Building Alumni Affinity through Convocation

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Submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of Alberta
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Communications and Technology

June 22, 2021

Acknowledgements

Disclaimer

Abstract

Convocation ceremonies mark the day graduates celebrate the successful completion of their academic studies and become alumni of their post-secondary institutions. These highly traditional and ritualized events mark the culmination of academic achievement. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic abruptly brought decades of tradition to a halt, causing post-secondary institutions to reimagine these customary events which had served as steadfast and uninterrupted occasions for so long. From an alumni relations and fund development perspective, adjusting convocation ceremonies in the wake of a "new normal" prompts questions around the impact convocation ceremonies have on alumni affinity and how these ceremonies impact graduate loyalty. Like many traditions and rituals, convocation ceremonies have become automatic, engrained in the cycle of the academic calendar, an event to be routinely executed. But in an alumni relations context there is a different purpose: what meaning is communicated in these ceremonies and what outcomes can be anticipated from those graduates who attend convocation? This research sets out to explore if convocation attendance has an impact on overall alumni affinity. Understanding the impact convocation has on alumni affinity might offer valuable insight into how these events contribute to the development of engaged alumni communities.

Keywords

Alumni, convocation, commencement, brand communities, alumni brand communities, brandfest, campus traditions and rituals, community building

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Introduction

Alumni are a testament to the education and knowledge a post-secondary institution teaches. They are brand champions whose professional success is equated to the quality of education they received. Through continued engagement with their alma mater, alumni support their universities as avid sports fans, brand ambassadors, committed mentors, dedicated volunteers and generous donors. A historical account of the field of alumni relations reveals a progression from a grassroots movement originally fueled by the passion of engaged alumni volunteers to a strategic external relations engine now predominantly driven by university administration (McDearmon, 2013). As Newman (2009) notes, the purpose of alumni associations today is "two-fold: (a) to develop programs and activities intended to support the continued affiliation of alumni, and (b) to devise and manage alumni efforts in support of institutional goals, such as fundraising, government relations and student recruitment" (p. 42). As public post-secondary institutions face reductions in government funding, the focus of activities related to university revenue generation has progressively become more important as has the growing need for private donations from alumni (Sullivan, 2017; Bourgeois, 2013). In light of this, universities are increasingly turning to engagement strategies seeking to strengthen alumni affinity with the hopes of establishing lasting and lucrative relationships with their alumni.

Acknowledging the financial and reputational benefits derived from strong alumni support, a post-secondary institution "must look at the tools at its disposal, and one of the most readily available activities that a university can promote in an effort to increase alumni support are its *traditions and rituals*" (Martin, Moriuchi, Smith, Moeder, & Nichols, 2015, p. 109). In this context, convocation ceremonies emerge as a tool in assisting post-secondary's alumni engagement efforts. Described as "exit rituals" (Magolda, 2003, p. 780), "convocation ceremonies" in a Canadian context (referred to as "commencement" in American sources) mark

the day graduates celebrate the successful completion of their academic studies and become alumni of their post-secondary institutions. These highly traditional and ritualized events mark the culmination of academic achievement. Universities mark the occasion with full displays of institutional plumage and pageantry in celebration of student success and, just as importantly, re-affirm institutional heritage and values (Siegel, 2008; Hermanowicz & Morgan, 1999; Manning, 2000).

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic abruptly brought decades of tradition to a halt, causing post-secondary institutions to reimagine these customary events which had served as steadfast and uninterrupted occasions for so long. What happens when traditions central to reaffirming group identity change (Siegel, 2008; Hermanowicz &Morgan, 1999; Manning 2000)? From an alumni relations and fund development perspective, adjusting convocation ceremonies in the wake of a "new normal" prompts questions around the impact convocation ceremonies have on alumni affinity and how these ceremonies impact graduate loyalty. Like many traditions and rituals, convocation ceremonies have become automatic, engrained in the cycle of the academic calendar, an event to be routinely executed. But in an alumni relations context there is a different purpose: what meaning is communicated in these ceremonies and what outcomes can be anticipated from those graduates who attend convocation? Understanding the impact convocation has on alumni affinity might offer valuable insight into how these events contribute to the development of engaged alumni communities. As Magolda (2003) suggests, "formal campus rituals such as commencement are intentional, not accidental . . . [t]hey convey meaning to audiences, although ritual organizers and participants seldom consciously think about the meaning and implications of these rituals." (p. 780) Thus, the impact and importance of campus events like convocation may be overlooked and taken for granted by the institutions who espouse

them and who never fully realize the affinity building potential they possess. The construct,

purpose and impact of convocation ceremonies need to be first understood before determining

how best to see these events against the backdrop of a global pandemic or otherwise. This line of

inquiry and subsequent research is intended to assist post-secondary institutions as they make

decisions around the format and delivery of these traditional ceremonies in contributing to

building engaged alumni communities.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

An investigation into how convocation ceremonies impact alumni affinity requires an exploration of existing literature in the context of the following question:

RQ1: Does participation in convocation ceremonies contribute to a greater sense of alumni affinity to their alma matter?

A purposive sampling of literature utilizing a grounded theory analysis was undertaken. This approach considers linkages among overarching themes and categories related to the subject matter. The following themes guided the selection of literature that was reviewed.

Figure 1. *Initial Theme and Category Identification*

Alumni Relations

post-secondary, higher education, graduation, Alumni, graduates, alma mater, degrees,

Convocation

graduation, ceremony, public events, celebrations, traditions, rituals

Community Building

affinity, engagement, group identity, relationship building, belonging, gathering
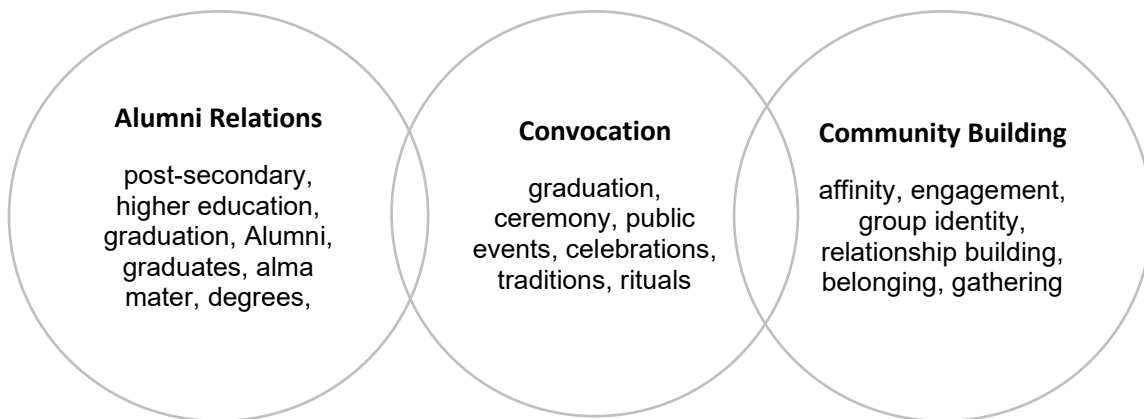
The PICOC framework (Booth et al, 2016, p. 86) offers a helpful lens from which to understand contributing themes related to the research question; it includes the following elements:

Figure 2. *PICOC Framework Applied to Research Question*

Population
Alumni, graduates, alma mater, post-secondary education, degrees, credential, alumni association

Intervention
Convocation, graduation, ceremonies, recognition, public celebrations, rites of passage, rituals, traditions, public events, commencement

Comparison
Graduates who did not attend convocation

Outcomes
Alumni engagement, community building, relationship management, alumni communication, alumni event attendance, culture, community, group identity, belonging, loyalty, philanthropic support, giving, legacy, nostalgia

Context
Structural Ritualization Theory, Relationship Management Theory, Canadian/US public universities/colleges, campus culture, university, college, post-secondary institution,

The research question directed inquiry to the field of alumni relations and foundational theories associated with ritual, traditions, public gatherings, and group identity. A review of foundational scholarship in the fields of communication theory, sociology, and anthropology offered insight into the community building function of alumni relations. Exploring how ritualized events serve to create and affirm a sense of community may offer a fuller understanding of the role convocation plays in contributing to alumni loyalty, belonging and ultimately community. Given the context of alumni engagement, themes of community building

and loyalty are also significant for the philanthropic aims of alumni associations. Subject matter relevancy, publication source, citations and publication factored into the literature eligibility criteria. While Canadian content is ideal, American post-secondary insights have served as a primary resource because of limited Canadian material.

Creating Affinity

Given alumni associations' objective of advancing "institutional goals" (Newman, 2009, p. 42) through alumni engagement, how can post-secondaries create a sense of affinity among graduating students? Sociological, anthropological and communications theories that address ideas of group solidarity and belonging may help answer this question.

Contributing Theories: Rituals, Traditions and Emotions

Exploring the pageantry and purpose of ritualized public events, Durkheim's (2004) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* offers a foundation upon which modern day scholars still build. Durkheim (2004) describes an embedded idealism underlying public ceremony that works to "strengthen the ties between the individual and the society of which he is a member" (p. 116). He examines the ways in which shared artifacts and symbols contribute to group solidarity, describing symbolic artifacts of ceremony as mechanisms for groups to identify themselves. Claiming that "sacredness is highly contagious" (p. 115), Durkheim (2004) notes the cyclical nature of many ritualized events which serves to keep "the principles that inspired it eternally young" (p. 119). Many of the elements Durkheim identifies are present in convocation ceremonies. Symbolic objects, traditional dress, and revered university emblems, as well as reunions employed to renew and remind alumni of the original experience, demonstrate how ritual can promote group solidarity and shared understanding.

American Sociologist Randal Collins (2004) takes Durkheim's theory one step further. He explains "Durkheim raised the fundamental question of sociology: What holds society together? His answer is the mechanisms that produce moral solidarity; and these mechanisms, I suggest, do so by producing emotions" (p. 131). Collins (2004) identifies the common building blocks of public ritual as shared audience focus, collective group action, and a shared mood among members of the audience. Synchronized correctly, these elements combine to create a "successful build-up of emotional coordination . . . to produce feelings of solidarity" (Collins, 2004, p. 131). These building blocks are clearly seen in convocation ceremonies – the audience's attention directed to a stage set with banners and robed academic leaders, the graduate oath/pledge diligently recited by the graduates in unison, and the celebratory atmosphere of academic achievement which produces an event ripe with positive "emotional energy" (p. 131). This "collective emotion," Collins (2004) argues, is a potent ingredient in creating group solidarity. J. David Knottnerus' Structural Ritualization Theory (SRT) echoes this sentiment and examines the role of emotions in ritualized events claiming as he does that "the greater the emotional intensity experienced by persons, the greater will be their commitment to and solidarity within the group" (Knottnerus, 2010, p. 39). Emotions have a role in both creating and sustaining group unity as Salmela (2014) contends: "[c]ollective emotions are important both for the emergence of social groups as well as for their maintenance and development" (pp. 159 – 60). According to communication scholar James W. Carey (2008), the very purpose of ritualized communication is to confirm rather than inform. Carey (2008) writes that the focus of ritualistic communication is "not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (Carey, 2008, p. 15). Community building through ritual is an emotional process, eliciting feelings of group solidarity and shared understanding. The literature reviewed reveals that the

creation and affirmation of heightened collective emotion in ritualized events contribute to establishing stronger sense of affinity.

Brand Community Theory

From a commercial vantage, marketing and business scholars have explored how emotions work to create feelings of consumer loyalty and brand solidarity around products and experiences (Gobe, 2010; McAlexander et al, 2003; Schau et al, 2009; Bartholomew, 2011; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). Exploration of how rituals and traditions impact consumer loyalty reveal the concept of "brand community" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). Conventional markers of brand community are "shared consciousness, rituals and traditions and a sense of moral responsibility" (p. 412). Bartholomew's (2011) exploration of brand community and the application of structural ritualization theory echoes Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) claim that "rituals are an important part of brand communities because rituals perpetuate the community's consciousness, culture, and history" (Bartholomew, 2011, p. 75). McAlexander, Koenig and Schouten (2006), suggest a brand community framework that considers consumer loyalty through customer relationships with the product, the brand, the institution, and other customers (visualized below):

Figure 3. *"The brand community"*
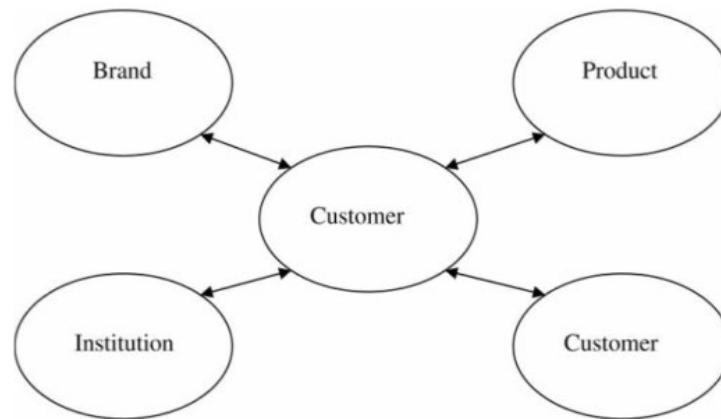
(McAlexander, McAlexander & Koenig, 2010, p. 71)

McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) go on to explain the "many and diverse" benefits of

developing a strong consumer brand community:

> Community-integrated customers serve as brand missionaries, carrying the
> marketing message into other communities. They are more forgiving than others
> of product failures or lapses of service quality (Berry 1995). They are less apt to
> switch brands, event when confronted with superior performance by competing
> products. They are motivated to provide feedback to corporate ears. They
> constitute a strong market for licensed products and brand extensions. In many
> cases, we even find loyal customers making long-term investments in a
> company's stock. Customers who are highly integrated in the brand community
> are emotionally invested in the welfare of the company and desire to contribute to
> its success.
>
> (p. 51)

From this vantage, brand communities become an appealing proposition. The theory expands

traditional consumer-product marketing strategies and addresses broader drivers that contribute

to brand loyalty.

Events: Brandfests

Within the brand community framework are corporately sanctioned events, coined as

"brandfests" and designed for "the benefit of current customers," (McAlexander & Schouten,

9

1998, p. 378) to create and affirm feelings of brand community. A study of the deeply loyal

consumer following of Jeep and Harley Davidson brands reveals how brandfests create

"extraordinary experiences" (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998, p. 389), later labelled

"transcendent customer experiences (TCEs)" (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007, p. 357).

Applied in the hospitality industry to promote activities like outdoor events and art displays,

brandfests are public events engineered to generate high levels of consumer emotion. The

exhilaration resulting from TCEs and shared group experience creates a brandfest, which

reaffirms brand identity and drives brand loyalty (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998, p. 378).

These events are strategically "engineered" marketing devices designed to increase customer

loyalty; according to Schouten et al (2007):

> by facilitating TCEs marketers can bring about quantum shifts in brand
> community integration, thus engineering loyalties that are relatively immune
> to the vagaries of product or service performance.

> (p. 365)

Schouten et al (2007) document how brand community can be strengthened through strategic

"facilitation" (p. 357) of TCEs, explaining that "TCEs are characterized by feelings such as self-

transformation or awakening, separation from the mundane, and connectedness to larger

phenomena outside the self" (Schouten et al, 2007, p. 358). Creation of TCEs can be carried out

in several ways, including the employment of "sacred texts, rituals and symbols" (Schouten et al,

2007, p. 358), which are elements woven into the fabric of convocation ceremonies. According

to Schouten et al (2007), a well-constructed TCE can have a lasting impact on customer loyalty,

contributing to existing loyalties and in some cases converting less loyal customers into brand

loyalists:

> Our results indicate that across the set of respondents, TCEs had a
> significant impact. Marketers expect their messages to carry well among the

> converted. However, this study also underscores the potential for
> conversions among newer and less committed customers.

<div align="right">(Schouten et al, 2007, p. 365)</div>

However, Woolf and Walker (2013) point out, all TCEs are not engineered equally, and each individual event will yield varying degrees of loyalty based on the elements from which it is constructed. Even so, the concept of brandfests and TCEs offer a conceptual starting point for exploring how collective events like convocation might contribute to a sense of brand community and affinity.

A Post-Secondary Context

Examining how rituals and traditions contribute to building campus communities offers additional context when considering how campus events like convocation impact affinity and loyalty.

Creating Alumni Affinity

Stephenson and Yerger (2014) consider alumni engagement through a social identity theory lens, proposing that "the most important benefit of branding specifically in higher education is the ability to offer students and alumni a sense of belonging" (p. 244), which in turn produces a sense of identity with their alma mater. Factors of prestige, satisfaction, brand interpretation and identification, promotion, competitiveness, and continuing contact all contribute to positive brand identification according to Stephenson and Yerger (2014). The results of their study indicate that "brand identification . . . [is] statistically significant and positively related to brand-supportive behaviors of alumni" (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014, p. 257). Ridely and Boone (2001) define a loyal alumnus as "a graduate who readily acknowledges the unique contributions of [their alma mater] in his/her personal and professional growth and one who has maintained an active interest in the college" (p. 2). The Council for Advancement

and Support of Education (CASE, 2018) offers a framework from which to define, classify and evaluate alumni engagement. Four key engagement activities - volunteerism, experiences, philanthropic support, and communications – offer guidance to post-secondary institutions seeking to measure alumni engagement. Rather than categorize alumni engagement by function, Gallo (2010) assesses the progression of alumni affinity through four stages as they become more connected to the institution – affiliation, affinity, engagement, and support. Indicators such as propensity to donate, willingness to recommend, staying in contact, returning to campus and inclination to become a member of the alumni association are employed to assess alumni loyalty behaviours and predict future levels of engagement (Snijders et al, 2019; Gallo 2010). Although measured in different ways, alumni engagement speaks to a type of emotional connectedness predominantly nurtured by a sense of belonging and expressed through a sense of loyalty and commitment to the post-secondary institution. (Hendrick, 2017; Ridely & Boone, 2001; Gallo 2010, CASE 2018).

Post-Secondary Rituals, Traditions and Emotions

Exploring the "central way that groups establish and sustain identities" (Hermanowicz and Morgan, 1999, p. 198), scholars have examined "the meanings of college culture" (Manning, 2000, p. 2) of university events. Masland (1985) describes university rituals as "a set of beliefs and values tied together in a story" that strengthen "the bond between the organization and students, alumni, faculty, and staff" (p. 159). Siegel (2008) maintains that rituals and ceremonies "are like moorings that tether students intellectually and cognitively to their college or university" (p. 12). He explains, "[i]f campus rituals and ceremonies are indeed communal behaviors, we can intuit that participation in such celebrations and displays of campus culture is a powerful form of engagement that has the capacity to pay significant intellectual and emotional

dividends" (p. 17). Understanding the emotional and communal "dividends" of campus rituals offers a starting point from which to explore convocation ceremonies more specifically.

Convocation Ceremonies

Drolet (2011) writes, "[c]onvocation is probably the most enduring of university traditions, and the one that has changed the least from its roots" claiming that the ceremony "remains a unifying moment in the life of the student body" (paras. 13-15). Applying Van Gennep's (1960) anthropological three-part rites of passage structure, both Kuh (1998) and Manning (2001) liken the separation phase of Van Gennep's theory to the separation of graduates from the audience of friends and family during convocation ceremonies. As Manning (2000) points out, the soon to be graduates "line up together, struggle with the unfamiliar regalia, and walk as one into the ceremony" (Manning, 2000, p. 29). Van Gennep's second "transition or liminal stage" (Manning, 2000, p. 30) is described as "the time and place where change occurs" (p. 30). "Liminality," Manning (2000) explains, is "an opportunity for transition, transformation and provocation" (p. 72) and is a unique and powerful element of ritualized events. Rituals are constructed to contain liminality where the participant can "make choices, retreat to old roles, or move ahead to the next stage, self or place" (Manning, 2000, p. 72). Such themes of transformation and "moving ahead" reside in the very heart of convocation ceremonies evidenced through the act of crossing the stage, awarding credentials, and the symbolic transferring of motor board tassels. These actions signal to participants and audience members alike that a transition has occurred, and that the graduates are emerging differently than they arrived. Van Gennep's final "incorporation" phase sees the reintegration of graduates into the roles and behaviors expected of the newly acclimatized (Manning, 2000, p. 29-30; Kuh, 1998), easing "the transition with a reception, food, and company" (Manning, 2000, p. 22). Thus, the

pedagogy of convocation ceremonies concludes, and the transference of knowledge to new graduates as they begin their lives as alumni is complete.

In his paper, "Saying good-bye: An anthropological examination of a commencement ritual," Magolda (2003) analyzes the finer elements that make-up convocation ceremonies. He identifies the standard fixtures of convocation as:

> . . . student and faculty processionals, a sundry of welcomes, a commencement address, the conferring of honorary, undergraduate, and graduate degrees, the hooding of doctoral degree recipients, the tossing of mortarboards into the air at the conclusions of the event, and a recessional.
>
> (Magolda, 2003, p. 780)

Magolda (2003) then analyzes the messaging inherently communicated within convocation ceremonies. Likening the general atmosphere to a "pep rally" (Magolda, 2003, p. 784), he describes a ceremony where only "happy endings are told" (p. 784). In his ethnographic account, Magolda (2003) portrays convocation as an orchestrated effort to "[c]ultivate loyal graduates" throughout "nearly every act of the performance" (p.791). He claims that the "call to action is clear: be purposeful as you make this upcoming life-transition; think; make important contributions to society; do not forget what the university has done for you; and do something for your university" (p. 786). Magolda's (2003) account reaffirms Kuh's (1998) assessment that "cultivating loyal graduates" (p. 156) is a desired outcome of commencement ceremonies. Kuh (1998) goes on to describe the engineering efforts of convocation stating:

> . . . such events, when carefully planned and orchestrated, can have positive side effects for both individuals and institutions. They provide occasions to address such important community challenges as affirmation of different groups of students and collective as well as individual achievements. When used properly, they can encourage students to reflect on what they have learned. They also are vehicles permitting people to thank those who have made special contributions to their education and affirm commitments, thereby further knitting seniors to one another and the institution.

(p. 169)

Building on this theme of meaning making and identity, McDearmon's (2013) exploration of alumni role identity explores how social signals and messaging communicate anticipated future behaviour, proposing that "individuals use social cues and perceived expectations to develop a sense of identity and behavior patterns for each role they have been assigned" (p.286). Put another way,

> when rituals are public . . . they communicate to others the values and expectations of certain groups, differentiating them from members of other groups, and allow participants to make meaning of the milestones in the company of others who understand the importance of the experience.

(Kuh, 1998, p.154)

The underlying messages of convocation serve to communicate a sense of loyalty and solidarity among new graduates and articulate their desired future behaviour.

Applying Brand Community Theory in a Post-Secondary Context

Traditionally, universities motivated to develop and maintain lifelong relationships with their alumni audiences have focussed on strengthening the relationship between the alum and the institution. McAlexander and Koenig (2001) observed these efforts as "too 'one-sided'" leaving graduates "feeling as though they are punished for their loyalty rather than rewarded" (p. 22). This prompted McAlexander et al (2006) to apply the holistic framework of brand community theory in a post-secondary context. As such, their work provides an "empirical study that explores the applicability of the brand community construct among university alumni and its relevance to important challenges of advancement" (McAlexander et al, 2006, p. 108).

Alumni Brand Communities: Affinity Built Through Rituals, Traditions and Emotions

Recognizing brand community as a "web of relationships that connect customers to a brand and, under its umbrella, to its products and services, its associated institution, and its other

customers" (McAlexander et al, 2006, p. 108), the four central pillars of brand community are adapted to a university setting as follows:

Figure 4. *Brand Community and Alumni Brand Community*

4 Pillars of Brand Community	**4 Pillars of Alumni Brand Community**
customer – product relationship ⟶	alumni – product relationship
consumer – brand relationship ⟶	alumni – brand relationship
customer – institution relationship ⟶	alumni – institution relationship
customer – customer relationships ⟶	alumni – alumni relationship

(McAlexander et al, 2006, pp. 109 – 115)

This approach offers a marked departure from the traditional focus of alumni engagement metrics designed to assess the singular relationship between an institution and its alumni. The brand community framework offers a more wholistic "web" of relationships resulting from any given student's post-secondary experience. The "alumni – product" pillar indicates satisfaction levels with the perceived quality of education offered, while the "alumni – brand" pillar considers the sense of identity (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014; Hermanowicz and Morgan, 1999) with associated institutional branding. The "alumni – institution" pillar measures alumni perceptions of interactions with the university from a service perspective while the "alumni – alumni'' pillar accounts for the relationships built *between* alumni and a sense of belonging (Stephenson and Yerger, 2014) to one's "tribe."

Building on the concept of alumni brand community, Martin et al (2015) explore the specific role traditions and rituals have in contributing to alumni brand community strength. They note how traditions such as special events, milestones, brand history, brand stories, and new member initiations contribute to building a sense of community within post-secondary campuses. Martin et al (2015) reiterate, "[w]hen brand community members participate in the community, they become more familiar with, learn about and gain a better understanding of the shared traditions and rituals" (2015, p. 112). Research into alumni brand communities has found that "the greater the perception of alumni that a university has valued, well established traditions and rituals, the greater their brand community relationships and intended behaviors associated with loyalty" (Martin et al, 2015, p. 112). With this in mind, one could anticipate that convocation ceremonies, which represent the peak expression of academic tradition and rituals, may contribute to the development of alumni brand communities.

The brand community framework has also been used to investigate the relationship between alumni brand community and philanthropic support and suggests that "brand community is a significant contributor to this expression of philanthropic intent." (McAlexander & Koenig, 2012, p. 122). In her doctoral dissertation investigating the institutional drivers impacting alumni philanthropic support, Bourgeois (2013) addresses the importance of brand community in building alumni affinity, identifying the need to explore "ways in which long-term institutional relationships are built, and how they might inspire the loyalty-related behaviors that result in financial support" (p. 88). Noting the significance of ritual and traditions in the endeavor to build alumni brand communities, she advocates that "more than simply marking time or being fun, these rituals and traditions can result in measurable benefits, especially for building future alumni loyalty and support." (Bourgeois, 2013, p. 75) In this context, post-

secondary institutions can identify and leverage campus events and experiences to strengthen alumni brand communities and inspire financial support.

Convocation Ceremonies as Brandfests

In many ways, convocation ceremonies serve as brandfests for new graduates, offering a highly emotional and transformative experience available exclusively through the university's patronage. Common linkages exist between the elements of liminality and transformation in convocation ceremonies and the TCEs described in brandfest literature. As McAlexander and Schouten (1998) explain, the

> . . . psychology of the extraordinary experience and its impact on consumer attitudes seems relatively simple: the emotional impact of personal growth or triumph becomes tied to the product that has been instrumental to the experience.

(p. 387)

The resulting "halo effect" (Schouten et al, 2007, p. 364) of TCEs is reminiscent of the emotional high graduates express following convocation ceremonies. Designed to celebrate the growth and achievement – even the triumph – of new graduates, convocation ceremonies may best be understood as university brandfests. Brandfests and TCEs perhaps offer a new lens from which to assess convocation ceremonies impact on alumni affinity. McAlexander et al (2002) find that an "increased sense of community longevity appears to be a direct result of the qualities of relationships facilitated by the temporary geographic concentration and the contextual richness of the events" (p. 43). The desired "community longevity" that results from brandfests is akin to the lifelong relationships post-secondary institutions seek to establish with their alumni communities after convocation.

Considering convocation ceremonies as brandfests in the context of building alumni brand communities appears to be a natural point from which to advance further inquiry into the

impact of these ritualized events. Alumni brand community theory not only offers a way to assess affinity, but it also addresses the role events have in contributing to feelings of affinity and solidarity. What is more is that it has been successfully applied in a post-secondary environment and has been customized for alumni specific audiences. (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998; Schouten et al, 2007; McAlexander et al, 2002; Woolf & Walker, 2013). Analyzing convocation through the lens of an alumni brand community framework also presents an opportunity to utilize existing methodological approaches, procedures, and data collection tools to measure alumni affinity. For example, McAlexander et al (2010) have developed the Brand Community Integration (BCI) "a multi-faceted and elegant measurement of affinity" to measure the four pillars of brand community and ultimately calculate a brand community score. Additionally, brandfest research offers methodologies that can be modelled, utilizing pre- and post-event surveys, as well as ethnographic studies to measure elements of TCEs (Transcendent Customer Experiences). To this end, prior research can be utilized, adapted, and applied to begin to explore and understand the role convocation ceremonies play in building alumni brand communities.

There is, however, less exploration into how convocation ceremonies themselves specifically contribute to building alumni affinity, even though post-secondary institutions regularly allocate significant dollars to these rites of passage events. Magolda (2002) acknowledges "a much-needed discussion about the role of anthropology, qualitative inquiry, and rituals in higher education" (p. 545) and expresses hope that colleagues "continue to fill this void and enhance cultural learning" (p. 545). Researching how convocation ceremonies rich in tradition and ritual impact alumni affinity may help contribute to this apparent gap in the literature.

Chapter 2: Research Design and Methodology

The literature review provided a baseline of theories from which to approach the research question. The guiding theoretical framework of alumni brand community theory was selected to advance the inquiry into the relationship between convocation and alumni affinity. Having determined the theoretical framework from which to pursue the research question, the research design process began. The setting, and population, instrument and procedures of the study needed to be determined and crafted.

Guiding Theoretical Framework

Borrowed from consumer-loyalty theories, the concept of brand community has been applied within a post-secondary setting and found to be an effective measure of alumni affinity (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002; McAlexander, Koenig & Schouten, 2006; McAlexander et al, 2010; McAlexander & Koenig, 2012; Martin et al, 2015). Traditional analysis of alumni engagement has predominantly been limited to an analysis of the singular relationship between the alumnus and the institution. Beyond a binary alumni-institution relationship lens, brand community theory examines alumni affinity more wholistically by focusing on four key relationship pillars (illustrated in Figure 5 below): alumni – product; alumni – brand, alumni – institution, and alumni – alumni (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002, p. 44). As McAlexander, Koenig & Schouten (2006) explain:

> A most important implication of this research is the demonstration of the strategic value that comes from viewing a university's connections with its students and alumni both broadly and holistically. Traditional approaches to interactions with alumni that neglect the diverse connections that form a university brand community may be shortsighted and result in lost opportunities.

(p. 115)

Figure 5. *"The brand community relationships"*
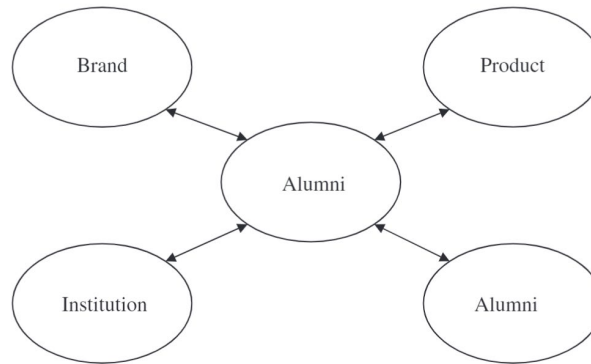
(McAlexander & Koenig, 2012, p. 123)

In this way, brand community theory offers a holistic framework to consider alumni relationships with their alma matter.

Research Design

The research approach undertaken in this study is modelled after brand community studies, specifically the Brand Community Integration approach developed by McAlexander and Schouten (1998), McAlexander & Koenig (2001, 2012), McAlexander, McAlexander & Koenig (2010), McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) McAlexander, Kim, and Roberts (2003); McAlexander, Koenig and Schouten (2006), Schouten, McAlexander and Koenig (2007) and Martin et. al (2015). The Brand Community Integration (BCI) or Integrated Brand Community (IBC) instrument is designed to address the four pillars of brand community identified in Figure 5 (above). Using Likert scales, the questionnaire poses three to four questions within each pillar to calculate a total brand community score and quantitatively assess brand community strength (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002; McAlexander, Koenig and Schouten, 2006; Martin et

al, 2015). As McAlexander & Koenig (2012) attest, "BCI scores are direct representations of affinity" (p. 130).

> Our analysis suggested that consumer-centric relationships with different entities in the brand community might be cumulative or event synergistic in forming a single construct akin to customer loyalty. Put another way, more and stronger points of attachment should lead to greater integration in a brand community (IBC). Similar to the construct of brand loyalty in that it conveys an emotional and behavioural attachment to a brand (Ehrenberg 1988; Jacoby and Chestnut 197), IBC is a more comprehensive concept grounded in consumer' total-life experience with a brand as most broadly construed.

(McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002, p. 44)

An online survey modelled after the Brand Community Integration questionnaire was devised to explore if there is a notable difference in alumni affinity (brand community score) between alumni who attended their convocation ceremonies and those who did not. In this study alumni attendance at convocation serves as the independent variable and brand community strength, measured by brand community score, is the dependent variable. The primary research question speaks to the brand community overall strength, but is supported by four secondary questions which address each relationship pillar with the brand community framework as follows:

Figure 6. *Research Questions*

Primary Research Question	Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger overall integration within the alumni brand community than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?
Secondary Research Questions	**Alumni – Product** – Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni-product relationships than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony? **Alumni – Brand** – Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni-brand relationship than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony? **Alumni – Institution** – Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni-institution relationships than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony? **Alumni – Alumni** – Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni-alumni relationships than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?

Keeping in mind this research is intended to assist post-secondary institutions and specifically alumni relations professionals, the research strategy considers the needs of these audiences. Alumni association programming is generally intended for the entire alumni membership, which includes tens of thousands of alumni in most cases. Therefore, statistically representative findings figured importantly as an output of this research project and necessitated a quantitative research approach. Interview and focus group strategies were considered but presented limitations in offering the representational validity achievable through the empirical findings of an online survey. The BCI questionnaire could be adapted to an online survey format

that would achieve such desired statistically valid findings in a cost effective and time efficient manner. Online surveys offer an attractive option in that they overcome geographic barriers for alumni who may be residing internationally who may have been excluded from phone or mail surveys. Additionally, online surveys also address environmental/sustainability concerns by reducing paper-based mail surveys. Given the uncontentious nature of the topic, an online questionnaire offered a straightforward and efficient data collection instrument which would offer a standardized dataset from which to draw statistically validity findings representative of a larger alumni population.

Setting

Brand community research ranges from small-scale studies investigating specific universities (Martin et al, 2015) to national-scale assessments of alumni affinity from a myriad of institutions (McAlexander et al, 2010). Because convocation ceremonies are unique to each university, an approach that focussed on alumni from one institution was preferred for the purposes of this research.

Having determined that an alumni population from a single university would be required for the purposes of this study, it became evident that a partnering alumni office or alumni association would need to be identified. As stewards of alumni relationships, alumni offices manage alumni communications and contact information. Partnering with an alumni office would offer significant efficiencies in gaining access to the target audience. Additionally, alumni office staff represent the target audience for research findings, and would likely have a natural interest in the findings produced by this research project.

As Director, Alumni at MacEwan University, I had a personal interest in applying the brand community research questions within the context of the alumni population at my own

institution. Having been responsible for the delivery of convocation ceremonies between 2012-2015, I also had insight into the elements of the university's convocation ceremonies. As a result of sudden changes to convocation brought on by COVID-19 public gathering restrictions, the Alumni and Development department was interested in learning what impact ceremony adaptations may have on overall alumni affinity. This research, then, served a dual purpose in fulfilling the requirements of the Master of Arts in Communications and Technology program with the University of Alberta while also addressing a pertinent issue that is relevant in a professional context.

Based in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada and established in 1971, MacEwan University has evolved from a local community college to a degree granting post-secondary institution serving over 18,000 students annually. With approval of the University of Alberta's research ethics [1]board and the MacEwan University research ethics board[2], this research was conducted in collaboration with MacEwan University's Alumni and Development department.

Population

It was important that the research population spanned several graduating years but also experienced a consistent ceremony structure. According to Alumni and Development department records, approximately 3,000 students graduate from MacEwan University each year to join over 80,000 alumni of their alma mater as members of the institution's alumni association. Approximately 60% of graduates at MacEwan University attend their convocation ceremony. The University's convocation ceremonies had evolved significantly over time – most notably in 2013 after the institution completed a re-brand which illustrated the change from a community college to a university. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented public gatherings requiring

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[1] Appendix A: University of Alberta Research Ethics Approval
[2] Appendix B: MacEwan University Research Ethics Approval

MacEwan to cancel its in person ceremonies. Therefore, MacEwan University alumni who

graduated between 2015-2019 with e-mail addresses on file with the University's Alumni and

Development department were identified as the target population for the purposes of this

research. This population offered a contactable collection of alumni who graduated within a five-

year timespan and experienced a consistent ceremony format.

Figure 7. *Population Size Determinants*

Population: MacEwan University Alumni Between 2015-2019 Contactable by Email:		
Attended Convocation	Did Not Attend Convocation	Total Contactable Alumni
7,318	4,804	12,122

There were 12,122 alumni who met this criterion with 7,318 who attended their convocation

ceremony, and 4,804 who did not. Alumni who did not have an email address on file were

excluded from the research population.

Population Sampling

As Denscombe (2017) explains, "[t]he basic principle of sampling is that it is possible to

produce accurate findings without the need to collect data from each and every member of a

research population" (p. 33). As data collection is central to the operations of alumni

departments, an effort was made to minimize harm and risks associated with participating in the

research. In an alumni relations context, this translated to reducing the potential for selected

participants to unsubscribe from their alma mater's email list. A **representative sampling**

approach was selected. This offered findings that would be sufficiently accurate in representing

the sentiments of the broader population while limiting the distribution of the survey and

mitigating the risk of unsubscribes.

With the total population size of 12,122, a target sample size of 370 was required to

achieve a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. (Denscombe, 2017, p. 47). Previous

survey response rates were factored in, which indicated an anticipated 10% response rate.

Therefore, a distribution population of 5,000 was targeted to achieve the desired 370 responses.

Figure 8. *Determining a Representative Sample Size*

Sample Size Calculation (Denscombe, 2017, p. 47)**:**

Size of Research Population: >10,000
Accuracy of Estimates: 5%

Variation: 50%
Target Sample: 370
Anticipated response rate: 10%
Survey Distribution: 5,000*
                    2250 dist. to Subgroup A: Attended
                    2750 dist. to Subgroup B: Did Not Attend
Randomly selected by the Alumni and Development department via Excel random number function =RAND ()

Mitigating Bias

The influence of a non-contact bias was carefully considered and noted in this project –

those alumni who attended convocation ceremonies may feel a stronger affinity to the institution

and therefore be more inclined to respond to the survey compared to those who did not attend

convocation ceremonies who perhaps feel less of an affiliation with their alma mater. To help

mitigate the risk of this bias, a **stratified sampling approach** was chosen which "subdivides the

research population into different subgroups (strata) and then chooses the required number of

items of people from within each subgroup using random sampling techniques" (Denscombe,

2017, p. 38). Alumni who were not able to participate via online format either by access or ability or have not shared their contact information with the Alumni and Development department were not represented in the sample.

Based on stratified representative sampling of the population noted above, the target was to achieve 50% (approx. 185) of responses from participants who did attend convocation and the other 50% (approx. 185) of responses from participants who had not attended convocation. This allowed a healthy comparison between subgroups. Noting that there may be a higher propensity for those who participated in convocation ceremonies to participate in the survey and acknowledging that approximately 60% of graduates attended their convocation ceremony, an effort was made to ensure the number of responses from those who did not attend convocation was achieved. Rather than distributing the survey equally between subgroups, distribution was slightly skewed, deploying 2,250 survey invitations to those who attended convocation, and 2,750 survey invitations to alumni who did not attend convocation.

Figure 9. *Stratified Sample*

Target Stratified Sample of Population	Distribution	Target Response Rate
Attended Convocation Subgroup	2,250	185
Did Not Attend Convocation Subgroup	2,750	185
Total	5,000	370

To further address any bias in the sample population, the Alumni and Development department employed a random number generator method with the 2015-19 contactable alumni who attended convocation, and again with the 2015-19 contactable alumni who did not attend convocation datasets to identify the sample target population invited to participate in the survey.

Instrument Design

Utilizing a 5-point Likert scale consistent with previous brand community research,

(McAlexander et al, 2006; Martin et al, 2015) a questionnaire was developed to move through

the four pillars of alumni brand community: alumni – product, alumni – brand, alumni –

institution, and alumni – alumni culminating in an overall quantifiable score. The following

survey questions[3] were developed modelling the BCI tool (McAlexander et al, 2006; Martin et

al, 2015).

Basic Participant Information

Basic information was collected at the onset of the survey which identified anticipated

variables which may influences responses:

Figure 10. *Basic Participant Information Survey Questions*

Please indicate the year you graduated from MacEwan University:
    (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019)
Please indicate the credential you graduated with:
    (Degree, Diploma, Certificate, Other)
What is your age?
    (18-24; 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; 65 or older)
Please indicate your gender identity:
    (Female, Male, prefer not to disclose, Other – please specify)
Did you attend your MacEwan University convocation ceremony?
    (Yes/No)

Pillar 1: Alumni – Product Relationship

The first set of questions focus on the alumni member's relationship with the university.

Described by McAlexander et al (2010) as "my education and me" (p. 72), survey questions

related to the alumni-product pillar seek to measure "the degree to which a person is satisfied

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[3] Appendix C: Survey Questions

with the University" (Martin et al 2015, p. 113). As per McAlexander et al (2006), "we made

inquires regarding skills and abilities acquired at school and the degree to which the university

education is deemed to be incorporated into sense of self" (p. 113). The following survey

questions were developed to explore the alumni-product relationship component of brand

community:

Figure 11. *Alumni – Product Relationship Survey Questions*

Please indicate the level to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:
Measured using 5-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

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1. I value the education I received at MacEwan University.
2. I'm proud to be a MacEwan University graduate.
3. The education I received at MacEwan University prepared me for my career.

Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni-product relationships than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?

Pillar 2: Alumni – Brand Relationship

The second set of questions focuses on the alumni member's relationship with the

university as a brand. According to McAlexander et al (2010), this pillar assesses the "personal

connection that can be developed with the university brand and its personality." (McAlexander et

al, 2010, p. 72). Martin et al (2015) elaborate further:

> one important action is donating to the university, especially as institutional
> funding by state governments decreases. But other desirable actions by
> alumni are important as well, such as wearing university logo clothing,
> being involved in alumni functions, sending their children to attend the
> university, and continuing their own education at the university.

(p. 116)

The following survey questions were developed to explore the alumni-brand relationship

component of brand community:

Figure 12. *Alumni – Brand Relationship Survey Questions*

Please indicate the level to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:
Measured using 5-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

1. I often wear clothing which displays the MacEwan University logo.
2. I would consider donating to MacEwan University.
3. I would recommend MacEwan University to my friends and family.
4. I would consider pursuing additional courses/programming at MacEwan University in the future.

Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni-brand relationship than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?

Pillar 3: Alumni – Institution Relationship

The third set of questions examines the alumni member's perception of the university from an institutional relationship standpoint. This pillar assesses "the degree to which a person feels connected to the University through her present or past relationship with it" (Martin et al, 2015, p. 113). McAlexander et al (2010) frame this pillar in the context of "can you help me?" (p. 73), maintaining that:

> College students and alumni can form and maintain interpersonal relationships with many institutional representatives. These are as seemingly inconsequential as transactional interactions (e.g., a one-time interaction with a food service employee in the cafeteria) to apparently more meaningful long-term relationships (e.g., students and their academic advisors or favorite professors).

(p. 73)

The following survey questions were developed to explore the alumni-institution relationship component of brand community:

Figure 13. *Alumni – Institution Relationship Survey Questions*

Please indicate the level to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:
Measured using 5-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

1. As a student, I felt that the University valued and cared about my needs and opinions.
2. As a student, I felt a sense of community and belonging at MacEwan University.
3. As I student, I felt that my instructors were invested in helping me succeed.

> *Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni-institution relationships than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?*

Pillar 4: Alumni – Alumni Relationship

The fourth set of questions focuses on the alumni member's relationship with their fellow alumni. Depicted by McAlexander et al (2010) as "roommates, classmates, and tailgates" (p. 73), this pillar of brand community attempts to measure "the degree to which a person participated in on-or off-campus activities while a student at the University" (Martin et al, 2015, p. 113). Historically this pillar has been quantified by assessing the number of activities in which a person participated and was calculated by adding the number of activities indicated (McAlexander et al, 2010; Martin et al, 2015). The following questions have been developed utilizing brand community indicators measuring customer-customer pillars introduced in initial brand community research (Schouten et al, 2007) to explore the alumni-alumni connection on what might be deemed a more interpersonal level:

Figure 14. *Alumni – Alumni Relationship Survey Questions*

Please indicate the level to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Measured using 5-point Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)

1. I met wonderful people while pursuing my education at MacEwan University.
2. I feel a sense of kinship with other students in my graduating class.
3. I would be interested in participating in MacEwan University's Alumni Association activities.
4. I remain connected to classmates I met while attending MacEwan University

Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni-alumni relationships than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?

Brand Community Score

The total brand community score is a cumulative average of the responses to the four

contributing pillars of brand community.

Figure 15. *Brand Community Score*

Alumni – Product (mean average score)

+

Alumni – Brand (mean average score)

+

Alumni – Institution (mean average score)

+

Alumni – Alumni (mean average score)

/ 4

= **Brand Community Score**

RQ: Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger overall integration within the alumni brand community than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?

Open-Ended Question

An open-ended question was included to provide the Alumni and Development

department additional insights as well as offer participants an outlet to share any related

information that they felt relevant.

Figure 16. *Open-Ended Survey Question*

Is there anything else you'd like to share with respect to convocation ceremonies at MacEwan University?

Incentive Prize Information

To help incentivize participation in the survey and reach the target sample response rate,

a prize draw for a $250 Visa gift card was offered. This section of the form requires contact

information to notify the winner.

Figure 17. *Incentive Prize Entry*

YES! Please enter me for a chance to win a $250 Visa gift card!

Please note, this information will be used for the purposes of the prize draw and is not connected to the survey and will be deleted following the prize draw. All survey participants can enter to win. The probability of winning this prize is estimated at 1 in 370. Due to the nature of the survey, participants who withdraw from the study will still have the opportunity to participate in the draw.

Name:

Email address:

Procedures

The following procedures were implemented to address the research design

considerations, participant recruitment, consent, and data requirements of the research project.

Approach and Technical Considerations

Achieving the target response rate was vital to the research and was carefully considered in the design and implementation of the research procedures.

Legitimacy. To establish legitimacy, the survey was deployed by the Alumni and Development department using the central alumni communications email address. Communication included the university logo and offered, "assurances of confidentiality, and contact details for the researcher [to] give the potential respondent some confidence that the survey is legitimate and, therefore, some thing that deserves attention" (Denscombe, 2017, p. 22).

Relevance. Establishing relevance and subject salience served to support higher response rates. As Denscombe (2017) suggests, "[m]ake the topic of interest to respondents" (p. 21). Therefore, the survey was framed to request alumni feedback on their graduation experience as an opportunity to impact the experience of future graduates. The survey reinforced a request for participants to share their perspectives to contribute to the University's understanding and future planning of convocation ceremonies.

Salience. Topical salience or showing that "participation will 'make a difference'" (Denscombe, 2017, p. 21) was addressed by appealing to alumni that their feedback will matter to future generations of alumni – suggesting that their participation in the survey will serve to ultimately improve the convocation experiences of others. As McAlexander and Koenig (2012) write:

> . . .collecting the BCI survey data provides an opportunity for members of the alumni community to provide voice, which itself can be motivating and rewarding to those who care enough about the institution to participate (Hirschman, 1970) For this reason, we would encourage those who would seek to survey alumni to affirm that the survey is an opportunity for alumni to offer valued feedback and that the institution intends to incorporate that

feedback into policy decisions and practices. The very fact that an alum responds to the survey can indicate some degree of affinity.

(p. 130)

Alleviating Response Burdens. The survey was designed to alleviate barriers to completion. A pilot questionnaire was deployed to identify and minimize the response burden of the survey (Denscombe, 2017, p. 22). This included seeking feedback from fellow classmates as well as Alumni and Development staff with respect to survey structure, wording, and average completion time. Additionally, an effort was made to design the survey in such a way that flowed seamlessly between brand community pillars and included an indication of "progress towards completion" (Denscombe, 2017, p. 22). To ensure adequate response time, the survey was open for a two-week window between April 15 – April 30, 2020, which allowed for follow-up reminder emails to assist in generating additional responses.

Incentives. To incentivize survey completion a prize incentive valued at $250 was offered – which required a commitment to confidentiality to participants rather than anonymity. Prizing amount and administration were conducted in compliance with the University of Alberta "Use of Incentives in Research" guidelines.

Recruitment of Participants

Participants in this study were randomly selected by the Alumni and Development department based on the stratified sampling criteria. In accordance with university policy, the Alumni and Development department did not sure alumni data. As such, all participant recruitment communication[4] (included the survey link) were distributed by the Alumni and Development department using the standardized alumni@macewan.ca email address. Survey

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[4] Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Communications

Monkey software was selected to facilitate the survey and subsequent data collection and quantitative analysis. Alumni participation was voluntary, and information collected through the survey was administered through an independent Survey Monkey account. To meet target response rates, participant names and emails were collected so that they could be suppressed by the Alumni and Development department when deploying subsequent reminder emails. This avoided unnecessary unsubscribes resulting from following-up with those who had already completed the survey.

Participant recruitment followed the schedule below, with all communications personalized to address each alumnus by their first name in an effort to promote click through rates. The subject lines for each email varied to promote interest and were presented in a familiar and informal tone to stand out in the alum's inbox and promote open rates. Each communication included a link to the Survey Introduction Letter Implied Consent document (required and approved by the Research Ethics Board) and noted the corresponding Research Ethics Board project identification information (Pro 00108100).

Figure 18. *Participant Recruitment Schedule and Purpose*

Introductory Email Distributed prior to survey launch	**Subject Line:** Name, please share your thoughts with us **Signatory:** Alumni Office **Purpose:** To maximize response rates, an introductory email was deployed by the Alumni and Development department to achieve a higher response rate, Denscombe (2017) recommends an introductory email claiming "it has been found that prior notification is beneficial in terms of response rates" (p. 21).
Survey Invitation	**Subject Line:** Name, got a minute? We need your input **Signatory:** Alumni Office **Purpose:** Following the introductory email, a second e-mail which included the survey link was deployed. The communication reiterated the voluntary nature of participation in the study and noted the prize incentive to help bolster response rates.
Reminder E-mail (If necessary; distributed 1 week after survey launch)	**Original Subject Line:** Your opinion matters **Updated Subject Line:** Name, want a chance to win a $250 Visa gift card? **Signatory:** Alumni Office **Purpose:** A follow-up reminder email was deployed to all participants reminding them to complete the survey. Denscombe (2017) suggests that "[m]ensures should also be taken to repeat the reminder two of three times if needed" (p.20) to boost response rate.
Final Reminder Email (If necessary; distributed 2 days prior to survey close)	**Original Subject Line:** Name, want a chance to win a $250 Visa gift card? **Updated Subject Line:** Name, turn two minutes into $250 **Signatory:** Alumni Office **Purpose:** A final email requesting participation was deployed prior to the close of the survey.

Informed Consent

Employing follow-up email reminders and prize incentives required participation in the survey to be confidential and not anonymous. The names and emails of participants who

completed the survey were shared with the Alumni and Development department and suppressed from subsequent reminder emails. This was strategically designed to avoid participant unsubscribes from unnecessary follow-ups. Due to the low-risk, opinion seeking nature of the survey which posed no notable negative consequences, the trade-off in offering confidentiality over anonymity was strategically made to achieve the desired response rate by way of a prize incentive and follow-up prompts.

Survey participation was voluntary, and questions were not mandatory to complete. This allowed participants autonomy to complete the survey fully or partially for a chance to participate in the prize draw incentive. By submitting the survey, participants acknowledged their consent to have all information gathered used for the purposes of the research project. To minimize the risk of security breaches and to help ensure confidentiality, participants were advised to use standard safety measures such as signing out of their account, closing their browser and locking their screen or device upon completion of the survey. Participants were directed to simply close their browser if at anytime they wanted to withdraw from the survey and were instructed to contact the researcher within two weeks of the survey close date if they wished to withdraw their responses. The research project was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Boards at the University of Alberta and at MacEwan University. Consultations with the offices of privacy and information were also conducted with each respective institution.

Data Storage, Retention, and Disposal

Data collected through participation in the Survey Monkey survey was stored on servers located in the United States of America, and as such are subject to review by the U.S. Federal Authorities as per the U.S. Patriot Act (section 215 Access to Records). Electronic copies of the survey were encrypted and stored on a password protected computer in the researcher's secured

office. Participants were assured that the information shared will remain strictly confidential and will be used solely for the purposes of this research. Responses were confidential and all information was treated in the strictest confidence. Data was not shared or passed on to any third parties. Survey results were aggregated at the group level and no responses are attributable to specific individuals. The results of the survey will be shared with the MacEwan University community. The data collected will be kept secure for a minimum of five years following the completion of the research project, and when appropriate, will be destroyed in a way that ensures confidentiality.

Chapter 3: Analysis and Findings

The project was contingent on achieving results that were statistically representative of

the larger alumni population. As such, data management and sharing protocols, instrument

design, and overarching analytical approach were crafted to achieve valid and reliable findings.

An analysis of participant recruitment communications, participant demographics, brand

community pillars and finally brand community score was conducted.

Analysis

Denscombe 2017 (p. 2001) defines validity as:

> . . . the ability of the data to explain similar phenomena at a general level . . .
> If the findings suggest a theory that can be applied to situations more
> generally then there are grounds for believing that the data that have been
> collected are valid.

(p. 301)

In this case, the intention of the research project is to validate the established theory of alumni

brand community strength by measuring standardized pillars and applying an established

framework from which to understand and score alumni affinity. Put another way, "[v]alidity

refers to the relevance, accuracy, and precision of the data" (Denscombe 2017, p. 300). To

address this sentiment, this research project has strategically considered population sampling,

ways to mitigate bias, data management protocols, and instrument development to achieve a

level of validity and reliability from which to assess findings.

Data Management and Sharing Protocols

To maintain the integrity of the research it was also important to ensure proper data

management and data sharing protocols were in place, especially considering my professional

role at MacEwan University. In addition to achieving Research Ethics approval at both the

University of Alberta and MacEwan University, consultations were undertaken with the

respective privacy protection departments at each institution to seek input on proper data sharing protocols. In accordance with Alumni and Development department procedures, alumni data is not shared with third party researchers, however communications can be coordinated to promote participation in research opportunities at the department's discretion. As such, my role was delineated exclusively to "researcher" with all communications deployed by the Alumni and Development department. Participant selection was conducted by the Alumni and Development department using a random number generator. Once participants had completed the survey, the data "belonged" to the researcher and was only to be shared with the larger institution in an aggregated format. At no time were alumni records shared with the researcher. Maintaining integrity and transparency in how the research was conducted while ensuring proper protocols were followed served to strengthen the validity of the research.

Instrument Design

As Denscombe (2017) explains, the idea of "construct validity" as drawing on "existing theories and knowledge on the topic to show the relevance of the data" (p. 300). The brand community integration tool has traditionally been administered as a questionnaire organized by brand community pillars in addition to closing questions related to future loyalty indicators. Utilizing a 5-point Likert scale consistent with previous brand community research, the questionnaire (McAlexander et al, 2006; Martin et al, 2015) moves through the four pillars of alumni brand community: alumni – product, alumni-brand, alumni-institution, and alumni-alumni culminating in an overall quantifiable score which integrates the results from each pillar. An attempt was made to work with the researchers who developed the BCI tool, which would have afforded a very strong level of construct validity to this research project, based on the tool having already been applied across various audiences and circumstances. However, this request

was denied due to the proprietary nature of the BCI tool and the original researchers' intention to potentially adapt the tool for future commercial use. It is important to note that the questionnaire employed in this research is modelled after published research related to the BCI tool (McAlexander & Schouten,1998; McAlexander & Koenig, 2001, 2012; McAlexander et al, 2010; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig,2002; McAlexander, Kim, & Roberts, 2003; McAlexander et al, 2006; Schouten et al, 2007; Martin et. al, 2015) but is not an exact replica.

"Reliability refers to whether a research instrument is neutral in its effect and consistent across multiple occasions of its use" (Denscombe, 2017, p. 301). Unlike other data collection approaches like interviews and observation, online surveys offer a significant level of consistency as a data collection tool. The benefit of an online survey is the consistency it offers to all those who participate. As there were no branching off points in the survey design, all participants who completed the survey experienced the same survey questions. Because the survey questions needed to be developed and designed without access to the original BCI instrument, efforts were also made to "eliminate inaccurate answers" (Denscombe 2017, p. 300) and improve the reliability of results by piloting the survey among classmates, colleagues, and friends to ensure questions were clear and generated the anticipated responses correctly. Corrections and modifications were made to the instrument based on this feedback. Finally, a paid subscription to Survey Monkey software offered the added benefit of reducing potential of human error in both data collection and data analysis. The data was seamlessly collected and analyzed within the platforms functionality.

Analytical Approach

From the vantage of external validity, the presentation of findings as a generalized, cumulative score is a practice embedded within brand community research. Analysis was

conducted in the aggregate and responses were not associated in any way with individual

participants. Responses fell into two subgroups – participants who attended convocation and

participants who did not attend convocation. Responses were analyzed based on the independent

variable (convocation attendance) and dependent variable (brand community score). Cumulative

scores were applied to each brand community pillar, with the combined scores from all four

pillars contributing to an overall brand community score. Finally, the cumulative brand

community scores were analyzed against the study's independent variable – attendance at

convocation – to determine if there was a notable difference between the subgroup who attended

convocation in comparison to the subgroup that did not attend convocation.

Findings

387 completed responses resulted from the 5,000 survey invitations that were distributed.

The research surpassed the minimum target response rate of 370 and achieved results

representing a 95% confidence level. In total, 402 surveys were begun, 387 were completed and

15 remained incomplete at the time the survey closed. This resulted in a 96% average completion

rate. The high completion rate can likely be attributed to the fact that the typical time spent on

the survey was 2 minutes and 21 seconds combined with a prize incentive sign up rate of 98.4%

Figure 19. *Survey Response Summary*

Survey Response Rate
Completion Rate: 96%
Typical time spent: 2m:21s

Total Surveys	402
Incomplete Surveys	15
Completed Surveys	**387**

Participant Recruitment Analysis

Participants in this study were randomly selected by the Alumni and Development department based on the stratified representative sampling criteria. Alumni participation was completely voluntary. The Alumni and Development department did not share alumni data with the researcher; however, they did coordinate participant recruitment communications to alumni through the department's authorized email address alumni@macewan.ca. To limit unnecessary unsubscribes, the names and email addresses of those who had completed the survey and entered the prize draw were confidentially shared with the Alumni and Development department prior to the deployment of follow-up reminder emails.

Figure 20. *Participant Recruitment Schedule and Performance*

Introductory Email Deployed Wednesday, April 14, 2021, 1:23 p.m.	Distribution:5,000 Open rate total: 1607 Unique open rate: 17.70% (881) Bounce backs: 22 Unsubscribes:0
Survey Invitation Deployed Thursday, April 15, 8:48 a.m.	Distribution:4,994 Open rate total: 1360 Unique open rate: 16% (796) Click through to survey: 22.36% (178) Unsubscribes:0
First Reminder Email Deployed Thursday, April 15, 2021, 6:45 a.m. Suppressed Emails based on survey completion:148	Distribution: 4,840 Open rate total: 1270 Unique open rate: 13.77% (663) Click through to survey: 21.57% (143) Unsubscribes: 0
Final Reminder Email Deployed Tuesday, April 27, 2021, 6:45 a.m. Suppressed Emails based on survey completion: 272	Distribution:4,715 Open rate total: 1009 Unique open rate: 12.85% (603) Click through to survey: 19.73% (119) Unsubscribes: 0

Note. Open rate total tracks total number of times an email is opened. Unique open rate tracks the first open, regardless of how many times communication is opened.

The first participant deployment resulted in 148 responses before the second deployment which garnered an additional 124 responses. The final email reminder sent on April 27, 2021, brought in an additional 115 responses to achieve a total of 387 completed surveys – surpassing the goal of 370 responses required to achieve a confidence level of 95%. An overview of survey

responses correlates directly to the day of participant recruitment communications, demonstrating that the bulk of responses were received on the same day as the participant recruitment email was deployed.

Figure 21. *Response Rate by Date*

Responses (by day)
April 15, 2021 - April 30, 2021
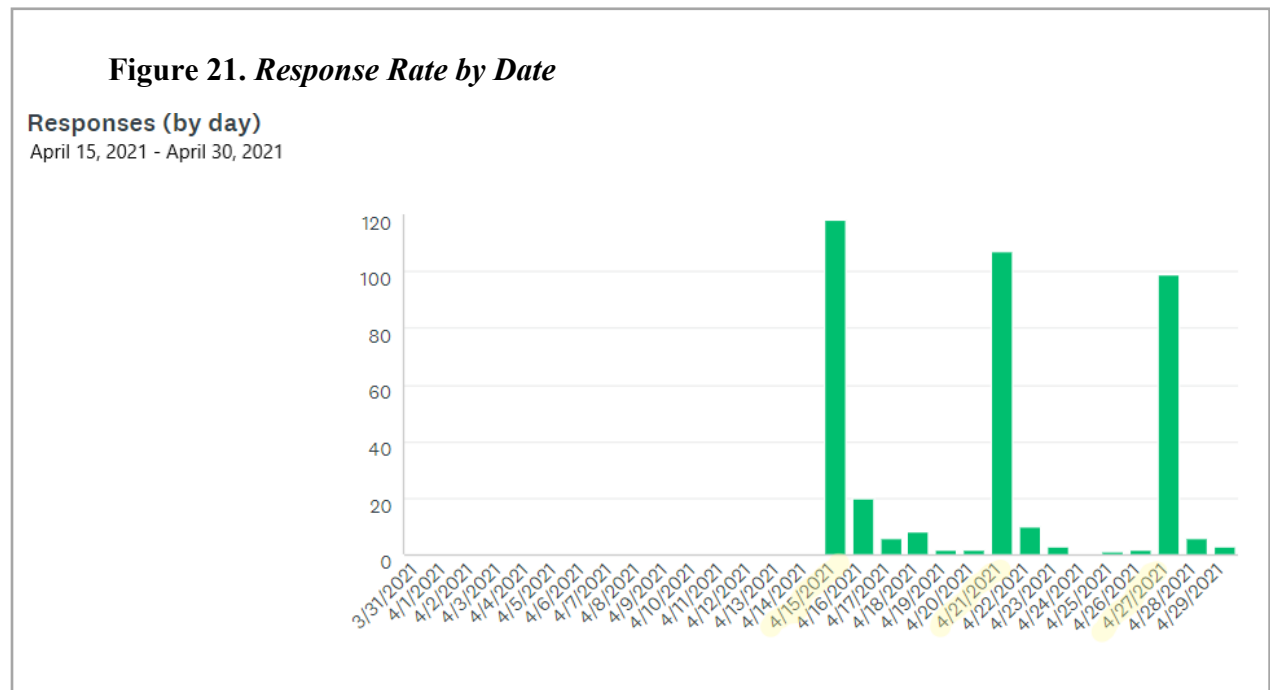
Minor amendments were made to the participant recruitment campaign based on the monitoring of survey responses throughout the campaign. For example, messaging on the final participant email was updated from referencing five minutes to complete the survey to two minutes based on Survey Monkey analytics indicating a survey completion time of approximately two minutes based on previous responses. This additional information caused the subject line of the final email reminder to change from "There's only a few days left to tell us how you REALLY feel!" to "Turn 2 minutes into $250." Additionally, information and resources available through Survey Monkey suggested that weekday participant recruitment emails show best results when deployed before 7:00 a.m., therefore the first and second reminder emails were deployed at 6:45 a.m. which yielded strong results.

Most notably, however, is the fact that no unsubscribes resulted from the survey communication. Mitigating the risk of alumni unsubscribes from the MacEwan University alumni mailing list was a key consideration in the design of this research project. The fact that the university saw no reduction in contactable alumni data as a result of this research project is an achievement worth noting. Achieving 387 survey responses with 0 unsubscribes suggests that the tone and messaging of the recruitment materials was audience-appropriate and validates the decision to sample the target population to achieve an outcome representing a confidence level of 95%.

Incentive Prize Analysis. In total, 381 of the 387 survey respondents entered to win the $250 Visa gift card incentive prize, equating to 98.4% of respondents. This suggests that the incentive was a critical factor in achieving the target response rate of this study to ensure a 95% confidence level. A winner was selected using a random number calculation on Wednesday, May 5, 2021, and informed via the MacEwan Alumni and Development department on Thursday, May 5, 2021.

Figure 22. *Incentive Prize Summary*

Total completed surveys	387
Total prize draw entries	381
Prize entry rate	98.4%
Responses from Attended Convocation Subgroup	221
Responses from Did Not Attend Convocation Subgroup	160

Note: Winner was randomly selected using the formula =INDEX (A1:A381, RANDBETWEEN (1,381))

Participant Analysis

Basic participant information was collected at the onset of the survey to give insight into participant demographic information with respect to year of graduation, credential, age, gender identity and attendance at convocation.

Participants by Convocation Attendance. Findings indicate a good representation of responses from both subgroups - those who attended convocation (225) versus those who did not attend their convocation (162). This resulted in a split of 58.1% of responses coming from those who attended and 41.9% of responses from those graduates who did not attend their convocation ceremony. Interestingly, these findings closely align with the alumni data provided at the onset of the research project from the Alumni and Development department, citing that approximately 60% of alumni attend their convocation ceremony.

Figure 23. *Participants by Attendance at Convocation*

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	58.1%	225
No	41.9%	162
Total Respondents: 387		
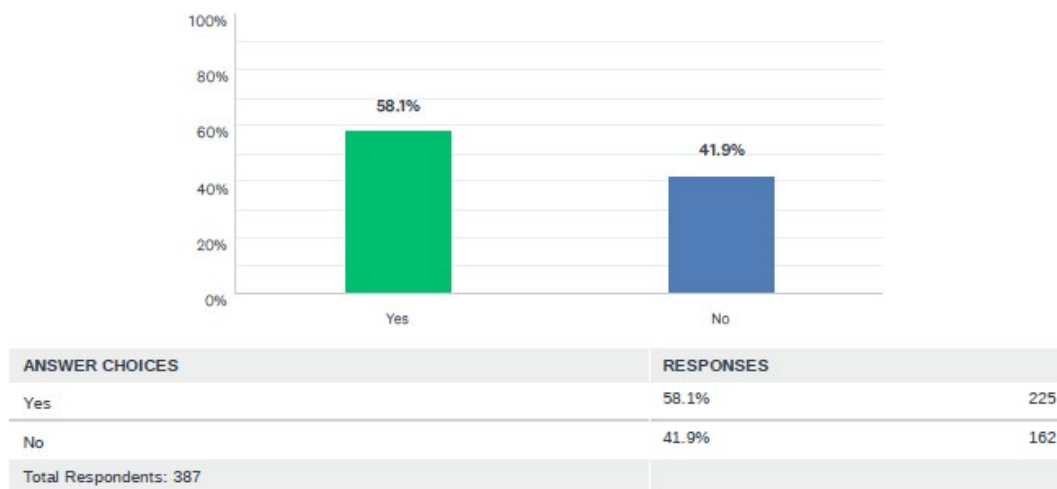
Responses, however, did not meet the stratified sample target of 185 responses from each subgroup despite weighting participant recruitment to solicit more participation from those who did not attend their convocation ceremony. Because a confidence level of 95% was achieved

with an overall 387 responses, this shortfall does not compromise the level of accuracy to

extrapolate findings to the larger population. However, what these findings do suggest is that it

was important to weigh survey invitations in favour of those who did not attend convocation to

overcome the non-contact bias and to ensure the segment of the alumni population who did not

attend convocation were well represented in survey findings. Had this bias not been anticipated,

it can be surmised that the number of responses from those who did not attend their convocation

ceremony would have been even less. Of the 5,000 email invitations that were deployed,

responses were received from 225/2250 who did attend their ceremony versus 162/2750

invitations sent to those who did not attend their convocation ceremony.

Figure 24. *Stratified Sample Targets vs. Actuals*

Population	Distribution	Target Response Rate	Actual Response Rate
Attended Convocation	2,250	185	225
Did Not Attend Convocation	2,750	185	162
Total	5,000	370	387

Analyzing the responses by each subgroup equates to a 10% response rate from those

alumni who did attend their convocation ceremony compared to a 5.9% response rate from those

who did not attend their convocation ceremony.

Figure 25. *Response Rate by Segment*

Survey Response Rates	Completed Surveys/ Distributed Invitations	Response Rate
Attended Convocation	225/2250	10%
Did Not Attend Convocation	162/2750	5.9%

Participants by Graduation Year. Survey responses were fairly evenly distributed across the five graduation years with the two most recent graduating classes yielding the most responses, 25.6% of responses from the Class of 2019 and 23.8% of responses from the Class of 2018. The lowest response rate was from the Class of 2015 at 14.2%. This may be an indication that recency in attending MacEwan University may impact participation responses, with recent graduates being more inclined to participate than less recent graduates.

Figure 26. *Participants by Graduation Year*
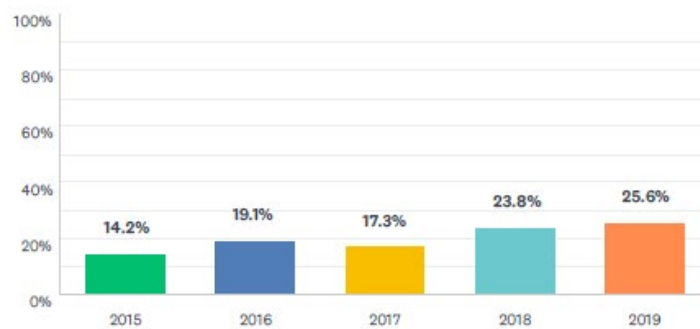
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
2015	14.2%	55
2016	19.1%	74
2017	17.3%	67
2018	23.8%	92
2019	25.6%	99
TOTAL		387

Participants by Credential. Of the total surveys completed, 49.2% of participants graduated with a degree, followed by 41.5% who graduated with a diploma and 9.3% with a certificate. This question considers the length of time the graduate spent pursuing their studies at MacEwan. The majority of MacEwan students are currently enrolled in degree programming.

Figure 27. *Participants by Credential*
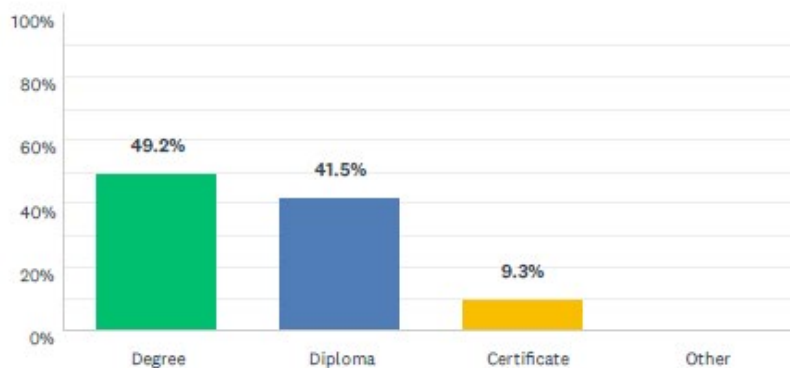
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Degree	49.2%	190
Diploma	41.5%	160
Certificate	9.3%	36
Other	0.0%	0
TOTAL		386

Participants by Age. Most responses (63%) came from participants in the 25-34 category. This finding is in alignment when considering that the average student age at MacEwan University is 24 and most students are enrolled in 2-year diploma or 4-year degree programming ("MacEwan University Facts and Figures," n.d.).

Figure 28. *Participants by Age*

Participants by Age
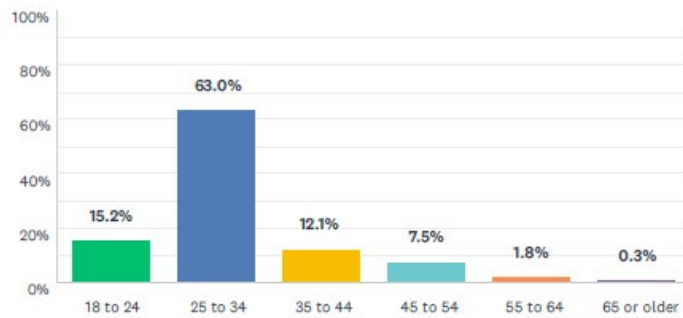
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
18 to 24	15.2%	59
25 to 34	63.0%	244
35 to 44	12.1%	47
45 to 54	7.5%	29
55 to 64	1.8%	7
65 or older	0.3%	1
TOTAL		387

Participants by Gender Identity. Survey participants reported their gender identity as 71.1% female, 26.4% male, while 1.6% preferred not to disclose and 1% selected other. Gender identity does not factor into the primary brand community analysis; however, these findings align with alumni population demographics which reports 70% female; 30% male (MacEwan University Alumni Association).

Figure 29. *Participants by Gender Identity*
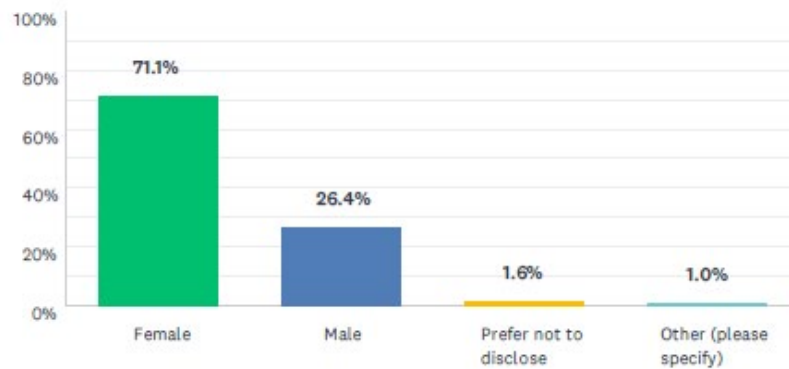
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Female	71.1%	275
Male	26.4%	102
Prefer not to disclose	1.6%	6
Other (please specify)	1.0%	4
TOTAL		387

Brand Community Pillar Analysis

Modelled after the Brand Community Integration tool which analyzes alumni affinity in four key categories, the following findings have been compiled and averaged based on overall responses to determine pillar scores and identify variations between those who attended and those who did not attend convocation.

Pillar 1: Alumni – Product Relationship. The alumni – product relationship was measured through responses to three questions and then broken down by subgroup to answer the question: *Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni – product relationships than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?*

Figure 30. *Pillar 1: Alumni – Product Relationship Findings*

	All Responses	**Attended Convocation**	**Did Not Attend Convocation**	*Variance Attended/ Not Attended*
I value the education I received at MacEwan University.	4.49	4.50	4.49	*0.01*
I'm proud to be a MacEwan University graduate.	4.44	4.47	4.39	*0.08*
The education I received at MacEwan University prepared me for my career.	4.03	4.0	4.06	*-0.06*
Pillar Score: (Question Summary/3)	**4.32**	**4.32**	**4.31**	***0.01***

Findings indicate a 0.01 higher score for those who attended convocation in comparison to those who did not attend convocation. Although technically the results demonstrate that a higher score was achieved by those who attended their convocation ceremony, the difference of 0.01 between subgroups demonstrates a marginal difference between the alumni – product scores of those who attended versus those who did not attend their convocation ceremony. The subgroup which attended convocation demonstrated higher scores for two of the three questions in this category. However, in the case of responses to the question "The education I received at MacEwan University prepared me for my career" findings show a .06 higher score from those who did not attend their convocation ceremony verses those who did. Based on this, findings for the question for this pillar reflect that *alumni who attend their convocation ceremony do not perceive a notably stronger alumni – product relationship than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony.*

Pillar 2: Alumni – Brand Relationship. The alumni – brand relationship was measured through responses to four questions then broken down by subgroup to answer the question: *Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni – brand relationship than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?*

Figure 31. *Pillar 2: Alumni – Brand Relationship Findings*

	All Responses	**Attended Convocation**	**Did Not Attend Convocation**	*Variance Attended/ Not Attended*
I often wear clothing which displays the MacEwan University logo.	2.74	2.86	2.56	*0.3*
I would consider donating to MacEwan University.	2.91	2.96	2.85	*0.11*
I would recommend MacEwan University to my friends and family.	4.39	4.39	4.40	*-0.01*
I would consider pursuing additional courses/programming at MacEwan University in the future.	3.98	3.90	4.09	*-0.19*
Pillar Score: (Question Summary/4):	**3.51**	**3.53**	**3.48**	*0.05*

Findings show a 0.05 higher score from those who attended convocation versus those who did not attend convocation. Once again, although technically the results demonstrate that a higher score was achieved by those who attended their convocation ceremony, the difference of 0.05 between subgroups reflects only a slight difference between the alumni – brand scores of

those who attended versus those who did not attend their convocation ceremony. The alumni –

brand pillar questions resulted in each subgroup reporting high scores for two of the four

questions posed. In this case responses to the questions "I would recommend MacEwan

University to my friends and family" and "I would consider pursuing additional

courses/programming at MacEwan University in the future" demonstrate slightly higher scores,

0.01 and 0.19 respectively, over those who did not attend their convocation ceremony verses

those who did. Based on this, findings for the question for this pillar reflect that a*lumni who*

attend their convocation ceremony do not perceive a notably stronger alumni – brand

relationship than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony.

   Pillar 3: Alumni – Institution Relationship. The alumni – institution relationship was

measured through responses to three questions, then broken down by subgroup to answer the

question: *Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni –*

institution relationships than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?

Figure 32. *Pillar 3: Alumni – Institution Relationship Findings*

	All Responses	**Attended Convocation**	**Did Not Attend Convocation**	*Variance Attended/ Not Attended*
As a student, I felt that the University valued and cared about my needs and opinions.	3.73	3.73	3.73	*0.00*
As a student, I felt a sense of community and belonging at MacEwan University.	3.78	3.87	3.67	*0.20*
As I student, I felt that my instructors were invested in helping me succeed.	4.19	4.20	4.18	*0.02*
Pillar Score: (Question Summary/3):	**3.9**	**3.93**	**3.86**	*0.07*

Findings indicate a .07 difference between the alumni – institution scores of those who attended versus those who did not attend their convocation ceremony. Again, this result demonstrates a higher overall score for those who attended their convocation ceremony, but the difference of 0.07 remains slight. The subgroup who attended convocation ceremonies reported higher scores for two of the three questions in this category and tied with the Did Not Attend Subgroup on one question. Based on this, findings for the question for this pillar reflect that: *Alumni who attend their convocation ceremony do not perceive a notably stronger alumni – institution relationship than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony.*

Pillar 4: Alumni – Alumni Relationship. The alumni – alumni relationship was measured through responses to four questions then broken down by subgroup to answer the question: *Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni – alumni relationships than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?*

Figure 33. *Pillar 4: Alumni – Alumni Relationship Findings*

	All Responses	**Attended Convocation**	**Did Not Attend Convocation**	*Variance Attended/ Not Attended*
I met wonderful people while pursuing my education at MacEwan University.	4.33	4.42	4.20	0.22
I feel a sense of kinship with other students in my graduating class.	3.67	3.79	3.51	0.28
I would be interested in participating in MacEwan University's Alumni Association activities.	3.24	3.36	3.08	0.28
I remain connected to classmates I met while attending MacEwan University	3.61	3.75	3.41	0.34
Pillar Score: (Question Sum/4):	**3.71**	**3.83**	**3.55**	**0.28**

Findings demonstrate a difference of 0.28 between the alumni – alumni scores of those who attended versus those who did not attend their convocation ceremony. This is the most notable variance displayed of the four loyalty pillars between those who attended versus those who did not attend their convocation ceremony. Additionally, this is the only pillar where the scores for all four questions were consistently higher for the subgroup of those who attended their convocation ceremony verses those who did not. Based on this, findings for the sub-question for this pillar reflect that *alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive a stronger alumni – alumni relationship than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony.*

Brand Community Score Analysis. The brand community score is determined by taking the sum of each pillar score and dividing that by four. Brand community scores were then calculated for each subgroup to answer the primary research question: *Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger overall integration within the alumni brand community than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?*

Figure 34. *Brand Community Score*

	All Responses	Attended Convocation	Did Not Attend Convocation	*Variance Attended/ Not Attended*
Alumni – Product	4.32	4.32	4.31	*0.01*
Alumni – Brand	3.51	3.53	3.48	*0.05*
Alumni – Institution	3.9	3.93	3.86	*0.07*
Alumni – Alumni	3.71	3.83	3.55	*0.28*
Brand Community Score: (Pillar Summary/4):	**3.86**	**3.9**	**3.8**	***0.10***

Findings indicate a difference of 0.10 between the brand community scores of those who attended versus those who did not attend their convocation ceremony. A review of the four loyalty pillar scores indicated that across all four pillars, scores were higher than the score of those who did not attend. Although a higher overall brand community score was achieved by the subgroup who attended their convocation ceremony, the difference of 0.10 represents only a slight degree of variance between the two groups. Based on this, findings for the sub-question for this pillar reflect that *alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive a slightly stronger*

overall integration within the alumni brand community than alumni who did not attend their

convocation ceremony.

Further Analysis

Beyond the brand community score, a further analysis of the survey wholistically offers interesting key insights.

Analysis of Pillar Performance. The survey data offered additional insights that could be of value to MacEwan University. Findings illustrate that among the four brand community pillars the alumni – product pillar produced the strongest scores while the alumni – brand pillar lagging.

Figure 35. *Pillar Performance*

Overall Ranking	Pillar	All Responses	Attended Convocation	Did Not Attend Convocation
1	**Pillar 1: Alumni – Product**	4.32	4.32	4.31
2	**Pillar 3: Alumni – Institution**	3.9	3.93	3.86
3	**Pillar 4: Alumni – Alumni**	3.71	3.83	3.55
4	**Pillar 2: Alumni – Brand**	3.51	3.53	3.48

Analysis of Question Performance. Further review of the questions which received the lowest scores can identify where future efforts can be directed with recent alumni, while questions that received higher scores gives an indication of where alumni are very satisfied with their experience. Of all the survey questions, the two lowest scores were found in the alumni – brand pillar and related to wearing MacEwan University branded clothing and propensity for future giving.

Figure 36. *Question Performance – Lowest Scores*

	All Responses	Attended Convocation	Did Not Attend Convocation
I often wear clothing which displays the MacEwan University logo.	2.74	2.86	2.56
I would consider donating to MacEwan University.	2.91	2.96	2.85

Six questions scored over 4.0 across all responses and subgroups. Three of those

questions resided in the alumni – product pillar, with a one question of each of the other three

pillars achieving a score of over 4.0.

Figure 37. *Question Performance – Highest Scores*

Overall Ranking	Question	All Responses	Attended Convocation	Did Not Attend Convocation
Pillar 1: Alumni – Product Relationship Findings				
1	I value the education I received at MacEwan University.	4.49	4.50	4.49
2	I'm proud to be a MacEwan University graduate.	4.44	4.47	4.39
Pillar 2: Alumni – Brand Relationship Findings				
3	I would recommend MacEwan University to my friends and family.	4.39	4.39	4.40
Pillar 4: Alumni – Alumni Relationship Findings				
4	I met wonderful people while pursuing my education at MacEwan University.	4.33	4.42	4.20
Pillar 3: Alumni – Institution Relationship Findings				
5	As I student, I felt that my instructors were invested in helping me succeed.	4.19	4.20	4.18
Pillar 1: Alumni – Product Relationship Findings				
6	The education I received at MacEwan University prepared me for my career.	4.03	4.0	4.06

Analysis by Credential. An analysis by credential considered whether there were any linkages between the credential earned/length of program and brand score based on convocation attendance. Findings revealed that the brand community score were again higher across those who attended convocation in comparison to those who did not. The variance, however, was relatively negligible illustrating a 0.15 difference in the degree category, 0.11 in the diploma category, and a mere 0.02 in the certificate category. Results do indicate an inverse result between duration of the credential and brand community score – with certificate graduates who attended convocation achieving the highest score of 3.93. This finding may suggest that duration of study in months and years do not necessary correlate to higher brand community scores.

Figure 38. *Brand Community Score by Credential*

Pillar	Degree		Diploma		Certificate	
	Yes (131)	No (59)	Yes (85)	No (75)	Yes (8)	No (28)
Pillar 1: Alumni – Product	4.30	4.27	4.33	4.26	4.50	4.55
Pillar 2: Alumni – Brand	3.50	3.42	3.58	3.43	3.60	3.71
Pillar 3: Alumni – Institution	3.96	3.86	3.90	3.84	3.84	3.93
Pillar 4: Alumni – Alumni	3.84	3.47	3.83	3.66	3.79	3.46
Brand Community Score	**3.90**	**3.76**	**3.91**	**3.80**	**3.93**	**3.91**
Variance Attended/Not Attended	*0.15*		*0.11*		*0.02*	

Open-Ended Question Analysis. Open-ended questions were included in the survey to serve as an outlet for respondents, and an opportunity to collected additional insights on behalf of the Alumni and Development department at MacEwan University. Of the 387 survey responses, 73 (19%) offered additional comments in response to this question. The breakdown in responses to this question aligns with the overarching response rate of the survey, with 45 responses (62%) coming from those who attended convocation and the remaining 28 (38%) of responses coming from those who did not.

Figure 39. *Open-Ended Question Responses*

Open-Ended Question Responses	Total
Responses from Attended Convocation Subgroup	45 (62%)
Responses from Did Not Attend Convocation Subgroup	28 (38%)
Total Open-Ended Question Responses	73

Based upon initial examination, responses were sorted into the categories of positive, negative, neutral. Responses were predominantly positive (37), while there were twelve negative and 10 neutral comments. Twenty-five of the comments offered suggestions on how to improve the ceremonies. Interestingly, a theme of "closure" also emerged – with twelve comments related to "endings" and "conclusions" – which harken to the sociological "exit-ritual" (Magolda, 2003, p. 78) purpose that convocation ceremonies perform.

Further analysis of responses revealed that 73% of positive responses came from those who attended convocation while only 27% came from those who did not. There were an equal number of negative responses from each segment, and slightly more neutral comments from the segment that did not attend convocation (60%). 68% of suggestions came for those who attended their convocation ceremony, while 38% of suggestions were offered by those who did not attend

their ceremony. Feelings of closure were predominantly expressed by alumni who attended their convocation ceremony (83%) in comparison to those who did not (17%). This may suggest those who feel a desire for closure related to their post-secondary experience have a higher tendency to attend convocation in comparison to those who do not share these sentiments.

Figure 40. *Open-Ended Question Responses by Theme*

	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Suggestions	Closure	Total
Attended Convocation	27 (73%)	6 (50%)	4 (40%)	17 (68%)	10 (83%	45 (62%)
Did Not Attend Convocation	10 (27%)	6 (50%)	6 (60%)	8 (32%)	2 (17%)	28 (38%)
Total	37	12	10	25	12	73

Exploring the qualitative responses to the open-ended question uncovers feelings of pride, family and gratitude. An analysis of the positive responses from those who did not attend their convocation reveals a sense of gratitude and achievement as well, but also speaks to a desire to attend but cites barriers such as schedule, travel or personal circumstances. This is important to note, as it identifies a segment of graduates who wanted to attend their convocation ceremony but did not due to extenuating circumstances and may contribute to the high brand community scores from the "Did Not Attend Convocation" category. Negative responses from each group were fairly similar taking exception to the time, expense and relevancy of the ceremonies. Neutral responses seemed to portray a lack of purpose around the ceremony – acknowledging a sense of tradition but not feeling strongly about attending which was consistent across those who did and did not attend their ceremony. Suggestions from those who attended their ceremony focussed on event organization and logistics like name announcements, length of speeches and opportunities for more photos. While suggestions coming from those who did not

attend convocation were focussed on pre-event communications and the inconvenience of attending ceremonies based on time and location. With respect to the theme of closure, those who attended convocation acknowledged an "end" and that the ceremonies "finalized" their post-secondary experience. Those who attended their convocation appreciated an acknowledgment of their hard work and a formal celebration of their achievements, noting the symbolic value of the ceremony. Additionally, many of the positive responses from alumni who had attended their convocation ceremony referenced the importance of sharing the milestone with their families. Those who did not attend their ceremony also noted the importance of their achievements being acknowledged and expressed gratitude for their post-secondary experience.

Figure 41. *Excerpts of Open-Ended Question by Theme*

Positive Responses (37)
Attended Convocation Segment (27) • "It's important to attend the convocation for a student to feel proud [sic]." • "I really loved the convocation ceremony. It was a great way to celebrate all the hard work it took to get my degree and it let me celebrate with family and friends." • "I loved my in-person convocation ceremony. It was a great opportunity to see friends and professors, and I felt supported and extremely thankful." • "It is an essential celebration for all students." • "Convocation ceremonies make students feel proud of themselves." • "I had the amazing convocation at MacEwan, loved every part of it." ***Did Not Attend Convocation Segment (10)*** • "I would like to attend my convocation" • "I wanted to attend but I had already been hired at the job my degree helped me get." • "Had a good experience. My professors for the most part were fantastic" • "It gives you immense happiness of achieving with your hard work." • "Even though it would have required me to travel, I regret not having attended my convocation ceremonies."

Negative Responses (12)

Attended Convocation Segment (6)
- "They are a waste of time and money"
- "I felt the ceremony was almost a waste of time as a student. I only went because my parents shared the photos."
- "I think they're far too long for the amount of time you're actually on the stage/receiving your scroll."

Did Not Attend Convocation Segment (6)
- "I didn't go to convocation, seemed like an unnecessary expense for a lot of sitting around and I don't think it was very accessible. It was also confusing to me that it wouldn't be held on campus."
- "They are a costly expense that further represents the gross costs and burden of acquiring an education. They do not add value in any way to the educational experience. It is just as easy to celebrate the achievement elsewhere, without incurring the cost of renting a gown, photos, travel costs, and use of valuable time [sic]."

Neutral Responses (10)

Attended Convocation Segment (4)
- "Honestly, I didn't get a ton out of the convocation ceremony itself, but I know it's a tradition that is meaningful to a lot of people."

Did Not Attend Convocation Segment (6)
- "I didn't feel any purpose for going. The only drive is that maybe family would want to attend- but with limited seating being able to go becomes a lottery."

Suggestions (25)

Suggestion Responses: Attended Convocation Segment (17)
- "Inform students about how long the ceremonies typically last. I was unprepared and planned my day poorly as a result."
- "I think they're far too long for the amount of time you're actually on the stage/receiving your scroll."
- "Shorten the speeches."
- "I really enjoyed the convocation. The Winspear was easy to navigate and the process to get a gown and walk was easy. I wish there were more places to do photo-ops!"
- "One convocation in winter would be helpful. Please call a graduate by their preferred name."

Suggestion Responses: Did Not Attend Convocation Segment (8)
- "I think providing more information. I didn't know much about it so that's why I didn't go."
- "I didn't go to convocation, seemed like an unnecessary expense for a lot of sitting around and I don't think it was very accessible. It was also confusing to me that it wouldn't be held on campus"
- "Mine was at a very inconvenient time and place. It didn't seem like whoever organized or approved the time slot, put much consideration into it. Hence, I did not attend mine."

Closure Responses (12)

Closure Responses: Attended Convocation Segment (10)
- "The convocation ceremony was such an important "end" to my time at MacEwan. It was such a wonderful, and deserved, celebration of all the hard work that goes into a degree. I would have been incredibly disappointed if I didn't have a convocation ceremony, as I worked incredibly hard to get to that point."
- "University was a really challenging experience for me that had a lot of ups and downs. Beyond getting my degree, the convocation ceremony was really a chance to celebrate my accomplishments and made me feel "finalized" in finishing my degree! It was a highlight for me for sure!"
- "It was an amazing experience celebrating my achievements with the very people who walked with me through my journey in nursing school!"
- Convocation is a very important symbol for many students & therefore I think that more emphasis needs to be put on this ceremony until the pandemic subsides."
- "In my opinion, the ceremonies are important as it allows families and friends to celebrate a successful outcome. The students do the academic work however, for most people, family and friends are the unrelenting supporters who helped to get you through to the end."

Closure Responses: Did Not Attend Convocation Segment (2)
- "It gives you immense happiness of achieving with your hard work"
- "Thank you for the life experience not just educational experience"

The open-ended question was initially included in the survey to offer respondents an outlet and give the institution additional information to assist with convocation planning. However, upon further review this single question offered an intriguing qualitative snapshot into graduate perceptions around convocation ceremonies in their own words. The suggestions offered by both segments will be of direct value to event organizers. However, more importantly, the nature of the positive comments and feelings of closure that were expressed may merit

further exploration, perhaps by event organizers and researchers alike, into the meaning-making capacity of these ceremonies.

Discussion

The initial research question posed at the onset of this project was "Does participation in convocation ceremonies contribute to a greater sense of alumni affinity to their alma matter?" An exploration into related research and existing theories revealed the concept of brand community, which adjusted the initial research question slightly to "Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger overall integration within the alumni brand community than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?" This adjustment measured alumni affinity within four brand community pillars related to alumni relationships with the product, brand, institution, and other alumni, resulting in four secondary research questions.

Findings demonstrate a brand community score for those who attended convocation being only 0.10 higher than those who did not attend their convocation ceremony. Similarly, while scores from all four supporting pillars were higher for those who attended convocation in comparison to those who did not, the difference was negligible ranging from 0.01 (alumni – product) to 0.28 (alumni – alumni). Figure 42 below summarizes the guiding primary and secondary research questions and corresponding findings statements.

Figure 42. *Findings Summary*

Research Question	Research Findings Statement
Primary Research Question	
Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger overall integration within the alumni brand community than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?	Alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive a slightly stronger overall integration within the alumni brand community than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony.
Secondary Research Questions	
Pillar 1: Alumni – Product	
Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni – product relationships than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?	Alumni who attend their convocation ceremony do not perceive a notably stronger alumni – product relationship than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony.
Pillar 2: Alumni – Brand	
Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni – brand relationship than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?	Alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive a notably stronger alumni – brand relationship than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony.
Pillar 3: Alumni – Institution	
Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni – institution relationships than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?	Alumni who attend their convocation ceremony do not perceive a notably stronger alumni – institution relationship than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony.
Pillar 4: Alumni – Alumni	
Do alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive stronger alumni – alumni relationships than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony?	Alumni who attend their convocation ceremony perceive a stronger alumni – alumni relationship than alumni who did not attend their convocation ceremony.

Although my research findings suggest a slightly higher brand community score for those who attended convocation versus those who did not attend convocation – the difference of 0.10 is negligible and not statistically significant. This finding suggests that according to the quantitative surveys competed, the convocation ceremonies at MacEwan University do not significantly contribute to a stronger sense of brand community among new alumni. However, this finding is somewhat tempered with the information found in the more qualitative, open-ended responses. These responses point to strong feelings among some participants with respect to a sense of closure and formal acknowledgement that convocation ceremonies convey. These responses may offer an opportunity for further exploration into the emotive nature of convocation events and how emerging themes like family attendance, pride, recognition, and gratitude play into the construct of convocation ceremonies.

This study intentionally defines "convocation ceremonies at MacEwan University" because brandfests by their very nature are engineered. Creating brandfests in a commercial space is highly orchestrated and strategized with the intention of building and strengthening customer loyalty. Although convocation ceremonies are highly ritualized rites of passage events, with similar accoutrements to brandfests, the underlying intentionality of these ceremonies may not be well defined. Perhaps there is more truth than originally recognized in Magolda's (2003) quote "formal campus rituals such as commencement are intentional, not accidental . . . [t]hey convey meaning to audiences, although ritual organizers and participants seldom consciously think about the meaning and implications of these rituals." (p. 780) Research suggests that Convocation ceremonies have the capacity to contribute to stronger alumni affinity, but without defining that this is an intentional outcome, the opportunity may not be entirely leveraged by universities. This is not to say that these ceremonies cannot and do not serve other purposes

related to closure and recognition of achievements. Qualitative responses gleaned from this research can offer some initial insight into how feelings of closure, pride and accomplishment can be intentionally harnessed within ceremony construction. However, the findings seem to suggest that an alumni specific outcome may not be strategically instilled in the planning of these events. As Magolda (2003) outlines, convocation ceremonies represent an orchestra of elements – carefully crafted scripts, pageantry, atmosphere, displays of traditions and historical texts. In a commercial context, marketers work to orchestrate brandfests to strategically build a sense of community and solidarity. However, in a post-secondary setting the overall objectives of these elements may not be as precisely defined, leaving these elements to organically interplay with one another with no specific desired outcome as Magolda (2003) suggests.

What is interesting is the emergence of the score in the alumni-alumni pillar between subgroups. This may indicate that those who attend convocation do so because of stronger relationships already established with classmates and perhaps may be a reason to attend convocation, rather than a result of attending the ceremony; however, further exploration into this area may be required to validate this.

Ironically, one of the most notable differences between those who attended convocation and those who did not was revealed through the response rate to the survey rather than a brand community score. Despite reducing the number of invitations sent to alumni who attended their convocation, the response rate from this subgroup outperformed the response rate of those who did not attend their convocation ceremony. The survey response rate form those who attended their convocation ceremony was 10% while those who did not attend their convocation ceremony responded at a rate of 5.9%. This finding seems to suggest that a difference in alumni affinity may still exist between these two subgroups, however convocation is likely not the

differentiating factor, and the brand community matrix tool may not capture the full scope of factors at play.

Limitations

The limitations of this study predominantly fall into the categories of participation, instrument design, and setting.

Participation

Alumni who are not able to interact with an online format either by access or ability, as well as those who did not have contact information on file with the Alumni and Development department would not have been represented in the sample. Participants' ability to recall their convocation experiences up to five years after the event may have been limited and should also be considered in the context of the final findings.

Although measures have been undertaken in the design of this research to mitigate non-response bias, those who attended convocation ceremonies may have felt a strong affinity to the institution and therefore been more inclined to respond to the survey compared to those who did not attend convocation ceremonies who perhaps felt less of an affiliation with their alma mater. With this said, a participant self-selection bias may also exist among participants in general, generating responses from those who did not attend their convocation ceremony, yet still feel a strong sense of affinity to their alma mater. A participant self-selection bias may result in a collection of responses from the university's most affiliated alumni – whether they attended convocation or not. Additionally, a level of bidirectional causality may also exist as graduates may already have a high level of affinity towards their alma mater, which contributes to their decision to attend their convocation ceremonies.

Individual interviews with alumni prior to questionnaire development may have helped identify emerging themes, such as those discovered in the open-ended question, which could have informed the construction of questions pertaining to convocation as a brandfest within the survey instrument.

Instrument Design

The questionnaire employed in this research has been modelled after descriptions of the Brand Community Integration (BCI) tool. However, due to the proprietary nature of the BCI tool, the questionnaire does not directly correspond with the actual tool. Utilizing the BCI tool would have offered the added advantage of construct validity to this research project, having been used in several research projects related to alumni.

Additionally, the research instrument was predominantly quantitative by design offering an empirical measurement using Likert scales to the concept of affinity while at the same time delivering statistical valid findings representative of the larger alumni community. Based on the responses collected from the one qualitative question in the survey offered valuable insights into underlying themes related to convocation ceremonies. This suggests a mixed methods approach incorporating qualitative research may complement the quantitative measurement of affinity measured by the BCI instrument.

Setting/Research Bias

Finally, findings are specific to MacEwan University, based on the nature and elements of the convocation ceremony, a university may find a greater or lesser brand community score is found among graduating alumni.

It is important to acknowledge that both my current role as Director, Alumni as well as my previous experience coordinating convocation ceremonies for MacEwan University may

influence my findings. Admittedly, this may result in a narrow interpretation of findings based on the operations, culture, and administrative functions within a context specific to MacEwan University. Alternatively, my hope is that my observations present a unique intersection of two generally separated functions within university settings – convocation and alumni affinity – and create a space to discuss how these functions can compliment larger overarching goals around alumni engagement and ultimately philanthropic support.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research set out to determine if convocation attendance had an impact on overall alumni affinity. As Magolda (2003) writes, "[c]ommencement . . . is so commonplace and ingrained in the fabric of the campus culture, it is immune from critical analysis. Participants and organizers seldom question the intent of these ceremonies, articulate desired outcomes, or evaluate effectiveness" (p. 779). Perhaps this explains why so many post-secondary institutions celebrate and invest in these rites of passage ceremonies even while little is known of their direct influence on the participants and the institutions they represent. The theoretical framework of alumni brand communities emerged through the literature review, offering a more wholistic understanding of the drivers of alumni affinity. In turn the concept of brandfests offer a way in which to understand the role convocation ceremonies play in contributing to alumni brand communities. The research project was designed with the intention to make it relevant and informative for post-secondary institutions and alumni offices. The project sought to explore the role of convocation ceremonies as brandfests within established alumni brand community theory. By focussing on MacEwan University located in Edmonton, Alberta, this research also contributes a Canadian perspective to alumni brand community discussion.

Using a survey modelled after the BCI, and applying a brand community score, the quantitative findings of this research demonstrate that there is only a marginal difference between the affinity of those graduates who attended their convocation ceremony in comparison to the affinity of graduates who did not attend their convocation ceremony. This does not suggest that convocation is irrelevant to the alumni experience and does not call into question the role of convocation in the academic lifecycle. Although empirical findings suggest that convocation ceremonies at MacEwan University do not significantly contribute to a greater sense of alumni affinity, this is not to say that they *cannot* contribute as brandfests within an alumni brand community context in the future. The qualitative responses collected in this survey indicate that convocation ceremonies do carry inherent meaning among graduates with respect to contributing to a sense of accomplishment, pride, and closure. Therefore, this research may serve as starting point from which an institution can utilize the "tools at its disposal" amidst mounting financial pressures and increasing need to strengthen alumni affinity as Martin et al (2015) suggest.

Martin et al, (2015) write in the introduction to their study on "The Importance of University Traditions and Rituals in Building Alumni Brand Communities and Loyalty":

> Theoretically, the research will contribute to the literature on brand communities by examining empirically the role of university traditions and rituals. Practically, the research will assist universities in determining the role that traditions and rituals play in alumni brand communities and in generating marketing strategies and tactics for garnering alumni support.

(p. 108)

As post-secondary institutions face declining levels of government funding and increasingly look to alumni audiences for financial support, leveraging campus traditions and rituals offers an opportunity to strengthen alumni feelings of loyalty and sense of belonging. In doing so, academic passage from student to alumni during the highly ritualized ceremonies of convocation

can be better understood and utilized. Siegel (2008) maintains that rituals and ceremonies "are like moorings that tether students intellectually and cognitively to their college or university" (p. 12), explaining, "[i]f campus rituals and ceremonies are indeed communal behaviors, we can intuit that participation in such celebrations and displays of campus culture is a powerful form of engagement that has the capacity to pay significant intellectual and emotional dividends" (p. 17). Perhaps more importantly, this research serves to bring attention to an existing resource that is not fully realized in developing alumni communities, offering alumni relations professionals a framework and tool to evaluate convocation ceremonies in the context of alumni affinity within their own institutions.

Opportunities for Further Exploration

The data collected within this project represents the alumni population of one post-secondary institution. It would be interesting to see this research replicated among other institutions to determine if there are post-secondaries that do see a more pronounced difference among the alumni affinity scores between those alumni who attended the ceremonies and those who did not. Further exploration into the ceremony constructs of those institutions who do see higher alumni brand community scores may shed further light on how convocation ceremonies can contribute to affinity and group solidarity. This could offer insight into the more specific constructs that Magolda (2003) illustrates as contributing to the larger ceremony such as speeches, ceremony flow, and ambience to elicit the heightened emotional state of TCEs (Schouten et al, 2007). SRT (Structural Ritualization Theory) also offers a framework to analyze the frequency, setting, the pace, supporting props and resources (Knottnerus, 1997, 2010, 2014) of ritualized events which may aid in future in-depth analysis of the elements that comprise convocation. As discovered in the analysis of the open-ended question, incorporating a qualitative aspect to this research study,

such as participant interviews, may further complement the design of this investigation by offering an opportunity for alumni to elaborate on the emotional nature of their convocation experience and offer insight into key themes (i.e., family attendance, accomplishment, pride, gratitude, and closure) that shaped their experience. Additionally, further qualitative inquiry into the relationships and friendships developed during university may also complement the alumni – alumni pillar finding – which showed a 0.28 stronger brand community score among alumni who attended their convocation ceremonies. This research may shed light on "why" alumni attend their convocation ceremonies offering further insight into primary drivers that play into graduates desire to attend their convocation ceremony.

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Appendices

Appendix A: University of Alberta Research Ethics Approval

ARISE: Your Ethics Application is Approved   Pro00108100 - Message - Mail   —   □   ✕

↩ Reply   ↩ Reply all   → Forward   ⊟ Archive   🗑 Delete   ⚑ Set flag   ⋯

ARISE: Your Ethics Application is Approved   Pro00108100

A   arise@ualberta.ca <arise@ualberta.ca>
1:55 PM

To: mstevenson25@hotmail.com

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Ethics Application has been Approved

ID:	Pro00108100
Title:	Convocation Ceremonies and Alumni Brand Communities
Study Investigator:	Michelle Stevenson
	This is to inform you that the above study has been approved.
Description:	Click on the link(s) above to navigate to the workspace.
	Please do not reply to this message. This is a system-generated email that cannot receive replies.

University of Alberta
Edmonton Alberta
Canada T6G 2E1

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Appendix B: MacEwan University Research Ethics Approval

MacEwan
UNIVERSITY

April 13, 2021

Michelle Stevenson
External Researcher
MacEwan University

File No: 101899
Approval Date: April 13, 2021
Expiry Date: April 12, 2022

Dear Michelle Stevenson,

The Research Ethics Board has reviewed your application titled 'Convocation Ceremonies and Alumni Brand Communities'. Your application has been approved. This REB approval expires on **April 12, 2022**. To continue your research past this date, you must submit a Renewal Form. When your research is complete, please submit a Closure Form to close out REB approval monitoring efforts.

Note that any research activity occurring face-to-face during COVID restrictions is not covered under this approval. In order to conduct face-to-face research activities, you must refer to the 'Off-campus Research Resumption Request Form' and 'Guidance for Conducting Off-Campus Research and Scholarly Activity with Human Participants under COVID-19 Restrictions' guidelines available on the Office of Research Services website, and ensure all appropriate approvals are in place. Any proposed changes to the study must be submitted to MacEwan's REB for approval prior to implementation, and you are reminded of your obligation to advise the REB of any unanticipated issues or events that occur during the approval period, per University policy.

If your project activities involve acquiring information through an institution, organization or other group, you should be aware that these bodies may have their own ethics or operational requirements, beyond REB review, for allowing access to their sites and to the use of their resources. It is your responsibility to formally collaborate with the relevant body to seek permission to proceed with the project.

If you have any questions about the REB review & approval process, please contact the REB at (780) 497-4280 or REB@macewan.ca. **Do not reply to this message.**

Sincerely,

Dr. Christopher Striemer
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Appendix C: Survey Questions

As a MacEwan University alum who graduated between 2015 - 2019 we invite you to complete this survey.

This research seeks to understand how convocation ceremonies contribute to building alumni communities.

Your opinion matters – and we recognize that your time does too! Please take five minutes to complete this survey before April 30 and you'll have a chance to win a $250 Visa gift card!

Please note that your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. Should you choose to withdraw midway through, simply close the link. Data from incomplete surveys will be destroyed and excluded from the research. This research is being conducted by Michelle Stevenson, Director Alumni and Community Engagement, MacEwan University and will contribute to the fulfillment requirements of a Master of Arts in Communications and Technology through the University of Alberta. Inquiries related to this study can be directed to:

Research Investigator: Michelle Stevenson (mstevens@ualberta.ca)

Academic Supervisor: Dr. Rob McMahon (rob.mcmahon@ualberta.ca)

University of Alberta Ethics ID: Pro00108100

1. Please indicate the year you graduated from MacEwan University:

- ○ 2015
- ○ 2016
- ○ 2017
- ○ 2018
- ○ 2019

2. Please indicate the credential you graduated with:

- ○ Degree
- ○ Diploma
- ○ Certificate
- ○ Other

3. What is your age?

- ○ 18 to 24
- ○ 25 to 34
- ○ 35 to 44
- ○ 45 to 54
- ○ 55 to 64
- ○ 65 or older

4. Please indicate your gender identity:

- ○ Female
- ○ Male
- ○ Prefer not to disclose
- ○ Other (please specify)

[ ]

* 5. Did you attend your MacEwan University convocation ceremony?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

6. Please indicate the level to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I value the education I received at MacEwan University.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I'm proud to be a MacEwan University graduate.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
The education I received at MacEwan University prepared me for my career.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

7. Please indicate the level to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I often wear clothing which displays the MacEwan University logo.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I would consider donating to MacEwan University.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I would recommend MacEwan University to my friends and family.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
I would consider pursuing additional courses/programming at MacEwan University in the future.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

8. Please indicate the level to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
As a student, I felt that the University valued and cared about my needs and opinions.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
As a student, I felt a sense of community and belonging at MacEwan University.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
As I student, I felt that my instructors were invested in helping me succeed.	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

9. Please indicate the level to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I met wonderful people while pursuing my education at MacEwan University.	○	○	○	○	○
I feel a sense of kinship with other students in my graduating class.	○	○	○	○	○
I would be interested in participating in MacEwan University's Alumni Association activities.	○	○	○	○	○
I remain connected to classmates I met while attending MacEwan University.	○	○	○	○	○

10. Is there anything else you'd like to share with respect to convocation ceremonies at MacEwan University?

Thank you for your feedback!

To register your responses, please scroll and click the SUBMIT button below.

By submitting your responses you are providing consent to use the data provided for the purposes of this study. Please print a copy of this form for your records. The information that you will share will remain strictly confidential and will be used solely for the purposes of this research. Only the Research Investigator and Academic Supervisor will have access to the data collected. The distribution of survey invitations and reminders has been completed with the assistance of MacEwan University's Alumni and Development Office, however, the University will not have access to survey data collected.

Results will be aggregated at the group level and no responses will be attributable to specific individuals. Data will not be shared with third parties. Answers to open-ended questions may be used verbatim in academic and/or professional presentations and publications but neither you (nor your organization) will be identified.

Data collected through participation in this Survey Monkey survey will be stored on servers located in the United States of America. Under US privacy laws, the government has the right to access all information held in electronic databases. Electronic copies of the survey will be encrypted and stored on a password-protected computer in the researcher's secured office. Data will be kept secure 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.

Requests to withdraw must be submitted to the researcher in writing to mstevens@ualberta.ca before May 31, 2021. In the event of opting out, all data will be withdrawn and destroyed.

This study has been reviewed and approved by Research Ethics Boards at the University of Alberta and MacEwan University. Questions regarding your rights as a research participant or how this research is being conducted can be directed to the Research Ethics Offices at 780-492-2615 (University of Alberta) and 780-497-4156 (MacEwan University).

Questions related to this study can be directed to:
Research Investigator: Michelle Stevenson
Graduate Student, MACT, Faculty of Arts
University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB
Phone:780-902-3971
Email: mstevens@ualberta.ca

Academic Supervisor: Dr. Rob McMahon
Associate Professor, Faculty of Arts
University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB
Phone: 780-248-1110

Email: rob.mcmahon@ualberta.ca

University of Alberta Ethics ID: Pro00108100

1. YES! Please enter me for a chance to win a $250 Visa gift card!

Please note, this information will be used for the purposes of the prize draw and is not connected to the survey and will be deleted following the prize draw. All survey participants can enter to win. The probability of winning this prize is estimated at 1 in 370. Due to the nature of the survey, participants who withdraw from the study will still have the opportunity to participate in the draw.
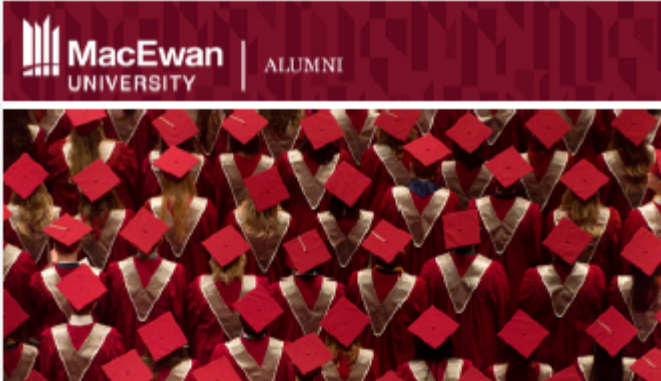
Name

Email Address

Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Communications:

Introductory Email

MacEwan UNIVERSITY | ALUMNI

Dear Rebecca,

We are turning to you as a recent graduate to share your thoughts and opinions. The Alumni Office is conducting a survey to help understand how convocation ceremonies contribute to building alumni communities.

Please watch for our survey link in your inbox tomorrow. The survey will take less than five minutes to complete and you'll have a chance to win a $250 Visa gift card.

Alumni are important members of our university community, and your perspective helps contribute to the growth of our institution — please take this opportunity to share your thoughts and opinions.

Thank you!

The Alumni Office
MacEwan University

This research is being conducted by Michelle Stevenson, Director, Alumni and Community Engagement and will also be utilized to fulfill the requirements of the Master of Arts in Communications and Technology program at the University of Alberta. Your participation is completely voluntary.

The information that you share will remain strictly confidential and will be used solely for the purpose of this research. Only the research investigator and Academic Supervisor will have access to the data collected. The distribution of survey invitations and reminders has been completed with the assistance of MacEwan University's Alumni and Development Office, however, the university will not have access to survey data collected. Survey results are confidential and will be aggregated at the group level. No responses will be attributable to specific individuals. Findings will be shared with the MacEwan University community. Data will not be shared with third parties. Please direct any questions to Michelle Stevenson (mstevens@ualberta.ca) or her academic supervisor Dr. Rob McMahon (rob.mcmahon@ualberta.ca).

For further details relating to informed consent describing how your feedback will be utilized click here.
Research Title: Convocation Ceremonies and Alumni Brand Communities
University of Alberta Ethics ID: Pro00108100

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We acknowledge that the land on which we gather in Treaty Six Territory is the traditional gathering place for many Indigenous people. We honour and respect the history, languages, ceremonies and culture of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit who call this territory home.

Participant Recruitment Communications: Survey Invitation
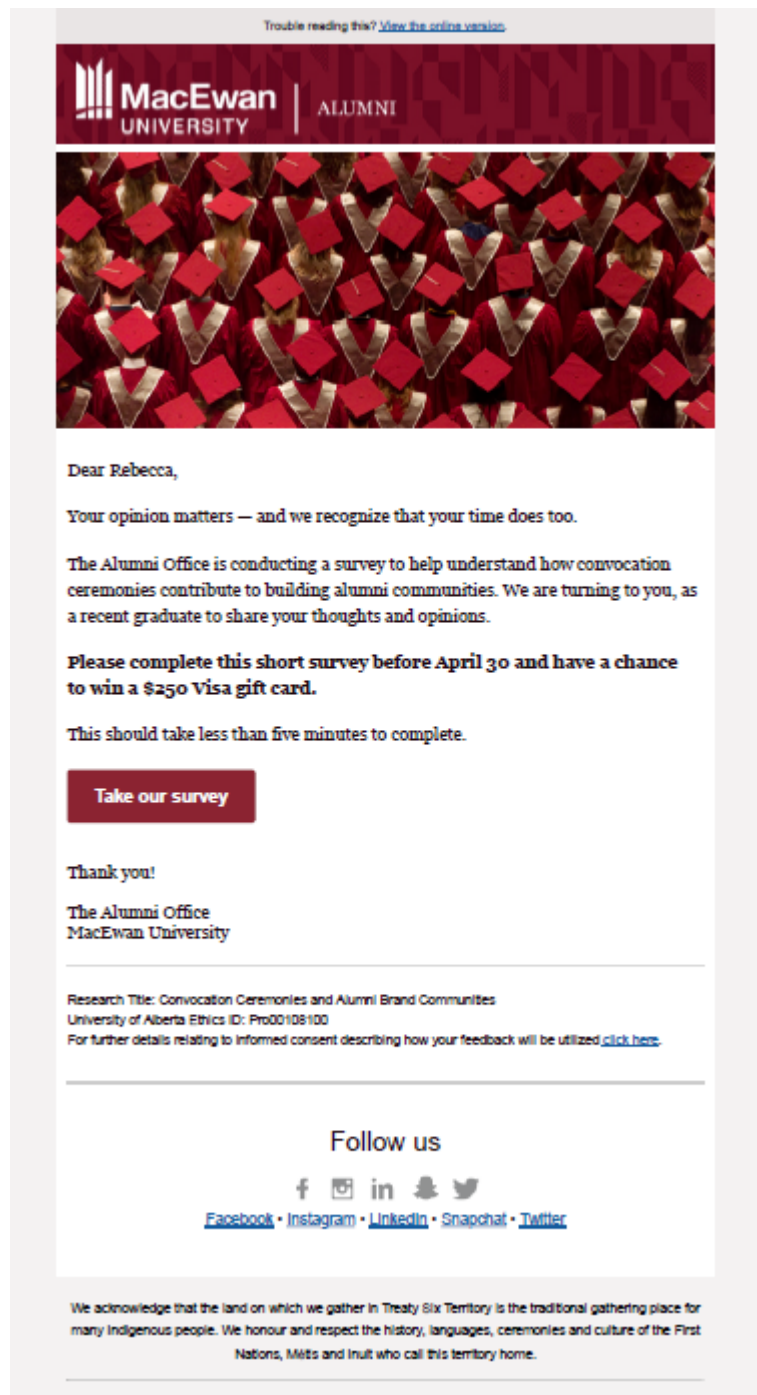
Participant Recruitment Communications: Reminder Email (Original)

MacEwan UNIVERSITY | ALUMNI

Dear Rebecca,

Your opinion matters — and we recognize that your time does too.

The Alumni Office is conducting a survey to help understand how convocation ceremonies contribute to building alumni communities. We are turning to you, as a recent graduate to share your thoughts and opinions.

Please complete this short survey before April 30 and have a chance to win a $250 Visa gift card.

This should take less than five minutes to complete.

Take our survey

Thank you!

The Alumni Office
MacEwan University

Research Title: Convocation Ceremonies and Alumni Brand Communities
University of Alberta Ethics ID: Pro00108100
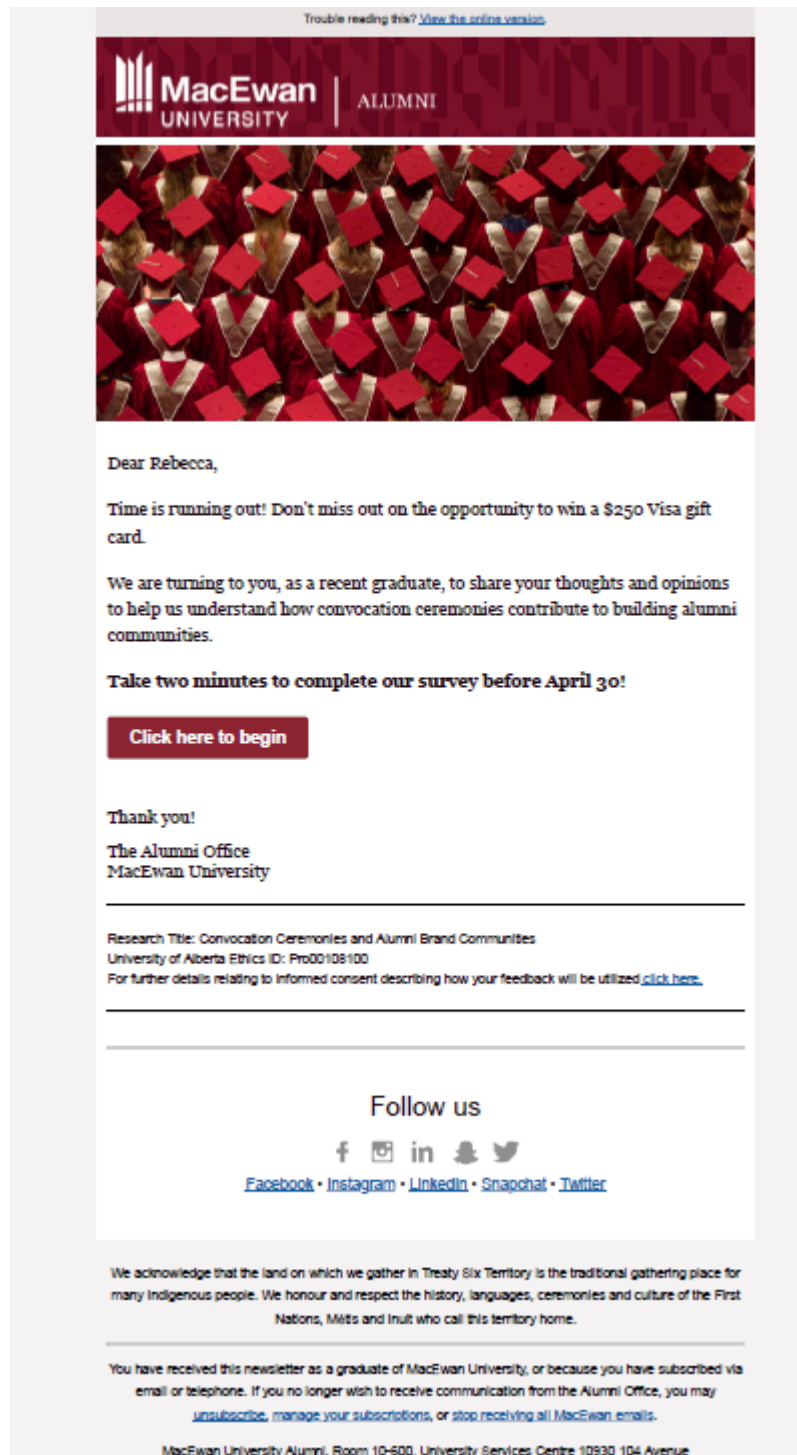For further details relating to informed consent describing how your feedback will be utilized click here.

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We acknowledge that the land on which we gather in Treaty Six Territory is the traditional gathering place for many Indigenous people. We honour and respect the history, languages, ceremonies and culture of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit who call this territory home.

Participant Recruitment Communications: Reminder Email (Updated/Actual)

MacEwan UNIVERSITY | ALUMNI

Dear Rebecca,

Time is running out! Don't miss out on the opportunity to win a $250 Visa gift card.

We are turning to you, as a recent graduate, to share your thoughts and opinions to help us understand how convocation ceremonies contribute to building alumni communities.

Take two minutes to complete our survey before April 30!

Click here to begin

Thank you!

The Alumni Office
MacEwan University

Research Title: Convocation Ceremonies and Alumni Brand Communities
University of Alberta Ethics ID: Pro00108100
For further details relating to informed consent describing how your feedback will be utilized click here.

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We acknowledge that the land on which we gather in Treaty Six Territory is the traditional gathering place for many Indigenous people. We honour and respect the history, languages, ceremonies and culture of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit who call this territory home.

MacEwan University Alumni, Room 10-600, University Services Centre 10930 104 Avenue

Participant Recruitment Communications: Final Reminder Email (Original)

MacEwan UNIVERSITY | ALUMNI

Dear Rebecca,

There's still time to complete our survey and have a chance to win a $250 Visa gift card!

The Alumni Office is conducting a survey to help understand how convocation ceremonies contribute to building alumni communities. As a recent graduate, please take this opportunity to share your thoughts and opinions.

This should take less than five minutes to complete.

Take our survey

Thank you!

The Alumni Office
MacEwan University

Research Title: Convocation Ceremonies and Alumni Brand Communities
University of Alberta Ethics ID: Pro00108100
For further details relating to informed consent describing how your feedback will be utilized click here.

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We acknowledge that the land on which we gather in Treaty Six Territory is the traditional gathering place for many Indigenous people. We honour and respect the history, languages, ceremonies and culture of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit who call this territory home.

Participant Recruitment Communications: Final Reminder Email (Updated/Actual)