

We Are Who We Include: Inclusive Branding for Higher Education

How can the brand for NorQuest College evoke a sense of belonging for all?

By:

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Disclaimer

The views expressed in this capstone project are those of the author and do not reflect the views of the University of Alberta, the Faculty of Arts, Communications and Technology Graduate Program, and NorQuest College.

Abstract

Higher education plays a critical role in society, creating a path for individuals and communities to better health and wellbeing. To support more diversity in higher education, brand plays a fundamental role in attracting a more diverse group of students, as well as staff and faculty, facilitating a strong sense of belonging. The role of inclusive branding is at the core of building a sense of belonging within a post-secondary institution (PSI), and can act as a catalyst to hold an institution more accountable for actions to support inclusivity and build equity.

This paper is a feminist autoethnography of the brand process for NorQuest College to support their organizational strategy, *NorQuest 2030: We are who we include* (NorQuest, 2020). The goal of the brand for NorQuest College is to attract and build a strong sense of belonging within a more diverse group of students, critical to achieving the outcomes outlined in the organizational strategy. The brand refresh was guided by inclusivity and accessibility in order to evolve to an inclusive brand, a type of brand that takes into consideration diversity in all forms. Reflections of the brand process are shared through personal reflections, alongside a series of interviews with key executive members and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) experts from the college, about the importance of inclusivity in higher education. As the expectations regarding inclusivity continuously evolve within society, the evolution of this brand aligns to the continuous support needed for the communities the college serves. It is also important to note the major role technology plays within an inclusive brand by creating not only the means to foster inclusivity, but also barriers that can detract.

This research study is a call to action for further research on inclusive branding for higher education and other public sector organizations. Inclusive branding is a style of communications

and marketing a PSI should strongly consider adopting, not only to better position the institution to more attract students, build a more diverse faculty and staff, and strengthen external partnerships, but more importantly to support diversity and inclusion within our society through inclusivity within higher education.

Keywords: inclusive brand, higher education, inclusive design, visual communications, feminist autoethnography, post-secondary institution, inclusivity and equity, accessibility

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Introduction

Why is it important to create a sense of belonging in higher education and how can brand play a fundamental role in supporting inclusivity? To understand why a sense of belonging is important within higher education, we must also understand how a sense of belonging can best be portrayed by a post-secondary institution (PSI) through brand. This research paper explores the importance and process of inclusive branding at NorQuest College, through a feminist autoethnography, to reflect on the inclusive brand and visual identity project for the college. Additionally, the research is supplemented by four interviews held with executive members and staff with expertise in equity and inclusion at NorQuest College. Qualitative analysis of the findings from the four interviews explores the meaning of an inclusive brand, the criticality of an inclusive brand to achieve the college's organizational strategy; and how the activation of inclusivity within higher education plays a critical role to reduce inequities within society.

This paper looks at the fundamentals of current branding in higher education, the emerging thinking around brand inclusivity for PSIs, and how a visual identity, guided by inclusive design principles, can lift and power up an inclusive brand. Higher education is a sector that may not only benefit significantly from inclusive branding from a marketing aspect, but also cultivate the overall sense of belonging for everyone within the college community, including staff, faculty, and students throughout their academic journey, starting with the consideration of applying to a specific PSI, the experience of being a student through to graduation, and then becoming an alumnus of their chosen PSI.

NorQuest College - We Are Who We Include

NorQuest College is a publicly funded community college in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The student body is over 12,000 full-time or part-time credit students, and approximately 8,500 non-credit or continuing education students. The diverse student body consists of domestic, Indigenous and international students with over 78 first languages spoken (NorQuest, 2023). According to NorQuest College's statistical data and a comparison of student population trends in Alberta, NorQuest College is the largest community college in the province in 2023, with continual student growth projections (NorQuest, 2023).

The rebranding process for NorQuest College was requested by the executive team to support the new organizational strategic plan, *NorQuest 2030: We are who we include* (NorQuest College, 2020). The organizational strategic plan outlines ambitious goals for an increased growth of 50% of learners, with a 90% satisfaction rate for the overall quality of the education they received. The key objectives focused on potential learners' improved accessibility, increased diversity within programs, integrated Indigenous knowledge and wisdom integrated into all aspects of college life, and preparation of learners for the workforce with skills and deeper understanding of inclusivity. The plan also focuses on creating an inclusive organization as a key strategic direction, aiming to achieve a Level 5 in the foundational categories on the *Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Benchmarks* (GDEIB) (Molefi, O'Mara & Richter, 2021). The GDEIB is an equity, diversity and inclusion tool for organizations to determine a measurable strategy to track their progress in supporting EDI endeavors.

To rebrand the college, the communications and creative services team undertook the analysis of the process needed to understand and implement how best to represent a PSI striving towards inclusivity to support diversity across all areas of the college. This process was initiated

by the creation of a new visual identity for an inclusive brand, guided by inclusivity and accessibility, and informed by research-based best practices in inclusive design, visual communication, semiotics and inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility (IDEA). This paper also touches on the important role of technology in inclusive branding for higher education and how it may be used for inclusivity, with a strong awareness of the barriers it can also create.

The process of creating the inclusive brand and visual identity generated questions and answers identified in this research paper in order to share insights and learnings that may be helpful for PSIs and other public-sector organizations that are looking to understand the importance of more inclusive branding practices and implement them for their organizations. This research paper also highlights the necessary evolution an inclusive brand must continue to embrace in order to authentically reflect systems of inclusivity within the brand and to best meet the needs of all communities higher education must serve. There was a surprising lack of research around branding for higher education, specifically inclusive branding, for not only higher education, but other industries in general.

To understand the importance of inclusive branding in higher education, we must first understand the importance of brand for a PSI related to the role higher education plays in society. So how can the NorQuest College brand evoke a sense of belonging in all its constituents? To answer this question, we must first understand how branding for higher education can be more inclusive to attract a more diverse student population, as well as staff, faculty and external partners. The elements of a brand that is more inclusive must also be determined, including the key elements of a visual identity, and applications of the brand, especially across new and emerging technologies. An inclusive brand must also support the organizational strategic plan, playing a crucial role towards building inclusivity within society.

Societal Role of Higher Education

Higher education plays a crucial role in supporting society by driving economic growth and improving a sense of overall health and well-being for individuals and communities. These impacts can play a major role in promoting social mobility and reducing inequalities, identified within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2015) with education being key to overcoming poverty and reducing inequalities. Higher education provides opportunities for learners from diverse backgrounds, regardless of their socio-economic status, to access education and improve their wellbeing. When PSIs strive to create more equitable opportunities within higher education, it leads to empowering individuals to overcome barriers and achieve upward mobility for themselves and members of their communities (Yamamura & Koth, 2023). Higher education helps to drive economic growth and development, equipping individuals with specialized knowledge and skills that are in demand in the job market. As a result, graduates with higher education degrees tend to have better employment prospects and higher earning potential (Kehm & Teichler, 1995). This leads to increased productivity, innovation, and entrepreneurship, which ultimately benefit society as a whole.

Higher education has traditionally been exclusive in many ways, with high profile universities historically serving students from upper-class, wealthy families, creating class inequity within the education system (Alon, 2009) and minimal diversity amongst students and lifelong learners (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). With the need for higher education to become more inclusive and serve more diverse learners, especially communities that have been excluded in the past, the question this paper serves to answer is how can a PSI create a sense of belonging as an authentic brand? To create a sense of inclusivity and authenticity, the role of an 'inclusive brand' strives to attract diverse learners, staff and faculty to better serve communities within society,

leading to building and strengthening systems of inclusion across society. Higher education fosters active citizenship and prepares individuals to participate effectively in the democratic processes. Students gain a deeper understanding of social, political, and cultural issues, which enables them to engage in constructive dialogue, contribute to their communities, and advocate for positive change. Additionally, higher education promotes global awareness, cultural understanding, and international cooperation, preparing individuals to become responsible global citizens.

Branding for Higher Education

To understand the importance of inclusive branding, we must first understand the importance of branding for higher education in general. Branding is crucial for higher education institutions for competitive positioning, often based on the reputation of the institution shared through former student experiences and achievements from faculty and alumni (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, I 2006). Higher education institutions face intense competition, and branding helps them stand out from the crowd (Melewar, Foroudi, Dinnie & Nguyen, 2018). A strong brand distinguishes an institution from others by highlighting its unique characteristics, which include academic programming, cultural values, and research opportunities (Melewar & Akel, 2005). This differentiation attracts students who align with the institution's offerings and feel as though they can belong to a particular PSI. Prospective students are more likely to choose a PSI with a strong brand that aligns with their aspirations and values, including a sense of belonging aligned to a sense of opportunity for achievement (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012). Furthermore, a strong brand can foster a sense of belonging and loyalty among current students, staff and faculty, which leads to higher retention rates (Pinar, Trapp, Girard & Boyt Thomas, 2014).

Another very important outcome of strong branding within higher education is the opportunity to attract and build strong partnerships and attract funding opportunities (Yamamura & Koth, 2023). A well-known and respected brand can entice collaboration with other institutions, organizations, and businesses. These partnerships can lead to joint research initiatives, exchange programs, internships, and other valuable opportunities for students and faculty (Blanton, 2007). Additionally, a strong brand enhances an institution's appeal to potential donors and sponsors, increasing the likelihood of securing financial support for the institution

Alumni are another essential stakeholder in PSIs. A strong brand cultivates a sense of pride and loyalty among graduates, encouraging their continued involvement with the institution. Engaged alumni can provide valuable support through donations, mentoring programs, networking opportunities, and career services (Gallo, 2012). A positive brand image strengthens the bond between the institution and its alumni, fostering lifelong connections and the growth of a robust alumni network (Carter & Collinson, 1999).

In summary, branding is important for higher education because it differentiates between institutions, enhances reputation and prestige, attracts and retains students, fosters partnerships and funding opportunities, and promotes alumni engagement. A strong brand can significantly impact an institution's success, influence, and long-term sustainability in an increasingly competitive higher education landscape.

An Inclusive Brand for a Post-Secondary Institution (PSI)

Having established the importance of branding for higher education, this research reflects on taking it a step further to better understand the importance of a brand guided by inclusion and accessibility, known as inclusive branding. To attract and retain more diverse learners, staff and

faculty within higher education, there must be trust in the brand (Halliday & Kuenzel, 2008). Inclusive branding is important for higher education because it helps attract a diverse student body, fosters a sense of belonging, promotes equity and social justice, enhances reputation and competitiveness, and aligns with evolving societal expectations. By actively showcasing and practicing inclusivity, institutions can create an environment that benefits all areas of higher education - learners, staff and faculty. A focus on inclusivity can also help to prepare learners for success in a diverse and interconnected world.

Inclusive branding helps PSIs appeal to a wider range of students from different backgrounds, cultures, and identities. By showcasing an inclusive and welcoming environment, institutions can demonstrate their commitment to diversity and increase their chances of attracting students from underrepresented groups. This can contribute to a more diverse and enriching learning experience for everyone involved. This can be achieved through fostering a sense of belonging within higher education. Inclusive branding shares the message of inclusivity to current and prospective students, highlighting their value and inclusion within higher education regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or any other aspect of their identity. This can create a sense of belonging, which is essential for student retention and overall academic success. Inclusive branding can contribute to building a positive reputation for an institution with students, parents and other stakeholders who increasingly value diversity and inclusivity when making decisions about higher education (Guo & Jamal, 2007). Institutions that are recognized for their commitment to inclusivity are more likely to attract top talent, secure funding and partnerships, and enhance their overall competitiveness in the higher education landscape.

The role of an inclusive brand goes beyond marketing the PSI by addressing systems of inequality and promoting social justice. By adopting inclusive branding, PSIs can demonstrate their commitment to equity and diversity, both internally and externally. This can include showcasing inclusive policies, programs, and initiatives aimed at promoting equal opportunities for all students and addressing barriers that may disproportionately affect certain groups. The hope is that further research about inclusive branding in general, as well as specifically for higher education, will address the current gap in research and explore the possibilities of the pivotal role inclusive branding plays within society.

Literature Review

The identity of a post-secondary institution (PSI) is now more important than ever. Institutional branding is a powerful method that identifies the values of an institution to its audiences and allows it to better position itself in a diverse market (Maurya & Mishra, 2012). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015) identify equitable and inclusive quality education as crucial to overcoming poverty and reducing inequalities (UNESCO, 2016). This call for action has sparked a focus for post-secondary institutions (PSIs) to become more inclusive, guided by best practices in equity, diversity and inclusion. Inclusive education practices have grown over the last 20 years to create more inclusive and equitable learning; however, further growth and understanding is necessary (Fornauf & Erickson, 2020). PSIs need to consider how they brand themselves in order to reflect institutional inclusivity and cultivate an overall sense of belonging for learners at all stages of engagement with an PSI.

Higher education institutions, especially institutions in English-speaking countries, now face fierce competition on the global market (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). To obtain a competitive advantage in the highly competitive global marketplace, an PSI must have a brand that is attractive to diverse and savvy prospective learners internationally, whilst still retaining domestic student applicants (Melewar & Akel, 2005). Trust and commitment are cornerstones of an effective brand (Cornelissen, 2002), attributes that are critical for an authentic and effective PSI brand in order to create a sense of belonging and attract audiences in a global market. Brand now must represent what a PSI “stands for” such as values and characteristics (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009) to gain the interest of and “*attract high quality students and academic staff at an international level*” (Melewar & Akel 2005, p. 338).

The purpose of this paper is to identify what is already known about branding for PSIs and relate the importance of inclusive brand and design practices, alongside communication and marketing applications, to build a stronger sense of belonging for learners in higher education in the global market. This literary review aims to answer the question, “How can higher education be represented by an institutional brand to provoke a sense of belonging for all?” To answer this question, the search to understand how branding for higher education can become more inclusive to better represent and appeal to a more diverse audience is crucial, including how the visual identity and application of the brand can best be applied.

Literature Review Approach

The approach to this literature review was to establish the need for further research into PSI branding, noted in a multitude of studies outlined in this review, and gather global studies on PSI branding to compare different viewpoints about PSI branding. Further to this, this literature review aims to create a link between branding and visual identity for PSIs to the emerging practice of inclusive branding and inclusive design practices which can facilitate a sense of belonging, through marketing and communications to communities the PSI serves, including learners and staff. To determine the scope of the literature review, my initial search for research involved the keyword phrase ‘inclusive branding’ to clearly describe the emerging topic area. As a popular and emerging concept currently, this keyword phrase unsurprisingly revealed a large variety of gray literature; however, surprisingly, there was little scholarly research on this topic. Further investigation reveals a gap in research literature regarding inclusive design for brand and its supporting visual identity.

The eligibility criteria for this literature review focused on identifying the scope of my study for inclusive branding in higher education and consists of identifying leaders in higher education branding, specifically those who are publishing in higher education journals, and are widely cited. My initial examination of article titles and abstracts informed the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Booth et al., 2016) which aided me in the development of my exclusion criteria. Keywords including ‘equity, diversity and inclusion’ and ‘accessibility’ did not necessarily inform the specifics of my topic and were avoided other than searching specifically for digital application of brand and the foundations of the concept of inclusivity. ‘Inclusive education’ is also a keyword I excluded because it is a whole other area of research; however, inclusive education is a concept that informs an inclusive brand for an PSI that practices it and has therefore been referenced sparingly. The iterative process has involved continuously revisiting and revising my search criteria and what I have considered to be in scope throughout the information gathering process (Rumsey, 2008). To inform fundamental understanding of branding for higher education and to build further understanding around the opportunities for inclusive branding in higher education, the search for literature regarding branding practices in higher education and brand visual identity were explored.

The literature was collected from the ProQuest database, Design & Applied Arts Index (DAAI) database, the University of Alberta online library and Google Scholar search engine. Google was also utilized to search for prominent gray literature for this popular and emerging topic including relevant journals and Higher Education news outlets such as Harvard Business Review, Forbes, The International Journal of Higher Education Research (Springer) and the Academica Group. The advantage of articles found in gray literature is the current relevance of the materials, which capture the emerging concept of inclusive branding and its link to

ethnographic research, and the opportunity to uncover PSIs currently developing inclusive branding. However the disadvantage of the gray literature is that it is often created quickly and through a stream of consciousness, with the author writing through an emotional lens, rather than taking a deeper dive into documented research (Oliver, 2012). The positives and negatives of using gray literature will need to be outlined in a capstone project. To understand branding for higher education to provoke a sense of belonging, the fundamental question needs to be asked: ‘why is it important to create a sense of belonging through branding in higher education?’ This is supplemented by understanding how branding has been determined for higher education in the past decade and how brand visual identity and application of brand can also support inclusivity and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: post-secondary education, higher education, inclusive brand, inclusive design, visual identity, education brand application, digital inclusivity/accessibility

Why is a Sense of Belonging Important in Higher Education?

As you look through the images of the first graduating class at the University of Alberta, the lack of diversity is very apparent. Universities have long been places of exclusion, although driven by the purpose to better society from sharing the knowledge gathered by scholars. In the first convocation speech at the University of Alberta in 1908, president Henry Marshall Tory stated “*The people demand that knowledge shall not be the concern of scholars alone. The uplifting of the whole people shall be its final goal. This should be the concern of all educated men, it be never be forgotten*” (Boyle, 1992, para. 19). Although Tory shared his belief that

knowledge must be inclusive for all, gathering this knowledge in a university setting was very exclusive to a limited group of scholars.

Inclusion in higher education has been defined in different ways at different times. So what does inclusion in higher education mean today—and how can it be portrayed through branding PSIs? Inclusivity in higher education is not only a factor for marketing to prospective learners, but also for retaining them. Many PSIs now have diversity in the forefront of their marketing and communication tactics to attract prospective students and retain current ones. Public demand for inclusivity and accessibility has been reflected in how universities are positioning themselves to comply with external pressures to continue to be viewed as legitimate institutions for education (van Vught, 2008). A sense of belonging within an PSI is important while an individual is attending school, and supports student retention. A student's perception of an PSI is a major factor that can influence their choice of attending that institution, alongside other factors that may include the quality of the learning environment, graduate success and access and opportunities available (Shah et al., 2013). Students can feel vulnerable when adjusting to student life and may have feelings that they don't belong, leading to high student attrition rates, seen as significant issues for PSIs globally (O'Keeffe, 2013). There is a critical need for students to feel included through all stages of their education as depicted in Social Identity theory whereas '*an individual defines themselves through the membership of an organization*' (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

As PSIs seek to attract learners globally, marketing and communication efforts need to be attractive to a diverse group of students with different social, economic, academic and political attitudes—contrary to historic views of higher education seen as a place of exclusion (Maringe 2010, as cited by Bamberger et al., 2020). However, the continued practice of worldwide

university ranking, or League Tables, could be viewed as demonstrating the promotion of an exclusive environment rather than showcasing the educational value an PSI stands for (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012). A recent literature review by Fumasoli et al (2020) outlined the factors that contribute to the strategic positioning of an PSI and found that current research points to two conflicting hypotheses: that either PSI positioning is reflected by external forces or PSI positioning is determined by senior leadership. A conflicting study by Collins et al. (2019) suggests that, although there is progress towards inclusive education, it is driven by individual students rather than the institution. Being driven by student demand resulted in a disconnect between student demand and staff understanding leading to challenges ranging from the lack of perceived need by staff for supporting resources, lack of staff training, low visibility of students in need, and poor experiences with new employers after graduation that lack inclusive practices (Collins et al., 2019).

The concept and execution of inclusive education is being embraced by many PSIs. A study comparing the effects of competing policies on the development of inclusive education in New South Wales, Alberta and Finland found that the lack of effective legislation seemed to pay lip service to inclusion rather than truly deal with growing exclusion found in society (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011). To determine how to make the move towards creating a more inclusive brand, support from the PSI leadership, coupled with student demand, is necessary to make this shift. Support from leadership can be reflected by the type of management structure as seen in the analysis of the strategic intent behind the University of Warwick's refreshed corporate identity (Melewar & Akel, 2005).

Branding in Higher Education

“Corporate identity [brand] is the presentation of an organisation to every stakeholder. It is what makes an organisation unique and it incorporates the organisation’s communication, design, culture, behaviour, structure, industry and strategy” (Melewar & Akel, 2005). The perceived perception of an institution fueling trust and commitment is often associated with an organizational corporate brand as outlined in social identity theory and upheld by organizational communications practices and visual identity (Halliday & Kuenzel, 2008).

There appears to be limited research regarding analysis of PSI branding; however, some brand analysis research has been conducted in the United Kingdom at University of Warwick, notably informed and guided by researcher and author T.C. Melewar, who specializes in branding, corporate identity and international marketing. In one such study, Melewar et al. (2018) analyze the strategic approach of the University of Warwick’s corporate identity through a qualitative approach of in-depth interviews with key stakeholders involved in implementation of all key components of the brand, including design, culture, behaviour, structure, industry and strategy. The results of this study have produced guidelines with clear actions that can be applied by communication practitioners in building a brand for an PSI. The growing interest for branding PSIs in the past decade focuses on defining the essence of what the institution is and represents (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). Enhancing brand equity can be a driver for student engagement, matching the student experience with the brand identity (Waqas, 2022).

There have been limited tools developed to measure PSI brand effectiveness that possibly inform the development of a toolkit or template that communications practitioners can use to develop and measure the effectiveness of an PSI brand. One such tool is the University Brand Personality Scale (UBPS), developed by Wæraas & Solbakk (2009), which measures how

students and alumni perceive their alma mater. This was conducted at a regional university in Northern Norway, and identified the level of crucial need to brand positioning within higher education which includes such elements as prestige, sincerity, appeal, liveliness, conscientiousness, and cosmopolitan atmosphere. Wæraas & Solbakk (2009) discuss the barriers, complexity, and commitment necessary to encapsulate one brand identity for an institution, noting the gap in research regarding PSI process to develop branding efforts internal to the institutions and noting the need for further exploration into the challenge of defining a ‘university brand’. Another related tool, developed in Malaysia, measures the brand identity between public and private PSIs, incorporating the combination of visual and verbal expression (Goi et al., 2014). Findings from the application of this tool, comparing private and public PSIs in Malaysia, found significant differences in dimensions of marketing, communications, public relations, services and cost (Goi et al., 2014), also noting the limited empirical research is limited regarding brand identity in higher education. It is important to understand that there are many factors that can support diverse audiences to feel a sense of belonging to an PSI. PSIs are complex institutions, comprising different areas such as faculties, departments and service areas. These multifaceted areas also feed into the overall institutional or ‘parent’ brand, and have a *“backward reciprocal transfer from the extension to the brand parent”* and can provide further legitimacy to the overall reputation and brand of the institution if they are aligned to the functional, symbolica and self-image of the overall brand (Yuan et al., 2016, para. 4).

Language is another key area of brand. Although outside of the scope of this research, it is important to identify key factors that may play a role in inclusive branding to determine how language can be incorporated into an inclusive brand, and voice is certainly a key factor of brand. An ethnographic study done in 2017 showed the importance of language to appeal to diverse

audiences to support the development of a university identity and a reflection on how a university identifies (Lowrie, 2007). Higher education spans centuries, with the historical heritage woven throughout the brand and visual identities of PSIs, evident even in newer institutions that have been only established in the past decade. PSIs have the opportunity to create a much stronger connection with audiences, based on the feelings connected to this history—*“a perfect tool for this purpose”* (Bulotaite, 2003, p. 454).

Inclusive Branding for Higher Education

The importance of inclusive design can enhance user experience for diverse audiences, as well as boost the institution’s brand position as a market leader (Morales, 2021). There are clear advantages to utilizing inclusive design to inform an inclusive brand. Market positioning aligned to the needs and interests of a wide range of audiences can simply attract more interest, including triggering innovation and new ideas that may have not been thought about from limiting a smaller audience focus (Bound & Coleman, 2010). This is extremely important within PSIs to be more representative to a diverse student body. Higher education is undergoing a seismic shift from institutional exclusivity to diversity and accessibility, creating the need for branding to reflect this evolution and build a sense of belonging for groups historically underrepresented and oppressed, including women who are Black, disabled or mature (Anderson & Williams, 2018).

Popular gray literature, such as articles in Forbes magazine, highlight the importance of inclusive branding, with articles outlining ways to develop and create inclusive branding. One such article shares a five simple ways to look at how an organization can build an inclusive brand: start by focusing on creating an inclusive culture that truly reflects the inclusivity goals of the organization, surround the organization with influencers and partners to promote inclusivity

and diversity, build a deep understanding of audiences' expectations to meet their needs, understand the customer journey, and create marketing and communication campaigns and tactics that are informed by your audiences (Thompson, 2021). Although gray literature may have biases in the articles, Forbes magazine is a popular source of identifying market trends, including inclusive branding, and is widely used by organizations globally with a reported readership of 50 million worldwide. To understand how higher education can be positioned through brands to promote inclusion and a sense of belonging, there are universities in North America leading with 'inclusive branding' guided by equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) practices. North Carolina Central University and Miami University are examples of universities utilizing inclusive branding, highlighting the importance of EDI practices embedded in branding rather than reactive communications and brand positions that are often taken when responding to social issues, as discussed on Higher Voltage, a podcast for higher education marketers (Stern, 2022).

The importance of inclusive branding for PSIs, specifically for student recruitment, is outlined through a series of interviews capturing the opinions of marketing and communications leaders from 25 universities across London and southeast England to determine the key elements of brand crucial to the appeal to prospective learners (Ali-Choudhury, 2009). Insights from these interviews by Ali-Choudhury (2009) include the importance of branding guided by inclusivity and diversity, igniting a sense of belonging to draw prospective students to the institution and effected through brand visuals and the balance of marketing messaging to appeal to more diverse audiences. Branding for higher education is not only a factor in attracting students, but also faculty and staff. Inclusive branding can attract talent and allow an PSI to become an employer whose employees are reflective of the diversity of their organization (Özbilgin et al., 2015).

Inclusive branding within higher education is not only beneficial to attracting learners to an PSI, but also can attract staff and faculty. A study by Jonsen et al (2021) examines the websites of five major companies in five different countries (France, Germany, Spain, the UK and the US) finding that inclusive branding is also beneficial in attracting talent and positions the organization as an employer of choice.

A Visual identity for a Higher Education Brand

To determine the brand of an organization we first look at the four sub-constructs that a corporate identity can be broken into: communication and visual identity, behavior, corporate culture, and market conditions, with these sub-constructs informed through various definitions of corporate identity as seen in Figure 1 (Melewar & Jenkins, 2002). One of the most prevalent elements is the corporate visual identity (Simo~es et al., 2005), reflected in the logo, typeface and corporate colours; however, other human sensory perceptions can also be considered within a corporate identity and includes visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile perceptions (Bartholmé & Melewar, 2011).

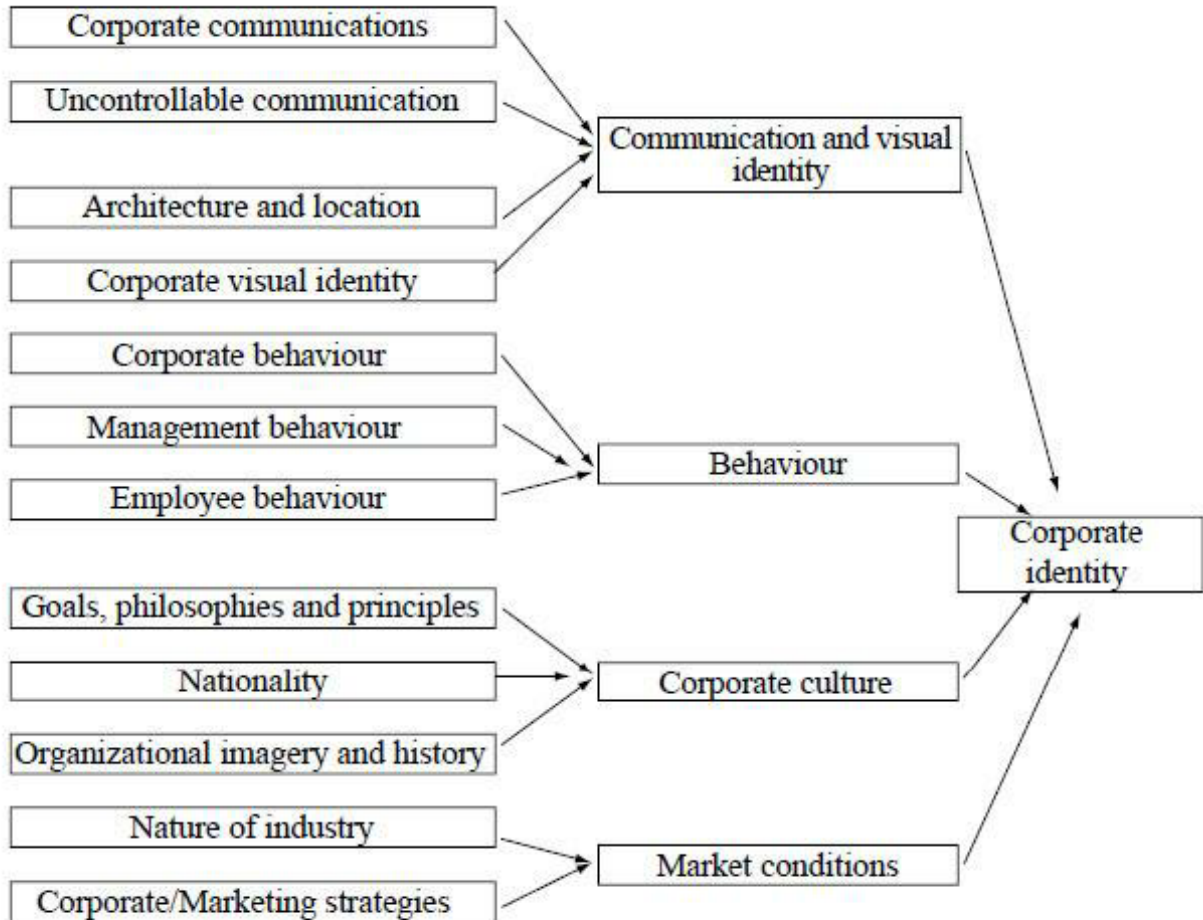
Semiotics plays into the brand and visual identity as we see the interplay of an PSI brand identity's interpretations by learners to their sense of belonging to the institution. It is important that the brand identity truly reflects the institution and is authentic to what it stands for. It's important that brand and visual identity not only stand out, but also authentically represent an organization. Communications practitioners managing organizational branding need to understand the rhetorical power that will convey credibility and persuade audiences to look toward their branding and past the vast signs they are inundated with daily (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001, p. 311). A study measuring student appeal linked to university visual identities

in the Northeast United States determined that there is a strong relationship between a university's visual identity and the reputational view held by its students (Alessandri et al., 2006). The brand promise is something that must meet the needs of the audience, portrayed through the visual identity. This is where representation of diversity and inclusion in a PSI is critical to convey to the diverse group of audiences looking to belong as part of a PSI community, such as a student body or academic or support staff member. To support brand development in higher education, an integrated communications approach is necessary, including the development and socialization of brand messaging to PSI staff to positively and authentically convey the brand identity (Judeson et al., 2006). To differentiate PSIs from one another, the institution's reputation and visual identity play a large role in student perception.

The role of PSIs are changing in society and are reflective of the branding seen through the application of visual identity elements including logos and slogans to inform brand identity to attract and retain interest with learners. New to universities is the necessity to lead with unique and distinct branding to reach and entice learners as private PSIs start to aggressively enter the market, playing into the need for brand awareness and relationship with the brand to identify belonging to a particular PSI. An analysis of brand positioning of universities incorporates Critical Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2004) to determine key elements, and found the differences between public and private universities in Pakistan clearly used different visual indicators to differentiate branding, including public universities using Islamic ideology for imagery and slogans compared to private institutions that created their own unique slogans and visuals to represent the branding (Qadir, 2020).

Figure 1

Corporate Identity Model (Melewar & Jenkins, 2002).



The logo of a PSI is a critical component of a brand identity. The importance of a logo is seen in the study of the reception process and evolution of incorporating a new logo and major redesign of the visual identity as part of a university merger, resulting in it anchoring the new brand identity as audiences' personal preferences act alongside organizational change (Erjansola et al., 2021). The benefit of diverse stakeholder engagement to develop a visual identity through diverse brand stories is important. Audience participation in the development of a brand visual

identity can help to better inform the outcome of audience perception to a brand (Lelis & de A. Kreutz, 2021) and can stir an emotional reaction that can constitute engagement (Batey, 2015).

Colour also plays an important role in the brand visual identity for an PSI to help stand out from the saturation of opportunities in the higher education sector for learners. The Elaboration Likelihood Model, as a theory of persuasion, suggests that perception is linked to persuading an audience (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) supporting the importance of colour theory for a brand visual identity. Using colour theory as a tool to strategically position an PSI brand across marketing and communications channels and collateral plays an important part in visual equity to identify the brand across all platforms (McKenney, 2020). A recent study by McKenney, which examines applications of university visual identities, identifies the link of brand visual identity colours that can be associated with the feelings of competence, excitement and sophistication outlined in colour theory. Colour can also be perceived differently through a cultural lens, evoking different emotions or perception linked to cultural connotations. The colours applied to website design can conjure different reactions and emotions about the brand as viewed by different culturally distinct user groups, signifying how colour can be a significant determinant for website trust and satisfaction depending on viewers from different cultures (Cyr, Head & Larios, 2010). Understanding of the connotations of colour, as well as colour accessibility when applied to marketing and communication collateral, especially digital platforms, can be another element in the creation of a sense of belonging to an institutional brand.

Inclusive Design Practices for Brand Visual Identity

Architectural practices have been informing graphic design trends, as architectural applications for accessibility can be seen evolving to meet legislative requirements, including

practicing in universal design, inclusive design and Design for All (Di Bucchianico, 2021). Di Bucchianico (2021) shares how inclusive design is energizing architecture due to globalization and the need for higher accessibility for all from an architectural viewpoint. The Inclusive Design Research Centre at OCAD University defines inclusive design as “*design that considers the full range of human diversity with respect to ability, language, culture, gender, age and other forms of human difference*” (Inclusive Design Research Centre, n.d., para. 1). Adobe, a leading American corporation of design software, has embraced inclusive design in support of designers to better enhance user experience for diverse audiences, boost market position, improve SEO, and increase sales (Morales, 2021).

Harnessing powerful visual cues to convey a message of inclusion visually, and support better accessibility, can boost overall brand appeal (Lidwell et al., 2010). The creation of a brand visual identity to support an inclusive brand can be informed by accessibility standards, user experience (UX) and inclusive design. To counter design exclusion, inclusive design casts a wider net around inclusivity than previously seen in Universal Design, attracting the widest possible range of people which supports more connected and engaged audiences (Keates & Clarkson, 2012). Public demand, alongside legislative requirements, has cultivated the need for inclusive design practices. Inclusive design can be applied to graphic design, as well as architectural and industrial design, to make an experience more accessible and better for everyone (Coleman et al., 2016). Leading with inclusive design principles supports a shift away from the cycle of exclusion and moves toward thinking of how to include everyone independent of age, ability, and economic status to support economic growth and create opportunities for all segments of the population and overcome social inequalities as described by the World Economic Forum (Holmes, 2020).

Application of Brand in Communications Channels

There are various methods to apply corporate branding to communications channels driven by technology including email, social media and websites. Strategic branding efforts have had to evolve as the physical connection between consumers has changed with the advancement of technology (Cruz, 2017). Designing on digital platforms has pushed communication and design practitioners to find ways to reach the largest possible audience members; however, it is important to define the concept of inclusion and how it can be measured to ensure it meets legislative requirements and user needs to ensure the usability for the widest possible range of targeted audiences (Persson et al., 2015).

A PSI website is one of the most effective marketing tools, with the ability to reach prospective and current students, staff, donors and partners. It is important to build and maintain a strong online presence and clearly convey the values the PSI represents. A study by Saichaie & Morphew (2014) found that the brand messaging and visual identity of 12 PSI websites focused on the benefit to the student, rather than the overarching benefit of education for public purposes. The focus on the benefits to the individual learner and the sense of belonging to a particular PSI could influence the student's choice of which PSI to attend.

Social media is another digital platform that PSIs are increasingly using to attract learners, specifically international students, with the branding and visual identity portraying student experience. The application of a brand can be conveyed in various ways on social media. Social media platforms utilized by learners can help activate a brand and the sense of belonging to a PSI. There are several studies outlining different social media platforms and insight branding practices on these platforms for PSI. One such platform is Snapchat, a popular platform used by younger learners, that can create feelings of inclusivity and reliability, producing a powerful

experience and experience to build a relationship with a PSI (Sashittal et al, 2016). There are also many ways to convey the PSI brand on social media. An analysis of two Israeli PSIs' social media data trails (FaceBook posts) by Bamberger et al. (2020) compare divergent approaches to brand representation between personal and institutional to represent inclusion and exclusion. The personal approach, focused on sharing personal profiles and stories from current international students, was extremely effective and could be linked to the success of attracting more international students than the other PSI.

It is also important to measure the success and effectiveness of the execution of a brand, with the ability to do so quickly and efficiently on digital channels, analyzing reach and return on investment (ROI) when comparing social media to websites to inform (Peruta et al., 2013). To measure the effectiveness of the design and impact of the user experience, many variables play into understanding how to construct inclusive branding; however, it can not be simply constructed by an outline of attributes (Di Bucchianico et al., 2013). Di Bucchianico et al. (2013), created two toolkits, informed by a Design for All approach, that could be used to analyze PSIs brand and visual identity application, leading to better understanding of brand alignment and effectiveness and better inform the importance of inclusive branding and visual identities for these institutions. This toolkit looks to outline and define three key areas—design, metrics and strategy utilizing a IVS (Identity Values Star) graph to illustrate the six areas of brand identity aligned to the values and key concepts identified through feedback from a questionnaire, and the SAB (Sign Analysis Board) to outline the strengths and weaknesses of the visual communication of the brand visual identity and specific components and applications.

Summary

The brand of an PSI can set them apart in the highly competitive international marketplace, highlighting their competitive advantage through their corporate identity to appeal to prospective students (Melewar & Akel, 2005). The emerging practice of inclusive branding has clear benefits for PSIs to better position their brand to evoke and cultivate a sense of belonging and attract a more diverse group of students, staff and faculty. The visual identity, constructed by inclusive design practices, is an essential and powerful method to bring a PSI brand alive and connect with its diverse audiences across collateral and digital platforms. Ensuring accessibility is adhered to, not only to meet legislative standards, but also to support a diverse group of people to be easily informed and engage with the PSI website, social media and print collateral, is an important step within an inclusive brand.

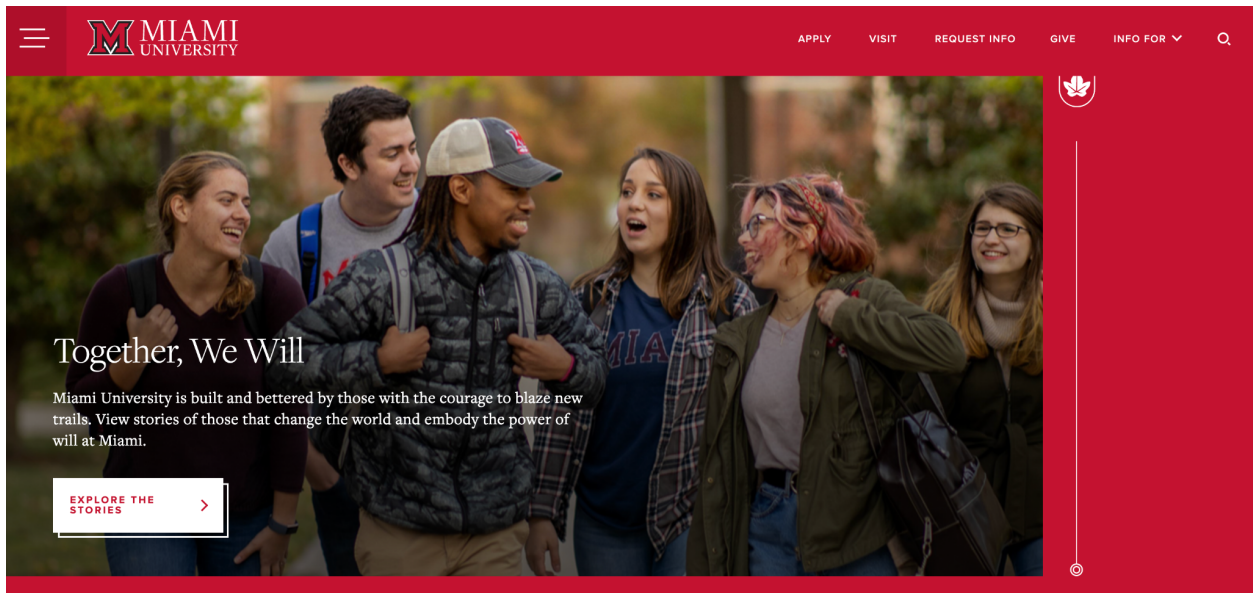
Due to the paucity of research regarding inclusive branding for PSIs, the aim of this paper was to compile a comprehensive outline of key areas around branding for PSIs and inclusive branding in order to illustrate the benefits of inclusive branding for PSIs. The peripheral articles provide insight into the topic of inclusive branding for PSIs and illustrate a strong connection to the benefits of inclusive branding and visual identities for PSIs to provoke a sense of belonging for diverse audiences. Many of the references cited in this literature review have identified a major gap and need for further research about brand and visual identity for PSIs and the higher education sector, including how PSIs need to manage their brand identity and prosper in the international market (Yuan et al., 2016). There is also a surprising lack of research related to inclusive branding in general, although the concept is clearly being embraced and applied abundantly as captured throughout gray literature. In searching for PSIs embracing inclusive branding on their websites, there are many including Queen's University and University of Utah,

with many more embracing ‘inclusive language’ within their brand guidelines. Miami University (Figure 2) and North Carolina Central University (Figure 3) have shared their commitment to inclusive branding and share their commitment and insight for other PSIs to embrace inclusivity through brand with higher education new media (Stern, 2022). Melewar et al. (2018) notes *“future research could further our understanding of corporate identity management in the higher education sector by investigating the importance in this sector of issues such as diversity, ethics and social responsibility”* (p. 356).

To answer my research question in my capstone, “ How can PSIs embrace inclusive branding to build a sense of belonging for diverse audiences”, I will continue to continue to scan recent gray literature for further insight into inclusive brand development and research related to PSI branding, in particular, research and studies that provide templates and guidance for inclusive branding, branding for PSIs and application of brand to digital platforms. My capstone will focus on the inclusive branding process undertaken at NorQuest College outlined as an autoethnography to document my personal role and experiences refreshing and evolving the brand for NorQuest College to be more inclusive and build a strong sense of belonging for all communities the college serves. The hope for the outcome of my capstone is to provide the beginning of further research into the effectiveness and benefits of inclusive branding for higher education, whilst providing preliminary guidance for communications practitioners in higher education with the first steps of creating an inclusive brand for a PSI.

Figure 2

University of Miami website homepage



Note. The imagery used for the homepage of the University of Miami shows a diverse group of students with a message of inclusivity, “*Together, We Will*”. Retrieved July 29, 2023, from <https://miamioh.edu/> (website). University of Miami.

Figure 3

North Carolina Central University - Department of Diversity and Inclusion webpage

NCCentral
UNIVERSITY


We Are NCCU | Life at NCCU | Academics | Admissions | Research | Administration

HOME / DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS / ENGAGEMENT AT NCCU / **DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION**

Diversity and Inclusion


Through programming, education and training, we work to ensure Eagles excel with an understanding and appreciation for equity, inclusion and diversity.

Programs




Native American Law Students Association Powwow

The NCCU Native American Law Students Association (NALSA) and Department of Diversity and Inclusion present the Annual Soaring Eagle Powwow.



Homecoming Drag Show

The Ultimate Drag Show is a Homecoming event filled with talent and fashion. This event is a celebration of the LGBTQIA+ community at NCCU.



Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Conference

In collaboration with the Women's Center and the Career and Professional Development Center, we co-organize annual Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Conference. It offers the organizations, corporations and higher education institutions across the country and opportunity to learn more about HBCU culture and how to better prepare their organization for our students and graduates.

Note. The imagery used for the Department of Diversity and Inclusion at North Carolina Central University shows diversity in program offerings, including an Indigenous cultural celebration, a drag show, and a DEI conference. Retrieved August 5, 2023, from <https://www.nccu.edu/dsa/engagement/diversity-and-inclusion>. North Carolina Central University.

Positionality

It is important to understand the writer's position, especially as part of a feminist autoethnography to enhance and support the validity of the research and theoretical contribution (Massoud, 2022), as well as highlight the privilege and potential bias of my positionality due to my socio-economic background and upbringing to illustrate the positionality I bring to this research (Holmes, 2020).

The majority of my life has been lived inside Alberta, Canada, where I was raised in an educated, middle class family. My life has been surrounded by higher education from a very young age, starting with attending nursery school on the university campus as a child. Life on a university campus was an exciting place to explore and experience, with many of my earliest memories related to walking around the university campus, meeting students from around the world, and being in awe of all the sights and activity happening around me. My father was an international student from the United Kingdom and my mother worked and then studied at the university. My early childhood years were spent living in university housing for international students, where I spent many of my formative years as part of a highly diverse cultural community, reveling in many different languages, food and music. My earliest memories are filled with the multifariousness of a global community—a different adventure of flavour on my taste buds at every house I visited, alongside the rhythms and sounds of music from around the globe filling the air, and a joy of different cultural celebrations throughout the year.

Both my parents undertook higher education, with my father completing a Master of Library and Information Studies when I was a young child, and my mother returning to higher education later in life after raising children, to complete a Bachelor of Arts in Music. My sister

completed a Bachelor of Arts in Drama, and a Bachelor of Science in Conservation Biology, and is currently completing her Masters of Science in Wildlife Biology & Conservation. After completing his master's degree, my father taught at a community college and my mother worked in an administrative office at the university. My education has not been a straight path, having not completed high school, but rather working through my late teens and early twenties, until attending a local college and gaining two diplomas, one in visual communications, and one in public relations.

I had struggled to complete high school, having moved from different schools every year and not feeling engaged with an institutional way of learning. I needed to drop the shackles I felt from the restraint of formal education in order to experience and learn about the world on my own terms. I chose to pursue a college education rather than a university degree because I felt these programs offered the credentials that would help me gain employment quickly and build specific skills necessary for the communications professional. I also felt that as a neurodivergent person, interested in art and design, I would succeed better within a smaller, community college setting, rather than at a large traditional university.

Immediately after graduation, I started a successful career in the strategic communications profession, working in higher education and government for over 20 years, within Canada and the United Kingdom. I was struck by the high esteem held for communications in the UK, especially within an integrated, strategic communications model, with decision making based on analytics from key performance indicators (KPIs), specifically for communications metrics. I now practice this model in Canada, implementing it within the communications strategies I create and lead.

One of the most influential roles within my career was working at the International Centre at the University of Alberta. I was once again part of an international community, rich in cultural diversity, including more amazing food, sounds, language, and, of course, many different cultural celebrations. The experience of working with colleagues from around the globe, and welcoming international students from every corner of the world, strengthened my passion for inclusivity in a diverse and global community, linked to higher education. The experience of moving to the United Kingdom to work in government supporting diverse communities across England bolstered my commitment to inclusivity and accessibility practices, especially within a brand experience.

As a White, cis-gendered, female, my viewpoint takes on a feminist expression, aligned to the oppression often felt by women, but acknowledging my lack of understanding of more specific oppression distinct to women of minorities who may lack a number of the privileges that I experience as a White woman. I acknowledge and continually work to understand the bias I bring to this research given the opportunities I have been exposed to due to my white privilege and how this may affect the analysis of the interview data and my approach to creating and reflecting an inclusive brand. I have felt a level of discomfort writing a feminist autoethnography and have explored how these feelings are part of my positionality, particularly the reflection of my personal values as to why the subject of inclusiveness in higher education is so important to me. I believe this is based on the personal experiences I've had with being part of a diverse, international culture, and my personal struggles with navigating the education system.

I included the interviews as an important part of this research to learn more from both an executive lens from those responsible for supporting and uplifting the inclusivity work at NorQuest College, as well as experts in EDI who work for the college. I continuously seek to

further what my role can be to support and lift equity and inclusion amongst my peers, friends and the students I ultimately serve as part of working within higher education through education, experiences and friendships.

Research Design and Methodology

This study demonstrated the use of a qualitative methodological approach to inductively and holistically understand the perspective of creating an inclusive brand for higher education, using the specific example of NorQuest College. To capture and reflect on the work of the inclusive brand rebranding process, the findings will be presented through a feminist autoethnography perspective and key aspects drawn from interviews with members from the college's executive team and Office of Equity. The advantage of capturing a reflection of the inclusive branding process through the lens of an autoethnography is to capture the immersive experience within a social and professional environment. This method showcases the experiences of learnings and insight throughout the branding process, including a personal reflection of an inclusive brand implemented within an organization. Whilst focusing on my own narratives and how I have been shaped by the cultural context of the college and this process, the research can reflect a deeper understanding of the importance of inclusive branding for higher education.

Four interviews were conducted for this paper to gather the views on the inclusive brand for NorQuest College, alongside valuable insight and expertise from executive members of the college and the Office of Equity team members to gain qualitative data regarding the importance of inclusive branding for higher education. These interviews were conducted on the college campus within the participant's personal office or meeting space, in my office, or online. The interviews are an important element of this research study and its effort to capture other perspectives about inclusive branding from within the NorQuest College.

An Autoethnographic Approach

Autoethnography is an emerging qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on their experience to extend understanding about a societal phenomenon (Alkhaled, 2017). Both autoethnography and ethnography contribute to our understanding of cultures and societies, but they approach research from different perspectives and emphasize different aspects of the research process, transforming the perspective of the researcher into that of a critical insider. The use of an autoethnographic perspective hones in and focuses on the experiences of the researcher through personal narrative and reflections, compared to an ethnography that aims to provide an overall view of the culture it is researching. Autoethnography entails the investigation of the researcher's own experience by means of analysis of a personal narrative or reflection (Mentz et al., 2010). This method is particularly well suited for this research as it places the self at the center of the research and within the specific social context (Cohen et al., 2018), removing the issue of bias by declaring a positionality and sharing an explanation to how the researcher interprets and analyzes the data through reflexivity. Autoethnographies can use interviews and participant observation as a member of a cultural category (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte 1999).

Autoethnography is grounded in postmodern philosophy and is linked to a continuing debate about reflexivity and voice in social research (Hammersley, 2006). The intent of autoethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural and to make room for non-traditional forms of inquiry and expression (Burawoy et al., 2000). In itself, an autoethnography promotes inclusivity, as it embraces a more creative writing style, compared to traditional research writing, allowing the research to be palatable to and readable by

a wider range of people. The flexibility and openness of an autoethnography lends itself well to sharing my experience of leading the inclusive brand project for NorQuest College.

The original research design reflected a case study format; however, the use of the autoethnography was chosen in order to better provide insight and reflection from my personal perspective as a critical insider within a leadership role for the inclusive brand work. An autoethnography also opens the doors for reflection of power dynamics with team members I directly manage and the leadership role I play directing internal communications and managing brand culture at the college. I also aim to capture some self-reflection from this experience to further inform the process of creating, implementing and maintaining the inclusive brand for NorQuest College. As I incorporate my personal narrative, I hope to create a sense of connection with readers through sharing my experiences of my personal exploration, in the hopes that I can capture for the reader the deeper complexities of creating an inclusive brand for a PSI.

Within an autoethnography, it is critical to identify the positionality of a researcher to better understand possible bias, and identify possible power dynamics and privilege within society. The positionality is a person's identity within a social and political context, including race, class, gender, and other social factors, including sexuality and ability status. This is especially important to identify as a researcher to better understand the potential effects positionality may have on the research process, and how positionality may potentially affect the outcome of my research (Bourke, 2014). It is also important to note for this research specifically, that I highlight and reflect on the role my employment at NorQuest College affects my view and how this may impact how I share the inclusive brand process I was involved in, especially due to the role I played as a leader for this project.

Incorporating a Feminist Lens

A recent research paper discusses the rise in autoethnographic methodology, mostly undertaken by women, to research and discuss discrimination and exclusion in higher education (Edwards, 2022). Edwards (2022) notes that an autoethnography can raise the volume, power and space of minority voices that are often not heard. A feminist autoethnography expands the boundaries of traditional research methodologies by incorporating subjective experiences and personal reflections. It offers a unique way of generating knowledge that is rooted in personal lived experiences, complementing and enriching existing academic research from a woman's perspective (Ettorre, 2016).

“[Autoethnographic research is] ideally suited to feminist research because its contextual, experiential approach to knowledge eschews the false dualisms of positivism and, drawing upon such traditionally female strengths as empathy and human concern, allows for an egalitarian, reciprocal relationship between knower and known” (Stacey, 1988, p. 21).

I do feel a level of discomfort writing an autoethnography and wanted to deepen my understanding about it from a feminist viewpoint, especially the importance of documenting my personal experience as a woman working in higher education for over two decades. My concerns are also founded on the fact that it has been documented that many scholars can dismiss autoethnography as a research method, especially from a feminist perspective, as it may be seen as lacking validity for academic research (Méndez, 2013). However, I am intrigued by the opportunity for personal empowerment through my writing by sharing my exploration of my

experiences creating the inclusive branding at NorQuest College, unveiling the intersectionality between the systems of power within higher education and the oppression that can occur, leading to a broader social change within a PSI. I also felt a feminist lens may be important due to the feminine profile of NorQuest College, with a current student body composed of a majority of females compared to males (NorQuest College, 2023). Due to the large number of females at the college, prior branding has often focused on targeting females.

Another opportunity of a feminist autoethnography approach that was appealing to me is the encouragement for self-reflection and self-awareness (Ettorre, 2016). I felt it was important to critically examine my personal experience, acknowledging my biases, because of the need to understand diversity and inclusivity for brand creation, as well as the hope that I can gain personal growth, foster a more informed and inclusive worldview, and connect with a deeper understanding of myself and the relationship I have within the larger social structure of branding for higher education, specifically with NorQuest College. It has been uncomfortable for me to embrace the feminist autoethnography style of research, although I thought it would be something that would come naturally to me. I am known for my storytelling, and enjoy sharing experiences and learnings through a personal lens to better illustrate all sense experiences, including more personal feelings or emotions.

I chose to apply and note the feminist lens for this research study through critical reflexivity to share my subjective experience as a woman working in higher education in a leadership role, interrogate my relationships within the roles I played for the brand project, and identify and reflect on power dynamics that may have affected the project and this research study. I also hope to open the boundaries of what future research may look like and question the restraints that currently shape institutions within higher education.

Feminist Interviews

Interviews are a commonly used method for collecting qualitative data in research, with benefits that include a deeper exploration of the topic through open-ended questions. This allows the participant to express their experience, thoughts and feelings in more detail, leading to richer and nuanced insights (Qu & Dumay, 2011). There are several advantages to conducting interviews for a feminist autoethnography including the opportunities to explore the power dynamic within relationships, identifying who is in charge of the discussion or direction of an outcome, and having more intimate conversations that can freely explore ideas and thoughts about the subject in question (Hesse-Biber, 2007). There is certainly an aspect of trust built within these interviews that lends itself to authentic responses to the interview questions (Brown & Danaher, 2019). Feminist interviewing can enhance the quality of research and address anticipated ethical dilemmas that could occur by asking sensitive questions. This may help to avoid the exclusion of important information from participants, and questions that could silence or distort participation—as well as affect the researcher when selecting participants and collecting data (Ackerly & True, 2008). These important questions, reflections, and power dynamics could be easily overlooked without the use of feminist interviewing.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted on the NorQuest College campus, either in the office of a participant, in my office, or through online video. I was mindful of the location of the interviews, as I know this can affect the dynamics of the interview and in turn affect the responses, and aimed to have the interviews face-to-face and in person to identify important social cues during discussions (Opdenakker, 2006). The interviews will offer expert opinions and deeper understanding about the importance of inclusivity within higher education, particularly at Norquest College. I feel that integrating the data from the interviews, with expert insight, will

strengthen the overall research findings (Quinney, Dwyer, & Chapman, 2016), especially with the case of exploring the sensitivities that can surround inclusivity and brand. The interviews have semi-structured, open-ended questions in order to adjust the questions as needed throughout the interview depending on participants' responses (Wildemuth, 2016), giving way to probing deeper about particular responses to further understand the complexity that can be linked to an inclusive brand. The aim was to collect rich and detailed data from the interview responses to better understand the perceptions and behaviors found in the organizational culture at NorQuest College in relation to inclusive branding.

Synthesis of the Inclusive Brand Process at NorQuest College

A big motivator for this exploration of the inclusive branding process for NorQuest College was to retrospectively evaluate and determine how to best inform the next phases of the branding for the college and the continuous evolution of the brand. To me, the importance of belonging to a PSI as a staff member is rooted in building systems of inclusion, which is linked to my passion to better understand what an inclusive brand for a PSI is and the importance of it to create a sense of belonging in higher education. To deepen my understanding of inclusive branding for higher education, I will share my reflections of the process to create the brand strategy for NorQuest College, shared through a feminist autoethnographic narrative, comparisons to the question regarding inclusive branding to the AI application, Chat GPT; and explore the key points pulled from four interviews with colleagues at the college from both the executive team and Office of Equity.

I have chosen to take a more analytical autoethnographic approach (Anderson, 2006). This is due to my limited knowledge and experience writing in this style, but also my level of personal comfort I have experienced as I share more personal insights about the work of inclusive branding. An autoethnography presents a way to better share the experience of discovering and leading an inclusive brand project, the development of the supporting visual identity and communications collateral, as well as sharing an intimate understanding and perspective of the internal culture of the college. Sharing the work of the communications and creative team at NorQuest College was more difficult than I expected. I feel that there is so much more to share about inclusive branding and hope to see further research about the impacts inclusive branding can have for higher education. Another perspective of inclusive branding is

also captured through the interviews undertaken as part of this research to gain insight from inside NorQuest College regarding the importance of inclusion within higher education and how impactful an inclusive brand can be.

Determining the Path Towards an Inclusive Brand Strategy for NorQuest College

The request was to rebrand NorQuest College to support the new strategic plan, NorQuest 2030: *We are who we include* (NorQuest, 2020). The core of the strategic plan was spelled out in the title - '*We are who we include*' - pointing to the central theme of inclusivity to achieve the five major outcomes outlined in the plan, which include: *Learner, People, Connection, Investment, and Transformation*. Inclusivity must be at the core of the rebrand, but the question remained, "How do we create a brand guided by inclusivity?". This question led to discovery of the terminology 'inclusive brand' that appeared to be trending in marketing gray literature, but many questions remained as to what an inclusive brand really was and how best to achieve one.

So what exactly is an inclusive brand? And what elements are key to creating an inclusive brand? These were the questions I asked myself as I started to determine the best way forward with rebrand. Key to the success of the brand implementation was the rollout through internal communications channels to employees, both staff and faculty. (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). Brand is a key factor to facilitate an organizational culture that can be interpreted in multiple ways (Schroeder et al., 2006). One of the major impacts of branding for internal organizational culture is the effectiveness it can have on building corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities when employees are deeply engaged, increasing the make-up of committees committed to CSR and creating and supporting the development of new organizational systems that best serve the organization (Ikram et al., 2021). One piece that stuck out to me was the

negative reaction often associated with rebranding - often with the most criticism from internal stakeholders, especially faculty and longer term staff. This has been noted in research, especially about the misunderstanding of what brand is to the internal audience and how it may affect their role in the institution (Clark, Chapleo & Suomi, 2020). This initiated a different way we talked about the rebranding process internally, shifting to a lighter jargon of 'brand refresh'. Did it make a difference? Unfortunately, we do not have specific metrics to prove it did; however, what it did do was help the communications and creative team set a tone, identifying important keywords that could better resonate with the internal audiences, and providing a strong framework for the brand work right from the beginning of the project. Other lines of questioning included 'What exactly is an inclusive brand?', 'What are examples of great inclusive brands?' and 'How do we evolve the brand to be more inclusive?'

So what exactly is an inclusive brand? And what elements are key to creating an inclusive brand? These were the questions I asked myself as I started to determine the best way forward with the rebrand for NorQuest College. Key to the success of the brand implementation was the rollout through internal communications channels to employees, both staff and faculty (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). Brand is a key factor to facilitate an organizational culture that can be interpreted in multiple ways (Schroeder et al., 2006). One of the major impacts on branding for internal organizational culture is the effectiveness it can have on building corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities when employees are deeply engaged, increasing the make-up of committees committed to CSR to creating and supporting the development of new organizational systems that best serve the organization (Ikram et al., 2021). I have experienced negative reactions about changes to a brand by employees past brand projects, which can be linked to the misunderstanding of what brand is to an internal audience and how it may affect their role in the

institution (Clark, Chapleo & Suomi, 2020). This initiated a different way we talked about the rebranding process internally, shifting to the use of lighter jargon, calling it a ‘brand refresh’ rather than a full rebrand. Did it make a difference? Unfortunately, we do not have specific metrics to prove it did; however, what it did do was help the communications and creative team set a narrative of how we would frame the brand work right from the beginning of the project.

I was surprised by the little research I found about inclusive branding, especially inclusive branding specifically for higher education. The major marketing brands that claimed they were inclusive brands were vague about their institutional process to create an inclusive brand, leaving us with more questions about how to define an ‘inclusive brand’. With new Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools emerging, I was interested in comparing my thoughts on what is an inclusive brand to that of Chat GPT, a current, leading AI language processing tool, which would respond to the question ‘*What is inclusive branding?*’. The key areas identified were: 1) *Diversity and representation*, 2) *Authenticity*, 3) *Inclusive language*, and 4) *Accessibility* (see [Appendix D](#)).

Although I can’t argue with the summary Chat GPT has provided, it lacks the nuances and depth to what an inclusive brand needs to be. These elements are certainly the framework through which to build an inclusive brand; however, what I feel is missing from this definition is the organization strategy and leadership needed to drive inclusivity at the organization. I believe the importance of strong leadership to guide and action inclusively in higher education is imperative. I feel that this summary also showcases the misunderstanding of what an inclusive brand should be, as it reaches much deeper into what the organization is trying to achieve. This is especially true for higher education and the societal role I’ve outlined in the introduction and literature review for this paper.

To zone into the specificity of inclusive branding for higher education, I asked Chat GPT “*Why would inclusive branding be important for higher education?*” The results of this request were much more robust: 1) *Attracting a diverse student body*, 2) *Fostering a sense of belonging*, 3) *Promoting equity and social justice*, 4) *Enhancing reputation and competitiveness*, 5) *Aligning with societal expectations* (See [Appendix E](#)). This response was much more in line with my findings, especially the point regarding aligning with societal expectation. I think this is the crux of inclusive branding for higher education, as Chat GPT summarizes that, “*institutions can create an environment that benefits all students and prepares them for success in a diverse and interconnected world.*” Positioning the college to prepare students for work is essential for higher education, including teachings in EDI to meet the goals needed to support cultural competence (Fuentes, Zelaya & Madsen, 2021).

An important element of the brand, that can often be overlooked by higher education, was ensuring it represented NorQuest College holistically—as ‘one’ institution and not several smaller areas, often seen with specific-faculty branding. I have found in my experience working in several PSIs that it is difficult to hold a ‘one-brand’ mentality across the institution with faculties continuously wanting to promote themselves without the foundation of the institution's brand. This has been a source of discomfort and difficulty for myself and team members having to navigate power dynamics within higher education, especially with faculties dictating marketing and communications for their faculties or departments, rather than the overall brand of the institution. There are other challenges to specific branding for faculties related to knowledge domains, partnerships and research traditions, but moving to a brand representing the institution as a whole is important to strengthen brand equity. This was brought into consideration whilst determining the NorQuest College brand refresh, with conversation about how different areas of

the college can stand out from each other, but still be contained and identified within one brand identity and particularly, how to create buy-in from deans and directors to embrace the one-brand concept.

Through the gray literature and discussions within the communications and creative services team, key factors to an inclusive brand were identified—this included many articles from Forbes magazine and Harvard Business Review. To find a foothold to start designing the visual identity of an inclusive brand for NorQuest College, the Creative Services team started to dive into learning more about accessibility in design. This is what kicked off our in-depth weekly conversations as we did team critiques of the current design work and started to build out the key elements of the new brand book. These weekly workshop meetings were set up with the creative services team focused on creating space and conversations about what an inclusive brand and supporting visual identity entails. Key areas of discussion included: learning more about accessibility in design for both digital and print; the necessary templates and ‘tools’ needed by employees to embrace the brand refresh and ‘get on brand’; phases and steps to support the brand’s continuous evolution as we learn and experience our brand; and the necessary steps needed to create buy-in for the ‘one brand’ concept to represent the college, and to lift the brand as a whole and utilize the power of a unified brand.

Another big question that stood out to the team was how the NorQuest College brand could stand out from the crowd, amongst so many other PSIs within the same city? I felt confident that as a team we could deliver a substantiated brand, but would it achieve the goal of raising awareness of NorQuest College across all stakeholders, including industry partners, donors, and government agencies? It was identified early on that the brand work would be a continual journey, so the implementation was outlined in three phases: 1) visual identity and

rollout, 2) brand research and refinement of brand strategy, 3) and final evaluation. The last step focused on evaluation was geared toward the evolution of the brand. Other elements that would be undertaken in the future included a new style guide to support more inclusive language across all communications channels for employees and external stakeholders.

I felt it was important to share the inclusive brand work at NorQuest College to start building a better understanding about what inclusive branding is, how it can be implemented, and key factors to be addressed when supporting an inclusive brand. I wasn't sure how sharing this information may be viewed or criticized by other professionals in communication, marketing, and design, but I felt that by sharing the research as a feminist autoethnography would best capture my personal experience and insights having built a career in branding and communications. I continue to reflect on the work that was done to create the inclusive brand and feel a strong sense of pride in the work that we achieved. I also feel a strong sense that we are really on to something—not something mysterious, but more like uncovering something that has been right in front of us the entire time. Having worked on several high profile branding projects throughout my career, I have always aimed to entice and engage diverse audiences. Working to create an inclusive brand, guided by inclusivity, inclusive design principles and accessibility, has felt so much stronger and more credible—even though the approach has been evolutionary, compared to past brand work where everything needed to be mapped out before the brand launch and then rolled out according to plan. I also have seen a difference with the buy-in for the brand from staff and faculty, as well as the marketing and communications team as they seem to feel their expertise is seen more in their field when they lean into the principles guiding the inclusive brand work. There has also certainly been light grumblings about the new brand, and criticism about how inclusive the brand really is—alongside a lot of support and understanding from many

employees at the college, especially wanting to embrace the inclusivity so deeply rooted in the institutional strategic plan, but also amongst the staff and faculty that are so committed to supporting the diverse learners at the college.

How a Visual Identity Can Best Represent an Inclusive Brand for NorQuest College

The purpose of a visual identity for a PSI is to support the institutional brand, communicate to audiences what the institution represents, and to evoke an emotional impression and thus create a sense of belonging. The current trend of inclusive and accessible design, coupled with the need to communicate quickly and effectively to diverse audiences, is at the core of effective branding for higher education to better support learning outcomes and achieve organizational goals. As public demand for inclusivity and accessibility grows, the importance of a visual identity led by these factors increases, especially in publicly funded higher education. Critical discussions were had about the past visuals, as well as the state of the current visual identity. Although there had been a lot of progress with the visual identity from the publication of the organizational strategic plan, through critique discussions, also highlighted was the need to become more inclusive and representative of a more diverse group of students. The creative team determined that the visual identity would be a primary tool to launch the brand refresh, as it would be such an engaging and powerful agent for repositioning the organization (Baker & Balmer, 1997).

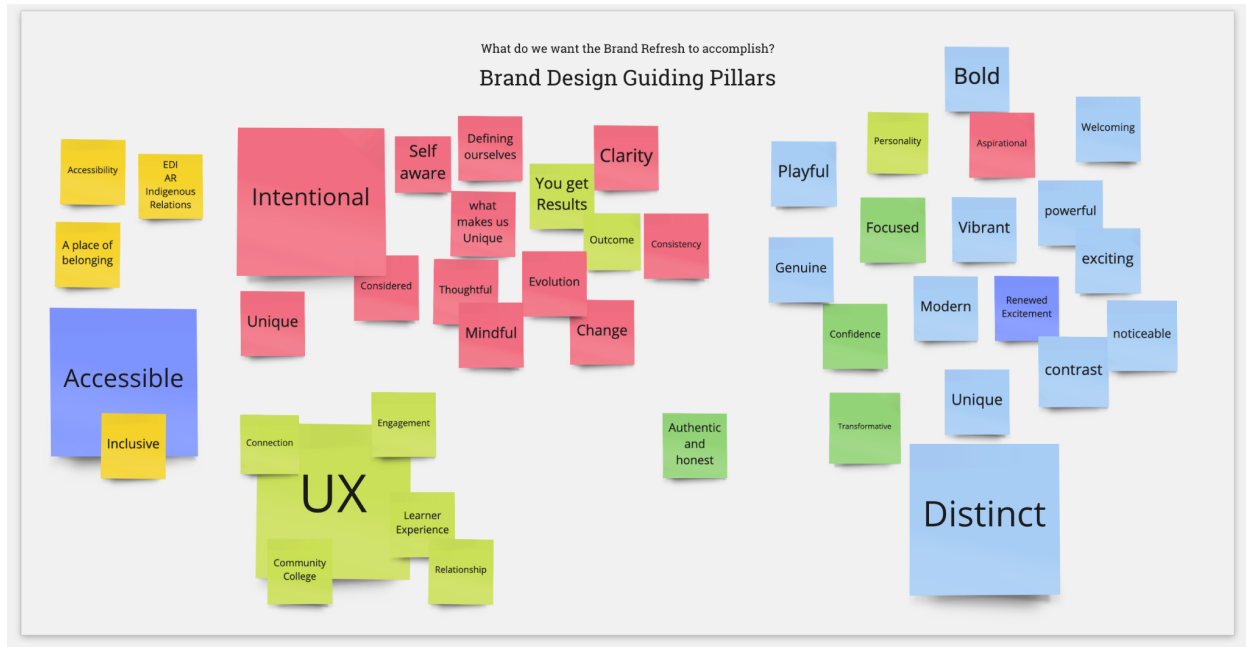
The Creative Services team, made up of myself and two female graphic designers, undertook extensive discussions and research to determine key factors that would guide design for a visual identity to represent an inclusive brand. The big question was ‘how could a visual identity best represent an inclusive brand?’ Upon researching different principles of design,

including universal design, accessible design, and design for all (Persson, Åhman, Yngling & Gulliksen, 2015), the concept of inclusive design emerged, with principles to counter design exclusion (Keates & Clarkson, 2012), and build upon a sense of belonging to the institution. This created a clear sense of the direction for the creation of the visual identity for NorQuest College. It also aligned to the original emphasis of creating a sense of belonging through a visual identity, and supported the validity of placing the visual identity at the core of the brand work, through the understanding that *“inclusive design applies an understanding of customer diversity to inform decisions throughout the development process, in order to better satisfy the needs of more people”* (Waller, Bradley, Hosking & Clarkson, 2015).

The first big step of creating an inclusive brand visual identity was to create guiding design pillars. I led a brainstorming exercise to discuss all the factors of what we wanted the brand refresh to accomplish to identify guiding design pillars to guide us as we learned more about inclusive design for an inclusive brand (Figure 4). This was an exciting exercise that spurred a lot of conversations, which was very helpful for future conversations as we debated what paths to take to create the visual identity. These design pillars would be used to continually assess the brand and visual identity as the brand evolved, and provide discussion touchpoints when critiquing design work. From this exercise, the following brand design guiding principles were established for the visual identity to be: accessible, intentional, focused on user experience (UX), and distinct (Figure 5). The use of the word UX was used intentionally, in hopes to establish the understanding of the expertise behind the visual identity.

Figure 4

Brainstorm session: What do we want the brand refresh to accomplish?



Note. Notes captured during a brainstorming session (screen grab, Miro board) held with the Creative Services team at NorQuest College asking the question ‘What do we want the brand refresh to accomplish?’, (Communication and Marketing), 2021. NorQuest College.

Figure 5

Brand design guiding pillars

Accessible	Intentional	UX	Distinct
Is this accessible? Accessibility is our north star supporting inclusivity.	Are we doing this intentionally— or just because we have always done it this way?	Does the user experience (UX) allow the user to interact with and experience our brand in an easy and efficient way?	Do we stand out from the crowd? Are we distinct from competitors and other institutions?

Note. The four brand design guiding pillars are: accessible, intentional, UX (user experience), distinct. From NorQuest College brand book [pdf]. (NorQuest College, 2021c).

Why did we feel it important to establish our expertise in design? I really think it is connected to a consistent need to exert and explain your expertise and training within the profession of communications and design. I felt it wasn't as much of an issue in the UK, but within my roles in higher education in Canada, I have felt the constant need to prove my expertise and training. This struggle has been documented through research, noting the difficulty of women designers establishing credibility in the profession (Buckley, 1986) and credibility as a strategic communications professional (Schriver, 2012), layered further with the difficulty of persuading colleagues of the value and expertise of professional writing and strategic communication professionals (Henry, 1998). Perhaps my personal thoughts are marred by decades of work in this profession, so the instant solution is to determine and highlight the expertise that informed all the brand work, embedded in key messages to help further establish buy-in of the brand internally within the institution.

Another major consideration through the visual identity design process was how new technologies, especially for education and higher learning might work against accessibility, but how technology could also be a great accessibility tool for learning that can support inclusivity (Campbell, 1999). For guidance of an accessibility standard for colour, we leaned heavily into the WAGAC AAA standards, used for online and digital accessibility. Web accessibility regulations came into force for UK university and other public sector websites and mobile applications in 2018, (Government of the United Kingdom, 2021); however, there is no legislation in Alberta at this time; unlike other provinces, there is no doubt that it will be coming. NorQuest College is already working on ensuring our accessibility standards are above average to support the inclusive brand, more so than meeting legislative requirements.

Refreshing the colour palette

The creative services team focused a lot on colour, especially the meaning behind the colours. This was an area that was of great debate and created a lot of very engaged conversations. The psychology linked to colours has been well established in research (Elliot, Fairchild & Franklin, 2015), alongside the emotions that they may evoke, the personality traits that can be connected to them, and more importantly, perhaps the idea of a destiny—something that is often sought after in higher education as seen in the colour wheel in Figure 6.

The colours were based on the original logo, which was kept and updated, as we were very mindful of using minimal budget to refresh the visual identity and brand (Figure 7). This was another consideration of trying to minimize backlash or concern about the brand refresh and build stronger buy-in from employees. The creative team also discussed being mindful of colour representations, noting the colour perception of a North American, colonial mindset and that the interpretation of colour may be seen through other worldviews.

Our refreshed colour palette maintained the key logo colours, eliminating unused and unnecessary colours from the previous palette to strengthen the visual identity and makes the overall palette intentional and cohesive (Figure 8). By maintaining the key colours, we maintain recognition of the logo on major building signage, and past advertising, building on the established brand equity. We chose to brighten the hues of the key colours slightly to increase the vibrancy and boldness to the visual brand overall.

There were great debates over the colour palette to ensure all the colours were accessible, using WCAG AAA compliant combinations (W3C Web Accessibility Initiative, n.d.), as well as the various ways the colour palette could be applied using different combinations to showcase its versatility and longevity (Figure 9). Intention layout design and application of brand elements

was done in a very bold and intentional manner, to quickly grab someone’s attention, but also feel a warmth and connection to the brand. The use of gradients within the colour palette was also something that was established with the design of the strategic plan and was kept as a powerful and significant design element, used sparingly to avoid oversaturation of this element.

Figure 6

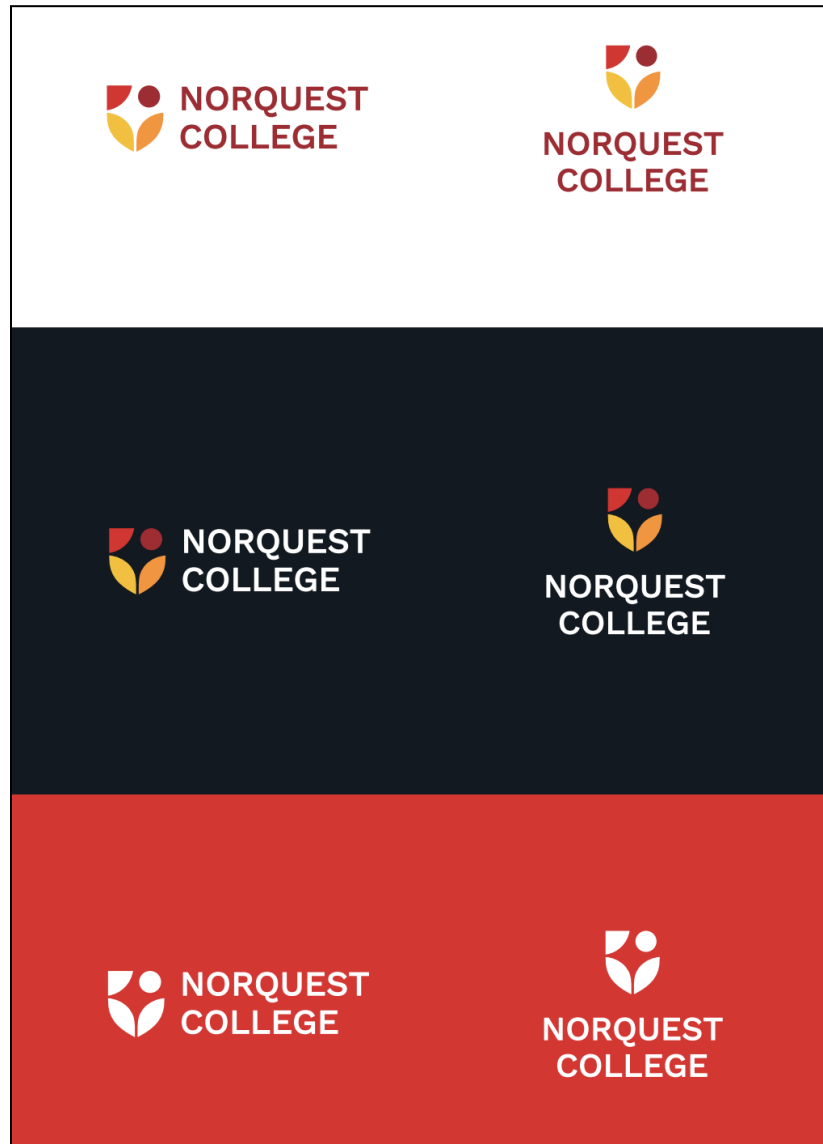
Colour Wheel - Twelve major personality archetypes



Note. From zionbalkon [Vector illustration], n.d., Adobe Stock.

Figure 7

NorQuest College logos



Note. The NorQuest logo comes in two versions: horizontal and vertical. There are three different colour options for the logo - full colour (4 colours), full colour for dark backgrounds (5 colours), and white (when the full colour logo can not be used for design or printing purposes). From NorQuest College brand book [pdf]. (NorQuest College, 2021c).

Figure 8

Colour palette for NorQuest College



Note. The colour palette for NorQuest College is shared in this manner, not only to showcase the colours, but also to illustrate the weight that should be applied to each colour. For example, bright red (Pantone 185C) is the primary colour of NorQuest College, supported by yellow (Pantone 7548C) and orange (Pantone 1495C), all used in the college logo. Purple (Pantone 526C) is used as an unique accent colour. The gradient is off on its own, as it is meant to be used on its own and sparingly to represent the overall identity of the college. Cream (Pantone 7506C - 35%), Dark red (Pantone 187C), and Black (Pantone Neutral Black C) are applied as baseline colours to provide high contrast and high accessibility. From NorQuest College brand book [pdf]. (NorQuest College, 2021c).

Figure 9

Accessible colour combination for copywriting and design



Note. From the NorQuest College brand book [pdf]. (NorQuest College, 2021c).

Updating the logo for NorQuest College

Other key elements of the visual identity included updating the logos, photography, and a new font. The power of a logo can't be denied (Kelly, 2017), with the implication that a logo that does not create a sense of belonging, or in fact, possibly excludes people through imagery can be detrimental to the brand. There are high profile examples of changes to logos, as seen at Harvard Law School and Imperial College London, with a change to their logos spurred by pressure to address racism (Xu, 2021).

Although there was not a lot of change to the logo for NorQuest College, there were very important redesign elements to the logo that needed to be made to support greater accessibility and strengthen the overall design. However, it was important to preserve the brand equity already accumulated by the logo, as well as avoiding any major financial implications to changing the logo, including major building signage and alumni certificates.

The refreshed NorQuest College logo comes in multiple formats that are accessible, versatile and simplified (Figure 7). The vertical logo is left aligned to increase legibility and work in cohesion with other left aligned elements in marketing communications. The horizontal logo was created specifically for marketing communications collateral pieces for long and narrow design formats that need to be centered. Multiple logo orientations allows our logo to be adaptable to any application. The logo colours were updated to the new, brighter brand colours (Figure 6), and the typography colour was changed from burgundy and gray to the newly identified primary colour of red (Pantone 185C). This change eliminated an additional, unnecessary colour to the logo, allowing for simplicity to provide further clarity on NorQuest's new primary colour and potential cost savings for spot colour printing. The refreshed logo was not a dramatic change, but an important one.

Finding a more accessible font

The font was another element to the visual identity that generated great discussion, and impacted the typography in the logo. The design team was surprised to realize the font they were using was not very accessible. Once again, as seen with the update to the colours and logo, the creative team did not want to stray too far from what was being currently used, so a new font needed to be found that was similar, but much more accessible.

The creative services team were unable to find research about the criteria for font accessibility, so we created our own font accessibility checklist to identify us what fonts would be the highest for accessibility. The checklist that was established included accessibility factors such as large x-height; simple curves; distinguishable characters; large height difference between ascenders and capital letters; distinct characters for “l”, “1” (a small ‘L), and “1” (the number one); - all to support high legibility. We based our typeface choice on accessibility, legibility, uniqueness, and several other important factors such as, similarity to our website font, the cost for college use of the font, and a large “font family” with many variations of letters and special characters. The unique look of the letter “Q” accented in our institution name, NorQuest College. Work Sans proved to meet all our needs according to our font checklist, and was a favourite with the designers aesthetically.

It was exciting to dig into research and establish criteria for our own accessible font checklist, but it also was used to build credibility as female designers. This was important to the brand project to stave off the anticipated negative feedback often seen in past branding projects from stakeholders when introducing a new brand, with very specific critique about each brand element. It was also important to us to find a font that was intriguing to the designers on the creative services team and perceived as unique, as per our guiding design pillars for the visual

identity. It was also fairly close to the current font we had been using, to avoid the appearance of big changes to the current visual identity and unnecessary need to update all print and digital collateral with the new font. The Google font, Work Sans, designed by Wei Huang (*Work Sans*, 2015) was chosen, ranking one of the higher accessibility fonts and meeting our checklist criteria, including the fact it was an open source font family that can be accessed anywhere and used by anyone for free (Figure 10).

Figure 10

Work Sans font



Note. Designed by Wei Huang (*Work Sans*, 2015). From the NorQuest College brand book [pdf]. (NorQuest College, 2021c).

The ‘selfie’ photography style

It was important to establish a unique look for photography. In my experience, photography for PSIs in Canada looks relatively the same. The idea of the ‘selfie’ photography

style is to capture a moment that someone wants to share the excitement, pride or sense of belonging in a location with people, often friends. This photography style is not intended to be about taking a ‘selfie’, but rather capturing the moment by models engaged with the camera and experimenting with different camera angles (Figure 11). The goal of this photography style is to create a unique visual for NorQuest College and share captured moments of joy that are natural, welcoming, dynamic, engaging, and inviting—ultimately something a new student could see themselves belonging to.

Figure 11

See yourself here - A sample of selfie imagery for NorQuest College brand



Note. From the NorQuest College brand book [pdf]. (NorQuest College, 2021c).

Brand rollout

As discussed in the initial brand strategy, internal audiences were key to creating buy in and lifting the brand. The brand rollout first stage was focused on employees of NorQuest College. This was done very intentionally to build brand awareness and support. An email from the college President and CEO, Carolyn Campbell, was the first step to introduce the brand refresh (see [Appendix E](#)) to establish legitimacy to the brand refresh and create buy-in driven by senior leadership. To gain deeper understanding about the inclusive brand refresh, a web story was pushed out through both internal and external communications channels. To support the brand rollout out, internally and externally, a web story, *'Who We Are and Who We Want to Become'* (NorQuest College, 2022a) was shared to highlight the importance of the brand refresh and the critical role that all stakeholders must embrace to uplift and live the inclusive brand at the college. It also positioned the inclusive brand refresh as an evolving brand that the college aspired to be, by taking clear and measurable action to achieve.

A brand webpage (NorQuest College, 2022b) was developed to share the brand positioning for NorQuest College, the brand book (NorQuest College, 2022c) and the logo assets for ease of use by external partners. A Brand Asset Library was created for employees to further garner excitement and provide easy access to templates and brand assets with employees in order to start using the brand elements. Although it can be difficult to clearly establish the success of a brand rollout, through positive comments and short surveys, the brand rollout was deemed very successful by the executive team.

The outline of the visual identity and brand refresh certainly does not capture all the elements of a successful inclusive brand as there are more elements to consider when creating an inclusive brand, including the inclusive language outlined in a style guide. This reflection notes

the key components the creative services team identified as part of phase one of the brand refresh; however, further brand research with a subsequent evaluation of the brand is necessary to further develop the inclusive brand at NorQuest College.

Inferential Interviews - Qualitative Data

The participants all hold pivotal roles to inform and lead inclusivity at the college. There is an equal balance between male and female participants, with the majority holding leadership roles in the college. The participants represented some diversity in ethnic minority backgrounds, with half representing minority groups. I feel that the information and personal perspectives shared in the interviews would not be detrimental to any of the participants, as these views and leadership are shared publicly within their roles at the college.

It was an uplifting experience to take the time to discuss the fundamental of inclusivity in higher education with each participant, as the majority of time at work is focused on actioning projects in order to support inclusivity, rather than having deeper discussion about the importance, not only for the college, but also across higher education, and the personal dedication to this work that we each feel.

Once the interviews were completed, I worked through all the responses for each question to identify key themes for data coding purposes. I also created a Word Cloud (Figure 12) to visually see a representation of keywords used throughout the interview by all participants. To create this word cloud, I removed the words: inclusive, brand, inclusivity, higher, college, institution, and education, to capture the top keywords used to describe inclusivity and inclusive branding for the college. It is exciting for me to see so many active words within the word cloud, including commitment, support, create, question, change, build, learn, align, foster, and reflect.

What is the importance of inclusivity and what does an inclusive brand mean to you?

The first three interview questions were focused on the importance of inclusivity in higher education, what an inclusive brand means to the participant personally, and the importance of accessibility guiding a brand for higher education. All participants highlighted the role of higher education as a vital driver for personal development and success, leading to crucial growth within communities, significantly amongst minority communities—and especially true for helping newcomers settle in a new country. All participants identified the imperative role of PSIs to remove barriers in higher education and move away from exclusionary practices, often attributed to economic status, in order to rebuild connections with historically underrepresented communities. This must be done by actively including diverse voices to produce diverse knowledge to create systems of inclusion within higher education to fulfill the mission as a pillar of society. One participant also shared that they felt “*the importance of inclusivity in higher education is that if you don't see yourself represented within an institution, it can make it almost seem out of reach*”.

Overall, inclusivity is seen as a crucial aspect of education, enabling access, representation, diversity of perspectives, and the fulfillment of the broader mission of higher education institutions. However, a participant remarked that exclusivity has historically been an indicator of success for PSIs, promoting their value and reputational strength through scarcity of access to top institutions. This is perpetuated by the world university rankings where exclusionary criteria define the educational value of a PSI and can lead to facilitating new forms of exclusion within society (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012). Throughout the interviews the systemic barriers built into higher education were discussed, built as they are in the institutions, systems and technology used within higher education. This could affect a prospective student's ability to

overcome barriers faced in the admission process, or overcome institutional barriers once they are a student. One participant speculated that a type of feedback loop can be created to support the evolution of an inclusive brand by creating collaboration between communications and EDI and accessibility experts. This collaboration is particularly important in order to reveal and solve inclusivity challenges and issues, evolving the inclusive brand alongside the rapidly changing landscape of EDI and accessibility within society. The participant remarked that *“it's this idea of surfacing areas within the brand where—whether it's verbal, visual or any of the ways that we reflect the brand—we might have blind spots to unintentionally creating barriers for various equity seeking groups.”*

There was a general consensus that an inclusive brand goes beyond surface-level efforts and encompasses a deep commitment to inclusivity in all aspects of the organization, by creating an environment where everyone feels welcome, fosters diversity and equity, and continuously evolves to meet the changing needs of society. Participants observed that a brand is not just a fancy slogan, but defines who and what an institution is. This must be shown through the dedication and hard work undertaken by NorQuest College, as outlined in the organizational strategy and actioned through investment, hiring practices, and expectations of employees. Through the interviews the discussion of an ever-evolving inclusive brand was identified as imperative to align with the evolving understanding of inclusivity including terminology, imagery, and social justice; this was summed up by one participant with the quote from American civil rights activist, Maya Angelou, *“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”*

The concept of a ‘cycle of inclusion’ was shared by one participant with expertise in EDI, noting their thoughts on an inclusive brand related to a *“collection of systems that physically,*

materially, and discursively construct an environment where people are actually included in the program or institution that they are trying to be a part of.” This cycle of inclusiveness is necessary to have these inclusive systems working together simultaneously, starting with attracting people that actively support inclusivity to develop those inclusive systems. Once activated, the outcome can become a truly authentic experience for people engaging with an inclusive brand. Inclusivity can also help to create multiple entry points and pathways, driving diversity and inclusion within higher education. An inclusive brand for a PSI can help to address the changing demographics and market growth within higher education in Canada, which is important as immigration plays a significant role in driving population growth.

Reflecting on the experience of the interviews, I still feel the excitement I experienced as participants shared their thoughts and perceptions about inclusivity in higher education and inclusive branding. This excitement stirred my passion on the subject of inclusive branding and generated further enthusiasm to continue the work to evolve the college inclusive brand. A key theme I identified after reviewing the responses, is how a brand, guided by accessibility and EDI in higher education, is crucial for fostering inclusivity, building trust, attracting diverse talent, addressing market growth, promoting equity, and changing past practices of exclusion. Incorporating accessibility and EDI principles into a brand for a PSI can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone.

How can an inclusive brand support the NorQuest College strategic plan, “We are who we include”, and how can the brand continue to evolve?

All the participants were very engaged with this question, as it captures the current work being undertaken at NorQuest College. All participants expressed how the inclusive brand

should accurately represent the college's vision, values, and strategic goals by communicating the college's dedication to inclusivity, diversity, and equity in all aspects of its operations, including education, services, and support. One participant outlined the importance of alignment between a brand and the values held by the organization with the work being undertaken to succeed in the strategic vision, remarking:

“We have to have alignment with what we value, with what we invest in, with what we focus our attention on internally and the brand externally. So if there was a disconnect where the brand wasn't inclusive and the brand didn't have that as a foundation, and if we didn't have visibility and intention around creating an inclusive brand, it wouldn't be aligned with the work that we're doing internally.”

From a marketing perspective, a participant shared that the work of an inclusive PSI is important because it's simply the right thing to do, as well as being absolutely imperative to support the province of Alberta in the coming five to seven years from an economic standpoint. By removing barriers to higher education, showcasing success stories, and promoting the college as a place where diverse individuals can thrive, the brand can increase confidence levels and encourage more people to engage with the college.

Another important angle discussed in the interviews was the role an inclusive brand plays in advocating for social justice and fostering deep system change. An inclusive brand can act as an advocate for social justice movements such as decolonial indigenization and anti-racism. By actively supporting these initiatives and showcasing their importance in the brand's messaging and actions, the college can demonstrate its commitment to equity and justice. An inclusive

brand should go beyond surface-level representation and aspirational messaging. It should reflect the college's ongoing efforts to implement deep systemic changes to create an inclusive and equitable environment. By aligning the brand with these changes, the college can demonstrate its progress and inspire further advancements. However, the discussion around managing expectations outlined thoughts about how a brand should be aspirational and also be grounded in reality. Setting realistic goals and communicating them transparently could help avoid creating false expectations or misleading stakeholders. Focusing on current issues and actively working towards addressing them is essential, while simultaneously striving for progress and improvement. The alignment of the inclusive branding and achieving the college's strategic plan (NorQuest, 2020) was also outlined by a participant sharing that it would not be possible to achieve the metric of obtaining a Level 5 Benchmark from the *Global Diversity, Equity & Inclusive Benchmarks* (Molefi, O'Mara, & Richter, (2021) without the college adopting "*an approach to inclusive branding that necessitates that there are deep systemic changes in conjunction with a culture shift that retains and attracts people who embrace that same worldview*".

A strong theme emerged about how vital it is for an inclusive brand to continuously evolve in order to keep pace with societal changes and the evolving needs of diverse communities. One participant stated that "*what is considered an inclusive brand today cannot sit stagnant because in two years society will have moved past.*" This statement was really eye-opening to me, because, although I instinctively knew the inclusive brand needed to evolve, I realized how intrinsically linked the evolution of our society is to an inclusive brand.

Inclusive branding needs to respond to the ever-changing sociopolitical context and adapt to the needs of different equity-seeking groups. As communities and cultures change, the brand

must continually evaluate and reevaluate its inclusivity to ensure it remains relevant and effective. It should reflect the unique needs of various communities and be responsive to their evolving expectations. The idea of conducting regular assessments to determine where the college currently stands in terms of inclusivity was an important point to understand how inclusive the brand is at present and identify areas for improvement. Other ideas included the engagement in community-based participatory processes, involving the diverse communities the college aims to serve, to gain insights into their needs and perspectives. By incorporating these communities' input, and involving them in the design and evaluation of systems and processes, the college can better align its brand with communities' expectations to create a more inclusive environment.

I feel the following statement shared by a participant really summarizes the ultimate goal of the college: *“You want to make NorQuest an easy place to come to, and a hard place to leave.”* If it was just that easy! I love this statement and plan to embrace it as I work through the many challenges and tribulations it takes to evolve the college's inclusive brand.

What is the role of technology to support an inclusive brand?

Many insights were shared by participants related to accessibility through technology including the principles of user experience, the use of inclusive design, reputational management and ethical considerations with technology, and the historical bias built into technology. There was a strong understanding amongst all the participants that the many existing technologies utilized by the college were developed without considering inclusivity, through algorithms and systems created decades ago that could perpetuate biases and exclusion. It was identified these biases must be acknowledged and lead to action in order to rectify skewed baselines and work

towards more equitable solutions. The criticality of the work undertaken by the marketing and communications team was highlighted regarding meeting technological accessibility standards and critically examining our communications channels to support higher inclusivity. It was acknowledged that there is still critical work to be done to achieve these higher standards of accessibility within these channels and that avoidance could lead to significant brand damage. Automation was identified as a tremendous opportunity, but high risk.

One participant remarked that technology is like a double-edged sword, that can create inclusiveness and equity or can rapidly exacerbate inequities and create barriers that multiply quickly. All participants expressed thoughts of how technology can either enhance inclusivity or create barriers, depending on how it is designed, implemented, and used. There was consensus amongst participants that NorQuest College needs to critically examine the technology it employs, involving diverse perspectives, in order to continuously align with their commitment to inclusivity.

Reflection of the key themes and interview experience

To better understand and reflect on the overarching key themes of the participant's responses to the interview questions, I created a table to summarize them (Table 1). The key themes were outlined in three categories that emerged from the interviews: 1) The Role of Inclusive Branding in Higher Education in Society, 2) The Role of Inclusive Branding in Higher Education, and 3) Key Factors Related to the Implementation of an Inclusive Brand. These categories align with my findings within my literary review and personal reflection of the inclusive brand work at NorQuest College.

One of the strongest themes that stood out to me was about the critical need to continuously evolve the inclusive brand for NorQuest College through ongoing self-reflection, community engagement, and adaptability to societal changes. This point struck me the most because, although I had understood that the evolution of the inclusive brand was important, alongside a critical evaluation, I had not fully grasped the criticality of an inclusive brand continuously evolving to meet the rapid changes in societal inclusivity. The interview responses and subsequent discussions about an inclusive brand have cemented the necessity of inclusive brand evolution in my mind and will subsequently be an addition to the overarching brand strategy at the college. By continuously assessing and responding to the needs of diverse communities, NorQuest College can continue to work towards being a more inclusive institution, becoming more effective in fostering a welcoming and supportive environment for all, and continue to be relevant in its pursuit of inclusivity with higher education.

The interviews provided a deeper understanding of the importance of inclusive branding in higher education in general, but also brought to light the necessity of further understanding about how to embrace and take action to implement and uphold an inclusive brand, communicating clearly to all the communities higher education needs to serve. The role of inclusive branding within higher education can play a key role in reducing inequities within society. Reflecting back on the international communities I've been part of make me realize that although there was diversity in cultural backgrounds, most members of these communities were also from families with a long history of higher education. The role of an inclusive brand in higher education could build upon the diversity within the international students that attend higher education in North America, and extend it to include domestic and international students who may have been excluded in the past, including those from different economic backgrounds.

This, in turn, can support great economic growth and increase the health and wellness of communities that have been historically excluded from higher education.

Table 1

Interview key points: the role and implementation of an inclusive brand

<p>The Role of Inclusive Branding in Higher Education in Society</p>	<p>The Role of Inclusive Branding in Higher Education</p>	<p>Key Factors Related to the Implementation of an Inclusive Brand</p>
<p>An inclusive brand for higher education plays a critical role to reduce inequities within society.</p>	<p>Inclusive brand is a necessity of inclusive education.</p>	<p>The visual identity of an inclusive brand must be guided by accessibility and inclusive design principles</p>
<p>Systems of inclusive and equity from higher education will be reflected in the communities they serve in society.</p>	<p>Strong leadership is critical in driving inclusive branding within a PSI.</p>	<p>The continual evolution of an inclusive brand is a necessity in order to maintain alignment with society.</p>
<p>Inclusive practices within higher education play a</p>	<p>An internal culture, guided by inclusive branding for a</p>	<p>Internal communications is essential for driving</p>

key role in supporting economic growth.	PSI, is key to driving systems of equity and inclusion which ultimately can create social change.	inclusivity within an organization
Inclusivity and equity within higher education can increase the health and well-being of individuals and communities.	The use of inclusive branding creates actions of inclusivity and drives accountability of EDI and accessibility practices in higher education.	The need for collaboration between communications and EDI and accessibility colleagues for continual identification and solutions to inequities and exclusion.
An inclusive brand for higher education plays a pivotal role in advocating for social justice.	The adoption and cultivation of an inclusive brand leads to fostering systemic change.	Technology plays a major role in inclusivity, either through creating barriers or opportunities.

Note. Data from this table was pulled through personal insight and from participant’s interview responses conducted as part of this study outlining the role it can play within society, higher education and important notes about implementation. (2023)

My first interview for this research study was with a senior executive member at NorQuest College. I was a bit nervous because it was the first time I had conducted a research interview and hadn't had the chance to test my interview questions for flow or determine the best way to record and take notes. The first participant was very supportive and comforting, helping me feel more relaxed as we discussed our shared passion of inclusivity in higher education. This in part was a shared experience of being students, alongside our challenging roles at that college.

The other participants were just as supportive and welcoming as we started off each interview with a personal exchange of pleasantries. When it came to my fourth and last interview, I felt very confident. It was uplifting to hear the participant share that I had excellent interview skills, after finding my flow from the other interviews. This gave me an extra boost of confidence, something I didn't know I really needed as I started unpacking the interview data. I still feel apprehensive about sharing the results—not because the results aren't interesting or insightful but because I want to ensure I share them in the best way that they deserve. However, through this process, I feel I continue to learn and develop my research skills and build confidence.

Throughout the interviews, I could see the passion of each participant about inclusive branding. This in turn, strengthened my resolve that I had indeed taken the right direction in response to the request to lead the rebranding work at the college. It felt to me that inclusive branding was an obvious path forward for a PSI; however, upon further research I determined that, although many institutions may claim they have inclusive branding, there is still much needed work to define and implement a truly inclusive brand, notably the continuous brand evolution and evaluation. The opportunity to uplift and build inclusivity within a diverse community, seen within many PSIs, is something I believe I can support through my work in

strategic communications, branding, and design in higher education. I think that my experiences living in diverse student communities is what fuels my passion for inclusivity within higher education. The opportunity to interview leadership and experts at NorQuest College has strengthened my commitment to inclusive branding, not only for higher education, but also other public and government sectors, and to seek and build on the knowledge in the areas of inclusive design, implementation of an inclusive brand, and the continuous evaluation of an evolving inclusive brand within higher education.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to identify what is already known in research about branding for higher education and enforce the importance of inclusive brand and design practices, alongside communication and marketing applications, to build a stronger sense of belonging for learners in higher education in the global market. Inclusive branding for higher education extends beyond being an important tool for a PSI to attract more diverse students, but also plays a fundamental role in supporting the evolution of our society to be more inclusive. PSIs often do not have successful branding (Chapleo, 2005); however, this paper offers the solution that by effectively applying the principles of inclusion as the foundation for a brand can strengthen the reputation and public image of an institution, building a stronger sense of inclusion within higher education overall. This is a necessity for the current market, in order to attract students from across the globe, as well as support the inclusion of minority groups that have been historically excluded from higher education.

Higher education has historically been a place of exclusion; however, as HEIs [higher education institutions] seek to attract a more diverse group of learners, international students are a key market for a range of reasons including social, economic, academic and political” (Maringe, 2010, as cited by Bamberger et al., 2020).

Although the importance of an inclusive brand to attract a diverse student body is key from a business perspective for a PSI, there is a much bigger importance placed on inclusive branding for higher education. Inclusive branding is vital to communicating a sense of belonging

within higher education, supporting diverse communities to see themselves as part of the communities a PSI serves. Community members can see themselves as a student, staff or faculty within a PSI, building diversity across all areas of the institution. The importance of this lies in the fundamental role of higher education in the evolution of our society. Education, as a pillar of our society, is key to opening the door to building systems of inclusion and plays an important role in social justice. Inclusive branding is a vital piece to support systems of inclusion and support the role of social justice.

Defining an inclusive brand

There are many factors that need to be taken into account for inclusive branding for a PSI. First, there must be an organization strategy with foundations in inclusivity, with measurable action the institution is accountable for. It is important that leadership are key drivers of inclusivity for a PSI through the strategic plan to continually power up the organization and keep the hard work afloat as the inclusive brand continuously evolves. This will help to create action, grounded in accountability. The risks of an inclusive brand are more than other branding disciplines. Making strong statements of inclusion and basing your identity of the organization as an inclusive organization comes with the downside of critical analysis from not only stakeholders but from the wider public. However, this can work to hold organizations accountable, leading to measurable action to implement more inclusive practices.

The internal culture of the organization is foundational to an inclusive brand in creating authentic experiences that reflect its brand. Strong engagement with branding by employees of a PSI facilitates building better organizational systems of inclusiveness and will better support a highly diverse student body—ultimately driving social change within the communities an

organization serves. Employees of a PSI must be engaged with the inclusive brand to continue to evolve the inclusive brand and systems of inclusivity in an institution. The visual identity is a powerful tool to support better understanding of what an inclusive brand means. This visual identity to support inclusive branding needs to be guided by accessibility and draw on inclusive design principles to fulfill the visual communications of an inclusive brand.

The process of creating the inclusive brand for NorQuest College was an example of the many considerations needed to understand and develop an inclusive brand for a PSI. Through this process, there were many questions that needed to be guided by accessibility and inclusivity to find the necessary answers to build the brand; however, there are many more questions to be asked. The NorQuest College brand continues to evolve, with insight from brand research undertaken after the launch of the brand refresh, and through the first evaluation process.

Evolution versus revolution

An inclusive brand must evolve to stay relevant and meaningful. Without the evolution of an inclusive brand, it will remain stagnant and not evolve alongside the communities it serves or continue to play a bigger role supporting inclusion within society. An inclusive brand must evolve to continue to remain inclusive alongside society and communities as they evolve. There continues to be a growing emphasis on equity, diversity and inclusion in many areas of society recently. Students, their families, staff and faculty are increasingly seeking institutions that align with their values and prioritize inclusivity. By embracing inclusive branding, higher education institutions can demonstrate their responsiveness to societal expectations and position themselves as leaders in creating an inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Technology plays a major role in inclusive branding, either enhancing inclusivity or creating major barriers that can be detrimental to an inclusive brand. A PSI must critically examine the technology it employs, involve diverse perspectives, and commit to continuously improving the user experience through technological communications channels to align with their commitment to inclusivity.

Feminist autoethnography - Lessons learned

Although I strove to write this paper as a feminist autoethnography, I must share that I feel I did not go as deeply with this method as I had hoped. However, the learnings I've taken from working within this methodology have been significant from a personal perspective. There were many questions I asked myself, as a women leader in higher education, as I grappled with different angles of writing a research paper and the reasoning behind the discomfort I experienced. I had many questions to myself about the perceived credibility for this research paper using the methodology of a feminist autoethnography.

As a female leader in higher education, specifically within the communications profession, this journey has made me realize that my approach to major projects for a PSI is always developed with a plan to prepare for resistance and criticism. It is difficult to measure the success of a brand's appeal or psychological effect; there are no immediate, hard numbers that can clearly show that a brand has had an emotional impact on its target audience to build a sense of belonging to a PSI. Building and measuring brand awareness is known as a top funnel tactic for marketing, serving as a touchpoint throughout a student's academic journey, and continuing on as an alumnus; however, although brand awareness and connection is difficult to measure, that doesn't mean the effectiveness is not there. Qualitative data and research using methods such

as an autoethnography can share these insights, especially through a feminist voice to amplify the belief in working to increase equity. I feel that I often overcompensate when trying to prove the validity of the direction I have taken to drive a project to success. I found confidence in the direction I led for the rebranding project for NorQuest College through the guidance of accessibility and inclusivity, supported by experts in the college and enabled by the strong female leadership of the institution.

The work of the creative services team was also fueled by this feminist belief to strengthen credibility, by taking a deeper dive into the necessity of inclusive design and the feeling that it was imperative to prove the worth of the work. The opportunity to delve into inclusive design principles and be guided by accessibility and inclusivity supported the creation and roll out of the refreshed, inclusive brand for NorQuest College, with a sense of commitment and determination, driven by principles of equity and inclusion.

Addressing the research gap

Further research about inclusive branding for higher education is needed to better understand the importance of the role of inclusive branding for higher education, as well as guide other PSIs to embrace this type of branding to move towards not only a more inclusive brand, but as a driver for inclusivity in higher education. As discussed, there are active conversations and sharing of information about inclusive branding found in gray literature, but are limited in peer-review research. As stated in this paper, the importance of inclusive branding for higher education suggests the need for further research in this area to create a deeper understanding of how to create and evolve an inclusive brand. Other public sector organizations can certainly

benefit from inclusive branding and embracing a sense of inclusivity can elevate all communities the public sector serves.

Although the importance of higher education within society can be easily understood and accepted, the importance of a PSI embracing an inclusive brand may not be seen as so crucial. Connecting the marketing and communications goals of an inclusive brand to attract and retain more diverse audiences, which can include students, staff and faculty, will help to support more inclusive thinking through building diversity in higher education—this is no small expectation; however, building more inclusive brands within higher education is a critical step.

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Appendix A



Information and Consent Form

University of Alberta - Faculty of Arts

Master of Arts in Communications and Technology

Capstone Research Project

We Are Who We Include: Inclusive Branding for Higher Education

U of A ethics ID# (Pro00131556)

Study Title: *We Are Who We Include: Inclusive Branding for Higher Education*

Research Investigator

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Background

This research is a feminist autoethnographic reflection of the brand refresh for NorQuest College to support the NorQuest 2030 Strategic Plan: *We are Who We Include*. The results of this study will be used to support my capstone for completion of a Masters of Arts in Communication and Technology at the University of Alberta. Findings may be submitted for publication and presented at conferences internationally.

Purpose

The purpose of my research is to document an autoethnographic review of the evolving process to rebrand NorQuest College guided by accessibility and inclusivity to support the organizational strategic plan. Post-secondary institutions (PSIs) may want to consider how the institutional brand reflects institutional inclusivity to cultivate an overall sense of belonging for learners at all stages of engagement within higher education. The study will include how an inclusive brand can be applied to both print and online channels of communications to better inform and support diverse populations.

Study Procedures

Interviews will be conducted for one hour. The interviews will be conducted in a semi-formal format, based on questions provided a week in advance to interview participants. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. The Primary Investigator may also take observational notes during the interview. Data from the interviews (audio-recordings and transcribed documents) will be retained by the

Primary Investigator, will not be accessible by the public, and will be stored in a locked office, protected by encrypted computer passwords for five years.

Benefits

The benefits of this feminist autoethnographic study are the collection of qualitative data, through observations and interviews, to reflect and draw conclusions about the NorQuest College brand evolving to a more inclusive brand representation of inclusive higher education. The autoethnographic approach shares authentic and holistic insight from the principal investigator of the process and cultural experiences of evolving an inclusive brand for a post-secondary institution. This study could benefit NorQuest College by sharing the dedication of the institution to equity, diversity and inclusion for all the communities the college serves, including learners, employees and partners.

Voluntary Participation

As a participant, you are under no obligation to participate in this study, nor are you obliged to answer any specific questions even if participating in the study.

Participants are under no obligation to participate in this research study due to their role at NorQuest College. You have the right to withdraw from the interview and choose not to participate. You are free to withdraw from the research study at any time without any adverse consequences, and you have the right to opt-out without penalty. You may request to withdraw any data collected for this study within 2 weeks of your interview, by contacting the researcher. If you choose to withdraw during the interview, you may do so verbally at any time. There has been minimal risk identified for participation in this study.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants for this research are two members of the executive team at NorQuest College and fundamental to the development of the organizational strategic plan that the inclusive brand represents and supports. Two of the participants are from the Office of Equity at NorQuest College, both having expertise and insight to organizational inclusivity. The fifth participant is a member of the Communications and Creative Services team and reports to me directly within the role of lead graphic designer. This graphic designer played a fundamental role in designing the visual identity for the inclusive brand and creation of the brand book for NorQuest College.

Confidentiality & Anonymity

All information collected will be coded to protect the participant's privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. Coding is used to discuss the responses to the interview questions from a participant, with the participant not identifiable, unless prior approval has been obtained.

Upon a request for a direct quote to be used identifying the participant, specific approval from the participant will be required. The data collected will be kept in a secure place for a minimum of 5 years following the completion of the research project, and when appropriate, will be destroyed in a way that ensures privacy and confidentiality.

Further Information

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact MJ Fell, Primary Investigator at mjfell@ualberta.ca, or Dr. Katy Campbell, my

supervisor, at katy.campbell@ualberta.ca. The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

Consent Statement

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.

_____	_____	_____
Participant's Name (printed)	Signature	Date

Identifiable information

As noted above, upon approval, a participant may be identified in the study through a direct quote or identifiable information pertaining to their role at NorQuest College at the time of this research study. Please sign below for permission for your identity to appear in the study, with prior approval of any direct quotes or identifiable information.

_____	_____	_____
Participant's Name (printed)	Signature	Date

_____	_____	_____
Research Investigator (printed)	Signature	Date

Appendix B



Information Sharing Agreement

Capstone Research Project

Master of Arts in Communications and Technology

We Are Who We Include: Inclusive Branding for Higher Education

This Agreement made this 21 day of May, 2023

For the AGREEMENT OF INFORMATION EXCHANGE BETWEEN

Mary Johanna (MJ) Fell, “Primary Investigator”

And

NorQuest College

Information collected and maintained by Mary Johanna (MJ) Fell in relation to research being conducted in fulfillment of a Masters of Arts in Communication and Technology at the University of Alberta.

This information will be gathered by Mary Johanna (MJ) Fell for the purpose of providing background and insight for her research study, regarding the evolution of an inclusive brand for NorQuest College. The data will be kept for 5 years as per University of Alberta ethics policies.

Mary Johanna (MJ) Fell will only use the material collected in the interviews upon final approval. During the active use of the information from the interviews, the files will be retained in a secure location whereby only authorized personnel will have access. The information collected by the interviews will not contain confidential information or personal information. Direct quotes will identify the participants only upon approval. Participants will have the opportunity to redact any content in two instances; within two weeks of sharing the interview transcripts, and two weeks after sharing the final written research study.

NorQuest College collects personal information under the authorities of the Universities Act, (in accordance with the provisions of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act) and other legislative authority. The collection, use and sharing of this information is in compliance with Sections 33c, 34(1)(n), 34(2), 35, 38, 39(1)(a), 40(1)(l) and 40(1)(x) of the Freedom of information and Protection of Privacy Act.

The Principal Investigator, Mary Johanna (MJ) Fell, will maintain her responsibilities in this Agreement and will give participants of this study at NorQuest College notice of any change in policy, regulations or statutes relating to their respective programs or services that is likely to affect this Agreement.

Principal Investigator

Mary Johanna (MJ) Fell

MACT Program, Faculty of Arts, University of Alberta

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. What is the importance of inclusivity in higher education?
2. What does an 'inclusive brand' mean to you?
Prompt - The experience of NorQuest rather than just the visual identity?
3. What is the importance of a brand being guided by accessibility and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in higher education?
4. How can an inclusive brand support the NorQuest College 2030 Strategic Plan: *We are Who We Include?*
5. Why is having an inclusive brand so important to represent NorQuest College and how can the NorQuest inclusive brand continue to evolve?
6. What role can technology play in building and supporting an inclusive brand?
Prompt: Is tech something that enhances or detracts from inclusive branding of an organization? Can you think of any examples of tech that has supported or created barriers for inclusion in higher education?

Appendix D

July 2023 - Chat GPT response to the question “What is inclusive branding?”

Inclusive branding refers to the practice of creating and promoting a brand that is accessible, relatable, and appealing to a diverse range of individuals. It involves designing marketing strategies, messaging, and visuals that resonate with people from different backgrounds, abilities, cultures, genders, ages, and identities.

The goal of inclusive branding is to ensure that all individuals feel represented, respected, and included in the brand's messaging and imagery. It recognizes the importance of diversity and seeks to avoid exclusionary practices or stereotypes that might alienate certain groups of people. Inclusive branding aims to create a positive and inclusive brand image that fosters a sense of belonging and connects with a broader audience. Some key elements of inclusive branding include:

1. Diversity and representation: Inclusive branding showcases a diverse range of individuals in its marketing materials, including people from various ethnicities, genders, ages, body types, abilities, and cultural backgrounds. This representation reflects the diverse reality of society and helps people see themselves reflected in the brand.

2. Authenticity: Inclusive branding requires genuine efforts to understand and respect the experiences, perspectives, and needs of different communities. It goes beyond surface-level diversity and seeks to create meaningful connections by addressing real issues and concerns that resonate with diverse audiences.

3. Inclusive language: Brands that practice inclusive branding use inclusive language that avoids assumptions or stereotypes based on gender, race, or any other characteristic. They strive to use language that is respectful, inclusive, and neutral, ensuring that their messaging is accessible and relatable to a wide range of individuals.

4. Accessibility: Inclusive branding considers the accessibility needs of individuals with disabilities. This includes designing websites, marketing materials, and products that are inclusive and usable by people with different abilities. It may involve providing alternative text for images, using captioning or audio descriptions in videos, and ensuring compliance with accessibility guidelines.

By adopting inclusive branding practices, companies can create a stronger connection with their target audience, improve brand loyalty, and enhance their reputation as an inclusive and socially responsible organization.

Appendix E

Inclusive branding is crucial for higher education institutions for several reasons:

- 1. Attracting a diverse student body: Inclusive branding helps universities appeal to a wider range of students from different backgrounds, cultures, and identities. By showcasing an inclusive and welcoming environment, institutions can demonstrate their commitment to diversity and increase their chances of attracting students from underrepresented groups. This can contribute to a more diverse and enriching learning experience for everyone involved.*
- 2. Fostering a sense of belonging: Inclusive branding sends a message to current and prospective students that they will be valued and included within the university community, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or any other aspect of their identity. This can create a sense of belonging, which is essential for student retention and overall academic success. When students feel supported and accepted, they are more likely to engage in campus life, form positive relationships, and achieve their goals.*
- 3. Promoting equity and social justice: Higher education institutions have a responsibility to address systemic inequalities and promote social justice. By adopting inclusive branding, universities can demonstrate their commitment to equity and diversity, both internally and externally. This can include showcasing inclusive policies, programs, and initiatives aimed at promoting equal opportunities for all students and addressing barriers that may disproportionately affect certain groups.*
- 4. Enhancing reputation and competitiveness: Inclusive branding can contribute to building a positive reputation for an institution. Students, parents, and other stakeholders increasingly*

value diversity and inclusivity when making decisions about higher education. Institutions that are recognized for their commitment to inclusivity are more likely to attract top talent, secure funding and partnerships, and enhance their overall competitiveness in the higher education landscape.

- 5. Aligning with societal expectations: In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion in various sectors of society. Students and their families are increasingly seeking institutions that align with their values and prioritize inclusivity. By embracing inclusive branding, higher education institutions can demonstrate their responsiveness to societal expectations and position themselves as leaders in creating an inclusive and equitable educational environment.*

In summary, inclusive branding is important for higher education because it helps attract a diverse student body, fosters a sense of belonging, promotes equity and social justice, enhances reputation and competitiveness, and aligns with evolving societal expectations. By actively showcasing and practicing inclusivity, institutions can create an environment that benefits all students and prepares them for success in a diverse and interconnected world.

Appendix F

Audience: All employees - Send date: July 6, 2023

Subject: An inclusive brand guided by accessibility

Hello NorQuesters,

I am delighted to introduce NorQuest's refreshed brand. Together, we are putting our best foot forward as a college to better represent who we are and who we want to become.

A brand refresh guided by accessibility

First, this is not a new brand. Instead, we are introducing a new take on our existing, successful, well-loved NorQuest brand—with inclusion and accessibility at its core. It's bright, it's inclusive, it's confident, it's essential... In short, it's us.

Experiencing the brand is step one

For NorQuest's stakeholders – learners, staff, faculty, employers, community partners, government – our brand is defined by their experience with the college. For many of those stakeholders, the changes in our refreshed brand are so subtle that they will go unnoticed. But it is crucial for our space in the community that we embrace this together as a college.

You can start familiarizing yourself with the refreshed brand by checking out our [brand webpage](#), where we define who we are and where we are going. You will also

learn about the core brand elements we are introducing, including a new font, a colour palette, our visual identity, and refreshed logos. All these elements will combine to express NorQuest. The Marketing and Communications team has led this work and will support this work as it continues to evolve.

Our brand at your fingertips

The next issue of our staff newsletter, In the Loop, will share additional details on the brand elements. You will receive a link to the new Brand Asset Library—your hub for brand templates and tools. As a first step, please download and update your new email signature. Finally, if you have any questions on the brand, please reach out to Marketing and Communications or email marketingandcomms@norquest.ca.

Thank you for your support as we move towards a more accessible brand to support inclusion. I cannot wait to see how you will implement the brand into your work as you begin the process of embracing our new visual identity.

Best wishes, Carolyn Campbell, President & CEO