

**Branding a Tertiary Institution by Committee: An Exploration of Internal Brand
Analysis and Management Processes**

Abstract

This article explores how a branding committee was used to facilitate part of a Canadian university's branding process. It builds on recent cases exploring the effectiveness of branding processes, focusing on using a committee of selected stakeholders. The benefits and drawbacks of using such a committee in the institution's brand analysis process are examined from the committee members' perspective. In-depth interviews were conducted with the committee, exploring individual contributions, leadership, engagement, and overall effectiveness, as well as possible improvements. These interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis, eliciting key themes and rich narrative. Specific insights into the committee members' perceptions of the benefits of a branding committee and their attitudes about their effectiveness, both as individuals and the committee as a whole, are also discussed. The overall findings offer theoretical and practical implications in terms of managing the branding process in an inclusive manner that takes account of stakeholder views and taps into their inherent knowledge, arguably presenting a more holistic brand. While the context is that of a Canadian university, the authors argue that the findings offer significant insights into key factors surrounding the use of committees when managing the branding process for the majority of larger organizations.

Keywords: university branding, higher education (HE) branding, education brands, university marketing

This research explores organizational brand analysis, organizational decisions about brand planning processes, and the branding stakeholder engagement process, using the case of Thompson Rivers University (TRU), a Canadian university, as it proceeded through a rebranding process during 2015. As such, the research therefore builds on earlier work exploring how internal aspects of branding unfold in particular cases (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008), and adds to it by exploring the use of a brand committee to manage the branding process. Findings therefore generate themes that can be used in future empirical work, and answers the call for more specific cases in this area (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008). The work also overlaps previous research on corporate branding, which relies on understanding and embracing the organizational culture to a far greater extent than product branding does (Balmer, 2001). The research also has implications for the role and effectiveness of organizations' internal branding processes.

A key aspect of the rebranding process in TRU was its use of a branding committee to support the organization's brand analysis and decision process among stakeholders. The committee comprised individuals from diverse internal and external stakeholder groups, some with brand-specific knowledge, and others who had minimal exposure to branding theory. All members shared the common purpose of contributing to the stakeholder engagement process, the redefinition of the institution's strengths and brand, and the appointment of an agency to develop the creative framework for the university's rebrand.

A fundamental question concerns the extent to which a branding committee of this type contributes to a more effective branding process outcome. This question was explored from two perspectives: the view of committee participants on their roles in the branding process; and, secondly, the views of the same respondents on strengths and weaknesses of the branding committee overall. The research therefore has significant managerial implications in terms of

how an organization's branding processes should be managed, the use of committees and who should be involved in branding decisions, and the goals and purpose of branding committees of this type.

Branding in the Education Context

Although some argue that *brand* is a subjective term (Kapferer, 2001), many writers define it based on 'rational' and 'emotional' factors (Caldwell and Freire, 2004; de Chernatony, 2010; de Chernatony and McWilliam, 1990), so a broad initial conceptualization based on these two factors may be argued (Chapleo, 2015; Hart and Murphy, 1998). In HE, a brand can be defined as a construct that allows its owners to augment the institution and its products using certain values. These values in turn facilitate a process by which consumers clearly come to recognize and appreciate such values (Chapleo, 2015).

Despite universities increasingly adopting branding concepts and approaches, only limited progress has been made towards a culture (and corresponding infrastructure) in HE that wholly embraces branding. Branding has also had limited impact on the HE marketing literature until comparatively recently (Bennett *et al*, 2007; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006), although there is evidence of a steady increase in published research. The often vocal debate on the desirability of a marketing culture in HE (Jevons, 2006) is perhaps one reason that HE branding concepts have not been wholly embraced by academia. Therefore a discussion of the supporting rationale for branding in the sector is pertinent. This research has a Canadian context, but convergence in global HE has made the discussion fairly generalizable (Becher and Trowler, 2001).

HE brand management

Historically, branding was used to confer awareness and a perception of quality on a product, but the term has evolved into a contemporary paradigm derived from abstraction and cultural engineering, where products are attached to consumers' ideals but are less clearly linked to functional benefits (Chapleo, 2015; Holt, 2002). Higher education institutions (HEIs) require strong brands to enhance both awareness and to differentiate themselves from competitors (Bennett *et al*, 2007) and 'branding should be shorthand for the range of criteria that constitute the quality of the university' (Jevons, 2006).

Robust arguments for the application of branding theory and practice in HE are therefore evident, but a debate on their desirability as part of wider marketization continues. Historically, much branding activity in HE has been viewed as communications-driven visual identity, although increasingly the contemporary view has evolved into a more holistic concept. Embedding this holistic view throughout the organization can, however, be very challenging for a university in practice.

Competition in HE is increasing, driven by global market forces and funding agendas, but branding may offer a source of potentially sustainable competitive advantage (Caldwell and Coshall, 2002). Brands may be linked to an organization's corporate and social responsibility (Blumenthal and Bergstrom, 2003), or make consumers' choice processes more effective (Doyle, 1989). While there is therefore a clear case for branding, others argue that branding in a sector such as this may drive 'unhealthy competition' (Sargeant, 2005). Overall, the concept of a brand as a clear, succinct identity for an organization that consumers trust to deliver on their needs (de Chernatony and McDonald, 2005) is desirable for universities, as for all organizations. Increased understanding of the structure and process that supports HE branding therefore has

significant value in clarifying conceptual assumptions and practical challenges in a sector where purely commercial approaches may be incongruous.

Particular qualities of branding in HE

Analysing and managing strong brands is challenging for all organizations, but specific issues face universities in building and managing their brands (Chapleo, 2015). Commercially derived activities such as branding may be inherently difficult for universities, where the needs of departments that do not have solely commercial objectives need to be reconciled with those of the institution (Brookes, 2003, p. 140).

Embedded cultural resistance to branding is often an issue for universities. As a business function, marketing interacts with most areas of an organization and marketing initiatives may run into resistance and from other staff and departments within the organization (Low and Fullerton, 1994). For many academics, the adoption of a marketing orientation has traditionally been 'theoretically uncomfortable' (Brookes, 2003). Specific cultural issues can make it challenging to encourage internal stakeholders to commit fully to branding (Hankinson, 2001). Organizational culture may be a source of competitive advantage, but only when brand values express and embrace that culture (Hatch and Schultz, 2003). A brand's identity should therefore be consistent with employees' values and behaviour (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001); ignoring employees' views and the dominant organizational culture is risky.

The organization's cultural context influences how staff 'live' brand values through social interactions (Vallaster and de Chernatony, 2005).

Some degree of employee engagement and consultation to engender buy-in is therefore desirable in both theoretical and practical terms. This engagement can be approached through

various means, one of which is by using a committee comprised of stakeholders. This paper focuses on the use of such a committee in overseeing a rebranding process.

Branding approaches in HE

Branding in HE institutions may increasingly be managed with techniques similar to those used by corporations (Kotler and Kotler, 1998; Whelan and Wohlfeil, 2006). However, corporate branding generally requires a sophisticated organizational structure and appropriate culture to support the brand (Hatch and Schultz, 2003), and this aspect still proves challenging for many universities. However, tapping into internal knowledge to begin to understand the culture of the organization and what makes it distinct is an important element in building a corporate brand (Balmer, 2001). A university brand may therefore benefit from being taken back to its roots so that the essence of its differentiation may be understood (Aaker, 2004). This may include the institution's quality, heritage, culture, and innovation (Aaker, 2004; Hatch and Schultz, 2003).

The importance of the organization's culture in corporate branding has long been recognized. Branding in nonconsumer goods sectors (Kavaratzis, 2004) such as HE could also benefit from this approach. Likewise, since HE brands tend towards complexity and intangibility, corporate branding can help bring a clarity of focus (Simoes and Dibb, 2001). At the same time, many corporate brands have no genuine value proposition and are simply large organizations with limited distinctiveness (Aaker, 2004). This may also be true for other complex organizations, including universities, where defining a single holistic identity is a fundamental challenge (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008). However, embracing a distinct assemblage of the characteristics of an institution—drawing from their diversity—may offer a path to

conceptualize corporate brands in the HE sector (Wæraas, 2008). Institutional history and organizational cultural sensitivity in brand management are therefore particularly important.

Overall, the literature suggests that areas of branding theory, such as corporate branding, have a degree of applicability for HE, but particular management, cultural, and organizational qualities mean that the practical application is challenging. It may be argued that academic writing has not consistently kept pace with evolving HE marketing practice (Iqbal *et al*, 2012; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008). To examine processes that support branding analysis, conceptualizing and implementing it in HE is therefore topical and significant.

Branding Processes: Where Does Decision Making Lie?

In literature where the idea of teams is touched upon, brand management processes have received a certain amount of attention (de Chernatony, 2010; de Chernatony *et al*, 2013) but little specific investigation has taken place into who should be involved in making branding decisions, or how those decisions are made in a way that optimizes outcomes. Most studies on branding, particularly in the specific HE field, have tended to explore external elements of brand, but the internal processes of defining the HEI's brands have received scant attention.

There are exceptions to this. In one noteworthy example, the internal processes that a Norwegian university undertook in a rebranding project are investigated (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008). This 'values and identity project' (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008, p. 450) was challenging to implement due to the university's particular qualities and was ultimately described as delivering a 'rather disappointing outcome'.

More widely the committee as a decision-making vehicle in HE has received some recent exploration (Bates, 2014) and models of effectiveness have been evaluated with interesting

results. However the particular qualities of branding as a management process mean that context-specific scrutiny is desirable.

The above-mentioned cases reaffirm the lack of knowledge in this area, calling for more work to expand knowledge of the processes that underpin branding in HE. This article therefore draws and builds on Wæraas and Solbakk (2008), Bates (2014), and de Chernatony *et al* (2013) in seeking to further understand and improve branding processes in HE.

Research Focus

Background to the case

TRU is one of eleven universities in the province of British Columbia and one of ninety-eight universities in Canada. Initially established in 1970, this institution was a community college until 2007, when it was assigned university status. As it moves from being a teaching-focused college to a research-focused university, its culture is still evolving.

TRU is unusual among Canadian universities. It has a very broad mandate that spans support of learners of all abilities, through programmes in ESL (English as a second language) to graduate studies and academic research. TRU's programmes bridge a wide range of disciplines including trades, business, arts and sciences, nursing, culinary arts, and law. TRU also offers education to students on campus and across the world through a range of online courses.

In total, approximately 25,000 students are enrolled at TRU, with approximately 85 percent being domestic Canadian students. TRU is located in the city of Kamloops (population approximately 85,000) in the interior of Canada's westernmost province, British Columbia. TRU is also geographically situated between the cities of Vancouver, British Columbia, and Calgary, Alberta. However, although a medium-sized institution, recently conducted research indicated

that less than 5 percent of those surveyed outside the catchment area—primarily Alberta and British Columbia—had even heard of TRU.

The need to reassess the brand at TRU was driven by anticipated reductions in the numbers of high school students expected within the region, increased competition expected from current and emerging players in the online and distance education market, and the need to build diverse private funding sources as public funds continue to shrink. Developing what TRU terms a ‘strong and compelling brand’ had become increasingly urgent. TRU leadership felt that they needed a

. . . brand that inspires students to choose and commit to our university and our programmes, employees to want to work with us, community and industry partners eager to employ our alumni and donors choosing to make their mark by supporting us over other organizations. To ensure TRU continues to thrive, we will need to tell the TRU story in a way that motivates many different students, faculty, and supporters, from both near and far, to choose and stay with TRU.

An ambitious and clear rationale was emerging for evaluating and enhancing the TRU brand. However, as discussed above, the contentious nature of branding in HE meant that a degree of political sensitivity with regard to the university’s history, culture, and goals had to be exercised among stakeholders. As this paper seeks to address, this was undoubtedly one reason that TRU chose to use a committee. In doing so, TRU explored topics directly drawn from the objectives and the literature, including perceptions of individual contribution, group contribution, and effectiveness of the committee’s contributions to the organization’s branding process. This article further explores the branding committee members’ attitudes towards their individual and group contributions, the branding process, and the branding committee’s primary purpose.

Internal branding processes: Role of the branding committee

The branding committee was conceived as a key element of the rebranding strategy and was in place for just over one year, between May 14, 2014 and June 10, 2015. In total, the committee met approximately twenty-eight times. Each meeting lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The committee was chaired by the associate vice-president of marketing.

A key influence on the branding process and the branding committee was the marketing communications leadership committee (MCLC). The MCLC was made up of five people in the institution's upper administration that decided upon, for example, who would be on the branding committee, the process the committee would follow, and which of twelve agencies would be shortlisted to three for the branding committee to view and choose from among.

The branding committee comprised fourteen individuals representing different internal and external stakeholder groups, including students, alumni, community members, online faculty, face-to-face faculty, and managers from the development office, the athletics department, the campus bookstore, and TRU's international division, TRUWorld. Among these fourteen members, five were members of the marketing communications leadership (MCL) team, which was responsible for selecting the committee members and setting a process for the branding committee to follow.

As directed by the MCLC, the branding committee was a working committee responsible for:

1. *Becoming educated about branding*, through assigned reading, discussions, and reviews of examples of recent HE branding activities at other institutions.
2. *Gathering and synthesizing information* from multiple sources, including: branding literature; current and historical data about TRU; competing universities and colleges;

- the university's strategic priorities, its key target audiences, current marketing and communications activity samples; and input from the TRU community through consultations.
3. *Facilitating meetings* with individual faculties, schools, and the community—at Town Hall meetings, faculty councils, committee meetings, and divisional/departmental meetings. In total, approximately twenty stakeholder meetings were held, each ranging in time from 30 minutes to 1.5 hours.
 4. *Summarizing key findings* and recommendations from the above.
 5. *Choosing a branding agency* from the shortlisted alternatives.
 6. *Providing feedback* on the development of a brand concept and a broad creative direction, based on the key findings and recommendations.

The committee conducted its work based on five guiding principles (see Appendix). An often repeated theme by the branding committee chairperson, and one in keeping with Aaker's (2004) theory, was that the new TRU brand should capture 'what makes TRU *distinctive* (different from other institutions), *meaningful* (important to those we serve and want to serve) and *credible* (able to deliver on our promises)'.

Research Methodology

Using a case study of a particular Canadian university was considered appropriate for this work as it involves detailed and intensive analysis with a view to identifying issues and generating insights (Bryman and Bell, 2003). The investigation of the internal branding processes was conceived primarily as a 'revelatory case' (Yin, 1984) with a predominantly inductive approach (Bryman and Bell, 2003) that sought to elucidate the perceptions, opinions, and specific approaches of the branding committee members and other key leaders.

The authors, while seeking to achieve a degree of theoretical generalizability from this research, were aware of external validity issues—it is not always possible to use typical cases to represent a class of objects or events (Bryman and Bell, 2003). The crucial question was not ‘whether the findings can be generalized to a wider universe, but how well the researcher generates theory out of the findings’ (Bryman and Bell, 2003, p. 56). Having decided on a case study as an appropriate methodology, we then had to select an appropriate method of data collection, since ‘a case study approach in its own right will not provide data’ (Bryman and Bell, 2003, p. 32).

Case study design exponents often favour qualitative techniques, since these are particularly helpful in generating an intensive detailed examination that would provide information of a rich nature (Bryman and Bell, 2003; Miles and Huberman, 1994). We therefore chose in-depth interviews as our methodology, similar to other studies on brands (Chapleo, 2015; Hankinson, 2004). An interview guide was used to steer the discussion. The respondents were the fourteen members of the branding committee and two branding agency personnel—overall, a group with whom some degree of brand ownership lay (Free, 1999). The sample of sixteen was appropriate for an exploratory study, and offered indicative results that were representative (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Careful transcription and coded content analysis through NVivo was undertaken to exploit the particular benefits of the qualitative data we collected. The analysis was informed by Miles and Huberman’s (1994) approach, where responses that demonstrated semantic similarity were attached to one of the themes derived from the data. An independent researcher (free from bias of the interview process) was used to code data initially. Doing so helped the authors focus on a thematic structure—some scholars argue that independent coding also improves interrater

reliability and helps avoid coder bias. Open coding of key phrases was initially carried out followed by subcoding (King and Horrocks, 2010); by coding into a ‘parent-child’ hierarchy, data analysis is more nuanced.

Themes were coded to answer, rather than to question, and a degree of paraphrasing was used to reduce the material while preserving the essential contents. Although the interview guide was followed, respondents were allowed to expand upon topics with a fair degree of flexibility, generating richer information, illustrated through quotes, that brought the qualitative data to life (Daymon and Holloway, 2004).

Objectives

This research explored internal aspects of the organization’s brand analysis process. We looked at questions of the early stages of brand execution and its future brand strategy. Research questions explored the perspectives of those individuals on the branding committee who were facilitating the rebranding process. Overall, the work aimed to provide a greater understanding of organizations’ internal branding processes and their effectiveness.

Specific research objectives to be considered by the branding committee members therefore related to this aim. They were:

- exploration of perceptions of the use of a branding committee and its overall benefits to the branding process;
- exploration of attitudes towards individual and group contributions during the branding process;
- identification of factors that limit the effectiveness of a branding committee; and
- discussion of perceptions of how the use of a committee during the branding process could be improved.

Findings

Qualitative research seeks rich data—data that draws out information and insights through the course of a narrative. A number of themes relating to the objectives became apparent: the committee members' perceptions about the branding committee's process; their attitudes about their contributions to the process; and their ideas about how using a branding committee during a branding process could be improved.

Committee members' perceptions of the benefits of the branding committee processes

Analysing the committee members' understanding of the purpose of the branding committee was a first step towards seeking to understand the internal benefits of the committee's involvement in the branding process and towards exploring perceptions of its effectiveness. A discussion of whether the committee actually added value to the branding process followed. A number of themes emerged. In particular, committee members were inclined to describe the benefits of the committee in terms of its ability to recognize the organization's diversity through both its diverse membership, which enabled engagement with different stakeholder groups, and its ability to provide transparency to the branding process. They saw the committee as a vehicle through which cultural alignment with the organization could be achieved.

The committee's ability to understand the historical and cultural essence of the institution by tapping into the knowledge contained in different perspectives was well articulated by some respondents as 'a more inclusive view of what TRU really stood for and is at the core of the institution'. This also included aspects of narratives; one committee member said:

Sharing the different perspectives, the passion, and deep understanding of the organization is again not to be underestimated. It resides in people very strongly and it's very easy to overlook just how deep the connections are . . . and for us to be able to get access to those stories from people is very valuable.

Other committee members articulated that the committee's key role was to 'help ease the campus community into a new brand for TRU or creating a brand for TRU' and 'to inform and guide the process' or 'to represent the diverse stakeholders'. Supporting this theme, one interviewee said that a key benefit of the committee was its engagement with the various stakeholder groups:

The branding committee was all about getting wide representation from the university, from the stakeholder community, not only the university but the community members, we had a couple of those people, and then using the branding committee to help drive that whole process and getting the buy-in.

A similar view was held by a number of respondents. Poignantly supporting this view, one respondent stated the branding committee 'adds fairness and democracy' while another commented, 'I definitely think it helps to hear those voices, providing a fair opportunity for different views to be heard'.

Of note, the MCLC, who managed the process, and the creative agency, who were expected to directly use the branding committee's work, saw great value in stakeholder engagement. This is illustrated through one respondent's view:

Often stakeholder alignment is a challenge. So with any organization like TRU, we have the unenviable task of finding the commonalities between all of the different perspectives and ambitions and aspirations. So creating a solution that everybody is satisfied with and connected with and actually passionate about is a real challenge.

Ultimately, a number of views from the wider branding committee emphasized the value of the stakeholder process; one respondent said: 'as a baseline it brought a lot of stakeholders' perspectives into the room.' For another respondent, the process even seemed essential: 'I don't think the branding process without the branding committee would have functioned or would

have even been possible. Universities are political animals. All stakeholders need to be heard and feel that they are being heard’.

Closely linked to this theme, clearly emerging from the interviews was the need members expressed for the organization’s branding process to be seen as transparent and inclusive, therefore preventing criticism of the process by the wider stakeholder community. This was eloquently illustrated through statements such as ‘I don’t think the marketing department wanted to end up having anyone at the university say that you guys chose this brand and shoved it down our throat’ and ‘consultation sessions that were conducted with faculty, with community, and with Deans that would make it harder for people to later say “well, you guys didn’t get it right”’. *Transparency* was a frequently used word among respondents.

The overall value of the committee in the branding process was evident especially from respondents who were likely to have responsibility for managing or implementing branding activities. This was well articulated in terms of breadth of view by one respondent:

I think committees are invaluable. I think it invites various perspectives to evaluate the visions or strategies along the way, which I think is necessary to ensure these decisions are made based on objectivity rather than on personal subjectivity. So there’s that kind of testing of ideas across a broader stakeholder group which is really useful.

Those managing the process also saw benefits in terms of really understanding the brand; ‘a real sense of community which is obviously what this brand is rooted into, so it’s not surprising now that I have had some exposure to what everyone who gets infected with TRU gets’.

Those who would also be involved in executing the rebranding strategy saw this mutual benefit very clearly: ‘What we do is we help brands find that story and articulate that in a way that connects with an audience, but also connects with a number of diverse stakeholders and we simply can’t do it without you’.

Those not from marketing backgrounds also argued the value of the committee, such as this one respondent:

I think that that the purpose of this at the end of the day is to align all of these different faculties, different pillars of strength and align them under one core brand that can operate better—that allow different entities to operate with synergy. That’s what I believe is the purpose of this.

Additionally, the extent to which the branding committee saved the university money was raised as a practical and direct contribution of the committee. Indeed, ‘saving money through splitting into subgroups for key tasks’, for example undertaking different stakeholder brand consultation sessions, was cited as a key benefit. Much of the branding committee’s work in engaging stakeholders provided knowledge of the institution for the creative agency to build upon. If the branding committee had not performed this work, it would have probably been completed by an external agency—which would have been an additional expense for the university.

Another theme that quickly became apparent during interviews was almost uniform agreement over improvement in committee members’ perceptions of their brand knowledge, particularly among those who did not work in marketing roles anyway, such as MCLC members. For example, one committee member said: ‘I think my knowledge has improved around the inner working of the branding process. . . . [and] some of the steps being taken to make sure there is a collaborative consensus about the brand and how it is developed’. Another respondent stated: ‘Just understanding the complexities of how [branding experts] look at key factors that influence the development of the brand. That’s a newer process that I had not seen in detail’.

This improved knowledge of branding led to an improved understanding of the value of the process:

A good branding strategy has the ability to focus the mind of the various stakeholders in the institution to remind them that this is the purpose of the institution in a way that is much more effective than a mission statement. . . . It is very critical to have a clear and understandable statement and presence that really encapsulates what the university stands for.

Another respondent articulated this view most clearly :

If your brand and everything that you stand for is aligned, it makes it easy for a student to identify you and makes it that much easier for them to make that choice. . . . Having a strong, effective brand that's properly aligned and that's accurately representing you . . . allows people to be honest in their decision making because they know what they are getting.

One perhaps unexpected positive outcome of this increase in understanding and knowledge of branding among committee members, which may be of ongoing value to the institution, is the creation of brand ambassadors who have improved knowledge of the breadth and depth of the institution and now intend to go out and articulate that across TRU and beyond. Their contribution to the creation of a brand was a clear, direct benefit of serving on the branding committee. Indeed, as one respondent stated: 'These ambassadors then need to go off and live that brand. When they live it and they ask others and encourage others to live it, that's when that brand really comes to life'. The creation of these brand ambassadors is worthy of note for future research in the area of brand strategy and brand strategy execution.

Overall, committee members realized that stakeholder consultation was an important activity. Therefore, the aforementioned stakeholder engagement process was therefore perceived as having a significant value by the majority of members on the branding committee.

Committee members' attitudes towards individual and group members' contributions to the branding process

Any group should ideally be greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, gaining an understanding of the individuals' perceptions of their contributions to the committee was therefore significant. Generally speaking, there was a sense among most committee members that bringing individual skills to the process made the committee greater than the sum of its parts. However, a number of individuals struggled to give specific examples of their individual contribution; individual contributions were not widely articulated. Although some expressed disappointment that they had not contributed more fully, some argued that the committee's original formation and its purpose was the vital variable determining its success. Results in this area of enquiry were therefore interesting.

The few respondents who were able to clearly articulate their individual contributions seemed more strategic in their views, and in particular were concerned with ensuring that the different schools and faculties of the institution had a voice and were represented in the holistic vision of brand. Several respondents talked about their individual contributions but, in fact, instances they gave were actually more aligned with those of the committee overall—for example, appointing the creative agency—or else were tactical examples such as 'I made some points regarding the logo or designs'. One of those responsible for the ultimate implementation of the new brand suggested that 'I don't expect everybody on the branding committee to necessarily know what good branding is or what a good branding process is but I expect them to have an open mind and be willing to collectively work on the right process and the path for your institution'. Agency selection was the most obvious tangible result and was frequently mentioned, one in which committee members 'felt they were making key, significant decisions

in the branding process'. This tangible and significant theme regarding one of the committee's purposes was apparent in a number of answers.

A number of respondents understood that not all decisions could be taken by the branding committee. They felt it was 'important that the smaller MCLC pushed through some decisions'. Indeed, MCLC committee members seemed more able to articulate their contributions. One felt that his most significant contribution was the initial selection of the actual branding committee members. However, overall, the branding committee members' commitment to the process was key, and a pertinent point was 'we were genuinely interested and passionate about what we were doing'.

How the use of a branding committee during the branding process could be improved

Respondents were also asked how they felt the committee's process could be improved upon in future. Several noteworthy themes emerged in their responses. First, in terms of actual improvements in the branding committee's functioning and organization as part of the branding process, some suggestions were made for an adjustment in the committee culture. For example, some members suggested that the committee's performance could have improved if there had been opportunities to develop stronger relationships among branding committee members. One respondent said:

Creating opportunities for casual conversation. . . . When work is fun, work is better. I definitely think we could have made things a little bit more fun. Again that comes with . . . frequent meetings. That way people are loose, people are comfortable, people are open, people aren't as shy, people aren't as reserved.

It was also argued that the branding committee's work could be made more expedient through the use of subgroups. Two reasons were suggested for this. One respondent said:

A big and smaller group to ensure it works well: to have a smaller working group so that decisions are made relatively quickly by the people who are best placed to make those ongoing decisions rather than bringing it out to the masses. So there are justifications for both the smaller working teams and the larger stakeholders groups.

Secondly, some felt that smaller forums would provide a less intimidating opportunity for committee members who might feel less confident to voice their opinions. Periodic smaller meetings might offset these feelings of insecurity in committee members less versed in brand theory. One particular insight was that some committee members, such as students, may have been less likely to risk voicing their opinions in front of the more senior or experienced individuals on the committee.

Factors that could have been improved on or have limited the effectiveness of the branding committee

A number of themes regarding the committee's limitations and its benefits emerged in response to questions about members' views of what obstacles limited their performance and how committees of this type could be improved upon. A first, recurring response on this topic had to do with the time commitment that participation on the branding committee required. In particular, participants had other full-time work priorities so that many felt their ability to fully absorb and act meaningfully upon the information provided in the committee was compromised.

This is illustrated in this key quote:

The amount of time I had to access and digest some of the information was not realistic in all cases. . . . So in many cases I was doing a peripheral scan of the information and review of the information in between other things. So one of the challenges is making sure you have people who can participate fully, but also that they have time to actually review and digest all of those pieces.

Committee member commitment to the branding process also emerged as being an important factor influencing the committee's success. In fact, the degree of commitment of some committee members to the committee's involvement in the branding process was questioned. For example, some respondents talked of 'too many meetings . . . that led to rarely a full complement of committee members; as, although the mental commitment may have been there, people had other roles and tasks outside the committee', this may have been a more extreme view. Levels of commitment did not seem consistent among all committee members.

This point perhaps links to a degree of cynicism about due process. One interviewee even opined that the branding committee represented an agenda to 'create a work project for some members of the university'. This cynicism, and a view that perhaps the broader purpose was to limit or deflect future criticism, was a concern exemplified in a number of quotes. For example, one respondent said: 'No matter what you do, someone is not going to like it. And so basically they just cover their butt'. Another committee member's view was: 'Basically, we fulfilled a need. If anyone has a complaint about the eventual decision', decision makers could say: 'You had your chance to contribute during these meetings, we asked for you input'.

Some respondents believed that brand decisions should be limited to those with marketing knowledge, who hold a senior leadership position. But limitations voiced by just one or two interviewees included the view that the committee was too marketing based: 'too many marketing specialists . . . took us off into kind of an abstract realm, which could have been tempered a bit'. Another minority view was that the operational process was too linear: 'I was not comfortable having a real, prescribed, iron-clad set of steps that we move through, and sometimes we wouldn't go through it in a very linear fashion'. A view was also expressed that

the committee could get stuck : ‘we get too involved in the semantics as opposed to the emotions of this’.

A major concern committee members expressed was their feeling that their input and work on the committee was not really valued, and that therefore the consultation work with stakeholders might not be used. Most significantly, members felt it critical to ensure that the HE institution’s senior leadership (e.g. president or vice-president) understood and visibly supported the branding process, including the branding committee and its stakeholder engagement process. One respondent expressed this idea emphatically:

There is nothing worse than a committee feeling empowered to make decisions to only be then undermined by a senior voice that hasn’t been part of that process (and overrides things with a personal opinion) undermining the whole nature of that committee.

Of note, referring to another way committee work could be devalued, one member stated: ‘My biggest worry is that you do all this consultation and then in the end . . . the agency we hired didn’t use it or we didn’t even use it ourselves to guide us in what was decided’. Another respondent questioned also whether the work was valued, saying that they ‘don’t know how much our input was really taken into account’.

Overall, then, it seems the more significant criticisms of the committee were related to cynicism about whether the committee’s input was really valued and to be used by the creative agency, and whether the committee’s wide consultations were actually more of an exercise in visible stakeholder engagement. A caveat to the criticisms of the committee and its process, however, is that several of these emanated from respondents who had, for whatever reason, been less engaged in the process in terms of attendance; in research of this type personal agendas can never be entirely eliminated.

It is of note that the committee's leadership was identified as being an important feature of the branding processes' effectiveness. On this topic, one respondent emphasized this view when revealing 'there was good leadership on the committee, and there were really interesting people on the committee who challenged my ideas about branding and obliged me to think again'.

Discussion and Conclusions

A number of themes emerged from this research, and a number of aspects are worthy of further highlight and discussion. Regarding the contribution of committee members to the branding process, there was a clear tension between the contributions of individuals and the committee as a whole. Most respondents were unable to articulate their individual contributions, instead defaulting to what the overall committee achieved. To some extent this phenomenon may be due to the limited notable opportunities for individual members to actually contribute their personal opinions, based on the limited actual extent of influence they had upon the committee's goals and the process itself.

One of the biggest benefits associated with a committee's use in the branding process was seen as its broad membership. Specifically, committee members were clearly conscious of, and willing to engage with, the institution's diverse internal and external stakeholders. The importance of this contribution—in light of the existing research about the need for a brand to reflect an organization's culture—needs to be acknowledged. In contrast, however, the members of the MCLC were more able to articulate their contributions. It may be that some committee members did not contribute effectively as possible since they did not fully understand their role on the committee. Clearly communicating the role and responsibilities of each branding

committee member should be addressed. In future, such committees should be asked what each individual actually can and is likely to contribute to the process.

A degree of cynicism towards the branding committee among some respondents was also apparent from this research. Some believed the branding committee process was to an extent only an exercise in 'tick[ing] the stakeholder diversity box'. From an objective point of view, this might partly be true, revealed by there being few opportunities for individual members to contribute while on the committee. Member buy-in to the importance of their contribution was thereby decreased, possibly also weakening the committee's purpose. It is important to communicate clearly to future internal branding committees that they have a genuine voice that influences decisions. Responses do suggest, however, that in fact one of the committee's main contributions was how it ensured that diverse stakeholder groups from across the university were identified and that they had an opportunity to voice their opinions regarding the institution.

To be expected, all respondents said that their branding knowledge had improved. This did however have an interesting secondary benefit: it often made committee members enhanced brand ambassadors. Therefore for some individuals their ongoing contribution may be more significant as brand ambassadors than actually during the process of branding.

Another evident conclusion is that leadership support was critical, in two ways. First, the overall buy-in of a key strategic leader who supports the process and supports it at a senior level is vital for effective branding processes. Second, leadership in terms of specific committee conception and briefing has a great impact. At the same time, institutional level leadership support could have been evidenced to committee members by greater leadership acknowledgement and involvement.

There is a clear opportunity for additional follow-up research. For example, the extent to which the current, newly created brand ambassadors support the eventual creative work supplied by the branding agency would be a potential area of future insight. An additional area of future exploration would be the manner in which different stakeholder groups might respond to the agency's creative work. This would also further develop ways to expand the committee's stakeholder engagement process.

Before this research was undertaken, we lacked knowledge about university branding processes. The institution in this case considered fundamental questions. Should such a decision be left in the hands of people who might not fully understand or appreciate the purpose of a brand? Would a committee contribute to the branding process? If so, who should be on the committee, and how should it proceed? Reflecting on the results, it may be argued that a wider committee is a worthwhile approach, although members' roles and the stakeholder engagement process they follow must both be clearly understood from the beginning and carefully managed throughout. To do otherwise risks cynicism among committee members, and eventual branding decisions that may not be fully supported by the committee members. Such results will, in turn, negatively serve an institution's ability to successfully execute its brand strategy across all stakeholders.

This case study suggests that a wider branding committee does have the ability to add real value to internal aspects of the branding process. For example, such a committee clearly has the ability to foster stakeholder engagement and create a culture of inclusivity towards the branding process. These aspects are fundamental challenges in achieving success across large, diverse institutions such as a university, and are arguably important to all organizations seeking a holistic corporate brand that reflects the internal and external aspects of their identity and culture.

However, a number of pitfalls and drawbacks associated with management through branding committees must be borne in mind. Crucially, an ill-informed committee may actually be counterproductive to the creation of a brand; for the committee to work effectively, attention must be paid to selecting participants who bring specific strengths. Ongoing effectiveness requires briefing and management of participants throughout the process; transparency and reassurance in terms of how contributions from the committee are used; and measures to manage the process expediently, such as breaking into smaller groups for specific tasks. Ensuring that stakeholders are aware and supportive of the branding committee's work and the agency's creative foundation are also necessary.

In conclusion, this research offers theoretical and practical implications in terms of managing the branding process in an inclusive manner that takes account of the views of internal stakeholders and taps into their inherent knowledge to arguably present a more holistic brand. While the context was that of a Canadian university, the authors argue that the broader findings offer significant insights on managing the branding process for the majority of larger organizations. Future research to evaluate the outcomes of this particular rebranding programme post-executions is envisaged.

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Appendix

The branding committee conducted its work based on five guiding principles:

- **Inclusion.** Through membership on the committee or core focus groups, and participation in ongoing face-to-face and online meetings, town halls, focus groups, interviews and other forms of consultation, anyone associated with TRU will have many opportunities to provide input.
- **Best practice.** The university's most senior and accomplished marketing and communications practitioners will lead the process to ensure it invites, reflects and, where possible, redefines marketing and communications best practice.
- **Transparency.** A public website—tru.ca/branding— will contain a frequently updated consultation schedule, consultation input, branding presentations and reference material. Any emails sent to branding@tru.ca will be shared with the committee.
- **Diversity.** To maximize membership diversity, include representatives of key TRU groups (students, faculty, staff, alumni and community members) from multiple backgrounds, orientations, circumstances, ethnicities and cultures, fields of study and areas of TRU.
- **Learning.** Explore opportunities for learning or professional development presented by this branding initiative.