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Sociolinguistic research projects as brands

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Abstract: Sociolinguistic projects can benefit from brand management practices to meet their research goals. This is especially (but not exclusively) relevant for projects involving longitudinal relationships between the researcher and the community. Scholars may be skeptical of branding, because it can evoke the idea of institutions spending money on corporate image rather than on research or teaching support. Yet by curating their project's brand as an indexical field, sociolinguists can bring more intention to their project vision. This intentionality in turn helps to save time and energy by making all decisions easier, and by improving communication to project stakeholders. The paper offers an overview of relevant public sector brand theory and gives examples from four recent sociolinguistic projects: MI Diaries, Accent Bias in Britain, Manchester Voices, and Our Dialects.

Keywords: sociolinguistics; brand; indexical field

1 Introduction

The goal of this paper is to help linguists – particularly sociolinguists – see the benefit of thinking of their research as nonprofit BRANDS. It is not intended to be a detailed how-to guide, although we do provide some examples from recent sociolinguistic project branding, as well as references for further reading. Rather, we lay out a broad proposal for how linguists can curate their project as a brand, adapting this approach to their own goals, expertise, and resources. Drawing primarily from our own learning experience, we suggest that there are two central advantages of research branding for the researcher(s): (i) an explicit and shared understanding among collaborators and stakeholders of what the project stands for; and as a result, (ii) simplified decision-making in all areas of the project.

Sociolinguists are well placed to understand the most critical essence of branding, namely that a brand is an INDEXICAL FIELD (Eckert 2008). Every brand from IBM to Doctors without Borders indexes a constellation of “intangible attributes” (Sammuto-Bonnici 2015) like *fun* or *reliable* or *caring*, that contribute to brand identity. Since sociolinguists are familiar with how social indices work, they already have the skill set to be effective brand creators. Indeed, many sociolinguists already employ branding, even if they do not realize it. For example, fieldworkers are already akin to personal brands, using signifiers like clothing and communication style to project the indexical values of *trustworthiness* and *approachability* that are needed to recruit participants and community partners.

But personal brands may be insufficient for bigger projects and for those involving remotely collected data (e.g., online surveys, citizen science apps, Zoom interviews). For these kinds of projects, well-conceived project “brands” can help reach the target audience and communicate with the wide range of stakeholders connected to them (Letts et al. 1999). However, a project brand approach can be useful even for the smallest of research projects. Minimally, articulating the desired indexical field for a project helps to make decisions easier (Morrison and Firmstone 2000: 607), from the micro (“Which font should we use?”; “Does this survey question about gender

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identity send the right message to participants?") to the macro ("What should we name the project?"; "Should the project be associated with this funding source?"). In turn, this can help to reduce the effort needed to communicate with potential participants, project personnel, funding bodies, and the public.

To our knowledge, although there is a growing literature on branding in higher education and in science communication (see, e.g., Illingworth (2017) on the importance for science communicators of developing a personal brand; Cooke et al. (2017: 238) for a list of considerations for science communicators, including building a brand; Erisher et al. (2014) and citations therein on higher education brands), there is no published work specifically on the branding of research projects, or even research labs, either in (socio)linguistics or beyond. An exception is Skolozdra (n.d.), which explains how the branding of a lab's physical environment (e.g., office space design, artwork, signage) can strengthen the lab's internal and external reputation. This is surprising, since many labs and projects, including those in linguistics and in allied fields such as psychology, engage in some form of brand activity, such as a logo and a website.

This paper represents a first step in filling this gap. We introduce and offer examples from our own MI Diaries project (Sneller et al. 2022), as well as three other recent sociolinguistics projects: Accent Bias in Britain (Figure 1; Levon et al. 2020), Manchester Voices (Figure 2; Drummond et al. 2022), and Our Dialects (Figure 3; MacKenzie 2018).¹ The directors of the Smith & Brown agency, who devised the PR plan for Accent Bias in Britain, were also consulted. We discuss the relationship between university brands and research project brands, before describing the utility of a mission, vision, and values exercise (Ireland and Hirc 1992; University of Minnesota 2019; Want 1986) in mapping out where the project sits relative to other brands, social personae, and associated attributes. We provide some examples of how the resulting indexical field can facilitate appropriate and effective communication with relevant stakeholders. In our concluding summary, we aim to provide reassurance and encouragement to other researchers based on our collective experiences.

1.1 Our introduction to research projects as brands

Our original motivation for exploring branding comes from our experience with a large remote sociolinguistic research project, MI Diaries ("Michigan Diaries"). MI Diaries was started in mid-April 2020 by the first and second



Figure 1: Logo for Accent Bias in Britain project.



Figure 2: Logo for Manchester Voices project.



Figure 3: Logo for Our Dialects project.

¹ This is a convenience sample rather than a representative one.



Figure 4: MI Diaries project logo.

authors as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Academically, we were interested in how social isolation might affect ongoing language change.² Practically, we wanted to test whether we could collect spontaneous, informal speech during lockdowns.³ We settled on audio “diaries” recorded by participants on their mobile devices (Sneller et al. 2022).

The project was originally called “MI Covid Diaries”. Recruitment materials highlighted “changing life and language during the pandemic”. Diary prompts – sent weekly via email to participants – nearly always included questions about the pandemic. Eight months later, however, COVID was no longer a strong motivator for participation, and the early success of our data collection efforts had led us to aspire to greater project longevity. We renamed the project “MI Diaries” (Figure 4) to reflect this change of focus. With our team of around 20 students, we mulled how to attract new participants. Student research assistants often suggested entering partnerships with businesses and other organizations. This led to team discussions about how such associations might reflect on the project. For example, were coffee shops too bourgeois? Thus as a group, we began to more explicitly articulate questions like “What do/don’t we stand for?” and “Who are we trying to reach?”. That’s when we realized we were building and protecting a “brand”.

1.2 Some key concepts from nonprofit brand theory

A BRAND is a “psychological concept” (Bedbury and Fenichell 2002: 15), made up of a “name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of them” (Kotler and Keller 2016: 11). While the term is most conventionally associated with commercial products and services, it can also be applied to groups and individuals (e.g., Beyoncé), municipalities (e.g., New York City), professionals (e.g., teachers, the US Marines), nonprofit organizations (e.g., Oxfam), tertiary education providers (e.g., Juilliard), research centers (e.g., CERN), and – we contend – research projects. Like any other semiotic phenomena, brands are comprised of “a unique set of associations representing what the brand stands for”, that is, a BRAND IMAGE (Sammut-Bonnici 2015). For example, in a comparison of the leisure shoe companies Nike and Adidas, Arora and Stoner (2009) found that consumers associated Nike primarily with characteristics like *innovative*, *creative*, and *practical*, while they associated Adidas with *customer focused* and *relaxed*. The value of a well-calibrated brand image is dependent on a high level of BRAND AWARENESS (Aaker 1991) among the target audiences. In turn, brand awareness is “a prerequisite for further engagement ... such as the development of BRAND TRUST” (Boenigk and Becker 2016: 186, our emphasis).⁴ Nonprofit brands, including research projects, are especially dependent on building and maintaining trust with stakeholders, because their activities and outputs are not as tangible or visible as consumer goods and services (Erisher et al. 2014: 3; Sargeant and Lee 2004: 188).

² As the project grew beyond this first focus, our interests have likewise since expanded. See, e.g., Barnhardt (2023), Sneller and Barnhardt (2023), Sneller and Greeson (Forthcoming), Ye (2022).

³ See also Abtahian et al. (2022), Hall-Lew et al. (2022), Nesbitt and Watts (2022).

⁴ We follow Boenigk and Becker (2016) in emphasizing the importance of brand trust for nonprofit brands. For concision, we have folded their dimension of brand commitment into our discussion of trust.

2 Universities as a branding shortcut

An obvious route for researchers to achieve high levels of brand awareness and trust is to use their university's brand as their primary signifier. This may help research projects reach a wider audience and achieve trust more quickly, but may likewise come with a trade-off in brand image, depending on how the indexical field of the university aligns with (or against) the intended indexical field of the research project.

When researchers describe a project to participants or funders, they must convey that they are *competent* and *trustworthy*, and that the research will be of value to society. Because universities are associated with *prestige*, *serious purpose*, and a *social mission* (Boenigk and Becker 2016), they serve as a “branding shortcut” for potential stakeholders (Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel 2013). Indeed, one reason that researchers rarely think about branding is because they can already rely on their university's brand. For experimental and survey-based sociolinguistic studies, a clear association with the university – for example, a university logo on a consent form – may be beneficial.

For fieldwork-based studies, paradoxically, sociolinguists must often minimize the university brand. This is because sociolinguistic fieldworkers strive to put participants at ease, so as to facilitate vernacular language (Labov 1984). While a university affiliation might activate participants' trust on the one hand, on the other hand it may make participants use more self-conscious language styles.

For this reason, developing a (semi-)independent project brand can be especially beneficial for the kind of data collection that sociolinguists do. That said, universities may impose restrictions on a project's degree of latitude, and it is worth a researcher's time to inquire about their institution's policies before they invest too heavily in their project brand. An example comes from *Our Dialects* (<https://www.ourdialects.uk>; MacKenzie 2018; MacKenzie et al. 2022), an interactive UK-wide dialect geography project. *Our Dialects* was initially required to have an institutional domain name. According to Laurel MacKenzie (pers. comm.), this lent valuable legitimacy. However, the research team was careful to avoid “heavy University of Manchester branding” elsewhere, since they thought it would discourage the friendly, non-prescriptive tone they were trying to achieve. Much later, the team were able to move to a noninstitutional domain name. Conversely, when projects actually do seek to use university-branded elements, they can still face institutional obstacles. For example, universities may charge a fee for the use of their domain name or email addresses, or require extensive written justification, as we have found at our home institution.

To serve their brand, universities promote research projects through press releases and social media. This is another potential locus for tension between the attributes of the institutional brand and the project brand; as such, researchers must decide whether or when a press release is beneficial to them. And since university copywriters are generalists, they may need extensive help with the content of a piece, and in thinking about the audiences to be reached. In some cases, researchers may have to proactively lobby for a press release, as we have found with *MI Diaries* and colleagues have found with *Manchester Voices* and *Our Dialects* (Rob Drummond, pers. comm.; Laurel MacKenzie, pers. comm.) because in-house university PR offices are often understaffed and underfunded (Adam Brown, pers. comm.). As one positive outcome of this proactive work, MacKenzie (pers. comm.) found that requesting a university press release gave the *Our Dialects* project recognition and approbation with university stakeholders, and led to further institutional grants to support project activities.

As we suggest below, a clear sense of the project's brand can help researchers to determine whether it is worth wrestling with these kinds of challenges.

3 Mission, values, style, and the indexical field

One major goal of this paper is to encourage (socio)linguists to reflect on and intentionally direct their project's indexical field. In other words, what are the “intangible attributes” that the project should convey to potential stakeholders? What proportion of that indexical field can be occupied by university-associated indices, and what

proportion must be asserted by the project separately? Outlining the desired indexical field can help researchers streamline all of their decisions by orienting towards it.

3.1 Mission, vision, values

Accent Bias in Britain (ABB; <https://accentbiasbritain.org>; Levon et al. 2020, 2021; Sharma et al. 2022) examined linguistic discrimination in the United Kingdom and its effects on hiring. The research team employed an external communications firm, Smith & Brown (<https://smithandbrown.eu>), that consulted on everything from project name, visual design, and press release text, to strategy for social media and press campaigns. Importantly, the firm’s consultants asked the team questions about their vision and values. The result was agreement that the project’s brand should primarily convey the values of *expertise* and *diversity*. Erez Levon (pers. comm.) explained that:

With *expertise*, we wanted to get across the message that it is important to listen to linguists. Our project aimed to counter the narrative that everyone knows how language works, and that experts on this topic are unnecessary. With *diversity*, we wanted to convey that there is more linguistic diversity in the UK than people are aware of, and that there can be negative consequences due to this lack of awareness. These key themes influenced everything from the project’s color palette to its website and beyond.

For MI Diaries, conducting a MISSION, VISION, AND VALUES (MVV) exercise was similarly critical in identifying our core values. Unlike ABB, we did not employ external professionals. Instead, the activity was suggested and led by an undergraduate on our team who was majoring in Advertising. The MVV exercise can be readily adopted by other project teams and there is a literature on its theory and practice (e.g., Davidson 2005; Mittal and Sridhar 2021). Our initial MVV brainstorming session included all of our team members, including principal investigators, students, and youth interns: about 20 people in total. The majority were from Michigan, which was important for ensuring that the branding of our regional-focused project would resonate locally. We free-associated in response to questions like “What comes to mind when you think of our project?”, “What do we really want to achieve?”, and “Who is MI Diaries for?”.

The resulting web of responses informed the indexical field for the MI Diaries brand (Figure 5) in which four attributes (in bold text) emerged as our key project values. Those values were then fully discussed and elaborated as shown in Table 1.

The project values are similar to first-order indices in an indexical field. They are at the core of what MI Diaries represents as a brand.⁵ But, similar to a sociolinguistic variant (e.g., /t/-release in Eckert 2008), a brand indexes “a constellation of meanings that are ideologically linked” (Eckert 2008: 464). For MI Diaries, our indexical



Figure 5: Indexical field for MI Diaries. Bold text = first-order indices (project values); italic text = second-order indices; text in boxes = social types; graphics = brands.

⁵ For the MI Diaries mission statement, see <https://mi-diaries.org/the-project>.

Table 1: Project values for MI Diaries.

Authenticity	To provide participants with a space to share their stories where they can be open and authentic, and be heard for who they are.
Trustworthiness	To incorporate a code of professionalism in our work that assures diarists, scholars, and the public of the high ethical and scholarly standards that we adhere to.
Mentorship	To encourage students to further their professional development skills through research, project management, and engagement with the community state-wide.
Research longevity	To recognize the historical value of this project by continuing to develop as a research opportunity <i>for Michiganders by Michiganders</i> .

field (Figure 5) includes not only our project values in bold, but a variety of nth-order indices such as the personae in boxes (*Spartans*,⁶ *scholars*, *custodians*) that these values connect to, and some additional related institutional brands. Additional attributes related to each project value are included in italics.

Importantly, we keep this broader indexical landscape in mind at all times. Knowing how personae and attributes are connected to the project and to each other helps the research team more intentionally lean into intended attributes and steer way from others. For instance, a social media post about our students helping with a science festival exhibit evokes *mentorship* and our role as *caring custodians*. But such a post could also activate *scholars* and create social distance between us and our participants. Our student social media creators use the indexical field to guide their text and image choices, such as selecting a photo of a smiling student talking to a visitor rather than a student in front of a dialect survey display.

For an MVV exercise to have lasting impact, a mission statement and a set of values cannot simply be a set of superficial claims, but must be frequently turned to as “a strategic guidance system” (Mirvis et al. 2010: 317). This has certainly proved true for our project: our mission and values provide a concise reference guide, which has dramatically simplified subsequent decision-making.

3.2 Style guide

As another example of how a clearly articulated indexical field can regularly guide project decisions, we turn to visual design. The aesthetics of a brand contribute to its overall image and thereby to the degree of brand awareness and trust it can garner (Batra 2019; Danesi 2013). Sociolinguists are not (usually) designers, and so they may benefit from working with experts (although see Murchie and Diomedede (2020) for a how-to guide for science communicators on graphic design). The Smith & Brown agency, for example, provided design services to ABB. Manchester Voices (<https://manchestervoices.org>) analyzed language, folk-linguistic beliefs, and local identity in Greater Manchester in the UK (Drummond et al. 2022). Manchester Voices worked with Manchester Metropolitan University’s (MMU) design team on graphics for a mobile recording studio (the “Accent Van”), vertical display banners, and other visual materials, but with an external company to create a “virtual Accent Van” website (when COVID-19 lockdowns prevented fieldwork) and online dialect perception maps. MI Diaries has primarily employed undergraduate students from Michigan State University’s Experience Architecture and Graphic Design majors for its visual work. The choice of expert depends on the project budget and on other constraints: for example, Drummond (pers. comm.) found that the MMU design team was cheaper than an external agency, but he had to compete with other MMU projects for selection.

What designers cannot do is determine the project’s brand: it is the researchers who have to convey their vision to designers. Drummond, for instance, worked with his consultants to develop a striped speech bubble logo, which evokes the worker bee, a widely known symbol of Manchester. Drummond wanted to index the regional specificity of Manchester Voices as well as a sense, for participants, of community belonging.

⁶ “Spartans” is a nickname for Michigan State University’s sports teams and their fans. The Spartans’ mascot, shown on the far left of Figure 5, is named Sparty. The nickname is also used by the university to refer to its current and former students, faculty, and staff.

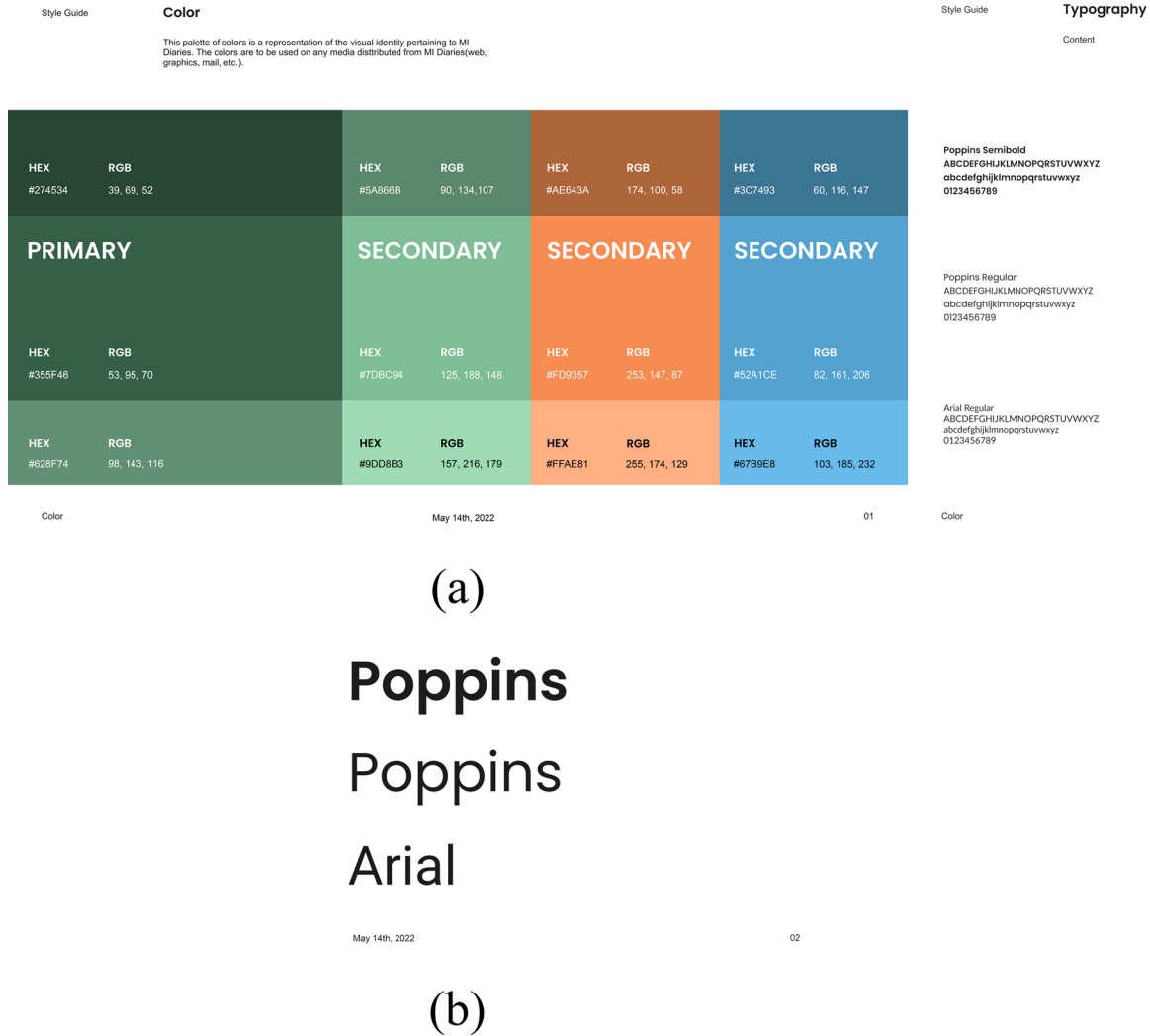


Figure 6: Color (6a) and font (6b) pages from MI Diaries style guide.

An indexical field can be an invaluable resource for conversations like this. When all parties understand the project’s values and can discuss the network of social meanings they connect to, designers can more effectively offer their own input. Working from an initial brief, MI Diaries student designers developed a two-page *STYLE GUIDE* that specifies our brand colors and font. They also revised an existing logo (see Figure 4, which had been made green to index *Michigan State University*). In their discussion with our undergraduate (primarily Michigan-raised) project team members, it was suggested that the dark green “felt” more serious than we wanted to convey with our project brand. As a result, the project green became lighter, to index *friendliness*.⁷ Secondary and tertiary colors (orange and blue) were incorporated to add a splash of fun and provide a wider toolkit for designs. Three levels of saturation for each color ensured visual accessibility through contrast between our colors (Figure 6a).

With the help of our student designers, we also identified a primary font, Poppins, a sans serif font with relatively wide kerning, which we felt conveyed both *fun* and *legitimate*, and was selected primarily to appeal to the difficult-to-recruit teen audience (Figure 6b).

⁷ We note that the specific meanings indexed by any feature – including font types, colors, and linguistic features – are often locally specific (Giddens 1984: 286). As a result, it is good practice to get input from members of the intended audience as well as from visual designers.

Thinking of MI Diaries as a brand with an indexical field meant that we did not have to learn about colors and fonts ourselves. Instead, we could use our brand knowledge to direct other people as they created the style guide for us. There are beneficial downstream effects too. The nature of working with student research assistants means regular personnel turnover. Having a clear style guide has enabled a coherent visual presence aligning with our brand across items designed by different student team members, including (i) our website design (<https://mi-diaries.org>), (ii) social media, and (iii) recruitment and outreach materials. Our style guide made all design choices simpler, which in turn resulted in fewer design iterations, saving project leadership time. It also enabled us to project a single identity through our visual branding, which we believe promotes our project value of *trustworthiness* to all stakeholders.

4 Stakeholder communication

Research project stakeholders differ from project to project, depending on goals, resources, home institution, local population, reliance on external funding, and other factors. Clearly identifying different audiences for a project enables researchers to communicate more effectively by prioritizing the most relevant aspects of their brand's indexical field.

Smith & Brown encouraged the ABB research team to think about the different audiences for its outputs – academics, HR professionals, policy makers, and other publics – and came up with strategies for differentially addressing them. Smith & Brown profiled the audiences, figured out how ABB could be important to them, and considered which aspects of the project would resonate most with each audience type. From there, Smith & Brown designed a framework of four to five key messages that upheld brand consistency by “underpin[ning] *all* the communication outputs” (Adam Brown, pers. comm.).

Why did ABB go the expensive route of hiring Smith & Brown for this work? Levon says that the team always conceived of the project as public-facing: “Nobody had done this work in the UK before. For example, the UK has a Social Mobility Commission but it had never mentioned language as a barrier to mobility. We especially wanted HR professionals to be interested, too.” A professional project brand strategy ensured that the project's findings would reach these broader audiences, and that they would be taken seriously.

But even if the project budget is small, the mere act of thinking about a project as a brand can be effective. As a result of our MVV exercise, we found it easier to communicate effectively with MI Diaries' range of project stakeholders. We give some examples below.

4.1 Research participants

Because retaining research participants is critical for MI Diaries' longitudinal success, participants are the first stakeholders that we consider in most decisions. We work to uphold our brand values of *authenticity* and *trustworthiness* at all times, and adhere to our mission of *fostering an inclusive community*.⁸ Practically, this means that our recruitment materials convey the message that MI Diaries is for everyone. For instance, we developed cartoons that use a range of skin tones and hair textures (Figure 7), which have been used in a video hosted on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/b0Uli6BUNec>), flyers, and event signage. They also incorporate brand color elements from our style guide.

While it is not possible to directly test the role that branding has had on our participant recruitment and retention, we note that we have had enormous success in this domain. We continue to recruit new participants (to date, 1,605), of which 622 (almost 40 percent) have submitted at least one diary entry. Of those 622 diarists, 35

⁸ Both research and marketing have historically been over-representative of more privileged populations. See, e.g., Burgess et al. (2022) and Burton (2009) for marketing; Medin et al. (2017) for research; and Stanford (2016) and Charity Hudley et al. (2020) for sociolinguistic research. Because of this, we find it especially important to make brand decisions that communicate to our research participants that we are committed to fostering a research community that is truly open to everyone.



Figure 7: Example MI Diaries cartoon image employed across a range of project media.

percent are regular contributors. This is a relatively high retention rate for longitudinal sociolinguistics studies; one of the acknowledged highest, for the well-known Montreal French study, was only 50 percent (Sankoff 2018).

4.2 Academics and university personnel

A second group of project stakeholders includes both institution-internal personnel (e.g., administrators, PR staff, students) and institution-external academics (e.g., colleagues in the field, funding bodies). Researchers who are confident about their project’s brand can curate its profile for these audiences in ways that are beneficial.

As an example, thinking about the brand indexical field has led MI Diaries to differentiate its social media presence. Because of Twitter/X’s relatively small user base but high density of scholarly institutions and individuals, we have posted there about academic milestones, such as project-related publications; achievements by current and former team members; and any of our public activities featuring students. This kind of content rarely appears on our Facebook and Instagram accounts, where we instead aim to engage participants with excerpts from recently submitted audio diaries. We have found that our Twitter/X posts have attracted invitations from within our university to speak at public events (which in turn led to more participant sign-ups), offers of research collaborations, and promotion of our lab to current and prospective students.

In fact, compared with previous research projects run by the first and second authors, we have found that MI Diaries attracts more student interest across a wider range of disciplines. We believe this is in part due to our ability to effectively communicate our project values to potential team members. In the text and visuals of our posts, internal job advertisements, “join us” website pages and other channels, we especially foreground *mentorship*, with an eye to *authenticity* and its associated sense of approachability.

We have also been able to more clearly articulate project goals to funding bodies, which we believe has contributed to our success in obtaining both internal and external funds. Drummond (pers. comm.) and MacKenzie (pers. comm.) also both found that cohesive design and messaging garnered positive attention from university administrators, which led to funding and other opportunities.

4.3 Publics

The broader public, or more accurately, *PUBLICS*, is a third relevant stakeholder. Researchers must typically keep multiple kinds of public audiences in mind, and the specific kinds will depend on the nature of the projects and the reasons they have for interacting with the public. For MI Diaries, we seek out public interaction to (i) garner more participants from Michigan-based audiences, (ii) give back to the Michigan public, and (iii) educate Americans about linguistic diversity. Our primary public is “anyone living in the state of Michigan”, followed by “Michiganders elsewhere” and “the national public”.

“Anyone living in the state of Michigan” overlaps with the “research participants” stakeholder group covered above, but we must also consider that these individuals are simultaneously members of the public. Therefore, different aspects of the MI Diaries indexical field are appropriate depending on which of their roles is foregrounded at any time. For example, notifying users of updates to our mobile app is directed to their participant identity, and must be done in a way that activates *trustworthiness* and a sense of *research longevity*. On the other hand, a news media piece should be designed to resonate with their general public identity, and should activate the project’s more relatable, Michigan-grounded indexical meanings.

We have found it invaluable to refer to our MI Diaries brand in planning and executing public-facing activities. For example, we have held events at public libraries and Michigan State University’s family-focused Grandparents University program (<https://alumni.msu.edu/grandparents-university/>) because these venues aligned with the attributes of *approachable* and *trustworthy*. A local beer festival, on the other hand, while associated with *fun* and our regional focus on Michigan, took us too far from our brand image as scholars and mentors.

Central to Manchester Voices’ identity are values similar to MI Diaries value of *research longevity* (because it is for and about people in Manchester from all walks of life). These values have driven a range of project decisions, from involving L2 English Mancunians through an arts collaboration, to making its findings accessible through an attractive public-facing website (<https://explore.manchestervoices.org/>), a public library exhibit, and local and national news coverage.

For research projects with other primary values, those also guide the specific communication strategy employed to reach their publics. For instance, one of the foundational goals of ABB was to inform the public about accent bias and to suggest pathways to mitigate bias. This requires a different focus for public communication, leaning heavily on the stated value of *expertise*. In line with this brand goal, ABB’s website is written authoritatively but also clearly for a lay audience, and includes training interventions (<https://accentbiasbritain.org/training-intervention/>) for organizations and individuals looking to mitigate accent bias. A layman language report (Levon et al. 2022) was produced for the Sutton Trust, a national UK charity that works to improve social mobility. The Sutton Trust’s own high brand equity and association with expertise served to amplify ABB’s message that accent bias hinders mobility.

5 Summary

We have argued here that research projects are brands, just as universities are brands, and sociolinguistic fieldworkers are personal brands. Branding may seem like a frivolous extra that obscures or even drains resources from valuable academic work (Mathews 2021), but when judiciously employed it can boost the success of the research. Moreover, sociolinguists have been using branding from the inception of the field. Sociolinguists have projected legitimacy through university consent forms, and even lab coats (Ohio State College of Arts and Sciences 2016). And they have long attended to the brand persona of the “approachable listener” by considering fieldwork clothing choices and spaces they enter or avoid (e.g., Eckert 1989). This is where strong branding can shore up trust, serving as a “risk reliever” for stakeholders (Erdem and Swait 1998).

Yet even when researchers feel positive about more explicitly corporate forms of branding, they may simply not have the time and resources to make branding their labs or projects worthwhile (Mathews 2021; Philpott et al. 2011; Ritchie et al. 1999). Of course, major grants and external PR firms can exponentially improve a project’s success in areas like participant recruitment and public engagement. But we emphasize that branding is simply thinking – albeit in a focused and intentional way – about the research project and the ethos we want to project. For this, no funding is required. Furthermore, sociolinguists are already trained in an array of relevant conceptual tools, from indexicality (Silverstein 2003) and audience design (Bell 1984) to positionality (Savin-Baden and Major 2022). Science communication guides typically emphasize how to convey factual information to audiences; but sociolinguists know how to think about the semiotics of their message too (Batra 2019).

Branding may be especially helpful for larger projects, but explicating a research project’s desired indexical field is a good exercise for everyone. It can be clarifying for a solo researcher, and can ensure members of teams

all have the same mental map. A clearly defined brand can also motivate stakeholders to contribute resources. Importantly, a visible and consistent research project brand can reach and reassure people who might not otherwise feel invested in its work, because they are not at a research institution, are minoritized, or are not in academia at all. Finally, good branding communicates a project's goals in appropriate ways to each of the project's audiences. As Adam Brown (pers. comm.) points out, “that combination – a good understanding of your audiences and what matters to them, clear and compelling key messages, and consistency and discipline in using those messages” – was fundamental to the success of ABB. It is a lesson that all researchers can learn.

Most importantly, branding is streamlining. Project leaders can stretch resources, stakeholders know immediately what the brand is all about, and team members know what they are doing. To achieve this, we recommend (along with our ABB colleagues) that researchers conduct MVV exercises early on and with as many team members and stakeholders as possible (including with qualified PR professionals, if budget allows). Referring to research by Morrison and Firmstone (2000), Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel (2013: 22) observe that “brands function in the same way as trust, by *simplifying decision making and acting as summarized knowledge*”. Indeed, branding can be a valuable shortcut – cutting down on shoe-leather effort to recruit and retain participants and team members, signifying quality to internal and external audiences, and breaking through the walls of the ivory tower to communicate project goals and outcomes to the public. We call on universities to recognize projects as brands and to support them appropriately in the pre- and post-award process, and even in early stages of unfunded pilot work. Such support is more likely to materialize with systematic investigation and quantification of the effect of branding on participant recruitment and retention, public engagement, and research outputs. While such an investigation is beyond the scope of the present paper, we hope to see future work in this direction, whether conducted by linguists, other scientists, or marketing scholars.

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