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## **Faculty Responses to Business School Branding: A Discursive Approach**

**Sanne Frandsen, Manto Gosti, Allanah Johnson, Andrea Whittle, Steven Frenkel, Andre Spicer**

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### **Abstract**

It is increasingly recognized that the branding of universities presents a different set of challenges from corporate, for-profit sectors. However, much remains unknown about how faculty in particular interpret and make sense of branding in this complex environment. This paper investigates faculty responses to branding through a qualitative interview-based study of four business schools. Our discursive approach to understanding faculty responses highlights the fluid and reflexive nature of brand engagement, in which faculty adopt a number of stances towards their school's branding efforts. In particular, the study identifies three main faculty responses to branding: endorsement, ambivalence and cynicism. The study highlights the ambiguities created from higher education brand management efforts, and the multiple ways that faculty exploit, frame and resist the branding of their business schools. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for branding in university contexts.

**Keywords:** higher education, business schools, brands, branding, faculty, discourse

## Faculty Responses to Business School Branding: A Discursive Approach

### 1. Introduction

Branding has become the zeitgeist of our society (Kornberger, 2010). And it is 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, as 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/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 argues that branding in universities presents a different set of challenges from the corporate world (e.g. Jevons, 2006). Authors, for instance, emphasise 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 what is promised in the classroom. Brand promises grounded in research or real-world impact also rely on faculty to deliver those promises in their research activities, whether that is through their publications or via their engagements with policy makers and practice-based communities. Yet, scholars highlight the challenge brought by 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 rest uneasily at times alongside discourses of professionalism, public service, knowledge advancement and education as an end in itself (Alwi

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

We contribute to the limited, but growing, scholarly debate about 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 faculty's viewpoint, 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 assumed in extant literature. 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. The specific objectives of our research are, thus, 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.
- further the debate on the issues surrounding the branding of higher education, by highlighting the important, yet ambiguous role, of faculty members.

We draw on a qualitative study in four business schools, two in Australia and two in the UK, to explore our overarching research question: How do faculty members of 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, having only become the focus of attention

and investment over the last few years. Our focus was not on faculty perceptions of their school's brand itself, but rather what faculty thought about the process of branding more generally in their school.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a review of extant literature on business school and university branding, and the critical role of faculty. We also draw on sensemaking and discursive positioning literature to outline our theoretical position for exploring how business school faculty make sense of their school's branding. Then, the research methodology is outlined. Next, the findings of the study are presented, followed by a discussion of theoretical and managerial contributions, and limitations that point to future research directions.

## **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 specifically on business school branding, despite increasing calls for such research (e.g. Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007). What scholars clearly emphasise though, is that university leaders are facing increasing pressure to enhance the perceived value of their institution/college/school and their relative position against key competitors (Naidoo *et al.*, 2014). Branding has been loaded as a 'cure' to this problem. To date, studies have, thus, largely focused on the drivers of branding in universities at large, and business schools in particular (Gioia and Corley, 2002; Temple, 2006). Two major forces have been found to fuel this phenomenon.

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, in particular, are under mounting pressure by the rise of for-profit, online 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 capture the essence of the value that the university, the college or the school offers to its stakeholders (Judson *et al.*, 2008) and distinguishes it from competitors (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016).

Much of the interest in the branding of universities has been triggered by increasing competition for overseas students (Hemley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007; Idris and Whitfield, 2014; Whisman, 2009). University/college/school brands are considered useful, because they may help brand-savvy, prospective students to make decisions when selecting 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 and, ultimately, impact 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 do not only tend to be more positively evaluated 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, thus, believed to enhance student satisfaction and, in turn, improve student loyalty (Brown and Mazzarol, 2009).

Yet, strong brands may impact universities/colleges/schools beyond student recruitment (Vásquez *et al.*, 2013). Universities/colleges/schools with strong brands are more likely to recruit

talented faculty (Watkins and Gonzenbach, 2013) and attract (the ever-diminishing) funds available in higher education (Curtis *et al.*, 2009; Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007; Vásquez *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, branding can help universities build institutional co-operation (Huisman and van der Wende, 2004) and also 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/league tables (e.g. Times Higher Education rankings, Shanghai Jiao Tong indices), that identify ‘the best schools’ and the ‘top programs’, has also elevated the significance of branding within business schools to unprecedented heights (Gioia and Corley, 2002). Rankings may guide students’ choice as to which university they should select to study and which programme they should apply for (Assad *et al.*, 2013; Stensaker, 2007). Argenti (2000) notes that rankings of business schools in particular, have more effect on admissions, placement, hiring and funding than any other single variable. As a result, Gioia and Corley (2002) observe that resources in business schools are often shifted from teaching improvements (e.g. developing courses and educational infrastructure) to image management initiatives (e.g. PR, hiring image consultants, responding to media requests).

## *2.2 Branding practices in university settings*

Chapleo’s (2010) study of brand managers across 11 universities revealed that there does not seem to be a uniform strategy for achieving a successful brand in the university sector. In fact, studies have shown that conventional brand management techniques may prove inappropriate for universities (Chapleo, 2015). Vásquez *et al.* (2013), thus, argued that despite typical portrayals of university branding as a strategic and structured process, a more complex picture is emerging from empirical studies of branding within university settings.

Mirroring practice, extant literature in branding within university settings has, to date, predominantly adopted an external focus (Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009). Studies, for example, have looked at how universities employ strategic approaches to segment and target students, and how to position the university to attract their targets (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010). Emphasis has been placed on the role of marketing communication activities for 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 process and wider stakeholders' perceptions (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016). Increased attention has been placed on the role of the corporate visual identity, as studies have found, for instance, that logos, styles, nomenclature, architecture and interior design need to be managed to maintain a consistent offline and online brand presence (Idris and Whitfield, 2014).

While branding in universities is typically externally oriented, authors also emphasize the critical role of academic faculty (Judson *et al.*, 2006). For instance, in Dholakia and Acciardo's (2014) study of the University of Rhode Island, the key to the success of its branding program was indeed the commitment from academic staff and the inclusion of their input into the branding strategy. Academics 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). They are, thus, 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 increasingly implement internal branding initiatives to endorse such brand commitment (Nguyen *et al.*, 2016). Internal branding is seen as important for faculty to understand the brand, take ownership, 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 and move beyond traditional marketing activities, to a more cultural approach that allows the brand to guide organizational behaviour. Yet, despite these aggrandized accounts of the importance of faculty and power of internal branding in aiding the meaning-making processes of academic staff, writings increasingly suggest that it may prove to be hard to engage faculty in the branding of their university (Chapleo, 2010).

### *2.3 Challenges in engaging faculty in university branding*

Extant literature has started to unpack the challenges in 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 branding exclusively as a promotional activity that ‘smacks of commercialism’ (Beneke, 2011). Others argue, that articulating a brand identity that captures the multiplicity of voices of different stakeholders is difficult in university settings (Curtis *et al.*, 2009; Nicolescu, 2009; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009). Senior academic managers (f.e. Deans), for instance, may articulate the university/college/school brand differently than 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 the authority of academics (Drori *et al.*, 2013), the academic culture and its values (Chapleo, 2015). Branding has, thus, often been portrayed as a ‘dirty word’ in university settings, mirroring a push towards marketization and commercialism, which are at odds with the traditional conception of universities as institutions in pursuit of the greater good (Weerts *et al.*, 2014).

Yet, scholarly debate on the branding of business schools falls short of empirical examination, particularly in relation to the implications of the branding logic from the perspective

of the academic staff (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawandarna, 2007). We seek to contribute to the limited, yet growing, stream of studies, which explore the faculty's viewpoint, and have so far 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 more a varied manner than normally assumed (Naidoo and Pringle, 2014).

We build on these studies to further unpack how such ambiguity and uncertainty is expressed and managed discursively in multiple ways, when faculty members make sense of branding. We thus bring in a discursive perspective, which does not treat branding as a robust category (Lowrie, 2007), but instead seeks to explore what lay meanings are ascribed to the concept and practices of branding by the academic staff (Vásquez *et al.*, 2013). We thus treat branding as a logic, which on the one hand carves out a discursive position to the academic staff, but on the other hand is also discursively re-constructed through the faculty's negotiation of this position. In the section that follows, we draw on sensemaking and discursive positioning literature to outline our theoretical position for exploring how faculty make sense of branding.

#### *2.4 Sensemaking and discursive positioning*

In business schools, one may find logics portraying the faculty as educators, as researchers, or as corporate consultants and sellers, among others. The ways in which social actors negotiate and make sense of these different logics is of interest here, particularly the branding logic. One way of trying to understand this process is to explore how individuals attempt to frame, manage or maintain the discursive tensions surrounding these logics (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), and through this process of sensemaking, intersubjective meaning is created (Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). The sensemaking process is interactional and discursive, as employees create various accounts - or discursive constructions of reality - that help interpret and explain what is occurring (Antaki, 1994). Thus, the way in which people make sense of differing, and possibly conflicting logics, is a narrative and discursive process (Brown, 2000).

Developing this perspective further, work in the field known as discursive positioning has advanced understanding of how people take up multiple positions within their talk, as they both respond to dominant discourses (for example, branding), but also draw on such discourses in order to work up particular self-positions or lines of arguments. Discursive positioning has been developed within the broader field of discursive social psychology. The perspective is valuable because it enables us to analyse 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), taking up a subject position means that the 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 for business school faculty members: for example, of faculty as sellers of knowledge products, and students as consumers, to name but a few. 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 in original). In particular, this research focuses on what the discursive positions adopted in relation to branding discourse (such as embracing, rejecting, distancing, humour, cynicism and so on) *do*, both at an interactional and institutional level. These discursive positions are enabled through processes of splitting (treating as separate), normative ordering (treating some as of higher importance than others) or weaving (blending together) competing discourses with alternative logics, such as a branding logic, a professional logic, and a public service logic. As Davies and Harré (1990, p.45) argue, “discourses can compete with each other or they can create distinct and incompatible versions of reality”. However, precisely how these discourses (branding, commercialization, public service, professionalism, etc.) relate to one another, and are made sense of by business school faculty remains unknown, and, hence, motivates this study.

### **3. Methodology**

This qualitative study draws on data collected in four research-active business schools, two in Australia and two in the UK, and is part of a larger study on branding in higher education. The overarching research question guiding the generation of empirical data for this paper was: How do faculty members of business schools make sense of, and discursively position themselves in relation to, their school’s branding process? To answer this question, semi-structured interviews across the four business schools were our primary empirical material. In each school, we first interviewed the Dean in order to build an understanding of how they constructed the role of branding in their school and how they saw the role of faculty members in the branding effort. Our main data collection efforts then focused on interviewing a randomly selected sample of faculty across the four business

schools. In order to have a cross-section of views in our primary data on faculty responses, faculty interviewees were drawn from a variety of disciplines, covering an equal number of men and women, and at both junior and senior levels. Both relatively new and long term academics were included in the sample of interviewees. In total, 50 faculty members across the four business schools were interviewed. Branding-related information from marketing materials, internal reports, the School's websites, physical structures and artefacts, and discussions with senior level (e.g. senior marketing managers beyond the Dean) and other university marketing staff assisted with pre-interview preparation and added insights in our understanding of the phenomenon. For instance, it became clear that, in all four business schools, structural and political changes (e.g. the appointment of a new Dean) coincided with the emergence of focus on branding of the school. In all four business schools the faculty Dean granted full permission for this research. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the research topic and questions, all four business schools were assured anonymity. All informants were furthermore assured of anonymity and confidentiality. An overview of the data sources is provided in Table 1 below.

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

The interviews were conducted in private offices and varied in length from 20 to 60 minutes. A structured interview guide with open-ended questions was used, yet the intention was to let the informants speak for themselves rather than lead them in particular directions (see Appendix 1). Each interview was conducted by a single researcher from the authoring team and was tape-recorded. For example, at the beginning of each interview, informants were to explain what they believed the brand of their business school was. A common response across all four cases was that

some faculty were unsure what constituted branding. As we discuss in the findings, this ambivalence and uncertainty was a significant finding in this study.

The analytical procedure followed Tracy's (2013) framework for analysing qualitative data and was 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. To us, this meant that the researchers who had collected the data from each business school listened to the recordings and initially coded the interviews into first-level codes and assigned common themes, which captured the essence of the interview accounts. Through constant comparative methods (Charmaz, 2006) these codes and their associated data were organized into a table 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, which could explain and synthesize the first-level codes. Rather than imposing pre-established codes from the literature, codes were developed that reflected *faculty members'* different levels of identification with their school's branding. For example, faculty members expressed a range of levels of identification with their school's branding, including cynicism, ambivalence, indifference, etc. During the third step, early drafts on each of the business schools were developed and shared among team members to check for differing and consensual interpretations. At a subsequent workshop, common discursive themes were refined. Interview quotes were included in the tables covering the four business schools. However, while trying to 'fit' each interviewee into these categories, it became apparent that the interview data was inconsistent and not fully conforming to either one or the other second order code, but rather continuously oscillated between the various levels of identification. As we demonstrate in the analysis section, most faculty expressed a range of positions towards the branding of their schools within the same interview and thus did not fit neatly into a singular code. Instead of viewing this as a methodological problem of internal validity, we sought to develop a

more advanced analytical strategy (Tracy, 2013) by focusing on the discursive resources used by the informants to fully capture the nuances of 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), where we focused more on the meanings faculty members constructed around their school's branding efforts (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008) and the context within which these meanings were constructed (Hardy, 2001). Approaches to discourse analysis vary (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) and there is no uniform application of discourse analysis in the discipline of marketing (e.g. Roper *et al.*, 2013; Sitz, 2008). Drawing from Potter and Wetherell's (1987) guidelines for discursive analysis, we listened to and coded the recorded interviews again, this time not categorising the *interviewees 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, the terminology used to describe branding by the faculty and the stances taken, ranged from faculty being active co-producers of the brand (e.g. 'Brand Me') to employees expressing more cynical stances evoking terminology of 'hype', 'vener' and 'façade – and the oscillations which in each interview meant multiple and complex discursive stances.

At this stage our tables covered the four business schools, and represented *discursive positions* rather than interviewee 'attitudes' or 'levels of identification'. It is important to note that we use the term 'discursive positions' rather than 'attitudes' to indicate that we coded the discursive position taken up in an interview account. The discursive approach we adopt looks at 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 questions the way it is produced. In our study, we are thus not interested in branding as it 'is' in our four cases, but rather how meaning is ascribed to 'branding' and thus creating a particular social reality for the faculty. Furthermore, a discursive approach rejects the idea that we each have stable 'attitudes' that would enable individual respondents to be categorised (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). It is therefore neither surprising, nor problematic, that people can take up ambivalent or even contradictory positions in the same interview (see for example Wetherell *et al.*, 1987). Interview accounts, from this perspective, do not provide a 'window' into the minds of the individual or the inner workings of organizations. Rather, interviews provide a context in which people can draw upon and use discourses to produce an account of 'who they are' and 'what they think and feel'.

Fifth and finally, the analysis phase concluded by returning to the literature on branding, sensemaking and discursive positioning to aid the interpretation of informants' multiple discursive positions towards their school's branding (for example, from the faculty's perspective: 'brand endorsement', 'brand ambivalence', 'brand cynicism').

In-keeping with an interpretive and inductive approach, we did not enforce any restrictions (such as pre-testing potential informants and assessing how they regarded the notion of 'branding' and 'brand' in relation to their school) or make pre-judgements on the types of responses we sought from informants. 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 school's branding (irrespective of whether they could confidently define 'branding'). Interestingly, when we embarked on our interviews, we assumed that informants (Deans and faculty) within these four research-active business schools would all immediately understand what 'a brand' is, and indeed what their school's brand is. Instead, we were surprised to find that a number of staff did not know what was meant by the term 'brand' itself. As we illustrate in our findings and discussion section, this is interesting because:

a) researchers might assume, as we did, that 'a brand' is an easily identifiable and understandable term. Our findings indicate that the very notion of 'a brand', at least in these business school contexts, is often not clear, and suggest that in this type of context researchers should not assume there is a common understanding of what 'a brand' is.

b) when informants did engage in their own sensemaking of the brand and their school's branding efforts, it was at times seen in a negative light, or conflated with 'hype' and 'marketing'. This is interesting, as despite the fact that some informants did not have a clear notion of what 'a brand' is, the term 'brand' was discursively constructed as problematic. Our analysis and discussion examines why faculty in particular might associate branding efforts with something negative (for themselves, for their school, and for the higher education sector).

c) the lack of clarity for some respondents of what 'a brand' and 'branding' is, suggests a number of implications for creating a brand that faculty are willing to engage with. As we note in our discussion, if faculty (and even senior management/Deans) see branding as a vague and ill-defined concept, this makes it particularly difficult for management to create an enduring source of meaning that faculty want to identify with.

## **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 the role of branding. In particular, our analysis focused on how each Dean articulated the role of faculty in engaging with the brand. The Deans all positioned branding as important for their respective school, and argued that developing their school brand was a key part of their (newly acquired) role. 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, and identified 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 as if he was unsure what constituted branding, yet paradoxically at the same time highlighted the school brand as important in maintaining a competitive advantage.

All four Deans positioned faculty as important representatives of the school’s brand, and argued that branding was more likely to encourage faculty to recognize and understand the brand and therefore engage with it. Analysis of the Deans’ discourse about faculty and their role in branding revealed two key themes; faculty were expected to help ‘deliver the brand promise’, and to ‘engage in brand endorsement’. The Deans talked about ‘delivering the brand promise’ as integral to faculty’s ‘internal work’ within the school, while ‘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, measured through student evaluations and school rankings), publications (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 (not just themselves). Having a ‘strong’ school brand, according to all four Deans, is something faculty should want to represent and engage with, 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 went on to explain that representing the brand is a win-win 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)

Therefore, the Dean discursively constructed ‘branding’ as nothing but advantageous for faculty. Yet, the same Dean also stated that encouraging academics to identify with, and represent the school brand, rather than promote their own research (or indeed, ‘personal brand’), was not easy:

*“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)

In these local discourses of branding, the business schools’ Deans positioned the school brand, and faculty’s willingness to engage with this, as important. Yet they also stressed that a tension exists between faculty identifying with the brand and seeking to build their own professional (personal) brand. According to the Deans, faculty did not necessarily see ‘being brand ambassadors’ and ‘delivering on the brand promise’ as mutually beneficial, but rather tended to focus more on their own ‘personal brand’. Yet, as we show further below, faculty’s non-willingness to engage in branding is far more nuanced and complex than simply being interested in their own personal brand or research agenda. Below we present faculty’s discursive positions towards the branding efforts of their respective business school.

## *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). This literature argues that when employees identify with, and internalize, the brand values of the organization, they will *live them out* in their day-to-day interactions with external stakeholders. Yet, in this study, positive endorsements of the Business School brand are almost exclusively associated with more instrumental notions of *what*

*the brand can do for me.* Benefits for the Business School brand were quickly translated into benefits for *me*; Brand Me. Many informants highlight the importance of personal brands as academics, and reflected positively on the benefits of a strong Business School brand for individual career and reputation purposes.

*“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 US 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 that make sense of branding instrumentally, and somewhat individualistically, in terms of the *game* of building Brand Me. While this might be more relevant to knowledge workers in highly mobile labour markets, the faculty members of this study do not simply internalize the brand message of the business school, but seek to enhance that brand with an instrumental view to furthering their own Brand Me.

The last interview quote, from Case D, is particularly interesting because it shows the dynamic of how *organizational* branding is employed as a way of establishing *individual* reputation and labour market value. Notions of *the place you work at* are 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 a weak organization?* Branding, for this respondent, is a natural and progressive extension of the trend towards competition and markets in higher education 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)*

Branding is hereby understood in terms of a new type of employment relationship in higher education. No longer do universities simply provide a wage in return for employee effort, they are also envisaged as providing faculty with a strong brand that will enhance their CVs and future careers. The employment relationship is thus reconfigured according to a new form of capital: offering employees not only financial capital (i.e. money), but also symbolic capital (i.e. a brand on their CV) in return for their work effort.

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 that would benefit faculty. Of course, this was part of a bargain that expected certain things in return. The following informant 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 Business School brand is placed by this respondent as the fundamental driver of work quality. The discourse positions the employee as someone who, if they worked at a business school with a lower ranked brand, would lower their standards in their own work accordingly. Working at a business school with a supposedly strong (i.e. highly ranked) brand is said to cause intimidation and stress to raise work quality. In describing a kind of Foucauldian

self-disciplinary mechanism, this informant points to the significance placed in 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 informant, branding was not a burden or 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 interviewees were critical of the branding of their own business school rather than ‘branding’ per se, 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 sum up, the findings suggest that branding is used as a resource to re-imagine the financial, physical and psychological aspects of the employment relationship, as one which seeks to

engage faculty in new levels of identification and passion for their business school (brand ambassadors). However, the findings also show that faculty are far from passive in internalizing and reproducing brand messages. Many of the academic staff were able to articulate a highly sophisticated awareness of the link between their own brand, as Brand Me, and the Business School brand of their employer. In comparison with the Deans' positioning of the faculty in relation to branding, we see some commonalities with the faculty discourse of business school branding here, as a win-win for both the school and the academics' own career and professional brand. Yet, while the Deans stress the difficulties in engaging the faculty in branding the school rather than themselves, the discursive positioning of the faculty illustrate that, actually, the Brand Me is described as a strong motivator for endorsing the school.

#### *4.2.2 Brand ambivalence*

It is important to note that not all of the interviewees positioned themselves as *captured* or *engaged* with the discourse of branding in their business school. Some, it seems, had been left relatively untouched by the developments within their business school into the world of branding, 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 interviewees, even the terms brand and branding in the context of higher education were problematic in themselves. By problematic, this does not refer to hostility and resistance to using the terms, but rather 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, the term branding was recognized but argued to be empty of meaning and associated with ‘spin’ or a certain ‘sort of talk’ because of its frequent use in academia, where business schools brand themselves on similar qualities, such as ‘excellence in research and teaching’.

*“... because it’s going everywhere, and 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, which doesn’t mean that the term has no meaning, but it’s getting emptied of meaning because it’s just promiscuously dispersed across everywhere”.* (Senior academic, Case B)

These interview extracts point to some of the limits to the branding discourse, sites where it clearly has not *reached* or *reconfigured* faculty in any meaningful way, nor even been registered as a meaningful term in itself. While the faculty positioned themselves as distanced from, or

untouched by, branding processes and branded messages in their schools, they do not articulate a cynical or resistant stance. Branding is simply not something they know or think about, it is not relevant, or is often forgotten about.

It is clear from this study that, for some faculty members at least, they lacked a clear sense of what was *branding*. The term *brand*, initiated by the interviewer at the start of the interview, often (and quite quickly) slipped or got melded 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, branding was practically part of everything they did at work: publishing papers, meeting students, attending meetings, and so on. For others, a narrower view was built up (e.g. branding as putting logos onto conference presentations). In fact, none of the respondents maintained strict boundaries and definitions throughout the conversation. This suggests that the slippery, fluid and loosely or poorly bounded nature of branding makes articulations of resistance or even cynical distance hard to maintain. Faculty are left with the difficult task of trying to work out: 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*

Faculty informants across all four cases also narrated accounts that expressed cynicism, distancing and resistance to branding. Interestingly, these narratives did not target the particular brand message itself, but rather the resistance was targeted at the very idea of branding in the first place. Their target of critique was the very notion that their School should be in the business of branding at all, viewing it 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 is here conceptualized as a ‘façade’, ‘vener’ and ‘hype’, and not representing the *true* or *proper* values of the business school. The last quote is interesting precisely because the notion of the brand is juxtaposed against the notion of reputation: the former seen as false/manufactured, the latter as true/authentic. Cynicism, then, is presented in terms of a particular discursive position: a type of person who can *see through* the perceived *fake* branding values, instead of the supposedly real, core values and attributes of the business school. Cynicism is 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 are more categorical in their rejection of branding as something false, fake or misaligned with the perceived *real* values of the organization.

The second quotation above is particularly interesting because the informant positions himself as somebody who is consciously reflexive about paying lip service. The informant presents himself as somebody who knows it is just a performance, who recognizes that it is false and fake, but also is able to maintain a *real self* in private, or behind the scenes, similar to this 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 they sometimes have to defend the claims made by the brand even though they may not be true. In other words, branding makes us have to 'lie' about the organization we work for. He positions this response as something that is normal, rational, to be expected, and *what anyone else would do in the same situation*, by 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 contemporary employment relationship. The interviewee rhetorically poses himself a question of whether "defending ... the School's operations, its ethos, its values" is "anything to do with the brand". This finding is significant: notions of resistance to the role as brand ambassador break down because branding to the faculty is ambiguous, slippery, and hard to pin down.

In other cases, a cynical stance was adopted which viewed branding not only as 'spin' but also as a kind of 'political weapon' to exercise power and influence. This interviewee was reflecting 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':

*"... because it's going everywhere, and 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, which doesn't mean that the term has no meaning, but it's getting emptied of meaning because it's just promiscuously dispersed across everywhere".* (Senior academic, Case B)

In Business School A especially, one particular artefact - a Business School calendar that featured a photo of a faculty member for each month - became the focal point of many strong

accounts of resentment and resistance. The calendar, which was sent to businesses and alumni, was recounted by most of the interviewees. The story of the calendar ‘disaster’ or ‘debacle’, as it was referred to among interviewees, provided a common theme for reflecting on the very idea of, 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 referred to as ‘superficial fluff’, ‘self-indulgent’, and ‘talking yourself up’. Cynicism towards branding is not presented as motivated by a generally resistant attitude towards anything that emanates from senior management, or associated here with a *lack* of identification (the

organization is unrelated to my sense of *who I am*), nor a *negative* identification (the organization is opposing my sense of *who I am*). Rather, these respondents present themselves as organizational citizens who are *deeply identified* with a particular sense of *who we are*. Organizational identity can therefore be conceptualized as part of the narrative positions that are authored in these accounts, as part of the socio-political action of justifying a particular distribution of resources. By positioning the self as a custodian of the *proper* and *right* organizational identity (*who we should be*), resistance to branding is portrayed as a reasonable and warrantable attitude.

The cynicism is in other words framed as motivated by a sincere concern for the organization, for directing 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, the informants position themselves as employees who seek to resist branding for reasonable, rational, perhaps even honorable motives. Resistance, as a discursive position, thereby enabled two key social actions to be performed: presenting oneself as a moral character, and presenting arguments for (or against) the use of resources in certain ways.

#### *4.2.4 Understanding multiple discursive positions*

An important aspect of the discursive positioning perspective is that discourse (e.g. interview accounts) is not read as expressions of stable underlying attitudes, values, motives and so on (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Rather, discourse is understood as 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 is not viewed as an expression of an underlying confusion or lack of cognitive clarity, and ambivalence and contradiction are understood as normal, if not somewhat inevitable, outcomes of discourse-use, rather than evidence of internal cognitive conflict or dissonance. Indeed,

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 in accounting practices (Wetherell *et al.*, 1987). Thus, the analysis in this research approaches the way in which informants switched or shifted positions within interview accounts not as an analytical problem – what was their real opinion/attitude – but rather as an analytical topic 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 was done differently, or done *better*. The following example serves as an illustration. The interviewee 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 interview, branding is presented as a necessary evil: not something that should be embraced, but nonetheless 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, a more positive endorsement of branding is made. The interviewee expresses a desire to have a more unique brand that would improve the School, and by implication, their 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 informant expressed a deep cynicism towards branding as a whole, viewing branding as 'over-rated' and paying too much for a 'premium', which is later revised to something attributed to an inevitable external 'force' (the commercialization of education). However, later in the interview, she also articulated a sense in which a "stronger" and more "unique" brand would be welcomed 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 was also blended with other discursive positions that articulated a desire for better or more branding. This pattern of blending of *cynical distancing* and *embracement* of branding - of the right kind, done in the right way – was commonplace throughout the four cases. Thus, it could be tentatively concluded that it does not make much sense to talk of a faculty member as a brand cynic, or brand ambassador, but rather these should be analysed as discursive positions that can be taken up in a fluid, flexible and variable way within the process of making sense of branding in business schools.

## **5. Discussion**

This paper examines how faculty members of four business schools make sense of and discursively position themselves in response to their school's branding. Our findings show that despite a 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 in faculty's relationship with their school's branding. The findings of this paper unfold such

complexity and thus contribute in three important ways to advance research on the branding of business schools.

Our first contribution relates to our research objective of investigating 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 pointed out, that while faculty are considered important in higher education for delivering 'the brand promise', empirical evidence on faculty responses to branding are rare. Our paper addresses this shortcoming and thus extends 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 business schools studied. 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, a somewhat instrumental position was constructed, in which branding was viewed as a positive process only insofar as it had instrumental benefits for the profile and career of the academics themselves. The second response was one of 'non-engagement' with the branding process. Here, faculty spoke of their lack of awareness of the brand claims being made by their school. Others spoke of knowing what the brand claims were all about, but viewed them as not personally relevant, with their own personal reputation being more important than that of their school. Some faculty also showed a lack of awareness of what the term 'brand' meant in itself, with confusion and ambiguity about what distinguished the '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', a 'veneer' that was decoupled from the perceived true values of the business school. Here, faculty members positioned

themselves as the perceived guardians of the ‘true’ identity of their business school. The narratives highlighted a concern that the brand will lead the business school astray, guiding resources and attention away from core areas, such as teaching and researching. In adopting a type of moral distancing, branding and branding discourse was seen as not only missing the mark, but viewed as 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 who it is for. Branding was thereby presented as a threat to the very *raison d’etre* of the school. These three positions towards branding are illustrative of the different ways the faculty make sense of branding in the school and position themselves towards it, in ways that neither fully embrace branding, nor completely disregard it, but continuously moving back and forth in the ‘grey zones’ of ambivalence in between these polar positions.

Our second contribution relates to our research objective of applying a discursive approach to the study of faculty sensemaking of branding in business schools. The discursive approach has proven particularly relevant to open up a more complex understanding of the ways faculty respond to branding (Naidoo and Pringle, 2014) and to highlight the fluidity and swift shifting of subject positions towards branding, even with in the same interviews. The multiple discursive positions suggest that the school’s branding is made sense of in multiple and different ways, as faculty wrestle to understand ‘what the brand is’, ‘what branding involves’ and ‘what it means to them’. We thus propose a different understanding of ‘branding’: from a robust category (‘something that is’) as it is currently described in the literature, to how the faculty *ascribe* meanings to the concept and practices of branding, constructing *it into* existence. The discursive approach applied in our study has highlighted that understanding of ‘branding’ was rather ambiguous and vague. Branding emerges as a slippery and loosely bounded concept in the local discourse of faculty, and is sometimes used in connection to reputation, image, ethos, values. This is a significant finding in

itself since all four business schools were chosen precisely because they had been involved in initiatives to clarify and strengthen the brand profile of the school 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 initiative. 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 promise. The fact that faculty across all four schools displayed a lack of engagement with or awareness of the brand and the branding process therefore shows that the senior managers failed to engage faculty in a way that was *meaningful* to them. Branding discourse, it would seem from this study, had penetrated the four educational contexts to some extent, but had not fully engaged faculty. For those who were not aware of the brand, were not clear what branding meant or knew the brand, but did not identify with it, the notion of ‘living the brand’ (Ind, 2001) was never considered, nor were strong positions against branding maintained.

Finally, our third contribution relates to our research objective of advancing the debate on the issues surrounding branding of higher education, by further unpacking the important, yet ambiguous role, of faculty members (Aspara *et al.*, 2014; Chapleo, 2011; Idris and Whitfield, 2014; Naidoo *et al.*, 2014; Weerts *et al.*, 2014; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008). Branding may be seen as a logic, that on the one hand carves out a discursive position for the faculty, yet on the other hand the faculty also re-construct and negotiate this position in their local branding discourses. This finding calls for a more critical perspective on how branding is interpreted by faculty, moving beyond the assumption that employees will embrace the brand and seek to ‘live’ it in their daily work. 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 and resistant attitude towards branding, associated it with being ‘fake’ and antithetical to the true values and priorities of the organization.

## **6. Managerial implications**

The findings call brand managers in higher education at large, and business schools in particular, to rethink faculty's brand engagement and their (brand managers) role as sense-givers (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) to faculty's sense-making. The literature on branding of higher education seems to argue that brand dis-engagement among faculty arises because of a lack of clarity around brand values and dis-integration of brand 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. Vagueness, can cause problems, but also allows for the co-existence of multiple perspectives and interpretations – and thus may be used as a platform for more participatory approaches to internal branding. Ambiguity may thus be used strategically as pointed out by Eisenberg (1984). Therefore, in 'crafting' a school's brand identity, our findings urge brand managers in business schools to 'talk up' the multiple logics evident in university settings and leave the brand open to pluralistic interpretations.

More importantly, our study illustrates that brand managers in business schools need to move beyond top-down internal branding approaches. Brochures, internal communication meetings and staff brand training are necessary but not sufficient tools to encourage faculty engagement and commitment to the school's 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 sense-making is much more complex and nuanced than this. This questions the role of Deans and brand managers in regards to shaping the faculty's sensemaking around brands and branding. While, the literature often gives priority to 'sensegiving activities' of internal branding, we would argue that sensegiving and

sensemaking should be considered equally important and iterative processes, which influence each other in order for faculty to 'live the brand'. We argue that top-down oriented sensegiving branding efforts will elicit more faculty resistance and turn the more ambivalent and even positive responses to more cynical positions towards branding. This is in line with ideas put forward by Weick (1995), who argued that "when told to walk the talk, their vehicle for discovery, the walking, is redirected" (p. 93). Instead of considering the ambiguous, slippery and inconsistent nature of brands and branding as a threat, it could instead be considered by brand managers as a resource for development.

## **7. Limitations and future research directions**

Several limitations of this qualitative study pose opportunities for future research. First, our sample consisted of faculty within four business schools. We focused on business schools, as they tend to be at the forefront of branding activity in higher education. However, future studies should perhaps widen their focus to include other schools, where faculty are even less familiar with the branding discourse. Second, faculty within the four business schools included in this study were research-active, which appeared to play a role in how the faculty engaged with their school's branding efforts. Future research could usefully explore how branding is made sense of by faculty in non-research active business schools. Third, despite the four business schools' branding initiatives, faculty in our study displayed a lack of awareness of and engagement with the school's brand and the branding process. In future, researchers could widen their focus in business schools where there is a strong awareness of and engagement with the brand and the branding process. Fourth, our study focused on how faculty make sense of and discursively position themselves in the school's branding process. Future studies can turn their focus on the organizational perspective. For example, scholars can explore how Deans and brand managers within universities can 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 examine how faculty's sensemaking of and discursive positioning towards their school's branding may explain loyalty-related behaviours.

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**Table 1. Data Sources across the four business schools**

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

## **Appendix1. Interview Guides**

### **Faculty Interview Guide**

#### **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 INITIATIVES:**

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 student/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?