study fragmentation considers the volume of new digital marketing techniques that emerge as a result of fragmentation within the ecosystem. For example, the *IO* may change their algorithm in order to penalise a certain type of content, which suggests that new digital marketing techniques are required to be learnt in place of those that are discouraged by the *IO*. **The current study is the first to make the perceived impact of algorithms more explicit upon fragmentation and its resulting strain upon client-agency trust.** Fragmentation increases the pressure and workload upon the agent with the power to thrust them back into a perceived state of ignorance with each industry change. This undermines perceptions of expertise and competency where existing bodies of knowledge are required to change in response to fragmentation within the digital marketing landscape. This interpretation echoes a similar sentiment shared by Dornas et al. (2014) who contend that rapid advances within digital marketing means that clients and agents must revise their business model and strategy. However, a link between this and client-agency trust is not made within their study.

- Participant interviews highlight a frustration with a lack of controls over the ability to practice as a digital marketing agent. This is considered within Dziubaniuk's (2015: 377) study of the search engine marketing industry where she finds that the industry is *"overloaded with different companies and the entry barriers to this market are very low"*. Dziubaniuk (2015) feigns to address why there are a lack of barriers and the implication a lack of barriers to entry has, however. The current study evolves this point, finding that changes to the digital marketing ecosystem are often ambiguous and hard to define. This means that controls, barriers to entry or regulatory action are increasingly hard where there is little agreement over how controls should be embedded within a continually shifting environment. This undermines the rationalist ideals discussed in Chapter One.

- Complementing insights from extant client-agency trust literatures, the perceived intangibility of the digital marketing industry and the services that comprise it, make it hard for participants to formulate appropriate judgements of digital marketing activity and output. Client participants in particular struggle to see the value of digital marketing activity if it is not generating a clear return on investment. Contemporary client-agency research highlight this as an issue within credence industries or *"knowledge intensive services"* (Pedeliento et al., 2017: 1082). Knowledge intensive services are described

as industries where output is "*encoded in an intangible output*" (Pedeliento et al., 2017: 1082). They require a significant level of interpretation, which often is not possible due to limits upon fallible knowledge and a lack of benchmarks.

Whilst many similarities between the current study and extant literature can be observed when discussing the digital marketing ecosystem, it is **the notion of an *IO-dominated* ecosystem that offers an original contribution to the client-agency debate**. This is elucidated further within the following sub-section.

6.5.1   *IO*-dominated digital marketing ecosystem

A unifying spatial characteristic of the client-agency trust issue, across the extant literature, is the influence of technology and media upon the practice of digital marketing (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2017; Moraru, 2017; Dornas, et al., 2014; Chen et al., 2017; Mola et al., 2017). However, this is to be anticipated due to the SLR methodology adopted throughout the literature review. The search strategy includes key search terms such as "*digital", "technology", "media", "platforms*" and "*algorithms*" (further details in appendix 2). A clear distinction between digital marketing and more traditional conceptualisations of marketing is also made in Chapter One. Findings from the extant literature, suggest that advances in technology make the agents role more challenging, where attempts to keep up with technological changes are difficult (Dornas et al., 2014; Royle and Laing, 2014). Here, the argument is that client-agency trust may be impaired where more pressure is placed upon the agency to deliver, despite operating within an increasingly uncertain and complex setting (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016; Gijic et al., 2014; Reyes, 2015; Sanchez and Fernandez-Cavia, 2018). The current sub-section complements this view but makes a more compelling argument for the way in which **the *IO* is perceived to propagate ambiguity, uncertainty, complexity and volatility within the digital marketing ecosystem and the theoretical implications this has upon client-agency trust.** The current study finds that changes to the digital marketing ecosystem, driven by changes to an IO's algorithm have the power to undermine agent performance, knowledge and benchmarks; all perceived to be critical to the construction of client-agency trust in digital marketing contexts. However, of most original significance is the argument that a clear link between the *IO* and its impact upon the digital marketing ecosystem and client-agency relationship, is incredibly difficult to establish, if it can be established at all. Significant changes to the *IO* may be unknown, unknowable or entirely fictitious, depending

upon who is making such a claim. As such, the three core issues that derive from notions of the IO-dominated ecosystem, are:

1) **The significant risk of unconscious versus conscious ignorance to potential changes to the IO-dominated ecosystem;**

2) **The significant risk of unconscious versus conscious agent opportunism, where ambiguities within the IO-dominated ecosystem may be leveraged;**

3) **The distinct inability to prove changes to an IO-dominated ecosystem *and* its impact upon performance outcomes, with any great confidence.**

Within Professor Frank Pasquales (2015: 65) book, *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms that Control Money and Information,* he notes an "*endless cat and mouse game*" between black box platforms, such as search engines, and the end content provider. In this instance the content provider is the agent. Within the current study, participants believe that they are in a continual state of attempting to keep up with the *IO* and their powerful algorithms. Common questions consider *whether or not a change to an algorithm has occurred? What the change to an algorithm could be? What the impact of the algorithm change is?* As such, many of the participant accounts suggest that they are in a continually reactive state, relative to possible *IO* changes to the digital marketing ecosystem.

Such a perspective strikes deep similarities with more traditional views of technological determinism, when reviewing literatures beyond those identified within the SLR. A socioeconomic theory at heart, technological determinism espouses that changes to technology have the power to change societal culture and social values (Kline, 2015). The notion of determinism suggests a primary causative link between technology and social change, unlike social determinism, which influences changes to technology (Barnes, 2000). For example, participants often discuss the way in which they are required to make changes to their marketing strategy, tactics and KPIs, in light of perceived changes to the *IO* and their digital marketing ecosystem. This puts strain upon the client-agency relationship where changes may be costly or without appropriate grounding.

However, within the broader literature, notions of determinism are criticised for being overly reductionist and linear (Paragas and Lin, 2014), where a link between input A and output B is overly simplistic. The current study, along with wider client-agency trust literatures, indicate that there are a multitude of possibilities that may contribute to output B. As such, a more complex interpretation of the impact of the *IO* highlights how the *perceived* influence of the *IO* upon the digital marketing ecosystem may threaten client-agency trust, whether a causative link between the IO and client-agency outcomes is established or not. Instead, proving an unpredictable and unknown set of effects, *potentially* introduced by the *IO* within the client-agency relationship, indicates that *actual* determinism is not core to the client-agency trust issue. Rather, a core challenge to client-agency trust is the possible impact that *perceived* influence may have. In other words, whether the *IO* has made a change to their ecosystem or not, the likelihood or threat is always there. Ambiguities within the digital marketing ecosystem may then be consciously or unconsciously blamed for undesirable digital marketing outcomes.

Consider the following scenario: it is easier for an agent to prove that there has indeed been a change to the *IO* so that any weaknesses or anomalies in performance data can be rationalised. As such, more pragmatic decision making can ensue and the client can see that there has indeed been a change made by the *IO*. However, this is suggesting that the agent does not consciously take advantage of actual industry updates in order to explain their weak performance. For example, a known industry update may be consciously leveraged by an agent should they be underperforming. Participants within the current study contend that this is a distinct possibility and a conscious form of opportunism. However, because *IO* changes to the digital marketing ecosystem cannot always be proven or known, further problematic scenarios occur as outlined below. Each scenario contributes significant challenges to current conceptions of client-agency trust in *IO*-dominated digital marketing ecosystems:

- Knowing that an IO has made a change and knowing its impact. i.e. *the agency was performing but there is clear evidence that an IO update has impaired performance. The client must trust that the agent is not consciously taking advantage of such an update.*
- Knowing that the IO has made a change, however, the agency consciously leverages this in order to explain unrelated weaknesses in performance data *i.e. the agency was already underperforming but the agency blames weak performance on an IO update.*

- Knowing that the IO has made a change, however, the agency unconsciously leverages this in order to explain unrelated weaknesses in performance data i.e. *the agency was already underperforming for other reasons but the agency honestly believes that weak performance is due to an IO update.*

- Not knowing if an IO has made a change and not knowing its impact i.e. *the agent is completely unaware that there has been an IO update with wider implications upon their performance.*

- Not knowing if an IO has made a change, however, the agency consciously leverages this in order to explain weaknesses in data. *i.e. the agency leverages IO ambiguities in order to cover-up their own weak performance.*

- Not knowing if an IO has made a change, however, the agency genuinely believes it has had some impact upon weaknesses in data. *i.e. the agency truly believes that some unknown IO update has impaired their performance, where it could be something else.*

- Knowing nothing has happened to the IO, however, the agency blames it for poor performance. *i.e. the agency consciously fabricates an IO change in order to cover their poor performance.*

Such scenarios suggest a very real threat of opportunism, whether or not this is conscious or unconscious behaviour of the agent. Opportunistic behaviours are addressed within Chowdhury et al's (2016) study of the dark side of digital marketing agencies. Here they suggest that opportunism "*refers to actions which involve self-interest*" (Chowdhury et al., 2016: 101). Their study suggests that opportunism stems from power asymmetries between the client and agent where gaps in understanding can be taken advantage of. This is also a view shared by Kolbjørnsrud (2017). Their study depicts a digital marketing industry with intentionally malicious actors who willingly take advantage of gaps within data. However, of original value to the debate are the current studies findings that agents may consciously *and* unconsciously leverage perceivably uncontrollable changes and ambiguities within the *IO*-dominated ecosystem, where changes may or may not have occurred. This may result in significant or weak-form opportunism. As such, constraints upon client-trust are clear where the client may not trust their agencies claims of changes to the *IO*. However, the burden is then placed upon the client in order to prove or disprove the agencies claim, which is problematic in black box digital marketing ecosystems.

As such, arguments turn to questions over empiricism and notions of the causal impact of the *IO*. In other words, how does one *prove* the impact of the IO? This indicates an attribution problem yet to be addressed within extant client-agency literature. The following sub-section addresses this in greater detail.

6.6 Attribution

A key finding within the current study considers significant client-agency trust issues under participant perceptions of an *Attribution* constraint. *Attribution* comprises the participants ability to confidently determine causal links between digital marketing activity and digital marketing performance data (Patti et al., 2017). Interestingly, academic literature exploring attribution problems within the client-agency digital marketing context is limited. This is an interesting gap where agents are being placed under more pressure to justify their value to the client by demonstrating how their work has generated the desired impact for the client (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al., 2019; Gambetti et al., 2016; Dziubaniuk, 2015). Therefore, it is most surprising that attribution models are significantly overlooked within the academic client-agency literatures. Only two out of forty client-agency trust studies within the SLR, address attribution or concepts relating to cause and effect, where both are given cursory attention.

Patti et al. (2017: 352) define attribution as "*the attribution of 'clicks' to sales*". They go on to note the value of attribution in digital marketing evaluation through the advent of more sophisticated digital marketing tracking and analysis software. It is believed that the very advent of such tracking software, has increased demand for evidence and greater attention to epistemic trust in digital marketing contexts (Patti et al., 2017). In other words, the dependence upon digital marketing analytics software has introduced a dependence upon evidence gathering behaviours. Because of this, clients are demanding greater transparency over cause and effect between digital marketing activity and output, in order to ascertain whether or not it was right to place their trust within their agent. For example, has the agent managed to achieve an appropriate return on investment on behalf of the client? Was it specifically their digital marketing activity that generated this? Conversely, has the agent failed to generate a return on investment? Was it the agents digital marketing activity or something else?

Echoing this sentiment within the extant literatures, Hanssens and Pauwels (2016: 173) argue that calculating return on investment *"remains an elusive goal for most companies, which are*

struggling to integrate big and small data and marketing analytics into their marketing decision and operations". Hanssens and Pauwels (2016) suggest that more attention to appropriate objective setting; integration of data across various platforms and better communication of value is a remedy to digital marketing data issues. This is a similar view shared by Levin et al. (2017), where they believe that client-agency relationships are impacted by the agents inability to communicate their impact to the client. Other reasons for weak performance outcomes are touched upon within the literatures. More generally, contemporary authors suggest there is a data issue, where a lack of understanding regarding appropriate metrics and methodologies behind analysis of performance metrics is common (Hand et al., 2014; Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016; Keegan et al., 2017; Moraru, 2017; O'Connor et al., 2016; Vercic et al., 2018). Indeed, digital marketing data and analytics are more accessible and trackable than ever before within a digital marketing context (Hanssens and Pauwels, 2016). However, understanding digital marketing data and metrics has proven to be a significant challenge to agents, clients and other stakeholders within the current study. This is a point touched upon by Levin et. al (2017: 4) who argue that issues with ambiguous success metrics and a lack of readily assessable data, can make it *unlikely that a project will be absolutely successful*" (Levin et al., 2017: 4). Similarly, Royle and Laing (2014) note the data deluge facing contemporary digital marketers.

However, the current study finds that powerful forces, within the IO-dominated digital marketing ecosystem can undermine the agents ability to deliver against its obligations, if they were ever correct to begin with. Likewise, the perceived presence of such forces makes it increasingly difficult to ascertain cause and effect between digital marketing activity and outcomes with any great confidence. With this, and wider findings from the thesis, in mind, three key attribution issues emerge:

1) Trust Claims: misattributed data may be used to inform knowledge bases and benchmarks, often used in the formation of expectations (trust claims and signals);

2) Gaps in Performance Data: the perceived presence of an IO has the potential to impair the attribution of digital marketing activity to digital marketing performance data, with wider ramifications upon evaluation;

3) Challenging agency claims: conditions affecting the ability to attribute digital marketing activity to digital marketing performance makes it hard for the client to challenge their agent should they be unhappy with weak performance data or suspect foul play.

Each attribution issues raises questions over the epistemically appropriate nature of proof and evidence within a digital marketing context (Dougherty, 2014), especially where a burden of proof is placed upon the client. Additionally, significant temporal issues are raised when discussing implications for expectation setting and evaluation. Such scenarios contribute to a perception and accountability gap. This is given particular significance within the following sub-section.

6.7 Perception Gap

Much like the current study, the notion of a gap between expectation setting and evaluation is noted across primary and secondary data. Vercic et al. (2018: 158) identify an "*expectation gap",* representing a gap between expectation and evaluation. Similarly, researchers such as Hanssens and Pauwels (2016: 173) argue:

> *"Marketing is at a crossroads. Managers are frustrated by the gap between the promise and the practice of effect measurement, big data, and online/offline integration"*

Within the wider literatures, expectations comprise the client's expectation of their agency i.e. *are they knowledgeable? Are they digital marketing experts*? Additionally, expectation setting comprises a multitude of possible digital marketing objectives including but not limited to the anticipation of a return on investment, increased awareness of a clients brand online, increased ranking of a website in search engine results pages etc. (Laurie and Mortimer, 2019). The process of expectation setting is more poignant and formal during the beginning stages of the client-agency relationship (Turnbull, 2016). However, the client also frequently enters into a continuous process of expectation setting and evaluation throughout the duration of the relationship.

Because of this, the earlier stages of the client-agency relationship are given significant attention within the extant literature (Turnbull, 2016; Seres-Huszarik et al. 2017). Patti et al. (2017: 352) adopt Belch and Belch's (2015: 221) view that "*many companies have difficulty with the most critical step in the promotional planning process – setting realistic objectives*". This is a view complemented within the current study, which suggests that many agents are uncomfortable committing to key performance indicators or targets in uncertain environments with unpredictable futures. Pedeliento et al. (2017) find that significant information asymmetry between clients and agents puts the client at a great disadvantage when coming to define what they want from the service. The current study echoes this issue where participants argue that the rationality of setting expectations is challenging in knowledge asymmetric environments, particularly those dominated by an *IO*.

With this in mind, notions of evaluation are also important when determining whether or not an agency has fulfilled their expectations and the client was right to place their trust within their agent. Levin et al. (2016) espouse that trust is actually the by-product of evaluative constructs based upon empirical evidence, such as performance data. This indicates how well the service is delivered against expectations set. Therefore, their findings identify that trust is developed through evaluation. However, as can be ascertained from the current studies empirical data, participants, both clients and agents have great difficulty in evaluating performance and competence without trusted data (due to issues with attribution), or a lack of appropriate benchmarks.

Extant literatures also argue that appropriate evaluation can only be achieved through the adoption of "*correct evaluation*" criteria (Bachnik et al., 2017: 3). However, the notion of "correct" evaluation is not addressed. Similar trends are also seen across business literature such as Dornas et al.'s (2014) study on *The Relationship between Trust, Value and Loyalty in the Internet Era*. Their study identifies that clients evaluate the perceived quality of an agent based upon "*correct values*" (Dornas et al., 2014: 804) pertaining to dimensions of service quality such as reliability, accessibility and credibility. However, as identified within the benchmark thematic category, many are unable to identify correct evaluative criteria, where notions of "correct" are easily undermined.

Further to this, Hanssens and Pauwels (2016) study finds that performance data outcomes are hard to evaluate meaning agency contributions are often viewed with scepticism. They

recommend that such concerns can be reconciled through better attribution modelling. However, the current study challenges this recommendation, noting the key challenges of attribution. Hanssens and Pauwels (2016) touch upon the impact an inability to evaluate outcomes has upon accountability. However, they suggest that contemporary client-agency research upon attribution and accountability is lacking. Such a gap is addressed within the following sub-section.

6.7.1 Accountability Gap

An accountability gap between expectations and evaluation indicates a much wider problem yet to be sufficiently addressed within the extant client-agency literatures. Indeed, Laurie and Mortimer (2019) address accountability for performance outcomes and fair payment structures. Financial accountability is also considered to be important by Hanssens and Pauwels (2016) and Levin et al. (2016). Within the current study, an accountability for return on investment is most important to participants, also. In other words, proving that the agencies digital marketing activity has resulted in a significant return on the investment to the client, is central to evaluating trust relationships.

Whilst being a small feature of the extant client-agency debate, barriers to accountability are given some cursory consideration by some contemporary authors. For example, Hanssens and Pauwels (2016) note that variance away from what was originally planned (expectation), raises questions over accountability. They argue that incorrect market assumptions are to blame thus giving credence to the importance of expectation setting in assigning accountability. However, they do not discuss where incorrect marketing assumptions derive from. Further to this, contemporary marketing researchers such as Quinn et al. (2016: 29) suggest that *"Accountability for marketing strategy decision-making is also more ambiguous, often falling outside of the sole control of senior marketers."* A lack of controls is pertinent to the current studies findings, however, consideration of the contributing factors to a lack of control is not made within their study. The current study goes some way to addressing this gap by illustrating the uncontrollable nature of the *IO*-dominated ecosystem and its impact upon accountability measures. This also raises questions over whether or not the *IO* have some accountability to its users when its is believed that *IO* changes have negatively impacted performance outcomes. For example, when referring back to chapter one, an eight-year law suit between Foundem and

Google suggests that attempts to gain accountability from Google are currently being made. However, attempts to gain any insight from Google have been thwarted thus far.

Interestingly, accountability within the client-agency trust debate has only become a prevalent theme as of 2019. In Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al.'s (2019) study, *The unobserved signaling ability of marketing accountability: can suppliers' marketing accountability enhance business customers' value perceptions?,* they raise the importance of accountability and its impact upon the construction of trust perceptions. Their study examines whether accountability of an agency impacts the clients perceived value of their agency. Invariably, the answer is yes. However, most importantly, they argue that effective accountability measures can only be undertaken when appropriate understanding of *measurement* and *impact* is established. They borrow Verhoef and Leeflangs (2009: 20) definition of marketing accountability, which describes the agencies *"capability to link marketing strategies and actions to financial performance measures"*. This is a shared belief within the current studies findings, which places great emphasis upon attribution. However, they feign to consider key constraints upon the ability to demonstrate impact and the ability to measure this. **The current study finds that *attribution* problems derived from an *IO*-dominated ecosystem make it increasingly challenging for clients to assign accountabilities for outcomes, therefore impairing client-agency trust.**

Making this notion more complex, is the view that it is often hard to prove whether it is the agencies fault for a less than desirable output where complexities within the IO-dominated *ecosystem* are perceived to exist. For example, the current study finds that clients struggle to determine if gaps in attribution are consciously being taken advantage of by the agent i.e. *has poor practice been concealed behind ambiguities within the data?,* or *has an agent taken credit for an inexplicable peak in data?*

Similarities are found within Reyes (2015) position piece of *The Legal Obligations of Search Engine Optimisation Firms.* Reyes (2015: 1126) stipulates that clients are often unable to determine if they have been treated unfairly, where they are required to have knowledge and evidence of *"falsity or ignorance of its truth"*. In other words, the client must be able to prove a perceivably poor performance is indeed the agencies fault, but also prove that this derives from a deliberately poor service delivered by the agency. Reyes (2015) argument for legal reform for the digital marketing industry is also made upon assumptions that clear understanding of relative unethical and ethical practice exists, which is not currently the case

within the digital marketing context. Reyes (2015) does not make clear who's benchmark claims of ethical and unethical practice are made. Previous categories within the current study dispel the usefulness of epistemically-rationalist assumptions of truth, evidence and proof within a digital marketing context (*Knowledge* thematic category). Having knowledge of falsity and truth is found to be problematic within digital marketing black box systems dominated by the *IO*. Additionally, without "appropriate" benchmarks, there is argument to suggest that the client is not in a position to challenge their agency where a perceivably "poor" digital marketing service is received. For example, an agent could recommend using only paid link building techniques for their search engine optimisation clients. Whilst this is not advisable, it is not unlawful. As such, opportunities for recourse and recompose diminish, with wider repercussions upon perceptions of client-agency trust.

Notions of a lawless digital marketing landscape mirror the symbolism of the *Wild West* metaphor introduced by a number of participants within the current study. However, what is most interesting about the Wild West is the way in which it is believed to have ended. In the late 1800s the first transcontinental railroad was developed, which provided a train route across the United States for the very first time in American history (Bridge, 2019). The transcontinental rail road brought industrial order to the west with its standardisation of time zones and railroad rulebooks for 377 railroad companies across the US (United States Department of Labour, 1890). The westward expansion of the railroad also brought more development to the west, making it less isolated (Transcontinental Railroad, 2019). Ultimately, new bureaucratic operating procedures of the rail companies and the introduction of standard time zones, transformed and tamed the landscape of the Wild West, reducing its perceived unpredictability and uncontrollability. Translating this to current day, Chapter One indicates attempts for similar bureaucratic rationalism through the introduction of standardised rules, contract frameworks and codes. However, it took the transcontinental rail to introduce such standardisation and tame the frontier. It could therefore be argued that, until new innovation or more radical digital marketing laws are introduced, with the power topple the dominance of *IOs* or shed light upon their black box *ecosystems*, challenges to understanding digital marketing *knowledge, benchmarks* and *attribution* will prevail. As such, the possibility of a new fiduciary class of trust is limited, where obfuscation of *accountability* will continue to erode perceptions of client-agency trust.

6.8   Summary

A more radical perspective of knowledge asymmetry emerges, which challenges currently held assumptions within the field-related literatures. Findings and discussion indicate that the latent impact of the *IO* and unknown changes to their digital marketing *Ecosystem* can make it increasingly difficult to *attribute* digital marketing performance to planned digital marketing activity. This is perceived to have wider implications for establishing *benchmarks* for "best" practice with wider ramifications upon evidence and rationalist trust mechanisms. As such, the current chapter raises umbrage with the quality of expert *knowledge*, where asymmetries and ignorance is perceived to be propagated by an *Internet Oligopoly (IO)*. The introduction of the IO upon the client-agency relationship challenges relational assumptions of the client-agency trust issue within a digital marketing setting. Additionally, misattribution and potentially fallible evidence impairs the ability to assign *accountability* for "poor" practice throughout the client-agency relationship. An inability to *evaluate* outcomes creates a particularly difficult situation where the opportunity for relative recourse or recompose is limited. Often changes within the digital marketing ecosystem are unknown or hard to prove, giving rise to an issue of unconscious and conscious opportunism. Such findings comprise new and contemporary client-agency trust issues facing the digital marketing client-agency relationship, yet to be considered within the literatures.

7 Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter allowed for the current studies findings to be situated against a number of theories and concepts within the extant research. Debate within the literatures was complemented and challenged. However, insights regarding the impact of an *IO,* and their *IO-*dominated *ecosystem* upon the client-agency trust relationship, allowed for a novel contribution to current debate and field related literatures. Such findings highlighted gaps within extant theories commonly adopted to address client-agency trust issues. In doing so, prevalent rationalist assumptions of client-agency trust were challenged. Therefore, the purpose of the conclusion chapter is to bring together and summarise key conceptual insights and theoretical findings examined throughout the current study, against its overall aim and research questions. In doing so, the significance of the original contributions to knowledge, derived from current study can be established.

In order to demonstrate how the thesis advances and contributes to knowledge within the field, the current chapter is structured as such: the current studies research problem is revisited, followed by a holistic summary of the entire study; contributions to knowledge are established; practical implications for digital marketing clients and agents, as well as wider stakeholder audiences are made; recommendations for further research are made; the overall limitations of the current study are reflected upon; finally, an overarching conclusion is provided, bringing an end to the thesis.

7.2 Revisiting the Research Problem

Following the researchers time working within the digital marketing industry, client-agency trust issues were observed directly. However, at the time of commencing with the current study in 2015, response within popular industry and academic literatures was limited, despite a resurgence of interest from regulatory bodies and trade associations over 2016. Here, relevant institutions and scholars placed great emphasis upon rationalist trust-building mechanisms. However, such approaches did little to improve perceptions of client-agency trust, where academic papers highlighted a worsening client-agency trust problem. Significant gaps were identified within the literatures, namely: a dependency upon more traditional assumptions of client-agency trust despite rapid advances within contemporary digital marketing settings; a dominant assumption that client-agency trust issues are relational, between the client and agent;

a dependency upon rationalist client-agency trust mechanisms; an empirical imbalance in favour of agent perspectives over a wider client and multi-stakeholder view; a solution-focussed mentality to client-agency trust issues, in place of understanding *why?* client-agency trust issues are perceived to exist in the first instance. Such assumptions were considered to be outmoded, warranting further research within the current study, the entirety of which is summarised within the following sub-section.

7.3 Holistic Summary of the Thesis

The current study aimed to explore contemporary challenges to the client-agency trust relationship within the digital marketing industry within the UK. In doing so, the current study sought to challenge fundamental assumptions of client-agency trust within dominant discourse and generate client-agency trust theory suitable for digital marketing contexts.

Chapter One established a digital marketing industry in crisis, with a significant client-agency trust problem. A systematic literature review within Chapter Two, would indicate issues with an apparent knowledge asymmetry between clients and agents and its wider ramifications upon the client's ability to assess value and construct trust judgements (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar, 2015). Greater cooperation, commitment, collaboration, communication and knowledge sharing were advocated, as a result. Specific epistemic theories were favoured, namely Signalling Theory (Pedeliento et al., 2017) and Knowledge sharing theory (Mola et al., 2017), both underpinned by rationalist ideals. Here, it was assumed that client-agency trust was built through the act of sharing pertinent information and evidence of claims to trust. More calculative theories such as social-exchange theory were also prevalent within the debate (Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014). Here, clients would make an appropriate value assessment of their prospective agencies perceived trustworthiness relative to their expected return on investment from available evaluative criteria. As such, trust assessments were deemed to be heavily grounded in *evidentialism* and *epistemic rationality*. In other words, in order for *A to trust B, B must prove they can X. X* comprised claims to success, expertise, professionalism, competency, amongst many other trust signals.

In order to explore the client-agency trust phenomenon, an interpretivist paradigm was adopted, following careful deliberation of alternatives in Chapter Three, Methodology. Inductive thematic analysis of multi-stakeholder in-depth interviews were considered to be the most

appropriate in order to examine the research phenomenon. Chapter Four, Implementation, offered detail of the thirty-two digital marketing participants, comprising representatives from client, agent, trainer, procurement, trade association, regulatory, legal and recruitment groups. They were purposively sampled for the current study. Key nuances of the online interview setting were explored in conjunction with a detailed overview of inductive thematic analysis and coding.

Within Chapter Five, findings from the current study were synthesised into key thematic categories of *Knowledge, Benchmarks, Internet Oligopoly, Ecosystem, Attribution* and *Accountability Gap*. Efforts to integrate thematic categories based upon their interpreted interrelationships, created a conceptual *BAAKE* framework, which would challenge dominant in-house assumptions within the extant literatures and visualise client-agency trust issues along the client-agency lifecycle (Chapter Six). This would comprise the current studies original contribution to knowledge, outlined in greater detail within the following sub-section.

7.4   Original Contributions

Walsham (2006) suggests that a thesis conclusion should answer how a study claims to make an original contribution to knowledge and advance understanding of field related theory, practice and audiences. Therefore, the following sub-sections are structured as such: original contribution to knowledge (research questions revisited); original contribution to practice; original contribution to audiences.

7.4.1   Contributions to Knowledge

Under Nicholson et al.'s (2018) notion of a revelatory contribution, the current study claimed to make a revelatory contribution to the body of marketing knowledge concerning client-agency trust. The current study examined the philosophical traditions of trust, finding dominant discourse within contemporary client-agency research drew heavily upon *rationalist* and *relational* assumptions of client-agency trust. However, through enhanced understanding of the digital marketing domain, currently accepted mechanisms for client-agency trust and the fundamental assumptions that support them were challenged (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011).

Empirical evidence from the current study, would challenge the value of knowledge sharing theory (Mola et al., 2017), signalling theory (Pedeliento et al., 2017) and social exchange

theory (Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014). **As such, in-house assumptions of rationalism, such as epistemic rationality, were challenged in dominant discourse** (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011).

Attention was redirected towards a **volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous digital marketing *ecosystem*, dominated by *an Internet Oligopoly (IO),* and its influence upon the traditional client-agency trust dyadic**. It was conceptualised that an omnipotent and omnipresent *IO*, had the power to undermine the value of knowledge and knowledge assessments in trust exchanges between the client and agent. The influence of the *IO* was further conceptualised through the agents inability to attribute digital marketing activity to performance outcomes and the impact this had upon the construction of evidence and benchmarks. Such evidence and benchmarks could be used within the construction of client-agency trust throughout key stages of the client-agency lifecycle. By considering the contextually rich spatial and temporal aspect of the research phenomenon, new aspects of the client-agency trust debate were emphasised.

Significant issues within the early stages of a client-agency relationship were identified*,* where both clients and agents were unable to construct appropriate value assessments or expectations based upon untrustworthy *knowledge* bases. Linkages to an inability to evaluate the outcomes of client-agency trust relationships within its later stages were also made. Unpredictable and unknown top-down changes made by the *IO* to their IO dominated *ecosystem* could significantly impair the ability to *attribute* performance data to digital marketing activity. Misattributed performance data and external *IO* influences, could quickly cast doubt over knowledge bases, resulting in weak-form evidence used for client-agency trust assessments. A notable scenario emerged where undesirable or unexpected digital marketing outputs and effects could be blamed upon the influence of the *IO,* with the client, amongst other stakeholders, having little ability to prove otherwise. A key challenge was proving the influence of the *IO* due to the latent ambiguity of the *IO* upon the digital marketing *ecosystem.* Likewise, it was often unknown whether an agent had consciously and intentionally placed blame upon an external influence or not. A threat of conscious and unconscious ignorance and opportunism emerged. Such scenarios made it difficult to assign *accountability* for perceivably poor practice, particularly where there was a discernible lack of *benchmarks* for quality of output within the digital marketing industry. In particular, an examination of accountability within the digital marketing client-agency setting, indicated that: 1) accountability was

especially overlooked within the contemporary client-agency trust debate; 2) that accountability was often not possible where misattribution, weak-form knowledge and benchmarks existed in an *IO*-dominated ecosystem. This would prove to be a significant issue throughout the client-agency relationship, where clients often felt like they were without leverage to challenge their agency should they be unhappy with their agencies performance. A concern for appropriate and fair recompense was expressed. **This was an original narrative yet to be considered within the extant field.** Original claims from the current study are compounded in an original conceptual BAAKE framework in Figure 20.
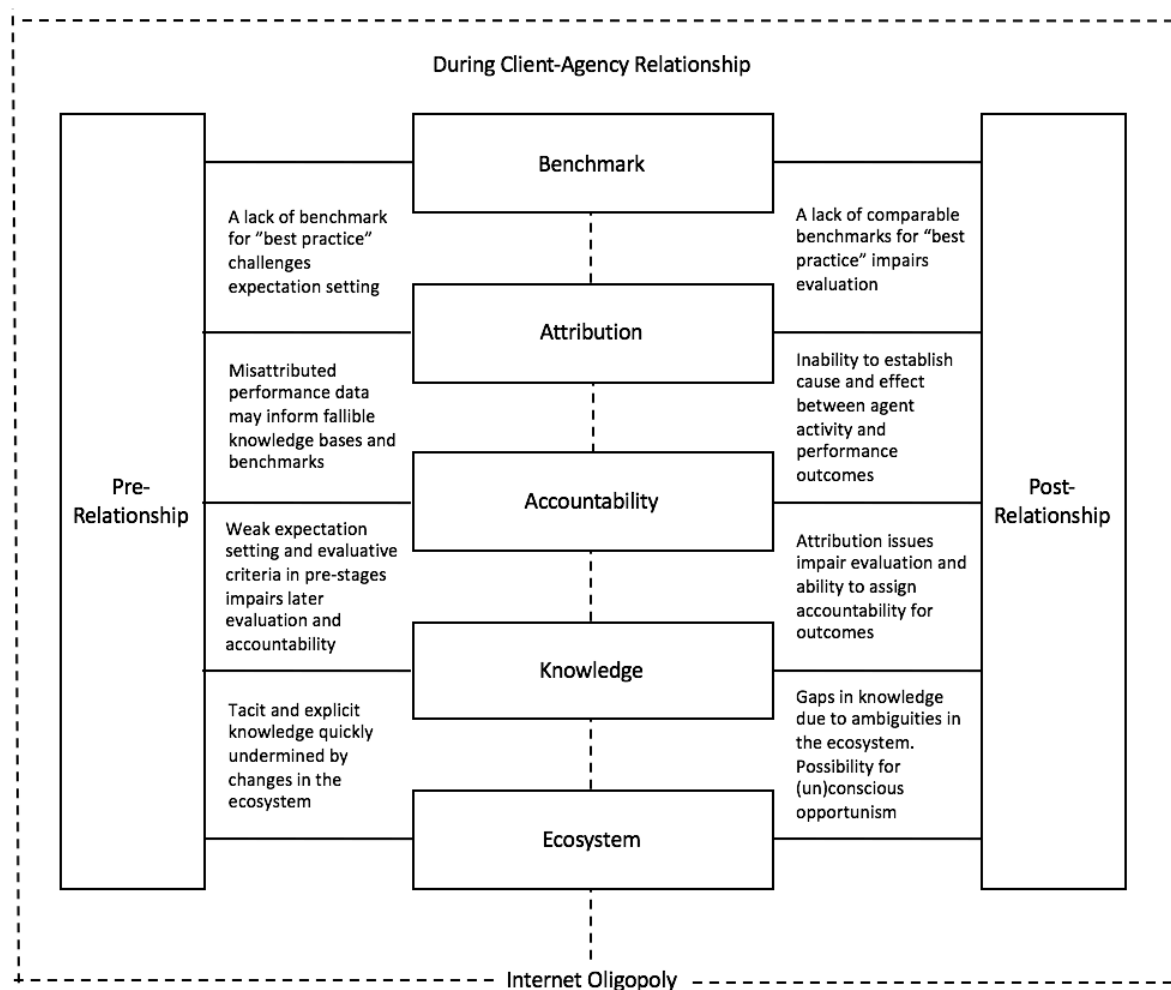
Figure 20. BAAKE Framework

7.4.2   Revisiting the Research Questions

Attempts to remain close to the current studies research questions were made throughout the thesis. They gave some structure to certain chapters as well as the inductive thematic coding

process, without limiting or skewing the thematic categories that emerged under each research question.

In order to make an original contribution to knowledge, the current study first asked: *How are existing in-house client-agency trust assumptions challenged?* In following Alvesson and Sandbergs (2011) problematisation strategy, a series of in-house assumptions emerged. Dominant discourse suggested that client-agency trust derives from knowledge-asymmetry between the client, which may be rectified through greater knowledge exchange and knowledge sharing. This was explained this under the multiple lenses of knowledge and social exchange theories (Mola et al., 2017; Jansen Van Rensburg 2014) as well as signalling theory (Pedeliento et al. 2017). Rarely was any consideration granted to the interrelationships between the digital marketing context and the in-house assumptions behind such theories. As such, the current study aimed to explore the following: *In what ways has the changing nature of the digital marketing landscape influenced perceptions of client-agency mistrust*? In order to address this question, the current study aimed to explore the source of digital marketing client-agency mistrust. Thus, the over arching research question became: **Why is there a perceived lack of digital-marketing client-agency trust?,** explored through the following research questions:

- *What are the key challenges to digital marketing client-agency trust?*
- *Who is contributing to the challenges to digital marketing client-agency trust?*
- *What are the contextual challenges to digital marketing client-agency trust?*

In doing so, a number of novel insights could be made relative to each question. This is reflected in Table 17, which highlights the studies research questions against existing assumptions within the literature and the current studies original findings.

Research Question	Thematic Category	Assumptions within the extant literatures	Claims to Contribution/Challenge to Dominant Assumptions
What are the key challenges to digital marketing client-agency trust?	Knowledge	Two key arguments within the extant client-agency trust literatures suggest that client-agency mistrust is derived from: 1) Perceptions of knowledge asymmetry between the client-agent (Chen et al., 2017) and issues with knowledge exchange (Lessard and Okakwu, 2016). 2) Challenges to trust assessments (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar, 2015) remediable through best practice evaluative criteria (Beachboard, 2017). Rationalist and evidentialist assumptions of client-agency trust are dominant in discourse.	The current study challenges conceptualisations of knowledge asymmetry between the client and agent, claiming that knowledge asymmetries are propagated by an Internet Oligopoly (comprised of online ad platforms such as Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Microsoft). As such, knowledge asymmetry is evident between the client-agent and IO. The current study also claims that asymmetries propagated by the IO impair the ability to attribute digital marketing activity with performance data. Potentially misattributed data may the be used to inform evaluative criteria used in trust assessments. Sharing of misattributed evidence, against the better knowledge of stakeholders, may perpetuate client-agency trust issues further. A paradox emerges where participants are unconscious to this, introducing an ignorance problem. This challenges the value of signalling theory (Pedeliento et al., 2017), knowledge sharing theory (Mola et al., 2017) and social exchange theory (Jansen Van Rensburg, 2014) underpinned by rationalist and evidentialist assumptions.

	Benchmark	Assumes there is "best practice" (Beachboard, 2017). Assumes trust may be calculated via subjective and objective probability assessments and judgements (Dornas et al., 2014), from available evaluative criteria. Discusses the importance of making rational and calculative assessments of anothers claims to being trustworthy (Gambetta, 2000; Barbalet, 2005). Epistemically rationalist assumptions are inherent in this belief.	The current study claims that issues with misattribution and the IO-dominated ecosystem, undermine objective notions of "right" and "wrong" i.e. best practice. Because of this there is nothing from which, to compare claims to trust. i.e. an agent might claim to be an expert and follow best practice digital marketing but by what/who's benchmark are they comparing themselves? In a IO-dominated digital marketing ecosystem, who has the right to say they are an expert? Similarly, where there are no perceivable benchmarks for "good" or "bad" practice in digital marketing, how may a client evaluate whether or not they have received an appropriate digital marketing service from their agent? How do they know they are consulting the best advice? How can they identify "good" versus "poor" performance if such measures are vague? Epistemically rationalist assumptions are challenged in a digital marketing context.

	Attribution	Attribution is important to assigning accountabilities in a digital marketing context. This considers responsibility for return on investment (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al., 2019).	Constraints upon attribution, may be influenced by the IO. Misattributed data may be propagated by stakeholders within the digital marketing industry. Such information may inform trust signals and resulting trust judgements. The IO's constraint upon attribution makes it difficult to ascertain whether the client was right to trust their agent or not. Gaps in attribution may be consciously or unconsciously taken advantage of by agents against the better knowledge of the client and sometimes the agent. Assumptions regarding epistemic rationality are challenged.
Who is contributing to the challenges to digital marketing client-agency trust?	Internet Oligopoly	Trust is an issue internal to the client-agency relationship (Chowdhury et al., 2016). Extant literature briefly touches upon trust as a multi-stakeholder construct i.e. digital marketing institutions and communities are important to client-agency trust (Kolbjørnsrud, 2017). However, dominant discourse suggests that trust is interpersonal and relational (Mcleod, 1999). More specifically, trust is a three part relation: "*A trusts B to do X*" (Cohen and Dienhart, 2013: 2).	Client-agency trust is not just a client-agency problem but a multi-stakeholder problem. Furthermore, and most critically, the current study introduces the impact of the Internet Oligopoly upon the digital marketing ecosystem and client-agency trust relationship. This challenges relational assumptions of client-agency trust within the literatures, creating a new intersection between the client, agent and IO, yet to be explored within extant literature. Empirical findings also indicate that other stakeholder groups such as Trade Associations, Regulatory Bodies, amongst others, are suffering the same inalienable asymmetry challenges as clients and agents. As such, authority given to such bodies (and their qualifications, awards, accreditations amongst other trust signals) may be quickly

			undermined. With this in mind, rationalist assumptions are further challenged.
What are the contextual challenges to digital marketing client-agency trust?	Ecosystem	The domain is important to the construction of trust but overlooked in literatures (D'Cruz, 2018). Contemporary client-agent relationships are playing out in complex and digitised environments, which are quick to change (Kuzheleva-Sagan and Suchkova, 2016). Literatures suggest that volatile online markets can create an untrustworthy setting for client-agency relationships (Dziubaniuk, 2015; Moraru, 2017; Turnbull 2016).	Empirical evidence depicts the digital marketing ecosystem as a volatile, unpredictable, complex and ambiguous environment. However, the current study advances this argument by introducing the notion of an IO-dominated digital marketing ecosystem, comprised of continually changing, black box algorithms, with the power to influence the outcomes of the client-agency relationship.
	Accountability Gap	There is a significant issue with expectation and evaluation setting in client-agency settings (Patti, Hartley, Van Dessel and Baac, 2017; Turnbull, 2016). Therefore, accountability is an important but overlooked trust signal to client-agency trust. It demonstrates the ability to link digital marketing activity to digital marketing outcomes (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al., 2019).	The current study advances the notion of an evaluation-expectation gap within dominant discourse. However, greater emphasis is placed upon challenges within: 1) the pre-relationship stage, due to a lack of benchmark knowledge; 2) the latter stages of a client-agency relationship due to issues with attribution and accountability. Issues with a lack of recourse and recompense emerge as a result, particularly where evidence and proof is considered fallible.

Table 17. Fulfilment of Research Questions

7.4.3   Contributions to Practice

In acknowledging the current studies original contributions, key implications for practice are recognised. In particular, empirical findings from the current study have a number of implications for digital marketing agencies and clients across key stages of the client-agency relationship. Such implications are applicable to various other client-agency relationships within analogous communications industries, such as public relations, as long as some element of their communication takes place on online media and advertising platforms. Additionally, the findings from the current study also implicate the way in which educators, lawyers, trade associations, or other relevant bodies may want to consider addressing client-agency trust issues in future. Key contributions to practice are listed below:

- Give greater consideration to the sharing of digital marketing misinformation based upon potentially misattributed data. Consider greater rigour in measurement, conditions, data set, and peer review before publishing insights on a public domain.

- Adopt a more cautious use of positivist and objectivist language, i.e. *"best practice"*, within digital marketing literatures, educational resources, regulation and policy due to the lack of widely recognised digital marketing benchmarks.

- Carefully consider the label of the digital marketing *"expert"*, particularly where an understanding of the expert concept within a digital marketing context is divisive.

- Be mindful of be selling and delivering potentially out of date digital marketing services. Attempt to keep up with changes within the digital marketing ecosystem and allow time for learning.

- Agencies and clients should approach attribution issues and the influence of the *IO* head on, through an open and frank discussion of contingency planning, experimentation and qualifying stakeholder appetite for risk i.e. no guarantees. This is particularly pertinent within the early stages of the client-agency relationship, during expectation setting.

7.4.4   Contributions to Audience

Whilst the thesis indicates various implications for researchers within the field of digital marketing and other analogous client-agency industries such a traditional marketing, public relations and advertising, various other audiences could also benefit from the empirical findings within the current study. Considerations for clients and agents are clear within the previous sub-section. However, implications for wider audiences are also observed. They

include the varying digital marketing stakeholders that reflect the participants interviewed within the current study i.e. *trainers, educators, institutions, procurement, regulatory groups, trade associations, lawyers, recruiters*. For educators and trainers, there is recommendation for teaching less prescriptive or rigid approaches to best practice regarding certain aspects of digital marketing. In its place, the sharing of tools for increased responsivity to the continuous evolution within the digital marketing industry, is recommended. Based upon the current study, new mental models for coping with change within the digital marketing ecosystem, often unknown change, are recommended within educational settings.

Similar recommendations for institutions, regulatory groups, trade associations, NGOs can be made, where there is recommendation for a renewed agenda in industries influenced by large internet advertising and media platforms. A review of current rationalist mechanisms such as guidelines, codes of conduct, contracts frameworks (Chapter One) is recommended so new and appropriate mechanisms for client-agency trust in digital marketing settings may be developed. A similar recommendation is made for lawyers with relative interest in digital marketing client-agency trust issues, where the need for a new fiduciary class outside of common fraud law, is required.

7.5 Suggestions for Further Research

Throughout the current study a number of opportunities for further research emerged. Such topics were still relevant to the current studies research focus but were potentially too much to consider within the scope of the current study. As such, a number of potentially fruitful research avenues are addressed below, framed as overarching research questions for future studies:

- Original findings from the current study suggested that affective trust is not suitable in business to business settings, and calculative and rationalist trust is easily undermined by the IO. As such, it could be argued that common assumptions behind the trust paradigm are not entirely suitable for digital marketing settings at all. With this in mind, is there a need to establish a new type of trust when considering trust in abstract and black box internet systems? Or, are black box systems inherently untrustworthy?
- Due to the idiosyncratic challenges posed to the client-agency relationship by the IO, with the power to influence performance outcomes, can a new fiduciary class for the digital marketing industry be established?

- Whilst the current study considered the notion of client-agency trust there is potential to consider findings against a similar dyadic, such as clients and digital marketing consultancies. Therefore, a future research question could ask, how do notions of client-agency trust differ from client-consultancy trust in digital marketing contexts? How do accountabilities differ between agencies and consultancies?

- Notions of unconscious and conscious ignorance held significant paradigmatic value to the current study. Therefore, how do assumptions of client-agency trust in digital marketing contexts change when studied under the philosophical paradigm of Agnotology (Procter and Schiebinger, 2008)?

- In identifying that rationalist and evidentialist trust mechanisms are problematic within a digital marketing context, an interesting future research question could ask, can the digital marketing industry be professionalised or governed?

- Whilst the current study suggested that the IO and its changes to the digital marketing ecosystem are volatile, unpredictable, complex, ambiguous and often unknown, acknowledging this offers some form of predictability. Therefore, an interesting research question could ask, is it possible to study predictability in a perceivably unpredictable IO-dominated digital marketing ecosystem? With this in mind, chaos theory, a branch of mathematics, could be adopted.

- The current study failed to undertake a successful deliberative inquiry into client-agency trust issues during its pilot study. However, now a clear problem has been elucidated, a possible question for deliberation could be, how may client-agency trust issues be addressed when considering *BAAKE* issues from the current study?

- Whilst not a research question, the current study identified a number of pertinent digital marketing stakeholders relative to the current studies client-agency trust issue. As such, future research could map the complex social structures and stakeholder relationships that comprise the digital marketing ecosystem under network theory or clique theory.

7.6 Limitations

Throughout the thesis relevant limitations per specific sub-sections within each chapter were made. However, the current sub-section considers the overall limitations encountered during the entirety of the study. Key constraints upon the current study may have derived from the relativist underpinnings adopted throughout the research process. In particular, attempts were

made to preserve the integrity of varying insights, which often meant a number of concepts were addressed throughout the study.

Outlining the current studies original contribution to knowledge was also particularly challenging due to the relativist underpinnings of the current study. Creation of the thematic categories and conceptual model, synthesised complex client-agency trust issues into a determinate set of thematic categories that placed the *IO* and their *IO*-dominated ecosystem at the heart of the client-agency trust issue. Making such a claim was challenging where there was a desire to avoid the minimisation of subtler but still significant aspects of the client-agency trust issue. For example, a benchmark is not always required to make trust judgements; valuable knowledge and trust signals still exist; issues with attribution may be due to issues with tracking and the individual's calculative assessment capabilities; accountability can still exist without considering attribution. Additionally, notions of an IO-dominated ecosystem were considered to be a potentially positivist claim that assumed a direct cause and effect relationship between the Internet Oligopoly and the client-agency relationship. Such perspectives held paradigmatic assumptions close to critical realism, indicating something of a paradigmatic blur. However, in attempting to make a more radical interpretation of the impact of the *IO* upon the client-agency relationship, in order to challenge in-house assumptions with the extant data, such contributions within the current studies empirical data were advanced.

Additionally, in selecting a broad research focus of trust, the in-house assumptions within the field were many, meaning many interpretations of the concept could be drawn from primary and secondary data of value to current debate. Interpretivist approaches to the research also meant that the study lacked the benefit of triangulation or positive testing. Finally, the very process of challenging in-house assumptions within extant literatures called for a type of problematisation, which meant that the study was potentially approached as something requiring a "solution".

7.7 Final Conclusions

The final chapter of the thesis has outlined a brief summary of the current study, as well as it's contributions to knowledge, practice and broader audiences. Its research questions were also addressed in order to clearly outline what was known versus what is known now. This made it clear to see how in-house assumptions were challenged. Overall limitations and possibilities

for future research were identified. The current study aimed to examine contemporary challenges to client-agency trust in order to develop a client-agency trust theory, more suitable to the digital marketing context. Long-held assumptions within extant literature regarded the client-agency trust issue as something rational and relational. However, findings from the current study introduced a more revelatory contribution where the influence of an omnipotent and black box Internet Oligopoly (IO) had the power to challenge traditional conceptions of client-agency trust.

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Appendix 1. Literature Review Study Summary

Authors	Field	Description	Theory	Method
Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar (2015)	Advertising	Clients perceived value derives from their agents reputation, credibility and quality. This is grounded in functional, emotional and social assessments of their agent.	Relationship Theory	Survey
Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, Zabkar and Diamantopoulos (2019)	Marketing	Clients perceived value derives from assessments of their agents perceived reputation, credibility, quality and accountability. Suggests that there are 10 measures of accountability.	Signaling Theory	Survey
Bachnik, Nowacki and Szopinski (2017)	Advertising	Clients assess the trustworthiness of their agency dependent upon their perceived quality and the size of their agency.	None	Survey
Beachboard (2017)	Marketing Communications	Clients assess their agency based upon their perceived expertise by the clarity, credibility, consistency and differentiation in the content they publish online. Argues that clients assess the best practice criteria of their agencies website, when making a choice about their agent.	Informing Science Theory	Content Analysis of Websites
Chen, Chen and Wu (2017)	Marketing	Knowledge asymmetries between the client and agent may be minimised by the agency investing in training for their unknowledgeable client.	Specific Asset Investment	Survey
Chowdhury, Gruber and Zolkiewski (2016)	Marketing	Upholds the importance of value co-creation over information exchange.	Value Co-Creation	Multiple Case Study

Dornas, Carvalho de Mesquita and Patrocinio (2014)	Services Marketing	Clients seek agents who are perceived to be high quality and high value thus resulting in greater loyalty	Theoretical model of relationship trust	Survey
Dziubaniuk (2015)	Search Engine Marketing	Trust is built through communication, ethical principals and evidence such as qualifications and case studies.	Resource Based View	Email Interviews
Gambetti, Biraghi, Schultz and Graffigna (2016)	Strategic Marketing	Clients and agents should increase reciprocity and goal congruence in order to improve client-agency trust	None	Ethnography
Geneste and Galvin (2013)	Small Business	Client-agency trust derives from knowledge asymmetries between the client-agent. More knowledge exchange is advocated.	Knowledge based theory of the firm	Survey
Gijic, Dimitrijevic and Jovic (2014)	Business Studies	Trust is impaired by inaction and slow response to changes within the digital environment	None	Literature Review
Hand, Samra-Fredericks and Pick (2014)	Advertising	Trust is impaired by pressure to measure creativity in light of technological advances within the industry	Institutional Theory	Semi-structured Interviews
Hanssens and Pauwels (2016)	Marketing	Agents are under more pressure to prove ROI, however weak metrics relative to awareness, loyalty and revenue often make assessments problematic.	None	Literature Review
Jansen Van Rensburg (2014)	Advertising	Trust relationships are built upon mutual assessments of relational factors between the client and agent. Such assessments inform expected value of the relationship. This is based upon agency selection criteria.	Social Exchange Theory	Questionnaire

Keegan, Rowley and Tonge (2017)	Marketing	Explores sources of conflict within client-agency settings such as a lack of cooperation and issues with perceived risk and performance evaluation.	Agency Theory	Systematic Literature Review
Kolbjornsrud (2017)	Business	There is a need for greater governance in digital marketing collaborative communities. However, the same trust issues are present there such as knowledge, power and risk asymmetries.	Multiple Agency Theory	Multiple Case Study
Kuzheleva-Sagen and Suchkova (2016)	Internet Services	A lack of transparency within abstract internet systems creates a problematic setting for client-agency trust relationships.	None	Content Analysis
Laurie and Mortimer (2019)	Integrated Marketing Communications	Trust can be improved if clients become better leaders to their agency, and the agency contributes greater strategic insights. Teamwork may be improved. Fairer payment structures are required.	Agency Theory	Survey
Lessard and Okakwu (2016)	Business Services	Knowledge intensive business services such as marketing require greater knowledge sharing and value co-creation.	None	Literature Review
Levin, Thaichon and Quach (2016)	Marketing and Advertising	Trust is derived from perceptions of agency service quality and performance. This is comprised of technical and functional quality as well as claims to creative competence, prowess in project management and good performance outcomes.	None	Interview
Levin, Thaichon, Quach and Lobo (2017)	Marketing and Advertising	Perceived value of creative competence and good project management help to build client-agency trust and loyalty.	None	Interviews
Masiello, Marasco, Izzo and Amato (2014)	Advertising	Trust is built through the process of co-innovation between clients and agents.	None	Case Study/Survey

Milan, Eberle and Bebber (2015)	Relationship Marketing	Trust is derived from perceived value through the process of relational exchange.	None	Survey
Mola, Russo and Giangreco and Rossignoli (2017)	Supply Chain	Emphasises governance in contemporary digital environments and the importance of mutual trust.	Knowledge Sharing Theory	Multiple Case Study
Moraru (2017)	Online Advertising	Considers the long-held battle between creativity and effectiveness in online settings.	None	Semi-structured Interviews
Mortimer and Laurie (2017)	Advertising	Client-agency trust may be improved through greater influence of the client, a stronger strategic lead from the agency.	Agency Theory and Social Power Theory	Qualitative Statement
Neill and Schauster (2018)	Advertising and Public Relations	Advertising and Public relations are becoming more blurred and more challenging. Financial return is an imperative. Collaboration between the client and agent is paramount.	Strategic Contingencies Theory of Interorganisational power	Interviews
O'Connor, Koslow, Kilgour and Sasser (2016)	Advertising	There is conflict between what is objectively known and what is creatively possible.	Measurement Theory	Survey
Ots and Nyilasy (2015)	Integrated Marketing Communications	Barriers to effective marketing drive from a divergence in mental models.	Mental Model Theory	Grounded Theory Interviews
Parasarathy and Forlani (2016)	Marketing Management	Goal divergence between the client and agent can result in a loss of trust and relationship termination.	Diffusion Theory	Survey

Patti, Hartley, Van Dessel and Baac (2017)	Marketing Communications	The importance of setting the right objectives in order to assess outcomes is made. There is additional pressure to prove the effectiveness of agency activity.	None	Nominal Group Technique
Pedeliento, Andreini, Bergamaschi and Klobas (2017)	Professional Services	Knowledge asymmetry may be reduced by leveraging appropriate trust signals. Advocates for the reduction of pre-transaction mistrust through online recommendation systems.	Signaling Theory	Survey
Ponder, Holloway and Hansen (2016)	Services Marketing	Interactive bonds and commitment are important to increasing trust in client-agency relationships.	Trust Commitment Theory and Intimacy Theory	In-depth Interviews and Questionnaires
Reyes (2015)	Digital Marketing Law	There is a need to determine ethical and unethical digital marketing practice in order to make recourse and recompense easier. Current law does not allow for the idiosyncrasies of digital marketing.	None	Literature Review
Sanchez and Fernandez-Cavia (2018)	Advertising	Advances in technology are changing traditional advertising knowledge and competencies resulting in a lack of trust in discourse.	Theory	Survey/Interview
Schauster and Neill (2017)	Public Relations	There is a need for more ethics in contemporary communications industries	Identity Theory	In-depth Interviews
Seres-Huszarik, Jozsa and Toth (2017)	Advertising	Selection criteria during the early stages of the client agency relationship is incredibly important to fruitful relationships i.e. evidence of experience, cooperation, creativity	Agency-Client Lifecycle Theory	Survey

Strauss (2018)	Corporate Communications	Understanding trust in multileveled stakeholder networks beyond the client-agency relationship is important.	None	Literature Review
Turnbull (2016)	Marketing	The importance of assessing key stages of the client-agency lifecycle from pre-relationship to termination. Pre-relationship emphasised.	None	Literature Review
Vercic, Tench and Vercic (2018)	Public Relations	Conflict and a lack of trust between clients and agents derive from a lack of agency understanding of their client, poor performance, a lack of experience, misinterpretation, unclear objectives, differing role expectations, financial disagreements, interpersonal differences.	General Agency Theory	Survey

Appendix 2. – SLR Overview

Secondary Data Methodology

A rigorous approach to the preliminary literature review is deemed to be critical within the marketing field. This is due to an increasing fragmentation of various marketing techniques, sectors and consumer behaviours (Quinn et al., 2016). As such, in order to give structure to the ongoing debate, Seers (2015) recommends the adoption of a literature review search strategy for a clear elucidation of the key stages assumed during the preliminary literature review. The following sub-sections are structured as such: sourcing appropriate studies; establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria; selecting appropriate literary sources; extracting and managing secondary data; undertaking iterative cycles of analysis; implementing the SLR strategy.

Sourcing Appropriate Studies

Sourcing studies specifically considering client-agency trust in digital marketing has been difficult due to an apparent under-representation of the field in academia (Wymbs, 2011). Whilst some scholars argue that this is due to the infancy of the industry (Royle and Laing, 2014), the study of trust phenomena within the digital marketing field has been minimal (Dziubaniuk, 2015). Of the extant digital marketing academic literature that does exist, there appears to be a greater emphasis placed upon research discussing digital marketing techniques and tactics (Visser & Wiedeman, 2011; Gronlund, 2010). Other prevalent trends within digital marketing research also consider (but are not limited to) the role of data in digital marketing strategy and the impact converging communication technology has upon the customer journey. However, a radical reassessment of digital marketing as part of the wider trust paradigm is yet to take place (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar, 2015). In response, insight from other fields of research are reviewed, such as: Public Relations, Advertising, Technology, IT and Information Systems, as well as literature expounding more general themes of trust.

The chosen approach for sourcing and analysing extant literature for the current study is a *Systematic Literature Review (SLR)*. Within the SLR literature, the process has multiple interpretations and approaches. However, the underlying mechanism of the SLR is always the same, which sees a rigorous review of individual studies brought together to form a connected whole relevant to the research phenomenon. Such an approach parallels Gadamer's (1975) interpretive concept of the *hermeneutic circle*, which signifies the process of moving between

constituent parts of understanding, from relevant studies, until more rounded view of the phenomenon can be ascertained. As such, hermeneutics, in particular hermeneutic-dialectics (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) a method of interpretive inquiry, is adopted throughout the literature review. Further detail of its adoption is discussed further within Chapter Four, Research Implementation.

It is imperative appropriate studies are selected as part of this systematic literature review in order to encourage rich theoretical development from the beginning, meaning a detailed overview of inclusion and exclusion criteria is required (McDonagh et al., 2013). Varying types of qualitative and quantitative studies have been considered, so not to limit the wider and richer insights that can be gained. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the current study are addressed within the following sub-section.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Throughout the SLR, important decisions need to be made about what literature is most critical to advancing theoretical discussion. In doing so, McDonagh et al., (2013) argues such an approach can be highly subjective due to the researchers invariable involvement in the selection process. Tong et al's (2012) advocates the adoption of inclusion criteria protocol in order to give structure to the literature review process. However, they also note that the process can become too systematic or objective as commonplace in more quantitative reviews. Table 18. offers an overview of the inclusion criteria guide constructed for the current study.

✓ Different language (if translation option is not available)
✓ Position piece lacking in empirical data
✓ Low quality (no doi, no discernible citation)
✓ Thin or irrelevant argument
✓ Non-academic trade blog
✓ Pieces in completely opposing industries
✓ Age (no pre-2010) unless absolutely relevant

Table 18. Inclusion Criteria for the SLR

Recency as a Central Inclusion Criteria

Developments in marketing literature suggest that debates surrounding trust have long presupposed the emergence of digital marketing and related technologies (Keegan et al., 2017). Commonly positioned as an element within client-agency conflict, a lack of trust emerges as a key phenomenon within Management and Marketing literature as early as the 1960's (Keegan et al., 2017). From this point, a number of client-agency vulnerabilities contributing to "*client disenchantment*" (Doyle et al., 1980: 18), are recognised, illuminating gaps in performance dissatisfaction and decision-making ambiguity (Keegan et al., 2017). Other contributions from early client-agency literature focus upon the "*key attributes valued by clients*" (West and Paliwoda, 1996: 22), offering insights into stages of the client-agency lifecycle, where a breakdown in trust is most apparent. However, whilst historical accounts of conflict offer instrumental parallels into the implications conflict may have upon contemporary client-agency relationships, the purpose of the literature review is not to aggregate concepts derived from historical client-agency scholarship, of which there are many. Rather, the current study seeks to explore the impact emergent technologies and internet systems have upon client, agent and wider stakeholders perceptions of client-agency trust. This suggests that recency in research, as criteria for inclusion, should be given more weight due to the emphasis upon contemporary communications technologies. Furthermore, whilst there are some historical client-agency studies that explore the additional challenges imposed by the emergence of radio and television (Hoffman and Novak, 1996), the research problem stresses the importance of exploring the implications rapidly evolving internet mediums have upon the stakeholder relationships and perceptions of trust (Dziubaniuk, 2015). Therefore, the decision to explore contemporary studies from 2010 onwards is made. Placing such confinements upon the field-related literature has been scrutinised by many social scientific researchers, who suggest that a lack of depth or insight from historical research can constrict the development of knowledge and proffer bias to certain types of "*fashionable*" methodological techniques (Oliver, 2012: 70).

Following justification of the inclusion criteria, the next stages of the SLR are explored within the following sub-section, which offers detail of the notable literary resources consulted throughout the process.

Literary Resources

A number of online academic literary databases relevant to the marketing field are accessed. A full list of such databases accessed are found in Table 19.

Academic Database
Emerald (Business, Management and Economics E-books; emerging Market Case Studies; Insight)
Wiley
Jstor
EBSCO
Springer
Palgrave
ScienceDirect
Sage Publications
Elsevier
Tandfonline
Ingentaconnect
Ieee
Proquest
ACM Digital Library

Table 19. A list of notable academic databases consulted throughout the study.

Data Extraction, Analysis and Management

Whilst there are a number of recommended approaches to managing the literature review process and subsequent analysis of secondary data, Thistoll et al. (2016) present a seven stage method to doing so. Their model leverages insights from Wolfswinkel et al's (2013) five stage literature review model, a key study also adopted for its inclusion criteria framework. In particular, they uphold the use of open coding of texts. Wolfswinkel et al. (2013) maintain that the coding of secondary data is effectuate with a theory building approach, whereby, a comprehensive view of the literature is explored without compromising the inductive and emergent nature of theoretical insights. A combined visual of both models is provided within Figure 21.

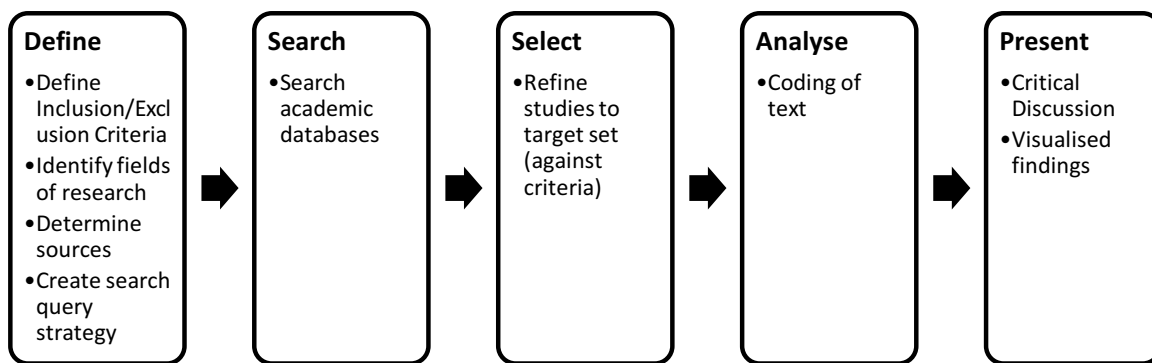| **Define** | **Search** | **Select** | **Analyse** | **Present** |
| •Define Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria •Identify fields of research •Determine sources •Create search query strategy | •Search academic databases | •Refine studies to target set (against criteria) | •Coding of text | •Critical Discussion •Visualised findings |

Figure 21. Literature Review Process (Wolfswinkel et al., 2013)

The current sub-section has highlighted a number of systematic stages of the preliminary literature review. However, it must be noted that the process did not happen in an explicitly linear format. This is due to the extensive amount of literature gathered over the duration of the four-year study. Rather, a cyclical and iterative process was adopted as possible theoretical constructs began to emerge, a high-level overview of which can be found in the following sub-sections.

Iterative Cycles of Literature Review

As noted by Hussein et al. (2017), the literature review process can be nonlinear and iterative, until a more comprehensive understanding of the core perspectives in scholarly literature are gained. However, Stebbins (2001) argue that the overall aim of the qualitative literature review is to leave the review open-ended with no formulation of any specific or predetermined answers. The literature review should help to establish a platform for new ideas and continued theoretical discussion. As such, a high-level overview of the iterative and cyclical process of the literature review is discussed within the following sub-sections and illustrated in Figure 22.
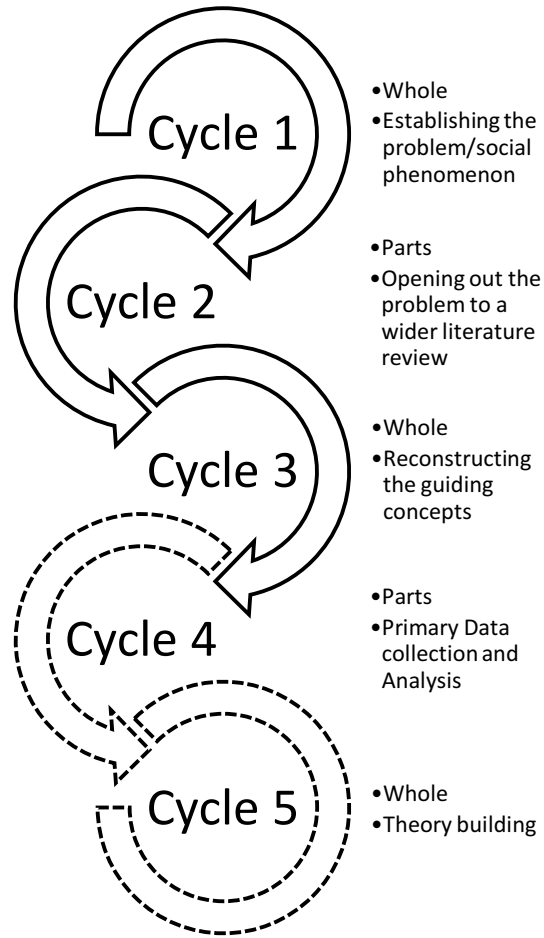
Figure 22. Iterative Cycles of the Literature Review

The cyclical process is founded upon an adaptation of the hermeneutic circle. It illustrates the cyclical stages of the review and visualises the open ended nature of emergent theoretical categories. The first cycle aims to problematise the overall phenomenon of trust within the digital marketing field, as defined in Chapter One. Second, the research phenomenon is opened out to possible emergent themes synthesised from secondary data sources within the preliminary literature review in Chapter Two. Third, following the preliminary review of literature, the phenomenon is reconstructed as a problem with ambiguous and amorphous systems in digital marketing. Fourth, further emergent themes relative to the reconceptualised phenomenon are explored during the primary data collection process and resulting analysis. The actual process adopted within the current study is elaborated upon further within the following sub-sections.

Literature Review Methodology Implementation

Cycle One – Reviewing Digital Marketing Specific Literature

The overarching research question, *why is there a perceived lack of digital marketing client-agency trust?*, was fragmented into its abstract parts whereby, keywords comprised of synonyms and antonyms were proposed for the search strategy. Table 20. provides an overview of the initial keywords adopted.

Keywords	Synonyms and Antonyms of
"Digital Marketing"+	*Trust; client-agency trust; "client" "agent" "trust"*
"Internet Marketing"+	
"Online Marketing"+	

Table 20. Synonyms and Antonyms of the Core Research Question

Studies isolated as part of cycle one were used to frame the initial research problem within Chapter One. Whilst very specific to the digital marketing field, initial observations at this stage highlighted a significant dearth of theoretical discussion (Royle and Laing, 2014). As such the decision was made to open out the search strategy to wider fields as part of cycle two.

Cycle Two – Reviewing Broader Fields of Relevant Literature

Other fields of literature, such as Marketing and Information Systems, Public Relations, Advertising and Communications Technologies were explored. The current studies research questions were also addressed at this stage.

In order to maintain focus within the expansive literature review process, exact match keyword search strategies were also adopted. The keywords were then compounded into various combinations, as demonstrated in Table 21., which provides a sample of such search queries. Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014) note that the combination of various key phrases can return a high volume of literary results. As such the researcher made sure to systematically apply its predefined inclusion criteria.

> *"client-agency "relationship" "marketing"*
>
> *"client-agency "relationship" "marketing"*
>
> *"stakeholder" "marketing" "trust"*
>
> *"marketing" "trust"*
>
> *"marketing "client" "trust"*
>
> *"agency" "client" "trust"*
>
> *"client-agency "Marketing" "trust"*
>
> *"client-agency "Marketing" "trust"*

Table 21. Example of Keyword Variations used in Literature Review Search Strategy

Studies sourced at this stage of the literature review exhibited a more conceptual discussion of the research phenomenon. However, many appeared to be scoping or propositional without empirical data. That being said, the studies provided a theoretical departure point from which to explore broader scholarly perspectives, including trust philosophy. As such, findings gained from contemporary field-related literature were parsed into broader philosophical debates surrounding concepts such as evidentialism, so that future directions for the current study could be clearly oriented. This is especially important given the broad and amorphous conceptualisations of trust that currently exist in literature (Williamson, 1993).

Cycle Three – Reconstructing the Guiding Concepts

Within the literature review chapter, extant literature was analysed via computer aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), Nvivo. A wider review of literature suggests that adopting CAQDAS for the literature review is a novel technique (Silver and Lewins, 2014). Typically, analysis via CAQDAS is reserved for primary data. However, its adoption at an early stage of the current study offered a more rigorous and robust approach to the analysis and organisation of insights derived from secondary data (Bandara et al., 2014). An example of the secondary data coding process is provided within Figure 23.
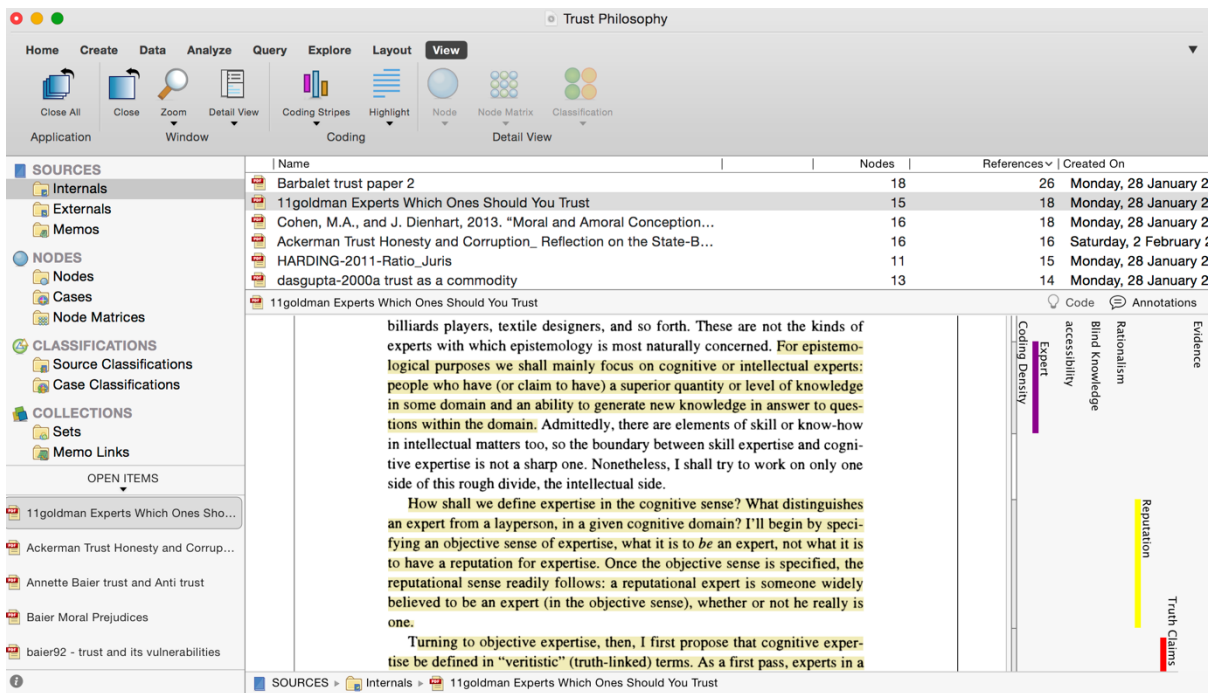
Figure 23. Screenshot of secondary data in Nvivo.

Codes were generated inductively in place of creating coding families derived from pre-existing theoretical frameworks. Despite there being a number theories of interest within the contemporary client-agency literature, the adoption of a theoretical framework was not assumed at this stage of the current study. This was for two key reasons: first, adoption of a theoretical framework is disparaged by interpretivists for fear of impairing or influencing theoretical development (Miles and Huberman, 1994); Second, the attachment to a preconceived theory may be avoided in order to circumvent a pre-conceptualisation of the phenomenon (Dunne, 2011). The adoption of a theoretical framework was considered to be too prescriptive where so much disparity in core client-agency trust constructs exist. Instead broader in-house assumptions related to particular theoretical perspectives were considered (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). That is not to say that pertinent theoretical frameworks will not be revisited at a later stage within the discussion of findings, Chapter Six. Likewise, relevant theories are critically examined and scrutinised in greater detail throughout part two, of the literature review.

Appendix 3. Participant Letter of Invitation

Project Title: Digital Marketing Client-Agency Trust
Student Researcher (Details): Sophie Iredale, Salford Business School, University of Salford, s.iredale@edu.salford.ac.uk 077xxxxxxxx
Date: DD/MM/YYYY

Dear [Name],

You are invited to take part in a postgraduate research project conducted by Sophie Iredale of Salford Business School, University of Salford. Before you decide if you would like to take part please ensure you fully understand why the research is taking place:

What is the project about? Why is the research project being conducted?
This research project aims to explore why there is a perceived lack of trust in Digital Marketing and how this can be addressed.

What is involved in the project?
The research project will require 1 hour of your time for an interview, taking place on site at the University of Salford, your place of work or via e-conferencing techniques.

Why have you been approached?
Because of your experience with the Digital Marketing industry, I believe your insights could contribute a wealth of valuable insight into the research problem.

If you would like to take part, please complete and return the 'Informed Consent Declaration' form.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions.

Yours faithfully,

Sophie Iredale

Participant Information Sheet

Project Title: Digital Marketing Client-Agency Trust
Student Researcher (Details): Sophie Iredale, Salford Business School, University of Salford, s.iredale@edu.salford.ac.uk 077xxxxxxxx
Date: DD/MM/YYYY

The 'Participant Information Sheet' provides an overview of the research project and what will be required from you.

Will you receive any financial reward or travel expenses for taking part?
Unfortunately, no.

What are the benefits of taking part?
You will be contributing to research that aims to improve client-agency conduct within the Digital Marketing industry.

Will participation involve any physical activity, discomfort, embarrassment or harm?
No.

What will the next steps be following participation completion?
No further action will occur. Please be aware you are in a position to withdraw your involvement following participation without fear of penalty.

Will my personal details and details of my involvement be kept confidential?
This research project is entirely voluntary and you will decide whether or not to take part. Details of your involvement will be entirely anonymous and confidential. The research study will not make use of participants names. All participant names will be codified and anonymized using pseudonyms. Data will be treated as personal under the 1998 Data Protection Act. Data will be stored securely on an encrypted USB in a secure environment.

How will the data be used?

Interviews will be recorded by the researcher and transcribed by the researcher. Anonymised data will be submitted to the UK Data Archive. Data will be used to inform future digital marketing practice. Anonymised data may also be presented at academic conferences and in academic papers.

Who will take ownership of the data?

The researcher will take full ownership of data.

Do I have the right to withdraw?

Participants have a right to withdraw at any time without prejudice and without providing a reason. Participant data will be destroyed by the researcher. If you are concerned that your rights are being infringed, please contact Dr. Aleksej Heinze (supervisor) who will investigate your claim: a.heinze@salford.ac.uk

Appendix 4. Informed Consent Declaration

Project Title: Digital Marketing Client-Agency Trust
Student Researcher (Details): Sophie Iredale, Salford Business School, University of Salford, s.iredale@edu.salford.ac.uk 077xxxxxxxx
Date: DD/MM/YYYY

I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided about the research project. I confirm that I have been given the opportunity to ask further questions.

I confirm that I understand I can withdraw at any time without reason and without penalty.

I confirm that I understand confidentiality and anonymity procedures and the use of data in future research publications, sharing and archiving.

By signing this consent declaration, I voluntarily agree to participate in the research project.

_____ _____

_____/____/_____

Name of Participant (Printed)   Signature   Date

_____ _____

_____/____/_____

Researcher (Printed)   Signature   Date