

**AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF THE FIELD  
OF BOOK GHOSTWRITING**

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the Temple University Graduate Board

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Doctor of Business Administration

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

“Almost every statement spoken today by major political, business, and academic leaders was written by someone else” (Einhorn, 1991, p. 115). Those “someone elses” are ghostwriters who are willing to craft documents, anonymously, for clients for a fee. As familiarity with the role of ghostwriters has risen, shame or embarrassment at having used their services seems to be declining (Conner, 2014), which is why we have heard that Prince Harry paid his ghostwriter \$1 million and apparently Michelle Obama had as many as six different ghostwriters assisting in the writing and production of her bestseller, *Becoming*. Still, very little is known about who ghostwriters are and how they work.

To begin to empirically understand the burgeoning ghostwriting industry and its participants, as well as how the occupation has evolved, I conducted an in-depth inductive, qualitative study using a grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) methodology, conducting interviews with ghostwriters, ghostwriting agency owners, and ghostwriting clients to chronicle and explain the trajectory of the field.

*Keywords: ghostwriting, occupation, profession, author, publishing, thought leadership, grounded theory*

## **DEDICATION**

For all the members of the Association of Ghostwriters, who share what they know about the field with aspiring ghostwriters, fellow ghostwriters, and clients, in order to improve the quality of the work we produce.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Some argue that ghostwriting as an occupation is almost as old as the written word, with the earliest examples of writing not assigned to a particular person. Logography experts Corbett (1965), Enos (1974), Kennedy (1963), and Einhorn (1981) report that as far back as the fifth century B.C., “poorly educated royalty were dependent on scribes and professional advisors to ‘compose as well as write down [their] message’ (Murphy, 1974, p. 196)” (Riley & Brown, 1996, p. 711). Having information and conveying it through the written word could only be done by literate scribes whose job it was to record history. The scribes’ task was the equivalent of transcription or dictation, converting the exact thoughts and spoken words of royal leaders into written form. The focus then was on what was being recorded and ensuring it matched the intended words and message. Today, however, with most residents of the Western World being literate, interest has shifted from the “what” to the “who.” That is, *who* is actually creating the writing we’re all reading?

The answer has been surprising to some. Questions have arisen throughout history about the authorship of important works, from the Bible to Shakespeare’s masterpieces. The play “Cyrano de Bergerac,” written by Edmond Rostand in 1897, in which the protagonist pens romantic letters on behalf of someone else shined a spotlight on the practice of ghostwriting more than 100 years ago. More recently, it has been revealed that much of President John F. Kennedy’s writings were not his own. Nor were all the books in beloved childhood series *The Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* written by a single person.

“Almost every statement spoken today by major political, business, and academic leaders was written by someone else” (Einhorn, 1991, p. 115). Those “someone elses” are ghostwriters who are typically, but not always, professional writers. Many have journalism training while others simply have a natural talent for writing. As ghosts, such professionals are willing to craft documents for clients for a fee, while remaining largely anonymous, or at least behind the scenes much of the time.

Lois Einhorn, PhD, is an author and professor at Binghamton University of the State of New York whose work has explored speeches and the speechwriters who crafted them, including ghostwriters. Supporting Einhorn’s assertion of the publishing industry’s reliance on ghostwriters is Anteby and Occhiuto’s (2020) statement that “nearly 50 percent of memoirs that have appeared on the *New York Times* list of nonfiction bestsellers in the past five years were written, at least in part, by someone else (i.e., a ghostwriter was listed).” Jack Hitt, a *New York Times* journalist with personal experience editing ghostwritten works, indicates, in the *New York Times*, that the percentage is closer to 80 percent or more (Hitt, 1997), not 50 percent.

Although long kept quiet, the field of ghostwriting does appear to be coming out of the shadows. On one hand, it has become obvious that certain authors had help drafting their manuscripts. It is likely that memoirs “written” by celebrities, such as actors, models and professional athletes, tipped consumers off that these well-known personalities had assistance. That assistance was generally provided by hired writers, who took responsibility for gathering background details about the celebrity’s life and shaping it into a more interesting story.

In a *Time* magazine article about the improving the quality of celebrity memoirs, thanks to celebrities' willingness to reveal painful details of their lives, writer Cady Lang claims, "This new approach to celebrity memoirs extends to the writing process itself. Ghostwriters, typically the faceless forces behind many books by famous non-writers, are now becoming more visible, with celebrities openly teaming up with high-profile professionals. It's a move that aligns with the hunger for realness from the people whose images appear on the books' covers" (Lang, 2021). In addition to unmasking the formerly anonymous ghostwriters, the writing process itself has also evolved, from pure transcription to collaboration. Modern ghostwriters are frequently expected to weave in their own thoughts, ideas, and experiences in combination with the client's, to craft a richer and more interesting manuscript. This is occurring with celebrity memoirs as well as other genres, though not everyone approves of how a ghostwriter's experience can shape their client's storytelling; Prince Harry's ghostwriter J.R. Moehringer, for example, has been faulted for potentially bringing too much of his own story into Harry's book, *Spare* (Govani, 2022).

And while not everyone has been willing to admit having received such help, mere discussions surrounding ghostwriting has brought a considerable amount of attention to the field (Mayyasi, 2016). "It's hard to say whether more people are using ghostwriters these days or whether the practice has simply 'come out of the closet,'" Mayyasi quoted publishing industry insider Karl Weber as saying in *Priceonomics*.

As familiarity with the role of ghostwriters has risen, shame or embarrassment at having used their services seems to be declining, states communications consultant and

publicist Cheryl Conner. Conner writes in *Forbes* that “‘ghostwriter’ has even progressed to a commonly accepted job and function with no embarrassment attached (although even those who proudly proclaim the title will generally consider it in bad form to identify whom their clients may be).” Embarrassment or not on the part of the client, the ghostwriters’ role does appear to have emerged as a new and legitimate occupation.

The rise of ghostwriting as a career has been triggered by social phenomena (Barley & Kunda, 2001), which “reflect broader changes in social values and norms (Lounsbury, 2001)” (Howard-Grenville et al., 2017, p. 525).

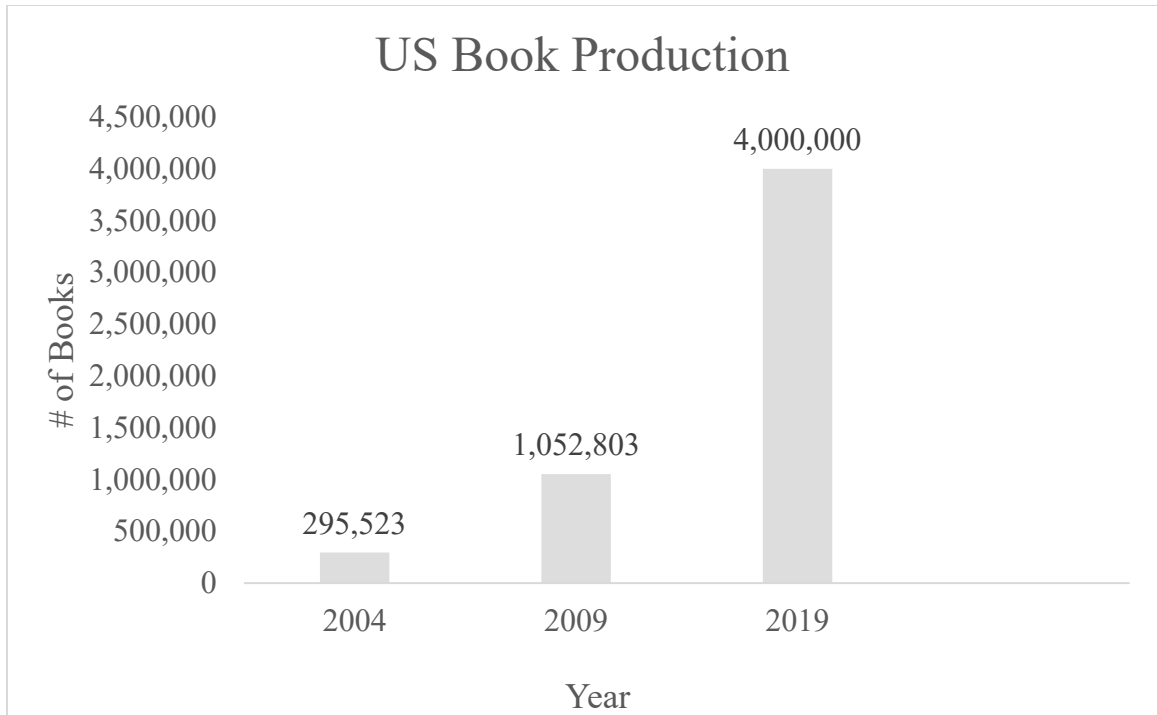
The ability to connect with people and organizations worldwide in real time, thanks to the internet’s commercialization, was a major catalyst for a number of subsequent technological, societal, and corporate shifts. The internet, which begat social media platforms, dramatically increased access to and demand for information—a.k.a. “content.” The ease with which information could be gathered and referenced caused “the fall of New York gatekeepers who suppressed different kinds of writing” (Laquintano, 2016, p. 4)—meaning the major traditional publishing houses. The loss of that lofty position shifted the power dynamic within the publishing world, raising the visibility and credibility of self- and independent publishers: Self-publishing has exploded, gone mainstream, and consequently shed its former stigma (Laquintano, 2016). The fall of the traditional publishing gatekeeper prompted the emergence of multiple new publishing models that both complement and compete with each other (Laquintano, 2016).

Another factor is the rise of the “thought leader” (Drezner, 2017), which is a new class of intellectual. Industry leaders now aspire to become de facto experts or gurus in their field, which can lead to more business and opportunities. The term “expert” has

recently given way to “thought leader” as a level of authority to which many professionals aspire. Thought leaders establish and defend their positions of authority and influence by publishing regularly to share their ideas and opinions. Book publishing has emerged as a shortcut to thought leader status, opening the doors to new publicity opportunities once the subject-matter expert or thought leader has it in hand; the “author” title appears to trump other signs of authority.

Since most leaders have no experience in writing or publishing books, they turn to those who do—namely, ghostwriters. Book writing and publishing is time-consuming, which is why ghostwriters have been asked to step in; first, quietly and anonymously, and now, with more credit and acknowledgement, often as collaborators. Ghostwriters, for a fee, turn previously unknown experts into prominent thought leaders.

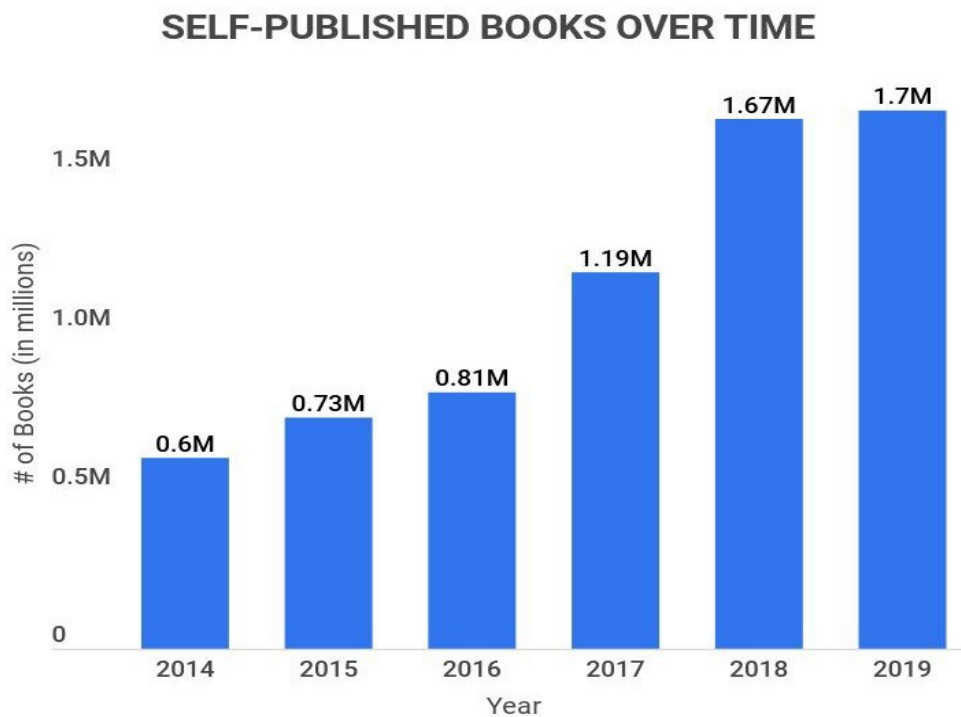
Evidence of that work can be found in the number of books being published each year. Although the book publishing industry has been struggling sales-wise for many years, Bowker reports that the number of books published between 2002 and 2010 has increased 1148 percent (Bowker, 2021). Given that the Big 5 publishing giants—Penguin Random House, Hachette Livre, HarperCollins, Macmillan Publishers, and Simon & Schuster—have not increased their production, the growth is coming from self-publishing or hybrid efforts (the difference between the two being a function of how much customer service the author receives). Self-publishing is generally preferred by aspiring thought leaders eager to see quick results.



**Figure 1.** Growth in U.S. Book Production. Source: Bowker, Zappia

Within the last decade, dynamics within the book publishing world have changed, making it much more difficult for first-time authors to be published and placing greater emphasis on the author's platform. To sidestep the process of building a massive audience while still in pursuit of thought leader status, many aspiring authors have turned to self-publishing.



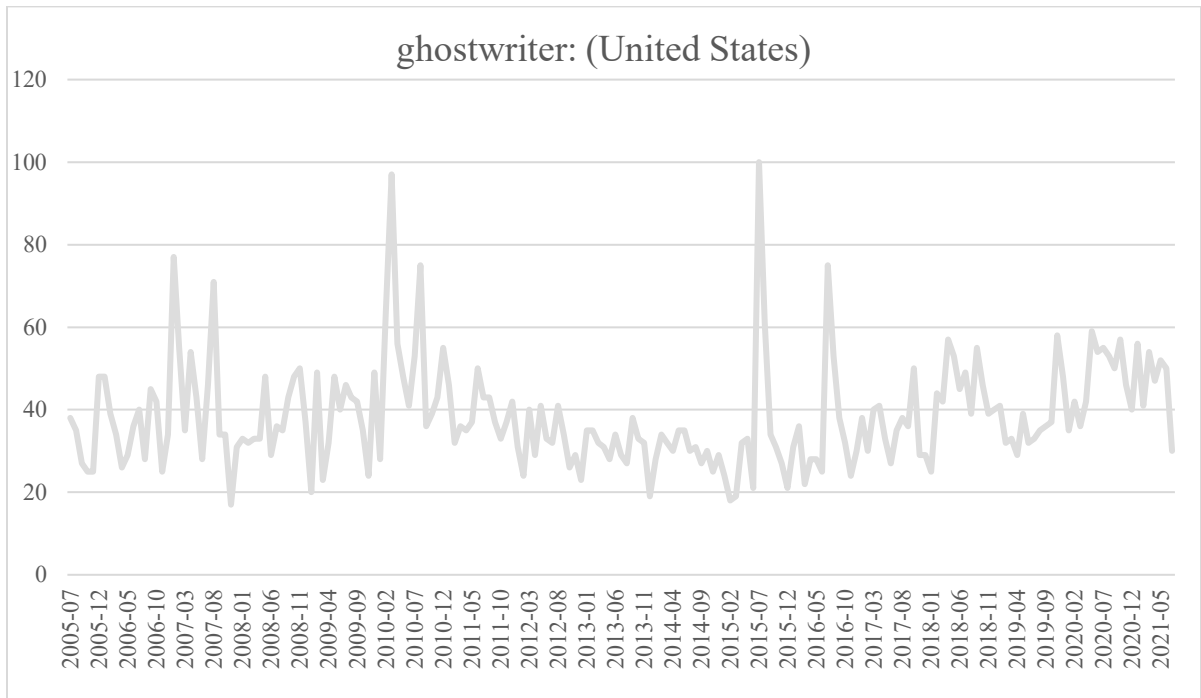


**Figure 2.** Self-Published Books Over Time. Source: Zappia.

This has dramatically boosted the number of books being published, despite the fact that demand for books has not increased (Berrett-Kohler, 2020). “Even adding in e-book sales and audio sales, the total book publishing pie has shrunk since its peak in 2007,” according to Berrett-Koehler, based on data from the NPD Group. Given that many thought leaders produce books to use as marketing tools, rather than as another income stream, this market dynamic makes sense; although producing books, thought leaders aren’t contributing to book sales.

In some cases, hiring a ghostwriter has almost become a badge of honor. According to Gotham Ghostwriters, “What truly and fully brought ghosting out of the shadows, and in turn helped drive a stake through the heart of the stigma, was the ubiquity and transparency of the Internet.”

While ghostwriters may be coming out of the shadows, Google Trends suggests that interest in the subject has remained relatively stable between 2005 and 2021, with spikes likely occurring following the publication of articles about the profession, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3:** Google Search Analytics. The number of searches for the term “ghostwriter” has remained relatively flat between 2005 and 2021.

Modern ghostwriters are not a new occupation, however. One of the first ghostwriting agencies, 2M Communications, Ltd., was founded in 1982, more than 40 years ago, as a literary agency and became a ghostwriting matchmaker exclusively in 2002. Kevin Anderson & Associates, another ghostwriting agency, was established in 2007 and is now a multimillion-dollar firm (Hennick, 2020). Gotham Ghostwriters, which boasts 2,500 editorial specialists in its database, was founded in 2008.

However, in the last 40 years, ghostwriting has emerged as a legitimate occupation, maybe even a profession. There is a difference between the two, with an

occupation describing a job someone holds to earn a living and a profession suggesting a level of training or credentialing that not all occupations require. “Professions encompass only a subset of occupations” (Anteby et al., 2016, p. 188). A profession is a “certain type of occupation” characterized by “(1) abstract, specialized knowledge, (2) autonomy, (3) authority over clients and subordinate occupational groups, and (4) a certain degree of altruism” (Hodson & Sullivan, 2012, p. 260). Although there is no professional training required to assert oneself as a ghostwriter, specialized knowledge, autonomy, authority, and altruism are typically in evidence when ghostwriters craft a manuscript.

While some ghostwriters existed, but not in great numbers back in 1982, their presence has dramatically increased and the career formalized since the turn of the century. What were near anomalies in the 1980s are now part of a growing community of writers who have “common tasks, work schedules, job training, peer relations, career patterns, [and] shared symbols,” (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984, p. 291), which the researchers state is evidence of an occupation. Researchers Howard-Grenville et al., who studied the emergence of the field of green chemistry, observed that “Members of an occupation form an occupational community, or a ‘group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work whose identity is drawn from the work [and] who share with one another a set of values, norms and perspectives that apply to but extend beyond work.’”

Today, the ghostwriter is one of three major players in the book publishing industry, as detailed in Figure 4. Although not all authors opt to hire a ghostwriter to help draft their manuscript, those who do become part of this framework.



**Figure 4:** Book Publishing Industry Paradigm. © Marcia Layton Turner.

My research aims to explore the emergence of book ghostwriting as an established profession and to document the technological, societal, and social events that have brought it to the fore. To do so, I undertook an inductive, qualitative study using semi-structured interviews with ghostwriters, ghostwriting agencies, and clients of ghostwriters, to try to pinpoint when ghostwriting services became a recognized career and to understand the market dynamics leading up to it.

#### Motivation for Research

As a business book ghostwriter without any journalism training or early career publishing industry experience, my entry into this field felt like it was through the back door. Lacking any education in how the publishing world works, I've learned about ghostwriting first-hand, and wondered whether my experience was similar to others. To

try to gather professional ghostwriters together for this type of information-sharing and benchmarking, I founded the Association of Ghostwriters in 2010. The more I've learned about the experiences of ghostwriters, the more fascinated I have become with understanding what drives demand for such services within the business and professional community.

The bulk of the scholarly research conducted to-date has focused on the use of ghostwriters in the academic setting, and the debate over whether that application is ethical. In the academic scenario, ghostwriters are being hired to complete work academic institutions assign students to assess their understanding and mastery; the ghostwriter's role then makes it impossible to evaluate the student's true skills. However, this practice, or use of academic ghostwriters appears to be more prevalent, or perhaps accepted, outside the U.S. Students in the U.S. who pay others to do their work risk expulsion for submitting assignments that do not reflect their own thinking and analysis, not to mention the student's voice, since many universities have honor codes that require independent work. This is not where my interests lie, however.

My interest has to do with professionals, leaders, and experts who hire ghostwriters to help shape their own thoughts and ideas into publishable books. In this case, the ghostwriter is not typically overlaying their own subject-matter expertise onto their clients', as with academic ghostwriting, but rather, operating as a support system, more like an advertising agency, accountant, or attorney serves.

There has been no research exploring ghostwriting as a career. The goal of this research is to explore the experience of being both a modern-day ghostwriter and ghostwriting client, as well as the "how" and the "why" surrounding the occupation.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Although researchers agree on what, exactly, a ghostwriter is and does—namely a writer who agrees to create documents for others while remaining anonymous—none so far have explored the factors that fuel the industry. Nearly all research conducted thus far has concerned itself with debating when and if ghostwriting as a practice is ethical, or under which conditions it is acceptable.

#### The Publishing Industry

Ghostwriters are “an open secret in book publishing and any industry that involves content with a byline: that the title of ‘author’ is often more of an executive position rather than an indication of who wrote the words on the page” (Mayyasi, 2016, p. 1). Pressure to have a book manuscript accepted by a major publisher led some authors to retain assistance from ghostwriters to ensure their work met the standard for quality; without that support, many books would likely not have qualified for publication. However, the need for the Big 5 traditional publishing firms has been on the decline, partly due to industry consolidation and partly due to technological advancements that have made self-publishing options become more respected, or perhaps simply more accessible. That shift in dynamic led more non-writers with interesting ideas to consider attempting to publish books.

“Although traditional publishers still have a comparative advantage in terms of better data and funds to pay advances, self-publishing has benefits in terms of speed, as

well as offering authors greater freedom and control over the final products and possibly even the pricing of their books.” (Hviid et al., 2019, p. 356). Hence the reason the number of book titles published has mushroomed while sales figures have stagnated (Bowker, 2021; Berrett-Koehler, 2020)—more books are being published for personal branding reasons than for revenue generation.

Traditional publishers have been the book industry’s “gatekeepers” for centuries (Hviid et al., 2019), however, the emergence of the e-reader was a disruptor, the researchers say, with Amazon as the leading e-book seller. Couple this new technology with the availability of information on the internet and traditional publishers appear to have lost their clout. “The wealth of information and new technology that has been made possible by the internet may give authors the means to bypass traditional publishers and potentially side-step new and traditional retailers by dealing directly with those interested in reading their works” (Hviid et al., 2019, p. 359).

This is good news for aspiring business authors who are interested in publishing books for marketing purposes, rather than as products in and of themselves expected to contribute to the bottom line. When marketing and promotion are the primary aim, speed and control of book content trump any potential cachet associated with big name publishing houses. Being able to produce a book more quickly makes it possible to expedite the promotion process and opportunity pursuit. All of which is in the name of positioning the author as a thought leader or subject-matter expert; their book then becomes their calling card or brochure, to demonstrate their expertise.

### The Ghostwriting Industry and its Dynamics

Fisher, McLeod, Savage, and Simkin (2015) characterize ghostwriters as “hired guns” who do “other people’s work,” namely, taking tests and writing papers. While Fisher et al look specifically at the environment that has resulted in the use of ghostwriters within the academic setting, what is interesting about their work is that they “[speculate] that their numbers are also growing,” in reference to the legions of ghostwriters. However, they also admit that “statistics on how many ghostwriters exist are understandably difficult to acquire.” That is true no matter what type of ghostwriting is being explored; academic ghostwriters stay in the background because their work is considered unethical and ghostwriters who write books, articles, and blog posts remain anonymous because their clients generally want all the credit.

Another study that explores the ethics of ghostwriting of speeches explains that such discussions generally take one of three perspectives: the ethicist’s, the organization’s, or the speechwriter’s (Riley & Brown, 1996). The ethicist’s position, according to Bormann, is that “the practice of ghostwriting is ‘deceptive’ and therefore unethical” and that collaborating with others without informing the audience is a form of plagiarism (Riley & Brown, 1996, p. 712). The organization’s position is very different, arguing that “the use of ghostwriters mirrors the use of other specialists” within an organization to support its goals and, therefore, is not unethical. While speechwriters see themselves as “language craftspeople” (Einhorn, 1988, p. 107), where “the ghostwriter is not entirely responsible for the speech” (Riley & Brown, 1996, p. 713) and, therefore, not engaging in unethical activity.



Zheng and Cheng (2015) take the position that ghostwriting is acceptable “when the audience expects it.” Which is why in academia a student’s use of a ghostwriter’s services is considered unethical, while a senior government official or corporate leader hiring a speechwriter is fair. In the latter case, it’s “the desire to craft an effective public image [that] leads to the use of ghostwriting” (Zheng & Cheng, 2015, p. 124; Riley & Brown, 1996).

Lisa Lines’ (2016) examination of ghostwriting services used in academia in Australia covers similar ground as other papers on ethics, but also shines a spotlight on the impact the internet has had on the profession. “Quick and constant internet access has undoubtedly changed the way students—from primary to tertiary—learn, engage with resources, research and produce their own work” (Lines, 2016, p. 889). The ease with which students can now track down information makes digital plagiarism easier, but also easier for professors and administrators to spot. For that reason, more students in need of writing support are relying on paid ghostwriters to create “work tailored to the student’s requirements.” This type of “contract cheating” is “far more difficult to detect” (Lines, 2016, p. 890).

Her research examined the prevalence of ghostwriting, services ghostwriters offer, and how universities are taking steps to detect it. Websites offering ghostwritten papers are now ubiquitous on the internet, perhaps reflecting the rising demand for such services.

Researchers Anteby and Occhiuto (2020) were especially interested in authenticity with respect to ghostwriting. The researchers were less concerned with how ghostwriting was perceived by outsiders and more curious about how ghostwriters

themselves viewed their role and the products they created for clients, which were primarily memoirs. Anteby and Occhiuto propose that ghostwriters face “recognition estrangement,” which is a condition where ghostwriters would prefer to be recognized and acknowledged, but justify their anonymity as a professional necessity.

The role of the ghostwriter within the book writing process has been evolving of late. Where historically ghostwriters were collaborators responsible for drawing content out of their client, more recently ghostwriters have assumed nearly all the responsibility for crafting a title (Hitt, 1997).

Although ghostwriters have worked quietly behind the scenes for centuries in the production of books on behalf of their clients, more recently, an increasing number of authors are not only admitting to having used a ghost, but some have even taken to boasting of it. Hitt reports in the *New York Times* of George Stephanopoulos’ \$2.75 million book deal, for which he retained the services of high-profile ghostwriter William Novak: “fetching William Novak to write his book is a coup for Stephanopoulos, a mark of prestige like being seen about town with a trophy wife...”

This admission by Stephanopoulos may have marked an important shift in the direction of author transparency and away from ghostwriters remaining completely anonymous and uncredited for their work.

### *Ghostwriting as Gig Work*

Unlike other professional service providers, such as lawyers and accountants, who typically work as permanent employees, ghostwriters are more commonly freelancers or gig workers. That independent contractor status allows ghosts the freedom to choose how many clients they work with, when and where they work, what they charge, and how the

work is completed. Although ghostwriting agencies exist, most offer contracts to ghostwriters on an as-needed basis, reducing the need to hire writers as full-time employees and allowing those writers to continue to control their own workload. Many ghosts have “found contracting better paying than permanent employment” (Kunda et al., 2002, p. 234).

However, Bidwell and Briscoe (2009) report that independent contractors are most likely to choose gig work “both at the beginnings of their careers and also much later, when they have accrued significant experience.” Contracting becomes a long-term way of life, by choice. The researchers “found that much contracting is performed by highly experienced and skilled workers who are likely to have other labor market options” (Bidwell & Briscoe, 2009, p. 1165).

Understanding how the field of ghostwriting has evolved and the role that ghostwriters are now playing in the publishing industry could have far-reaching implications for ghostwriters, publishers, and clients.

### *Thought Leadership*

Recent attention paid to personal branding may be at the heart of the desire for executives and subject matter experts to be perceived as thought leaders. Rather than being seen as a cog within a larger organization, more leaders and industry forerunners are stepping out to develop their own personal brands in an effort to create new career and/or business opportunities for themselves. “Personal branding discourse invites workers and job seekers to rethink their dependence on bureaucratic employment as an economic platform, and instead to view themselves as profit-seeking enterprises that can best succeed by applying corporate marketing strategies to their face-to-face and online

interactions” (Vallas & Christin, 2018, p. 5). One of the best tools to further the ascent to thought leader status is to publish a book.

Books have long been the barrier to entry to the national speaking circuit and other paying business opportunities. The title of “author” is a prerequisite for many such gigs, which has been driving business professionals and experts to conceptualize and publish books with their names on them. “There’s a saying in the public relations industry: If you want to get booked, you need a book” (Horowitz, 2011, p. 14).

#### *Time as Commodity*

“Ghostwriters exist for the same reason that Bill Gates doesn’t mow his own lawn: It’s just not worth his time” (Mayyasi, 2020, p. 1). Jerrold Jenkins of the Jenkins Group, a book producer, says, “The appeal is pretty clear. If you are an executive making \$10 million a year, will you really stop working for two to three months to write a book?” (Mayyasi, 2020, p. 1). Not only do ghostwriters take the lead in determining a book’s structure and collecting disparate facts and figures to help tell a story or share a message, but they also serve as project managers who are typically responsible for keeping the project moving forward.

Studies regarding the link between time and money in consumers’ minds found that people who don’t routinely think of their payment for work in terms of an hourly wage were less likely to trade money for more time. When research participants were asked to calculate their hourly wage, they were more willing to trade more time for money (DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2007). “When paid by the hour, people come to see time more like money, become more sensitive to the monetary opportunity costs of their time, and will, therefore, prefer to trade more of their time for more money” (DeVoe et al., 2010, p.

628). Recognizing this direct connection helped explain why independent contractors were prone to working longer hours, because they “came to see their time primarily in terms of money” (DeVoe et al., 2010, p. 628).

However, DeVoe et al (2010) found that the more income rose, the less willing people were to trade more time to earn more money. Age also impacted a respondent’s willingness to give up more time for more money. This is relevant for ghostwriting because the higher the income, the more likely individuals are to hire outside help, including writing support.

### *The Feminization of Ghostwriting*

Publishing anonymously, without any name attached to the work, or pseudonymously, using a pen name, was the standard at various times throughout history for novels and creative nonfiction, particularly in England. Authors chose to remain anonymous for many reasons at the time, including “an aristocratic or gendered reticence, religious self-effacement, anxiety over public exposure, fear of prosecution, hope of an unprejudiced reception, and the desire to deceive” (Griffin, 2003, p. 7). Jane Austen’s books, for example, “were published without her name on them during her lifetime but she retained the copyright and self-published” (Griffin, 2003, p. 4), generating enough income on which to live. Austen was not alone in hiding behind anonymity.

Many female authors hid their gender by communicating with publishers by mail, sometimes signing cover letters with a masculine name, or through intermediaries, as Swift, Burney, Austen and George Eliot did, Griffin says (anyone who has watched the “Bridgerton” Netflix series will recognize the “Lady Whistledown” character does exactly this: use a pseudonym to continue to travel in aristocratic circles undetected,

handing off draft versions of her newsletter to her publisher by cover of night.)

“Anonymity protected one’s social position” (Griffin, 2003, p. 8), or helped obscure it for other reasons. As with Mary Robinson in the 1800s, multiple pen names were used to hide exactly how prolific Robinson was (Griffin, 2003).

Anonymity and pseudonymity gradually gave way to writing for others. “The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates to 1884 the first instance of “ghost” being used to mean ‘one who secretly does artistic or literary work for another person, the latter taking the credit.’ (Price, 2003, p. 212),” although the specific term “ghostwriting” did not appear until 1927 (Price, 2003, p. 214). Amusingly, the first novel in which the term “ghostwriting” appears is the 1888 *Confessions of a Publisher*, written by John Strange Winter, the pseudonym of Henrietta Stannard (Price, 2003).

What sparked the increased practice of ghostwriting, says Leah Price in her essay, “Delegating Authority at Fin de Siècle,” was “an increase in the number of female office workers,” which increased 80-fold between 1850 and 1914 (Price, 2003). Women were behind many of the books that were being published with men’s names on them and were content to stay behind-the-scenes in order to continue earning a living; putting their names on the covers or title pages would serve no benefit to anyone. However, there appears to have been a collective assessment or belief that women naturally possessed the ability to translate raw material into publishable works. This realization or awareness “can provide a clue to the riddle of why employers at the end of the nineteenth century suddenly began to recruit women for the clerical work previously monopolized by men,” (Griffin, 2003, p. 218). Although secretarial work has been deemed women’s work for decades, this is a relatively recent switch, it turns out.

The deskilling and unmanning of secretarial work has traditionally been explained by factors as various as turn-of-the-century corporate mergers, the 1870 Education Act, and the commercialization of the typewriter and the phonograph along with lower-tech inventions such as the filing cabinet and the index card. But in a society where women's labor is almost invariably cheaper and where employers always want cheaper labor, economic factors alone can never suffice to explain why one field becomes feminized at a particular time rather than another (Price, 2003, p. 218).

However, the trend of women serving in secretarial work continued and carried over to other communications work. A majority of communications professionals today, including writing roles, are women. In such female-dominated occupations, women “tend to receive lower economic rewards” (England, Allison & Wu, 2007).

### *Secrecy*

Because the use of ghostwriting services is considered unethical in some circles (such as academia), or potentially embarrassing in others (such as publishing), not everyone is willing to admit to having relied on a ghostwriter for writing support. Due to lack of familiarity with or a misunderstanding of the ghostwriter's role, it has been mistakenly believed by some that ghostwriters create written materials without the involvement of or guidance from their client, who then takes credit for thoughts, ideas, and words that are not their own. For that reason, some ghostwriters are shifting to the use of the term “collaborator,” to avoid any impression that “the subject — generally, the ‘author’ in contractual language — had nothing to do with the finished product” (Harris, 2023).

The ghostwriter's role is to help convey thoughts and ideas more clearly, not to conceive of new ideas for which their client can take credit. Or, as ghostwriter Michelle Burford explains her role in a recent *New York Times* article about ghostwriting,

explaining that clients provide the raw materials to build a house, which she puts “together, brick by brick. ‘You own the bricks,’ she said she tells them. ‘But you — and there should be no shame in this — don’t have the skill set to actually erect the building’ (Harris, 2023). Lacking publishing expertise is one reason would-be authors turn to ghostwriters (one exception where ghostwriters often do far more than teasing stories out is in fiction writing, where clients provide storylines and the ghostwriter fills in the bulk of the character development, story arc, and details).

This mistaken assumption about the nonfiction ghostwriter’s level of contribution feeds the stigma that has long existed around the field. For that reason, clients may deny the ghostwriter’s existence so that the author can claim the ghostwriter’s words as their own if they so choose. However, it is only the words and not the thinking that they take and use in exchange for the ghostwriter’s fee for service.

While hiring a ghostwriter is completely legal and most full-time ghostwriters publicly market their services, rather than hiding, people who become their clients are not necessarily willing to admit to having hired them. Many prefer to keep that relationship a secret.

Interestingly, extant research on “occupational secrecy” has focused almost exclusively on the worker’s or service provider’s preference for secrecy. One study of exotic dancers in *Women & Health*, for example, found that “Many women hid their occupation from others, especially family and close friends. While secrecy decreased stigmatization, it placed dancers in a perpetual state of anxiety and fear that they would be discovered” (Maticka-Tyndale et al., 2000, p.101). Workers in abortion clinics also



took steps to hide their identities and remain unknown (Todd et al., 2002). Police informants also prefer to remain unknown (Neyroud & Beckley, 2000).

While ghostwriters do not keep their occupation secret, clients often prefer not to be named. Denying use of a ghostwriter's services then impacts ghostwriters' marketing ability, making it more challenging to prove experience or success when clients do not want to be named. Some clients prefer to pretend they didn't need help at all, which fuels the stigma attached to ghostwriting. And "though the stigma has lessened, it is not gone. There are public figures who take more credit for the writing than they should, publishing professionals say, and celebrities who insist they wrote a book all by themselves when they didn't" (Harris, 2023).

#### Ghostwriting as an Occupation

Within the publishing industry are multiple job titles involved in creating and producing books. Jobs "are bundles of tasks performed by employees under administrative job titles" (Cohen, 2013, p. 432), while "an occupation, on the other hand, is broader membership in a shared community that spans across jobs" (Anteby et al., 2016, p. 188). Anteby, Chan and DiBenigno (2016) "suggest that occupations are socially constructed entities that include: (i) a category of work; (ii) the actors understood—either by themselves or others—as members and practitioners of this work; (iii) the actions enacting the role of occupational members; and (iv) the structural and cultural systems upholding the occupation." In essence, occupational categories are rather broad and would include the role of writer, for example, because the function of that role is to write.

Where does ghostwriting fit? Is it an occupation or a profession?

Professions “encompass only a subset of occupations” (Anteby et al., 2016, p. 188) and, according to Hodson and Sullivan (2012), are “a certain type of occupation.” More specifically, a profession “has succeeded in convincing audiences they are characterized by (1) abstract, specialized knowledge, (2) autonomy, (3) authority over clients and subordinate occupational groups, and (4) a certain degree of altruism.” When those characteristics are applied to ghostwriting, it becomes clear that ghostwriting is a profession rather than an occupation. Ghostwriters have specialized knowledge of book authorship and the publishing process, they work autonomously as independent contractors and freelancers, serve as project directors while crafting manuscripts, and often do so to aid authors in presenting their ideas and materials in the best light possible.

One area where there may be some dispute with respect to ghostwriting has to do with credentialing. Freidson (1988) states that “professionals often rely on credentials to ascertain and showcase their specialized knowledge.” However, few ghostwriters have specific credentials related to the field. There is no degree at any secondary level in ghostwriting, no apprenticeship or other training (though there is a 13-month non-credit online certificate program through California State at Long Beach). Since such a certification is a relatively new credential and few ghostwriters have enrolled, it could not be considered a requirement for participation in the field.

But when and how did ghostwriting become a formal profession? “Studies of occupational change have focused on how external triggers—including new technologies, regulatory changes, encroaching neighboring occupations, and organizational pressures—compel and shape change efforts” (Howard-Grenville et al., 2017, p. 525). In the case of ghostwriting, those external triggers were the perfect storm of internet technology driving

up reliance on (online) information, the evolution of self-publishing as a viable book production option, the rising desirability of thought leader status, and the decline of freelance writing opportunities for traditional publications, such as newspapers and magazines.

Freelance writing has long been considered a mainstream profession, where organizations and media outlets paid writers to craft needed documents—everything from articles to newsletters, white papers, reports, blog posts, speeches, books, and more. Hired on an as-needed basis, successful freelance writers juggled multiple clients and projects as they pieced together income streams. Ghostwriters were a niche within the category of freelance writing.

However, as celebrity culture rose in prominence, (due in part to social media), the celebrity memoir became a new publishing genre. Since many celebrities lacked writing skills, ghostwriters became important cogs in that publishing process. “Popular opinion of the celebrity memoir is that they are, for the most part, ghostwritten” (Lee, 2015, p. 1256). However, concerns have been raised about the lengths to which members of the celebrity machine will go to extract stories from female celebrities, in particular, and “the power dynamics of ghostwriting” (Yelin, 2020, p. 9), thereby implying the essential role the ghostwriter plays in this emerging industry.

Demand for help writing books has likely led to an increase in the number of book ghostwriters, sparked by celebrity collaborators as far back as the 1920s (Carvalho, Chung & Koliska, 2021) and more recently as part of celebrity culture (Yelin, 2020). But what was once a behind-the-scenes activity has only recently started to become acknowledged as a legitimate profession, thanks to “the new knowledge economy

[which] also enables new ways of acquiring and sharing expertise that do not conform to professionalization theory” (Croidieu & Kim, 2018, p. 2).

Where professionalization theory states that “to be acknowledged as legitimate experts, actors in these occupations need professional credentials, which are obtained by completing formal training, gaining licensure, and abiding by the profession’s code of ethics” (Croidieu & Kim, 2018, p. 2), such as with doctors and attorneys, new examples of recognized experts are emerging that lack such bona fides. Such is the case with ghostwriting. “After all, ghostwriting for prominent leaders is so prevalent today that scarcely an eyebrow is raised on learning that a speech or other communication is the work of a hired writer” (Knapp & Hulbert, 2017).

#### *Legitimacy of an Occupation*

Although book ghostwriting as a service has existed for centuries, when did it transition from an activity conducted by independent individuals to an institution or legitimate occupation? What was the catalyst for individual agents to form an institution to “reflect, protect, and advance their interests” (Scott, 1995, p. 115)? Exploring the professionalization of occupations may provide some answers.

Individual ghostwriters toiled primarily as independent freelancers for much of history, making individual decisions regarding clients, work processes, which contractual obligations were demanded, what rates were charged, how materials were delivered and when, all based on personal preference and financial needs.

However, book ghostwriters, by definition, are also dependent on publishers—both directly and indirectly—for work. Without an established market for book writing, ghostwriting would cease to exist as a service. That ongoing relationship shapes the degree to which ghostwriters, collectively, behave.

But is ghostwriting a legitimate profession? According to Richard Abel, professionalization is “articulated along two key dimensions: the regulation of production *by* producers and the regulation of the production *of* producers” (Abel, 1988). The first dimension has to do with who controls such services and who can provide them, while the second dimension aims to dictate who can train or produce new members of the profession. “This collegial form of professionalism seeks to create a labor market shelter for certain occupations, guaranteeing them a high degree of discretion over their work and empowering them *vis-a-vis* their customers and potential employers” (Garcia & Barbour, 2018). However, such collegial professions have been challenged by two new occupational categories: organizational professions and knowledge workers. Organizational professions, such as supply chain managers, focus more on solving technical problems for their employers than laying claim to a particular designation or title. And knowledge workers, such as management consultants and, perhaps, ghostwriters, “eschew professionalization entirely and instead prioritize marketization” (Garcia & Barbour, 2018), meaning profit. Rather than giving up on bringing these types of workers into the fold of professionalism, a number of researchers have proposed the concept of a hybrid model of “corporate professionalism” to bridge the gap.

Professions require groups of workers to collaborate in raising the visibility and credibility of the tasks performed, which, until recently, would not have described ghostwriters, who work independently. As technology has increasingly connected ghostwriters to each other, establishing alliances and even business relationships, homogeneity has increased across all aspects of the work being conducted (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). And with increased homogeneity, or reduced diversity among members of the profession, comes the emergence of a more formal field, or occupation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

For ghostwriters, and other workers, “the label of profession frequently enhances the status, prestige, power, and legitimacy of an occupation, which usually translates into

additional resources and power” (Cronin et al., 2018, p. 2112). “Professional ‘legitimacy’ means more power and influence for the occupation, which usually translates into additional resources (legal, political, financial, and otherwise). The ultimate reward of being designated a profession by society is occupational survival” (Cronin et al., 2018, p. 2112).

To establish its legitimacy, ghostwriters collectively must apply four strategies for achieving occupational legitimacy. First, they must construct and lay claim to expertise (Abbott, 1988). Although there are numerous writing courses and degrees that provide trained writers with legitimacy, there is only one non-credit certification program designed by a practitioner to teach the ins and outs of ghostwriting. The source of their expertise currently comes through experience and reputation. Second, signs of gatekeeping must emerge, to create barriers to entry into the occupation (Francis, 2022). According to MacDonald, “Regulated access is a hallmark of any fully formed profession, wherein occupational membership must be earned and formally granted” (McDonald, 1995). The only current official requirement relates to membership in the Association of Ghostwriters at the professional level (versus associate), which is having ghostwritten two book-length works. However, to gain access to paid book project opportunities also requires demonstrated expertise. Reedsy requires at least five published books for inclusion in its database of ghostwriters (Reedsy, 2023, 3/21/23 chat) and ghostwriting firms, such as Gotham Ghostwriters and Kevin Anderson & Associates also require evidence of past ghostwriting success, in the form of ghostwritten books that have been published. Third, the skills and knowledge must be standardized (Larson, 1979), to assist in “regulating the entrée of newcomers to the profession” (Francis, 2022). The formation of trade organizations to which ghostwriters can join is one sign of such legitimacy. And, finally, forging intra-industry alliances and pursuing endorsements from industry leaders (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994) is another strategy, which ghostwriters have undertaken by partnering with established ghostwriting agencies.

Occupations, or occupational fields, emerge through a “structuration” process (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148) consisting of four parts: (1) an increase in interactions among organizations in the field (2) the emergence of alliances and factions (3) increased information load and (4) “the development of a mutual awareness among participants in a set of organizations that they are involved in a common enterprise” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148).

With respect to ghostwriting, (1) the number of trade and professional organizations serving ghostwriters has increased in the last 20 years, with an association specifically for these types of writers having been established, along with businesses specializing in ghostwriting services. (2) alliances and relationships between agencies and ghostwriters have emerged, as well as informal ties between agencies and professional groups for writers. Thanks primarily to technology, (3) more information about ghostwriters has been published and then shared within the profession’s members. And (4) ghostwriters as a group have become more connected and bonded, sharing tips and best practices in order to create new, better opportunities for all.

At the core of this evolution of the field of ghostwriting is the negotiation of legitimacy, or “social acceptability and credibility” (Scott et al., 2000). According to Suchman, “legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). However, the challenge for an emerging occupation is for members to “clarify their occupational identity and carve out occupational jurisdictions for their services” (George, 2013, p. 181), which is a first task toward legitimacy. Members of the occupation must set boundaries through experience, training, and service offerings to set parameters around professionals and nonprofessionals. Like life coaches, which George studied in depth, ghostwriters “have had to convince others that the services they are providing were commodities and second, that they are commodities worth buying” (George, 2013, p. 192). Specializing is one way

that members of an occupation can further delineate their services as being superior, “creating new occupational jurisdictions” (George, 2013, p. 192). Once commoditized, life coaches compared their services to those of established professions, though ghostwriters have fewer comparisons to make beyond freelance writers, which is a broader occupational category. Next, life coaches worked to institutionalize their knowledge through certifications, though, in contrast, ghostwriting has yet to expand beyond one existing certification program.

Chiropractic medicine is another example of an occupation working to be recognized as a profession, which has been successful by earning licensure rights, access to healthcare funds, and accredited training (Brosnan, 2017), which reflect collegial traits, knowledge base, and service orientation. Outside the U.S., major universities now offer chiropractic courses of study and degree programs (Villanueva-Russell, 2011), which was perceived as a major step forward toward legitimacy of the field, by putting it on par with what many consider to be the original profession: Western medicine. The struggle chiropractors now face is an ongoing need to reinforce that achievement, to retain the level of recognition that chiropractors have obtained (Brosnan, 2017).

In contrast, librarians are “struggling to protect and improve [their] image and status” (Garcia & Barbour, 2018, p. 1)—effectively, to defend and preserve the field’s professional identity. Their challenge is that the profession’s stature has been diluted as “information technology changes have profoundly impacted librarians and libraries. Card catalogs have been replaced by online databases, more books are available in online formats, and the advent of online lending platforms has called into question the need for brick-and-mortar libraries” (Garcia & Barbour, 2018, p. 6). Professional librarians, many of whom have master’s degrees in the field, now find themselves competing with patrons who can conduct online research on their own. In this field, however, professional identity stigma is proving to be an obstacle, as librarians combat the stereotype that their ranks consist of “‘Marian,’ a single, bookish, socially awkward spinster woman...”



(Garcia & Barbour, 2018, p. 7). Even when “an occupation has attained the hallmarks of a profession, these can be lost again” (Brosnan, 2017, p. 84).

However, where librarians and ghostwriters diverge as professions has to do with budgets. Where budgets for librarians are shrinking (Garcia & Barbour, 2018), money available for ghostwriting services seems to be increasing, as evidenced by the numbers of books being anonymously authored each year.

Applying this definition, ghostwriting has potentially reached the threshold of legitimacy, at least in most circles.

### *Becoming a Ghostwriter*

Anteby, Chan and DiBenigno (2016) investigated the process by which a member of an occupation becomes part of the collective, does the work, and relates to others. The researchers explain: “Through a becoming lens, scholars would notice the transformation of newcomers as they become socialized into an occupation. Using a doing lens, on the other hand, scholars would notice the tasks occupational members perform and claim jurisdiction to, as well as those they collectively avoid. Through a relating lens, scholars may notice the complexities of the relations members build to clients and other external stakeholders” (Anteby et al., 2016, p. 189).

How a ghostwriter enters the occupation is of particular interest, since there is no established career path. It is a profession with a less formal but high barrier to entry. Ghostwriters are “members of the creative class, paid to use their ‘mind’ (rather than their physical labor)” (Florida, 2002, p. 9). For many, the fee they earn is in exchange for keeping quiet about their role, which is problematic for attracting more work. Anteby and Occhuito’s (2020) study reported that ghostwriters were increasingly negotiating for some type of acknowledgment, whether on the cover, the title page, or in the

acknowledgments section of the book they help create. “Many mentioned the need for recognition in terms of resume building and their ability to secure future work” (Anteby & Occhuito, 2020, p. 12). “This desire for recognition was particularly acute for ghostwriters who were beginning their careers” (Anteby & Occhuito, 2020, p. 12).

Once established, however, ghostwriters “no longer need publicity to secure gigs” (Anteby & Occhuito, 2020, p. 12) and frequently have “intermediaries” who refer them work. These more experienced ghostwriters, who Anteby and Occhuito define as ghosts who have worked on at least 10 book projects, have the autonomy to choose projects that interest them, to manage their workload and craft, and to charge what they believe their skills are worth. After demonstrating their ability to write a) a book-length work b) in another person’s voice, the gates open. From there, bestseller status and awards propel ghostwriter rates forward in terms what they can demand. Because of the above average potential for income as a ghostwriter, more freelance writers are working toward establishing their credentials in this emerging field.

The field of ghostwriting has long existed but has only reached a level of awareness in business circles in recent years. That has led to my research question: How can the field of ghostwriting be characterized and how has it evolved in the past 20 years? To answer that question, I conducted two studies. The first investigated the experience of being a ghostwriter (Study 1), followed by the experience the clients of ghostwriters have (Study 2), in order to provide a 360-degree view of the field.

## CHAPTER 3

### STUDY 1—THE GHOSTWRITER EXPERIENCE

For my first study, I conducted an inductive, qualitative study using a grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) research method, to study the industry of ghostwriting and its participants. Because there is so little that is known about the inner workings of the field of ghostwriting, an exploratory effort was most appropriate. My goal was to rely on first-hand data gathered from industry participants in order to discover the underlying theory at work, rather than trying to force-fit (Vannoy & Salam, 2010) the data to existing hypotheses and theories. Digging deep in the interviews to uncover the ghostwriters' personal experiences, and the context in which their services were provided, yielded a rich description of why and how they entered the field, what they do, how their clients feel about the ghostwriter's role, and why interest in such services may be rising.

My approach was more of a traditional grounded theory approach, in that I will focus on the “emergence of theory” from the data gathered (Mills & Birk, 2014).

Interviews were focused specifically on nonfiction book ghostwriting, versus other genres, such as fiction, young adult (YA), and textbook, because the skills required for nonfiction ghostwriting are different and distinctive. To be a ghostwriter generally requires strong writing abilities, lack of ego, and a willingness to take direction. However, a nonfiction book ghostwriter must have those skills *and* an ability to get into the client's head—to think like they do, perceive situations like they do, and feel emotions the way they do—and then communicate those thoughts, ideas, and feelings in

the same way the client themselves would. Focusing on this genre also made sense because it is where my own expertise is based; I ghostwrite nonfiction books exclusively and could bring my own experience to bear in designing the research.

In addition, nonfiction ghostwriting services appeal to clients who typically aim to convey an idea, a practice, or an experience they have experience with. This is a well-defined target market that I anticipated would enable me to make more definitive conclusions from the data.

### Sample

Before beginning any interviews, I completed the application for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Temple University. As part of that process, I supplied background information about my study, proposed interview questions, as well as my plans for storing and analyzing any data, to ensure the security of interviewee identities and responses.

The research was approved, with minor clarification of some points related to data storage, and a pilot study of two ghostwriters was conducted to test the utility of the questions being posed. The respondents were either from outside the U.S, or not earning a full-time income from ghostwriting. Their responses were not included with those of official participants.

For this first study, I interviewed 30 professional book ghostwriters, or individuals who earn the majority of their income from writing nonfiction books for other people anonymously. Between 25 and 30 interviews are appropriate for grounded theory work (Thomson, 2010, p. 45). Recruiting for the sample was done through ghostwriting Facebook groups (Association of Ghostwriters, Binders Full of Ghostwriters, and

Ghostwriting for Profit), after receiving permission from the admins to do so. Only full-time ghostwriters based in the U.S. were considered for interviews. The sampling process was “purposive rather than random” (Miles et al., 2020), sampling within online groups where such professionals congregate to network.

Even within that subset of professional ghostwriters, however, there was a fair amount of diversity, in terms of gender, age, and career stage, as shown in Appendix A. Although all participants were highly knowledgeable, they entered the field for differing reasons and at different times in their lives, some as a way to ramp up their earnings through a career pivot and others as a way to slide into a comfortable semi-retirement. The goal of this research was to understand the phenomenology of their work.

The participants ranged in age from 29 to 75. Twenty-one were female, eight were male, and one was nonbinary. All worked independently, though many received project work through ghostwriting agencies and publishers.

Those who were interviewed were offered a \$25 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation. All participants accepted the gift, although one ghostwriter requested instead that \$25 be given to a Ukrainian charity, which was then donated anonymously.

### Interviews

Thirty (30), semi-structured interviews were conducted with ghostwriters. All received a copy of the consent form in advance and gave verbal, and sometimes written, permission to proceed. All were conducted via telephone, except for one done via Zoom. The interviews took between 35 and 75 minutes.

The questions posed related to their experiences as ghostwriters, their observations of the field and of their clients, followed by demographic questions. The questions included:

#### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

*First, I'd like to ask you a few questions broadly asking for your perspective on the field of ghostwriting.*

What do prospects and clients think when they hear the term “ghostwriting?”

What do they envision a ghostwriter can do for them?

Has people’s perceptions of ghostwriting changed at all in the last few years? If so, why do you think that is?

How do you describe what you do as a ghostwriter?

What kinds of skills do you think are the most useful for being successful as a ghostwriter?

*Now, I'm going to ask you about your experiences as a book ghostwriter.*

Why did you get into ghostwriting? What attracted you to that kind of work?

Do you have a college degree in journalism or English? If yes, has that helped you become established as a writer? Has it helped you with ghostwriting, specifically?

Tell me about your first ghostwriting project. (Did you pursue it or did it find you?)

Who is your typical ghostwriting client?

What is the range that you typically charge for your work?

About how many books do you complete in a typical year? Has that held steady or has it changed?

How many hours a week would you say that you work?

How long does the typical book project take you to complete?

What skill has helped you the most?

What has been your biggest challenge as a ghostwriter?

What has surprised you about it?

How do you typically find ghostwriting work?

*Next, I'd like to hear about your experiences with ghostwriting in the last 12 months.*

What types of projects have you taken on in the last 12 months?

Have the last 12 months looked much the same as the previous, or has your business changed at all? How so?

Has demand for your services changed at all in that time?

Why do you think that is? What happened that caused the change?

*Finally, what haven't I asked that you think would be useful for me to know about your ghostwriting work?*

### Demographics

Gender

Education level

Years of experience

Business incorporated?

Annual income range

Age range

This list of questions was the starting point for the interviews, but the order of the questions did evolve as I realized there was redundancy and cross-over within some of the questions. There was also a point of saturation at around the 22nd interview, at which point the responses provided by participants mirrored the experiences that other interviewees had shared; there were no more revelatory responses that differed considerably from prior interviews.

### Reflexivity

“Reflexivity in research is not a single or universal entity but a process—an active, ongoing process that saturates every stage of the research” (Gillam & Guillemin, 2004, p. 274). As an experienced nonfiction book ghostwriter who also leads the field’s professional association, I was very aware that my own work history, opinions, and beliefs could shape my research. Consequently, I worked hard to separate myself from the task of information-gathering and to routinely stop and reflect on whether my personal opinions or experiences were impacting the responses I was getting or my interpretations of their meaning.

In particular, I tried to keep Mason’s (1996) definition of reflexive research top-of-mind: “the researcher should constantly take stock of their actions and their role in the research process and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their ‘data.’” (Mason, 1996, p. 6).

I tried to build reflexivity into my research process from the start. In developing questions to ask ghostwriters, I tried to take the perspective of someone who was new to the industry, to be sure that my own biases and knowledge base were not limiting the data being gathered. I also shared the draft questions with other ghostwriters, requesting



feedback to try to ensure I wasn't overlooking an aspect of the field due to my own assumptions. During the semi-structured interviews, I regularly asked interviewees for clarification when I suspected I might be making assumptions about the point being made or the experience being shared. In some cases, I stopped myself from asking follow-up questions that interested me personally but did not add to the research task at hand. During the coding process, as I reviewed each interview transcript, I tried to take a step back and read it from the perspective of someone who does not have industry experience to overlay onto the data. Although it is likely impossible to completely put aside one's own personal beliefs and experiences, I remained very conscious of and alert to any tendencies to insert my preconceived notions into my data.

### Analysis

The collected data, in the form of recorded audio files, were then transcribed by Speechpad, an online transcription service staffed by humans (versus artificial intelligence technology) and analyzed using an open-coding method, to try to break down interviewee expressions and ideas into separate identifiable pieces or concepts. In order to leverage the strength of grounded theory, which is that each subsequent interview builds on what is learned in previous discussions, coding of interview transcripts began once 5 interviews were done. In the first round of coding, I looked for common initial concepts that the subjects expressed independently in their interview responses.

That first open coding step was followed by axial coding, where the first set of codes were reviewed to identify connections between them and then reorganized to reflect the potential relationships that were uncovered. Related codes were grouped by category. Those categories were then organized around a larger, core category or

dimension, that emerged in the final, selective coding step (Saldana, 2009) and that related to existing business theory (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Data Coding Structure—Study 1.

| 1 <sup>st</sup> Order Codes   | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Order Codes | Aggregate Dimensions |
|---|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| Few understand<br>Underestimate skills required<br>Have wrong impression                    | Misunderstood profession    | Legitimacy           |
| Increasing media coverage<br>Rising awareness<br>Less shame                                 | Increasing legitimacy       |                      |
| Traditional publishing waning<br>Self-publishing rising<br>Hybrid emerging                  | Power dynamic shift         | Power dynamic        |
| Glamorous<br>Sexy<br>Mystique   | Status signaling            |                      |
| Referral<br>Fell into<br>Happy accident   | Happenstance career         | Opportunity          |
| Client reached out<br>Answered online ad<br>Received referral                               | Reactive client acquisition |                      |
| Business titles<br>Nonfiction<br>Self-help<br>Thought leadership<br>Fiction                 | Nonfiction prominent        |                      |
| Empathy<br>Lack of ego<br>Active listening skills<br>Interpersonal skills<br>Trust-building | High emotional intelligence |                      |

Table 1. (continued).

|  |                         |                 |
|--|-------------------------|-----------------|
| Finding steady work<br>Marketing/promotion<br>Breaking in                              | Feast or famine earning | Embedded agency |
| Websites<br>Agents<br>Cold pitching<br>Word of mouth<br>Google Adwords<br>Social media | Online-based marketing  |                 |
| Surprised how much people pay<br>Avg \$50-70k/book<br>Some make \$200k+                | Well-paid work          | Motivation      |
| Love the work<br>Enjoyment<br>Can make a living at it                                  | Meaningful work         |                 |

### Results

The semi-structured interview questions were grouped according to three general lenses: 1) The market, or public's, view of the field of ghostwriting and the role the ghostwriter plays, 2) The ghostwriters' view of their role and work process, and 3) The ghostwriters' view of the external marketplace. For example, the question "What percent of people today understand what a ghostwriter does, in your experience?" attempts to understand the general public's familiarity with ghostwriting as a profession." What has been your biggest challenge as a ghostwriter" aims to explore the interviewees' experience working as a ghost. And "Has demand for your services changed much in the last few years?" is designed to capture what the ghostwriter has observed and experienced with respect to market demand, based on their individual experiences.

The first round of coding began with a reading of all of the transcripts and all of my accompanying handwritten notes, to understand the common points interviewees made about their experiences. Those 30 interviews provided a list of initial concepts related to the main topics the participants were asked about. Those concepts included common first-order concepts, such as “*(Members of the general public) have the wrong impression,*” “*media coverage increasing,*” “*happy accident*” (to stumble across the field), the challenge of “*finding steady work,*” and “*lack of ego*” and “*emotional intelligence*” as being characteristics critical to success. A total of 43 first-order concepts emerged from the data.

Quotes from interviewees reflect and underscore these codes in surprising ways. For example, when asked what percent of the general public understands what a ghostwriter does, one source responded that people they come into contact with will often remark, “*Wow, I didn't know that was a thing!*” Although the term “ghostwriter” is meant to convey that a writer creates material on behalf of someone else anonymously, some people misconstrue the word, with some individuals interpreting it to mean the writer creates stories about ghosts, or that the writer can draft a book or story based solely on a phrase or scant input.

When asked about whether the perception of ghostwriting is changing at all, several interviewees indicated that it was becoming more “*legitimate,*” and that “*there is less shame among people considering working with a ghostwriter.*” Thanks to media coverage regarding celebrity use of ghostwriters and an increasing comfort level with that revelation, interviewees sensed that for some clients, using a ghostwriter was a badge of

honor. In turn, clients seem to be becoming more comfortable with giving their ghostwriter cover credit.

Most ghostwriters interviewed did not enter the field with a college-level English degree or journalism major. In fact, many were skilled writers in high school but didn't ever really consider that writing could be the basis of a career. Others did have writing-related occupations, such as in magazine publishing, copywriting, or freelance writing, and were not aware of ghostwriting as another potential specialty or niche. As a result, most first ghostwriting projects came through referrals or introductions to clients, rather than the ghostwriter proactively seeking such opportunities; one interviewee said, "*Like most ghostwriters, I stumbled into it.*"

This particular sample included ghostwriters who are overwhelmingly nonfiction writers. Within nonfiction, however, ghostwriters penned business books, memoirs, self-help guides, and biographies, among others.

The marketing tactics ghostwriters use were varied, leading to a wide range of sources of work. The most commonly mentioned source of clients was literary agents, which 9 ghosts mentioned. The next most common source, mentioned by 7 participants, was social media, which included leads through LinkedIn, Facebook groups, and online personal connections. Other sources of work included referrals, from agents, editors, past clients, and fellow writers, Google, their own website, gig platforms, publishing and ghostwriting agencies, and Google Adwords.

The challenge that most ghostwriters face was summed up nicely by one source, who explained, "*Somebody needs a ghostwriter, you just don't know who it is.*" Marketing then becomes a process of trying to discover and discern who has considered writing a

book, has an idea for what to write about, and has adequate financial and time resources to devote to it. For many ghostwriters, that means investing time and resources in marketing and promotional activities designed to connect them with prospective clients, and then sitting back and waiting, hoping, for the phone to ring or for an email to land in their inbox from someone who is thinking about writing a book and suspects they'll need help to complete it.

The skills required to be successful as a ghostwriter ran the gamut from having stamina and speed to being patient, flexible, able to conduct interviews, able to sell yourself, as well as lacking an ego (which was mentioned several times), to being deadline-oriented, and having strong interpersonal skills, mentioned multiple times). Only 5 ghostwriters specifically mentioned writing as an essential skill, though others did mention communication as important.

As for typical clients, the common denominator across all descriptions was leadership. Clients who hire ghostwriters are often prominent members of their industry, with healthcare and business the most frequently mentioned. "*Leaders*," "*aspiring leaders*," and "*CEOs*" were commonly mentioned, but some participants were extremely clear about their best clients. One interviewee stated that their typical client is a "*Black female faith-based entrepreneur*." That response was a rarity, however, with nearly all other respondents listing broader categories of leaders.

Ghostwriters are well-paid, according to participant responses. The majority earn between \$70,000 and \$175,000 per book with the average annual earnings across all ghostwriters interviewed being \$108,000. Two interviewees cited lower fees, with a low of \$10,000 and a high of \$50,000 between them. Although many ghosts write two or

three books per year, at the rates charged, nearly all are six-figure earners, with some topping \$200,000 per year. Many stated that they had been making a concerted effort to steadily increase their rates each year, or after each subsequent book, after hearing what other ghostwriters manage to command for their work.

Repeatedly, ghostwriters expressed surprise at their good fortune—that they had stumbled onto ghostwriting as a writing niche, that they have been able to charge what they charge, that the work is steady and interesting. One interviewee seemed to speak for many when they said they were most surprised "*That I make a living at it.*" They thought they might have to go back into journalism early on if ghostwriting didn't work out, but it has, and they ended up leaving journalism in the rearview mirror.

The second round of coding yielded 12 second-order categories that reflected the statements made in the first round. These 12 include: Misunderstood profession, increasing legitimacy, hybrid (publishing) no longer embarrassing, cachet, happenstance career, reactive client acquisition, feast or famine, online-based marketing, high EQ, nonfiction genre prominence, well-paid work, and meaningful work.

The third round of coding was devoted to developing aggregate dimensions. A total of three emerged from the prior 12 categories. The second-order categories consisted of the following, as shown in Table 2:

Table 1

| Theme                    | Description and Relation to Ghostwriting  | Representative Quotes   |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| Misunderstood profession | <p>The combination of the word "ghost" and "writer" causes confusion to some members of the general public. Rather than interpreting "ghost" to mean anonymous, some people make a connection to spirits.</p>   | <p><i>I don't think [a client] understood that [ghostwriters] cannot fill in gaps that they cannot fill in themselves.</i></p> <p><i>There's a gap of understanding in terms of professionalism and skill; they're not quite clear [on what it means].</i></p> <p><i>I'm a doula; I'm not delivering the baby, I'm just helping it along.</i></p> |
| Increasing legitimacy    | <p>Legitimacy has to do with how well something conforms to society's norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. As outsourcing writing work to a ghostwriter becomes more acceptable, it becomes more legitimate.</p>  | <p><i>[Ghostwriters] have kind of come out of the shadows.</i></p> <p><i>Adds an air of respectability.</i></p> <p><i>It's not as hush-hush as it used to be. People are starting to look at it differently.</i></p>  |
| Power dynamic shift      | <p>Traditional publishers have long been the gatekeepers, determining which works were of sufficient quality to be produced. Today, however, authors are choosing to work with hybrid or independent presses, which allow them to make more money, print their books faster, and retain control of the content.</p> | <p><i>Hybrid is in a sweet spot for clients who do not have the time or the interest to self-publish...but their books aren't of the caliber to interest a traditional publisher.</i></p> <p><i>It's a lot easier to go through the self-publishing route.</i></p>  |



|                             |   |  |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Status signaling            | <p>Because recent media reports about ghostwriters almost always mention a celebrity, the two roles have become intertwined. Now, many people associate ghostwriters with celebrities. Some aspire to have the money and the story to interest a ghostwriter.</p> | <p><i>There's always been this mystique and sexiness...and glamour.</i></p>  |
| Happenstance career         | <p>Few writers plan a career as a ghostwriter and, instead, are offered an opportunity that opens the doors to the field. Some writers previously had no idea that writing anonymously for someone else was even an option.</p>                                   | <p><i>I fell into it by desperation.<br/>I had no intention of being a ghostwriter; I didn't even really know what the career meant.<br/>It was serendipitous.</i></p>   |
| Reactive client acquisition | <p>To land clients, ghostwriters have to connect with people who are considering writing a book. However, not everyone is so open about such plans, especially if they question whether they have the skills to write it themselves.</p>                          | <p><i>I try to put myself everywhere [online, to connect with prospects]. [Ghostwriting agencies] are doing those kinds of [online] ads and that kind of marketing, but it goes from them to me.<br/>If [other ghostwriter] hadn't referred that client to me, I don't know how I would have gotten my first book.</i></p> |
| Feast or famine             | <p>The life of a freelance worker is frequently feast or famine in terms of work and cash flow. Steady work is a goal for many ghostwriters.</p>  | <p><i>[Business is] a little bit sporadic. Unbelievable roller coaster life.<br/>...you trade freedom for security in your career. My income has literally been everywhere...it's so up and down, it's so unpredictable.</i></p>   |

|                            |   |   |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Online-based marketing     | <p>Today, the most popular marketing tools used by ghostwriters are internet-based, from LinkedIn, to designing a professional website, to Facebook, and online job platforms.</p>  | <p><i>[Uses] Google Adwords from the end of February to October to drive business. Along comes Google and all of a sudden, you're in direct communication with the entire world.</i></p>  |
| High EQ                    | <p>Besides writing, strong emotional intelligence was most frequently cited as necessary for success as a ghostwriter. Empathy, self-awareness, and social awareness are considered must-haves.</p>                       | <p><i>...being able to be their therapist at times.</i></p> <p><i>You have to be very diplomatic, because people are opening themselves up and sharing their souls when you're interviewing them.</i></p>   |
| Nonfiction genre prominent | <p>While fiction ghostwriting is in demand, it does not pay as well as nonfiction. Nonfiction is also growing because of interest on the part of business professionals in positioning themselves as thought leaders.</p> | <p><i>Nonfiction pays better than fiction. They're trying to establish themselves as thought leaders.</i></p>   |
| Well-paid work             | <p>Earning more than \$100,000/year is a common occurrence among nonfiction ghostwriters.</p>   | <p><i>I've progressively increased my rates, year-over-year, for the past 4 years.</i></p> <p><i>I make more money at this than I did [at my last job].</i></p> <p><i>I've stopped feeling guilty about the fact that someone is paying me well to do this, even if their book deal isn't huge.</i></p> |
| Meaningful work            | <p>Ghostwriters feel fulfilled and satisfied by their client work, often more than they expected. No one was interested in leaving the field.</p>   | <p><i>I've met some really great, amazing people.</i></p>   |

## Discussion

The intention of this research was to add to the extant body of literature about the field of ghostwriting, to explain exactly what it is. With only one previous study specifically focused on book ghostwriting (Anteby & Occhiuto, 2020), the opportunity to add to the knowledge base about ghostwriting seemed wide open. The goal was to deepen the literature about the field of ghostwriting and gain a better understanding of the profession.

At the outset of this study, my focus was on understanding the experiences of professional ghostwriters and, in particular, if they were seeing changes within the market with respect to the work, clients, and fees paid. The interview questions were crafted to try to elicit data on that topic.

The data that emerged suggested that demand for ghostwriting services may not have suddenly increased in the last few years, despite the launch of new ghostwriting agencies in the last 15 years and the rise of publishing-related platforms containing ghostwriting opportunities. The majority of interviewees asked that question indicated that they had not seen a noticeable increase in demand, though few were currently without work.

Is demand for ghostwriting increasing? Most ghostwriters said no. However, there could be other factors at work. One is that some ghostwriters are relatively new to the profession and, therefore, may not have a long enough track record to discern changes in demand. Another possible explanation is that there are more ghostwriters in the field

today than there were 10 or 20 years ago, allowing for a larger number of projects to be dispersed over a greater quantity of professionals.

Several ghostwriters noted that their work was often done independently, but that they rarely felt alone. Thanks to new professional organizations and groups that cater to ghostwriters, there is a rising sense of community. Ghostwriters now recognize that there are others to which they can reach out for guidance or problem-solving with respect to their work or their business practices. This has likely impacted the rates that ghostwriters, on average, charge, since getting feedback on market rates is now easier. Additionally, editorial organizations such as The Editorial Freelancers Association and Gotham Ghostwriters have published rate reports designed to educate the market and those professionals within it.

Ghostwriters coming together to share best practices and industry information, effectively forging a community to which they belong, is one sign of an emerging profession. Through their linkages, standards are established to which other ghostwriters can choose to follow. This scenario is described as “occupational boundary play” (Murphy & Kreiner, 2020), “where the key identity problem is not one of tailoring identity content effectively but creating an identity in the first place – more specifically, an identity whose existence feels justified and valid” (Murphy & Kreiner, 2020, p. 871). This is in contrast to individuals in “well-established occupations,” where occupational identities have long been established and include such factors as occupational values, goals, tasks, and routines (Murphy & Kreiner, 2020).

Some of the most interesting and unexpected findings related to the public’s perception of a ghostwriter’s work included the educational background many

ghostwriters have, the prominence of literary agents within the publishing process, and the seeming lack of agreement on which marketing strategies are the most successful.

Media attention has raised awareness of the role a ghostwriter plays, nearly everyone stated, but several also stated that the attention was sometimes problematic. That is, because media attention was frequently related to a celebrity's use of a ghostwriter, some members of the public have the mistaken impression that celebrities are the *only* types of clients ghostwriters have. Consequently, the lifestyle of ghostwriters is often perceived to be much more "*glamorous.*" Average consumers appeared to assume the celebrity's luxury lifestyle matched the ghostwriter's, even when there was little overlap; the relationship is that of a client and vendor, rather than as peers. Interviewees observed that others "*still have a fundamentally skewed concept of what it means.*"

Another interesting fact is that ghostwriters with college-level training in English, journalism, or writing are in the minority. One might expect that writers earning a premium for their services might have invested in secondary education, such as journalism school, for that purpose. But participants indicated that innate skill and interest were better predictors of their entering the field.

The number of ghostwriters who still rely primarily on leads and work from traditional publishers and literary agents is also counterintuitive and surprising, given the publishing industry shift away from traditional publishers. Authors today are increasingly opting to publish themselves through hybrid or independent publishers, which require an upfront investment, but can print and distribute books in a matter of months, rather than years; publishing industry reports of increasing numbers of book published but fewer

coming out of traditional publishing houses bears this out. Speed of production is enticing to entrepreneurs planning to leverage their published book as a marketing tool.

Ghostwriters who were seeing more of an increase in demand reported a parallel with the rise of thought leadership books. Many ghosts decided to specialize in this new genre, choosing to work with business leaders and experts who wanted to publish a book primarily to establish their expertise and authority. They saw the book as a tool more than as a legacy of their story, or as a personal story they wanted to tell. Such books had a purpose, which was to further their career. Whether the book became a bestseller was not always the goal, since such clients intended to use it mainly as a business card or brochure for their companies. Thought leadership books were a main driver of rising demand for their services, many sources revealed.

Those findings don't tell the whole story, however, and taking a closer look at the demographic data I collected provided unexpected insights. When you dissect the numbers, it becomes clear that there are two clusters within the ghostwriters I interviewed: the old guard and new guard. These groups were separated by age, years of experience, gender, college degrees in English, earnings, and source of work.

Age-wise, 11 of the 29 who answered the question were under age 50 and 18 were over 50. Fifteen interviewees had fewer than 10 years of experience and 14 had more than 10. Seventy percent were women, which mirrored what ghostwriting agencies reported as far as gender breakdown. Twenty-three percent had English degrees. Financially, 16 made under \$100,000/year and 13 made over \$100,000—often much more. And the 21 who found work online generally earned less than the 9 who worked through agents and publishers.

The biggest takeaway of relevance to ghostwriters, perhaps, is the range of marketing tools that ghostwriters can now rely on to find work.

Until about 25 years ago, there were only two “intermediaries” or sources (Anteby & Occhiuto, 2020) that referred ghostwriters work from potential author clients: literary agents and publishers. This makes sense since traditional publishers were the only path to publication and the final judges of which books were worthy to be produced.

Today, however, there are many more ways that ghostwriters can connect with potential clients, because there are many ways for books to be published. In addition to literary agents and publishers, which still refer work to ghostwriters, there are referrals from clients, ghostwriting agencies, Google, social media, publishing platforms such as Reedsy and Upwork, and writer organizations such as the Association of Ghostwriters, the American Society of Journalists and Authors, and the Editorial Freelancers Association.

Since it is almost impossible to design a targeted marketing campaign to identify individuals thinking about writing a book someday, ghostwriters try to increase their odds of coming in contact with those individuals by being active in a wide range of these networks, social media platforms, organizations, and, for some, by advertising online. The challenge is similar to finding someone who is thinking about selling their home or considering early retirement. Unless and until they take a step in that direction, it is hard to recognize what they might be planning.

## Practical Implications

In addition to helping raise awareness of the field of ghostwriting, this research has practical implications for working ghostwriters on a number of fronts. Because ghostwriting is almost always a solitary pursuit, with ghosts producing written material for clients often alone in an office, members of the occupation are not always aware of how other ghostwriters operate. Any kind of information-sharing within the field can assist in improving effectiveness and efficiency of ghostwriting businesses.

Given that the number one challenge shared by ghostwriters was finding steady work, details regarding the marketing methods used and the success that some ghostwriters have found with advertising, social media platform LinkedIn, and freelancing platforms could directly aid in broadening the ghostwriters' marketing efforts and ultimate financial success.

And while discussions of money are still considered taboo, when financial information is shared, ghostwriters invariably discover that they are charging too little, or at least less—sometimes considerably so—than their peers. The results of this research indicate that many ghostwriters are charging at least \$50,000 per book, although some are under the impression that clients will not pay more than \$10,000 or \$20,000, and have kept their rates low. The study may help open their eyes to the money they are currently leaving on the table.

At a minimum, information about the profession should boost the confidence of ghostwriters that there are many ways to be successful, and they are doing just fine.



## Research Implications

The identification of 12 second-order themes related to the profession of ghostwriting helps to increase understanding of the factors that determine success in the field. Three themes that expand on existing literature are legitimacy, gig work, and meaningful work.

Improving awareness of and familiarity with the services a professional ghostwriter provides, thanks to media reports that align ghostwriters with celebrities and experts, has contributed to the field's improving legitimacy. With legitimacy defined as, "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), the "voluntary disclosure" by celebrities, politicians, and business leaders that they relied on the help of a ghostwriter in the production of their books, is an important legitimizing tool. Ghostwriting's improving legitimacy is also serving to reduce any shame or stigma that was formerly attached to the notion of outsourcing writing work.

The rise of the gig economy and the popularity of side hustles suggests that ghostwriters are generally able to earn more by working independently than from full-time jobs (Kunda et al., 2002). That fact, too, could explain the increasing interest in and the emergence of more ghostwriting opportunities. Since ghostwriting is one example of gig work, this research expands our understanding of why it has become so popular.

And the discovery by several interviewed ghostwriters that the work they do is meaningful work (Fay et al., 2022)—often helping their author-clients process and share important personal experiences—adds to the literature in that area. Ghostwriters' ability

to control the pace and content of their work adds to their enjoyment of it, and the sense of fulfillment they receive from helping clients produce important written works.

#### Limitations

Limitations of this research that make wide-scale conclusions more difficult are, namely, the size of the sample. With the number of ghostwriters estimated in the thousands, it is very possible that 30 interviews is not a large enough cross-section from which to derive reliable conclusions. Restricting interviews to U.S.-based ghostwriters is another potential limiting factor, although ghostwriters in other parts of the world are generally very different; they appear to charge lower rates and are more typically crafting works of fiction or academic papers than nonfiction books.

## CHAPTER 4

### STUDY 2—THE GHOSTWRITING CLIENT PERSPECTIVE

Until the turn of the twentieth century, the role that ghostwriters played in the book publishing process was very much hidden from the public, though certainly “an open secret in book publishing” (Mayyasi, 2016, p. 1). Publishing industry insiders, from literary agents, to acquisitions editors, publishers, and authors were well aware that anonymous writers were at the core of the manuscript development process, but few outsiders— meaning readers—were. Ghostwriters themselves might even have been unaware of others who were performing similar work on different books, thanks to the long-held secrecy associated with the process and non-disclosure agreements that threatened lawsuits if a ghostwriter dared reveal their involvement. Rather than operating as a cohesive collective, ghostwriters have long been independent agents.

Yet despite ghostwriters having effectively held up the foundation of the book publishing industry for several decades, almost nothing is known about this occupation. Until recently, the stigma and shame associated with authors who required professional writing help to finish their books kept many quiet. But as demand for written content, and books in particular, have yielded dramatic growth in the number of ghostwriters working in the industry, making it a much more common knowledge, negative connotations are dying out. That then causes more aspiring authors to consider asking for help to finish the manuscript they had pushed aside years before due to feelings of “overwhelm,” “intimidation,” and self-doubt.

Increased publishing opportunities, thanks in large part to print-on-demand (POD) technology, is causing upheaval within the book publishing industry. What used to be

controlled by mainstream traditional publishers has now mushroomed to also include non-traditional alternative presses. “Figures released by R.R. Bowker in mid-2008 for new titles produced in 2007 show that POD titles far outstripped their “traditionally” produced counterparts. The production of traditional books rose just 1% in 2007, to 276,649 new titles and editions, while the output of on-demand, short run and unclassified titles soared from 21,936 in 2006 to 134,773 in 2007. The five-year average, for output of titles between 2002 and 2007, shows a similar disparity: production of traditional titles rose 29% compared to a 313% increase in the on-demand segment” (Dougherty, 2009, p. 185). This is likely due to the many advantages non-traditional presses provide, namely “benefits in terms of speed, as well as offering authors greater freedom and control over the final products and possibly even the pricing of their books” (Hviid et al., 2019, p. 356).

Ghostwriting as an occupation has been kept underground for centuries. So why now are clients becoming more willing to openly admit to having used their services? What has gone on in the publishing world that has made it acceptable for the ghostwriter’s role to be acknowledged and even given cover credit? Has a shift occurred within the business world and our notion of what it means to be a thought leader? Or have ghostwriters coalesced into a community-turned-profession that has propelled the field forward?

These are many of the questions that emerged following my exploration of what it means to be a ghostwriter.

Where the objective of Study 1 was to better understand the personal experience of being a ghostwriter from within the field, my goal with Study 2 was to flip the

perspective and to look at the market within which ghostwriters are operating, by studying the companies and people who are hiring them. After all, it is that side of the market that has created demand for the ghostwriters' role.

They are, in many ways, two sides of the same coin: the ghostwriters' personal experience creating manuscripts anonymously and the clients who determine they need the services of a ghostwriter in order to achieve their goal of becoming published. One side cannot exist without the other.

Based on interviewee statements in Study 1, the field is continuing to develop, as the services ghostwriters are asked to perform are moving away from hidden authorship to more public—meaning credited—collaborations. In turn, that affects and shapes the ghostwriter's role within the publishing industry as well as the books that are produced. From changing work practices to emerging expectations and project partners, what it means to be a ghostwriter is being transformed by industry expectations. However, the path to success is still murky for the vast majority of ghostwriters interviewed.

Lacking familiarity with how other ghostwriters work, what standard practices are, what client expectations are, and what the writing process often looks like, until recently, ghostwriters have been working independently, individually, making business decisions based on their personal experiences. However, as demand for books has risen and the need for ghostwriting services has climbed, ghostwriters are finding others who do what they do. A community has formed that has become a legitimate and recognized profession. With the emergence of the profession comes increased public awareness, recognition, and credibility.

Within the publishing industry, that then raises the question that if ghostwriters are no longer anonymous, do they become part of the “book package” that a publisher evaluates and puts a contract price on? Will publishers now need to factor in the value a well-known ghostwriter brings to a project, in terms of skill, celebrity, and gravitas? Can ghostwriters become celebrities or gurus themselves?

Those answers depend on an assessment of where the field stands today. Has ghostwriting become a legitimate profession with standard practices, procedures, and standards (Howard-Grenville et al., 2017)? Or does it consist of siloed independent freelancers without a common identity and agreement on the scope of work to be done? Is it still in flux, still adapting and evolving to meet the industry’s needs, or has it evolved into a unified collection of job descriptions and required skills?

Those will certainly impact the future of publishing, marketing opportunities for thought leaders, as well as future ghostwriting opportunities.

With greater familiarity regarding the history of the profession, who clients have been historically, who the likeliest candidates are now, and where the greatest opportunities exist, ghostwriters can more effectively amass steady streams of ghostwriting work. Most ghostwriters interviewed in Study 1 expressed confusion or lack of knowledge regarding how and where to find more clients; for many, that is the main obstacle to their financial success. Connecting with potential clients who may not yet be comfortable stating out loud their interest in becoming an author or, more specifically, who are open to working with a ghostwriter, is a significant roadblock to career progression. The apparent solution of casting a wide marketing net is, however, costly and inefficient.

On top of context regarding the field's emergence, understanding the client decision-making process would be useful for ghostwriters, since they do not often receive feedback on why they were not selected (or even why they were) for a particular project. While many ghostwriters may feel that early interviews with the client are scheduled to help the author determine who they would like to partner with on their book, "with top ghostwriters, the client is also auditioning" (Mayyasi, 2016, p. 1). In-demand ghostwriters want to avoid committing their time to a project unlikely to come to fruition or to a client who turns out to be difficult. For that reason, some ghosts look for personal characteristics such as agreeableness with respect to the client, as well as the book's potential for commercial success before agreeing to work with an aspiring author. But what do clients look for? How important is a ghostwriter's track record, bestseller list, writing style, and personality to potential clients? What characteristics are likely to lead to successful publication? These are all questions explored in Study 2.

### Methodology

To continue to build on the scant knowledge base regarding the field of ghostwriting and the ghostwriters' experience and perceptions of their occupation, I conducted an inductive exploration of the client side of the profession, guided by a grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) approach, to build on Study 1. Advancing theory through an "interplay between the researcher and the data" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 426) was the goal. The data was gathered through interviews with leading ghostwriting agencies and with ghostwriting clients. Continuing with grounded theory research was the optimal choice since the ultimate purpose is merging "new observations

with extant theory to facilitate new perspectives that better explain a given phenomenon” (Murphy et al., 2017, p. 291).

To try to ensure that the data gathered in Study 1 from nonfiction ghostwriters provided a foundation for results from Study 2, I limited my interviews in Study 2 to discussions surrounding nonfiction books (as with Study 1). Most ghostwriting agencies specialize in this genre, but I limited client interviews to those authors who hired ghostwriters to complete nonfiction books. In doing so, my goal was to be able to compare apples-to-apples, as it were. The clients for nonfiction ghostwriting may be very different from those who hire ghostwriters to pen romance novels, children’s books, or fables, for example. Expanding my sample to include clients who hired ghostwriters in a variety of genres would make it more difficult to compare the two sets of results in search of observations or takeaways that might apply to both.

Because the focus in part of this study was at the organizational level, where ghostwriting firms, literary agencies, and publishers are conduits to the publication of ghostwritten titles, grounded theory again is the best choice because it is used to uncover social relationships and within and between groups (Crooks, 2001). In this case, the groups consist of the agencies bringing together client, ghostwriter, and publisher for the purpose of writing and producing a book-length work, as well as the ad hoc teams formed to aid author-clients in publishing their books without agency support. In both cases, all three constituents’ goals are aligned toward releasing a book that generates sufficient sales to be profitable.

At the core of those relationships, however, is the author-client, who has the final say on which ghostwriter will be hired to produce their book. Many author-clients receive



recommendations from their publishers regarding which ghostwriter to hire, while those who operate independently do not have the benefit of such counsel. For that reason, their decision-making process may differ. One main difference is that they can choose from the entire population of known ghostwriters, rather than from a firm or publisher's more limited database (a.k.a. their "stable" of ghostwriters).

While many ghostwriters make assumptions about how clients determine who is the best choice for their project, the decision-making process author-clients work through has been a mystery. What do they look for experience-wise? Do they want a publishing track record? And how important is price are all top-of-mind questions for individual ghostwriters trying to understand how such decisions are made. For this reason, it is worthy of study alongside ghostwriting agencies. Using an evidence-based approach, "grounded theory gives us a picture of what people do, what their prime concerns are, and how they deal with these concerns" (Crooks, 2001, p. 25). In this case, what is being studied is how author-clients evaluate ghostwriter candidates, what their priorities are in the selection process, and what candidate that selection process leads them to choose.

### Sample

Using semi-structured interviews, I interviewed 5 ghostwriting agency owners and executives who regularly retain ghostwriters on behalf of their clients. There are currently approximately 10 prominent agencies and independent publishers and book producers that hire ghostwriters directly and my goal was to interview 50% of these firms (who manage the hiring process rather than referring them to their author-clients to hire). There are certainly many smaller players who publish a handful of books each year, but they are not significant sources of ghostwriting work.

These candidates included Madeleine Morel, who is the owner of the first known ghostwriting agency, 2M Communications; Kevin Anderson of Kevin Anderson & Associates; Dan Gerstein of Gotham Ghostwriters; Erin Brown of hybrid publisher Greenleaf Book Group; and Leah Nicholson, production manager at book producer Jenkins Group, Inc.—all of which hire and rely on ghostwriters to generate revenue for their firms. Other firms include Scribe Media, Forbes Books, and Advantage Media, but who were not interviewed.

I also interviewed 20 author-clients who previously hired ghostwriters to assist in preparing their manuscripts, to understand what factors led them to hire the ghostwriter they did. Among the research questions posed were what factors they were initially looking for, as well as the criteria they ultimately used (in case they changed during the process) to assess and evaluate the writers they considered.

To identify potential clients willing to be interviewed, I asked for referrals from several sources, including ghostwriting agencies I interviewed, the moderators of two Facebook communities consisting of ghostwriters, and members of the Association of Ghostwriters. Because many clients work hard to cover up the fact that they used a ghostwriter, I offered to conduct those interviews anonymously, so as to ensure their identity would not be exposed. Many ghostwriters replied that they had asked their clients to assist and those who declined did so because they worried about their secret (that they had used a ghostwriter) being revealed.

Although I offered ghostwriters a \$25 Amazon gift card for their time, because time is their inventory, I did not offer authors the same payment. While I do not think it impacted ghostwriters' willingness to be interviewed, since many said they were not

aware that a gift card was offered to begin with and told me it wasn't necessary, the fact that authors were not also offered the token gift could have affected their willingness to give me their time.

Because I requested permission to interview agency owners and ghostwriting clients in my initial institutional review board (IRB) filing in January 2022, I already had approval to proceed.

The interviews were almost exclusively conducted by phone, although one was done by Zoom due to technical difficulties. I started with the following semi-structured questions.

#### Semi-structured interview questions

Questions posed of agency owners and managers include:

- *What triggers a potential client to reach out regarding publishing a book?*
- *What percent intend to hire a ghostwriter?*
- *What is the reasoning behind the use of a ghostwriter?*
- *What is the history behind the formation of your firm?*
- *How has the firm grown or changed through the years?*
- *Has ghostwriting become more or less important to the company's growth?*

Participant accounts of why the ghostwriting business was founded when it was, what the market opportunity was, and what their observations are regarding the publishing industry since their agencies' establishment, was the common focus.

Questions posed of ghostwriting clients included:

- *How many ghostwriters did you interview during your search?*
- *Did they come recommended by your publisher or did you seek them out?*

- *How did you find your candidates?*
- *Did you have requirements or expectations at the outset for the type of ghostwriter you preferred to work with? What were those requirements?*
- *What type of background or experiences did you want the ghostwriter to have had?*
- *How important was chemistry when you interviewed them?*
- *What stood out about the ghostwriter you eventually hired?*
- *How important was price/fee in your decision-making?*
- *What were the reasons you hired your specific ghostwriter?*
- *Did everything work out as you had hoped?*
- *What would you do differently next time, if anything?*

The goal for this second study was to craft an in-depth description of the emergence of the field of ghostwriting to provide guidance regarding client purchase behavior. The contribution of this information to the field could be revolutionary, since so few ghostwriters know what they can do to make themselves more appealing candidates for work. Armed with this context and market knowledge, professional ghostwriters will be much better positioned to market themselves, price their services according to market demand, and understand where future business opportunities are likely to exist.

The contribution to the scholarly literature will be a clearer picture of how the industry works, its role in the publishing process, and what the future for ghostwriters looks like.

## Reflexivity

As in Study 1, I took steps in Study 2 to reduce the impact my role and previous experience as a nonfiction book ghostwriter and association leader might have on the design and execution of this research effort. I recognize that my assumptions, biases, opinions, and experiences shape my view of the field of ghostwriting, although I suspect they may have less of an impact in interviews with clients and agencies, because I have not had those experiences. That is, I have not hired a ghostwriter or built a ghostwriting agency that employs ghostwriters, so there is less overlap of experience that could interfere here.

However, as in Study 1, I regularly took a step back in order to check that I was not allowing my own perceptions to color the data I was gathering. Relying on semi-structured questions and allowing interviewees to fully express themselves without interrupting, asking follow-up questions for clarification, and restating responses to confirm I heard the answer correctly are all steps I continued to take to try to ensure I was not limiting what participants shared with me, or that I was not leading interviewees in a particular direction or misinterpreting what they said due to my own experiences.

Although I recognize how difficult it is to ignore one's own personal beliefs and experiences, I regularly stopped to confirm that I was not making any assumptions that affected the results.

## Analysis

The primary data captured through audio files were transcribed by online transcription platform Speechpad, which produced a Word document of the dialogue, and which I then analyzed using an open-coding method in order to identify commonalities of

observations and ideas expressed by interviewees. Reading all of the transcripts to identify the core messages was the first step, extracting quotes made that reflected the sources' thoughts and feelings on the topics discussed. Those quotes were broken out as first-level codes.

Once first-level codes were identified, axial coding was used to identify connections between the different ideas, concepts, and expressions reflected in the initial analysis of the interview data. Recognizing underlying dynamics is the goal with second-order codes.

The second-level codes were then reorganized and consolidated to better reflect the relationships uncovered between the different concepts. By conducting the coding myself, without outside help, the goal was to eliminate any issue regarding intercoder reliability.

In the final selective coding step (Saldana, 2009), the second-level codes were aggregated into larger dimensions or categories that reflect how those expressed ideas relate to extant theory, as with Study 1.

The codes that emerged in Study 2 are shown in Table 3. There were 40 first-order codes, 9 second-order codes, and 6 themes.

| <b>1<sup>st</sup> Order Codes</b>   | <b>2<sup>nd</sup> Order Codes</b> | <b>Aggregate Dimensions</b> |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Publisher agnostic                  |                                   |                             |
| Self-publishing legitimacy          |                                   |                             |
| Declining stigma of self-publishing |                                   |                             |
| Attainable authorship               |                                   |                             |
| Fall of the gatekeeper              |                                   |                             |

|  |                      |                              |
|--|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Access to publishing options                   |                      |                              |
| Democratization of publishing                  | Publishing evolution | PUBLISHING ACCESS            |
|  |                      |                              |
| Thought leadership                             |                      |                              |
| Authority                                      |                      |                              |
| Marketing tool                                 |                      |                              |
| Prestige                                       |                      |                              |
| Validation for authors                         |                      |                              |
| Next career                                    |                      |                              |
| Credential                                     | Credentialing        |                              |
|  |                      |                              |
| Social media prevalence                        |                      |                              |
| Video  | Distribution channel | COMMODIFICATION OF EXPERTISE |
|  |                      |                              |
| Partners/Partnership                           |                      |                              |
| Creative input                                 |                      |                              |
| Collaboration                                  |                      |                              |
| Synergy  |                      |                              |
| Work alongside                                 |                      |                              |
| Wanted team                                    |                      |                              |
| Wanted process                                 |                      |                              |
| Wanted publishing guidance/expertise           |                      |                              |
| Normalized ghostwriter use                     |                      |                              |
| Bring different perspective                    |                      |                              |
| High opportunity cost (not to use ghostwriter) | Support system       |                              |
|  |                      |                              |
| Click  |                      |                              |
| Connection                                     |                      |                              |
| “Got me”                                       |                      |                              |
| Mirror me                                      |                      |                              |
| Alike  |                      |                              |
| Energy match                                   |                      |                              |
| Personality                                    |                      |                              |
| EQ adjacencies                                 | Ally                 | COLLABORATION                |
|  |                      |                              |
| Hiring help                                    |                      |                              |
| Buying speed                                   |                      |                              |
| Not a writer                                   |                      |                              |
| Intimidated                                    |                      |                              |

|                                      |                                   |                   |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Overwhelmed                          | Time efficiencies                 | EFFICIENCY        |
|                                      |                                   |                   |
| Online search                        |                                   |                   |
| Googling                             | Lack of knowledge of ghostwriting |                   |
|                                      |                                   |                   |
| Recommendations                      |                                   |                   |
| Referrals                            |                                   |                   |
| Confidence in source                 | Network                           | KNOWLEDGE NETWORK |
|                                      |                                   |                   |
| Changed opinion (regarding cheating) |                                   |                   |
| Offered cover credit                 |                                   |                   |
| More honest to acknowledge use       |                                   |                   |
| Admit usage                          | No stigma                         | LEGITIMACY        |
|                                      |                                   |                   |

**Table 3.** Data Coding Structure—Study 2.

### Results

Because there were two different samples in Study 2—ghostwriting agency leaders and individual author-clients—the semi-structured interview questions asked of each group varied slightly.

#### Ghostwriting Agencies

Questions posed of five agency CEOs and executives started with a history of their firm and how and why it had begun offering ghostwriting services. Following the historical question for background, the next question asked for more detail regarding what changes were occurring politically, economically, sociologically, technologically, legally, and environmentally (PESTLE) that led to an increase in demand for ghostwriting services, since all firms indicated there was a point at which they recognized a significant business opportunity. The biggest factors appeared to be sociological and



technological. One stated interviewee stated, *"I read the writing on the wall and I saw that there was this largely unserved market of authors who were recognizing they needed serious help in writing a book."* These former literary agencies, hybrid publishers, and resume writers evolved to become critical middlemen in the publishing industry, connecting skilled ghostwriters with aspiring authors. Most pivoted in the 2005-2007 timeframe as they experienced increased demand for ghostwriting services and opted to pursue this new business opportunity. Because new publishing options had emerged, the traditional publishing "gatekeepers" (Hviid et al., 2019, p. 355) were no longer in a position to keep aspiring authors at bay, and the number of books published skyrocketed.

The next question was about the current state of the market and their business. Nearly all firms had seen significant growth, which started around 2005, they said. One observed two main drivers of this increase in demand. The first was that *"self-publishing became more acceptable, it became more sophisticated. And the stigma started to go away."* And the second catalyst was *"the rise of social media,"* which made nearly everyone writers, some of whom wanted to produce a book-length work.

On the tails of social media's debut was the emergence of the thought leader, or leading industry voice, several agency leaders stated. As Vallas and Christin (2018) explained, thought leadership represented a shift in how experts saw themselves. Rather than remaining as corporate cogs, some thought leaders began "to view themselves as profit-seeking enterprises that can best succeed by applying corporate marketing strategies to their face-to-face and online interactions." Meaning, they could produce a book that would vault their business stature. This mirrors Thornton's position that the publishing world shifted from an editorial focus to a market, or profit, focus.

Thought leadership started around 2010-2015, said one interviewee, and "*coincided with the ability through social media to project thought leadership to a large audience.*"

Finally, CEOs were asked about trends impacting the field of ghostwriting and their forecasts for the future. Several noted the declining stigma surrounding use of professional ghostwriters, which was leading to increased media attention being paid. More media coverage of ghostwriters and their clients has become almost commonplace, though increased attention should not be equated with acceptance, Harris (2023) cautions; "Though the stigma has lessened, it is not gone."

Related to declining stigma, some interviewees commented on the increasing use of the term "collaborator," rather than "ghostwriter," in common discussions about hired editorial help. Several interviewees stated their interest in working with someone who would provide creative input and ideas to make their thinking and message stronger, rather than a straight behind-the-scenes writer. Some clients appear to want to distance themselves from any suggestion that the ideas did not originate with them, to quash any rumor that they were not heavily involved in the development of the book.

As for the future, one interviewee stated that the field has exploded because publishing has "*become more and more like Hollywood...*" All the publishers are vying for big-name books, and it is often ghostwriters who make those books happen. With one firm alone producing more than 500 books a year, few interviewees question the field's lucrative future.

### Author-Clients

In addition to the five ghostwriting agency leaders, I also interviewed 20 authors who had hired ghostwriters to aid them in completing their manuscripts. The semi-structured interview questions were slightly different from the agency leaders because this group made the hiring decision themselves.

In response to a question about what made them decide to write a book, the answers generally fell into two categories: 1) a traumatic event that had transformed their life that they wanted to share or 2) a desire to have a marketing tool to share with prospects and qualify for speaking opportunities. One author wanted to share his incredible life experiences with the world, for example, while another was advised by a therapist that it could be healing. On the marketing side, one was told that writing a book would qualify him for the type of speaking work he wanted to do, while another was told that a book would help him get into consulting. Creating new opportunities was the clear goal of publishing a nonfiction book.

When asked about their familiarity with ghostwriting, the majority had heard the term and had a vague idea of the ghostwriter's role. One admitted that he was pretty "*unsophisticated*" when writing his first book several years ago. He knew he needed help but didn't necessarily know the term "ghostwriter." That was true of several authors, though the most common refrain was similar to this interviewee's comment that "*I knew the term [ghostwriter] and knew that it existed but I didn't know anything about it.*"

Several interviewees had made attempts at writing their books but were ultimately not happy with what they produced and decided to explore hiring help to improve it. Others knew from the start that they needed guidance in how to approach the writing and

publishing process. One interviewee said he "*started looking for ghostwriters because I felt that I needed someone to partner with. I'm a good writer, not a great writer.*" The next step was identifying a potential writing partner or collaborator.

To find potential ghostwriters to assist in writing a book, strategies for locating a ghostwriter fell into two main camps, the authors reported: 1) Google and 2) recommendations from their personal or professional network. A typical scenario involved having conversations with people "*in my inner circle*" who then referred them to a ghostwriter. Frequently, that first ghostwriter was the person the author ended up hiring. Some authors also explored online marketplaces, such as Upwork, but none of the interviewees ended up hiring anyone from the platform.

To select a ghostwriter, some authors had specific criteria they had in mind, or characteristics they were looking for from the start, while others relied almost exclusively on the advice of their colleagues. One author, for example, was referred to a ghostwriter who he interviewed and "*decided he was the guy.*" Another explained, "*I took my friend's recommendation pretty strongly...I don't need 10 options...I didn't overanalyze it,*" he said. Others interviewed two or three candidates who came recommended and most went with the ghostwriter whose personality best meshed with theirs. One author said of his experience interviewing ghosts: "*I clicked with her. She got where I was coming from and she really saw the value in what I was doing.*" He chose her. Above all, most authors said—more important than writing ability or track record—was fit, or, as one author said, "*we connected on a personal level.*"

Was the price quoted a factor in the decision-making? Many, but not all, said that it was not the most important component. One interviewee did say that the price "*Was*

*one of the deciding factors. I had to decide how much it was going to be worth to me to get the book done. It was an investment."* He decided to proceed. However, another author's quote was similar to the majority of comments, which was that the fee was *"still a big chunk of money but it was something I could still handle."* No one declined to hire a ghostwriter because the fee was too high and one went so far as to indicate ghostwriters generally undercharge, explaining that people are under the impression that they can pay peanuts, like \$500, to a ghostwriter and get a decent quality book, and they can't. Another said *"Some [quotes] were so low, I'm like, 'You can't write a book for that. No one can.'"* He was more skeptical of that ghostwriter's skills as a result.

When asked if there was anything they would do differently on a future book, knowing what they know now, the main changes authors said they would make had to do with how payments were structured. One said if he were to do it over again, he would tie payments to milestones, rather than paying larger lump sums, another said he didn't like being billed on an hourly basis, and a third said she had paid various editorial contractors individually on the project and on future books she would pay the ghostwriter a lump sum and have them issue payments, so as to avoid all the administrative work associated with tracking many bills. The vast majority, however, were happy with the process and the finished result.

Looking back on the process, one author found *"it was super cathartic for me."* Surprised by his experience, another said, *"I thought it would be an organ transplant, that it would be really big and painful,"* and he ended up really enjoying the process. Another said he, *"Loved the experience of working with a ghostwriter for the ease of it..it let me focus on what I do best, and let someone else focus on the putting it together."*

On reflection, many also found that they learned more about ghostwriting through working with one. One author said, *"My opinion on ghostwriting maybe has changed...I see how that a ghostwriter could write some books for people, but now I understand that that's not the only role a ghostwriter can play. And sometimes it is helping you tell your story, and helping with all aspects of it, not just the writing part."*

Statements from interviewees that reflect the second-level codes identified are shown in Table 4:

| Theme                | Description and Relation to Ghostwriting  | Representative Quotes  |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Publishing evolution | <p>Major book publishers long held the role of gatekeeper, making it difficult to become a published author, but as self-publishing grew more acceptable and new technologies emerged, aspiring authors no longer had to follow the traditional process to have a book published. They had options.</p> | <p><i>"Speaking more broadly, I think [increased interest in book ghostwriting] had a lot to do with the combination of the breaking down the barriers to entry to book publishing through self-publishing."</i></p> |
| Credentialing        | <p>The two primary reasons authors sought to publish a book had to do with sharing a message and pursuing new career opportunities once they had established themselves as thought leaders.</p>   | <p><i>In business, "Once you have a book that actually helps you. It's better than having a calling card."</i></p>   |

|                                      |  |   |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| Distribution channel                 | <p>The launch of social media platforms created new opportunities for experts to share ideas and to attract followers. That led to the new thought leader positioning.</p>                         | <p><i>"The common thread through all of this is the internet and the way it's transformed the way we produce and consumer content."</i></p>   |
| Support system                       | <p>Aspiring authors with limited familiarity with the book publishing process frequently turn to agencies that can bring together a team of editorial professionals to accomplish their goals.</p> | <p><i>Social media and the Google algorithm have fueled expansion of the field - "100% yes."</i></p>  |
| Ally                                 | <p>Authors stated a desire to forge a collaboration or partnership with their ghostwriter that allows for the blending of expertise and new creative ideas.</p>                                    | <p><i>"What differentiated us from a lot of the pack was that we were more of a shop."</i></p> <p><i>"It was about those EQ adjacencies."</i></p> <p><i>"She and I just clicked from the first moment that we really started to talk to each other, so that was my only selection process."</i></p> |
| Time efficiencies                    | <p>Many experts and thought leaders recognize the value of delegating ancillary tasks to other professionals, who can often complete them faster and better.</p>                                   | <p><i>"Thought it was the best way to streamline my knowledge and be able to leverage my time with clients."</i></p>  |
| Lack of knowledge about ghostwriting | <p>Authors frequently began the process of searching for a ghostwriter with a vague idea of what they were looking for.</p>  | <p><i>"Started with a Google search and doing research on my end to see what the process looked like." Googled "ghostwriter."</i></p>   |

|           |  |  |
|-----------|--|--|
| Network   | In addition to or in place of Google, a majority of authors asked their professional network for referrals and recommendations to book ghostwriters. | <i>"When you don't do this a lot, you simply...rely on recommendations."<br/>"I took my friend's recommendation pretty strongly...I don't need 10 options."</i>          |
| No stigma | Ghostwriters, authors, and agency owners all indicated a declining taboo surrounding the admitted use of a ghostwriter.                              | <i>Doesn't mind revealing that she hired a skilled writer to help her. She likens it to inviting friends over and serving catered food. "Why wouldn't you admit it?"</i> |

**Table 4:** Emergent Career Themes—Study 2.

#### Discussion

There was concurrence among the results of Study 1 and Study 2 on many fronts regarding the field of ghostwriting. Ghostwriters and clients all reported that the stigma of having hired a ghostwriter was declining, with many clients now offering cover credit to their writing collaborators. Further supporting this observation is the fact that the term “*collaborator*” is now a preferred term by some ghostwriters and authors, to better reflect the back-and-forth writing relationship that forms.

However, the stigma has not entirely disappeared; Harris (2023) concurs (“it is not gone”). While identifying and persuading ghostwriters to be interviewed for Study 1 was quick and easy, asking ghostwriters to request the opportunity to interview their clients proved more challenging. There was much more resistance and many clients expressly declined to help for fear that their secret, of having relied on a ghostwriter,



would be revealed. For that reason, it took me several months and many, many email and phone requests to connect with a total of 20 author-clients.

The 20 clients willing to speak with me generally had no reluctance about revealing that they had used a ghostwriter, presumably because they associate no stigma with that choice. That then explains their belief that the stigma has declined. However, there are still many clients who prefer to deny that they had help (and who declined to participate).

According to agencies offering ghostwriting services, demand for content has been increasing overall since the dawn of the internet in the late 1990s, however, an even larger institutional change began a few decades before in the publishing world with “the decline of an editorial logic and the rise of a market logic” (Thornton, 2004, p. 14) in the early 1970s. Thornton chronicles this “period of transition in logics,” which she says was “propelled by four factors.” Those four forces were 1) availability of corporate capital 2) increased competition within the book market 3) “new sources of information from trade presses” and 4) the emergence of investment firms with a specialization in the publishing market (Thornton, 2004, p. 15). Against this historical backdrop, two ideal types “associated with different forms of capitalism and organizational archetypes” (Thornton, 2004) became clear: editorial and market logics.

In short, prioritizing good writing through an editorial focus took a back seat to marketing, which was all but unknown in the 1960s (Thornton, 2004, p. 28) but became the driving force in the 1980s, when “most publishers were emphasizing the most advanced marketing techniques” (Thornton, 2004, p. 28). Rather than striving to produce well-written books, pressure mounted to ensure those books were also profitable. By the

dawn of the internet, the pendulum from an editorial focus has swung to the market side, where revenue generation became the driver. The dawn of the internet and the emergence of social media platforms that spawned user-generated content further fueled this market-focus.

However, it wasn't until the early 2000s that content needs spilled over into the book publishing industry. It was then, around 2005, that experts and prominent business leaders and personalities were being encouraged to position themselves as thought leaders and to produce published books as evidence. Books became a symbol of validation, of credibility, authority, and legitimacy in and of themselves, leading to new business opportunities. In response to this new interest in book publishing, several firms I interviewed pivoted to offer ghostwriting as part of their publishing-related services. This was a first step towards institutional legitimacy for ghostwriting.

According to Thornton (2004), the two ideal types of institutional logics, or "patterns of strategy and structure," related to legitimacy are editorial logic, fueled by "personal reputation," and market logic, represented by the "market position of the firm." They are, effectively, dueling forces, with market logic having superseded editorial logic in the book publishing industry circa 1980.

Along with the rise of a market logic, the gates of the book publishing industry were being forcibly opened by the launch of print-on-demand (POD) publishing, which democratized the industry and made it possible for virtually anyone to produce a book. Although few traditional publishers at that point were interested in producing books by relatively unknown experts without platforms or built-in communities of buyers, thanks to a new focus on profit versus editorial excellence (Thornton, 2004), self-publishing

technology offered the opportunity to bypass traditional publishers altogether. Access to this new printing technology coupled with the rise of the thought leader as an aspirational professional designation fueled demand for the publication of more books. Whether those books sold thousands of copies and became bestsellers was of less concern than the credibility they signaled.

The early 2000s was also when many of today's social media platforms debuted, providing easy access to millions of users. Direct connection to potential followers made it possible for experts to quickly gain fame and a reputation. Social media made possible the rise of relatively unknown personalities to professional stardom in weeks or months.

Demand for ghostwriting services began rising around 2005 to 2007, as publishing service firms pivoted to meet the largely unserved market of authors needing help. Ghostwriting agencies and hybrid publishers stepped up, offering complete packages, including ghostwriting, to help authors finally get their books completed. And it turns out, because these new author-clients knew almost nothing about the publishing industry, they wanted a one-stop-shop to help them get the work done. They wanted a company, not a group of individual freelancers, to ensure the book would get done and be of high quality. Those companies with ghostwriter connections provided credibility and legitimacy to the ghostwriters they recommended.

The would-be authors interviewed admitted their need for support. Many were overwhelmed or intimidated with the task of authorship and were willing to pay for an ally—a partner or collaborator to work alongside them. Recognizing the efficiencies to be gained by retaining a writing expert to aid in crafting their book, authors began their search for qualified help.

Agencies and hybrid publishers were only too happy to help. While some clients initially were reluctant to bring on board a ghostwriter, feeling that hiring an outside writer would be “*cheating*” or “*dishonest*,” when publishers explained that hiring a ghostwriter was no different from hiring an attorney or an accountant, most changed their perspective. Agencies helped normalize the use of ghostwriters.

This process of pairing would-be authors with ghostwriters in order to convert the author-expert’s knowledge into a tangible form is considered commodification, or commercialization. “The term commodification describes the process in which the economic value of a commodity increasingly begins to dominate its other uses” (Musil et al., 2022, p. 3). In this case, the value of a published book is much more than bound printed pages; it serves as tangible evidence of authority, credibility, and expertise, which can then be leveraged to generate other revenue-generating opportunities. The commodification of expertise emerged from the coding as a partial explanation for the publishing industry’s increasing reliance on professional ghostwriters to meet demand from aspiring thought leaders to produce book-length products.

On the author-client side, many, but not all, authors interviewed had long considered writing a book. Some had tried and become “*overwhelmed*” or “*intimidated*” by the enormity of the task, or were disappointed with the results they achieved on their own and had shuttered the project, at least temporarily. A few acknowledged that they were “*not a writer*.” When the idea once again surfaced, either through prodding by clients and colleagues or at the realization that the time might be right, many began the process of asking for help. Some had no idea at the start that ghostwriters existed, but

they presumed that a professional somewhere could assist them in finishing their project. The words “*editor*,” “*book coach*,” and “*consultant*” were mentioned.

When the word “ghostwriter” was first used, some authors said they had a negative reaction to it. On one hand, some believed that ghostwriters did little more than take dictation and saw little value in hiring them. On the other, others interviewed went to the other extreme and thought that ghostwriters did absolutely all the writing, with little input from the client. That made them uncomfortable about claiming credit on the cover. When the authors learned that they would have considerable creative input, they were much more open to exploring the use of a ghostwriter.

Some interviewees had tried their own search when the term “ghostwriter” had been brought up to them. Those who tried used Google to surface potential candidates, through the use of the term “*ghostwriter*” and phrases such as “*help writing a book*” or “*book coach*.”

However, a more common route—instead of Google—was to turn to colleagues, friends, and connections who had published a book, for recommendations. Authors requested referrals from their personal and professional networks and received them. Some referrals were based on personal experience and others were friend-of-a-friend connections.

Tapping into their knowledge network made it possible to fast-track the ghostwriter search process. According to Ritala, De Kort and Gailly (2023), “When properly managed, knowledge networks enable time- and resource-constrained individuals to engage across organizational and industry boundaries” (McFadyen & Cannella, 2004; Yli-Renko et al., 2001). That is, turning to their professional connections

yielded relevant recommendations that saved them time in identifying candidates and in vetting them, or verifying their credentials and skills, especially since most were unfamiliar with the profession of ghostwriting.

Efficiency was a major benefit cited by several authors and agency leaders regarding ghostwriting services. Some immediately recognized the value a ghostwriter could bring to the process. One source said the “*opportunity cost was high not to use a ghostwriter,*” meaning that outsourcing such work was a much better use of their time. Another stated that clients were effectively “*buying speed*” by hiring a ghostwriter.

What was surprising, however, is that many authors then chose the ghostwriter their colleague recommended, or went with the first ghostwriter they interviewed. Few considered more than three ghostwriters in total. This trust and confidence in the referral source proved to be more important than anything else.

The authors did then take time to interview the referred ghost and paid close attention to certain factors—none of which had anything to do with writing ability. They wanted someone who “*got me,*” someone whose energy level matched theirs, whose personality clicked, and who was emotionally intelligent. They wanted a partner to surface ideas and offer input to help produce a respectable book more than anything else. Writing ability was verified by reviewing writing samples provided, though was not the most important criteria.

Price, too, was not a major factor in the selection process. Although three stated that if the price quoted had been too high, they would have had to continue their search, all said that the fee they paid was acceptable. A few even commented that it was less than

they expected and that if the price they had been quoted had been much lower, they would have questioned the ability and experience of the ghostwriter.

Everyone who was interviewed was happy with how things turned out; not all books have been published at this stage, however. While a few would change elements of the relationship, such as how payments were billed or how progress was charted, none regretted using a ghostwriter or the particular ghostwriter they chose. One said they *“loved the experience of working with a ghostwriter.”* This is likely a reflection of the close, personal relationship that can develop between a ghostwriter and client, who is hiring someone to be part interviewer, part therapist, part writer, and part editor.

#### Practical Implications

As reported in Study 1, the question ghostwriters most frequently ask is a variation of “how can I land more work?” It comes up regularly in discussions about finding clients, winning projects, and general marketing effectiveness. Ghostwriters want to know what works at attracting clients. And by asking authors who have hired ghostwriters about their search and decision-making process, ghostwriters can get a better sense of what they need to do. It turns out that what they need to do is expand their professional networks.

Rather than investing in advertising or social media posts designed to connect with clients directly, a better approach, based on the findings here, would be to forge and deepen relationships with potential sources of referral. Since the major of author-clients interviewed as part of this research reported hiring the first ghostwriter recommended to them, a smart strategy would be to cultivate a broader referral network. They need to focus on network-building. Being referred by members of their own network will

prequalify them with potential clients and reduce the amount of competition they will face.

What clients reportedly wanted from such a writing relationship was “*collaboration,*” “*partnership,*” “*synergy,*” *the ability to “work alongside”* someone who “*brought a different viewpoint.*” They wanted someone who “*clicked*” with them personality-wise and who, in many cases, could “*mirror*” their ideas and expressions, who was more like them than not, and who could therefore more easily adopt their tone and voice in the writing. This language indicates that clients want a partner and collaborator more than they want an independent writer who will shoulder all of the responsibility for writing a book. This is an important message regarding positioning that ghostwriters should be aware of and incorporate into their marketing.

Additionally, and building on this notion of collaboration, authors repeatedly indicated they wanted a publishing team; they didn’t want to work with a siloed solopreneur. Some had had negative experiences with independent writers and, consequently, wanted a “*team*” and a “*process,*” as well as “*publishing guidance*” and “*publishing expertise.*” They feared ending up with a finished manuscript and no idea what to do with it to get it published. Instead, they wanted a ghostwriter with publishing connections or an established process that would lead the manuscript to be handed off to a publisher directly. This stated preference should lead individual ghostwriters to partner with agencies and publishers who can offer clients a complete package. Ghostwriters should build a publishing team or establish their own network of publishing partners to which they can seamlessly hand off their clients to get their book launched.



Ghostwriters should also evaluate their current pricing model with an eye toward increasing their fee. Nearly all authors interviewed expressed satisfaction with the price they paid for ghostwriting services with some suggesting they would have paid more. One said, “*I was willing to pay anything*” and another stated “*I found all the ghostwriters to be pricing themselves underpriced.*” Some also said that the lower the fee quoted, the less confidence they had in the ghostwriter’s abilities or experience. This sense that ghostwriters are not charging as much as they can for nonfiction books, which came out of Study 1, is reinforced by clients.

Finally, where authors have historically been reluctant to admit use of a ghostwriter, that reluctance seems to be waning. Ghostwriters should be asking for cover credit, to help raise their own visibility. Some authors reported wanting to be open and honest with the public about having had ghostwriting help, going so far as to offer cover credit to their ghostwriter. However, not all ghosts wanted their names on the cover, likely due to the topic being sensitive or far afield from their area of specialization. The authors who felt strongly about it believed that it was “*more honest*” to acknowledge that relationship. The stigma of having used a ghostwriter has clearly declined, some said outright.

Legitimacy, on the other hand, does seem to be increasing, as evidenced by the rising number of books being produced for aspiring thought leaders and by the presence of the four parts of the structuration process (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The increased interactions among organizations in the field, the emergence of alliances and factions, increased information load, and development of a mutual awareness among ghostwriters that “they are involved in a common enterprise” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148) all

signal that ghostwriting is a legitimate occupation. Additionally, the four strategies for achieving occupational legitimacy have also been met, with ghostwriters having constructed and laid claim to expertise (Abbott, 1988), gatekeeping has emerged within the profession, skills and knowledge are being standardized through trade organizations, and alliances with and endorsements from powerful existing industry players (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994) is already occurring.

Ghostwriting has also met the standard for being considered a profession, in that ghostwriters “ha[ve] succeeded in convincing audiences they are characterized by (1) abstract, specialized knowledge, (2) autonomy, (3) authority over clients and subordinate occupational groups, and (4) a certain degree of altruism” (Hodson & Sullivan, 2012, p. 260).

There are also broader practical implications for the publishing industry. Because traditional publishing houses no longer control which books are published, to claw back a piece of that business, they should consider establishing their own self-publishing business units. Some already are. Wiley, for example, has a custom publishing arm.

Publishers should also forge alliances or partnerships with ghostwriters as a way to attract more of the thought leadership books being produced by self-publishers. Where publishers used to be the middleman, ghostwriters have frequently moved into that role.

And speaking out publicly in support of the use of ghostwriters could help further increase legitimacy of the profession and generate more business for all. Although publishers regularly rely on ghostwriters, they have not come right out and publicly encouraged aspiring authors to use ghostwriting services where needed. They should.

Where traditional publishers are generally quiet when it comes to speaking out about ghostwriters, more thought leaders are admitting they had help, often in the name of authenticity. From a practical perspective, thought leaders should rely even more on ghostwriters for book help, in order to make the most of their own time; it's more efficient.

On top of giving their ghostwriter credit for their work, thought leaders should take that relationship a step further and become true partners, so that both are promoting their book. This will help the ghostwriter attract more work and help the thought leader sell more books. It's a win-win.

Thought leaders who are publishing books regularly may want to consider creating their own publishing imprint, or publishing business, and publishing the works of other thought leaders in their space. This could help align them with other leading voices and also generate more revenue.

### Research Implications

Despite the universal sense that ghostwriting was no longer taboo and that the stigma associated with its use had declined in business circles, according to the results of coded interviews from both ghostwriters and ghostwriting clients and agencies, the reality is that there is still stigma attached. That fact became apparent when I began searching for authors to interview. I turned to my network of ghostwriters for help in finding clients willing to talk to me about how they found and worked with their ghostwriter, but there were many unwilling to reveal themselves, even with a promise of anonymity. That indicates that some stigma still exists and needs to be explored further, perhaps through a

longitudinal study monitoring feelings about the use of ghostwriters in partnership with agencies and publishers.

The growing use of the word “collaborator” or “partner” in place of “ghostwriter” is also noteworthy, both because it signals the evolution of long-standing nomenclature and because it may be related to continued stigma attached to the word “ghostwriter.” Are authors preferring to use such terms because they make more clear their essential role as expert in the book-writing process, versus the impression some members of the general public have that the ghostwriter does all of the thinking and the writing to draft a book manuscript? The two trends do seem to be linked.

What seems to have sparked the emergence of the profession was access to new publishing alternatives in the early 2000s in addition to social media platforms that made it possible for anyone to share written works. Those opportunities yielded a new genre of book by thought leaders; “thought leadership” is now its own publishing category. Published more as a marketing and industry positioning tool, thought leadership books became a much-desired marketing tool, which could be produced quickly with outside help. Since thought leadership titles are a relatively new phenomenon, this research is a potential step forward in understanding how new publishing genres emerge.

### Limitations

Since it is nearly impossible to guess how many books are ghostwritten each year without author admissions, it is therefore nearly impossible to know how large the population of ghostwriting clients is. However, given industry data, it is easy to surmise that the numbers are in the thousands each year. Which leads the 20 interviews conducted

with authors who retained ghostwriters to represent a tiny fraction of the population of ghostwriting clients. The results are therefore difficult to generalize.

Other parameters that make the results less generalizable include the fact that all agencies and clients are based in North America, all the books ghostwritten were nonfiction, and the ghostwriters sourced in a variety of ways.

That doesn't mean that the research is inconsequential, only that it may represent a small niche within the vast ghostwriting industry.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

My research has shown that ghostwriting has become a legitimate profession. According to Thornton, “professions are organized bodies of individual members who create knowledge and belief systems that define areas of interest and jurisdiction” (2004, p. 90).

The practice of hiring ghostwriters has now achieved normative legitimacy because it meets several basic conditions, according to Suchman (1995) and Aldrich and Fiol (1994). That is, ghostwriting has become widely understood, standards have been established for their use, and hiring ghostwriters has become a mainstream occurrence within the publishing industry. “Legitimacy is a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). In the case of ghostwriters, it is frequently *assumed* that busy executives and thought leaders will hire outside writers to help them get their books written. That presumption is the essence of legitimacy.

Despite the fact that the ghostwriters interviewed are under the impression that a small percentage of the population knows what they actually do, and that even some ghostwriting clients initially weren’t exactly sure what role ghostwriters played in the publishing process, the occupation meets the criteria established by Hodson and Sullivan (2012) to be considered a profession. Those criteria are that members of the field “ha[ve] succeeded in convincing audiences they are characterized by (1) abstract, specialized

knowledge, (2) autonomy, (3) authority over clients and subordinate occupational groups, and (4) a certain degree of altruism” (Hodson & Sullivan, 2012, p. 260). Interviews with ghostwriters demonstrated they have specialized knowledge, frequently work solo, are the experts when it comes to advising their clients regarding their manuscripts and the publishing process, and do much of their work because they want to make a difference in their clients’ lives. Many ghostwriters expressed how fulfilling it is to do the writing work they do. On a larger scale, this bodes well for ghostwriting as a profession, since “the label of profession frequently enhances the status, prestige, power, and legitimacy of an occupation, which usually translates into additional resources and power” (Cronin et al., 2018, p. 2112).

This linkage between the ghostwriting profession and rising demand for its editorial services signals a growing market size. More published books (fueled by the thought leadership trend) require more ghostwriting services, provided by more ghostwriters, all of which result in a higher market value. The driver here is business opportunity and profit, which reflects current larger cultural priorities: influence, prestige, and revenue generation. The current age of the “influencer” is much like the 1970s, when Thornton describes “a shift from the view of publishing as a profession to that of publishing as a business” (Thornton, 2004, p. 27). Then, in publishing, marketing books became the publishers’ purpose, rather than producing “good books [that] sold themselves by favorable word of mouth” (Thornton, 2004, p. 27; Powell, 1985, p. 10).

Now that ghostwriting has achieved professionalization, is a reconfiguration on the horizon? Potentially. Thornton cites Coser et al. (1982) for their work in uncovering that “competencies in traditional publishing firms were embedded more in the editor’s

relational networks with authors that in the routines of formal hierarchy” (Thornton, 2004, p. 90). That is, editors were deemed more competent the better and stronger their relationships with successful authors. Replacing editors with ghostwriters in that dynamic, it is possible that going forward, ghostwriters who can forge deeper, more meaningful relationships with their author-clients will be deemed more competent than those who focus more on process, such as meeting deadlines and producing error-free prose. As such, that is another potential source of competitive advantage.

Thanks to increased reliance on ghostwriters to craft books, and authors’ increased willingness to admit they hired writing help, the stigma attached to ghostwriting does seem to have waned, though it has not completely disappeared (Harris, 2023). As previously shared, “ghostwriting for prominent leaders is so prevalent today that scarcely an eyebrow is raised on learning that a speech or other communication is the work of a hired writer” (Knapp & Hulbert, 2017, p. v). Perhaps the rising use of the term “collaborator” and “partner” will help to reposition the work as supportive rather than “cheating.”

However, there is still a large knowledge gap when it comes to identifying and hiring a ghostwriter. Whereas finding and hiring an attorney, doctor, or accountant is fairly straightforward, author-clients were almost unanimously unsure of how to connect with a qualified ghostwriting candidate initially. The lack of widespread recognition by clients, on book covers or in acknowledgments sections of books, has made it challenging for ghostwriters to prove their experience level. “Many mentioned the need for recognition in terms of resume building and their ability to secure future work” (Anteby & Occhuito, 2020, p. 12), which serves to keep ghostwriters invisible and harder to find.



Some turned to Google to search for established writers, but the vast majority turned to their knowledge networks (Ritala et al., 2023) for recommendations. And in many cases, the first ghostwriter name that was mentioned was the one hired. This fact was surprising given the relatively high cost of ghostwriting services; my own assumption was that clients would carefully vet candidates who were going to charge them many tens of thousands of dollars. Yet that was not the case. Their confidence in their network's recommendations trumped any need to thoroughly investigate.

It turns out, most traditional marketing methods—such as advertising, publicity, and public speaking—are less effective at landing work than building a network of friends and colleagues who are also connected to potential ghostwriting clients. Referral sources have the power to refer work to ghostwriters that is effectively pre-sold, thanks to the trust that aspiring authors have for those in their network.

Across the board, ghostwriters and ghostwriting agencies reported that thought leadership books were the most lucrative and in high demand. This is likely because authors publishing books designed to generate more business opportunities will have a faster and higher return on investment (ROI), or so they indicated. They hire ghostwriters so that their books can be completed faster, so they can then start using them as marketing tools sooner, generating revenue more quickly, perceiving themselves as “profit-seeking enterprises” (Vallas & Christin, 2018, p. 5). Or, as Mayyasi (2020) already articulated, “If you are an executive making \$10 million a year, will you really stop working for two to three months to write a book?”

However, the bulk of the revenue to be generated from these books will not come from retail sales, but, instead, from more lucrative speaking engagements, consulting

engagements, and other business relationships sparked from awareness of the book's existence. The book becomes tangible evidence of an author's knowledge and influence.

The concept of thought leadership has evolved in the last 15 years to include a form of commodification (Musil et al., 2022) of expertise. Aspiring gurus can now package and productize their knowledge and expertise in the form of a published book; this becomes a tangible form of credential. Authors effectively transform their unique knowledge base into a physical product that has its own value and can be sold or shared as evidence of authority and credibility. This commodification trend has increased demand for publishing-related services, including ghostwriting.

And what started this whole snowball of increased demand for thought leadership books in the first place? As many agency leaders in my research said, it was the "*democratization of publishing*," which effectively made it possible for anyone to become a published author. This phenomenon was surfaced both by ghostwriters who identified the power dynamic shift in the publishing industry and ghostwriting clients, who described their increased access to publishing options. When traditional publishers' position as gatekeeper fell, more business professionals stepped up to explore alternate publishing platforms and the need for book ghostwriters to craft the books skyrocketed. Agency leaders are fairly confident that this trend will continue as long as thought leadership is a position to which business leaders aspire.

However, given that thought leadership as a position and a publishing genre has been around for more than 15 years, I expect the tide will eventually turn. I suspect we are close to saturation and smart thought leaders should be exploring new ways to

differentiate themselves and their expertise beyond books. New opportunities could emerge as next generation publishing platforms or as new forms of media.

Although ghostwriting is a legitimate profession, it is still in the early stages of development. As a result, there is little organization or hierarchy within the community of thousands of ghostwriters. Over time, as credentials appear, there will likely be strata or tiers of ghostwriters. “Tiers” is already a form of hierarchy in use at one of the major ghostwriting agencies to differentiate various levels of ghostwriting experience and tie it to compensation.

At the same time, where the “opportunity” that ghostwriters mentioned currently appears to be vast and disorganized, eventual industry consolidation is likely that may reduce the number of “intermediaries” that provide book ghostwriting work. Additionally, pending legislation in the U.S. titled the PRO Act, for example, could severely limit ghostwriters’ ability to work as independent contractors for ghostwriting firms and potentially shutter those agencies who rely on freelance ghosts. This underscores the importance for ghostwriters to connect directly with potential clients, rather than through corporate intermediaries.

Despite the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT that can now generate content independently, the ghostwriter’s role appears safe for now. It is safe for two main reasons. One, because AI cannot currently replicate the original thought and expression that professional ghostwriters can generate. AI can only regurgitate what it has been fed; it cannot ask insightful questions and assess which topics need more clarity. And two, because there is a very personal, very intimate relationship that often develops

between ghostwriter and client that enables the ghostwriter to write as if they are their client. It is a level of service that technology cannot yet replace.

Ultimately, it is that personal connection and intimate relationship—much like that of a therapist—that elevates the experience of working with a ghostwriter and justifies the large expense author are willing to pay.

Ghostwriting is a legitimate profession that has expanded in the last 25 years due to publishing technology changes and the rise of the thought leader label. Whereas ghostwriters have been a publishing industry secret for centuries, today high-profile authors are admitting they had help from professional writers, further fanning the flames of demand for these editorial services.

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## APPENDIX A

## Study 1 Participant Demographics

| ID  | Gender                           | Age               | Education     | Years of Experience        | Annual Income        |
|-----|----------------------------------|-------------------|---------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| 101 | M                                | 55                | Associate's   | 5                          | \$120K               |
| 102 | F                                | 37                | Some college  | 17                         | \$45-55K             |
| 105 | F                                | 46                | MFA           | 26                         | \$100-120K           |
| 107 | F                                | 63                | BA-English    | 18                         | \$125-175K           |
| 111 | M                                | 74                | BA            | Didn't answer              | \$175K               |
| 119 | F                                | 34                | BS-Journalism | 3                          | \$100K               |
| 123 | F                                | 46                | BA            | 7                          | \$125K               |
| 125 | F                                | 58                | JD            | 17                         | Refused              |
| 127 | F                                | 56                | BA            | 5                          | \$20-40K             |
| 134 | M                                | 54                | Some college  | 7                          | \$45-80K             |
| 135 | F                                | 48                | BA            | 10                         | \$69K                |
| 137 | F                                | 43                | BA            | 10                         | \$200K               |
| 138 | M                                | 39                | Master's      | 13                         | \$250K               |
| 142 | F                                | 55                | MFA           | 18                         | \$100K               |
| 145 | F                                | 45                | BA-Journalism | 5                          | \$30-90K             |
| 150 | M                                | 73                | JD            | 7                          | \$75-100K            |
| 155 | F                                | 71                | BA            | 15                         | \$40-65K             |
| 156 | F                                | 73                | MBA           | 25                         | Up to \$40K          |
| 157 | F                                | 51                | BA            | 9                          | \$100K               |
| 159 | F                                | 66                | PhD           | 10                         | \$96-144K            |
| 162 | M                                | 46                | BA            | 19                         | \$36-220K            |
| 166 | F                                | 59                | Master's      | 22                         | \$80-100K            |
| 178 | NB                               | 59                | None          | 3                          | \$45K                |
| 186 | F                                | Refused           | BA            | 20+                        | \$250-400K           |
| 187 | F                                | 75                | BA-English    | 27                         | \$50-70K             |
| 189 | F                                | 59                | BA-English    | 5                          | \$50-100K            |
| 193 | F                                | 29                | Comm Coll     | 9                          | \$120K               |
| 194 | M                                | 65                | Master's      | 17                         | \$60-90K             |
| 197 | F                                | 42                | BA            | 5                          | \$150K               |
| 200 | M                                | 70                | BA            | 11                         | \$50-100K            |
|     | 8 Men<br>1 Nonbinary<br>21 Women | Avg age:<br>54.86 |               | Avg years of exp.<br>12.62 | Avg income<br>\$108K |

