Faculty Responses to Business-School Branding: A Discursive Approach

Frandsen, S., Gotsi, M., Johnston, A., Whittle, A., Frenkel, S. and Spicer, A.

Faculty Responses to Business-School Branding: A Discursive Approach

Abstract

Purpose: The branding of universities is increasingly recognized to present a different set of challenges than in corporate, for-profit sectors. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how faculty make sense of branding in the context of Higher Education, specifically considering branding initiatives in business schools.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper is based on qualitative interviews with faculty regarding their responses to organizational branding at four business schools. Discourse analysis was used to analyse the interview data.

Findings: The study reveals varied, fluid and reflexive faculty interpretations of organizational branding. Faculty interviewed in the study adopted a number of stances towards their Schools' branding efforts. In particular, the study identifies three main faculty responses to branding: endorsement, ambivalence and cynicism.

Originality/value: The study contributes by highlighting the ambiguities and ambivalence generated by brand-management initiatives in the higher education context, offering original insights into the multiple ways that faculty exploit, frame and resist attempts to brand their organizations. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for branding in university contexts.

Keywords: business schools, brands, branding, discourse analysis, higher education

Faculty Responses to Business-School Branding: A Discursive Approach

1. Introduction

Branding has become the zeitgeist of our society (Kornberger, 2010), no longer a practice that is exclusive to corporate, for-profit sectors. Universities, for instance, are increasingly turning to branding to enhance their perceived value and competitive standing (Chapleo, 2010; 2011; 2015; Nguyen *et al.*, 2016). Business schools, in particular, are under increasing pressure to build strong brands, since they face growing national and international competition for students, faculty and resources (Alwi and Kitchen, 2014; Naidoo *et al.*, 2014) in an environment where rankings or league tables largely determine admissions, placement, hiring and funding prospects (Argenti, 2000; Gioia and Corley, 2002).

Although studies on business-school branding are scarce, scholars have started to unpack externally focused, image-driven brand-building practices in this context (Chapleo, 2010; Gioia and Corley, 2002; Vásquez, *et al.*, 2013; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009). However, a growing body of work has argued that branding universities presents a different set of challenges from the corporate world (e.g., Jevons, 2006). Authors, for instance, have emphasised the critical role that academic faculty play in delivering 'the brand promise' (Judson *et al.*, 2006). Brand promises about teaching and learning require faculty to enact in the classroom what is promised. Brand promises grounded in research or real-world impact also rely on faculty to deliver those promises through their research activities, whether through their publications or their engagements with policy-makers and practice-based communities. Yet scholars have highlighted the challenge that arises from the plurality of logics that coexist in university settings (Alessandri, 2007; Alessandri *et al.*, 2007). The discourse of branding, with its market-based logic, can exist uneasily at times alongside discourses of professionalism, public service, knowledge advancement or the notion of education as an end in itself

(Alwi and Kitchen, 2014; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008). Differing organizational cultures, competing resources and conflicting politics further complicate branding in the university environment (Assad *et al.*, 2013). In this context, orchestrating faculty understandings of the brand and mobilizing faculty commitment to the branding process are often described as important but challenging processes (Dholakia and Acciardo, 2014; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009).

We contribute to the limited, but growing, scholarly debate regarding how faculty interpret and make sense of branding in the business school context (Chapleo, 2011). Preliminary insights have depicted branding within universities as a contested practice (Naidoo *et al.*, 2014; Weerts *et al.*, 2014; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008). From the viewpoint of the faculty, most studies propose that branding is fraught with resistance, ambiguity and uncertainty (e.g. Aspara *et al.*, 2014; Chapleo, 2011; Idris and Whitfield, 2014). Yet Naidoo and Pringle (2014) hint that faculty may engage with the brand in a more nuanced and varied manner than extant literature assumes. Do faculty accept, reject, identify or disidentify with their school's branding? To date, much remains unknown about how business school faculty make sense of their school's branding and what meanings they ascribe to the branding process. Our research thus specifically aims to:

- explore faculty responses to branding in the context of business schools;
- apply a discursive approach to the study of faculty sensemaking of branding in order to gain a fuller and more nuanced understanding; and
- further the debate on the issues surrounding the branding of higher education by highlighting the responses of faculty members.

A qualitative study of four business schools, two in Australia and two in the UK, explores our overarching research question: how do faculty members at business schools make sense of and discursively position themselves in relation to their school's branding process? In all four cases, branding was a relatively new phenomenon, only gaining attention and investment over the last few

years. Our focus was not on faculty perceptions of their school's brand itself but rather on what faculty thought about the process of branding at their school more generally.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section reviews extant literature on business school and university branding, focusing in particular on the role of faculty. We also draw on the literature regarding sensemaking and discursive positioning to outline our theoretical position from which we will explore how business school faculty make sense of their school's branding. Then, the research methodology is outlined and the findings of the study are presented. A discussion of theoretical and managerial contributions follows, along with limitations that offer future directions for research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Drivers of business-school branding

The broader topic of marketing higher education has received growing research attention (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007). Within this literature, few empirical papers have concentrated on the branding of universities (e.g., Chapleo, 2010; 2011; 2015; Vásquez *et al.*, 2013), and even fewer have focused specifically on business-school branding, despite increasing calls for such research (e.g., Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007). What scholars clearly have emphasised, though, is that university leaders face increasing pressure to enhance the perceived value of their institutions and their relative positions against key competitors (Naidoo *et al.*, 2014). Branding has been presented as a 'cure' for this problem. To date, then, studies have largely focused on the drivers of branding in universities at large, as well as in business schools in particular (Gioia and Corley, 2002; Temple, 2006). The phenomenon of branding has been fuelled by two major forces, according to this work.

First, studies have identified that increased national and international competition, along with varying student fees, are forcing universities to compete, more than even before, for students, faculty

and resources (Curtis *et al.*, 2009; Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007; Naidoo *et al.*, 2014; Stensaker, 2007; Vásquez *et al.*, 2013). Business schools are under especially mounting pressure from the rise of for-profit schools, online programs and other alternatives to the traditional MBA (Khurana, 2007). Branding has been seen as a tool to help universities and business schools differentiate their offerings and tell 'their story' amidst this 'marketization' of higher education (Czarniawska and Genell, 2002; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Gioia and Corley, 2002; Judson *et al.*, 2008; Molesworth *et al.*, 2011; Ramachandran, 2010). Within universities, brands are understood to capture the essence of the value that an institution offers to its stakeholders (Judson *et al.*, 2008) and identify what distinguishes it from competitors (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016).

Much of the interest in branding universities has been triggered by increasing competition for overseas students (Hemley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007; Idris and Whitfield, 2014; Whisman, 2009). University brands are considered useful because they may help brand-savvy, prospective students to make decisions about which university to attend and what subject to choose based on a limited amount of information (Judson *et al.*, 2006; Whisman, 2009). A strong brand is seen to simplify this selection process for many, therefore impacting student recruitment (Bock *et al.*, 2014; Ivy, 2001; Jevons, 2006; Judson *et al.*, 2008; Watkins and Gonzenbach, 2013). Interestingly, studies have found that universities with strong brands not only tend to receive more positive evaluations by students but also enjoy more emotional engagement (Alessandri *et al.*, 2007). Branding, for instance, has been found to help build meaningful emotional ties with students (Durkin *et al.*, 2012; Stensaker, 2007). A strong university brand image is therefore believed to enhance student satisfaction and, in turn, student loyalty (Brown and Mazzarol, 2009).

In addition, strong brands are understood to impact universities, colleges and schools beyond student recruitment (Vásquez *et al.*, 2013). Institutions with strong brands are better able to recruit talented faculty (Watkins and Gonzenbach, 2013) and attract the ever-diminishing funds available for

higher education (Curtis *et al.*, 2009; Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007; Vásquez *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, branding is thought to help universities build institutional co-operation (Huisman and van der Wende, 2004) and instigate internal change (Naidoo *et al.*, 2014; Stensaker, 2007), particularly in terms of signalling a new strategy (Melewar and Akel, 2005).

Second, the increasing importance of rankings and league tables (e.g., the Times Higher Education rankings, Shanghai Jiao Tong indices) that identify 'the best schools' and 'top programs' has also elevated the significance of branding for business schools (Gioia and Corley, 2002). Rankings may guide students' choices about which university they should select to attend and for which programme they should apply (Assad *et al.*, 2013; Stensaker, 2007). Argenti (2000) notes that rankings of business schools, especially, have more effect on admissions, placement, hiring and funding than any other single variable. As a result, Gioia and Corley (2002) observe, resources at business schools are often shifted from improvements in teaching (e.g., developing courses and educational infrastructure) to image-management initiatives (e.g., public relations, hiring image consultants and responding to media requests).

2.2 Branding practices in university settings

Chapleo's (2010) study of brand managers across 11 universities revealed no uniform strategy for achieving a successful brand in the university sector. In fact, studies have shown that conventional brand-management techniques may be inappropriate for universities (Chapleo, 2015). Vásquez *et al.* (2013) argued that despite typical portrayals of university branding as a strategic and structured process, a more complex picture emerges from empirical studies of branding in university settings.

Mirroring practice, the extant literature on branding within university settings has, to date, predominantly adopted an external focus (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009). For example, studies have looked at how universities employ strategic approaches to segment and target students and to position

the university to attract their targets (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010). Emphasis has been placed on the role of marketing communication activities in brand-building (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010). For example, universities use externally focused promotional material, such as letters, brochures, booklets, websites and social media to promote their brand and influence students' decision-making processes and wider stakeholders' perceptions (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016). Increased attention has been placed on the role of the corporate visual identity, with studies finding that logos, styles, nomenclature, architecture and interior design must be managed to maintain a consistent offline and online brand presence (Idris and Whitfield, 2014).

While branding at universities is typically oriented externally, some authors have also emphasised the critical role academic faculty play in branding (Judson *et al.*, 2006). For instance, in a study of the University of Rhode Island, Dholakia and Acciardo (2014) identified the commitment from academic staff and the inclusion of their input into the branding strategy as key to the success of the branding program. Academic faculty embody the university brand through their research, teaching and wider engagement activities (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010; Judson *et al.*, 2006; Naidoo and Pringle, 2014; Vásquez *et al.*, 2013). As such, they can 'make or break' any brand promise and are therefore expected to incorporate the university's brand values in their everyday work, deliver on the 'brand promise' and 'evangelize' the value of the brand to students and other stakeholders (Judson *et al.*, 2006).

Universities are beginning to implement internal branding initiatives to generate this commitment to the brand (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016). Internal branding is seen as important for faculty to understand the brand, take ownership of it, and do 'brand work' (Judson *et al.*, 2006). Whisman (2009) has also argued that internal branding may assist universities to overcome 'internal resistance' towards branding, moving beyond traditional marketing activities to a more 'cultural' approach that allows the brand to guide organizational behaviour. Yet despite these accounts of the importance of

faculty and the power of internal branding in aiding the meaning-making processes of academic staff, evidence also suggests that it is difficult to engage faculty in the branding of their university (Chapleo, 2010).

2.3 Challenges in engaging faculty in university branding

A small body of work has started to unpack the challenges of engaging faculty in university branding. Studies have proposed that academics are hesitant because they have a limited understanding of what branding entails and tend to see it exclusively as a promotional activity that 'smacks of commercialism' (Beneke, 2011). Others argue that it is difficult in university settings to articulate a brand identity that captures the multiplicity of voices of different stakeholders (Curtis *et al.*, 2009; Nicolescu, 2009; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009). Senior academic managers, such as Deans and Directors, might also articulate the institution's brand differently to faculty (Lowrie, 2007; Nicolescu, 2009; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009). As a result, Lowrie (2007) has argued that university brands can be 'undecidable identities', while Vásquez *et al.* (2013) have noted that branding has surfaced an almost 'existential' reflection in universities about what defines them and how they are viewed. Moreover, studies have argued that the 'branding logic' challenges academics' authority (Drori *et al.*, 2013), as well as the academic culture and its values (Chapleo, 2015). Branding has therefore often been portrayed as a 'dirty word' in university settings, mirroring a push towards marketization and commercialism that stands at odds with the traditional conception of universities as institutions concerned with the pursuit of the greater good (Weerts *et al.*, 2014).

Nonetheless, scholarly debate on the branding of business schools falls short of empirical examination, particularly in relation to the implications of branding logic from the perspective of faculty (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawandarna, 2007). We seek to contribute to the limited, yet growing, body of work exploring faculty's viewpoints. To date, such studies have depicted branding

as fraught with resistance, ambiguity and uncertainty (e.g., Aspara *et al.*, 2014; Chapleo, 2011; Idris and Whitfield, 2014). Preliminary findings on faculty responses to branding exercises show that branding in the context of universities is a contested practice (Naidoo *et al.*, 2014; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008) and that faculty engage with the university brand in a more varied manner than what is typically assumed (Naidoo and Pringle, 2014).

We build on these studies to unpack further how such ambiguity and uncertainty is expressed and managed discursively when faculty members make sense of branding. We thus work from a discursive perspective, one which treats branding not as a pre-defined category (Lowrie, 2007) but instead seeks to explore what lay meanings academic staff ascribe to the concept and practices of branding (Vásquez *et al.*, 2013). We thus treat branding as a logic which, on the one hand, carves out a discursive position for academic staff (for example, as 'brand workers' or 'brand ambassadors'), while on the other hand also being discursively re-constructed through faculty's negotiation of this position. In the following section, we draw on literature of sensemaking and discursive positioning to outline our theoretical position from which we explore how faculty make sense of branding.

2.4 Sensemaking and discursive positioning

In business schools, as well as in other contexts of Higher Education, one may find logics portraying faculty as educators, researchers, corporate consultants or sellers of services, among other roles. The ways in which social actors negotiate and make sense of these different logics holds interest here, particularly how they make sense of branding logic. One way to try to understand this process is to explore how individuals attempt to frame, manage or maintain the discursive tensions surrounding these logics (see, e.g., Meisenbach, 2008). For example, when organizational members encounter moments of ambiguity or uncertainty, they usually seek to clarify what is going on and 'make sense' of what has occurred (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014); this process of sensemaking creates

intersubjective meaning (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). The sensemaking process is interactional and discursive, as employees create various accounts - discursive constructions of reality - that help interpret and explain what is occurring (Antaki, 1994). Thus, people make sense of differing, possibly conflicting logics, through a narrative and discursive process (Brown, 2000).

Further developing this perspective, work in the field known as discursive positioning has advanced understanding of how people occupy multiple positions with their talk, both responding to dominant discourses (for example, the discourse of branding) and also drawing on other discourses to work up particular self-positions or lines of arguments. Developed within the broader field of discursive social psychology, the perspective of discursive positioning enables valuable analysis of the duality of the discourse/subject relationship by viewing persons as both *products of* and *producers of* discourse (Davies and Harré, 1990).

For Davies and Harré (1990, p.46), occupying a subject position means that a person "sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned". In our study, the discourse of branding opens up certain subject positions to business school faculty members: to name but a few, for example, positions of faculty as sellers of knowledge products, which in turn positions students as consumers. Discursive positioning offers a processual perspective on the self, in which "an individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate" (Davies and Harré, 1990, p. 46). The self, then, is "always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices" (Davies and Harré, 1990, p. 46).

This study builds on Potter and Wetherell (1987) by advocating that the use of language and discursive practices "do not just describe things: they *do* things. And being active they have social

and political implications" (p. 6, emphasis original). In particular, this research focuses on what discursive positions (such as embracing, rejecting, distancing, humour, cynicism and so on) adopted in relation to branding discourse *do* at both interactional and institutional levels. These discursive positions are enabled through processes of splitting (treating as separate), normative ordering (treating some as having greater importance than others) or weaving (blending together) competing discourses with alternative logics (such as branding, professional and public service logics). As Davies and Harré (1990, p. 45) argued, "discourses can compete with each other or they can create distinct and incompatible versions of reality". However, precisely how these discourses (e.g., branding, commercialization, public service or professionalism) relate to one another - and how business school faculty make sense of them - remain unknown, hence motivating this study.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study draws on data collected at four, research-active business schools, two in Australia and two in the UK. All four were studied as part of a larger study on branding in higher education, with the overarching research question: how do faculty members at business schools make sense of and discursively position themselves in relation to their school's branding process? Semi-structured interviews across the four business schools were our primary empirical material to answer this question. We first interviewed the Deans of each school, building an understanding of how they constructed the role of branding at their schools and how they saw the role of faculty members in the branding efforts. We then interviewed a randomly selected sample of faculty across the four business schools. To obtain a cross-section of views, faculty respondents were drawn from a variety of disciplines, and we intereviewed an equal number of men and women at both junior and senior levels. Both relatively new hires and long-serving academics were included in the sample of informants. In total, across the four business schools, we interviewed 50 faculty members. Branding-related

information from marketing materials, internal reports, the School's websites, physical structures and artefacts were also collected. Discussions with senior-level staff involved in marketing (e.g., senior marketing managers) and other university marketing staff assisted with our pre-interview preparation and added insights to our understanding of the phenomenon. For instance, it became clear that, at all four business schools, structural and political changes, especially the appointments of new Deans, coincided with the emergence of branding initiatives. At all four business schools, the Deans granted full permission for the research. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the research topic and questions, all four schools were assured anonymity, and moreover all respondents were assured anonymity and confidentiality. Table 1 below overviews the sources of data.

-----Table 1 here----

The interviews, which varied in length from 20 to 60 minutes, were conducted in private offices. Each interview was conducted by a single researcher from the author team and was tape-recorded. We had a structured interview guide with open-ended questions but intended to let respondents speak for themselves rather than leading them in particular directions (see Appendix 1). For example, at the beginning of each interview, respondents were asked to explain the brand of their business school in their belief or opinion. A common response across all four cases was that some faculty were unsure what the 'brand' was and what constituted 'branding'. As we discuss below, this ambiguity and ambivalence was a significant finding in this study.

The analytical procedure followed Tracy's (2013) framework for analysing qualitative data, conducted in five overlapping and iterative phases. The first phase, according to Tracy (2013), entails 'opening up the data' through data immersion and primary-cycle coding. In this phase, the researchers who had collected the data from each business school listened to the recordings and generated first-

level codes that assigned common and recurring themes. Through constant comparative methods (Charmaz, 2006), these codes and their associated data were organized into tabular format. The second phase focused on secondary-cycle coding (Tracy, 2013), in which we examined the linkages between the first-level codes and organized them into second-order interpretive codes that could explain and synthesize the first-level codes. Rather than imposing pre-established codes from the literature, developed codes reflected *faculty members'* different levels of understandings of and identification with their schools' branding. For example, in this second stage, we noticed that faculty members expressed a range of levels of identification with their school's branding, including cynicism, ambivalence and indifference.

During the third step, early drafts on each of the business schools were developed and shared among team members to refine consensus interpretations of discursive themes, including by sharing interview quotes in tabular form. However, while trying to 'fit' each interviewee into second-order categories, it became apparent that the parts of the interviews from each respondent were sometimes inconsistent, imperfectly conforming to any single second-order code and oscillating instead among the various types of identification. As we discuss below, most faculty expressed a range of positions towards the branding of their schools within the same interview, thus not fitting neatly into any singular code. Instead of interpreting this as a methodological problem of internal validity, we sought to develop it as a key finding. We adopted a more advanced analytical strategy (Tracy, 2013) by focusing on the shifting discursive positions that faculty members adopted.

Therefore, the fourth step in the analysis involved a more discourse-analytical approach to our data (Davies and Harré, 1990; Potter and Wetherell, 1987), focused on the meanings faculty members constructed around their organizations' branding efforts (see also Kärreman and Rylander, 2008) and the context within which those meanings were constructed. Approaches to discourse analysis vary (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000), and the discipline of marketing has no uniform

application of discourse analysis (e.g., Roper *et al.*, 2013; Sitz, 2008). Drawing from Potter and Wetherell's (1987) guidelines for discourse analysis, we relistened to and recoded the recorded interviews, this time categorising not the *respondent themselves* but the *interpretive repertoires* and *discursive positions* they adopted. Interpretive repertoires are 'recurrently used systems of terms used to characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena' (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p. 149). For example, this approach enabled us to see how respondents' terminology used to describe branding ranged from positioning themselves as active co-producers of the brand (e.g., 'Brand Me') to expressing more cynical stances by evoking terminology like 'hype', 'veneer' or 'façade'. This approach also enabled us to interpret the oscillations within interviews as multiple and complex discursive stances.

At this stage, our tables of data covered all four business schools, representing the *discursive positions* used in the dataset. Importantly, we use the term 'discursive positions', not 'attitudes', indicating that we coded the discursive position adopted in an interview account (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The discursive approach considers how people talk and how that talk reflects the discourse they use to make sense of themselves and the world around them. While other qualitative methods may interrogate social reality as it exists, discourse analysis investigates the way it is produced. In our study, therefore, we are interested in how meaning is ascribed to 'branding'. Furthermore, the discursive approach rejects the idea that we each have stable 'attitudes' or 'identifications' that would enable categorisation of individual respondents (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). It is therefore neither surprising nor problematic that respondents would occupy ambivalent or even contradictory positions in the same interview (see, for example, Wetherell *et al.*, 1987). Interview accounts, from this perspective, provide not a 'window' into individual minds or organizational workings, instead offering a context upon which people draw to produce accounts of 'who they are' and 'what they think and feel' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Fifth and finally, analysis concluded by returning to the literature on branding, sensemaking and discursive positioning to help interpret respondents' multiple discursive positions towards their schools' branding. In keeping with an interpretive, inductive approach, we enforced no restrictions (such as pre-testing potential respondents or assessing how they regarded the notion of 'branding' and 'brand' in relation to their schools) and made no pre-judgements about the types of responses we sought from respondents. Rather than seeking 'expert' responses or understandings of what constitutes branding, we sought to understand how faculty made sense of and derived meanings from their schools' branding (irrespective of whether or not they could confidently define 'branding'). Interestingly, when we began our interviews, we assumed that respondents (both Deans and faculty) from these four, research-active business schools would all immediately understand the concept of 'a brand' and, indeed, the nature of their schools' brands. Instead, we were surprised to find that many staff did not know what was meant by the term 'brand' itself.

As we illustrate further below, this is interesting for three main reasons. Firstly, researchers might assume, as we did, that 'a brand' is an easily identifiable, understandable term. Our findings indicate that the very notion of 'a brand', at least in the contexts of these business schools, can also be opaque or contested. In such a context, then, researchers should not assume there is a common understanding of the nature of 'a brand'. Secondly, when respondents did engage in their own sensemaking of the brand and their school's branding efforts, the brand and these efforts were sometimes seen negatively, perhaps conflated with 'hype' and 'marketing'. This is interesting in that some respondents without a clear notion or definition of 'a brand' nevertheless discursively constructed the term 'brand' as problematic. Our analysis and discussion below examines why faculty might associate branding efforts with something negative, whether for themselves, for their schools or for the higher education sector as a whole. Third and finally, the lack of clarity for some respondents regarding the meaning of 'a brand' and 'branding' suggests a number of implications for

those who wish to create a brand with which faculty are willing to engage. As we note in our discussion below, if faculty and even senior management see branding as a vague, ill-defined concept, it will be particularly difficult for management to create an enduring source of meaning that faculty recognize, identify with and want to enact.

4. Findings

4.1 The Deans' discourse of branding

In order to contextualize faculty's discursive positions towards branding, we first examined how the Deans of each business school constructed branding's role. The Deans all positioned branding as important for their respective schools, arguing that developing their school brands was a key part of their (newly acquired) roles. As one Dean explained:

> *"Having a strong brand that people instantly recognise is so important. It's what sets us apart from other [business schools]. People should want to be part of that brand, to study there, to work there. Both internal branding and employer branding is vital."* (Dean, Case A)

All four Deans described branding as necessary in being able to compete in the higher education market, identifying other business schools as their main competitors. Branding, according to the Deans, provides a benchmark against external competition. Interestingly, as we found with some faculty, one Dean's articulation around the notion of 'branding' appeared rather vague - paradoxically appearing unsure about what constituted branding even while highlighting the school brand as being important in maintaining a competitive advantage.

Our analysis especially focused on how each Dean articulated the role of faculty in engaging with the brand. All four Deans positioned faculty as being important representatives of the school's

brand, arguing that internal branding was necessary to encourage faculty to recognize and understand the brand and therefore engage with it. Analysis of the Deans' discourse concerning faculty revealed two key themes: faculty were expected (1) to help 'deliver the brand promise' and (2) to 'engage in brand endorsement'. The Deans talked about 'delivering the brand promise' as integral to faculty's 'internal work' within the school, while also expecting that 'engaging in brand endorsement' (being 'brand ambassadors') was part of their 'external work'.

Internal work, according to the Deans, included teaching (e.g., delivering the brand promise to students, as measured through student evaluations and school rankings), publication (as measured through impact evaluations and journal rankings) and supporting accreditation activities. As one Dean commented:

> *"Certainly staff need to deliver on what this school says it will do. It's in the student charter, yes, but there's a broader issue of the promise we make . . . what do people expect when they study here? They expect the best in teaching and research. That is what (faculty) must deliver."* (Dean, Case D)

'External work' included how faculty represented the school to external audiences (e.g., at conferences), used brand logos and templates in their interactions with external audiences, looked and sounded professional, and publicised the school (and not just themselves). A 'strong' school brand, according to all four Deans, was something with which faculty should want to represent and engage, particularly when acting as 'brand ambassadors' to external audiences. As one Dean explained:

> *"Every single staff member represents this school. . . . They are an ambassador when they walk out this door, when they walk out this building . . . they have to realize that, they have to*

step up. We want people to identify with the business school . . . they can damage their own

reputation but they can also damage ours." (Dean, Case A)

The Dean continued, explaining that representing the brand is win–win, from his perspective, for the

faculty member and the school:

"*I think you can encourage people to want to invest themselves in the business school. They*

have to see what's in it for themselves . . . ultimately what's in it for them is being associated

with the number one business school in Australia. It should always be in their mind. We want

to be number one, we act as if we are number one. . . . we do not put up with less than optimal

ambition." (Dean, Case A)

This Dean discursively constructed 'branding' as nothing but advantageous for faculty. Yet the same

Dean also stated that it was not easy to encourage academics to identify with and represent the school

brand, rather than promoting their own research (or, indeed, 'personal brand'):

"*That's not unusual among academics because of the idiosyncratic nature of them and their*

focus on themselves, their research and so on…" (Dean, Case A)

While the Deans positioned as important the schools' brands and faculty's willingness to

engage with them, they also stressed that tension exists between faculty's identification with the brand

and their aim to build their own professional, 'personal' brands. According to the Deans, faculty did

not necessarily see 'being brand ambassadors' and 'delivering on the brand promise' as mutually

beneficial, tending instead to focus more on their own 'personal brands'. Yet, as we further describe

below, faculty's unwillingness to engage in branding is far more nuanced and complex than simply

being interested in their own personal brands or research agendas. Below, we outline faculty's discursive positions towards the branding efforts at their schools.

4.2 Faculty responses to business-school branding

4.2.1 Brand endorsement

The notion of employees as 'brand ambassadors' has been well documented in the branding literature (Hatch and Schultz, 2001, 2003; Ind, 2001), which argues that when employees identify with and internalize an organization's brand values, they will *live them out* in their day-to-day interactions with external stakeholders. Yet this study found that positive endorsements of the business school brand were almost exclusively associated with more instrumental notions of '*what the brand can do for me'*. Benefits of a strong brand for the business school were quickly translated into benefits for the individual*,* for 'Brand Me'. Many respondents highlighted the importance as academics of personal brands, reflecting positively on the benefits of a strong business school brand for the purposes of individual career and reputation.

> *"Academic life is very much about appearance, about, sort of, reputation, right. When you go around, your personal reputation is, sort of, partially attached to the reputations of the institutions."* (Senior academic, Case B)

> *"Before [Case D], I was at X and I have noticed that people take me more seriously now that I am at [Case D]. So I experience that [Case D] has a good profile and has benefited me personally."* (Academic, Case D)

"I also had an offer from a U.S. university, so of course, you know, I kind of looked through the rankings and I kind of looked also at the global branding and then I decided, also because of this, for [Case B], because it sends strong signals. And I think it's good for your career, you know, once you are in a strong institution with a strong brand, and I think strong brand basically means well-ranked." (Junior academic, Case B)

"I think that [Case D] has given me extra recognition. Now increasingly as you progress as an academic you create your own brand . . . But always, the place you are, even if you are the most accomplished academic, still the place you work for is a statement of your quality as well. Let me give you an example. We have some very good economists, they say they are North American. You say, OK, where does he work? And if the answer is not a very prominent place immediately you say really, he's not as good as I thought. Because if he was better he could be somewhere better. Individual branding to some extent is individually driven, but it's always influenced by the brand of the place that you work for." (Academic, Case D)

In contrast to the current literature focusing on employees as brand ambassadors, which emphasizes the importance of getting employees to internalize the values of the brand, these findings show employees as active *co-producers* of brand messages. Faculty make sense of branding somewhat instrumentally and individualistically in terms of the *"game"* of building Brand Me. While this process might be more relevant to knowledge workers in highly mobile labour markets, the respondent faculty members of this study do not simply internalize their business schools' brand messages but seek to enhance that brand, with an instrumental view towards furthering their own Brand Me.

The last interview quote, from Case D, is particularly interesting, showing the dynamic of how *organizational* branding is employed as a way to establish *individual* reputation and labour market value. The notion of *the place you work at* is used as a proxy for your quality as an individual. Notions of labour market mobility are also crucial here: *if someone was good at what they did, then surely they would have moved on from an organization with a weak brand?* Branding, for this respondent, is a natural and progressive extension of the trend in higher education towards competition and markets more generally:

> *"I'm positive about the idea of branding in higher education. . . . Primarily I consider branding as some kind of general assessment, perception. So branding to some extent is primarily recognition, how people see you as being a good or not good business school."* (Academic, Case D)

> *"Education is commercialized so branding is important. We have a product that we have to sell."* (Academic, Case D)

In this way, branding is understood in terms of a new type of employment relationship in higher education. Universities are expected to provide employees with a strong brand that will enhance their curricula vitae (CV) and future careers. The employment relationship is thus reconfigured according to a new form of capital, offering employees not only financial capital (i.e., a wage) but also symbolic capital (i.e., a brand on their CV) in return for their work effort.

Within this discourse, the onus is therefore not only on faculty to work to benefit the business school but also on the business school to provide a strong brand to benefit faculty. Of course, this

bargain in turn required certain things from faculty. The following respondent described the types of 'pressures' associated with this employment bargain:

> *"In terms of academics it [branding] certainly does [matter]. You try to live up to the name. If I were in a lower ranked business school I would have less high standards. My work here has to be of high quality. But it is also intimidating and stressful to be next to someone that churns 4-rated papers all the time."* (Academic, Case D)

In a particular kind of logic, the respondent places the business school brand as the fundamental driver of work quality. This discourse positions the employee as someone who, if they worked at a business school with a lower ranked brand, would accordingly lower their standards in their own work. Working at a business school with a supposedly strong (i.e., highly ranked) brand is here said to cause intimidation and stress that raises work quality. In describing a kind of Foucauldian self-disciplinary mechanism, this respondent highlights the significance placed on having a strong brand in terms of the kind of wage-effort bargain expected of the employment relationship and the peer pressure of working with colleagues who "churn 4-rated papers all the time".

However, for the following respondent, branding was neither a burden nor pressure but rather a win-win scenario, not just *good for me* or *good for them,* but rather part of the quid pro quo of the employment relationship:

> *"I see myself as enhancing the brand of the school through my publications, through good publications, [but] it works both ways. A good brand enhances my reputation and quality work, and publications enhance theirs."* (Junior academic, Case A)

Some respondents were critical of their own business school's branding, rather than 'branding' as such, because they believed that a strong and unique brand would be mutually beneficial:

"I can't sense [my organization] as a special brand. . . . It's not unique, not very special like Harvard Business School. . . . The more you are unique, the better it is for the business school and the people who you want to work for you. I don't know if it creates problems for staff. As long as we don't have a bad reputation it's not problematic. But if it was unique it would have been better. You would have higher income, it would attract better researchers, it would improve the quality of my own work and also the School." (Academic, Case D)

To summarise, the findings suggest that branding is used as a discursive resource to re-imagine the financial, physical and psychological aspects of the employment relationship, as faculty become engaged in new levels of identification and passion for their business school (i.e., as brand ambassadors). However, faculty also seem to be far from passive in internalizing and reproducing brand messages. Many academic staff were able to articulate a highly sophisticated awareness of the link between their own brand, as 'Brand Me', and the brands of their business school employers. Comparing faculty responses to the Deans' positioning of faculty in relation to branding, we see some commonalities in their view of branding as win-win for both the school and the academics' own careers and professional brands. Yet while the Deans stress the difficulties of engaging the faculty to brand the school rather than themselves, faculty's discursive positioning illustrates that, in fact, faculty use 'Brand Me' as a motivator for endorsing the school.

4.2.2 Brand ambivalence

Our study found that not all respondents positioned themselves as *captured* by or *engaged* with the discourse of branding in their business schools. Some, it seems, had been left relatively untouched by the branding developments within their business school, as the following quotes suggest:

> *"I know there is a brand, well I think there might be, I'm not sure. I know they (the school) take it very seriously, but I don't know what it is."* (Junior academic, Case A)

> *"No, the [Case C] brand isn't relevant for me. Mostly what I've done comes from me and is not associated with where I am employed."* (Senior academic, Case C)

> *"I don't have a single work thing; I don't have any credit cards, business cards, logos, brands; I travel around, I don't say where I'm working."* (Senior academic, Case B)

For some respondents, even the terms 'brand' and 'branding' in the context of higher education were themselves problematic. By problematic, we refer not to hostility towards or resistance against using the terms but rather to confusion about what the terms meant:

> Interviewer: *"The first question is: How do you see the School as a brand? Does it have a brand? And if so, what is it?"*
>
> Interviewee: *"I'm not sure what the expression brand means. So, could you help me?"* (Academic, Case D)

In other cases, respondents recognized the term 'branding', but argued it was empty of meaning because of its frequent use in academia without sufficient clarity about its meaning. For example, business schools tend to brand themselves on similar qualities, such as 'excellence in research and teaching'.

> "… *because it's going everywhere, and people are just . . . it's getting emptied of meaning because it's just promiscuously dispersed across everywhere.*" (Senior academic, Case B)

These interview extracts highlight some of the limits to the branding discourse, locations where it clearly has either not *reached* or not *reconfigured* faculty in any meaningful way; in some cases, moreover, 'branding' has not been registered as a meaningful term in itself. While the faculty respondents above distanced themselves from or positioned themselves as untouched by branding processes and branded messages at their schools, they did not articulate a cynical or resistant stance in this regard. Branding is simply not something they know or consider; it is irrelevant or often forgotten.

This study made clear that at least some faculty members lacked a clear sense of what *branding* is. The term *brand*, initiated by the interviewer at the outset, often (and quite quickly) slipped or merged with other terms, such as reputation, image, ethos, values and so on. While certain activities, such as wearing clothing with logos on, adding logos to presentations or business cards or carrying branded artefacts such as pens, were unambiguously identified as *brand-related*, many other activities were not. For some respondents, branding was part of virtually everything they did at work: publishing papers, meeting students, attending meetings and the like. Others built up a narrower view (e.g., branding as putting logos onto conference presentations). In fact, none of the respondents maintained strict boundaries or definitions throughout the conversations. This suggests that the

slippery, fluid and loosely bounded nature of branding makes articulations of resistance or even cynical distance hard to maintain. Faculty were left with the difficult task of trying to understand: What exactly is branding? How do I know when I see it? What am I expected to do with it?

4.2.3 Brand cynicism

Respondents' third and final discursive position articulated in the interviews involves accounts of cynicism about, distancing from and resistance to branding. Interestingly, these narratives targeted not the particular brand message itself but rather the very idea of 'branding' as a process and practice. Their target of critique was the idea that their School should engage in branding at all, something they viewed as a dangerous, distracting or simply false activity:

> *"I'm going to use a dangerous word, which is façade. Façade is an interesting word, and I'm using it quite cautiously because a façade implies something which is a front, and what's behind doesn't, you know, it's a fake, and what's behind it isn't true. Because I don't think that's what we're doing, but to an extent. Veneer might be a better word. So it's maybe polishing and making the front look a little bit nicer than it always is, maybe. Maybe trying to present something which covers up some of the cracks that are there, but behind it is still solid wood."* (Junior academic, Case B)

> *"I know I still need to fit in with the image, the brand, and there are times where I pay lip service to the need to present myself and the school in the certain way. Something about it works for me, but if it got too difficult I'd leave, but it's more about what I do and value, I tolerate the hype about 'what we do'."* (Junior academic, Case A)

"I don't have much identification with the brand. I see it as a marketing thing produced by people in the university, to serve the reasonable purposes of the university, but it is not particularly connected with me . . . The university is supposed to stand for more enduring values, not commercial values. The brand is the work of marketing." (Senior academic, Case C*)*

"We didn't need to put some brand to get people to come here, they came here because of reputation, because it was good." (Senior academic, Case A)

"What I associate with a brand is something that is over-rated. That it asks people to pay for a premium but does not correspond to the overall academic quality. The same as a product brand like Armani. You pay too much for the premium." (Academic, Case D)

Branding here is conceptualized as a 'façade', 'veneer' and 'hype', not representing the *true* or *proper* values or activities of the business school. The penultimate quote above is interesting precisely because it juxtaposes the notion of the brand against the notion of reputation: the former is seen as false or manufactured, while the latter is seen as true or authentic. Cynicism was presented from a particular discursive position: a type of person who can *see through* the perceived *fake* branding values, instead of the school's supposedly 'real' values and attributes. Cynicism was clearly not a single position but rather a continuum: the first narrative retains a belief in the reality behind the brand, the second narrative employs a more instrumental rationale (paying 'lip service' and 'tolerating'), whereas the final three narratives more categorically reject branding as something false, fake or misaligned with the perceived *real* values of the organization.

The second quotation above is particularly interesting because the respondent positions himself as somebody who is consciously reflexive about paying lip service. The respondent presents himself as somebody who knows it is just a performance, who recognizes that is it false and fake, but who is also able to maintain a *real self* in private, behind the scenes. A similar reflexive stance was adopted by the following respondent:

"I know I have defended aspects of the School's operations, its ethos, its values, to others, when in fact I wasn't entirely sure I agreed with my defence. I mean...but of course the question there arises, has that got anything to do with the brand, you know? Do we not all to some degree, because of the relationship between work, identity, employer, necessarily do that?" (Senior academic, Case B)

Here, as above, the respondent positions himself as somebody who knows that he sometimes has to defend the claims made by the brand even though they may not be true. In other words, branding is viewed as something that makes us have to 'lie' about the organization for which we work. He positions this response as something that is normal, rational, expected and *what anyone else would do in the same situation*, stating: "Do we not all to some degree . . .". Hence, being a 'brand ambassador' and defending the School is positioned as a normal, natural and somewhat inevitable outcome of the employment relationship. The respondent rhetorically poses a question to himself of whether "defending . . . the School's operations, its ethos, its values" has "anything to do with the brand". This is notable: notions of resistance to the role as brand ambassador break down because faculty view branding as ambiguous, slippery and hard to pin down.

In other cases, respondents adopted a cynical stance, viewing branding not only as 'spin' but also as a kind of 'political weapon' to exercise power and influence. This respondent reflected on the

'promiscuous' use of the term 'brand' in senior management meetings as a way of dismissing ideas on the basis that they are 'bad for the brand':

> ". . .people are just... They do spin things. Not that branding, as such, has to be that, but they just invoke the term brand as part of doing that sort of talk [dismissing ideas raised in meetings on the basis they are 'bad for the brand']." (Senior academic, Case B)

At Business School A especially, one particular artefact - a calendar that featured a photo of a faculty member each month - became a focal point of many strong accounts of resentment and resistance. Most respondents at Business School A recounted the calendar, which was sent to businesses and alumni, when asked about examples of branding. The story of the calendar 'disaster' or 'debacle', as respondents termed it, provided a common theme for reflecting on the idea and actual practice of branding:

> "I mean, they lost the plot, so I said to him it's all superficial fluff, that was the word I used. Directing money away from what I thought the School was about, which is teaching, research, supervision, and then putting it into marketing. I know there are a few people who agree with me on this. I don't think the 'powers that be' have sold the brand successfully internally. I think a lot of people resent the resources that are being devoted to the marketing and publicity. In my view, I don't think that's what we should be doing or what we are about. The brand I think they are trying to create is not something I want to be involved with." (Senior academic, Case A)

"[The calendar] was sent to people in industry. Now they (the marketing team) say it's for internal consumption. That's a lie. It was a huge branding mistake. . . . I think it was very self-indulgent. There's a real danger in any kind of branding in talking yourself up. You start believing your own publicity. And you start ignoring the really important signals, the things that are going wrong." (Senior academic, Case A)

The key theme in these quotes is the *reason* given for their cynicism towards branding, which is termed 'superficial fluff' that is 'self-indulgent' and involves 'talking yourself up'. Cynicism towards branding was presented not as motivated by a generally resistant attitude towards anything that emanated from senior management, nor associated with a *lack* of identification (i.e., the organization is unrelated to my sense of *who I am*), nor associated with *negative* identification (i.e., the organization opposes my sense of *who I am*). Rather, these respondents presented themselves as organizational citizens who are *deeply identified* with a particular sense of *who we are*. Organizational identity can therefore be conceptualized as one of the narrative positions authored in these accounts, part of the socio-political justification of a particular distribution of resources. By positioning the self as a custodian of the *proper* and *right* organizational identity (i.e., *who we should be*), resistance to branding is portrayed as a reasonable, warrantable attitude, something that any right-thinking academic should feel.

Cynicism is thereby framed as motivated by sincere concern for the organization. Branding, in this account, directs the organization away from "the really important signals", leading the organization to ignore or not invest in "the things that are going wrong" and "what the School is about", namely "teaching, research, supervision". Thus, respondents positioned themselves as employees who seek to resist branding for reasonable, rational and perhaps even honorable motives. Resistance, as a discursive position, thereby enabled the performance of two key social actions: (1)

presenting oneself as a moral character concerned with what is 'right' and 'proper' and (2) presenting arguments against the use of resources for branding purposes.

4.2.4 Understanding multiple discursive positions

An important aspect of the perspective of discursive positioning is that discourse (e.g., interview accounts) is not read as an expression of stable, underlying attitudes, values, motives and so on (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Rather, discourse is understood as a collection of situated performances that are used in the process of producing accounts of the self and the world around us (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Hence, ambiguity does not express underlying confusion or lack of cognitive clarity. Likewise, ambivalence and contradiction are understood as normal, even inevitable outcomes of the use of discourse, not as evidence of internal cognitive conflict or dissonance. Indeed, in accounting practice, for example, research has shown that contradiction is a normal and sometimes rhetorically functional aspect of the variable and flexible use of discourse as a linguistic resource (Wetherell *et al.*, 1987). Thus, the analysis here approaches the fact that respondents switched or shifted positions within interview accounts not as an analytical problem - something standing in the way of identifying their 'real' opinion, stance or attitude - but rather as a *topic* worthy of study. Even those who expressed a negative stance towards the very idea of branding also articulated other stances that suggested that branding would be welcomed if it were done differently or better. In the following illustrative example, one respondent, as already discussed above, began by expressing a highly cynical stance towards branding:

> *"What I associate with a brand is something that is over-rated. That it asks people to pay for a premium but does not correspond to the overall academic quality. The same as a product brand like Armani. You pay too much for the premium."* (Academic, Case D)

Later in this same interview, the respondent presented branding as a necessary evil: not something that should be embraced, but something that should nonetheless be accepted as 'just the way things are' nowadays:

> *"Education is commercialized so branding is important. We have a product that we have to sell."*

Later still, the same respondent more positively endorsed branding, expressing a desire to have a more unique brand that would improve the School and, by implication, her own work:

> *"I can't sense it as a special brand. . . . It's not unique, not very special like Harvard Business School. . . . The more you are unique, the better it is for the Business School and the people who you want to work for you. I don't know if it creates problems for staff. As long as we don't have a bad reputation it's not problematic. But if it was unique it would have been better. You would have higher income, it would attract better researchers, it would improve the quality of my own work and also the School."*

This respondent expressed deep cynicism towards branding as a whole, viewing it as 'over-rated' and leading students to pay too much for a 'premium', which she later revised to something attributed to an inevitable, external 'force' due to the commercialization of education. However, later in the interview, she also articulated a sense in which she would welcome a "stronger" and more "unique" brand in terms of its effects in getting "higher income", "better researchers" and "improving the quality of my own work and the School". Thus, a negative and cynical stance towards branding blended with other discursive positions that articulated a desire for 'more' or 'better' branding. Such

a pattern of blending *cynical distancing* and *embrace* of branding - of the right kind, done in the right way - was commonplace across all four cases. Thus, we tentatively conclude that it makes little sense to talk of an individual faculty member as a brand cynic or brand ambassador. Rather, these stances should be analysed as *discursive positions* that faculty adopt in fluid, flexible and variable ways within their process of making sense of branding in business schools.

5. Discussion

This paper examines how faculty members at four business schools made sense of and discursively positioned themselves in response to their schools' branding. Our findings show that despite widespread agreement that faculty play an important role in achieving a successful brand (Judson *et al.*, 2006; Whisman, 2009), the literature on branding in universities downplays the complexity of faculty's relationship with their schools' branding. The findings of this paper unfold such complexity, contributing in three ways to research on the branding of business schools.

Our first contribution relates to our research objective to investigate faculty responses to branding in the context of business schools. Emergent interest in employees' engagement with branding in higher education (Aspara *et al.*, 2014; Naidoo & Pringle, 2014; Vásquez *et al.*, 2013; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009) has noted that, while faculty are considered important in higher education for delivering 'the brand promise', empirical evidence regarding faculty responses to branding is rare. Our paper addresses this shortcoming, extending the literature on faculty's ambivalent responses to branding in university settings (Naidoo and Pringle, 2014). In particular, our research uncovered three main faculty responses to branding in the four studied business schools.

The first response involved faculty speaking positively about branding and endorsing the move towards a more 'branded' higher education environment. Importantly, faculty spoke of the relationship between the brand profile of their school and their own personal brand, or 'Brand Me'

(Lair *et al.*, 2005). Thus, faculty constructed a somewhat instrumental position from which they viewed branding as a positive process only insofar as it had instrumental benefits for their own profile and career as academics. The second response involved 'non-engagement' with the branding process. Here, some faculty spoke of their lack of awareness of the brand claims being made by their school. Others, while expressing awareness of the brand claims, viewed them as not personally relevant, placing their own personal reputations as more important than those of their schools. Some faculty also showed a lack of awareness of what the term 'brand' itself meant, with confusion and ambiguity about what distinguished the term 'brand' from other terms, such as 'reputation'. The third and final type of faculty response to branding was a more cynical and resistant stance. Branding was dismissed as 'superficial fluff', a 'façade' and a 'veneer' that was decoupled from the perceived 'true values' of the business school. Here, faculty members positioned themselves as the guardians of the 'true' identity of their business school. Their narratives highlighted concern that branding would lead the business school astray, guiding resources and attention away from core areas, such as teaching and research. Adopting a type of moral distancing, faculty saw branding not only as missing the mark but as actively working to contaminate the school and threaten the things that really matter. Notably, these concerns were justified through reference to more traditional ideas or 'logics' of what higher education is about and what or whom it is for. Branding was thereby presented as a threat to the school's very *raison d'etre*. These three positions towards branding are illustrative of the different ways faculty made sense of branding at their schools and positioned themselves towards it.

Our second contribution relates to our research objective to apply a discursive approach to the study of faculty sensemaking of branding in business schools. The discursive approach has proven particularly relevant in opening up a more complex understanding of the ways faculty respond to branding (Naidoo and Pringle, 2014) and in highlighting the fluidity of subject positions towards branding, even within the same interviews. The multiple discursive positions identified above suggest

that faculty make sense of branding in multiple ways, as they wrestle to understand 'what the brand is', 'what branding involves' and 'what it means to me'. We therefore propose a different understanding of 'branding' with respect to faculty, not as the robust category ('something that is') currently described in the literature, but as something *constructed into existence* by faculty as they ascribe meanings to its concept and practices. The discursive approach applied here highlights that faculty understanding of 'branding' was rather ambiguous and vague. Branding emerges as a slippery, loosely bounded concept in their discourse, sometimes used in connection with reputation, image, ethos or values.

This finding is significant in itself, since all four business schools were chosen precisely because they had engaged in initiatives to clarify and strengthen their schools' brand profiles both internally and externally. In all four cases, the school either had been or was about to engage professional brand consultants to develop their brand initiatives. All four schools had dedicated significant time and resources to their branding initiatives and had identified faculty as key to the delivery of their brand promises. The fact that some faculty across all four schools displayed a lack of engagement with or awareness of the brand and the branding process therefore shows that senior managers failed to engage faculty in a way that was *meaningful* to them. Branding discourse, it would seem, had penetrated the educational contexts of all four schools to some extent, but it had not fully engaged faculty. Those who were unaware of the brand, were unclear on what branding meant, or knew the brand but did not identify with it never considered the notion of 'living the brand' (Ind, 2001), nor did they maintain strong positions against branding.

Our third and final contribution relates to our research objective to advance the debate on the issues surrounding the branding of higher education by further unpacking faculty members' important, yet ambiguous and ambivalent role (Aspara *et al.*, 2014; Chapleo, 2011; Idris and Whitfield, 2014; Naidoo *et al.*, 2014; Weerts *et al.*, 2014; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008). Branding

logic may be seen on the one hand as carving out a discursive position for the faculty, while on the other hand being subject to re-construction and negotiation in faculty's local discourses. This finding calls for a more critical perspective on how faculty interpret branding that moves beyond the assumption that employees will embrace the brand and seek to 'live' it in their daily work, in line with other critical studies of branding (e.g., Lowrie, 2007; Kärreman and Rylander, 2008; Willmott, 2010; Brannan et al., 2011). Our study has found that even those who engage with and endorse branding do so within more instrumental accounts. Our study has also found that some faculty failed to engage at all with branding, while others held a cynical, resistant attitude towards branding associated it with being 'fake' and antithetical to the organization's true values and priorities.

6. Managerial implications

These findings call on brand managers in higher education at large and business schools in particular to rethink faculty's brand engagement, given their role as sense-givers (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) who seek to influence faculty's sensemaking. Existing literature on the branding of higher education seems to argue that brand disengagement among faculty arises because of a lack of clarity around brand values and disintegration of these values within the organization. However, based on our findings, we would argue that ambiguity around brands and branding may not be inherently problematic for business schools. While vagueness can cause problems, it also allows co-existing, multiple perspectives and interpretations; as such, it can be used as a platform for more participatory approaches to internal branding. Ambiguity can be used strategically, as Eisenberg (1984) pointed out. Therefore, in 'crafting' a school's brand identity, our findings urge brand managers in business schools to allow, rather than deny, the multiple logics circulating in university settings, leaving the brand open to pluralistic interpretations.

More importantly, our study illustrates that brand managers at business schools need to move beyond top-down internal approaches to branding. Brochures, internal communication meetings and staff brand training are necessary but not sufficient tools to encourage faculty engagement with and commitment to the branding process. Instead of assuming that branding initiatives automatically produce a high level of faculty engagement and identification - a 'win-win' for both faculty and the organization - our findings suggest that faculty sensemaking is much more complex and nuanced than this. This questions the role of Deans and brand managers in shaping the faculty's sensemaking around brands and branding. While the literature often gives priority to the 'sense-giving activities' of internal branding, we would argue that sense-giving and sensemaking should be considered equally important and iterative processes that must influence each other in order for faculty to 'live the brand' and to keep any brand from being perceived as 'false' or 'fake'. We argue that top-down sensegiving efforts at branding will elicit more faculty resistance, turning more ambivalent or even positive responses to branding towards more cynical positions. This agrees with Weick (1995), who argued that 'when told to walk the talk, their vehicle for discovery, the walking, is redirected' (p. 93). Brand managers could consider the ambiguous, slippery and inconsistent nature of faculty responses to branding to be not a threat but instead a resource for development.

7. Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations of this qualitative study pose opportunities for future research. First, our sample comprised faculty at four business schools, on which we focused because business schools tend to be at the forefront of branding activity in higher education. However, future studies could widen their focus to include other subject areas, where faculty are perhaps less familiar with branding discourses. Second, the respondents in this study were all research-active and employed in research-intensive schools, which appeared to play a role in how they engaged with their school's branding efforts.

Future research could usefully explore how faculty at more teaching-focused business schools make sense of branding. Third, despite the four business schools' branding initiatives, interviewed faculty in our study displayed a lack of awareness of and engagement with the school's brand and the branding process. In the future, researchers could widen their focus to include business schools where there is a strong awareness of and engagement with the school's brand and the branding process. Fourth, our study focused on how faculty make sense of and discursively position themselves with respect to a school's branding process. Future studies can turn their focus to the organizational perspective. For example, scholars might explore how Deans and brand managers within universities work with branding consultants to develop brand identities for their schools and how they use internal branding initiatives to motivate faculty commitment to the branding process. Lastly, future studies could also examine how faculty's sensemaking about their school's branding might interact with loyalty-related behaviours.

References

Alessandri, S.W. (2007), "Retaining a legacy while avoiding trademark infringement: A case study of one university's attempt to develop a consistent athletic brand identity", *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 17 (1), pp. 147-167.

Alessandri, S.W., Yang, S. and Kinsey, D.F. (2007), "An integrative approach to university visual identity and reputation", *Corporate Reputation Review*, 9 (4), pp. 258-270.

Alvesson, M. and Karreman, D. (2000), "Varieties of discourse: On the study of organizations through discourse analysis", *Human Relations*, 53(9), pp. 1125-1149.

Alwi, S.F.S. and Kitchen, P.J. (2014), "Projecting corporate brand image and behavioral response in business schools: Cognitive or affective brand attributes?", *Journal of Business Research*, 67, pp. 2324-2336.

Antaki, C. (1994*), Explaining and Arguing: The Social Organization of Accounts*, Sage, London.

Argenti, P. (2000), "Branding B-schools: Reputation management for MBA programs", *Corporate Reputation Review*, 3(2), pp. 171-178.

Asaad, Y., Melewar, T.C., Cohen, G. and Balmer, J (2013), "Universities and export market orientation: an exploratory study of UK post-92 universities", *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, 31, pp. 838-856.

Aspara, J., Aula, H. M., Tienari, J. and Tikkanen, H. (2014), "Struggles in organizational attempts to adopt new branding logics: the case of a marketizing university", *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 17(6), pp. 522-552.

Beneke, J. H. (2011), "Marketing the institution to prospective students-A review of brand (reputation) management in higher education", *International Journal of Business and Management*, 6(1), pp. 29-44.

Bock, D. E., Poole, S. M. and Joseph, M. (2014), "Does branding impact student recruitment: A critical evaluation", *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 24(1), pp. 11-21.

Brannan, M. J., Parsons, E., and Priola, V. (2011), *Branded Lives*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham.

Brown, A. D. (2000), "Making sense of inquiry sensemaking", *Journal of Management Studies*, 37(1), pp. 45–75.

Brown, R. M. and Mazzarol, T. W. (2009), "The importance of institutional image to student satisfaction and loyalty within higher education", *Higher Education*, 58(1), pp. 81-95.

Chapleo, C. (2010), "What defines 'successful' university brands?", *The International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 23(2), pp. 169-183.

Chapleo, C. (2011), "Branding a university: adding value or smoke and mirrors?" In Molesworth, M., Scullion, R., and Nixon, E. (Eds.), *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer* (pp. 101-114), Routledge, London.

Chapleo, C. (2015), "Brands in higher education: Challenges and potential strategies", *International Studies of Management & Organization*, 45(2), pp. 150-163.

Charmaz, K. (2006), *Constructing grounded theory*, Sage, London.

Curtis, T., Abratt, R. and Minor, W. (2009), "Corporate brand management in higher education: the case of ERAU", *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 18(6), pp. 404-413.

Czarniawska, B. and Genell, K. (2002), "Gone shopping? Universities on their way to the market", *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 18, pp. 455-474.

Davies, B. and Harré, R. (1990), "Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves", *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 20 (1), pp. 43-63.

Dholakia, R. R. and Acciardo, L. A. (2014), "Branding a state university: Doing it right", *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 24(1), pp. 144-163.

Drori, G. S., Delmestri, G. and Oberg, A. (2013), "Branding the university: Relational strategy of identity construction in a competitive field", *Trust in higher education institutions*, pp. 134-147.

Durkin, M., McKenna, S. and Cummins, D. (2012), "Emotional connections in higher education marketing", *International Journal of Educational Management*, 26(2), pp. 153-161.

Eisenberg, E. M. (1984), "Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication", *Communication monographs*, 51(3), pp. 227-242.

Gioia, D. A., and Chittipeddi, K. (1991), "Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation", *Strategic Management Journal*, 12(6), pp. 433-448.

Gioia, D. A. and Corley, K. G. (2002), "Being good versus looking good: Business school rankings and the Circean transformation from substance to image", *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 1(1), pp. 107-120.

Hatch, M.J. and Schultz, M. (2001), "Are the strategic stars aligned for your corporate brand?", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 79 (2), pp. 128-34.

Hatch, M.J. and Schultz, M. (2003), "Bringing the corporation into corporate branding", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 37 (7/8), pp. 1041-1064.

Hemsley-Brown, J. and Goonawardana, S. (2007), "Brand harmonization in the international higher education market", *Journal of Business Research*, 60, pp. 942-948.

Hemsley-Brown, J. and Oplatka, I. (2010), "Market orientation in universities: A comparative study of two national higher education systems", *International Journal of Educational Management*, 24(3), pp. 204-220.

Huisman, J. and van der Wende, M. (2004), *On cooperation and competition. National and European policies for the internationalisation of higher education*, Lemmens, Bonn.

Idris, M. Z. and Whitfield, T. A. (2014), "Swayed by the logo and name: does university branding work?", *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 24(1), pp. 41-58.

Ind, N. (2001), *Living the Brand*, Kogan Page, London.

Ivy, J. (2001), "Higher education institution image: a correspondence analysis approach", *International Journal of Educational Management*, 15(6), pp. 276-282.

Jevons, C. (2006), "Universities: a prime example of branding gone wrong", *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 15(7), pp. 466-467.

Judson, K. M., Aurand, T. W., Gorchels, L. and Gordon, G. L. (2008), "Building a university brand from within: university administrators' perspectives of internal branding", *Services Marketing Quarterly*, 30(1), pp. 54-68.

Judson, K. M., Gorchels, L. and Aurand, T. W. (2006), "Building a university brand from within: A comparison of coaches' perspectives of internal branding", *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 16(1), pp. 97-114.

Kärreman, D., and Rylander, A. (2008). "Managing meaning through branding: The case of a consulting firm", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 29 (1), pp. 103-125.

Khurana, R. (2007), *From higher aims to hired hands: the social transformation of American business schools and the unfulfilled promise of management as a profession*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Kornberger, M. (2010), *Brand Society: How Brands Transform Management and Lifestyle,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK.

Lair, D. J., Sullivan, K. and Cheney, G. (2005), "Marketization and the recasting of the professional self: The rhetoric and ethics of personal branding", *Management Communication Quarterly*, 18(3), pp. 307-343.

Lowrie, A. (2007), "Branding higher education: Equivalence and difference in developing identity", *Journal of Business Research*, 60(9), pp. 990-999.

Maitlis, S. (2005), "The social processes of organizational sensemaking", *Academy of Management Journal*, 48, pp. 21–49.

Maitlis, S. and Christianson, M. (2014), "Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving forward", *Academy of Management Annals*, 8(1), pp. 75-125.

Meisenbach, R. J. (2008), "Working with tensions: Materiality, discourse, and (dis)empowerment in occupational identity negotiation among higher education fund-raisers", *Management Communication Quarterly*, 22(2), pp. 258-287.

Melewar, T.C. and Akel, S. (2005), "The role of corporate identity in the higher education sector", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 10(1), pp. 41-57.

Molesworth, M., Scullion, R. and Nixon, E. (Eds.) (2011), *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer*, Routledge, London.

Naidoo, R., Gosling, J., Bolden, R., O'Brien, A. and Hawkins, B. (2014), "Leadership and branding in business schools: a Bourdieusian analysis", *Higher education research & development*, 33(1), pp. 144-156.

Naidoo, R. and Pringle, J. (2014), "Branding business schools: academic struggles with the management of reputation" In Pettigrew, A. M., Cornuell, E. and Hommell, U. (Eds.), *The institutional development of business schools*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, pp. 176-195.

Nguyen, B., Hemsley-Brown, J. and Melewar, T. C. (2016), "Branding higher education" In Dall'Olmo Riley, F., Singh, J. and Blankson, C. (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Brand Management*, Routledge, New York, pp. 407-422.

Nicolescu, L. (2009), "Applying marketing to higher education: scope and limits", *Management & Marketing*, 4(2), pp. 35-44.

Potter, J. and Wetherell, M. (1987), *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*, Sage, London.

Ramachandran, N. T. (2010), "Marketing framework in higher education: Addressing aspirations of students beyond conventional tenets of selling products", *International Journal of Educational Management*, 24(6), pp. 544-556.

Roper, S., Caruana, R., Medway, D. and Murphy, P. (2013), "Constructing luxury brands: exploring the role of consumer discourse", *European Journal of Marketing*, 47(3/4), pp. 375-400.

Sitz, L. (2008), "Beyond semiotics and hermeneutics: Discourse analysis as a way to interpret consumers' discourses and experiences", *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 11(2), pp. 177-191.

Stensaker, B. (2007), "The relationship between branding and organisational change", *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 19(1), pp. 1-17.

Temple, P. (2006), "Branding higher education: illusion or reality?", *Perspectives,* 10(1), pp. 15-19.

Tracy, S. J. (2013), *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*, John Wiley & Sons, West Sussex, UK.

Vásquez, C., Sergi, V. and Cordelier, B. (2013), "From being branded to doing branding: Studying representation practices from a communication-centered approach", *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 29(2), pp. 135-146.

Wæraas, A. and Solbakk, M. (2008), "Defining the essence of a university: lessons from higher education branding", *Higher Education*, 57(4), pp. 449-462.

Watkins, B. A. and Gonzenbach, W. J. (2013), "Assessing university brand personality through logos: an analysis of the use of academics and athletics in university branding", *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 23(1), pp. 15-33.

Weerts, D. J., Freed, G. H. and Morphew, C. C. (2014), Organizational identity in higher education: Conceptual and empirical perspectives. In Bastadom, M. N. (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research*, Springer, New York, Vol. 29, pp. 229-278.

Weick, K. E. (1995), *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Wetherell, M., Stiven, H. and Potter, J. (1987), "Unequal egalitarianism: A preliminary study of discourses concerning gender and employment opportunities", *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 26(1), pp. 59-71.

Whisman, R. (2009), "Internal branding: A university's most valuable intangible asset", *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 18 (5), pp. 367-70.

Willmott, H. (2010), "Creating 'value' beyond the point of production: branding, financialization and market capitalization", *Organization*, 17(5), pp. 517-542.

Table 1. Data sources across the four business schools

Business Schools	Interviews	Additional sources that assisted with pre-interview preparation and added insights in our understanding of the phenomenon
Case A	14 interviews *Faculty [13]: 4 senior, 9 junior* *Dean [1]*	Internal documents, minutes of meetings, student brochures, branding guidelines, marketing material Discussions with senior management beyond the Dean [5] and other university marketing staff [2]
Case B	10 interviews *Faculty [9]: 4 senior, 5 junior* *Dean [1]*	Internal documents, minutes of meetings, student brochures, branding guidelines, marketing material Discussions with university marketing staff [4]
Case C	17 interviews *Faculty [16]: 5 senior, 11 junior* *Dean [1]*	Internal reports, documents, student surveys, marketing material Discussions with senior management beyond the Dean [1] and other university marketing staff [1]
Case D	13 interviews *Faculty [12]: 3 senior, 9 junior* *Dean [1]*	Minutes of meetings, marketing material Discussions with senior management beyond the Dean [2] and other university marketing staff [3]

Appendix 1. Interview Guides

<u>Faculty Interview Guide</u>

BRAND:
How do you see this school as a brand? What does it 'stand for' or wish to convey?

IDENTIFICATION:
Do you identify with this brand? How strongly do you feel about the brand? Why?

OTHER BRANDS:
Are other brands more or less important to you than this school's brand? (e.g. The university? The school? Other bases for identification such as their discipline or occupation?)

WORK EXPERIENCE:
Does this school's brand match your experience working here? i.e. how closely does it reflect the reality of your work life here?

ACADEMIC CAREER:
Do you believe it is important to your academic career to be associated with this school? How does this association compare with other Business schools, which you might realistically consider?

SUCCESS:
Do you think this school's brand is successful? Why/why not?

BRANDING INITATIVES:
What are some of the branding initiatives of the school that you've noticed?

BRAND WORK:
What forms of brand work do you do? (e.g. always use the business school logo when giving presentations, clearly identify myself with this school at conferences, give students/clients business school cards, memorabilia, etc.).

FORMAL BRANDING ACTIVITIES:
Have you been involved in any forms of branding work? (i.e. featured on the school website, in brochures, represented this school in a public forum etc.). How did you feel about that? (If they say website, ask them about that experience and what they think of the webpage?)

FORMAL DISCUSSIONS:
Have you been in any formal situations (e.g. meetings, committees, etc.) where the branding of this school has been discussed? Can you tell me about this? (as much detail as possible).

INFORMAL DISCUSSIONS:
What about informally; have you ever discussed the school's branding with colleagues or friends? What was the discussion about?

Dean Interview Guide

What do you want (this Business School's) brand to 'stand for' or to convey? How do you compare this school's brand with other business school brands? What makes it distinctive?

What are the most important branding initiatives you are involved in?

What are some of the key elements of the brand that you are especially keen to convey?

What kind of knowledge-based resources are used in developing the school brand? (e.g. consultants, faculty, etc.)

Do you find branding work (decisions and conveying particular messages) straightforward or difficult? Explain (e.g. consensus or conflict in decision making? Any 'moral' problems in conveying messages, or misleading communication?)

Have there been any recent significant events (e.g. change in rankings, increase in funding, new or highly esteemed staff joining the school, etc.) that have affected (this Business School's) branding? How was this incorporated into the brand?

How do various core audiences (e.g. faculty, students, alumni, advisory board) respond to branding initiatives? Do you see (this Business School's) branding work as successful in terms of communicating the intended 'brand message'? How can you tell?

Were there any instances where you felt the intended brand message was not understood or not responded to in the intended way? (by faculty? students? the university? and/or the business community?). What happened and why do you think this was unsuccessful?

Do you see faculty as brand carriers/communicators? Can they be managed as such? If so, how?

Approximately what percentage of (the Business School's) annual budget is allocated to marketing and branding?