Sociolinguistic research projects as brands

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Our goals

1. **Develop high brand equity for a sociolinguistic research project…**

   Stakeholders (participants, funders, reviewers, students, the public) are **aware** of the project, know what **image** it has, and **trust** the project.

2. **…while mitigating the Observer's Paradox**

   Participants are comfortable enough to produce vernacular language; not turned off by overly slick or formal branding.

Education brands

- Education entities are brands – not always obviously
  - Universities, research centers, labs, scientists, Twitter linguists, even sociolinguistic fieldworkers…
- Brands attract resources (inc. participants); build reputation; influence public education and policy
- Let's think this way about sociolinguistic research projects
- **Brand equity** = **brand awareness, brand trust** and **brand image**
  - crucial: the brand's "intangible attributes" (Sammut-Bonici 2015) like *fun, reliable*
  - Similar to an **indexical field** (Eckert 2008)

Case: MI Diaries

- Launched 2020: *MI Covid Diaries*
- Self-recordings on mobile app

- Relaunched late 2021
- Pandemic no longer a motivator
- Updated brand image (but not just visual!)

Mission, values, meaning

MI Diaries ran a *mission, vision, and values* exercise (e.g. Want 1986).

Mission
- What's your research question/agenda?
- What are the broader impacts?
- What are the outcomes / legacy you'll leave?

To document changes in the lives and language of Michiganders, while fostering an inclusive community and a sense of connection in a time where neither are easy to experience. We aim to provide a place for diarists to confidently share their true selves, while also contributing their stories to a larger historical archive of life during and after the pandemic.
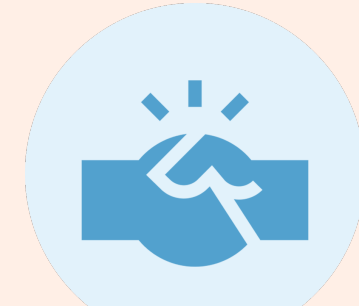
Values
- What do you care about most?
- What do you want to model for others?
- What will serve your mission?

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 for Michiganders by Michiganders.

Meaning
- How do values translate to meanings?
- What should be in brand indexical field?

Spartans — determined — authentic — funny — friendly — approachable

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

scholars — protective — trustworthy — caring — equitable

mentorship

LIBRARY OF MICHIGAN — research longevity — custodians

Putting it together

MI Diaries (Sneller, Wagner & Ye 2022)
- Selected diaries featured weekly on web, media. Stories with swearing, risky behavior foreground *authenticity* but may affect *trustworthiness*.
- Partner organizations can't be too local (*longevity* is state-wide) or bourgeois (affects *authenticity*).
- Mentioning student team in social media promotes *mentorship* but foregrounds higher education (affecting *authenticity*)
- Classic sociolinguistic fieldwork tension between *authenticity* and *trustworthiness*:
  - Weekly participant e-mail, social media 'voice' must be colloquial (*authenticity*) but not too much (*trustworthiness*)
  - Brand colors: Green indexes MSU (*trustworthy, scholarly*); peach indexes *fun, approachable, friendly, caring*.

Other projects
- 'Accent Van' graphics, merchandise for Manchester Voices (Drummond et al 2022) balance *friendliness*, *localness* (city's bee emblem) with *trustworthiness* (high production values).
- Accent Bias in Britain (Levon et al 2020) originally 'ABFAB': Catchy but indexed *silly, absurd*; mismatch for project about discrimination, *justice* (Levon p.c.).
- Our Dialects (MacKenzie et al 2022) avoided institutional website, sought standalone brand image for *approachability*, *national* scope.

Take-aways

- Include branding in initial project development (Levon p.c)
  - mission, vision, values exercise can help
  - indexical field is crucial

  "[B]rands function in the same way as trust, by simplifying decision making and acting as summarized knowledge"
  (Morris & Firmstone 2000:607)

- **Continually** come back to the brand and its values.
- Low/no budget projects are still brands!
  - Reflexivity; positionality – what do you index? What *don't* you want to index?
- High brand equity comes from clear and consistent image that is aligned with the brand's indexical field.

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