PROMISES TO KEEP: HOW INSTITUTIONAL BRAND ALIGNS WITH THE ADULT LEARNER EXPERIENCE

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Mariana Elizabeth O'Malley, born halfway through this quest toward a doctorate! I hope you grow up to be curious, confident, and compassionate. Continue to explore and question the status quo, pushing limits and creating new boundaries. In the words of Hillary Clinton, "never doubt that you are valuable and powerful and deserving of every chance and opportunity in the world to pursue and achieve your own dreams." You are the future, and the future is bright.

Abstract

The use of branding in higher education continues to grow as institutions invest more than ever before in marketing to attract and retain students. As institutions face enrollment pressures, higher education leaders are increasingly turning to online education and the adult learner population to combat stagnation in postsecondary enrollment. This study uses multiple case narrative to understand the alignment between institutional brand promises and the adult learner experience in an online master's degree program. A review of the extant literature revealed a limited amount of research about the intersection of branding and student satisfaction, and this study aims to fill the gap and offer recommendations intended to improve authenticity, effectiveness, and integrity of higher education marketing. The study uses expectation confirmation theory to better understand how the adult learner experience exceeds, meets, or falls short of expectations once the student enrolls. Through the stories of 17 adult learners pursuing online master's degrees across the United States, this research offers implications for practice among higher education marketing practitioners and leaders to ensure accurate marketing, quality academic experiences, and satisfaction among adult learners. While this research found some dissonance between institutional marketing and student experience, the majority of participants expressed satisfaction with their programs, indicating their experiences met or exceeded their expectations. Semi-structured interviews revealed the importance of perceived reputation, brand identity, and high service quality when seeking to satisfy adult learners.

Keywords: marketing, branding, adult learner, online education, master's degree, student satisfaction, expectation confirmation theory

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this multiple case narrative study is to understand the alignment between institutional brand promises and the adult learner experience in an online master's degree program. Within marketing, a strong brand is a manifestation of an institution's unique identity and should reflect that institution's ability to satisfy the needs of students, engender trust, and help prospective students make enrollment decisions (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009; Bick et al., 2003; Gutman & Miaoulis, 2003; Nguyen et al., 2019). A gap currently exists in understanding the impact of a brand on prospective students during the enrollment phase and once these prospects enroll as students in an institution (Bradley, 2018; Casidy & Wymer, 2015; Gibbs & Dean, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2019; Özkanal, 2019). Marketing practitioners who work to cultivate and communicate an institutional brand will benefit from understanding how adult learners view the alignment of brand promises with their experiences, as it may influence how messages are crafted and services are delivered, making the brand more effective and authentic. A primary aim of this research is to contribute to creating a culture of accountability among practitioners tasked with marketing the brand of an institution. The knowledge generated has the potential to initiate change within marketing departments and institutions at large when it comes to ensuring the fidelity between the institutional brand and the student experience.

This chapter begins with a statement of the problem with supporting evidence from the literature that elucidates the current issues facing marketing and branding in a higher education context. The significance of the study is discussed next, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work, followed by the research questions associated with this study. Finally, expectation confirmation theory, the theoretical framework serving as the lens for this study, is

introduced and described along with a brief description of the brand touchpoint wheel, the secondary framework being used for this research.

Problem Statement

The modern marketing landscape in higher education has dramatically shifted as the enrollment pressures facing institutions reach a boiling point. While enrollment growth is flat (Conley, 2019; Fain, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Westervelt, 2016), competition amongst educational providers is on the rise (Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2017; Gottschall & Saltmarsh, 2017; MacDonald 2018; Özkanal, 2019; Sinha & Bagarukayo, 2019). In this highly competitive landscape, colleges are increasingly approaching students as consumers and targeting them through the use of more refined consumer marketing tactics (Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2017; Gibbs, 2011; Guilbault, 2016; Parahoo et al., 2016; Woodall et al., 2014). Marketing is a key differentiating factor for attracting prospective students to attend a college or university with the aim of improving enrollment (Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2017; Jones, 2018; Lim et al., 2018; Özkanal, 2019).

In response to these factors, institutions are investing more than ever before in marketing to attract prospective students, with estimates as high as $100 billion spent annually on marketing and branding (Brock, 2017; Gibbs, 2011; Hall, 2019; Katzman, 2016; Torres, 2019). The growing investment into marketing efforts has led to scrutiny over funding (Marcus, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2018) and regulation at the federal level (McKenzie, 2019). This scrutiny extends to the cost of marketing to adult learners (McKenzie, 2019)—students over the age of 24 (Francois, 2014)—who have been identified as a prime market targeted to combat stagnation in overall postsecondary enrollment (Conley, 2019; Fain, 2017; Field, 2019; Murchison, 2018; Westervelt, 2016).

Despite this growing investment and attention, the impact of marketing and brand in higher education has been understudied (Bradley, 2018; Casidy & Wymer, 2015; Elsharnouby, 2015; Gibbs & Dean, 2015; Lai et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2019; Ozkanal, 2019) and there are calls for more understanding of the fidelity between promises and experiences (Hall, 2019; Mause, 2010; Smith, 2019; Zapata & Tejeda, 2016). Marketers today have access to dozens of metrics to measure the financial performance of their efforts—from advertising click-through rates to the cost of acquiring an enrolled student. However, little is known about if and how brand promises align with student experiences. As institutions adopt more corporate-style marketing practices (Arnim, 2019; Lawrence, 2019; Parahoo et al., 2016) and become more aggressive in their outreach, particularly to the large and growing adult learner market (EAB, 2019; Field, 2019; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Katzman, 2016), more should be understood about marketing practices and promises made about online programs (Bradley, 2013; Bradley, 2018; Carey, 2019; Hall & Dudley, 2019; Mitchell, 2017; Onsman, 2008). The 2020 global pandemic, which ignited a fervor within higher education to rapidly adopt online education (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020), also signals a need to more deeply understand what is being promised to the growing number online learners and what is being delivered. Without alignment between promises and experiences, there are significant risks for institutions and individuals. Therefore, this study seeks to understand the alignment between institutional brand promises and the adult learner experience in an online master's degree program.

Significance of the Research

As the use of marketing and branding continues to rise in prominence within higher education (Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2017; Dholakia & Acciardo, 2014; Elsharnouby, 2015; Furey et al., 2014; McManus et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2019), there is clearly a need to better

understand the impact of marketing and branding in relation to the student experience (Casidy & Wymer, 2015; Gibbs & Dean, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2019; Özkanal, 2019). Understanding how closely aligned the brand promises of a particular institution are with the actual student experience could help institutions spend their marketing budgets more wisely, refine messaging to be more effective and authentic, be more accountable, and increase student satisfaction leading to improved retention and engagement (Casidy, 2014; Chen, 2017). Additionally, the implications of this research could potentially be useful for individual students, as researchers point out that marketing is used to inform which school students enroll in, stay in, and give back to (Casidy, 2014; Chen, 2017; Joseph et al., 2012; McManus et al., 2017; Winter & Chapleo, 2017). This current study is significant because marketing spending has reached an all-time high, the literature reveals limited understanding of the impact marketing and branding have on adult learners, and there is increasing scrutiny and regulation related to institutional marketing.

As noted above, based on reported estimates of institutional marketing budgets and anticipated student enrollment, it is projected that more than $100 billion will be spent annually on marketing efforts by higher education institutions in the United States. This is approximately 17% of what postsecondary institutions annually spend in total (Fong & Caldwell, 2016; Katzman, 2016; Hall, 2019; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2018; The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019; Torres, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). With institutions' higher investment into marketing and recruiting, institutional resources are potentially being pulled away from other initiatives such as instruction and student support (Hall, 2019; Katzman, 2016; Torres, 2019). Institutions need to justify the effectiveness of their marketing spending and analyze the impact of their spending from multiple angles to ensure their investment results in a gainful return (Favaloro, 2015) and is appropriate given it may detract from funding other student

initiatives (Hall, 2019), leading to poor student satisfaction and abysmal persistence (Butrymowicz & Kolodner, 2020).

There is only one peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the intersection of marketing and higher education: *the Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*. Many researchers have called for further investigation of higher education institutions' marketing practices (Bradley, 2018; Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2017; Guilbault, 2016; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Similarly, higher education branding, a subset of marketing, is in its infancy as a practice and in terms of research on the subject (Garipağaoğlu, 2016; Idris & Whitfield, 2014; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Furthermore, while student satisfaction is adequately covered across the higher education literature (Santini, Ladeira, Sampaio, & Costa, 2017), there are only a handful of articles from the past five years directly connecting marketing and branding to an impact on student satisfaction in the United States (Casidy & Wymer, 2015; Chen & Chen, 2017; Dennis et al., 2016; Elsharnouby, 2015; Kaushal & Ali, 2019). While there is recognition of the influence marketing and branding have on college selection (Parahoo et al., 2016), little has been done to explore how the promises made by higher education institutions align with the student experience and are therefore ethical.

Nationally, a growing and troubling trend of unethical and predatory practices has been brought to the forefront as institutions of all types attempt to attract more students for financial gain by promulgating exaggerated or untruthful claims (Hall, 2019; McKenzie, 2019; Salemme, 2017; Schade, 2014; Swaminathan, 2020). As Ward and Tierney (2017) point out, while many regulations were put into place to protect students during the Obama administration, the work was largely undone by the Trump administration and unethical marketing and recruiting practices continue to cause strife. At the Congressional level, there has been a resurgence to

regulate claims by for-profit institutions (Shireman, 2019), and states are also increasingly clamping down on predatory practices at institutions of all types (Smith, 2019). Public and non-profit universities and colleges feel the pressure to boost enrollment, relying on the publication of rankings and out-spending the competition to get in front of prospective students (Warner, 2018), leading to further examination of enrollment tactics (Field, 2019). Marketing practitioners have significant latitude when it comes to promoting universities (Bradley, 2013; Bradley, 2018) and there is minimal oversight of quality marketing methods (Mause, 2010). With the upsurge of litigation related to intentional predatory practices in higher education marketing and recruiting (Cellini & Koedel, 2017; Schade, 2014), and even inadvertent negligence (Bradley, 2013; Mitchell, 2017), it is an ideal time to explore the fidelity of brand promises and student experiences.

If institutions fail to keep their promises, the risk can range from disappointment at best (Howarth, & Stifler, 2019) to litigation at worst (Onsman, 2008; Schade, 2014)—the entire spectrum of which can damage the institutional reputation that marketing practitioners work meticulously to create. Potentially even more egregious, aggressive marketing tactics and false promises can lead to a loss of federal financial aid and accreditation (Hall, 2019). Higher education institutions should move toward having greater accountability and ensuring protection of students (Darolia, 2015), particularly as students continue to spend thousands of dollars each year based on the expectations established by institutions through their communication strategies (Ng & Forbes, 2009). By examining the experience of adult learners, this research may help contribute to improving authenticity, effectiveness, and transparency of institutional marketing and brands, and start a conversation among practitioners about the culture of ethics and accountability in higher education marketing.

Research Problem and Research Question

As competition in higher education grows, the response has been to invest more in marketing efforts (Hall, 2019; Katzman, 2016; Torres, 2019). This investment in marketing has led to the danger of false promises made by institutions and the potential impact on student satisfaction if there is a disconnect (Siddiqui, 2011), which remains understudied. According to Onsman (2008), institutions must be held to a higher standard and "rather than provide what its customers want, each university has an obligation to provide what it says it will provide" (p. 78). There have been several calls for more scrutiny of institutional marketing (Bradley, 2013; Bradley, 2018; Mitchell, 2017; Zapata & Tejeda, 2016) and the promises being made to prospective adult learners are particularly important to assess given this population faces a barrage of marketing as institutions attempt to improve struggling enrollment (Busta, 2019; EAB, 201; Field, 2019; Katzman, 2016; Westervelt, 2016). While this research was conducted prior to the rapid shift to online education as a result of the 2020 global pandemic, and it remains unknown how higher education will contend with online course delivery once a sense of normalcy returns, the likelihood of institutions prioritizing online education is high (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020), requiring further examination of the promises being made to online learners.

The primary research question guiding this study is: What is the alignment between institutional brand promises with the adult learner experience? The study seeks to understand how the student experience exceeds, meets, or falls short of expectations once an adult learner enrolls in an online master's degree program. This research uses expectation confirmation theory, discussed in the next section, as a theoretical framework to better understand the impact expectations have on student satisfaction, along with the brand touchpoint wheel to understand the channels institutions use to communicate brand.

Definition of Key Terminology

Adult Learner-A student who is over the age of 24 (Francois, 2014) and is enrolled in an academic program, likely part-time (Kasworm, 2012); adult learners often take on multiple roles: full-time worker, spouse or partner, parent, or caregiver (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Contrast this with traditional students, who are typically between the ages of 18 and 22, attend school full-time, have few financial responsibilities, and likely live on campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998).

Brand-Brand, a subset of marketing, is an organization's unique identity (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008) and consists of the promises made to a consumer (Chapleo et al. 2011). The brand should be a "promise of future satisfaction" (Tolbert, 2014, p. 236), striving to reflect an institution's ability to satisfy the needs of students, engender trust, and help prospective students make enrollment decisions (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009; Bick et al., 2003).

Consumer-A customer who uses a product or service that is purchased. In the context of higher education, this term is at times considered controversial, yet is increasingly being used to refer to prospective or current students (Guilbault, 2016).

Marketing-Marketing is the delivery of communication and information that may have value to customers about reputation, competitive advantage, and overall brand (Favaloro, 2015). In the higher education context, marketing shapes the perceptions prospective students have about institutional reputation and image (Royo-Vela & Hünermund, 2016).

Reputation-Institutional reputation is the "…perception of customer experience of all services provided by the institution including service quality, university contribution, accreditation as well as student and alumni profiling" (Sembiring, 2014, p. 18). Reputation is a combination of internal and external perceptions based on the experiences of stakeholders (Suomi, 2014).

Satisfaction-Satisfaction is a feeling of pleasure or disappointment held by a consumer resulting from a comparison of performance and expectations (Kotler, 2000). Satisfaction in relation to higher education can be defined as an attitude, though perhaps a temporary one, that a student has based on their experience at a college or university (Casidy, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework has an impact on each part of the research process, including the problem of practice, research questions, methodology, findings, and analysis (Anfara & Mertz, 2014). The theoretical framework for this study is expectation confirmation theory (ECT), which offers a business-oriented lens to better understand consumer satisfaction (Oliver, 1980). A secondary framework, the brand touchpoint wheel (Davis & Dunn, 2002), is also used to ground this research.

The Evolution of ECT

The seminal author of expectation confirmation theory (ECT) is Oliver (1977; 1980; 1981; 1997), beginning in journals such as the *Journal of Applied Psychology* and the *Journal of Marketing Research*. Primarily used in psychology and consumer behavior contexts, ECT is a cognitive theory pertaining to post-purchase satisfaction (Oliver, 1980). There are four constructs that make up ECT (see Figure 1), including expectations, the perception of performance, disconfirmation, and consumer satisfaction (Oliver, 1997). Expectations are used by consumers to evaluate performance and assess whether there is a disconfirmation of beliefs (Halstead, 1999), meaning that performance is perceived based on positive or negative expectations (Oliver, 1980). The term “disconfirmation” may have a negative connotation, but in this model a disconfirmation of belief could be positive, meaning the product or service outperformed expectations, resulting in a disconfirmation of belief (Bhattacherjee, 2001). Throughout the

marketing literature, ECT is also known as "expectation disconfirmation theory," but is more commonly referred to as expectation confirmation theory (Bhattacherjee, 2001; Wang et al., 2018).

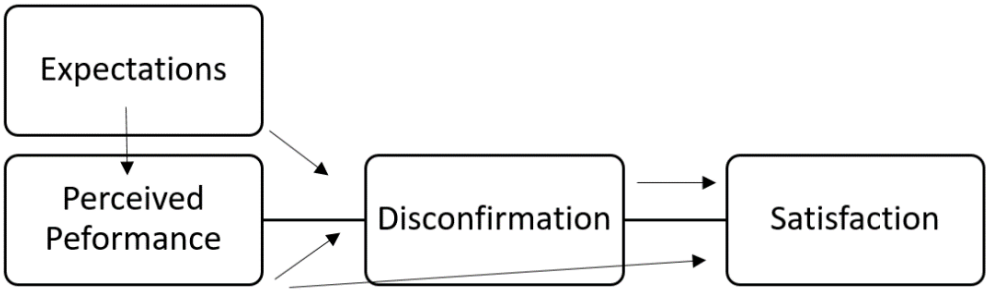

Figure 1. Expectation Confirmation Theory Diagram

Leading marketing scholar Keith (1960) highlighted the importance of the consumer in marketing, which he claimed to be "the most important function in business" (p. 35). As marketing theory evolved to focus on the buyer's perspective in the 1950s and 1960s, satisfying the customer became a paramount component of marketing as a practice (Kaur & Sharma, 2009). In fact, the concept of marketing as a business orientation striving to satisfy customers and generate revenue only emerged in the 1960s (Shaw & Tamilia, 2001). This emergence led to deeper research into consumer satisfaction within the discipline of marketing. While ECT wasn't fully developed until 1980, it stems from Anderson's (1973) earlier research on consumer dissatisfaction compared to expectations shaped by promotion. The theory really took hold within consumer behavior research, in which ECT is predominately leveraged as a way to predict and explain consumer behavior and shopping continuance (Qin, 2007).

Anderson and Sullivan (1993) deepened the discussion of satisfaction within consumer behavior research by confirming that satisfaction is best perceived when quality matches expectations developed prior to purchase. This is particularly useful in the context of marketing,

since advertising and information provided prior to purchase will shape the perception of performance (Anderson, 1973). While ECT was initially used within the realm of consumer behavior, it wasn't until three decades later that the influence of marketing communication on ECT was explored more thoroughly by Spreng et al. (1996); these researchers determined that marketing communication plays a significant role in determining consumer satisfaction and the disconfirmation or confirmation of expectations. Essentially, Spreng et al. (1996) found the use of marketing communication is influential in shaping expectations. Additionally, information satisfaction is a key component of overall satisfaction (Spreng et al., 1996). A more contemporary use of ECT resides in the field of information systems, first explored by Bhattacherjee (2001) who adapted ECT to determine continuance intention of information systems based on a user's expectations. Additionally, the hospitality and tourism industry has taken to ECT as a way to assess customer satisfaction with hotels and travel-related experiences (Pizam & Milman, 1993; Yüksel & Yüksel, 2001).

Counterarguments to ECT

Before Oliver (1980) developed expectation confirmation theory (ECT), theorists posited that customer satisfaction was determined based on values and desires (Value-Percept Theory) or through the process of comparisons (Equity Theory), while within ECT, the major tenet is that satisfaction is mediated by expectations and experiences (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2001). While these other theories related to consumer satisfaction are still in use today, they also serve as counterarguments to ECT, which relies on a disconfirmation of expectations as a primary principle. Researchers have also found that consumer satisfaction may still occur even if the experience falls short of the expectations (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2001), going against a significant tenet of Oliver's (1977) consumer behavior theory. Another counterargument to ECT is that

some consumers may use other standards beyond expectations such as desires or ideals in shaping post-purchase assessments, leading some researchers to discount ECT as an effective theory when it comes to consumer behavior analysis (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2001). Also related to expectations, another limitation of ECT is that it does not account for the dynamic nature of expectations and how these can shift dramatically depending on the lead up to the experience (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2001). For example, if a consumer has several interactions with a brand prior to purchase contrasted with just one experience, there may be varying levels of information that shape expectations. This was taken into account when developing the study since research participants have multiple touchpoints with an institution's marketing efforts.

While these counterarguments are certainly valid, ECT is still a strong and viable option for this particular research. ECT emerged from the field of marketing (Oliver, 1977) and is consistently used within marketing research today as a way to assess consumer satisfaction and behavior (Atapattu et al., 2016). Not only does ECT give insight into the satisfaction of consumers, but it also offers an opportunity to understand their propensity toward re-purchase (Liao et al., 2017; Lin et al., 2016; Qin, 2007) or in the context of higher education: student retention (Harris et al., 2011). ECT focuses on expectations being partially shaped by marketing activity (Oliver, 1977; Oliver, 1980; Spreng et al., 1996), which is a fundamental aspect of this particular research. While expectations and satisfaction are both difficult to determine, ECT provides a straightforward and accessible approach to assessing a consumer experience.

Rationale for Application of Expectation Confirmation Theory

The application of expectation confirmation theory (ECT) in a higher education context is novel, with limited research currently in existence that leverages this theoretical framework in the education field; these works include Arambewela and Hall (2009) who assessed international

student satisfaction related to educational services; Schwarz and Zhu (2015) who used the theory to assess the impact of student expectations around instructional tools on their engagement; and Lin et al. (2016) who leveraged ECT to propose a theoretical model for students' learning satisfaction and intent to continue in a blended e-learning environment. Since ECT is mostly used in the marketing, information technology, and hospitality industries, using this theory within higher education research is a relatively new approach, which deserves further exploration.

Traditionally, ECT has been used to indicate customer loyalty (Liao et al., 2017). ECT can help determine and predict repurchase or continuance of use (Qin, 2007), particularly related to technology (Lin et al., 2016). Succinctly put, satisfaction leads to loyalty. While higher education may not have repurchase opportunities in the customary consumer sense, satisfaction and loyalty among students leads to deeper alumni engagement (Santini et al., 2017), potential philanthropic donations (Parahoo et al., 2016; Stephenson & Yerger, 2013), and the opportunity for satisfied graduates to return to the institution to pursue lifelong learning opportunities (Wu et al., 2015). In this study, ECT can help shed light on the extent to which institutional experiences are meeting, falling short, or exceeding expectations shaped by the brand promises being made. Students use pre-purchase expectations to measure perceived performance and evaluate their experience and satisfaction level with an institution. While there is a lack of trust in universities to be completely transparent and accurate in its marketing (Gibbs & Dean, 2015), the lack of alignment between promises and experience is not proven and may vary by institution, advertising campaign, or individual interaction. As Spreng et al. (1996) found, marketing communication contributes to the formulation of expectations, which engender the perception of

performance. ECT is a straightforward theory that can be leveraged to better understand the expectations, experiences, and satisfaction level of students.

Application of Expectation Confirmation Theory to the Study

Expectation confirmation theory (ECT) is used as a guiding theoretical framework to shape this study's research questions, methodological approach including the questions for participants, and the analysis of data. To better understand student expectations, experiences, and satisfaction, ECT is a natural choice as a lens given its four components (expectations, the perception of performance, disconfirmation, and consumer satisfaction) can be used to shape participant questions and how data is analyzed. While ECT easily lends itself to quantitative research, for example one could measure simply *if* experiences met, fell short, or exceeded expectations, this is a qualitative study in order to ascertain deeper insights into the *impact* of promises aligning or not aligning with student experience. A strong argument is made by Harper (2007) to use qualitative methods when examining the impact of an institution on the experiences of students. Harper (2007) advocates that qualitative methods help gain a deeper understanding of student experience and claims that quantitative methods result in an "incomplete assessment picture that lacks depth, complexity, personal accountability, and voice" (p. 56). Kuh and Andreas (1991) argued for the use of qualitative research in student affairs, and Harper and Kuh (2007) further explore this and indicate there are many limitations to quantitative research compared to using qualitative research to understand the complexity of the lived experiences of students pursuing higher education.

The Brand Touchpoint Wheel

In addition to expectation confirmation theory (ECT), a secondary framework is used to ground this research and guide the order of interview questions and data analysis. The brand

touchpoint wheel (BTW) has four brand touchpoint categories including pre-purchase touchpoints, purchase touchpoints, post-purchase touchpoints, and influencing touchpoints (Davis & Dunn, 2002). Touchpoints are the ways "an organization's brand interacts with and makes an impression on customers, employees, and other stakeholders" (Davis & Dunn, 2002, p. 58). The touchpoints represent "points of contact between a brand and the consumers who encounter it" (Lee et al., 2013, p. 15). From advertising to phone support, there are several touchpoints an organization makes with a consumer that can influence their perception of the brand (Davis & Dunn, 2002).

The BTW framework (see Figure 2) was adapted from a general marketing tool for higher education purposes by Khanna et al. (2014) to have four touchpoint categories related to the student experience: pre-admission touchpoints, during the course touchpoints, post-passing touchpoints, and influencing touchpoints. The touchpoints a student encounters shape the overall perception of their experience; the media and information provided prior to admission serve as critical components of the student's perception of the brand and contribute greatly to the student's decision to enroll (Khanna et al., 2014). This framework helps guide the chronological flow of participant interview questions, as well as frame the order of data analysis and presentation of the findings, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

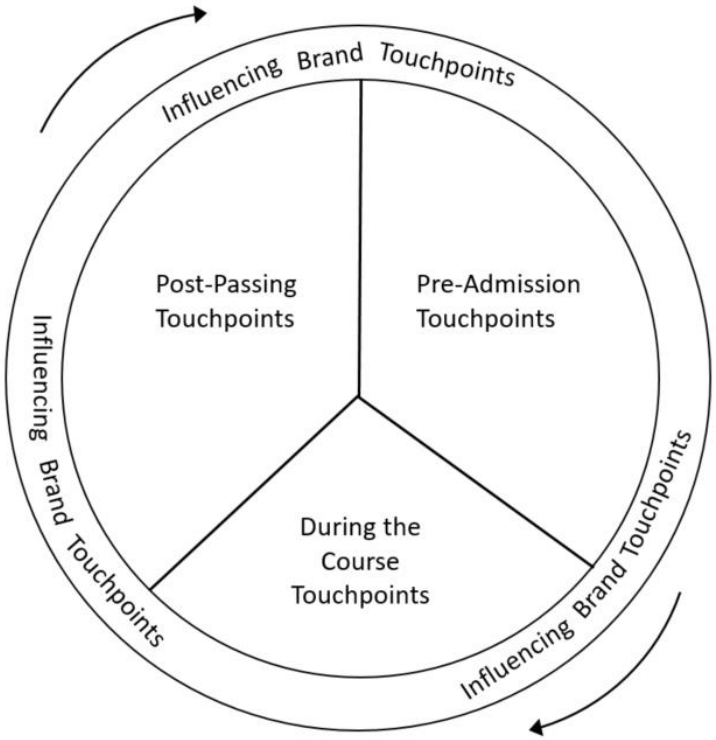

Figure 2. Brand Touchpoint Wheel Adapted for Higher Education (Khanna, Jacob, & Yadav, 2014).

The aim of marketing is to shape the way people perceive a brand, but the experience an individual has with an institution or organization also contributes to that brand perception and may shift over time. Branding, in essence, is a combination of an organization's identity that is presented to the world, in addition to the reality of the experience had by the consumer (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008). The BTW indicates the touchpoints, or moments in time, a consumer interacts with a brand. The ECT framework helps assess consumer satisfaction based on their interactions with a brand. Combining these two frameworks offers a robust way of examining the alignment between institutional brand promises and the adult learner experience.

Summation

As discussed above, marketing in a higher education context has changed drastically as institutions face increasing enrollment pressures and need to differentiate through distinct branding. The impact of these changes is crucial to address as institutions face litigation and damage to their reputation if their brand promises are not fulfilled. This study uses expectation confirmation theory as the primary theoretical framework, with a secondary framework of the brand touchpoint wheel, to better understand the alignment of institutional brand promises with the adult learner experience in an online master's degree program. In the following chapter, a literature review of marketing and branding within the context of higher education will be presented along with how marketing and branding influence student satisfaction. With the focus of this study being on adult learners, a presentation of existing research on this particular population will be included as well.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Over the last decade, there has been a dramatic rise in enrollment competition among higher education institutions (Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2017; Gottschall & Saltmarsh, 2017; MacDonald, 2018; Özkanal, 2019; Sinha & Bagarukayo, 2019). In response to this, higher education marketing is more prominent than ever before and institutional marketing budgets are increasing to attract students and differentiate (Cellini & Chaudhary, 2020; Gibbs, 2011; Hall, 2019; Harvey, 2018; Katzman, 2016). Marketing and brand shape the perception of institutional reputation (Favaloro, 2015; Tolbert, 2014) and can influence student satisfaction and loyalty (Casidy, 2014; Lai et al., 2015). Institutions' growing investment in marketing has given way to a rise in the consumerization of higher education, with schools treating students as customers and in turn, students adopting a more consumer-oriented mindset (Favaloro, 2015; Gibbs, 2011; Guilbault, 2016; Parahoo et al., 2016; Tolbert, 2014; Woodall et al., 2014). As a way to increase enrollment, institutions have set their sights on adult learners pursuing online education as an ideal consumer population (Conley, 2019; Fain, 2017; Westervelt, 2016). While aggressive marketing becomes a more relied upon strategy to attract adult learner enrollments (Dimeo, 2017; Magda & Aslanian, 2018; Manoff, 2019; McKenzie, 2019), little is known about the impact of these efforts on students and how the promises align with the student experience.

The purpose of this chapter is to position this study within the context of the existing scholarly work and justify the importance of the identified research (Creswell, 2012). This literature review surveys three major thematic strands within the existing research: 1) the evolution of marketing and brand, particularly in a higher education context 2) the factors that shape student satisfaction with an institution and 3) the role of adult learners in growing enrollment. The final section of this chapter will discuss how these thematic areas intersect and

situate this research within the extant literature. It should be noted that while “consumer” and “customer” are used interchangeably with “student” throughout the literature — a debate to be described later in this literature review — this particular study will use the term student.

Marketing and Brand in a Higher Education Context

As a general business practice, marketing communicates value to customers, clients, partners, and society (American Marketing Association, 2013) and takes into consideration the competition, target market, and the unique selling proposition of a product or service (Reichheld, 1994; Wright et al., 2012). Marketing is a critical practice for any organization and globally, corporations are estimated to have spent approximately $616 billion on advertising in 2019 (McDonald, 2019). Increasingly, higher education is turning to marketing to shape prospective student perceptions about institutional reputation and image (Royo-Vela & Hünermund, 2016). The perceptions that students hold shape their decisions when it comes to college selection (Munisamy et al., 2014) and loyalty as alumni (Casidy, 2014). In the following section, the literature on the evolution of marketing will be explored, along with a significant component of marketing: brand. The ethical issues associated with marketing in a higher education context will also be discussed, including the regulations in place to protect consumers.

Marketing and Brand in a Corporate Context

Marketing as a strategic management practice has only existed since the early 1900s (Jones & Shaw, 2002). In the past century, the concept of marketing has evolved to become an integrated, complex, and indispensable practice for all organizations (Jones & Shaw, 2002; Kumar, 2015). Specialty areas within marketing emerged in the 1960s, including quantitative analysis, consumer behavior, and marketing management (Jones & Shaw, 2002). This deepening of marketing as a practice led to the emergence of marketing as a science, an oft-debated notion

for many years (Jones & Shaw, 2002; Kumar, 2015; Shaw & Tamilia, 2001). By the early 1990s, however, most scholars agreed that marketing is a science and this was reflected in research endeavors and publications (Bass, 1993). The advent of the internet in the early 21st century created a new phase of marketing in the digital realm, taking advantage of data to measure performance and personalize content for consumers (Mortimer, 2018).

Stemming from business strategy, branding is a marketing practice (Nguyen et al., 2019) aiming to differentiate an organization through messages and visuals based on what it offers and what it stands for, boiling down to an organization's unique identity (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008) and the promises made to a consumer (Chapleo et al., 2011). Brand comes into play during every stage of the consumer journey — a concept developed in the late 19th century illustrating the purchase funnel that includes building awareness, forming an opinion, considering the product/service, developing a preference, and leading to a purchase (Lewis, 1899; Wren, 2017). Brand in a corporate context has evolved from a simple identifier such as logos and trademarks at the start of the 20th century to being a symbolic image of a consumer product (Merz et al., 2009). By the 1950s, people would "buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean" (Levy, 1959, p. 118). The early 1990s saw a shift in the way consumers related to brands, with brands becoming a relationship partner (Merz et al., 2009). Since 2000, brands have become more dynamic and social, with Muniz et al. (2001) calling branding a continuous social process.

The body of scholarly marketing literature started to form at the beginning of the 20th century (Jones & Shaw, 2002). Subsequently, there has been extensive research on marketing as it pertains to the retail and consumer environment since the inception of the *Journal of Marketing* in 1936 (Applebaum, 1947) and the dozens of related journals released in its wake.

From Borden (1965) first establishing the concept of the marketing mix to Keller's (2003) exploration of strategic brand management as a subset of marketing to Kotler and Armstrong's (2016) many editions of the *Principles of Marketing*, significant contributions have been made to the marketing literature by a variety of scholars. Yet, limited research exists about the intersection of marketing and higher education, particularly brand in higher education (Lim et al., 2018). In fact, Casanoves-Boix and Küster-Boluda (2017) call the existing research in this area lacking and incoherent. This is likely because marketing for academic institutions is a relatively new concept (Idris & Whitfield, 2014) and marketing as a practice is an emerging field of research in higher education (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006).

Marketing and Brand in a Higher Education Context

Early marketing scholar Bartels (1962) suggested that marketing should not only reside within the business realm, but rather be used for all types of organizations. Kotler and Levy (1969) furthered this notion, claiming non-business entities need to adopt marketing practices in order to survive. Higher education heard this call and saw marketing as a business practice that could be used to sell an experience and improve enrollment (Fiske, 1979). Financial woes and declining student numbers across the higher education sector in the 1960s and 1970s forced many colleges and universities to reimagine how to convey the value of a college education and compete among other institutions through the use of marketing (Hill, 2015; Rudd & Mills, 2008).

As Bartels (1976) continued to explore the role of marketing outside the confines of the business world in his seminal book on marketing thought, the higher education field was shaken up by the presentation of a more marketing-oriented approach with the introduction of “enrollment management” by Maguire (1976). Combining marketing fundamentals with data-driven recruiting tactics, Maguire (1976) defined enrollment management as “a process that

brings together often disparate functions having to do with recruiting, funding, tracking, retaining, and replacing students" (p. 16). Enrollment management involves the adoption of business strategies to acquire customers and grow institutional enrollment (Hill, 2018). Prior to this shift within the higher education landscape, institutions operated with more informal processes, but then Keller (1983) made waves by being one of the first to recommend a more strategic management of higher education in order to survive (Temple, 2017). Maguire (1976) viewed the higher education landscape as a marketplace (Hill, 2015), and while it took several decades for other institutions to adopt this philosophy, the practice of marketing and strategic enrollment management within higher education soon formalized and has become standard practice (Casanoves-Boix & Küster-Boluda, 2017; Svenson & Wood, 2007). In the second decade of the 21st century, a post-recession economy and increased competition among education providers have created a similar macro-environment as the mid-20th century, leading colleges and universities to turn to aggressive marketing to help grow institutional enrollment (Tucker & Au, 2019).

At the turn of the 21st century, branding as a practice within higher education rose in prominence (Idris & Whitfield, 2014) and has only recently emerged as a significant area of focus for university leaders (Lim et al., 2018; Sickler, 2018). Brand plays a major role in how prospective students initially select an institution (Joseph et al., 2012; McManus et al., 2017), not to mention an effective brand and reputation can help cultivate satisfaction and loyalty in students for their respective institutions (Chen, 2017; Casidy, 2014; Stoner, 2019). Researchers agree there is limited study about what makes a successful brand within higher education (Chapleo, 2008; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008; Bock et al., 2014), though Chapleo (2010) defines a successful university brand as a clear and consistent way of "demonstrating a distinct

competitive advantage and congruous with the needs of various customer/stakeholder groups" (p. 172).

The brand, Tolbert (2014) asserts, is a tool that communicates what prospective students can expect from a college or university. When it comes to attracting students, research shows that prospective students use a variety of information sources when determining the best fit, including printed materials, digital channels, and in-person experiences (Lettice et al., 2017; Royo-Vela & Hünermund, 2016; Winter & Chapleo, 2017). Marketing tactics incorporate many factors when shaping institutional brand, including the promotion of mission and prestige (Tolbert, 2014). These findings are similar to those from Brown and Mazzarol (2008), who determined universities that clearly and creatively communicate their mission through their brand will not only attract students, but will have an improved chance of satisfying them once they enroll, plus build loyalty. Royo-Vela and Hünermund (2016) investigated the decision-making process of prospective students and the influence of marketing, finding it plays a significant role in how students shape their perception of an institution (Royo-Vela & Hünermund, 2016). The use of more interactive marketing tactics, such as social media, increases the likelihood of prospective students preferring an institution due to the increase in trust these consumers felt when evaluating university options (Royo-Vela & Hünermund, 2016). The effectiveness of marketing to attract students and differentiate from competition has led to an increased financial investment in marketing tactics (Gibbs, 2011; Hall, 2019; Harvey, 2018; Katzman, 2016).

Marketing Budgets in Higher Education

Given the aforementioned factors such as increased competition and the need to grow enrollment, institutional marketing budgets recently reached an all-time high (Brock, 2017; Hall,

2019; Katzman, 2016). Based on budget figures and enrollment trends, an estimated $100 billion will likely be spent in 2020 by higher education institutions on marketing, including advertising and media expenditures (Katzman, 2016; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2018). Across the spectrum of public, private, and non-profit institutions, marketing spend ranges from 1.5% to 15% of the operating budget (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019; Zinkan, 2017). The average private non-profit institution is spending under 5% of annual revenue on marketing, with online programs geared for adult learners spending upwards of 20% of annual revenue on marketing (McKenzie, 2019). Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), a private non-profit institution focusing on online education to adult learners, has an annual marketing spend of $139 million, about 17% of annual revenue, and is emblematic of the direction pursued by many institutions (McKenzie, 2019). As a school catering to adult learners, SNHU's strategic use of marketing and its level of spending demonstrate how the shifting dynamics at play within higher education coalesce through this singular, though extraordinary, example.

As the investment in institutional marketing continues to grow, marketing practitioners must be more ethical in the way they approach these efforts. Siddiqui (2011) warns of false promises made by institutions and the potential negative impact this can have on student satisfaction. This fear is well-founded given that prospective students are more likely to decide which institution to attend based on image rather than actual evidence (Favaloro, 2015). The pressure on universities to deliver a return on investment has led to using image as a way to cater to consumers and differentiate in a crowded field of competitors (Favaloro, 2015). There are nearly 5,000 degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States (Moody, 2019), and brand distinction is key to standing out to acquire and retain students (Pampaloni, 2010). As

marketing and brand rise is relevance in higher education, it leads to a question of whether students are consumers.

Students as Consumers

If the massive increase in marketing spend across the higher education landscape in order to reach, recruit, and retain students is any indication, it appears the consumerization of higher education has become the new standard (Guilbault, 2016). Increased competition (Royo-Vela & Hünermund, 2016; Tolbert, 2014), higher marketing spending (Hall, 2019; Katzman, 2016), and the perceived role of faculty as service providers (Gibbs, 2011) all contribute toward the rise of students believing they are customers, with many universities adopting a customer-oriented business model (Parahoo et al., 2016). While the concept of the student as a customer may extend prior to the 21st century, research on this topic only started to emerge in the early 2000s (Clayson & Haley, 2005). Many researchers argue against the trend of students being considered customers, citing that it challenges the very nature of higher education (Gibbs, 2011; Hubbell, 2015; Svenson & Wood, 2007), while others deem this shift inevitable (Guilbault, 2016; Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick, 2014).

Slaughter and Rhoades (2009) introduced the concept of academic capitalism, asserting that the consumerization of higher education had led to knowledge being viewed as a commodity that can deliver a profit rather than considered a public good. Hubbell (2015) took a strong stance against this student-as-consumer movement, stating that it is an indicator of academic decline. Customer satisfaction is not the goal of higher education according to Hubbell (2015), but rather learning is the primary objective, which is hindered when students are considered buyers. Adopting a customer orientation leads to a “customer is always right” mentality among the students, absence of accountability, and a mindset that education is a commodity (Clayson &

Haley, 2005). Woodall et al. (2014) take a more neutral approach, claiming the debate is open as to whether students should be considered consumers and instead claim they *could* be considered consumers. Guilbault (2016) suggests ending the debate entirely given students already perceive themselves as customers, and instead proposes institutions reconcile academic integrity issues with the student-as-consumer mentality.

With the rise of consumerization in higher education comes an era of online review websites to describe student experiences, such as Yelp, Google, and ratemyprofessors.com (Major, 2019; Rosen, 2018). As students view their education as a service, they are more inclined to submit public reviews for the benefit of others, impacting institutional lead generation, course selection, and overall retention (ICEF Monitor, 2018; Major, 2019). Managing online reputation has become an increasingly important factor for colleges and universities looking to maintain and shape their brand image (Kumar, 2018). The online review culture and the concept of transparency marketing can have a positive impact on an institution's recruiting efforts by building trust and authenticity, as long as the promises closely align with the experiences (ICEF Monitor, 2018).

Despite potential protest from traditional academics, consumerism has crept into the halls of higher education and many colleges and universities now consider students as consumers (Gibbs, 2011; Guilbault, 2016; Parahoo et al., 2016; Tolbert, 2014). Institutions that adopt a marketing orientation and treat students as customers are more likely to increase student retention (Guilbault, 2016). As enrollment pressure increases, marketers are tasked to persuade prospective students to attend their institution, but it's important to keep in mind that "consumer trust is constantly threatened when a marketer's decision-making is framed by corporate pressure to attain specific performance goals" (Warren et al., 2012, p. 111). The online review culture

among consumers adds another layer to the debate and demonstrates the importance of authenticity in marketing. While the debate is likely to persist as to whether students are considered consumers, researchers and practitioners have called for additional consumer protection measures to guard students from misleading marketing and recruiting tactics (Bradley, 2018; Gibbs, 2011; Khanna et al., 2014).

Consumer Protection and Regulation in Higher Education

The interpretation that students are consumers leads to a discussion of consumer protection. The notion of consumer protection for students is long-standing; a brief yet poignant article published in 1978 calls for deeper consumer protection of university students who experience abusive practices by educational providers (Hamilton et al., 1978). The authors warn of institutions engaging in malpractice, including untrue or misleading advertising (Hamilton, Jung, & Wheeler, 1978). Despite this warning, little research has been executed on consumer protection as related to the marketing practices of higher education institutions. In fact, a search reveals only one article citing the Hamilton, June, and Wheeler (1978) piece (Mause, 2010). A more contemporary call for accountability is seen in research from Tolbert (2014) and Bradley (2018), who seek more protection of students in today's modern marketing era.

Historically, ethics and marketing have often intersected. Since the concept of a "marketplace" was first invented, deception has played a role in the practice of selling (Warren et al., 2012) and occurrences of ethical violations in marketing remain high to this day (Abela & Murphy, 2007). In the 1950s, most ethical issues pertaining to marketing involved misleading advertising and consumer manipulation, and these issues persist through the 21st century (Abela & Murphy, 2007; Nemko, 2017). Today, the internet compounds the ethical dilemmas facing marketing (Mortimer, 2018), with the influx of data leading to privacy concerns and the rise of

stealth marketing (Abela & Murphy, 2007), meaning covert promotional activity (Uslay, 2017). Higher education marketing is not immune to these ethical challenges.

Not only are marketing practitioners in the higher education sector facing greater scrutiny by their institutions when it comes to advertising spend (Favaloro, 2015), but they must also contend with the "reality gap" (Onsman, 2008, p. 80) that plagues some colleges and universities in terms of what is being promised and what is actually happening. From printed college viewbooks (Hartley & Morphew, 2008) to social media (Pippert et al., 2013), researchers have found significant disconnects between what institutions are selling and the reality of the college experience and call for further research on the topic (Bradley, 2018; Elsharnouby, 2015; Ng & Forbes, 2009). In one of the few recent pieces of literature related to the topic of misleading marketing tactics, Bradley (2018) proposes that universities take a more ethical stance in the ways in which they present their institution.

Codes of Ethics

As institutions strive for more marketing exposure, the concept of ethical marketing practice rises in prominence. Onsman (2008) championed the role of ethics in educational marketing as a way to avoid litigation, asserting that a deeper scrutiny of marketing messages is needed as dissatisfied students may consider legal action against institutions if promises do not align with student experiences. According to Onsman (2008), institutions must be held to a higher standard and "rather than provide what its customers want, each university has an obligation to provide what it says it will provide" (Osman, 2008, p. 78). Gibbs (2011) shared these sentiments, suggesting higher education marketing requires ethical scrutiny as consumerism pushes against the nature of higher education, proclaiming higher education should

be considered a "beacon of excellence" (p. 212), promoting knowledge and values opposed to the potential creation and spending of wealth.

In an attempt to provide ethical guidelines around higher education marketing, Gibbs and Murphy (2009) outline integrity, trust, fairness, and empathy as key pillars of ethical norms to be used by marketing practitioners promoting universities and colleges. More specifically, the researchers recommend professional judgment be used by practitioners when conjuring images and promises made to prospective students, while ensuring alignment between expectation and reality (Gibbs & Murphy, 2009). As an ethical guide for higher education marketing practitioners, Gibbs (2011) suggests use of the American Marketing Association Code of Ethics, which states that members should do no harm, foster trust, and embrace ethical values. However, Gibbs (2011) questions whether higher education marketers can adhere to these straightforward guidelines. Since student enrollment continues to be top of mind for institutional leaders in order to meet the bottom line (Gibbs, 2011; Hall, 2019), following codes of ethics becomes increasingly challenging for marketing practitioners tasked with meeting quantifiable goals.

Watchdog Groups

Few if any non-governmental watchdog groups related to ethical marketing practice in higher education are in place in the United States, though other countries have begun to tackle the issue. For example, the United Kingdom has two watchdog groups tasked with overseeing university marketing: the Advertising Standards Authority and the Quality Assurance Agency (Bradley, 2018). Momentum toward more watchdog oversight is growing in the United States. A recent example is the top independent accrediting body, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), activating a student consumer protection policy in September 2019 that aims to safeguard students against predatory marketing and recruiting practices (Higher Learning Commission,

2019). However, similar to other HLC policies, while institutions are held accountable for adherence to the policies, there are no prescribed approaches to do so and colleges and universities are only evaluated for compliance if the HLC receives a complaint (Higher Learning Commission, 2019).

Consumer Protection Regulation

Prospective students are ill-informed about educational services of institutions due to minimal oversight of quality marketing methods, leading to calls for additional government intervention and prudence on behalf of the market (Mause, 2010). Federal intervention in the early 1990s helped curve manipulative recruiting practices as Congress created regulation around incentivizing enrollment by banning commission (Shireman, 2019). Nearly two decades later, the Obama administration attempted to further protect students through regulation, but much of that work was undone by the Trump administration (Ward & Tierney, 2017).

The Federal Trade Commission works to protect prospective students from false advertising, recently forcing the University of Phoenix into a record $191 million settlement based on its deceptive advertising making false promises regarding future employment (Chappell, 2019). While truth-in-advertising laws are in place to protect end-users from deceptive advertising tactics, many within higher education still resort to exaggerated or misleading claims in their marketing materials (Bradley, 208; Mause, 2010; Schade, 2014), particularly for-profit institutions (Cellini & Koedel, 2017).

As demonstrated by McKenzie (2019), Royo-Vela and Hünermund (2016), Tucker and Au (2019), and Winter and Chapleo (2017), marketing and brand play important parts in today's higher education landscape, with more budgets being dedicated to these efforts in order to stand out amongst increasing competition (Brock, 2017; Hall, 2019; Katzman, 2016). From more

traditional printed viewbooks to the modern day website, marketing shapes a student's perspective and expectations about an institution (Favaloro, 2015), giving much power to the marketing practitioner. However, the literature neglects to explore if the marketing and brand being espoused by an institution align with the student experience. While much of marketing is done in earnest on behalf of an institution, the literature shows there is something to be gained from overzealous claims. As competition grows and student satisfaction hangs in the balance, researchers agree ethical scrutiny and consumer protection are vital to maintain integrity within higher education marketing. Though researchers such as Gibbs (2011), Hubbell (2015), Guilbault (2016), and Woodall et al. (2014) fail to come to a consensus in regards to the student-as-consumer debate, one thing is clear after examination of the literature: prospective students need to be protected from predatory marketing practices, ensuring an experience grounded in reality, which in turn can lead to student satisfaction.

The Role of Marketing and Brand in Shaping Student Satisfaction

As Oliver (1981) explained in his seminal research on satisfaction in retail settings, satisfaction is the "summary psychological state resulting when the emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations is coupled with the consumer's prior feelings about the consumption experience" (Oliver, 1981, p. 27). While this definition derives from a retail environment, it is apt to use within the context of higher education in relation to student satisfaction. Challenging to capture, student satisfaction can only be determined based on expectations and experience, though experience at a university is constantly evolving (Elsharnouby, 2015). Satisfaction in relation to higher education can be defined as an attitude, though perhaps a temporary one, that a student has based on their experience at a college or university (Casidy, 2014). Loyalty, on the other hand, is not as fleeting as satisfaction and is considered a long-term commitment during

school and well beyond graduation (Casidy, 2014). Key factors in shaping student satisfaction will be discussed in this section, including the student experience (Elsharnouby, 2015; Parahoo et al., 2016; Sembiring, 2014), social engagement (Ku et al., 2013; Martirosyan, 2015; Richardson et al., 2017; Rios et al., 2018; Tompkins et al., 2016), a student's perception of service quality (Alfy & Abukari, 2019; Mai, 2015; Parahoo et al., 2016; Sultan & Wong, 2012), plus institutional marketing and brand (Elsharnouby, 2015; Ng & Forbes, 2009; Santini et al., 2017; Zeithaml et al., 1990).

General Factors in Shaping Student Satisfaction

Student Experience

Naturally, much of the literature finds student experience is a top determinant in shaping satisfaction (Elsharnouby, 2015; Parahoo et al., 2016; Sembiring, 2014). The student experience is defined as a student's engagement in their institutional environment and interactions with the microsystems within that environment (Jones, 2018). While student expectations about the university experience tend to shift dramatically given they typically lack a benchmark for comparison purposes as one might find with consumer products or services (Elsharnouby, 2015), experience cannot be overlooked as a key factor of student satisfaction. Sembiring's (2014) research demonstrates both experience and reputation play significant roles in student satisfaction post-enrollment. Parahoo et al. (2016) also found this congruent with their research, as the day-to-day student experience contributes significantly to a student's sense of satisfaction.

Social Engagement

Whether a course is delivered on campus or online, research indicates social engagement is a key factor in shaping student satisfaction (Ku et al., 2013; Martirosyan, 2015; Richardson, Maeda et al., 2017; Rios et al., 2018; Tompkins et al., 2016). For traditional campus programs,

involvement in campus life and social integration are key factors in shaping student satisfaction and securing retention (Martirosyan, 2015). In online programs, Horzum (2017) found overall student satisfaction is highest when social presence is high. Among online master's degree students, collaboration and relationships ranked as top factors in shaping their satisfaction (Ku et al., 2013). Rios et al. (2018) reiterated the need for social presence in online courses, finding that learning communities promoting social interaction with both peers and the instructor lead to student satisfaction. Tompkins et al. (2016) found social support through faculty, peers, family, and friend groups led to higher levels of satisfaction among graduate students. In a meta-analysis, Richardson et al. (2017) also found social presence to be a key factor in relation to students' satisfaction in an online environment across academic disciplines.

Service Quality

When deciding where to attend college or university, students often look to perceived service quality to indicate whether or not an institution is the right fit (Sultan & Wong, 2012). Higher education institutions are more likely categorized as service providers rather than products (Furey et al., 2014), and service quality is considered the outcome of the intersection of service performance and service expectations (Alfy & Abukari, 2019), based on Oliver's (1980) research on consumer satisfaction. For students, perceived service quality is based on the evaluation of various service attributes of an institution such as academic services, administrative services, facilities, and student support (Alfy & Abukari, 2019). This concept of perceived service quality extends beyond the college selection process into the student experience, and serves as a predictor of student satisfaction once enrolled in a postsecondary institution (Parahoo et al., 2016; Sultan & Wong, 2012).

Key determinants of a student's perception of service quality include experiences with faculty, interpersonal interactions with staff in administrative roles, and the classroom environment (Elsharnouby, 2015; Sultan & Wong, 2012). Elsharnouby (2015) makes the simple yet imperative point that the better the service quality in higher education, the better the student experience, which leads to higher student satisfaction. Mai (2005) also found perception of service quality to be a key factor in determining overall student satisfaction. Alfy and Abukari (2019) find perception of service quality dynamic and contextual for students and an important area to consider in marketing. University brand factors into students determining the service quality of their institution and Sultan and Wong (2012) recommend institutions shift their focus to marketing efforts in order to improve student satisfaction. Offering prospective students adequate information through marketing prior to enrollment will influence their perception about service quality—even more so than past experience (Sultan & Wong, 2012).

Marketing and Brand as Factors in Shaping Student Satisfaction

As Santini et al. (2017) point out, there is a plethora of research pertaining to student satisfaction and the factors that contribute to it, though only a few studies mention marketing and brand as part of what shape prospective student expectations and satisfaction (Lai et al., 2015; Ng & Forbes, 2009; Wilkins et al., 2018). Ng and Forbes (2009) specifically set out to better understand the role of marketing in shaping student satisfaction and definitively state that marketing directly contributes to the formulation of student expectations, saying “student expectations of the institutions and of themselves are shaped by the messages conveyed by the institution through their brand and communications strategy” (Ng & Forbes, 2009, p. 55). There is a two-fold process to create student satisfaction according to Ng and Forbes (2009): to educate prospective students about expectations through a communications strategy and to deliver on the

services and experiences projected in that strategy. Too often, institutions fail to properly shape expectations through accurate communication strategies and there needs to be work done by researchers and practitioners alike to close this gap through marketing (Ng & Forbes, 2009).

Marketing and Communication

While some within universities hesitate to apply traditional marketing constructs to higher education because it is not a conventional product (Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013), Ng and Forbes (2009) advocate for the use of marketing to better position institutions and set student expectations of value. When marketing to prospective students, practitioners are more sophisticated than ever when it comes to producing materials that are consumer-oriented and offer value (Ng & Forbes, 2009). That value—and to an extent satisfaction—must be determined by both the student and the university in a co-creation process, plus lead with the mission of the university (Ng & Forbes, 2009; Tolbert, 2014).

Recognizing a clear connection between higher education marketing and student satisfaction was lacking in the literature, Lai et al. (2015) suggested the marketing function of higher education be embedded in the area of curriculum development and have more faculty involvement to ensure alignment between the promise and the experience. In order to deliver on the promises made to prospective students, institutions must deeply understand the experience they offer and clearly convey that through the execution of communications strategies (Ng & Forbes, 2009). Dholakia and Acciardo (2014) strongly recommend the use of students in developing marketing to ensure messages align with reality, which could lead to student satisfaction. Brown and Mazzarol (2009) recommend colleges and universities be mission-driven in their communication as they attempt to be market-savvy in a competitive market, and Tolbert’s (2014) work corroborates this mission-first approach. These are useful

recommendations as practitioners consider how best to market higher education and satisfy students.

Brand Identity and Image

Santini et al. (2017) appear to be some of the most contemporary researchers to consider brand as an antecedent to student satisfaction. They found institutional brand and identity are two significant factors contributing to the expectations of prospective students and shaping their satisfaction once enrolled (Santini et al., 2017). Promoting the prestige of an institution through brand identity adds credibility and minimizes cognitive dissonance in students, improving chances of positive student satisfaction (Wilkins et al., 2018).

The literature suggests university brand has a profound impact on student experience, and Casidy (2014) found brand image has a direct impact on student satisfaction and loyalty (Casidy, 2014). Brown and Mazzarol (2008) found similar results, determining student satisfaction could be predicted by the brand image projected by the university. The findings overwhelmingly stated the significance of image in the cultivation of institutional loyalty and satisfaction (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009). If the brand image aligns with the services the student actually experiences, the likelihood of student satisfaction is higher along with long-term loyalty as alumni (Brown & Mazzarol, 2008). Chen (2017) also found brand association directly influences student trust and satisfaction with colleges and universities. The better the brand performs (i.e., delivers on its promises), the more satisfied and trusting of the brand a student becomes.

An institutional brand that aligns well with the student experience can lead to increased student satisfaction, trust, and loyalty (Alavijeh et al., 2014). This indicates the need for higher education marketers to create long-term relationships with students, meaning the brand they project must be the brand the student experiences in order to ensure satisfaction and commitment

(Chen, 2017). As universities begin to focus efforts on retaining students who are already enrolled as a cost-saving tactic, a concerted effort to deliver on brand promises is underway across the globe (Alavijeh et al., 2014).

Perceived Reputation

Much of the literature refers to perceived reputation as an influential factor in achieving student satisfaction (Elsharnouby, 2015; Ng & Forbes, 2009; Santini et al., 2017). Institutional reputation is "defined as perception of customer experience of all services provided by the institution including service quality, university contribution, accreditation as well as student and alumni profiling" (Sembiring, 2014, p. 18). In a review of other studies, Parahoo et al. (2016) found that institutional reputation was a significant determinant of student satisfaction, particularly as universities adopt a more corporate approach to building reputation. Munisamy et al. (2014) found comparable results after increasing competition in the Malaysian higher education market led the authors to investigate the factors that influence student choice, finding reputation is a major determinant of choice and future satisfaction. In addition, Sembiring (2014) drew a strong connection between student expectations and university reputation having a significant impact on student satisfaction, leading to student retention.

Knowing brand has an impact on student satisfaction and loyalty (Casidy, 2014), it is imperative to also explore if perceived reputation remains constant throughout a student's experience. Investigating the brand promise and perceptions at a private liberal arts institution, Rodgers and Jackson (2012) found the perceptions of incoming freshmen and graduating seniors consistently matched the brand promises made by the institution. Students were generally in agreement that their experiences aligned with the university's promises, and students perceived the college reputation the way the college perceived itself. Graduating seniors, after spending at

least four years at the college, had the same perceptions of the institution's reputation as the incoming freshmen, indicating the student experience was consistent from start to finish (Rodgers & Jackson, 2012). Given that Rodgers and Jackson's (2012) case study only highlighted one institution, more research is needed to determine if perceived reputation is consistent from the point of entry through to graduation for both traditional undergraduate students, as well as adult learners as they are a key demographic.

Several factors go into creating student satisfaction according to Elsharnouby (2015), including perceived faculty competence, student/administration interaction, student/student interaction, and the most influential factor of all: perceived reputation. Elsharnouby's (2015) research credits external sources as what contributes to perception prior to enrollment, but there is no mention of what those external sources are. According to Munisamy et al. (2014), reputation is shaped by a combination of public relations, marketing communication, brand, and crisis/risk management. The literature consistently identifies perceived institutional reputation as an important factor in creating student satisfaction (Elsharnouby, 2015; Mai, 2015; Parahoo et al., 2016), but rarely mentions what contributes to shaping the reputation (Elsharnouby, 2015), which requires further exploration.

As researchers Lai et al. (2015), Ng and Forbes (2009), and Santini et al. (2017) contend, marketing plays a central role in shaping a student's expectations and sense of satisfaction. It should come as no surprise that the actual student experience in comparison to the expectations of a student plays a large part in shaping satisfaction. Student experience (Elsharnouby, 2015; Parahoo et al., 2016; Sembiring, 2014), social engagement (Ku et al., 2013; Martirosyan, 2015; Richardson et al., 2017; Rios et al., 2018; Tompkins et al., 2016), and perceived service quality (Alfy & Abukari, 2019; Parahoo et al., 2016; Sultan & Wong, 2012) are general factors that

contribute to student satisfaction, along with marketing and brand (Ng & Forbes, 2009; Santini et al., 2017; Zeithaml et al., 1990). The factors that contribute to attracting and satisfying students are consistent throughout the literature for several types of students, including adult learners, the population that will be the focus of this research and explored in the following section.

The Significance of Adult Learners Pursuing Online Education

Institutions are increasingly turning to the adult learner market as a potential source of enrollment and revenue (Busta, 2019; EAB, 2019) and online programming is growing to accommodate this population (Lederman, 2018; Magda & Aslanian, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), leading to an opportunity to further examine adult learners who study exclusively online (EAB, 2018; Rabourn et al., 2018). Throughout the literature, adult learning has increasingly become interchangeable with online education (Baharudin et al., 2013). Researchers agree that the adult learner market has been underserved and is ripe with potential to grow enrollment (BrckaLorenz & Shoup, 2018; EAB, 2019; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Lederman, 2018; Luminary Labs, 2019; MacDonald, 2018), particularly since institutions are no longer confined by geography to enroll students. Adult learners are a significant share of the overall postsecondary market, making up approximately half of all students currently enrolled in colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The shift in focus to adult learners through online education by institutions has led to more investment into marketing as schools compete for the attention of adult learners seeking online education (EAB, 2018; McKenzie, 2019).

Adult learners are those who are over the age of 24 (Francois, 2014) and are sometimes referred to as post-traditional or non-traditional learners (Rabourn et al., 2018; Soares, 2013), often referenced interchangeably throughout the literature. For adult learners, the barriers to

entry to higher education are numerous, as many of these students face challenges in terms of balancing time and securing funding to pursue an additional credential. This review of scholarly works begins with a description of adult learner characteristics and motivations to better understand how to attract and satisfy this segment of the population. Then, the discussion moves to an exploration of the shift in marketing trends occurring in the adult learner landscape, particularly given the rise of online offerings. The section will conclude with a review of literature pertaining to adult learner satisfaction as they pursue online education.

Understanding the Adult Learner

Understanding the adult learner population is critical for institutional growth (EAB, 2019). Adult learners are perceptive consumers, adept at navigating the digital landscape and may sometimes apply to schools as "stealth applicants," meaning they don't contact the institution prior to applying and rely on pre-admission marketing to make their decision (Ezarik, 2019). This stealth applicant trend indicates a need for marketing practitioners to deeply understand the characteristics and motivations of adult learners in order to appeal to this consumer market and prompt them to apply and enroll.

Characteristics of Adult Learners

While adult learners are typically at least 24 years old (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; Francois, 2014), defining this population goes well beyond an age bracket. Adults who pursue education are generally goal-oriented, activity-oriented, and learning-oriented (Houle, 1993). Regarding demographics, adult learners are more likely to be female (MacDonald, 2018) and less likely to be white, and are more likely to be first-generation students (Rabourn et al., 2018). Most adult learners take on multiple roles: worker, spouse or partner, parent, or caregiver, in addition to student (Ross-Gordon, 2011), creating several barriers to success at the postsecondary

level. Adult learners pursuing online education are also more often associated with the military (Soares et al., 2017).

A seminal author on the adult learner population, Knowles (1984), made five significant assumptions about this population and more than three decades later, these characteristics still ring true (Rabourn et al., 2018): strong self-concept and desire to direct their own learning, experience that can serve as a resource, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and internal motivation to learn (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). Interestingly, there is some discord throughout the literature in relation to self-efficacy, as Rabourn et al. (2018) go against Knowles' (1984) assertion and found that compared to their traditional counterparts, adult learners have lower self-concept and lower self-efficacy, which often serve as a barrier to their learning and success. However, Francois (2014) contends that adult students actually have higher levels of self-esteem leading to an intrinsic motivation to learn. Adult learners take ownership over their education and online course environments empower them to be more self-directed in their learning (Covelli, 2017). The self-directed approach to learning is a major characteristic of adult learners, along with a deeper need to apply the learning to their personal or professional lives rather than simply acquiring it (Rabourn et al., 2018).

There are several characteristics that are prevalent among adult learners, though Soares (2013) points to five commonalities that should be taken into consideration by postsecondary institutions in regards to adult learners: they are the wage earners for their families; simultaneously combine work and learning; seek credentials employers recognize and reward; often require developmental education; and need both academic and career advising. Being the breadwinners for their families and seeking compensation from their employers as a result of their education correlates with the fact adult learners are typically more sophisticated when it

comes to financial management (Bowers & Bergman, 2016). While adult learners are still beholden to the increasing costs of pursuing a higher education in the United States in the 21st century, their financial literacy and consumer savviness give them a better understanding of the implications of financial aid (Bowers & Bergman, 2016) and make them more discerning when it comes to marketing. Given the financial realities of pursuing a credential at the postsecondary level, adult learners need to understand the value of their education and have several motivators to earn a degree.

Motivations of Adult Learners

Many adult learners seek to enroll in an institution to build their confidence and become professionally well-rounded (St. Amour, 2019). Similar to traditional students, it is understood that adult learners are intrinsically motivated to learn (Burgess, 1971; Houle 1993; Rabourn et al., 2018; Sheffield, 1962), meaning they do it for internal personal fulfillment or satisfaction. However, focusing in on adult learners who are pursuing graduate-level degrees adds another critical motivational factor: the need to improve their performance in their career or change careers, or accommodate personal life changes (Francois, 2014). While adults have a proclivity to engage in lifelong learning and adults pursuing a master's degree have a cognitive interest in learning (Francois, 2014), career progression and compensation are also significant extrinsic motivational factors when it comes to pursuing higher education (Henry & Basile, 1994). These motivations are often used when attempting to appeal to adult learners through marketing (EAB, 2019).

Decision-Making Factors for Adult Learners

As adult learners become motivated to go back to school, there are several factors in their decision-making process when attempting to choose an institution, including convenience,

flexibility, and value of earning a credential (Bowers & Bergman, 2016). Decisions to enroll in an online program are primarily driven by career and financial factors (EAB, 2019). It should come as no surprise that adult learners are more likely to attend an institution offering fully online education given the many obligations they have with their families, work, and communities (Rabourn et al., 2018). To attract adult learners, institutions should emphasize the advantages and benefits of their online programs, including the immediate relevancy of the coursework (Dimeo, 2017). Adult learners need to see a clear potential for return on investment in order to be satisfied (EAB, 2019). Adult learners seek skills and knowledge directly related to the workplace in order to change careers, expand career options, or remain competitive (EAB, 2019). Price is another key concern of the adult learner market (EAB, 2019; St. Amour, 2019) as affordability is top-of-mind and cost and financial support are significant factors when choosing an institution (EAB, 2019).

Marketing to Adult Learners

Adult learners are an increasingly dominant focus of institutional marketing efforts to grow enrollment and to put frankly, survive (Busta, 2019; St. Amour, 2019). Adult learners consider themselves customers and are knowledgeable and demanding (Hadfield, 2003). Compared to traditional high school students seeking out a college, adult learners who are ready to go back to school can be more difficult to find (Sutton, 2017) and are more experienced and discriminating consumers (Ezarik, 2019). Marketing to this segment requires an aggressive and sophisticated system that produces highly targeted advertising both digital and traditional (Dimeo, 2019; McKenzie, 2019).

Many institutions, both non-profit and for-profit, adopt aggressive recruiting practices as they recognize a distinct difference between marketing traditional campus programs and online

programs to adult learners (Manoff, 2019). In marketing to adult learners seeking online education, institutions take advantage of large volumes of data to ensure personalized, targeted messages are presented to the right market (Dimeo, 2017). A wide variety of marketing channels are used in order to attract adult learners, from search engine optimization to content marketing and social media (DuPont et al., 2017). These marketing channels align with the information sources adults use to learn about potential programs, including the institution's website, broadcast commercials, and email as the top three sources (Magda & Aslanian, 2018). Despite the extensive list of marketing channels currently being used by institutions, Manoff (2019) uncovered that many universities are still experimenting with how to best reach adult learners seeking online education, as market dynamics are constantly shifting and the marketing and recruiting tactics vary in effectiveness.

Since adult learning and online education have become somewhat synonymous (Baharudin et al., 2013), effectively marketing an institution's online offerings has become crucial to enrolling adult learners. Many institutions have "slick, insistent marketing operations run by for-profit third-party companies" (Manoff, 2019, p. 1). The rise of online education has seen an explosion of corporate partnerships to outsource marketing activities, as colleges and universities employ companies like 2U, Inc. to be online program managers (OPMs) (Carey, 2019). These companies use upwards of 60% of revenue to market and operate online programs (Manoff, 2019) and are seen as capitalizing on the brands of highly regarded institutions (Hall & Dudley, 2019), creating concern about how online programs are being marketed. OPMs are heavily financed and employ hundreds of people, allowing them to be aggressive in their marketing, including extensive telemarketing and digital advertising (Manoff, 2019). However, these forceful recruiting tactics call into question the value of the degree being offered (Manoff,

2019) and this trend to employ OPMs has resulted in calls for transparency when it comes to institutions partnering with for-profit entities (Carey, 2019; Hall & Dudley, 2019; Manoff, 2019).

From mailing postcards and relying on radio (Hope, 2015) to aggressive telemarketing and digitally targeted ads that follow a prospective student to each website and social media channel they visit (Field, 2019; Manoff, 2019), the marketing mix to reach adult learners is varied and complex. However, attracting and satisfying this unique segment of the population requires more than a substantial marketing budget. As competition grows and adult learners become more market-savvy, institutions will need to truly assess what is being offered and the quality of what is being offered (St. Amour, 2019). Sickler (2019) reiterates this point, voicing the need for institutional leaders to fully invest in the alignment of the brand promises being made to prospective students with the actual services being delivered in order to satisfy adult learners.

Adult Learner Satisfaction

The adult learner's extrinsic motivation to learn (Henry & Basile, 1994) is significant because it results in adult learners being harder to satisfy when it comes to their experience at the postsecondary level since they need their education to lead to career advancement. In fact, Francois (2014) suggests that institutions must commit to learning more about the motivational orientation of adult learners in order to improve institutional recruiting and marketing strategies and in turn ensure student satisfaction. The many decision-making factors adult learners take into consideration when assessing their institutional options are also factors in satisfying them once they enroll: clear return on investment, affordability, and flexibility. Once enrolled, adult learners also use other factors and experiences to determine satisfaction.

Factors that contribute to adult learner satisfaction with courses include relevancy of the subject, faculty competency, workload, and classroom management—whether that classroom is in-person on a physical campus or online (Howell & Buck, 2011). Boeren et al. (2012) also found that classroom management was a key factor in satisfying adult learners, with classroom environment perception the leading link to satisfaction. Turning to satisfaction of adult learners pursuing fully online education, slight shifts occur in terms of the factors contributing to satisfaction, namely related to technology. The more technologically proficient a student is and the more positive they are toward technology, the more satisfied they will be with their online education (Beqiri et al., 2009; Pena & Yeung, 2010). Beqiri et al. (2010) also found that students who are studying at the graduate-level, are married, live at least one mile away from the physical campus, and are male are more likely to be satisfied with their online education than others.

In the online environment, adult learners expect student-centered interaction that focuses on community and engagement (Covelli, 2017). Kuo and Belland (2016) corroborates this expectation, finding that predictors of adult learner satisfaction with online courses centered around learner-content interaction and learner-instructor interaction, meaning individual student work and meaningful one-on-one interactions with the instructor led to satisfaction. Essentially, the more engagement and interaction students experience in an online program, the more connected and satisfied they feel (Kuo & Belland, 2016). Much of the satisfaction an adult student feels is centered on their experience with the instructor. In their research about adult learners in an online environment, Bourdeaux and Schoenack (2016) found that when "instructors do not meet student expectations, the students do not feel satisfied and may possibly even lose motivation" (p. 159). Not only are adult students more satisfied when expectations are being met, but they are better able to learn (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016). Teaching presence

is consistently cited as a predominant factor of satisfaction among adult learners pursuing online education (Kucuk & Richardson, 2019). If students feel an emotional connection and engagement on behalf of the instructor, they are more likely to be satisfied with the online course (Kucuk & Richardson, 2019). Communication and interaction with the instructor are highly important for adult learners, in addition to high-quality relationships with administrative staff (Rabourn et al., 2018). However, it should be noted that adult learners tend to be more autonomous and neglect to interact with campus stakeholders as much as traditional students (Rabourn et al., 2018). Ironically, despite this lack of interaction, consistent customer service with frontline employees is paramount for adult learners, who look to their experiences with these staff to gauge their satisfaction (Hadfield, 2003).

The needs of adult students vary compared to traditional students, as they seek early intervention, differentiated instruction, instructor support, and flexibility (MacDonald, 2018). Anderson (2016) concurs, citing flexibility, course offerings, and multiple options for financing education as the significant needs of adult students in order to satisfy them. Unlike more traditional undergraduates, adult students rarely drop out of school due solely to lack of satisfaction. Instead, stop-out among adult learners is more common than with the traditional student population namely because of the very factors that make non-traditional adult learners non-traditional: inability to find childcare, the demands of their full-time jobs, and family commitments (Bowers & Bergman, 2016). When it comes to adult learners completing their degree, the academic advising, faculty support, financial aid, and flexibility in course delivery are all significant factors in helping them succeed and complete (Bowers & Bergman, 2016). Most institutions gear their services and curriculum to traditional students, often neglecting their adult learner population (Glowacki-Dudka, 2019). Providing more online options that allow for

self-direction would be beneficial for institutions seeking to attract and retain more adult learners (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016).

Adult learners pursuing online education are a significant population among degree-seeking students in the United States and there is a need to better understand this segment's unique needs and motivations in order to effectively market to them (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016; EAB, 2018; Francois, 2014; Rabourn et al., 2018). Expectations and satisfaction play a critical role in how adult learners select, enroll, and engage in education at the postsecondary level. Throughout the literature, there have been several calls for further research about the adult student experience and how to best support this significant population to improve their satisfaction, which in turn may improve enrollment and retention rates (BrckaLorenz & Shoup, 2018; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; MacDonald, 2018).

Summation

Based on the review of literature, several conclusions can be derived. First, more attention and investment are being dedicated to institutional marketing and branding than ever before in order to attract, recruit, and retain students. Second, there is a concerning lack of regulation or standard ethical practice when it comes to institutional marketing and branding. Third, aggressive marketing tactics are used to attract adult learners, seen as a significant and well-informed consumer population that can help grow institutional enrollment. Finally, the impact of marketing and branding on student satisfaction has been understudied.

The literature indicates the use of sophisticated and data-driven marketing tactics is critical to grow enrollment and differentiate from intensifying competition (Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2017; Dimeo, 2019; McKenzie, 2019). As institutions realize this, they are investing more than ever before into marketing and branding efforts (Brock, 2017; Hall, 2019; Katzman,

2016; Torres, 2019). It is clear that marketing and brand shape decision-making (Munisamy et al., 2014), though little is known about the accuracy of the promises being made and the impact this may have on student satisfaction once a student enrolls—particularly among adult learners.

As the literature shows, adult learners are a significant population of students who are shrewd consumers (Ezarik, 2019; Hadfield, 2003). Recognizing this population of students primarily studies online (Baharudin et al., 2013), institutions have turned to this segment to improve enrollment (Busta, 2019; EAB, 2019; Field, 2019). As educational providers of all types compete, aggressive marketing tactics have been adopted to stand out amongst the competition (EAB, 2019; Field, 2019; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Katzman, 2016). Within the literature, there have been many calls to better assess the adult learner experience in order to best support this unique population (BrckaLorenz & Shoup, 2018; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; MacDonald, 2018). This is particularly relevant as many institutions resort to using untruthful claims in order to attract more students (Bradley, 2018).

There is a distinct lack of oversight when it comes to institutional marketing and branding, with a rising need to scrutinize these practices (Bradley, 2018; Carey, 2019; Hall & Dudley, 2019; Mitchell, 2017). For marketing practitioners, the research points out the need for implementing ethical standards in order to safeguard students from misleading marketing messages (Gibbs & Murphy, 2009; Gibbs, 2011). Higher education marketing practitioners shape the messages and visuals seen by prospective students, and yet few regulations or watchdog groups exist to assess the accuracy of these efforts (Bradley, 2018; Mause, 2010). The disconnect between the promises being made and the actual student experience can lead to dissatisfaction among students. Given the many benefits a well-aligned institutional brand can have—increased satisfaction, trust, and loyalty (Alavijeh et al., 2014)—it is essential for marketing practitioners

and higher education leaders to align promises with experiences and be ethical in their approach to marketing and branding.

Across the literature, researchers have sufficiently covered higher education marketing, branding, and student satisfaction independently, but rarely has the intersection of these areas been studied (Casidy & Wymer, 2015; Chen & Chen, 2017; Dennis et al., 2016; Elsharnouby, 2015; Kaushal & Ali, 2019). Several factors come into play when shaping student satisfaction, including the student experience (Elsharnouby, 2015; Parahoo et al., 2016; Sembiring, 2014), social engagement (Ku et al., 2013; Martirosyan, 2015; Richardson et al., 2017; Rios et al., 2018; Tompkins et al., 2016), and service quality (Alfy & Abukari, 2019; Sultan & Wong, 2012). Yet, few studies assess how marketing and brand shape student attitudes and satisfaction once enrolled (Lai et al., 2015; Ng & Forbes, 2009; Wilkins et al., 2018).

This research will give a voice to adult learners, who will share stories about their experiences with an institutional brand. The goal is to examine the alignment between institutional brand promises and the adult learner experience. The study will be beneficial for higher education marketing practitioners who craft the messages seen by prospective students, along with higher education leaders who help shape the student experience. The following section will describe the research design for this particular study, including the research question, methodology, and participants.

Chapter Three: Research Design

This multiple case narrative study is a qualitative approach to studying larger populations (Shkedi, 2005), a significant benefit to selecting this research approach. This study aims to understand the alignment between institutional brand promises and the adult learner experience in an online master's degree program. Adult learners have been identified as an opportune market to help solve enrollment stagnation at postsecondary institutions (Conley, 2019; Fain, 2017; Field, 2019; Murchison, 2018; Westervelt, 2016) and for a larger investment of institutional marketing efforts (Davie, 2019). As colleges and universities put more pressure on marketing practitioners to attract and enroll adult learners, attention should be paid to how the promises being made align with the reality of the student experience. The research question this study seeks to answer is: What is the alignment between institutional brand promises and the adult learner experience? This chapter will outline and defend the use of a qualitative research approach, introduce the participant characteristics and procedures used for the study, and explain the data collection and analysis methods. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of ethical considerations and the researcher's positionality.

Qualitative Research Approach

To answer the study's research question, a qualitative approach was employed. Qualitative research is a holistic approach that assumes there are multiple interpretations of reality (Jencik, 2011). Qualitative research centers on the collection of data about lived experiences, behaviors, phenomena, and emotions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Instead of examining *if* brand promises align with the student experience which would be the case in quantitative research, this qualitative research sought to know *how* brand promises align; learning about the lived experiences of adult students will give deeper insight into the impact branding has at the individual level. Focusing on a central phenomenon, in this case how adult

learners experience an institutional brand, qualitative research is well suited for this study because it uncovers the attitudes and motivations of participants (Creswell, 2014).

As Creswell (2014) indicates, the chosen methodology is dependent on the research problem, the intended audience, the researcher's chosen theoretical framework, and perhaps even the researcher's own training and preference. As is the case in qualitative research, the participants' own words are used to describe an experience or phenomenon (Kim, 2015; Ponterotto et al., 2005), making qualitative research the most appropriate choice for this study given the lived experiences of adult learners need to be explored to truly understand the impact branding has on them. A strong argument is made by Harper (2007) to use qualitative methods when examining the impact of an institution on the experiences of students. Harper (2007) advocates qualitative methods in order to gain a deeper understanding of student experience and claims that quantitative methods result in an "incomplete assessment picture that lacks depth, complexity, personal accountability, and voice" (p. 56).

Given this research seeks the perspectives of adult learners, a constructivist-interpretivist lens is used. A constructivist-interpretivist view espouses that reality is socially constructed and varied (Miles & Huberman, 1994), making this interpretive paradigm an appropriate fit with this research because it offers the opportunity to better understand multiple perspectives and unearth impact and implications (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ponterotto et al., 2005). Understanding how people experience brand is essential for formulating marketing strategy, and consumers experience brand differently (Brakus et al., 2009). Learning from multiple perspectives gives deeper insight into the experiences of adult learners and helps shape future strategy for marketing practitioners. An interpretivist lens recognizes there is no single truth but rather relies on different viewpoints of the experience being investigated (Butin, 2010), in this case interaction

with an institutional brand. A strength of this paradigm is how one can learn about personal experiences of participants and then analyze the impact of an event. By employing this paradigm, meaning is brought to the surface via story and reflection shared between the researcher and the participant (Ponterotto et al., 2005) via semi-structured interviews, which allows the participant to add depth and construct meaning through story (Riessman, 1993).

Methodology

The methodology chosen for this qualitative study is multiple case narrative, which is grounded in narrative analysis and offers the opportunity to study multiple participants (Shkedi, 2004). Multiple case narrative was first introduced by Shkedi (1997) in an educational context and thereafter has been used to study organizational leadership, pedagogy, and learning. This methodology has consistently been applied to assessing student attitudes and experiences, first by Shkedi (1997) and then subsequently by Hadar (2011) who researched students' conception of learning and later Goldberg et al. (2015) who assessed how social work students cope with their own mental illness. In this study, student attitudes and experiences pre- and post-enrollment will be assessed, relying on their storytelling to derive meaning.

Using an inductive-interpretive approach, multiple case narrative uses primary data from semi-structured interviews focusing on the participants' stories and the meaning they give to the phenomena under study (Shkedi, 2004), in this research how adult learners experience an institutional brand. Narrative assumes that individuals make sense of their world through story (Creswell, 2013; Kim, 2015; Polkinghorne, 1995), and by using semi-structured interviews the participants can share their stories in a flexible way (Bold, 2012). As Clandinin and Connelly (1990) posit, identity and understanding are constructed through stories and the depth of the

human experience, along with perceptions of the experience, can only be described using stories rather than a more positivistic approach (Carter, 1993; Shkedi, 2004).

After analysis of the narratives, results are presented in a final narrative report (Shkedi, 2004). The narrative report presents characteristics across the cases, connecting to larger theoretical constructs (Fine, 2009; Shkedi, 2004). A narrative report is a practical qualitative method (Pottie, et al., 2008) that presents the collected data in a story format with the themes unfolding in a sequence (Shkedi, 2005). The narrative report is most useful for research dealing with several case narratives (Shkedi, 2005) and is ideal in this instance since it does not rely on the details of individual stories, but rather the dominant themes to emerge from all the interviews. A qualitative, narrative approach allows a window into understanding experience and a narrative report offers a description of lived experience in a more generalized approach (McAlpine, 2016). By focusing on the themes to emerge from multiple lived experiences and stories, marketing practitioners and higher education leaders will get a better sense of the impact of brand, opposed to using other qualitative methodologies that rely on limited sample sizes and more in-depth stories.

The advantage of multiple case narrative is that "by studying the uniqueness of the particular, we come to understand the universal" (Simons, 1996, p. 226). Narrative research relies on storytelling about multiple lived experiences (Creswell, 2012), then generalizing these stories to create a narrative report with dominant themes (Shkedi, 2004). A benefit of multiple case narrative is the ability to study a larger population compared to other qualitative approaches such as interpretative phenomenological analysis, which trends toward a very small sample (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As Guba and Lincoln (2005) describe, there is "great potential for interweaving of viewpoints [and] for the incorporation of multiple perspectives" (p. 197).

Application of Multiple Case Narrative to the Study

Multiple case narrative is an appropriate fit for this particular study because it is a qualitative research method that leads to "findings which are more broadly cross-sectional and generalizable than the single or collective narrative cases, while concurrently providing for more in-depth process analyses of the phenomena than is provided by conventional-questionnaire surveys" (Shkedi, 2004, p. 91). The ability to generalize findings more readily than other qualitative approaches aligns well with the needs of this study, which uses expectation confirmation theory (ECT). The application of ECT to a qualitative study is somewhat unique, thus creating a need to use a methodology that while still firmly positioned as a qualitative approach, is perhaps considered more in the middle of the spectrum in terms of qualitative and quantitative studies. Multiple case narrative presents the best of both worlds—gathering stories from participants, while also allowing for the study of a larger population rather than sharing the narrative-by-narrative accounts of a small sample of participants (Shkedi, 2004). Used often in an educational context, multiple case narrative allows "learners [to] construct their personal knowledge as a result of reflecting on their experiences" (Burton & Vicente, 2018, p. 4). This qualitative approach to research allows for multiple perspectives to be examined and analytical generalization (Fine, 2009), which will help construct new theoretical approaches to the use of branding and its impact on adult learners.

Participants

Selecting appropriate research participants must enable the opportunity to answer the research question (Saunders, 2012), which in this case explores how closely aligned institutional brand promises are with the adult learner experience. While constraints may exist such as access and resources available (Saunders, 2012), the duty of the researcher is to obtain a sample of

participants that meets the needs of the research and can enhance the understanding of the phenomena being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), in this particular research how adult learners experience an institutional brand. Participants in this study are adult learners over the age of 24 who have completed at least four courses in an online master's degree program. Participants needed to have taken at least four courses (i.e., for most, be a third of the way through a typical 12-course master's degree program) in order to avoid insufficient experience in a program. Each participant shared stories about the marketing and brand they encountered during pre-admission at their institution, along with their experiences as a current student in a master's degree program. The volunteer participants' experiences interacting with institutional marketing and brand, role as a graduate-level student, and perspective as an adult learner pursuing education online were all taken into consideration in the participant selection (Sargeant, 2012).

Sampling Strategy

Given the aforementioned criteria of participants, both a self-selection sampling strategy and purposeful sampling strategy were employed for this study. The self-selection sampling strategy relied on promoting the opportunity to take part in the study and having potential participants volunteer (Sharma, 2017). Once volunteer participants self-selected by filling out an interest form, a purposeful sampling strategy was then employed. Widely used in qualitative research, purposeful sampling requires the selection of individuals who have direct experience with the phenomena under study (Creswell & Clark, 2017). With purposeful sampling, information-rich cases were sought out to study in depth and help gain understanding of the research question (Patton, 1990). The aim of purposeful sampling in this research study was to acquire a variety of perspectives in terms of volunteer participants' progress toward completion

in their program, geographic location of their institution, gender, and type of institution (public vs. private). There are nearly one million graduate students studying exclusively online in the United States according to the latest report available from the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics (Ginder et al., 2018), with the majority of these students likely categorized as adult learners over the age of 24 (Francois, 2014). While this represents a large population of potential participants, availability, exposure to the study, and willingness to participate in the study were needed to organize an appropriate purposeful sample (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Sample Size

Multiple case narrative allows for the study of larger samples compared to other qualitative approaches that tend to use small sample sizes (Shkedi, 2004). For this study's semi-structured interviews, a minimum of ten participants and a maximum of 20 were sought out based on Shkedi's (2004) recommendations and other examples of multiple case narrative research (Fine, 2009; Löwstedt & Räisänen, 2018; Smith & Suby-Long, 2019). This range would ensure enough data to help identify themes and patterns, though not an overload of data to manage (Fugard & Potts, 2014). Variety and diversity of participants are critical in qualitative research (Creswell, 2011; Patton, 2001) and multiple case narrative is particularly receptive to a heterogeneous group of participants (Shkedi, 2004).

Examples of multiple case narrative have seen a variance in sample size. Recent examples of multiple case narrative being used in an educational context include Minibas-Poussard (2018) collecting 19 case narratives to better understand unethical behavior in higher education; Lim et al. (2015) interviewing 10 nursing students to learn their views on prescribing; and Burton and Vicente (2018) choosing 10 participants to examine a minority research and

training program at the postsecondary level. In addition to an educational context, leadership is the other leading discipline to employ multiple case narrative in the past decade; Fine (2009) collected 15 stories to better understand women's discursive attitudes toward leadership; Löwstedt and Räisänen (2018) gathered life stories of 12 CEOs to gain knowledge about leadership style; and most recently, Smith and Suby-Long (2019) interviewed 10 women leaders to reflect on their purpose and careers. The total number of interviewed participants for this study was 17 and aligns with the multiple case narrative approach.

Recruitment

Before recruitment commenced, approval was obtained from Northeastern University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once the study was approved by IRB, the recruitment process began by directly promoting the opportunity to participate in the research through a Facebook ad (see Appendix A). The use of social media advertising to recruit eligible research participants is on the rise, particularly Facebook advertising, which has proven favorable in recruiting volunteer participants, especially for social research and health-related clinical trials (Forgasz et al., 2017; Frandsen et al., 2016; Nash, et al., 2017). Researchers have found the use of free and paid advertising on Facebook to be cost-effective and a rapid approach to recruiting the appropriate sample of participants (Bennetts et al., 2019; Pedersen & Kurz, 2016). Increasingly, Facebook has been used successfully in recruiting volunteer participants in educational research (Forgasz et al., 2017).

Using audience targeting filters on Facebook, the advertisement was initially geared toward people over the age of 24, who identify their education status as enrolled in graduate school, and who live in the United States. With this criteria, the potential audience reach was approximately 700,000 on Facebook. The promotional messages included a link to a Qualtrics

interest form (see Appendix B) that briefly described the research study and asked qualifying questions to ensure volunteers were aligned with the criteria of the research study. The advertisement ran for two weeks on Facebook. The advertisement targeting was adjusted after a week to only target men to help increase participant interest from that demographic category.

The advertisement reached 10,504 and had 186 link clicks, spending a total of $71.09 and resulting in 77 total responses to the interest survey. Of the responses, 47 were deemed valid and complete, with 44 identified as qualified. In order to ensure program, region, and school type diversity among the chosen participants, 30 volunteers were contacted by the researcher and 19 responded to schedule the phone interview. The interest survey also gauged the volunteers' use of review websites such as Yelp and Google to help determine a participant's propensity to critique, but those responses were ultimately not taken into account when selecting participants. The 30 identified volunteers received an email invitation to participate with the dates and times available to conduct the interview by phone (see Appendix C). Once the volunteer participant provided their preferred interview times, a follow-up email was sent (see Appendix D). Ultimately, 18 phone interviews were scheduled and 17 were completed, with only one confirmed participant failing to answer the phone when called at the pre-arranged time.

A $25 gift card incentive was offered to those who participated in the phone interview, though volunteer participants were able to end the interview at any time; all participants who began the interview completed it. A compensation strategy was used for this study for several reasons. First, the main population of adult learners have several competing priorities in their life and multiple roles (Ross-Gordon, 2011), and this could deter many from participating in an extraneous activity that is not related to their school, family, community, etc. Providing compensation exhibits respect for the participants' time and effort (Grady, 2001). Finally,

research shows that interest in participating may increase when incentives are offered (Marcus et al., 2007; Ulrich et al., 2005). Regarding the ethical considerations of offering compensation, researchers Grant and Sugarman (2004) found the practice to be innocuous and potentially very beneficial in attracting interest to the study.

Procedures

Once the study was approved by Northeastern University's IRB and the recruitment process took place, 18 participants were selected for in-depth interviews, with 17 participants ultimately participating in the interview. The way data was collected, managed, and protected will be discussed in this procedures section, along with a review of data analysis.

Data Collection

Participants completed a phone interview (see Appendix E) that ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in length. In-depth interviews are the primary source of data in multiple case narrative and allowing up to one hour gave enough time for the participant to offer meaningful and descriptive stories, while not tiring them with an exhaustive interview (Shkedi, 2005). An interview schedule was devised and meetings were held at times mutually convenient for the researcher and participant. Informed consent was obtained from each selected participant prior to beginning the recorded interview with pertinent ethical and data storage details outlined verbally (see Appendix F).

Semi-structured interviews are ideal given questions are focused, but allow for flexibility within the questioning (Bold, 2012). Per Strauss and Corbin (1990), the initial interview question may be broadly-defined, but then questions become more focused throughout the process. With semi-structured interviews, the researcher is more likely to receive responses that are aligned with narrative and new insights are more likely to emerge (Bold, 2012). Using Kim's (2015)

recommendation, the researcher asked participants to share stories as a way to report their experience in a narrative manner as storytelling is a meaning-making process (Shkedi, 2005). Six to ten open-ended questions are generally recommended (Smith et al., 2009), with this interview guide having 11 questions and follow-up questions as appropriate. For multiple case narrative, descriptive questions were used. Participants were asked to share their views, descriptions, and illustrations in story format regarding the phenomena so the researcher could experience the world of the participant (Shkedi, 2005).

Data Management

The instruments used for data collection included the Qualtrics survey tool for the interest form, a Toshiba laptop, the Audacity audio recording tool, Zoom audio recording tool, Microsoft Word for notetaking, an Apple iPhone for the phone call, and the data storage service Dropbox. Digital files were generated through Audacity and Zoom as a back-up; both files were saved to the researcher's computer once the interview ended. Data is currently stored and protected on the researcher's password-protected laptop that remains in a locked home office. Data is backed-up using the password-protected Dropbox cloud service. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed using the built-in Zoom transcription service. The only other individuals who have access to the data are the three members of the dissertation committee, including the researcher's advisor and the principal investigator for this research, Dr. Sean Gallagher of Northeastern University. Three years after this research study is approved without revision by the dissertation committee, all recordings and digital files of transcripts will be permanently deleted to ensure privacy, and this was clearly conveyed to the volunteer participants.

Data Analysis

Data analysis brings order and structure to the collected data, breaking it down and reorganizing it in an analytical order (Shkedi, 2005). Categories, or themes, were derived directly from the data rather than testing preconceived hypotheses (Shkedi, 2005). An inductive, interpretive analysis provides a close examination of the participants' stories, allowing for understanding and meaning to be gleaned from their provided narrative (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

The first step of data analysis in multiple case narrative includes reading and re-reading the responses (Shkedi, 2005). This practice of re-reading the responses helped to identify key categories and parts of the story being told by the participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Post-transcription analysis included a manual process of highlighting keywords, ideas, and phrases used throughout the interviews in the Word document using Track Changes and comments. Best described by Saldaña (2013) as "essence-capturing" (p. 5), coding was used to gain a deeper understanding of the data and what it had to offer.

A narrative categorization process occurred to take the text out of chronological narrative order and find both commonalities and differences across the responses (Shkedi, 2005). Data-driven categories were formulated and category names were assigned derived from the experiences discussed by the participants (Shkedi, 2005). Using verbatim language directly from the participants brings the themes to life and potentially adds more personality to the research findings. Once data was categorized, it was detached from the context and explored by the researcher.

Each transcribed interview was analyzed separately, and then the mapping stage of analysis began (Shkedi, 2005). The mapping analysis stage includes finding connections between categories across each individual response and identifying relationships and sub-categories

(Shkedi, 2005). The final stage of analysis included focused categorization and generating core categories, meaning the researcher organized categories into a logical storyline (Shkedi, 2005). These dominant narrative themes (Löwstedt & Räisänen, 2018) were used to structure the final narrative report (Shkedi, 2005), offering readers the opportunity to understand more about the alignment of institutional brand promises with the adult learner experience in an online master's degree program. A narrative-based theory of the phenomena is generated based on the data, aiming to help marketing practitioners and higher education leaders better understand the impact of branding.

Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research

This section will outline the processes that were employed to result in ethical, credible, and valid research, along with a brief overview of the researcher's positionality and the limitations of the study. Identifying the researcher's choices is critical to establishing trust (Chenail, 1995), along with providing the reader information about the researcher's role (Creswell, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

A strong set of ethical standards were followed at each step of the process (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). In undertaking this research study, the researcher adhered to the three guiding principles needed to conduct ethical research with humans: respect, beneficence, and justice (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 2014). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the study was described to participants in the initial interest form as well as verbally at the beginning of the phone interview, along with the confidentiality protections that were put into place. Identifying information was removed from the final transcripts, findings, and analysis; participant names

were changed to pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and volunteer participants' institutions are also anonymized. Digital audio files and all written interview notes are currently being stored in a password-protected device. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. This particular research contained minimal risks to the participants. The probability of harm or discomfort compared to daily life was extremely low for this research (Lopatto & Ellis, 2010) given the participants were adults who were asked to recount their experiences before and after enrolling in an online master's degree program. The one-on-one interview with the researcher was not expected to cause emotional distress with participants and at-risk populations were not included in this study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Credibility

In order to maintain the credibility of this study, the findings were validated through a process of cross-checking (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interview responses and researcher notes were cross-checked by the researcher throughout the research process to validate the categories that were identified. After the interviews were completed, transcribed, and analyzed, the researcher thoroughly reviewed notes and interview recordings for accuracy.

Transferability

Multiple cases were analyzed and the stories of the participants in this study aim to help practitioners understand the impact institutional marketing and brand have at an individual level. The adult learner population has been established as an important segment that deserves further examination, particularly when it comes to adult learner motivations and experiences (BrckaLorenz & Shoup, 2018; EAB, 2019; Glowacki-Dudka, 2019; Lederman, 2018; Luminary Labs, 2019; MacDonald, 2018). By focusing on this population of students, this study will help marketing practitioners and institutional leaders better support adult learners from pre-enrollment

through to graduation. The knowledge generated from this study can be used to inform marketing and brand practices, along with the delivery of the student experience, encouraging fidelity between what is being promised and what is being delivered. This knowledge can be used by institutions to refine messages, improve retention, and ensure satisfaction.

Positionality

This researcher's professional experiences, personal connections, and group membership play critical roles in the research process (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). Reconciling how identity, power, and experiences influence the research will be done through a brief exploration of the researcher's positionality (Gallagher, 1992; Roulston & Shelton, 2015).

This study's topic directly stems from the researcher's professional experience as a marketing practitioner working in higher education for the past decade. The researcher's personal connections encompass a community of practice related to higher education marketing as well as family members working in higher education. These connections, along with the researcher's own dual role of being a marketer and an adjunct instructor, provide unique insight into different institutions and functions. The researcher has pre-disposed ideas about the high value of marketing, coming from the perspective of an instructor who teaches marketing and a professional who practices it. This strong belief influences how the researcher constructs meaning and views the world (Briscoe, 2005). Early in this researcher's career, there was a realization that marketers hold significant power in their work shaping the messages and images seen by others. Knowing individuals hold this power, the researcher recognized that institutional marketers and leaders have an ethical responsibility to deliver the promises being made to prospective students.

The researcher herself is part of the population being studied for this research: an adult learner pursuing a doctorate entirely online while balancing a full-time career, a position as an adjunct instructor, and a mother. The researcher's self-identification as an adult learner provides unique insight into the experiences of the participants and helped establish trust with the participants. The researcher was mindful of how her identity as an adult learner could have presented issues of bias when conducting this research and sought out ways to responsibly address this bias when interpreting data and creating meaning (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

While race and ethnicity do not directly relate to this research, it is imperative to address the researcher's own race, power dynamics, and position in the world as these filters shape the interpretation of facts, stories, and experiences (Milner, 2007; Takacs, 2002). The researcher's experiences as a white, upper-middle class woman who is first-generation American have shaped her approach to research. Trust is an integral component of the research process (Briscoe, 2005) and it is crucial to examine historical and contemporary contexts (Kiel, 2015) while recognizing the bias these identities and experiences bring to research (Roulston & Shelton, 2015).

Ignoring bias and positionality does a disservice to the research being conducted and does not offer an authentic interpretation of information. When working with others as research participants, or others who are recipients of the research, the researcher will understand the inherent biases that come with identity (Freire, 2000). As posited by Roulston and Shelton (2015), bias cannot be avoided, but instead it can be re-conceptualized through questioning theory and method, assessing the role of the researcher, and analyzing the work of the researcher. Taking these steps can help lead to more illuminating and meaningful research.

Limitations

Potential limitations of the study center around the scale of the data and the population being studied. While multiple case narrative allows for multiple participants (Shkedi, 2005), there was still a limit to the number of individuals interviewed for this qualitative research study. Another limitation of the study relates to the diversity of participants. While an effort was made to have a diversity of perspectives in terms of school type (i.e., public and private, for-profit and non-profit) and the individual students being interviewed, a lack of racial diversity at the individual level resulted from the recruiting process. While the researcher strived to have an appropriate representative mix of individual participants in terms of race and ethnicity, there was a distinct lack of diversity. This limitation presents an opportunity for future research on the same topic of branding, but focused on minoritized (Benitez, 2010) or vulnerable student populations.

Summation

This research strives to understand the alignment between institutional brand promises and the adult learner experience in an online master's degree program. By pursuing a qualitative study, this research unpacks valuable insights into the lived experiences of adult learners and the impact marketing and brand have on this significant student population. The multiple case narrative research strategy allows for studying a larger population compared to other qualitative methodologies, and even permits some generalization in the presentation of the findings (Fine, 2009; Shkedi, 2004; Shkedi, 2005). Higher education marketing practitioners and institutional leaders will find this research compelling given it offers insight into the student voice and impact of marketing and brand beyond enrollment numbers. Understanding how brand promises align with the student experience can lead to student satisfaction and retention — crucial factors for

higher education leaders today given rising costs and competition. The following chapter will present the findings of this research study.

Chapter Four: Findings

This research study sought to understand the alignment between institutional brand promises and adult learner experiences, with a focus on the experiences of students over the age of 24 enrolled in an online master's degree program. The superordinate themes identified help answer this study's primary research question: What is the alignment between institutional brand promises with the adult learner experience? A particular emphasis of these findings is on areas of improvement for institutions in how marketing is presented or the student experience delivered. This section will outline the research findings through the lenses of the expectation confirmation theory (Oliver, 1980) and the brand touchpoint wheel (Khanna et al., 2014).

Overview of Participants

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with 17 participants (see Figure 3). Participants consisted of adult learners, those over the age of 24, currently pursuing or recently completing a master's degree through an online program. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for both the participant and their institution. Recruitment for participants was conducted solely via Facebook advertising over a two-week period, targeting those over the age of 24 currently attending graduate school and living in the United States.

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Region & School Type**	**Ethnicity & Gender**	**Program**	**Initial Expectations**	**Overall Expectations**
Anna	34	Midwest Private	White Female	Counseling	Fell Short	Fell Short
Bernie	24	South Public	White Male	Business Administration	Fell Short	Fell Short
Brie	30	Northeast Private	White Female	Psychology	Exceeded	Met
Brooke	57	West Private	White Female	Medicine	Exceeded	Exceeded
Chris	41	Midwest Public	White Male	Family Services	Met	Met

Colin	43	West Public	White Male	Business Administration	Fell Short	Exceeded
Eleanor	29	West Private	White Female	Education	Met	Met
Floyd	30	South Public	White Male	Criminal Justice	Met	Exceeded
Greg	31	South Public	White Male	Computer Science	Exceeded	Exceeded
Ian	45	Midwest Private	White Male	Education	Fell Short	Met
Kathryn	66	Southwest Private	White Female	Education	Exceeded	Exceeded
Liz	37	South Private	White Female	Education	Met	Exceeded
Morgan	34	Midwest Private	White Female	Social Work	Exceeded	Exceeded
Nia	29	West Private	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander Female	Criminal Justice	Met	Met
Pearl	56	Northwest Public	White Female	Education	Fell Short	Fell Short
Ruth	30	South Public	Asian Female	Education	Fell Short	Fell Short
Wes	36	South Public	White Male	Business Administration	Fell Short	Exceeded

Figure 3. Summary of Participants

Given the first phase of the sampling strategy employed self-selection sampling, the resulting mix of participants was remarkably well-aligned to the current demographics associated with online and adult learner markets. Of the 17 participants, all regions within the United States had representation and program type included a wide assortment, ranging from business to education. The breakdown of private versus public institutions was essentially even, with nine private institutions and eight public. The age range of participants varied from 24 to 66, with the average age being 38, aligning very closely with recent demographic data pertaining to online

learners nationally (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). In terms of gender, there were 10 participants who identified as female and seven who identified as male. Interestingly, the gender breakdown of participants (58% female) aligns nearly identically with national data, as female students comprise 60% of total post-baccalaureate enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, May 2020). Only two participants identified as people of color, with 15 identifying as white; this lack of diversity aligns with Facebook usage (Pew Research, 2019), and was an anticipated though unfortunate consequence of using only one social media platform for recruitment. Additionally, while post-baccalaureate enrollment of students of color has continued to grow over the past two decades, 70% of online learners pursuing graduate school are white (National Center for Education Statistics, May 2020).

Data Analysis

The data resulting from semi-structured interviews were reviewed and coded individually as described in the previous chapter, and then analyzed across individual interviews to identify overarching themes and connections. With multiple case narrative, a narrative report is produced, presenting dominant themes from across the participant interviews rather than the retelling of individual stories (Shkedi, 2004; Shkedi, 2005). The purpose of this narrative report is not to separately recount each narrative, but rather focus on the superordinate themes to emerge between the narrative cases (Shkedi, 2004). In alignment with the narrative approach, verbatim quotes are used to offer rich descriptions around core categories (Shkedi, 2004).

This inductive approach to analysis resulted in six dominant themes among adult learners in online master's degree programs. The order these themes are presented is guided by the stages in the brand touchpoint wheel: pre-admission, during the course, and post-passing (Khanna et al., 2014). The majority of the 17 participants determined their experiences met or exceeded their

expectations, with four indicating their overall experiences fell short of expectations. Five participants shared their experiences improved from their initial expectations compared to overall expectations. The superordinate themes to emerge from the interviews are summarized in the table below (Figure 4), with a detailed discussion to follow.

Superordinate Theme	**Sub-Themes**
Perceived Reputation and Brand Identity	Brick-and-mortar institution, rankings, accreditation, attending a well-known or large institution
Service Quality	Relevant and timely communication, flexibility, personal connection, career support
Acknowledge Students' Prior Online Experience	Prior online experience sets expectations, no prior online experience amplifies learning curve
Dissonance Between Marketing and Program Experience	Misleading/underselling the experience, lack of preparation, inconsistency in educational quality
Physical and Online Presence	In-person experiences, instructor presence
Giving Back to the Institution	Referrals, monetary donations

Figure 4. Summary of Findings

Perceived Reputation and Brand Identity

As highlighted in Chapter 2, perceived institutional reputation can lead students to choose to enroll and stay enrolled in a particular school, as the perception of reputation strongly influences satisfaction (Elsharnouby, 2015; Ng & Forbes, 2009; Parahoo et al., 2016; Santini et al., 2017; Sembiring, 2014). In this study, institutional reputation proved to be a major determinant for participants being satisfied with their experience, aligning closely with the literature. As participants described the brands of their chosen institutions, often those who were satisfied discussed the perceived prestige of the institution's brand identity. The factors contributing to perceived reputation in this particular research included having a physical campus, ranking, accreditation, and/or a larger or well-known presence. These factors will be described in this section.

Brick-and-Mortar Institution

While all participants were pursuing their master's degrees online, only two were in online-only institutions, with the rest of the participants part of programs with a physical campus, also known as brick-and-mortar institutions. Being a brick-and-mortar institution proved to be an important factor for participants who described their experiences as exceeding expectations. Consider this statement from "Brooke," attending a private institution in the West, who discussed the credential she needed for her field, "I really wanted it to come from a university, rather than from like the Ramada Inn over the weekend." Participants expressed comfort knowing their degree would be granted from a brick-and-mortar institution, like "Kathryn," attending a private institution in the Southwest, saying:

> Their brand at that time, it was a private, Christian university that has a significant ground population of students as well as online. And so I felt much more comfortable knowing that they had a large…that they weren't just an online university; I liked having the knowledge that they were a ground-based university as well.

The value of attending a brick-and-mortar institution also proved valuable for "Greg," who was earning a technical degree at a Southern public institution. He favorably compared his program to that of a technology-focused boot camp, which are rising in popularity (Fain, 2018), saying:

> In tech they have like non-accredited boot camp type things for people that are interested in, like, getting into tech or whatever, but this was more like a more rigorous, like fundamentals program, like an actual engineering degree…I mean, certainly the brand of [redacted] I think is good. And then, you know, just that the program itself is pretty rigorous, and you know as an online program, they have you go through the same stuff

> that you would be doing on campus so I wanted to make sure that I'm like actually spending my time wisely.

Rankings

Greg goes on to describe how the institutional marketing promoted the ranking of his school, saying, “They definitely do push their brand about being like a top whatever engineering school number. I don’t know the number.” Interestingly, he didn’t know the exact rank, but the mere fact it appeared on a ranking provided him confidence and comfort in the value of his degree and the perceived reputation of the institution. “Colin,” earning an MBA from a public institution, also felt assured that his degree would be granted from a top-ranked program in his state, a prominent part of the marketing. When describing the brand of his institution, Colin first mentioned the ranking, saying:

> In terms of a brand…technology, experienced professors, and a high-level ranking in the state…maybe it’s top 10 or top 15 in the country, I can’t remember. I’m trying to remember if it’s *U.S. News & World Report* or who they quote…but that’s the key pieces they try to promote as part of their brand.

Accreditation

Accreditation also played an important role in decision-making for several participants and contributed to perceived reputation of their institutions. “Wes,” who described his overall experience at a public school in the Southwest as exceeding expectations, initially chose his online master’s program because “it was accredited, it was ranked top three in affordable online programs, it was everything I was looking for.” Being accredited was a centerpiece of the institutions’ marketing efforts. Accreditation also came into play as a significant factor contributing to perceived reputation for “Morgan,” attending a for-profit, online institution.

When asked about her perception of an online degree, Morgan said, “I don’t feel like the program is going to be a liability for me now.” Morgan expressed a high level of confidence regarding the perceived reputation of her institution due solely to the fact it is accredited. Being part of a brick-and-mortar institution, ranking, and/or maintaining accreditation all contribute to cultivating a positive reputation as perceived by the participants prior to enrollment and during their program.

Attending Well-Known or Large Institutions

Attending well-known institutions, or larger schools either in terms of national brand recognition or enrollment size, instilled a sense of confidence among participants that their degrees would be valuable, leading to their satisfaction. Take for example “Brie,” who attends a prestigious private institution in the Northeast. When asked to describe the brand of the institution, Brie was very clear, saying, “I would say the brand overall is the Ivy League brand and there’s a sense of elitism…low accessibility, it’s high-brow, it’s old, and it’s of course a very respected institution, so it has that feeling of demanding respect.” The prestige of the institution was important to Brie in her decision-making process in choosing which program to attend, and she appreciates the prestige of her well-known institution as she reflects on the value and perception of her degree. Brie explained, “Every time I say that I went to [redacted], people are like ‘Wow,’ and I’m like, well, it’s working…it was an investment well made.”

Similarly, Colin anticipates the prestige of his state school will prove valuable, at least at the local level. Attending a well-known institution elicits a sense of pride for Colin, saying, “I’m proud to tell people that I am in this program and then…I’ll be an alumni. I think there’s a good credibility, for…[state]. I think it’s big and a well-known institution.” “Chris” also chose his

state school in the Midwest because it is well-established and known throughout his region, rather than an online-only institution. He said:

> The brand is very…people know it…they know [school], they support [school], they know it's a really good university, so having that behind me was kind of one of my draws for picking my university versus some university that I'd never heard of online, because with online there's so many different options out there and you don't know…like the accreditation of some of them, you know, and so I knew that I would stand behind the education that I'd receive after hearing from different people, and living here in general, you hear from people….it's one of the preferred colleges. That was a big part of my decision.

While perceived prestige and familiarity at the national or state level were important for some participants, others referenced the sheer size of their institutions as being a significant part of the institutional brand. Being a "truly diverse, large campus" was a key descriptor used by "Floyd" when asked about the brand of his public institution in the South. Likewise, "Liz" made several references to the size of her private, Christian-based institution, saying "They pride themselves on being one of the largest [online institutions] in the nation, I think, or in the world…My class was the largest, like, in history to that point. So they pride themselves on being big." The assumption of some participants is that the larger the institution, the more familiar others may be with that particular brand. Perhaps this is why several participants used the term "large" to describe the brand of their school, though from a marketing perspective, it's unclear if these schools would want that descriptor to be the leading brand attribute.

Service Quality

A student's interpretation of institutional service quality can shape their satisfaction with an institution (Alfy & Abukari, 2019; Mai, 2015; Parahoo et al., 2016; Sultan & Wong, 2012). As described in Chapter 2, service quality may include the performance of academic and administrative services, classroom environment, and student support (Alfy & Abukari, 2019). Often, participants in this study shaped their view of their online program experience based on their interpersonal interactions with staff and their ability to navigate technology such as student portals or learning management systems. Throughout this research study, four major components of service quality came to the surface, including communication, flexibility, personal connections, and career support, discussed below.

Relevant and Timely Communication

Relevant and timely communication is a significant factor in determining satisfaction among adult learners in online master's degree programs, from pre-enrollment interactions with staff to communication with advisors and faculty during the program. Prior to enrolling in their programs, the majority of participants noted communication methods were typically via phone calls, emails, social media, and the website. Once admitted or enrolled, frequency of communication declined for most participants, and was primarily conducted via email.

"Eleanor," attending a private online institution with experiences that met her expectations, noted the frequency of communication and how this made her feel a sense of accountability. Similarly, Kathryn detailed the high-touch communication from her private school, especially with professors, saying, "I always had their personal phone numbers, and just like you would in a regular class I had their email….during the course, or when they reviewed the papers, they would actually phone or email you. There was a lot of communication."

Colin nearly dropped out of his MBA program given his initial experience feeling overwhelmed by the program rigor and technology; however, a one-on-one conversation with a teaching assistant kept him enrolled. He shared:

> Basically, I had a phone conversation with him, and a Skype, to help me with some of the suggested things on what I should do, and how to kind of re-tool the way you learn and what you do…[then] I developed an online community with other MBA students so that helped and got me through the first class.

The communication outreach from the teaching assistant is what saved Colin from dropping out of his program, and indicates personal communication and frequent outreach can have a positive impact on adult learners.

Conversely, poor communication is a key theme identified among participants whose experiences fell short of their expectations of their online program. While most participants indicated they experienced consistent communication prior to the admission stage, once at the application phase, there appeared to be a breakdown in communication for some participants. Poor communication at some participant institutions ranged from having conflicting information on the website, to not having a consistent point of contact. Chris found the admission process and corresponding communication at his public school challenging, saying,

> There's a lot of things you need to do that unless you really know the system, like I had lot of last minute emails where they're like, 'this is due in the couple days…' That's just one of the drawbacks of online, sometimes you're not right in the moment so you don't realize the whole process.

Brie explained that her institution failed to communicate in a timely manner from the point of being admitted to her private school, saying she found out she was accepted by checking

her student portal rather than by email. Brie goes on to say, “So that kind of exemplifies to me the lag with delaying communications. Sometimes it's hard to get information from the right person at the right time.” As Brie describes below, receiving relevant communication about being a student proved challenging:

> I had a ton of trouble getting communication regarding like healthcare and setting up my student portal and enrolling in classes…it’s like pulling teeth to get that information, like if you if you’re not familiar with their system of signing up with classes, it’s really tough.
>
> There was no one who guided me through that, so it was up to us to ask the question.

This experience led Brie to describe her initial experience as falling short of expectations, though her attitude later improved when reflecting back on her overall experience.

Once enrolled in their online program, many dissatisfied participants noted communication from representatives of the institution was nonexistent or unresponsive. A key promise made to “Anna” at her faith-based private school in the Midwest was that there would be ongoing advisor communication, but this promise was not kept; Anna stated, “[they] don’t respond to anything.” This led Anna to explore transferring to another school more well-known for and seemingly adept at online education and accommodating distance learners, however she was too deep into her program to make this a viable option. Anna chose her institution because it has a brick-and-mortar presence and she wanted to avoid the “online-only stigma;” however, her poor experience led her to explore attending an institution with a brand more closely associated with online course delivery, despite the alleged stigma.

While some institutions proved unresponsive in their communication, others were simply not clear in their communication. This was the case for “Ruth,” who said about her public research university in the South, “I feel like the institution doesn’t communicate very clearly

with us at all." Additionally, Ruth indicated the social media presence for the institution is not "relevant to the online learning community." These issues with unclear and irrelevant communication led Ruth to feel frustrated and "unvalued" as a learner.

Flexibility

A surprising finding to emerge from this research is the frequency in which "flexibility" is associated as an institutional brand attribute, when typically considered more a feature in higher education marketing rather than integrated as part of the institutional brand (Ng, 2014). The term was used among several participants to describe their interpretation of the institution's brand, and many also cited flexibility as a promise made prior to enrollment. Flexibility within this research primarily relates to scheduling courses and time to degree completion, as most participants identified themselves as working professionals who needed to feel supported through flexible timelines to complete the degree.

For many participants, flexibility played a significant role in meeting or exceeding expectations and was a promise made to several participants, ranging from flexibility in accepting transfer credits; flexibility in terms of course-load moving from semester to semester; and flexibility of not attending classes at a set time as offered through an asynchronous online learning environment. Flexibility in terms of time to degree completion was a key part of the experience meeting expectations for Chris, as he describes the flexibility required as a working professional and father of three:

> Being able to be flexible with your timeline was another big one that they kind of promised, because I was nervous at first that I'd have like a time limit to complete the degree, and it was actually a six-year time limit…at first I started with two [classes], then I realized even two graduate classes is a lot, you know, working full-time with three kids

> at home. So I went down to one, and luckily because of the timeline, I knew I was still able to graduate within the time limit.

Chris expressed gratitude that the promise of the flexible program timeline met his expectations. The flexibility of time to completion was also a key marketing message for Eleanor, who was able to move through her program at her own pace, giving her a sense of "freedom." Flexibility was an element of the program promised to her prior to enrollment, and it delivered on her expectations, as she articulates here:

> I loved the flexibility of being able to work as fast as I wanted to through my courses. Like, once you are done with one course you can move on to the next one. And it wasn't like a set…number in a semester, a term…once you get one done, you move on to the next one…. that was something I think I was most looking forward to and really enjoyed that flexibility of being able to move through it quickly when I was able to, and then, you know, be able to take…a little bit more time when there's other stuff going on.

Flexibility within the courses, as provided by faculty through deadline extensions, also surfaced as a key trend among participants who had their expectations met. Liz shared a story about her experience with a faculty member being flexible with an assignment deadline:

> I was super overwhelmed with [an assignment] and so I didn't turn it in. And I emailed my professor and I was like, look: my daughter's teething; my principal has just changed how we're doing everything with our students; I'm completely overwhelmed, like on the brink of shutting down…And she was like, 'That's fine, I'm a single mom…my daughter's not teething…but I remember those days.' And so I turned it in late, she didn't take any points off for being late. So that really…made me feel like they were compassionate…that professor could have been a jerk…but I felt like…that took into

> account…the whole adult learner…she just chooses understanding…I think I cried, actually, when I got her email and I saw my grade.

Liz viewed this flexibility as compassionate, and felt she was being supported as the adult learner she was with competing priorities. This also helped Liz feel as though she had a personal connection with her instructor, another key theme identified among adult learners who expressed their experiences met or exceeded the expectations of their online master's degree programs.

Personal Connections

Interpersonal interactions with staff and experiences with faculty are key components of service quality (Elsharnouby, 2015; Sultan & Wong, 2012), and positive interpersonal interactions, either with a recruiter, advisor, or faculty member, was prevalent in the stories of participants who had their experiences meet and exceed expectations. For example, Eleanor described regular engagement with a student mentor and the value of that connection:

> We were supposed to have weekly contact on the phone and then I could, you know, email or message her anytime, but we talked usually once a week. It was great to have someone, you know, kind of accountable to…she was specific to like my program, so she knew a lot about the classes I was in…she was very knowledgeable and helping me with my specific coursework.

Connecting with an advisor prior to enrollment and maintaining that relationship throughout the program was an expectation Chris had going into his online master's degree program, and that experience cemented his outlook that the program met his expectations, as he details here:

> I think having your advisor and making that connection with you throughout the process is one of those ways that they have met my expectations, that they would be with you

> throughout the process and the advisor will check in with you…it felt like that same person was on my side throughout. If I had questions, I could go straight to them.

The consistency in advising from pre-enrollment through to graduation helped establish a strong bond with the advisor and resulted in Chris feeling "looked after;" it also reiterates the need for continuity of care to help deliver or exceed expectations. The promise of connection was dominant across the marketing for many participants. Kathryn, for instance, attributes the extraordinary one-on-one engagement she received in the recruitment process and throughout her program to her satisfaction, stating, "I felt extremely well supported, and I felt like they…did deliver what they promised." Of particular interest is Kathryn's story about her interaction with the recruiter, as she articulates here:

> The recruiter dropped her script and she talked to me as a person and we talked about what benefits there would be…it was made very personal to me and she spoke to me, not for the script, She talked to me for nearly an hour and it just made a huge difference to me because I felt like I was a person and not just, 'I gotta meet my quota for the day.'

This experience powerfully illustrates how cultivating a personal connection in the pre-admission stage can influence the decision-making of the adult learner, and help achieve satisfaction with their overall experience. Transcending expectations, such as omitting the script and having a more authentic conversation, contributed to Kathryn's positive regard for the service experienced. Morgan also found the relationship with her advisors critical to her satisfaction, and a crucial promise made prior to enrollment through marketing, stating:

> Starting maybe the second semester, I would say is when they actually started connecting us to the actual like fieldwork advisors and the head of the program even, so I would say

> that that's kind of where the communication that they had said about the advisors actually became more…than I expected.

In addition to advisors, one-on-one interactions with instructors also led participants to feel satisfied. The opportunity to connect individually with his professor was a key factor in improving Colin's perception of his experiences at his public institution. Colin initially felt his experiences fell short, but ultimately identified his overall experience as exceeding expectations, due in large part to a personal connection with a professor, as he shares here:

> I'd reached out to him separately to get some advice and again, the knowledge and the experience he had and how he helped me, you know, beyond just the student just more as a 'Hey, here are some things to think about and tools' …went above and beyond what a typical professor would provide.

Establishing familiarity with the instructor and receiving personalized feedback helped "Nia," attending a private university in the West, feel like the brand lived up to her expectations. In describing her interpretation of the institution's brand, Nia said it was "student-centric" and "tailored to your interest." This shone through in her personal connection with her faculty, as she explains here:

> It's really nice to you know with the small classes, the teacher is more familiar with your work and your progress in class versus, you know, when you go to a big lecture hall that's filled with maybe 50-plus students, you know, the professor's not going to really know your name for that semester. You're not going to see… your progress on an individual scale.

This one-on-one experience with faculty aided in delivering the institution's promise of being "focused on the learner." In addition to being student-centric, another promise made to Nia prior

to enrollment was that her program would enhance her ability to find a career in the field. This service of career support will be discussed below.

Career Support

Support in an online program can manifest in many ways, whether it be support in the form of faculty mentorship, regular advisor communication, or guided career advancement. Nia was promised improved job prospects in her chosen field as a result of graduating from her program, with the institution setting expectations around enhanced career outcomes during and after the program. For example, Nia said:

> They actually want to see you succeed…during the program, especially when it came to…the research and thesis, being able to discuss what potential career paths that I could take, why I think this research would be beneficial to the field, where I could apply my knowledge to…facilities or organizations, would also be interested in what I'm researching and looking into studying.

The ability to be career-focused during the program, including the research aspect of the master's degree experience, helped Nia feel like her expectations had been met and she was being supported in reaching her professional goals.

Additionally, many participants felt supported in pursuing their career aspirations either through promised networking opportunities or one-on-one mentorship. Improved career prospects and salary, lifelong networking, and personalized help were the three marketing promises Eleanor was made by her online institution through its website, as well as a phone call with a representative prior to enrollment. For Eleanor, she felt as though "the advertising was true to my experience and I would totally recommend it to anybody." As a recent graduate,

Eleanor has only just begun accessing the networking and career resources made available, but already feels like the promises the institution made about career support have come to fruition.

Acknowledging Students' Prior Online Experience

Aligning closely with the literature, this research study uncovered the desire of adult learners to have the institution acknowledge their previous experiences, particularly with online learning. For some, this meant recognizing if they were coming into a program with previous online experience, for others it was recognizing being new to online education and needing further assistance.

Prior Online Experience Sets Expectations

As online education becomes more prevalent, particularly with the shift to online many institutions made in 2020 to accommodate the global pandemic, more students will be coming into their master's degree programs with prior online learning experience. Interestingly, several participants who identified their experiences as falling short of expectations indicated they had previous experiences with online education. In fact, Anna recalled her experience building an online training program for her former company, so her experience with online education extended beyond her role as a student, and also included first-hand experience designing an online program. She explained:

> I've told them this multiple times. I've told all my professors. It's like, I know it, I know it can be done. I know we can create simulations…and then it can give me…feedback at the end. Because to a learner like me, who learns by hearing things, by seeing things, by doing things…that's how I'm going to learn. So I cannot wait for internship when I can finally be with somebody and learn.

Other participants had positive experiences with online education at their undergraduate institutions, such as Ruth; these previous experiences set expectations about the potential of online education, and when contrasted with their lackluster experience in their online master's degree program, they were left feeling let down with feelings of frustration. Ruth stated:

> I expected classes to be similar to online classes I took as an undergrad. I've also taught classes in a blended learning format, so I was pretty familiar what could be online. I was expecting more communication from the professors than we actually get; I was expecting less rigor and fewer assignments and more flexibility with due dates.

This demonstrates that many adult learners may come into their master's degree program with pre-conceived ideas of online learning, giving them a clear point of comparison. "Bernie," who had previous online course experience, did not have high expectations, saying:

> I think for me, my expectations were really the value of the degree, more so than the actual experience that I'd have. So from undergrad, I had kind of this idea of what online classes would be like, and so I knew how they were different from actual in-person educated courses…I think there's some limitations maybe to the online experience and how that is able to be conducted, especially for a master's program…it just kinda turned into more busy work than it was actual productive and informational.

This experience highlights how an adult learner with a mediocre experience with online education may still choose to pursue a master's degree online because of the credential's value.

No Prior Online Experience Amplifies Learning Curve

While online education is exceedingly more dominant today, it's critical to keep in mind that some adult learners are still new to this modality and require more assistance in this area. Consider Kathryn, a 66-year-old woman going back to school for the first time after several

years. While her experiences exceeded the expectations of her online master's degree program, Kathryn was new to online education, saying, "I understood how to be a student, I didn't understand how to be an online student." Similarly, Colin had never taken an online class prior to his master's program, and when discussing his experiences choosing and attending his particular school, he focused heavily on the technological platform, saying:

> They really strive for very sound, solid tech, like the technological platform is Canvas…that's one of the main things that they promote is that you can use the system from anywhere and that there, you know, is no downtime or any issues with your online learning experience.

While other institutions may have promoted their online learning management systems in their marketing, this was something that stood out to Colin, who was new to online learning. He also wanted the university to have a deeper understanding of him as a learner, saying, "Doing kind of a more in-depth analysis on me about my past history and how I learn…then they give you a little more tailored help with starting out, I think would be very beneficial."

Dissonance Between Marketing and Program Experience

A key theme to emerge from this research study is the dissonance between the marketing communication leading up to enrollment compared to the experiences of participants once they were enrolled in their online master's degree program. While the majority of participants indicated their experiences met or exceeded their expectations, the dissonance between marketing and reality was especially a factor for those with experiences that fell short of expectations. Many participants indicated that their institution undersold their program, as inconsistencies in promises and experiences proved problematic and in a few cases, misleading. Others mentioned that they were not adequately prepared for their program, as expectations were

not properly set. Additionally, several participants who indicated their experiences fell short of expectations faced inconsistency in educational quality throughout their program compared to how their programs were marketed to them.

Misleading/Underselling the Experience

Some participants with negative experiences at their institutions mentioned feeling misled, while others simply stated the institution was underselling itself to prospective students. For example, some participants indicated that their program was promoted as achievable for working professionals and that the courses would be tailored to adult learners, however, as Ruth notes about her Southern public institution, "there was not really a realistic way that [the program] could be achieved while working full-time." The rigor and workload of the program, along with the required number of courses changing halfway through due to shifting accreditation standards, made Ruth feel she was misled by her institution. Similarly, "Pearl" said of her public institution in the Northwest that "the doable part of it was kind of misleading" given practicum requirements were not fully explained prior to enrollment.

The dissonance between the institutional marketing and the actual student experience also led participants to question the value of the institutional brand. For example, Bernie felt let down by the lack of hands-on learning, which was promised in the marketing, saying, "I think that the brand might display itself to be a little bit better than what the experiences are…how they try to attract students is not exactly what is actually received." Similarly, if she saw advertising for her institution now, Pearl stated, "I would laugh." Expecting more engagement and mentorship based on the marketing of the program, Anna said the inconsistency "really lessens my view of the brand…I cringe a little bit because that's not what it's like." She goes on to explain her expectations going into her program:

> Because I was going into a master's program, I had high hopes...that it would be very interactive, very engaging, that I would have back-and-forth with professors, that I would have more face-time…I really went in thinking that this was going to be a very robust, helpful, 'we're with you' kind of program.

Some marketing lacked clarity and neglected to mention certain opportunities for students once they enrolled. Interestingly, the dissonance of the marketing and the experience sometimes resulted in a positive experience, simply one the participant didn't expect going into the program. Take for instance Brie, who was unaware of the club opportunities available, which ultimately contributed to her graduate school experience exceeding expectations. Brie said, "They didn't really advertise [clubs] so I was happy to discover that and enjoyed getting to know a smaller group of people who weren't in my cohort through various organizations."

"Ian," attending a private institution in the Midwest, had the opposite experience, in that the marketing communication at his institution focused heavily on co-curricular experiences, but his time as an adult learner attending a fully online graduate program did not align with the imagery depicted in the institutions' marketing. He explained:

> [My school] is mostly undergrad…mostly a residential campus, so the things that I see online, like on Facebook and I see their Instagram, that they promote that community piece, that residential piece. You see the young co-eds in their college sweatshirts enjoying life and doing the club activities and all that kind of undergrad stuff, where the graduate school is very separate from all of that, and is not that kind of relationship-building, best years of your life kind of thing.

It should be noted this disconnect between the imagery promoted by the institution and his actual experience did not bother Ian, who said, "looking at that and being part of that makes me feel

more of the community, even though I've never set foot on the campus." Likewise, Morgan indicated her school "undersold" the program, but ultimately ended up satisfied with her experience, describing it as exceeding expectations.

Lack of Preparation

As the extant research in Chapter 2 outlined, many institutions fail to shape expectations adequately through accurate communication prior to enrollment (Ng & Forbes, 2009). This research study bore this out, as a common issue cited among dissatisfied participants centers on not setting expectations or adequately preparing students. Many of the promises made to prospective students in the pre-admission phase were communicated through the website, emails, or phone calls with institutional representatives. However, these communications neglected to effectively prepare participants with proper expectations about a variety of program aspects, such as workload, technology, faculty involvement, and time to degree completion. Some participants expressed that they had "no expectations" going into their program, leading to a diminished view of the institution. While an experience ultimately exceeding expectations is typically interpreted as a positive interaction with a brand, it's important to consider that this phenomena may also be construed as neutral or even negative (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Bhattacherjee, 2001; Oliver, 1997).

Interestingly, Kathryn claimed, "I had no idea what I was getting into, to be honest," yet she remained steadfast that her initial and overall experiences exceeded expectations. Lacking adequate preparation can lead to frustration among adult learners. For example, Colin indicated he lacked proper expectations about the online class environment going into his MBA program at a state school and struggled with the transition to online learning, saying:

> I've never done an online class and so I really wasn't sure what to expect. I just really didn't know how it was gonna work…I think having that contact prior to starting school with either a professor or instructional coordinator or a counselor to understand better how I learned and where my background was and my level of technological savvy with this type of platform, and did I have any prior experience with online classes, or when's the last time I've been in class…there's ways they could have helped prep or prepare me better for that first class, because they almost lost the student because…they didn't do a very good job of really prepping me.

While Colin lacked an understanding of what the online experience would entail going into the online master's program, his experience greatly improved after familiarizing himself with the technology. That being said, even technically skillful students lacked the proper expectations going into their online program, as expressed by Wes, who was pursuing an MBA with a focus on information technology management:

> That was probably my problem for misinterpreting what to expect from the master's program…I was expecting it to be more interactive and teacher-driven classes. They seemed like they were really just facilitators telling you what to do and what to learn…I had a very good learning in the end, once I got over the expectations that I'd had and kind of adapted to the way that the school is doing the class…It's entirely self-driven.

Once Wes was clear on the course structure and self-driven nature of the online program, which had not been explained in the marketing prior to enrollment, his experience vastly improved, ultimately exceeding his expectations. Floyd also made note of his program being self-driven and receiving no preparation on how to navigate the program prior to enrolling, stating, "I mean, I pretty much did this on my own."

Inconsistency in Educational Quality

Quality and rigor played an important role in the participants' interpretation of their experiences in their online master's degree programs. The issue of quality in online education is a consistent theme across the literature, especially recently, given institutions are turning to online education in the face of a pandemic (Littenberg-Tobias & Reich, 2020; Muller et al., 2020; Wei & Chou, 2020). For some participants, their institutions presented a brand that was "learner-oriented," "professional," or "innovative," but the experiences of some participants woefully fell short of these promises. In fact, the quality of the program was the first promise identified by Pearl, who described her high expectations:

> I expected to go to classes and learn things that would immediately affect my practice…and that wasn't the case. I feel like after spending the time and the effort and the money for this program, we're still not really getting the skills we need.

Anna had a similar experience, as she was promised faculty involvement in her courses but instead suffered from "death-by-PowerPoint." Anna goes on to say, "So I'm paying $3,000 to read a book…just reading a book and regurgitating it doesn't do it for me." Bernie, a participant attending a public institution in the South, also indicated a high-level of busy work in his online program, not equaling the high-quality educational experience he anticipated based on the marketing. He explained that having an opportunity to speak with current and former students helped shape more accurate expectations, but the marketing led him to believe the quality of the coursework would be more engaging and valuable. He described his experience as "contradictory" to the marketing, saying:

> From the view of their marketing, there were some unmet expectations. Because I had those conversations with students prior, I kind of knew from a first-hand experience

> …what to expect more so than from…what they were marketing. I think there's a limitation to the online experience and how that is able to be conducted, especially for a master's program….I think it would have been a much more beneficial course had it been in-person, but because of the online format, they had to use this group work, online typed response method to get people's feedback, and it turned into more busy work more than it was productive and informational.

For many participants, the quality and rigor did not live up to expectations set forth by the institution through its marketing, leading Ruth to question the institution's priorities, saying:

> They're really selling their program and their students short because they could improve it so much, but it doesn't really seem like that's necessarily a very big priority, it seems like the priority is just churning students through the program.

Ian expressed similar concerns regarding the prioritization of program quality, explaining that, "It almost seems fraudulent as a school that it was very much kind of pay…the price and jump through the right hoops and you get the credit."

Lack of consistency in their academic experience was a challenge discussed among all participants who felt their experiences fell short of expectations. These experiences led students to feel frustrated and wanting more, like Ian, who noted his course experiences and professor involvement were not steady from course to course, saying:

> Some classes have been really sterile like that or have been really very hands-off and other courses have been very hands-on and I guess it goes really back to the instructor of the course. And I would say my experience has almost been 50/50. One class is really strong and the professor is strong and the class is rigorous and the class has a lot of

> professor interaction. And then the other one is show up, do your work, you'll get your grade, you'll go on.

Though prospective students were often promised high-quality education and according to Colin, a "solid learning experience," when not delivered, participants expressed disappointment and dissatisfaction with their overall experience.

Physical and Online Presence

Across academic programs and modalities, student satisfaction is highest when social presence is high (Horzum, 2014). The literature shows that establishing learning communities and social engagement with both peers and instructors in online coursework can significantly influence student satisfaction (Richardson et al., 2017; Rios et al., 2018). In discussions with participants, it became clear that in order to meet or exceed expectations and be satisfied with an online master's degree program, adult learners seek social support in the form of in-person experiences or instructor presence in online courses.

In-Person Experiences

A dominant theme to come to the forefront among participants who cited their experiences exceeded expectations is the inclusion of in-person experiences, either through brief meetings akin to conferences or hybrid courses that met partially on campus and online throughout the term. Some had week-long or weekend intensives, while others participated in campus courses to complement their online coursework. Regardless of format, however, the opportunity to engage with peers or instructors in person led to participants stating their experience exceeded expectations. This was articulated by Brooke, explaining:

> I think because of the hybrid, when we went back to the online portion, I know most of my classmates, I did some group experience with them, or I was in a workshop with

> them, or something, ok? Or they were hanging out with a person I was in a class with. So, in these classes when we're doing these discussion posts…I felt like I knew those people more. And then we would see each other in Zoom, even the ones I didn't know from the residential conference, you got to know them, because each class had at least three Zoom meetings, too…it has exceeded my expectations, because I went to a different online college, with no hybrid portion, no in-person portion, and no video conferences, and I can tell you I didn't give a rip what those people thought of anything. Just did your post and you moved on.

The opportunity to meet and engage with peers in person created a deeper connection for Brooke, making her feel more invested in what her classmates had to say in the online courses. This was a similar experience for Morgan, who attended short, in-person seminars in conjunction with the online coursework. She said:

> I think that it's very intensive, it's a week of a lot of really hard work, but I felt like that, you know, it connected me and other students especially and to a certain extent the professors in a way that it is not always found in a lot of online programs.

Taking a hybrid approach to coursework, completing courses both online and on campus, allowed Floyd to create more personal connections with his classmates, as he articulates below:

> As far as in-person [classes], I enjoyed those better because had I not done those at first, I wouldn't have met these people that I know, I wouldn't have gotten involved on campus because I mean you're not really meeting. I don't talk to anybody anymore that's in my online-only classes. It's more of a connection.

Despite preferring on-campus courses, Floyd needed to transition to the online modality due to his full-time work schedule, yet living within 50 miles of his institution, he became involved

with activities and clubs held on campus to stay connected and engaged. It's important to note that prior to enrolling at his school, Floyd felt the pressure from the institution to enroll in the online-only program, saying, "They were pushing you to do it as an online-only student. And I'm like, 'I don't want to do that.' I want to have the option, that's important to me." This led Floyd to describe the admission process as "sketchy," though overall he was satisfied with his experience.

For Liz, who had experiences that met and exceeded expectations, the in-person intensive was an opportunity to bond with other students, saying:

> It was really like a blended experience…but it gave me an opportunity to meet other students that were in your program, and so I got to you know bond with some other girls. I actually ended up rooming with a complete stranger, which I guess gave me the true college experience.

This in-person experience was particularly valuable for Liz, who said that while her institution was large, "they like the residential part to be small."

Instructor Presence

The concept of instructor presence, or instructor engagement, emerged as a driving factor for experiences to exceed expectations for adult learner participants. Instructor presence has long been viewed as a contributing factor to student satisfaction (Ku et al., 2013; Martirosyan, 2015; Richardson et al., 2017; Rios et al., 2018; Tompkins et al., 2016). Teaching presence entails being "seen" (Mandernach et al., 2006, p. 249) by students in the online environment and providing them with frequent and effective interaction with the instructor.

Morgan identified having access to her professors as a significant promise made prior to enrollment, and one that the institution delivered on, saying the program has "been able to create

sort of a consistent set of professors that you get to know in the program." The faculty presence in Kathryn's online courses helped her feel encouraged, particularly since she was new to online education. She said:

> I had more instructors who were good than the ones who…were there for the payment…who really put in the time and supported me...I think it really impressed me that there were people out there who were encouraging us to learn during the course of teaching these particular classes, the more I did [online], the more I liked it over going to a classroom because I had time to do it during the day.

Other participants highlighted faculty engagement and their involvement with technology as factors leading to their satisfaction. For example, Greg mentioned how his faculty held office hours, hosted real-time Zoom sessions, participated in a Slack forum, and created engaging pre-recorded videos as some of the many ways his professors stayed engaged and facilitated social presence. He said:

> I felt like the videos were very engaging where the professor like clearly spent a lot of time and effort on trying to create like some good videos and…she's really good at presenting…she had like some funny analogies and stuff like that. It was entertaining…but not only entertaining…but actually helped you learn the material, so I thought it was really good.

This experience aligned with Greg's expectations going into his computer science program and led him to feel the marketing was authentic, saying, "I haven't seen anything disingenuous about [the advertising]…they're very honest and transparent about it."

Giving Back to the Institution

Marketing, and brand as a subset, is a key factor among students to determine the school they will enroll in, stay in, and give back to (Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2017; Jones, 2018; Lim et al., 2018; Özkanal, 2019). Giving back can come in many forms, though institutions rely heavily on alumni donations, and branding and marketing play a critical role in shaping donor behavior (Stephenson & Bell, 2014). Research shows there is little difference in donor motivation between alumni who attended an online program compared to a campus-based program (Stephen & Clayton, 2019). That being said, participants were asked how they plan to give back to the institution, and more often than not that question was met with initial silence or laughter. Responses ranged from offering referrals to becoming an adjunct instructor, giving monetary donations to attending sporting events. It should come as no surprise that participants who said their experiences fell short of expectations were not willing to give back to the institution, other than offering feedback. Participants with experiences that met or exceeded expectations cited referrals as their primary way to give back to their institution. Few indicated a preference to make a monetary donation.

Referrals

Most participants who had experiences that met and exceeded expectations indicated a willingness to refer others to apply to their program or the institution overall. Interestingly, the promise to refer others to the program wasn't as prevalent for those who had experiences that exceeded expectations, and was much more common among the participants who had improved experiences from when they first started their program compared to their overall perception. Every participant who had an experience that improved over time indicated their willingness to refer others as a form of giving back to the institution. For example, Wes stated, "I would say

that the most that I could anticipate giving back to the institution will be just positive word of mouth and encouraging others to investigate that as an option if they're looking for a similar program."

Despite the fact his experience initially fell short and then eventually met expectations for Ian, he would still recommend the program to others and be willing to speak with prospective students about the advantages and disadvantages of the institution. The participants' willingness to refer is striking, as some had a negative initial experience. Over time, however, their experiences improved and either met or exceeded their expectations, resulting in a positive regard for their program and/or institution. It should be noted that some participants expressed a closer affinity toward their program over their institution, and they were more willing to refer others to their particular program versus the institution as a whole. This distinction was the case for Colin, who said his loyalty is "more to the actual MBA program as opposed to the school as a whole, just because… I'm not on campus and I never… lived on campus. It's not as big a connection."

Also offering to refer others to her specific program was Brie, who initially had an experience that fell short, but eventually met expectations. When asked if she would recommend the program to others, she said:

> Oh, absolutely, no question. Especially my program for the right person. I just feel astounded that I got in, I have no idea how I got here…I think if I was giving advice to anyone about choosing a program, I say first that it has to be the right program for you and then you should look at the college and they happen to be good on both fronts for me.

In the case of Liz, who had an experience that improved over time, giving back to the institution in the form of a referral is not just a futuristic action, as she is actively recommending

people to her specific program and the institution as a whole. She has represented her institution at a college fair at the high school where she works, and she has already referred colleagues who are now enrolled at the private, faith-based institution. Liz explains her willingness to refer by saying, “You know, anytime I hear anybody mention online learning, of course, if you have good self-motivation and you’re responsible and driven, then I highly recommend [school]. I definitely would recommend it for sure.” The growth Liz saw within herself and the improved experience she had at her institution led her to feel a deep sense of pride for her now alma mater — enough to enthusiastically refer others to pursue their education at the same institution.

Monetary Donations

Across the spectrum of participants, only a few even entertained the idea of providing a monetary donation to their institution. Take Brooke, for example, who said, “I don’t feel like I would be like one of those donators because the school doesn’t look like it really needs me to. I mean, they’re expensive.” Expressing similar feelings, Pearl explained she had already spent enough money on her institution and did not anticipate giving back in any way, saying, “I kind of feel like I've written enough checks.”

Others were open to the possibility of eventually donating, if the opportunity and ability to do so came to fruition. For instance, Floyd said, “I mean, if I'm making enough, yeah, sure, I’ll give them a donation, but I’m not going out of my way to do that.” Nia described a parallel sentiment here:

> After I pay off my student loans, I hope that I can be one of those alumni that is able to donate to the school or sponsor someone or be able to, maybe, fundraise or something like that for the school because if it helps the school continue, I guess.

While monetary donations were rarely mentioned among participants, those with experiences that met or exceeded expectations were more inclined to give back in this way.

This chapter identified six key themes and unpacked related findings from research into the alignment between institutional brand promises and the adult learner experience using the expectation confirmation theory and brand touchpoint wheel. The 17 adult learners interviewed for this study expressed a wide range of experiences at public and private institutions from across the United States, some negative and many positive. The verbatim quotes from the participants offered rich insights into their experiences, and helped illuminate the superordinate themes identified across the narrative accounts. Several patterns and commonalities were identified when comparing narratives and were used to express the key themes and findings. The next and final chapter will analyze the aforementioned findings and explore implications for marketing practitioners and higher education leaders who seek to better understand the impact of branding on adult learners.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to understand the alignment between institutional brand promises and adult learner experiences in online master's degree programs. Using multiple case narrative and semi-structured interviews with adult learners, this research generated insights into institutional branding efforts, student expectations and experiences, and adult learners' satisfaction with their online master's degree program. Using expectation confirmation theory as the primary theoretical framework, this study did not seek to simply find *if* expectations aligned with student experiences, but rather *how* expectations aligned. This chapter discusses the resulting implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and study conclusions.

Implications for Practice

Several superordinate themes emerged from the participant interviews as outlined in the previous chapter, and this section will focus on the synthesized discussion and implications for practice. The recommendations discussed will be particularly relevant for marketing practitioners and higher education leaders at institutions offering online master's degree programs targeted toward adult learners. While branding is the central theme of this research study, the findings also yielded key recommendations to improve the overall student experience, as the research sought to understand the full journey of adult learners in an online master's degree program. Prospective and current students would invariably benefit from institutions adopting these recommendations, as ensuring credible marketing messages will help in their decision-making and their overall experience.

This study uncovered the following implications for practice among higher education marketers and leaders to ensure quality academic experiences and adult learner satisfaction in online programs:

- Approach branding in a layered way, highlighting affordability and online delivery first, followed by signaling credibility such as rankings, being a brick-and-mortar institution, and accreditation.
- Set expectations for the online experience through marketing and communication.
- Deliver relevant and timely communication.
- Implement personalized continuity of care.
- Cultivate community through instructor presence online and/or in-person experiences.
- Provide robust career services and support.
- Prioritize referrals for enrollment growth.
- Institute ethical standards and proactively assess branding authenticity.

Each implication mentioned above will be discussed in-depth in the following pages.

Approach Branding in a Layered Way

Early in this study, brand was defined as a subset of marketing and representative of an organization's unique identity. In the context of higher education, brand should be a "promise of future satisfaction" (Tolbert, 2014, p. 236), aiming to reflect an institution's ability to satisfy the needs of students, engender trust, and help prospective students make enrollment decisions (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009; Bick et al., 2003). Some participants from this study asserted that their school being online, flexible, and affordable are part of their institutions' brand identity. Beyond these features of the school, participants were unable to identify what makes their institution unique from a branding perspective and were often flummoxed by the request to describe the institutional brand. Therefore, a resulting implication for practice among marketing practitioners is to approach branding in a layered way while actively working to avoid the "online only" stigma, a concern several participants mentioned. First, establish that the program

is affordable, flexible, and fully online, then find opportunities to signal credibility by showcasing the physical campus, touting rankings, and indicating accreditation if applicable. Only then can other branding attributes be introduced, and these should be considered secondary to the aforementioned key messages.

Being online, flexible, and affordable — the most frequently used words by participants to describe their institutions' brands — need to be baseline messages in institutional marketing, meaning these features should be front and center in advertising, websites, emails, and recruiter conversations. It is critical for prospective students to know about these features first so they understand the institution is qualified to meet their needs. This finding should be a reminder to institutions that basic questions need to be addressed in the beginning, essentially allowing prospective students to assess the program as viable (i.e., online, flexible, affordable).

Once basic viability is understood, then prospective students can assess credibility. Participants assigned higher value and reputation to institutions that are ranked, have brick-and-mortar campuses, and maintain accreditation. These features signaled credibility and improved the perceived reputation of the institution among participants in their decision-making process. Knowing that prestige and brand identity are antecedents to student satisfaction (Santini et al., 2017; Wilkins et al., 2018), marketing messages and imagery should both signal credibility. In order to achieve this, institutions could highlight logos from *U.S. News & World Report*, depict campus imagery in addition to graphics associated with online learning, and use accreditation symbols and other respected third-party endorsements. The inclusion of these graphics in marketing may seem minor, but to prospective students seeking information about potential online programs, these subtle signals can have profound impact on decision-making. Only after signaling viability and credibility can more unique brand attributes be introduced, such as being

innovative, learner-oriented, and inclusive — a few positive keywords used to describe the brands of some participants' institutions.

Set Expectations for the Online Experience through Marketing and Communication

Following the expectation confirmation theory (ECT), a consumer first establishes an initial expectation using information such as marketing communication, then after consuming the product or service, the consumer will assess the perceived performance. This comparison between the initial expectation and the performance creates the level of satisfaction (Oliver, 1985). Understanding this framework, the role of marketing communication efforts in a higher education context is to shape the perceptions of prospective students (Royo-Vela & Hünermund, 2016), though marketers and institutional leaders need to recognize that perception can be altered after a student enrolls and actually experiences their program. Based on this study's findings, properly setting expectations about the online experience through marketing and communication efforts and adequately preparing students for their online program is critical to influencing student satisfaction and success. Additionally, higher education leaders should be heavily involved in assessing alignment between what is being marketed and the actual student experience, as these leaders likely have oversight of the entire student journey.

Higher education marketers need to authentically align their marketing messages with the actual student experience, good or bad. As the experiences of the adult learner participants demonstrate, institutions need to set clear expectations about program rigor, delivery, and experience through their marketing and communication efforts, and adequately prepare students about topics like workload, faculty interaction, and the technology used in the online environment, to name a few. For example, highlighting the learning management system in pre-enrollment communication through videos or an interactive demo class will give prospective

students a clearer understanding of the online learning experience. Offering syllabi prior to enrollment also provides tangible expectations about coursework and workload. Whether the prospective student interprets the sample coursework as too rigorous or unchallenging is moot, as the purpose of providing this information is to properly set expectations before the student applies or enrolls. This ensures the student is choosing a program that is appropriate, as well as helps achieve student satisfaction if expectations are in alignment with reality.

Adequately preparing adult learners for their online master's degree programs also necessitates acknowledging their past online learning experience, a key finding from this research. Learning about the student's prior online experiences, perhaps by way of conducting a learner profile assessment, can help customize training for all skill levels and help set better expectations for the academic program. For students new to online education, marketers and institutional leaders can collaborate to create specialized trainings or orientations to help build confidence in adult learners entering an online master's degree program. For students familiar with online education, giving them access to demo classes will indicate if the learning environment aligns with their pre-conceived notions regarding online education. Acknowledging the backgrounds of adult learners, understanding how they learn, and providing relevant guidance can lead to being better prepared and ultimately, satisfied.

Deliver Relevant and Timely Communication

Marketing communication plays a significant role in shaping expectations (Ng & Forbes, 2009; Spreng et al., 1996) and closing the gap between the communication prior to enrollment and the experience during enrollment in a program is incumbent upon the institution. More specifically, it is the duty of marketing practitioners to be involved with all student communication throughout the student journey to help properly shape expectations, set the tone

of the program, and maintain enrollment through retention efforts. Based on the findings of this research study, communication can make or break the experience of adult learners. Those who reported that their experiences met or exceeded expectations noted consistent, frequent, and relevant communication from their institution — not just in the pre-enrollment stage, but once they were enrolled as students as well. Participants with experiences that fell short suggested communication deteriorated over time, often describing it as infrequent, unresponsive, lagging, or not customized to their experience. This demonstrates the need for marketers to maintain consistent involvement in communication throughout the entire student journey, not just when attempting to acquire students, to help influence student satisfaction.

Higher education marketers should engage in context marketing, which is the "ability to deliver the right content or experience to the right person, in the right place, and at the right time based on the sum total of that person's past brand interactions and current needs" (Lavric, 2017). Context marketing should be customized, relevant, timely, and consistent while addressing the needs of the individual student. Within higher education, this type of communication manifests in several ways prior to and after enrollment: a marketing automation campaign with pre-written emails when certain events trigger a communication (i.e., missing application materials, degree plan progress, registration opening, etc.); quarterly outreach from the advisor by phone, email, or text; or weekly communication from faculty in the form of a video or email. Automated email campaigns should be approached thoughtfully and used sparingly, as an over-reliance on automation may lead to impersonal, manufactured interactions. That being said, participants expressed the need to be prompted via email throughout their experience, even via automated messages, whether it's about course registration, requirements, or opportunities to engage with their peers or institution.

Implement Personalized Continuity of Care

Another implication for higher education leaders is to ensure students have continuity of care with a designated institutional representative from the pre-enrollment stage through to enrollment and graduation, as many participants expressed appreciation for having personalized service and attention when communicating with the institution. This study's findings suggest that students want to feel taken care of, and having a dedicated point of contact can help deliver that experience. Continuity of care could mean having pre-enrollment counselors also serve as academic advisors, allowing the prospective student to maintain a relationship with a designated coach or advisor. Recognizing there can be high employee turnover within higher education, the intent of continuity of care is to streamline communication to a single resource, even if the individual in that role changes over. In that scenario, notes about the student should transition to the next advisor to ensure the institutional representative fully understands the student, their needs, and their previous experiences.

Taking a personal interest in a prospective or current student proved valuable when participants assessed their institutional experiences, and those students tended toward a higher rating in terms of student satisfaction. Whether it be the enrollment counselor or a faculty member, dropping the script or being compassionate toward a life situation led to more positive feelings and affinity toward the school, as participants sought a high level of personalized service quality in their communication and interactions with administrative staff and faculty. Implementing continuity of care and striving to provide personalized service at each step of the student journey should help ensure adult learner satisfaction.

Cultivate Community through Online Instructor Presence and/or In-Person Experiences

Research shows social interaction and the cultivation of community can contribute positively toward higher levels of satisfaction among students (Rios et al., 2018), and the experiences described by adult learner participants in this study do not waver from the literature. Community through social engagement can be created through online courses with engaging instructor presence and high-impact practices, or in-person experiences. Participants who had substantive instructor presence in their online courses, took hybrid courses, or participated in in-person seminars or residencies rated their experiences as meeting or exceeding expectations. Cultivating a community through higher levels of online engagement or physical meetings in their online program made adult learners feel more connected to their peers and institution, resulting in satisfaction.

For online master's degree programs, this research revealed instructor presence is a crucial factor in influencing student satisfaction and a key tenet of sound online course design. Participants indicated their experiences met or exceeded expectations when professors were accessible, adept at technology, and highly involved in delivering and interacting with course content such as discussions. Higher education leaders should consider ensuring instructor presence in their online courses by requiring weekly videos and incentivizing higher levels of engagement and innovative use of technology. For marketers, highlighting interactive courses and engaging faculty can serve as useful content in pre-enrollment communication that helps set expectations for prospective students and signal program quality.

Many online master's degree programs require a limited residency of some kind, particularly in academic disciplines such as social work, education, and counseling. While the way these in-person experiences are delivered may vary, ranging from a weekend retreat to

hybrid courses, the opportunity to build community and connections in-person led to a higher sense of satisfaction among participants. As higher education leaders consider ways to structure online master's degree programs, optional in-person experiences or hybrid courses can cement relationships among peers and with faculty according to this study. Recently, an institution even offered an immersive residency delivered via virtual reality (Dolphin & O'Connor, 2019), exhibiting the ingenuity technology allows for in cultivating community and a connection to the institution. For those students living close to campus, allowing flexibility to seamlessly transition from online to in-person classes is another way to offer in-person experiences. It should be noted that this research reiterates that flexibility is a key component of adult learner satisfaction, particularly as many balance the demands of work and family obligations, so it is important to make in-person gatherings optional within online programs.

Provide Robust Career Services and Support

As a result of the participant interviews, a key area for institutions to consider strengthening is career services and support, not only after graduation, but during the online program as well. In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the demand for more career-focused, skills-based curriculum (Lee, 2020), highlighting the need to make and deliver promises related to career support in and outside of class. Many of the promises institutions made to the participants pertain to mentorship, improved career prospects, and networking with students, alumni, and industry professionals. Networking is so significant, in fact, many rankings have emerged in recent years that categorize institutions based solely on the strength of their alumni network, including *The Economist* and *The Princeton Review*.

While some institutions may view providing career services as a bonus rather than a standard benefit, according to the findings of this research study adult learners do expect some

level of career services within their online master's degree programs. Institutional leaders could potentially embed career advisors in each program, offer discounted or free career coaching for online students, or host online networking events with current students, alumni, and industry leaders. Recognizing most adult learners are currently working professionals, focusing career services on career changes and advancement would be ideal. Additionally, finding opportunities to connect coursework or research to industry can help adult learners feel as though they are progressing toward their professional goals while pursuing their degree. For marketers, showcasing real career outcomes of alumni and examples of how coursework ties to industry could help prospective students understand how programming is proven to be career-focused. A word of caution for marketers, however, is that exaggerated career promises can lead to legal trouble, as was the case for the University of Phoenix when it overstated connections to industry in its advertising campaigns and faced a Federal Trade Commission probe and a steep financial settlement (Fain, 2019).

Prioritize Referrals for Enrollment Growth

To expand enrollment, institutions often rely on high referral rates (Field, 2019), which of course is dependent on student satisfaction. Among adult learner participants, this study revealed a proclivity toward referrals as the primary form of giving back to the institution, opposed to the more traditional form of giving back through monetary donations. For participants who had experiences that exceeded expectations, and especially for participants who had experiences that improved over time, most were willing to recommend their program to others. This demonstrates the need for institutions to prioritize referrals for enrollment growth. Higher education marketers could develop word-of-mouth campaigns, establish referral incentive programs, and engage with alumni to refer friends, family, or colleagues. Additionally, investment in a strong customer

relationship management (CRM) system could help track active and satisfied alumni to leverage for future referrals. For higher education leaders, recognizing the value of referrals for enrollment is crucial, with a deeper investment in the student experience to ensure satisfaction being a notable implication for their practice.

Institute Ethical Standards and Proactively Assess Branding Authenticity

The importance of consumer protection for students is a key implication for practice and policy resulting from this study. Based on this research, it is recommended that schools institute ethical standards and proactively assess their own marketing authenticity. Across higher education, there are discoveries of significant divisions between what is being marketed to prospective students and what is being delivered (Bradley, 2018; Elsharnouby, 2015; Ng & Forbes, 2009). While only minor infractions appeared among participants within this research study, there were indeed instances of infidelity between the marketing and brand compared to the reality of the student experience. These discrepancies could have easily been uncovered by regulatory bodies, quality assurance entities, or the institutions themselves had there been more rigorous standards in place. Ensuring marketing authenticity begins with self-regulation and the institution prioritizing ethical standards, in addition to more proactive partnership with oversight groups.

Higher education leaders and marketing practitioners need to commit to establishing internal ethical standards when it comes to promoting their institutions. Without the implementation of clear ethical standards, marketers can avail themselves to any “facts” they see fit to help promote their products or services. Ideally, institutions could develop — then tout — their ethical standards when it comes to marketing practices, publishing the standards for the public to view. Marketing practitioners would be expected to abide by these ethical standards,

and prospective and current students could report any inconsistencies directly to the institution. This process may help prevent public exposure of infidelity between the marketing and the reality through review websites, social media, publications, or beyond. Take for instance the damaging report recently published by The Century Foundation, which exposed institutions that took advantage of the global pandemic in misleading marketing efforts (McKenzie, 2020).

Higher education is one of the most expensive consumer products/services an individual will ever purchase, yet there is little oversight of marketing and recruiting practices. Even the federal accrediting agencies only investigate the validity of institutional marketing when they receive a complaint (Higher Learning Commission, 2019). More proactive partnership between all institutional types and regulatory bodies or independent quality assurance entities could ensure prospective and current students are protected from fraudulent practices — intentional or inadvertent. This assessment of the student experience would ideally use both qualitative and quantitative data to determine fidelity between promotional messages and reality. Oversight organizations would need institutional cooperation in order to retrieve the data and confirm accuracy of messages. It's in the best interest of the institution to collaborate and invest the resources toward ensuring marketing authenticity so consumers know the brand can be trusted, and feel confident in their enrollment decision. If there were dedicated quality assurance entities to assess and publicly rank or score institutions on the fidelity between their marketing with reality, this may motivate schools to comply. Additionally, in the age of more transparency and with more consumers questioning the value of college credentials, it would behoove institutions to be more open about their marketing to avoid further scrutiny or exposure by publications or scorned students.

Implications for Future Research

There are extensive opportunities for future research to expand on this study and contribute to the body of literature on adult learners, online education, student satisfaction, and branding in higher education. This research study offers a helpful view of brand alignment for adult learners in online master's degree programs, though there are myriad opportunities to expand this research to other populations not addressed in this study. Given the gaps in this study's sample population, it is recommended that future research seeks to understand the alignment between institutional brand promises and the experiences of minoritized students (Benitez, 2010) such as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), as well as other vulnerable populations such as Veterans and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, the structure of this research study can be replicated to explore the brand alignment of similar academic program areas or school types, such as public and private, fully online and brick-and-mortar, or community colleges and four-year institutions.

Based on the data from participant interviews, additional implications for future research center on affinity, past experiences, and emotions. For example, exploring if and how adult or online learners have a closer affinity to their program or their institution emerged as an area for future research. Additionally, there could be further research to cultivate deeper understanding about how previous online experiences shape expectations and satisfaction. A topic that occurred naturally, though not intentionally, among participant interviews related to the emotions they felt when experiences fell short, met, or exceeded their experiences, and this exploration of emotions could lend itself to future study.

Other qualitative approaches could be employed to deepen this research. For instance, launching a study with a document review that examines institutional marketing materials, such

as websites, advertising, and print collateral, in comparison to the actual student experience has potential for future research. Approaching this topic from a quantitative research perspective, a larger sample size and survey approach could expand the breadth of this research by involving a higher number of respondents, resulting in more generalizable results.

Conclusion

Consumers are the most essential part of business (Keith, 1960), yet consumerism remains a controversial concept within academia. This research highlights the need and opportunity for marketers and leaders to adopt more corporate-style marketing practices and recognize students as consumers. Institutions need to deliver experiences that align with expectations shaped through marketing and brand in order to attract, retain, and satisfy their students. This means offering high service quality, committing to communication best practices, and providing consistent academic quality. For participants with experiences falling short of expectations, they were often misled, ignored, and unprepared — experiences consumers of commercial products/services would not expect or tolerate. The majority of participants expressed having experiences that met or exceeded their expectations, and were generally satisfied when they reflected on their institution's brand compared to their experiences. In these instances, marketers clearly articulated what prospective students could expect from their online master's programs, and there was alignment between brand and experience. Furthermore, institutional leaders followed through on the promises made to prospective students by delivering satisfactory, and in some cases exceptional, experiences.

In analyzing the experiences of adult learner participants, one of the most significant conclusions to be made is how intricately connected marketing practitioners need to be with the promotion of the institution and delivery of education, working hand-in-hand with institutional

leaders and being involved with the full student lifecycle. Traditionally, marketers are solely involved with cultivating awareness at the top of the funnel (Lobell, 2018), meaning the beginning of the student journey before a prospective student applies. In an alarming trend, some marketing activities are being outsourced entirely to online program management (OPM) companies or agencies (Manoff, 2019), with reduced involvement from the marketing practitioners employed by the institution. However, this study fortifies the importance and value of institutional marketers' continued involvement throughout the student lifecycle. Institutional marketers must have a voice in the promotional language being used and be knowledgeable about the experiences they are promoting to prospective students to ensure authenticity.

Institutions continue to look to online master's degree programs to bolster enrollments and remain relevant in a highly competitive education market. The global pandemic has created a sizable shift in the way institutions deliver education, and the online modality will only continue to grow and evolve. Take for instance the latest earnings report from 2U, a publicly traded company facilitating online education at well-established institutions: year-over-year revenue is up 35% during a major economic downturn (Paucek, 2020). If this is any indication, a bolder demand for and investment in online education is forthcoming. Additionally, adult learners will continue to be an important segment of students seeking online education, especially as the workforce faces new economic realities and need to learn new skills in order to transition careers and accommodate new technologies. If institutions strive to remain viable and survive upcoming seismic shifts in the future of work and education, they must be willing to address how to authentically market and brand themselves, as well as properly assess the student experience to ensure there is fidelity between what is being promoted and what is being delivered — there are

too many online programs and too many education providers to do anything less. Not only is the ethical integrity of an institution at stake, but so are their enrollments and future referrals.

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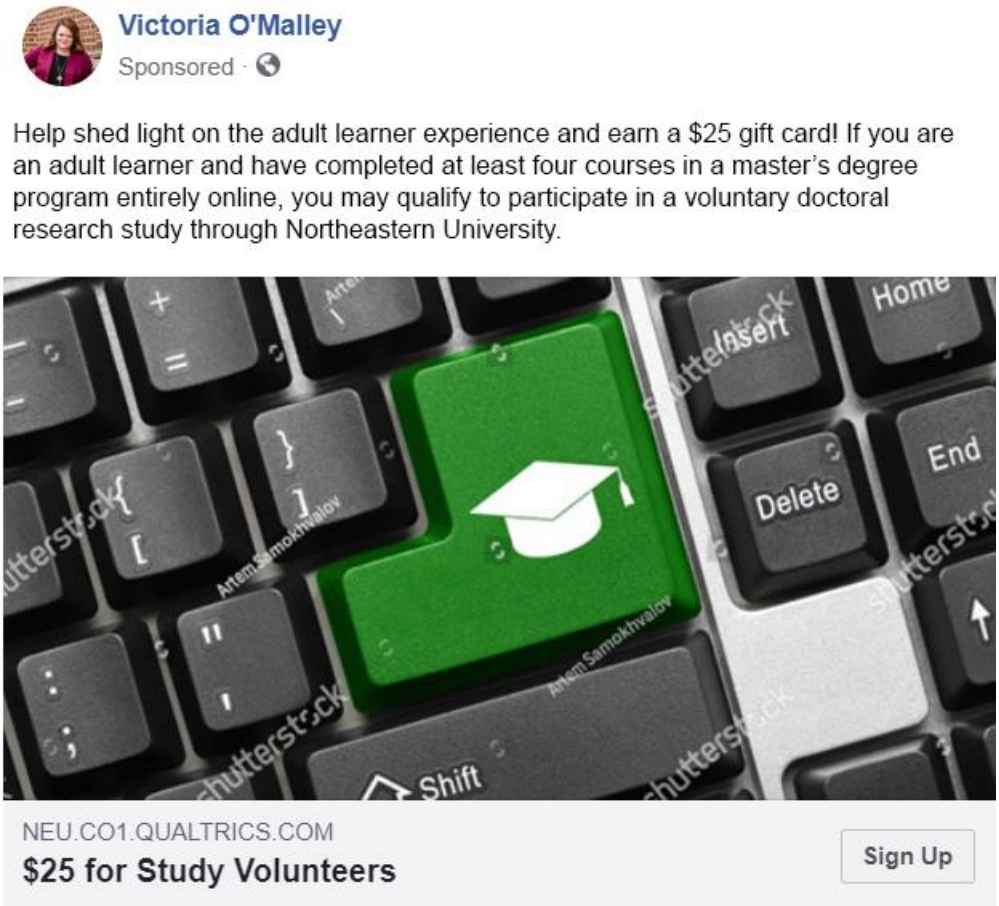
Appendix A

Promotional Messages

Facebook: Help shed light on the adult learner experience and earn a $25 gift card! If you are an adult learner and have completed at least four courses in a master's degree program entirely online, you may qualify to participate in a voluntary doctoral research study through Northeastern University. Sign Up <LINK TO INTEREST FORM VIA QUALTRICS: https://neu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0NZ5Q4CF8LuWMXH>.

Sample Facebook Ad



Appendix B

Interest Form

Qualtrics Preview Survey https://neu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_0NZ5Q4CF8LuWMXH

Thank you for your interest in participating in this voluntary research study! My name is Victoria O'Malley and I'm currently pursuing my doctorate at Northeastern University. The purpose of this doctoral research study is to understand your experience as an adult learner in an online master's degree program. As colleges and universities invest more than ever before in marketing, particularly for their growing online programs, higher education leaders need to know more about the impact brand has on the adult student. Your participation in this study will help shed light on how the process of marketing and brand works within a higher education context.

If you volunteer are selected to participate, we will schedule a 60-minute interview via phone. If you agree to participate, we will discuss your experience before enrolling at your institution and your time spent as a student. Once you complete the 60-minute interview, you will receive a $25 gift card of your choice to Amazon or Starbucks.

Your responses will be confidential. Because the research team has access to your name, there is no assurance of anonymity in this study. Only the researcher, the dissertation committee, and the transcription service will have access to our recorded interview. I do not anticipate any risk to you as you participate in this interview, and you are welcome to end the interview at any time. In the case I need to reference our interview, I will use a pseudonym for your name and your institution to help keep your responses confidential.

By filling out this form, you are only expressing interest in becoming a volunteer participant for this research study; it does not guarantee you will be selected for the study. If after you fill this out you change your mind, you do not need to participate in this study.

Thank you,

Victoria O'Malley
omalley.v@husky.neu.edu
575-496-4065

Name:

Email Address:

Phone Number:

Age:

Gender: {Male, Female, Non-Binary, Prefer Not to Disclose}

Ethnicity: {White, Black or African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Other}

Current university/college:

Master's degree program:

Number of master's degree courses completed:

Number of master's degree courses remaining:

How frequently do you use review websites such as Yelp or Google Reviews? {Often/Sometimes/Rarely}

Thank you for expressing interest in being a volunteer participant in this research study through Northeastern University to better understand the experiences of adult learners in an online master's degree program! If you are selected to be in the study, you can expect to receive an email in the next two weeks to schedule our 60-minute phone interview. Thank you again!

Appendix C

Recruitment Email

Dear {Volunteer Participant Name},

Thank you for your interest in participating in my voluntary research study through Northeastern University regarding institutional brand promises. I invite you to participate in this research project by way of a 60-minute interview conducted via phone. If you are still interested in participating in this study, see the days/times listed below and send me your top three timeslots that you prefer to meet, then I will send you a follow-up email with the chosen interview time.

- Option A
- Option B
- Option C
- Option D
- Option E
- Option F
- Option G

This study aims to understand the alignment of institutional brand promises with the adult learner experience in an online master's degree program. The results of this study will be used as part of my doctoral dissertation.

In the interview, I will ask you about your experiences prior to enrolling at your institution and how you interacted with the marketing and brand. Then, we will discuss your experience once enrolled as a student in the program.

Your responses will be confidential. Only the researcher, the dissertation committee, and the transcription service will have access to our recorded interview. I do not anticipate any risk to you as you participate in this interview, and you are welcome to end the interview at any time. In the case I need to reference our interview, I will use a pseudonym for you and your institution to help keep your responses confidential.

Once the interview is complete, I will send you a $25 gift card to Amazon or Starbucks as a small token of gratitude. Your responses will be critical to this research endeavor. Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to collaborating with you! If you have any questions, please reach out to me directly.

Many thanks,

Victoria O'Malley
Doctoral Student at Northeastern University
omalley.v@husky.neu.edu | 575-496-4065

Appendix D

Dear {Volunteer Participant Name},

Thank you for agreeing to be a volunteer participant in my doctoral research through Northeastern University. Your perspective will be incredibly valuable! Given the priority times and dates you identified, let's schedule our 60-minute phone interview for: Day, Date at Time.

I will call you on the number provided in the interest form (Phone Number) at the scheduled interview time. If you prefer I use a different phone number to contact you, please let me know.

Once the interview is complete, I will send you an electronic gift card via email for $25 as a small token of gratitude.

I am attaching an informed consent description that we will review together before the interview begins – there is no need to sign this document. Please note this research study been approved by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (#CPS20-03-19). If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call or email me. You can also contact Sean Gallagher, the Principal Investigator, via email at SR.Gallagher@neu.edu.

I look forward to speaking with you!

Many thanks,

Victoria O'Malley
Doctoral Student at Northeastern University
omalley.v@husky.neu.edu | 575-496-4065

Appendix E

Interview Guide

Hello, this is Victoria O'Malley calling for our scheduled 60-minute interview for the voluntary research project through Northeastern University. Is now still a good time to talk?

If yes…

Thank you for volunteering to be a participant in this study as part of my doctoral research at Northeastern University! I am going to start with the informed consent. I sent you a digital copy of this consent, and I'll go over the key information with you now.

Your consent is being sought for participation in a research project and your participation is voluntary.

The purpose of this research study is to understand the alignment between institutional brand promises and the adult learner experience in an online master's degree program.

With your permission, the interview will be recorded and transcribed. The only other individuals who will have access to the data will be the transcription service and the three members of the dissertation committee, including the student researcher's advisor and the principal investigator for this research, Dr. Sean Gallagher of Northeastern University. Once the doctoral thesis is completed and approved without revision by the dissertation committee, the transcripts and digital files will be destroyed.

Identifying information will be removed from the findings and analysis; your name will be changed to a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and your institution's name will also use a pseudonym. That means no one will know if you took part in this study. Any publications or presentations based on this research will use pseudonyms and will not identify you or your institution. Note that in interviews, there can be no promise of anonymity.

You must be at least 24 years old to be in this research project.

The study will take place via phone and will take about 60 minutes. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you answer a series of questions about your experience before you enrolled at your institution and your experience as a student enrolled in an online master's degree program.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study. The probability of harm or discomfort compared to daily life is extremely low.

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this research study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about the experience of adult learners.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

You will receive a $25 gift certificate to Starbucks or Amazon after participating in the interview.

Do you understand the information provided?

If yes…

Do you agree to take part in this research?

If yes…

Do I have your permission to record our interview?

If yes…

Thank you! I am starting to record our interview at this time. For the purposes of transcription, I'm going to repeat a question I asked you earlier. Do you agree to take part in this research?

If yes…

Thank you again for agreeing to part of this study. I'll now begin with the first interview question…

Influencing Brand Touchpoints

1. In marketing, a brand represents an organization's unique identity. Describe your interpretation of your college or university's brand.

    a. Please share how you think this aligns with the way the institution would describe their brand?

2. How did you first find out about your online program?

    a. Please tell me the ways your institution communicated with you before you were enrolled?

    b. What about ways the institution communicated with you once you were an enrolled student?

Pre-Admission Touchpoints

3. Universities make promises to prospective students through several marketing channels such as social media, the website, email, and interactions with recruiters just to name a few. Reflecting back on all of these marketing messages, what were three promises the institution made to you prior to enrollment?

4. Can you share a story from before you enrolled that reflects how one of these promises was presented?

5. Based on the marketing and branding efforts you experienced before you enrolled, describe your expectations going into your online program?

During the Course Touchpoints

6. Once you were enrolled as a student and started to take classes in your online program, would you say that your experience *fell short of, met, or exceeded* the expectations you had based on the marketing and branding efforts of the institution?

7. Can you share a story that brings me to a certain moment that illustrates the promises {falling short, meeting, or exceeding} expectations?

Post-Passing Touchpoints

8. Thinking back on your overall experience so far, how would you say the brand promises aligned with the student experience?

    a. Would you say that your experience *fell short of, met, or exceeded* your expectations based on the marketing and branding?

9. Can you share a story of the promises {falling short, meeting, or exceeding} expectations?

10. How do you anticipate you'll give back to the institution once you graduate?

11. Is there anything we didn't cover related to this topic that you want to share?

Appendix F

UNSIGNED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Northeastern University, Department of: College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): S*ean Gallagher, EdD (Principal Investigator) and Victoria O'Malley (Student Researcher)*

Title of Project: Promises to Keep: How Institutional Brand Aligns with the Adult Learner Experience

Request to Participate in Research

We would like to invite you to take part in a voluntary research project through Northeastern University. The purpose of this research is to understand the alignment between institutional brand promises and the adult learner experience in an online master's degree program.

Key Information

Your consent is being sought for participation in a research project and your participation is voluntary.

The purpose of this research study is to understand the alignment between institutional brand promises and the adult learner experience in an online master's degree program.

With your permission, the interview will be recorded and transcribed. The only other individuals who will have access to the data will be the transcription service and the three members of the dissertation committee, including the student researcher's advisor and the principal investigator for this research, Dr. Sean Gallagher of Northeastern University. Once the doctoral thesis is completed and approved without revision by the dissertation committee, the transcripts and digital files will be destroyed.

Identifying information will be removed from the findings and analysis; your name will be changed to a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality and your institution's name will also be confidential. That means no one who reads my dissertation will know if you took part in this study. Any publications or presentations based on this research will use pseudonyms and will not identify you or your institution.

You must be at least 24 years old to be in this research project.

The study will take place via phone and will take about 60 minutes. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you answer a series of questions about your experience before you enrolled at your institution and your experience as a student enrolled in an online master's degree program.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study. The probability of harm or discomfort compared to daily life is extremely low.

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this research study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about the experience of adult learners.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

You will receive a $25 gift certificate to Starbucks or Amazon after your voluntary participation in the interview.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Victoria O'Malley (omalley.v@husky.neu.edu or 575-496-4065), the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Sean Gallagher (SR.Gallagher@neu.edu), the Principal Investigator.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@northeastern.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (# CPS20-03-19).

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you.

Victoria O'Malley
Doctoral Student at Northeastern University
omalley.v@husky.neu.edu | 575-496-4065