# Understanding Brand Transference in Educational Institutions: A Reflexive Approach

Nandhakishore K[a], Vinay Sharma[*b]

[ab] *Department of Management Studies, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, India*

## Abstract

This paper explores the reflexive research methodology applied in doctoral study focused on brand transference in educational institutions. Central to this approach is the acknowledgment of the position held by the researcher and its impact on the research process. The study utilizes purposive sampling to select alumni participants, whose experiences and perceptions are explored through in-depth interviews. Reflexivity is maintained throughout the research, with the researcher continually reflecting on their influence on the data collection and analysis itself. The transcribed interviews are subjected to analysis, with the reflexive approach providing a nuanced interpretation that considers the interplay between researcher and participant perspectives. This methodological framework not only captures the complexities of brand transference but also offers a robust means of understanding how alumni experiences shape and are shaped by the brand identities of educational institutions. The findings underscore the importance of reflexive practices in qualitative research, particularly in studies exploring the dynamic and subjective nature of branding in educational contexts.

**Keywords:** Reflexive research, branding, higher education, research methodology, brand transfer

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The position of researcher in research has a strong bearing on how the whole process is ideated and materialized, which in turn has its effect on the outcomes. This brings about the need for more discussion and exploration of applying reflexivity in research particularly in studies that employ qualitative conduction methods. Applying a reflexive research methodology allows for more transparency in the research as there is a more effective engagement and interaction between the researcher and the subject matter. The background, inherent assumptions and the cultural underpinning of the researcher is acknowledged and reflected in their interactions with participants and the subsequent analysis. The ability of researchers to make and communicate decisions that are nuanced and ethical while producing real-world data which does reflect the chaotic nature of the participants' experience and social practices forms the basis for reflexivity (Finlay,2002).

Different disciplines of the academia have been using and working on reflexivity and have been debating on it. This includes the fields of philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology and psychology. Reflexivity plays a key role in anthropology as it allows researchers to analyze their influence on the research process critically and generate an understanding of cultural phenomena more deeply (Davies, 2012). The realm of sociology explores reflexivity in depth with reflexive sociology being extensively discussed by the works of Alvin Gouldner. There was a firm belief that researchers cannot truly be objective because they are also a part of society that are being studied (Gouldner 1970). Medical studies have also embraced reflexivity as it helps in ensuring more empathetic patient care while also understanding the biases that exist in the practitioners (Mann, Gordon & MacLeod, 2009). Reflexive writing and group discussions are some of the instances where reflexive practices are used in the medical field to help students and practitioners to identify and understand biases they might be having, particularly around gender and social roles.

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[*]Corresponding author.
E-mail: vinay.sharma@ms.iitr.ac.in

Reflexive research methodology has also been used in marketing, especially to create better understanding between the consumers, marketers and the brands. Researchers have a greater role in shaping the data collection methods and the interpretation of it and are acknowledged when reflexive approaches are adopted in marketing research for unraveling consumer behaviors (Spiggle, 1994). Alongside consumer research, reflexive approaches are also mostly used in social marketing and ethical marketing. Social marketing aims at changing or impacting the behavior of consumers and the society towards socially relevant issues. Within social marketing introducing reflexive methodology can be helpful in reassessing and adjusting, if the interventions implemented are not creating desired results (Millard & Akbar, 2024). As reflexive research approaches explore and questions the power and position of power of the researcher and the participants, it is used in the branding academia. Branding explores the reflexive approach both as a way for building theories and as a methodological tool in branding research (Iqani, 2023).

Educational institutions have multiple stakeholders that are interacting with each other and are not limited to just the students and teachers. It can also involve the interaction between other entities like non-teaching staff, alumni, external recruiters, corporate organizations, government and the public. Our doctoral study concentrates on understanding in detail whether there is an existence of brand transference from the higher educational institutions to the corporate organizations through the alumni who have studied in these institutions. A reflexive approach to this study can enhance the outcomes as the researchers are part of similar interactions. The personal experience of the researchers as alumni and teachers in the educational institutions aids in the research process and is a key reason for incorporating the same. The present paper hence aims sheds light on how the reflexive research methodology was adopted in doctoral study to understand the brand transference in educational institutions.

## 2.    LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of brand transference is ambiguous, with different definitions and meanings associated with it. Brand transference is looked upon through various lenses but is often used to explain the transfer of perception and value of a brand to another. Transference has been seen in psychiatry in the form of relational transference for a long time and, more specifically, finds its place in psychotherapy as a way of redirecting the attachment of a patient (Gill & Hoffman, 1982). However, its application in the field of branding and marketing has been limited. Russel, Schau, and Bliese, in their study, explored the transfer of brand loyalty from a brand that is withdrawn from the market to a substitute or competition brand that is viable. The transference here is aided when the brands themselves are not involved in their demise, whereas when the brands are responsible for their downfall, there is limited transference (Russel, Schau & Bliese, 2019).

Endorsers, especially celebrities, are also a key area of research that explores the transfer of traits. "Spontaneous trait transference (STT) talks about how the communicators become associated with the trait implications of their trait descriptions of others" (Skowronski, Carlston, Mae & Crawford, 1998). In marketing, the STT explains how traits shown by endorsers or celebrities can be transferred to the brands they endorse. McCracken, in 1989, proposed the meaning transfer model for celebrity endorsements as he says that celebrities carry the cultural meaning with them that is transferred to the product that they endorse and, in effect, is transferred to the consumers (McCracken, 1989). In higher education institutions, the research on brand transfer can be mostly found in the studies of relationships that the university brand has with other universities. University brands can transfer their brand identity and image to their extensions or to their satellite branches and also can have a backward reciprocal transfer to the parent brand from its extensions (Yuan, Liu, Luo & Yen, 2016). A study on the student's purchase intentions of dual-degree offerings shed light on brand alliances in higher education institutions and how transferability works in such alliances (Naidoo & Hollebeek, 2016). The present doctoral study pursues to add more perspective into the brand transference in higher educational institutions by employing reflexive research as the main tool.

The ability of reflexive methodology to enhance the depth and authenticity of data interpretation has made it more prominent in qualitative studies. "Reflexivity in this sense means thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions, and recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape how you research and what you see" (Mason, 2002). Finlay explains reflexive analysis in research as one that "encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself " and also points that reflexive analysis "moves away from the objective understanding of data collection as something that needs to be completed through impartial examination of "what I know and how I know it" to explore how knowledge can be constructed actively" (Finlay, 2002).

In reflexive research, the researcher turns the lens inward to acknowledge and take responsibility for their own position within the study. This means recognizing how their background, beliefs, and experiences influence the research process, including the setting, participants, questions posed, data collected, and its interpretation. The researcher's awareness of this influence is crucial in understanding the impact they have on the research outcomes. In her works Roni Berger states that "personal traits such as gender, race, affiliation, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, personal experiences, linguistic tradition, beliefs, biases, preferences, theoretical, political, and ideological stances, as well as emotional responses to participants, are all relevant factors in the researcher's positioning" (Berger, 2015). Understanding one's position is a crucial part of reflexive research. Just as a poem can be interpreted differently by two different individuals, the positionality of the researcher enables uniqueness in their interpretation and experience of the research.

The interest in reflexive methodology, especially in the social studies and medical fields have seen works that have widened its horizons. Multitudes of researchers have proposed different typologies of reflexive research through their works to differentiate and produce a framework for studies incorporating them. One of the major typologies to understand reflexive research was proposed by Russel Walsh in 2003. According to Walsh, a "reflexive research process involves four dimensions that interact and overlap with each other, namely, personal, interpersonal, methodological and contextual". Personal reflexivity focusses on the researcher and the attitudes and expectations that can shape the research project, while interpersonal reflexivity is concerned with the relationship between the researcher and the participant (Walsh, 2023). Methodological reflexivity, however, looks critically at the impact of their methodological decisions, and contextual reflexivity refers to finding a particular project in its cultural and historical context (Walsh, 2003).

Building on the concept that research findings are interpretations and constructed realities, Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2009) reflexive methodology involves analyzing and evaluating empirical data through four distinct levels of interpretation (Bates, 2012).The four levels consists of problematizing the empirical data, engagement in the interpretive act, clarification of political-ideological context and the considerations of questions of representation and authority and the interplay of these theoretical approaches helps in enriching reflexivity and is known as "reflexive interpretation" (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009). The concept of researcher reflexivity looks at researchers as creators of knowledge by questioning the objective nature of research and exploring their effect on the process. There is a strong case for researcher reflexivity to be embraced in the marketing and consumer research realm. In novel consumer and social marketing research, for instance, interpretive methodologies have been recognized as a respectable substitute for the prevalent scientific paradigm, offering consumer-centered narratives about their consuming experiences instead of the marketers (Bettany & Woodruffe-Burton, 2009).

Further, Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton through their work proposed a framework on the four possible reflexivities which are derived from the two dimensions of power and ontology. These reflexivities are objectivist, perspectival, experiential, and multiplex and none of them are considered as superior to the other one. The objectivist reflexivity involves the localized assessment of "technical" choices made during the research process, such as the selection of methods, decisions regarding analytical categories, choice of research participants, sampling criteria, and other similar considerations. Experiential reflexivity pertains to complex research contexts where both the researcher and the respondent engage in a mutual sharing of experiences throughout the research process. The different subjects or groups associated with a research study can have different perspectives on the same topic and are the basis for perspectival reflexivity. This is contrasting to multiplex reflexivity as the object of the research is not considered fixed and essential, and there can be different perspectives which are views through different lenses. Along with researcher reflexivity, the idea of self-reflexivity of informants is also explored in this field to generate a greater acumen on the informants' psyche (Takar & Chitakunye, 2012).

## 3.    METHODOLOGY: APPLYING REFLEXIVITY TO DOCTORAL STUDY

The doctoral study on brand transference in the higher educational institutions aims at understanding whether the vast brand value of these institutions transfer to the organizations through their students. This exploratory study utilizes in-depth interview as a major source of data by identifying elite respondents. For this study, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), one of the premium institutes of India, is considered as the case for exploring brand transference owing to its renowned alumni network and global recognition. Many students who graduated from IIT have become stalwarts in different fields of life. The institution's high reputation is complemented by a rigorous and difficult screening process for admitting the students. The researcher conducting the doctoral study completed his under graduation in Engineering and has completed post-graduate studies in Master of Business Administration (MBA). The MBA was completed from one of the IIT and hence the researcher has lived

experience of having learned from the institute. Through his study, the researcher found the institute's brand to have a strong influence on different aspects of his life. The researcher got a job through campus recruitments and worked in a private bank before moving back to academics.

Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) models first level of reflexivity concentrates mainly on the data collection. In-depth interviews were used as the main method for collecting data from the respondents, with the questions being open-ended to build accord with them. With a vast network of alumni, spread across the globe working in diverse fields, a judgmental sampling is used in determining the sample of the respondents to be interviewed. Judgmental sampling falls under the criteria of nonprobability sampling technique in which the researcher's judgment is used to select the base of the elements of population. These elements of population which are to be included in the sample are selected by the researcher through their judgment or expertise and are chosen because they believe that they are representative of the population which is of interest or find them to be appropriate (Malhotra & Dash, 2015). The sample comprised of elite respondents who are broadly defined here in this research context as alumni of IIT who are currently mainly occupying senior management roles or have a prominent role in making decisions in their organization (Harvey, 2010). The researcher's affiliation with the same alma mater was a good starting point for reaching these respondents. The contact information of the elite respondents was obtained through multiple sources, mainly the websites of their organizations, social media platforms like LinkedIn, alumni association, or through common acquaintances. Once the contact information is obtained, the communication is made through emails, phone calls or messages on social media. As the respondents agree show willingness to participate, they are provided the details of the study to enhance their understanding about the process, while also ensuring that they are not directed to any particular direction.

The interviews conducted are recorded for future references. Simultaneous to the interview process, the analysis of the data is started as initial data transcription is conducted along with identifying codes in the data. The second level of reflexivity in the research is the engagement with the interpretive act and it comprises of the bringing reflexivity in the analysis part of the data (Alvesson & Skolberg, 2009). The data are transcribed verbatim, and the recording of the interviews ensures that no details are omitted. The recording also enables us to check and recheck the interviews to improve the understanding of the responses, and the intention and emotions conveyed by the respondents, while also ensuring the same can checked by the supervisory teams for biases that could potentially arise (Engward & Davis, 2015). The process of data analysis in the reflexive research is in essence the interpretation of the interpretations that our respondents have on their experience and knowledge on the topic. During analyzing the interview transcripts were coded to understand if common themes are arising in them. The doctoral study is currently progressing, and the interviews and data analysis are being conducted simultaneously. As an exploratory study using judgmental sampling, the final samples are not predetermined before the start of the research but is reached through theoretical saturation, a point where more data collection will not provide any added benefit for the theory generating process (Strauss & Corbin, 2015; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

Alvesson and Skolberg (2009) model of reflexivity further explains the need for clarification of the political-ideological context in their third level of reflexivity and consideration of questions of representation and authority is the fourth level. The third level primarily looks at the values that researchers bring to the research and how their sociocultural and historical considerations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) affect them. The researcher must reflect upon the affiliations they carry and must be vary of portraying or bringing them into the research. The respondents are mostly top executives and professionals from different organizations, which can bring in small amounts of intimidation on the researcher and can reduce the level of interaction between them (Engward & Davis, 2015). Reflexivity applied here following the model of Alvesson and Skolberg (2009), helps in addressing the beliefs, faith and language of both the researcher and respondent in the research setting and subsequently aids the interpretation of the data by being mindful and transparent of how it is carried out. The fourth level of reflexivity, however, is involved in how the research's communication takes place. Doctoral study is still ongoing, and efforts are made to maintain reflexivity throughout the process, understanding that the researcher cannot be separated from research.

## 4.    CONCLUSION

Qualitative enquiries are reactive to and rooted in diverse contexts and hence methodological decisions should not be set at the beginning of the research. Reflexive research thus enables the researcher to make decisions on a continual basis in response to the data generated and unanticipated events that take place during the whole process (Varpio et al, 2020). This paper gives an overview of the application of reflexive research methodology in our doctoral research on brand transfer in higher educational institutions. Brand transference in the realm of higher education is a less ventured territory and the doctoral study being pursued looks at adding more to it. The study

works on introducing the idea of brand transference between the organizations in the business world and the higher educational institutions through the students who complete their education from them. The paper describes how reflexivity is embraced and adapted into research, from the initial conceptualization, identification of research gap, sample population, data collection and its analysis. Alvesson and Skolberg (2009) model on reflexivity explains about the four levels of reflexivity in research and identifies its interplay as reflexive interpretation, the same being followed in the study. Indepth interviews are conducted in this exploratory study and the data generated is transcribed and analysed, maintaining reflexivity throughout. The paper shows how reflexivity is relevant in the qualitative conduction of research and how the same can be used in realm of branding.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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