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Group Brands as an Innovative Pedagogical Tool: Using Marketing Theory in Real-World Collaborative Teaching

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Abstract – This paper demonstrates how group brands were used as interdisciplinary teaching tools in marketing, business, research, and social science classes by applying theories of branding, collaborative learning, and social identity in experiential learning. There were two primary reasons why this project was done: implementing a pedagogical tool that would bring students together in a collaborative team gaining a critically important business tool; enriching the curriculum by incorporating a semester long term-based group project would improve student learning. The group branding project was undertaken in New York City courses to overcome tribalism testing the powers of affinity, identity, and agreement between diverse students (N=391). It was effective as an empathetic social bridge-builder bringing together first and second language learners, students from different neighborhoods, various ethnicities and cultures, and other commonalities. This circumvents the tendency to tribalism.

Key words – branding, collaboration, networking, affinity, marketing, social learning, business

Relevance to Marketing Researchers, Educators and/or Practitioners – This paper is a creative teaching model used in diverse student environments using marketing principles in group work. It is useful in collaborative learning and design thinking.

Introduction

Bringing the consumer world into the classroom by incorporating the marketing concept of 'branding' is a real-world work application that doubles as an innovative pedagogical tool (Bandyopadhyay, Rice, & Wongtada, 2011). This paper demonstrates how group brands were used as interdisciplinary collaborative teaching tool in the college classroom by applying theories of marketing, group learning, affinity, and social identity in experiential learning.

There were two primary reasons why this project was done. First, implementing a pedagogical tool that would bring students together in a collaborative team over the period of a semester, would encourage them to learn variations of group dynamics in working together gaining a critically important business tool: the requirement of working in teams and networked relationships (Gilchrist, 2009). Second, enriching the curriculum of

business marketing and social science courses by incorporating a semester long term-based service project would improve student learning (Gonzalez-Padron & Ferguson, 2015). The overall learning goals were 1. To create a group identity based on affinities 2. Learn collaborative group techniques 3. Build relationship and accountability skills.

Marketing students "tend to prefer active, applied, real-world pedagogies" (Karns, 2005, p. 164) that place the classroom into the environment of business. The problem is many professors "shy away" from bringing the real-world experience into the marketing class (Razzouk, Seitz, & Rizkallah, 2003). Students, though apprised of the importance of learning communities, are often most concerned about individual grades and can view group learning as a hindrance to their self-oriented perspective on education that was bred in the test-taking intensives of high school.

The college environment provides a positive space for students to encounter multicultural difference academically and socially (Sweeny, Weaven, & Herington, 2008; Appiah, 2009; Anderson, 2011.). The group branding project demonstrates how group dynamics and affinity are used effectively in diverse New York City classrooms to overcome tribalism to build collaborative learning communities through a group branding pedagogy. The group branding projects create a cohesive identity for each group that strengthens the social and personal ties between the students in the groups.

Literature Review

Rooted in the social psychology of small groups and collaboration, experiential learning (Easterling, & Rudell, 1997; Ekrich & Voorhees, 2002; Razzouk, Seitz, & Rizkallah, 2003) has emerged as a current theme in pedagogy and has seen an increase on college and university campuses (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2007; Munoz & Huser, 2008, Alam, 2014; Bonet & Walters, 2016). Bringing together social theories of tribalism (Maffesoli, 1998), contemporary heterarchy (Stark, 2009), cosmopolitanism (Appiah, 2007; Anderson, 2016), collaboration (Damon, Heinze, Meuter, & Chapman, 2017) and affinity (Brimlow, & Heiss, 2015), this paper outlines and demonstrates how the concept is applied through a branding project as a group activity.

The current context of post-industrial business skills comprises of heterarchy (Stark, 2009.), flat or pluralistic leadership (Van Wart, 2011; Kettl, 2012,), community networking (Gilchrist, 2009), or networked individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2014). These are essential tools in business that are not being experienced by many students in the lecture method and individualized learning and meritocracy of many classrooms. This project is an experiential learning pedagogy using marketing (Graeff, 1997; Easterling & Rudell, 1997; Ekrich &Voorhees, 2002; Laverie, Madhavaram, & McDonald, 2008) that aims to introduce these skills.

Branding

Branding is defined in various ways. It is a process where an identity is created to create market distinction of a product, organization, mission, or cause (Wells et al., 1997; Ritchie,

Swami, & Weinberg, 1999). It is a story, a narrative, and a perception of what people believe about a product, person, or organization, that is embodied in a representative symbol or image that portrays the story and evokes an emotional response (Cooke, 2012.).

In recent years the concept of the personal brand has emerged wherein people identify themselves as a brand. This is popular with professional athletes in athletic wear, celebrities with fashions and fragrances. The rise of social media has created an even closer tie from the brand to the person, person to brand with individuals finding their specific connections and networks (Schirr, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2014). The most intimate brand is one's own face that shows how they are feeling and what they portray to the public view (Malone & Fisk, 2013.). It becomes what people think of someone else, their image, and their connection to whatever organization or product (Cooke, 2012.). An effective brand evokes emotions and beliefs about a product or group where consumers gain connection beyond a product where the brand becomes human (Malone & Fiske, 2013.) establishing feelings and attitudes about the product, organization, or cause (Rampersad, 2008; Worth, 2016). For example, the connection with corporate and human brand is seen strongly in the auto show industry where the mechanical product connects with the public through human touch in the models that represent the product beyond just being a pretty face or window dressing (Lewak, 2016). More than ever the human model represents the brand but also embodies it through intimate knowledge and connection. This creates a "strong and positive image" that is critical for good market exposure (Worth, 2016).

Competition forces a brand to differentiate itself from others, creating a distinctive connection with its consumer audience (Kotler, 2000). As competition continues to increase with the plethora of brand choices, it creates consumer freeze where people have so many choices they don't know what flavor to choose (Schwartz, 2005), an identifiable brand that connects people to a community is critical. Managers are becoming aware of competitive brands (Herman, 2009.) and worlds of marketing outside their own environments that compete with them. The global and transnational economy, with the possibility of social media and other communications technology to translate a brand into niches that find affinity with people who align with the product, has created a competitive environment as never before (Bandyopadhyay, Rice, & Wongtada, 2011). Therefore, "establishing a strong and positive image for a brand brings many benefits to an organization" (Worth, 2016, p. 220), especially when a group can be linked to the warm feelings of a personal connection (Malone & Fiske, 2013.).

Clutter and Story

Contemporary society is an information-rich and time-poor world of choices, categories, and media diversification (Underhill, 1999; Neumeier, 2003; Swartz, 2005; Cooke, 2012). There is information clutter where being distinctive and unique is increasingly difficult in differentiating oneself from other brands. In this realm, the brand must move from being an iconic idea, a personal connection, a warm feeling, and a definition against the competition, to a story that is believable and states something about the product, group, or service (Cooke, 2012). In a group brand, this becomes the motto or slogan, the rationale for

that slogan, and the means one uses to create the unique story. Cooke (2012) argues that the authentic brand is a way to overcome a cynical public that is skeptical of the plethora of choice (Swartz, 2005) that are available in mass media. People get "lost in alternatives" and are unable to differentiate themselves from others (Cooke 2012). Similarly, students on a large urban campus get emulsified from connecting with others and the educational experience is lost in individual pursuit bereft of authentic relationships with anyone.

Brand Connection

People make a connection first based on brand and the story that surrounds the brand (Neumeier, 2003). Thus, telling a good brand story is critical to first pass interest. A rationale for a brand with a motto or slogan fills this vacuum. This is helpful for sales or fundraising in doing a big ask for a customer or client commitment as it simultaneously requires a big story to be told (McLeish, 1995). The story must have value, be authentic, and tell a compelling message. "Whatever good this abundance brings to the world, it also brings confusion and clutter for people who are trying to make sense of it all." (Cooke, 2012, p. 27).

A strong brand creates loyalty. People are more committed to something with which they have a personal connection to a group, product, or organization (Underhill, 1999). A group brand intends to create deeper loyalty and cohesion in the classroom to one's group, rather than leaving it as a disparate collection of names on a class roster where people have little connection with their peers.

A good brand icon, as seen in a logo or symbol and distinctive colors, is an effective window through which many can connect with an organization or group, while providing a distinctive image of an organization setting it apart from other organizations. A problem can be, however, that an icon can become so representative that the outside observer does not even consider that there may be a group or cause that represents that icon or brand. Taking an icon or brand beyond the symbol and bringing meaning to that symbol becomes the task. Sociology has taught that people will assign meaning according to a personal need (spiritual, emotional, cultural) that bonds them to that icon (Durkheim, 1995). This is as true for consumerism as it is for religion (Durkheim, 1995). The goal with taking a marketing group branding project into designing a logo is to provide a visual symbol that attaches cohesive meaning to the individuals in the collective.

Collaborative Learning and Networking

Collaborative learning is a process where people are brought together to constructively "create authentic visions and strategies" (Chrislip & Larson, 1994) as people must act cooperatively in sharing intellectual, creative, and practical power (Huxham, & Vangen, 2000). The concept highlights the mantra that more people working together produces a stronger result than what one individual can achieve. In sharing power amongst one another, the result is stronger engagement to the task at hand (Laverie, Madhavaram,& McDonald, 2008). However, bringing people together has its own problems as well (Huxham, & Vangen, 2000). Trust can be broken if there isn't a strong honor code and accountability. A sense of unfairness can develop if some group members believe they are

doing more than their share of the work while some may be disengaging in the task at hand.

A collective working relationship is critical in the task of collaborating if an effective result is to be produced. Becker (1982) in *Art Worlds and Collective Activity* argues, " all artistic work…involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people." Every art form requires the collaborative efforts of a number of individuals from the painter, to the critic, to the marketer, to the audience, to the one whom makes the paintbrushes, to the purchaser who receives a tax break from the government. These represent a "bundle of tasks". In a group branding project, there is a gathering of every individual's contribution to make the whole.

This concept of bundling of tasks in a networked relationship (Rainie, & Wellman, 2014) is typical in today's business world that requires specialists from various fields to work together to complete a project. It is being applied in creative ways in the interdisciplinary college classroom through games and service learning (Easterling & Rudell, 1997; Shadinger &Toomey, 2014; Gonzalez-Padron & Ferguson, 2015). Understanding networking as a primary function of business leads students into learning and understanding teamwork (Laverie, Madhavran, & McDonald, 2008). Cohort based learning as a classroom methodology, is a mirror of the sub-group and specialty groupings used in current business projects in both corporations and small business where different people work together on the same contract or project. The role of networked relationships is critical to being a successful business person in the current era of social networks (Gilchrist, 2009).

A strong theme in this milieu is the principle of being personal and that relationships are core to define people outside of the corporate numbers-counting environment (Rigby, 2010). The 'benefits cluster' (McLeish, 1995) demonstrates how it is critical to pursue and continue a principle of interrelationships and missional cause even when building a consumer strategy. This would be absolutely important, in particular, for organizations and causes that are guided by missions. The human touch of market plans is essential to the ability in working as collaborative teams (Malone & Fiske, 2013). So, if organizations are collaborative teams, then it is essential to bring consumers into this collaboration. Marketers must work to meet the needs of others (as potential customers) as their own needs, both personal and corporate, are met through service in the organizational mission.

Social Collective Identity and Affinity

The foundation of this project was identifying social collectivity and affinity (Bell & Daly, 1984). Several synonymous terms define it such as relationship, togetherness, similarity, harmony, commonalities, kinship, cohesiveness, resemblance, and rapport. In our current self-interested social culture some argue that there is disconnection between an individual and their connection to an educational community. Learning is disengaged from community where the educated class is separate from the uneducated (Kozel, 2012; Putnam, 2017).

> Weakened social capital is manifest in the things that have vanished almost unnoticed-neighborhood parties and get-togethers with friends, the unreflective kindness of strangers, the shared pursuit of the public good rather than a solitary quest for private goods…So our challenge is to restore American community for the twenty-first century through both collective and individual initiative. (Putnam, 2000. p. 403)

As American colleges progressively evolve into large pluralistic societies that are interacting in transnational ways (Sweeny, Weaven, & Herington, 2008) across mass diversities of race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and academic prowess (Anderson, 2011), it can cause students to cloister themselves in tribalism as they try to find small groups of people they can relate to while shying away from difference. The campus can be an alien place of loneliness and anonymity where people feel disconnected from one another (Putnam, 2000). While there is in the post-modern era a breakdown of individualism and a turning against mass culture, people cluster into neo-tribes finding affinities in the midst of a sense of this alienation (Maffesoli, 1988; Bauman,1990). People want to be in a group.

So how does the educator overcome tribalism to teach effectively while still maintain a group identity where students feel a part of the activity? Collective learning through using principles of group dynamics in the classroom is a positive pedagogical method for doing this. Small groups become a critical social space for students to feel more at home. In these types of small affinity environments people learn trust and how to listen and communicate in more intimate and personal ways (Putnam & Fieldstein, 2003).

A positive element of affinity in the classroom is it overcomes alienation. Teacher-student affinity creates the environment for student-student affinity (McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986). To this end Gorham & McCroskey (1989) state that "students who like a teacher as a teacher will be more likely to like the teacher's subject and be more willing to engage in behaviors recommended by that teacher." (p. 26). They go on to argue that affinity teaching is underappreciated. Some would think that making students like oneself is a frivolous agenda that does not objectively ensure learning is accomplished. Affinity between teacher and learner according to Gorman et al. (1989) is critical in ensuring the affective element of learning. The result of this is students do not like the teacher and they do not like learning even though the content may have been memorized or known.

"We believe that this is precisely the attitude which leads students to dislike school and quit trying to learn, that is a philosophical position we hold, not necessarily an established fact" (Gorman et al., 1989, p. 26). This has now come full circle with students deciding first whether to like a class based on the teacher not whether they are learning the content. So, in having affinity with the professor who creates an environment of likability, it motivates and mentors students to also like one another (Marks & O'Conner, 2013). In this environment of affinity-based affective learning, students will more actively engage course content material within the confines of an affinity relationship they like. This aligns with a study of Singaporean purchasing behaviors and education coexist with one another. Bandyopadhyay, Riceb, and Wongtadaa (2011) show how consumer affinity strategies in Singapore, and how their affinity-attitudes towards Americans influences their purchasing behavior. Consumer based behavior seeks affinity between one's likes and the product. Just

as someone may like a product so they will like their education and be more apt to buy into it. Corrigan and Chapman (2008) show how trust between student and teacher increases motivation and empowers students in the process (Corrigan & Chapman, 2008).

Brimlow and Heiss (2015) studied how affinity affects the relationship between a tutor and tutee in a college environment. There are variations in the type of educational environment or pedagogy that is used in learning that is successful in affinity learning, and gender and racial difference can affect the level of affinity students might have with one another or the tutor. This pedagogy extends this concept to include marketing and branding as an intentional affinity class assignment. Brooks & Young (2015) noted how in online education where the professor has little opportunity to build face-to-face affinity with students or lacks in intentional communication with students despite the loss of human touch, increasing the likeability factor of the teacher-student affinity relationship, students were more likely to gain critical views of the course and their own learning. The increase in emotional connection, creates a stronger pedagogical relationship as Rigby (2010) argues in the return to more face-to-face interactions.

So, to summarize, affective learning and affinity are interrelated and increases when students have a positive and motivational relationship with one another and the professor.

The Interdisciplinary Classroom Group Assignment

The group branding project blends these theories (branding, collaborative learning, networking, community social identity, affinity) into a practical project with a defined outcome. It is a core assignment as a part of the larger course students are enrolled in. Each course intentionally includes groups as part of its outline, lessons, and assignments. The affinity strategy was piloted in business, marketing, sociology, pluralism and diversity, anthropology, and interdisciplinary social research courses in New York City on some of the most diverse campuses in the United States. The class rosters consisted predominantly of freshman and sophomore students. The ethnic blend of the students was immense with representation from many immigrant groups into the city along with international students on short term visas. It was not possible to obtain the specific status of each individual student, but the overall campus demographic is as follows: 32.6% Hispanic, 27.4% African American, 20.9% Asian, 13% White and the rest indicating Other 6.1%. The two campuses are both commuter-based in a vast metropolis so students do not gain the dormitory living closeness and connection that may exist on rural or college-town campuses. Many of the students also work at least part-time with several also working full-time while completing classes so there is little extracurricular time to build social relationships outside the classroom.

The rationale and objectives of the course delivery

With such diversity amongst the students, it was important to find a pedagogy that would build social cohesion in a learning environment. In the course delivery the goal was not only to teach the critical modern business skill of cohort projects and collaborative networking, but also to provide a venue for students to get to know one another and create

relationships and friend connections that would last beyond the class. This would help overcome the alienation and aloneness that some students might feel in college. This was especially true for recent immigrant or international students who had few relationships beyond their cultural enclaves in the international students department. A primary learning method was for students to learn to "think, pair, and share" in a comfortable and open environment where they might be intimidated to present their ideas. Students were all to equally share responsibilities in leading the discussions and documenting (scripting) the group work.

Course design and delivery process

In order for the Group Brand assignment to be successful it must be motivated by a significant grade benefit to each student and indicated as such in the syllabus. This motivates students to do the work. In the opening class review of the syllabus the importance of the group work is heavily noted. Group assignments are indicated on the syllabus as being worth 20 – 25% of the grade so it has significant impact on the overall final grade. Students meet with the same group once a week for about 40 minutes to an hour: 1 class out of three in a 3xs a week class, 2/3 of the time in one of the classes in a 2xs a week class, 1/3 of a class in a once a week class. They have the same group for the duration of the semester (about 14 sessions). The room itself gets reconfigured for the groups into close-knit square or hexagonal clusters where there are moveable desks and chairs, or into board room style where there are tables. This is an important physical representation of the group affinity that must be maintained throughout the semester to continue to forge the collaborative nature of the group (See Appendix Fig. 3). Indeed, changing the physical space affects the social relationships.

Set up Groups with affinities

Professional affinity identification was used in management and marketing classes bringing together common expertise. With accountants, techies, creatives, managers, and visionaries working in defined groups it resulted in pedagogical cohesion where the students could understand one another. Students stayed in the same group throughout the semester.

Execution

First phase of the assignment: Creating the groups

In the second week of the semester, students were divided into groups of four or five based on random selection using an icebreaker affinity such as a birthday month, a professional skill, or living in a similar neighborhood. For birthdays, students lined up around the room in a long single file circle based on their month of birth. From this line the professor counted off groups of four or five.

For professional expertise, student self-selected one of the following: story-tellers, accountants, managers, designers, techies. For neighborhood selection students placed their initials on a map of New York City based on where they lived. The professor then clustered them into groups of four or five based on this geographical mapping, so students

had a natural affinity when meeting one another based on where they lived. In the first meeting of the group they were assigned an Icebreaker assignment based on how they were clustered. Birthdays: “What is the best gift you have ever received?” Professional Expertise: “What is your career goal?” Neighborhood Niche: “What are the best and worst things about living where you do?”

Second phase of the assignment: Creating the brand identity.

As noted above, the primary rationale for the Group Branding Assignment is to build team cohesiveness and collaborative attitudes to counter the individualistic meritocracy mantra of education. This is accomplished through the group creating the affinity statement and motto based on a name that incorporates something they all have in common
Students had to brainstorm and decide on a group name that incorporated some element of affinity between all of them such as culture, popular tastes (gaming, fashion, sports), names (using their names in acronym).

Third phase of the assignment: Creating a logo, brand statement, and color scheme.

The group brand assignment itself was formulated based on a four pronged branding approach as shown in Fig. 4. The students were to collaborate and arrive with a brand that included a logo with graphics or a picture, a color and text, a motto with a rationale based on commonalities in the group.

Fourth phase of the assignment: Presenting the group grand to the rest of the class.

Groups were to complete a digital upload of their materials and present a Powerpoint, Google, or Prezi slide show of their group brand. Each person participated in some form. In an age where public speaking is seeing resurgence due to people posting their commentaries online, TED Talks, online lectures, and so on, it is incumbent for students to engage public speaking. Talking about their inventive group brand project and telling stories about their own commonalities was a comfortable learning method for students.

Student Sample

Mixed methods research design was using and interdisciplinary analysis of group based learning of N=13 classes or N=391 students in business, sociology, and research methods courses in New York City. IRB approval was obtained through the CETL office of the university. Students were tested over a period of three semesters using the group branding strategy as a pedagogical method based on collaborative learning. A specific type of affinity strategy was used in initially forming the groups, though there was flexibility in allowing the groups to create their own identity based on getting to know one another and discovering affinities. There were N=391 students overall, that were divided into N=77 affinity groups, with an average class size of 30 students, with 5 groups per class, consisting of 5-6 students per group. The various brands were then segmented into coded themes that demonstrate core trends that emerged as noted in Appendix Fig. 1 and Fig. 2. Student

affinity groupings: professional expertise (15 groups), birthday month (38 groups), neighborhood niche (18 groups), class major (6 groups), number of students (391).

Student Affinity Groupings

The key was each group had some level of connection the moment they met one another and could immediately forge some type of commonalities and could have conversations with one another even though they generally had never met one another (exception: class major). Some chose to use these initial affinity separations to define their group brand identity, while others used differing types of affinities once they got to know one another and formed a sense of cohesiveness in the Group Branding Project (Fig. 2).

Professional expertise (15 groups)

Fifteen groups were formed based on professional affinity where they were to self-select their group based on career aspirations, expertise, or skill-sets. This was useful in business classes where the defined skill-sets were clear. In actual class projects, once they had built their group brand, they followed through and used their skill-sets to accomplish group tasks, cohesively linking aptitude, affinity, and application.

Writers

Affinity is based on writing and journalistic skills. They are the story-gathering team that was charged with three core tasks: alumni involvement assessment, face-to-face contacts with the service sites, phone interviews. Their mission was to create narrative stories for promotional purposes and narrative reports for strategic planning purposes.

Techies

Affinity is based on website and technological aptitude and interest. They were tasked with social media and website creation, assessment, and redesign. They investigated various social media presences such as Facebook, Kickstarter, LinkedIn, Crowdfunding, Go Fund Me campaigns, and Instagram and how to incorporate it into marketing brand projects.

Accountants

Affinity was based on finance and accounting. They reviewed the accounting and finance operations of clients and non-profits as their primary work, leading to the creation of assessment rubrics for competitive analysis for different types of organizations. They also completed S.W.O.T. analysis.

Analysts

Affinity was based on their interest in marketing tactics and strategies. They investigated a plethora of methods of tactical marketing: technology, advertising, print, social media, publicity in trade magazines, community and ethnic news, reviewed and created videos for clients. Their core motivation was sales and recruitment.

Talkers

Affinity was based on their interest in creating publicity. Students generated creative promotional strategies for increasing the exposure of the non-profit organization or general public and niche markets. They were interested in public perception and public profiles of the clients and non-profits served in class projects.

Birthday month (38 groups)

The birthday month was the most widely used (38 groups formed) to separate students into initial affinities. To determine groups using birthday month, they were lined up single file around the classroom sequentially, starting and finishing with January and December at the front of the room. The professor separated them into groups of 5 or 6 students. Immediately students had a seasonal affinity and some used this in their brand identity such as Winterall or Springsters (a play on all women being "sisters born in spring"). This method was used in large classes with significant academic and ethnic diversity where affinity would be most difficult to determine quickly. However, many groups who were separated using birthdays used other commonalities or identities as their final brand such as sports and leisure (iDogs, Ballers), food (The Bakers, Hot Sauce), philosophical concept (DiverCity, Open Minders), or educational pursuit (Graduates, A Squad) among others.

Neighborhood niche (18 groups)

Eighteen groups were formed based on neighborhood niche affinity bringing together students based on where they lived. A map of New York City was projected onto the whiteboard showing various neighborhoods. Students individually came up and placed and X and an initial by the rough location where they lived in the city. After everyone in the class had completed this task, clusters of 5 students that were located nearest to one another were circled. This established relationships based on the neighborhood they lived in, and in the branding project often became core to the group identity. This was an ideal affinity grouping for classes where site-based assignments were necessary such as interdisciplinary social research and urban sociology. The affinity created brand identities based on unique neighborhood geography, common culture, residency, or other feature in their such as Brooklyn Subway train routes (J.A.R.F.), living in the Bronx (Uptown Rising) or a neighborhood in mid Brooklyn and all in the group being 18 years old (Central 18). Several groups used ethnicity, race, or nationality: Korebbean Soul blending Korean and Caribbean members of the group together, Fresh Islanders blending students who were all born on islands.

Class major (6 groups)

Using class majors as an affinity seems to be a natural and simple way to separate student groups as many already will know one another from other classes but was the least used. This is a fast way to link students if there are enough students in specific majors to connect them. Prior to using this method, a review of the class roster is necessary to ensure there are not several students who will be left out. In the case where there might be 4 or 5 students who do not link with others, their differences become an affinity such as the group

Divergent 5 who had no commonalities but saw themselves as "five points on a star" in coming together. Some samples of this type of affinity are: City Healers combining nursing students, The Bakers combining culinary arts students, or Tech 9.0 bringing together computer science students.

Creative Affinities

In several cases, initial groups based on pre-determined affinity morphed into other creative brands. In some classes the initial affinity groupings served as a starting point for student groups to build a brand based on a commonality of their choice as they saw fit. The process to build the brand would take three to four weeks from the initial group coming together with a working name created by the second class, and then adapted over the next two weeks as they saw fit. This built various creative results. Common themes that emerged were leisure interests, educational motivation, diversity, philosophical statement, and food. Interestingly, the most common creative affinity was diversity as students recognized the immense cultural and ethnicity differences that existed in New York City where this pedagogy was tested. This is important as the differences in the cosmopolitan urban social mosaic (Anderson, 2011) has potential for racial and ethnic tensions to emerge in the classroom. The collaborative learning and task outcome in creating a cohesive identity they all related to built relationships and friendships beyond the usual impersonality of a college classroom.

Challenges

There were challenges in developing and executing the project. Not all students were equally engaged. Introverts were often shy not speaking out in the group and less apt to contribute, though there was more possibility for interaction in the small group than in the larger classroom. The collaborative nature of this process in helping a group overcome stagnation is revealed in this student comment. "My group is a bit shy and quiet but whenever I come up with an idea, I can freely share it with them. They also try to input some work, I would not say I am working alone in the group". As noted earlier that trust is incumbent in building group affinity, this shows how the affinity/trust concept was established through consistent relationship building by working together for a whole semester.

Combined grades were a factor to ensure accountability making a good mix between empathy for another and accountability to complete the project. This student concludes that, "I trust all my team member's decisions and believe they are in the best interest of the group". However, trust was not active all the time, or in every instance. From time to time, the professor would receive student complaints that someone was not contributing fully to the group, with the hard-working group members concerned that their own grade would go down because others were not doing as well. Emotional empathy is critical to effective group affinity. The building of positive friendships that connect beyond the task at hand in the process of learning is an important factor to effective affinity learning. Overall, this was successful in this project. A student noted this important blend between accountability and relationships. "I always get along with most of my group members. As long as there's respect and (we) are focused on the task at hand then I am very open with them". The key

to this was the factor of respect arising out of individual accomplishments and contributions to the group's work.

In every class there is the possibility of lone wolves who, as one student noted, "hate working in groups". This is especially challenging if there are extroverts or expressive personalities who want everyone to be friends with one another. For a student that is a lone wolf, it could be the worst possible class scenario. An effective counter to this was putting the lone wolves together through affinity assignment. The difficult part in doing this at the beginning of the semester is often lone wolves don't emerge until a few weeks into the semester.

Another challenge was classmates who are equally driven and equally intelligent wanting credit for the group and do not want to wait for others in the group to "get it" and forge ahead with the assignment leaving the late adopters to "finally catch on" as one student noted in their frustration. Affirmation from the professor was critical in cases like this where grading credit would go to the high achiever, irrespective of the rest of the group, and it was duly noted by the professor. A way to give the high achievers opportunities to excel was allowing additional extra credit individual assignments related to the group. If a group posting was made on Blackboard in a group forum, individual students could attach and link their own thread response to the group work. From student responses, which were overwhelmingly positive, this student comment serves as a good sample. "Working with the team is a vital thing in life. Our affinity group understood each other and that is what I will take into my career in the future."

The group branding project had several important results. Students were engaged, empowered, and accountable with one another. The hands on reality based approach presented rich and memorable experiences that can be draw from in the workplace after graduation. Becoming marketing practitioners, the students became more aware of the consumer world they live in and how social identity relates to their own identity. Activating student learning was successful in that they worked with one another to build a project together while simultaneously finding relationships and concern for one another as the group brand was a personal reflection of themselves. Being a semester long team-based project solidified stronger emotional connection and friendships than would otherwise be possible. In several classes, students met outside of class not only for work projects but to be with one another. Some of those relationships continued on after the class was completed. The creative element in forging a brand is entertaining and fun while being a strong theoretical and practical assignment. Students enjoy naming themselves and finding themselves in a project.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper investigates how group brands are an effective pedagogy to incorporate into the real-world classroom, as students otherwise might not have learning relationships with one another. It has brought marketing principles common to the business sector into the classroom providing a valuable work skill that translates into a career later on. Using the theories of collaboration, affinity, and social tribalism, the pedagogy is a unique, creative

and interesting use of collective learning to complete a project. Shown to be successful in business and social science classes in the diverse environment in New York City, it is a valuable tool in bridging differences between students by motivating them to find commonalities with one another.

The interdisciplinary nature of this study shows strong potential brands is a unique way to teach that is understandable and familiar to students in a consumer society where corporate brands are pervasive. While successful in marketing and social science courses where the theories are linked to learning outcomes, using it in more content heavy courses such as mathematics may be a more difficult endeavor. Implementing a pedagogy such as this that students would be familiar with from their presence in the world of corporate and personal brands (especially in the way personal branding is dominating social media), and then linking it to the course material, increases student interest. Integrating brands with the course content, using the affinity identity strategy outlined in this paper, is a useful way to build educational empathy between the learning colleagues and the instructor. In the world of social media where students are consistently confronted with personal brands through Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat or other social media platforms, this proves to be a culturally popular teaching method. The researchers found that students understood quite quickly the concept though it took time to build strong affinity to create a group brand. The collective challenge proved to be a worthy exercise.

Further research should investigate how corporate methodologies that are familiar to students can be integrated into classroom pedagogy. By bringing the business world into the classroom it engages students earlier in a real world scenario. The degree to which method such as group brands stays with the student after they leave college should be understood to a greater degree. The translation of class learning into real life is a critical task of the college. Group branding as a pedagogical method is one method that has successfully tested this problem.

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Appendices

Fig. 1 Group Branding Demographic Chart

Class topic	# of classes	# of groups	# of students	Type of initial affinity used
Marketing and Business	3	15	75	Professional Expertise
Race and Ethnic Relations	1	7	35	Birthday month
Social Research	2	10	51	Neighborhood Niche
Aging	1	5	26	Birthday month
Introduction to Sociology	3	23	117	Birthday month
The Family	1	3	15	Birthday month
Urban Sociology	1	6	32	Class major

Anthropology	1	8	40	Neighborhood Niche
TOTALS	13 (30.07/class)	77 (5.07/class; 5.92/group)	391	

Fig. 2 Brand differentiation

Type of Affinity used to form groups in initial class	# classes	# groups	# students	Group brand name samples
Professional Expertise	3	15	75	OMG (online marketing group) Fast Cash (accountants) Social Addits (social media, web site) The Investigators (analysts) The PR Pros (promotions) Team Apple (technology) Money Hornets (finance) Tech 9.0 (technology) Financial Nation (finance) Queen of Marketing (marketing) SJK Jaguar (marketing)
Neighborhood Niche	3	18	83	18 Central (Central part of Brooklyn) Uptown Rising (Bronx) J.A.R.F (Subway routes from South and East Brooklyn) Fresh Islanders (all from the West Indies) Korebbean Soul (Korean and Carribbean students)
Birthday month	6	38	193	Winterall (winter birthdays) Springsters (all women with birthdays in spring "sisters of spring") Leo Girls (Zodiac)
Class Major	1	6	32	City Healers (nursing) Helping Hands (nursing, human services) The Bakers (culinary arts)

Fig. 3 Creative thinking by groups.

Other common affinities that were used in the branding process	Group name samples and brief explanations
Leisure interest: sports, shopping, video gaming, fashion, pets	Blooming Lines (all girl group mascara name brand) Gamers (video and sports gaming) Ballers (basketball, football, baseball) PhoMusTra (name derived from abbreviations of photography, music, travel) iDogs (All liked their iPhones and dogs) The Looney Tunes (fans of Disney characters and all in the group are 'weird') The Cashiers (all were cashiers in retail) JAB Marketing Team "knock out marketing" (boxing) Lucky 8 Empire (gambling) Triple Sharks (finance and gambling)
Educational Motivation	The Graduates (we will all graduate!) A Squad (everyone to get an A) Lions (learn, explore, conquer)
Diversity: commonly used when there were students of various ethnic and religious identities	DiverCity The Dream Rainbow (rainbow represents the differences in colors in the group) Peacemakers D.N.A. (abbreviation for Diverse Nationalities Affiliate) Opposite Connection (all from different nationalities finding connection) Multicultural Crew Student Mix (future leaders of the world)
Philosophical concepts	Cross Achievers (all from Christian backgrounds) Open Minders (being open to all ideas) Blue Storm (all face storms and come out ahead) Express Yourself (all have a voice) Black Jaguars (social justice in the vein of the Black Panthers) L.A.P.L.D. (counter play on LAPD [Los Angeles Police Dept.] acronym for Let All People Live Differently
Food	The Bakers (culinary arts students who enjoyed baking) Hot Sauce (everyone liked hot food) Six Pieces of Pizza (pizza lovers)

Fig. 4 Four Pronged Approach to Marketing

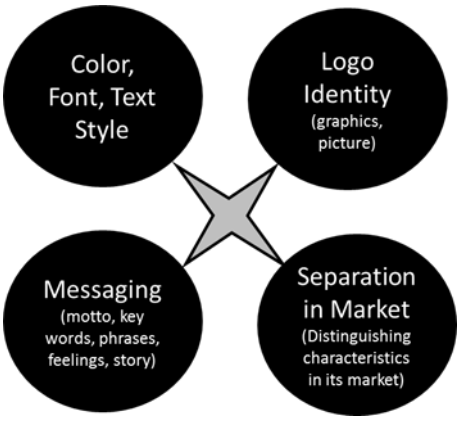

Fig. 5 Classroom Setup Configurations

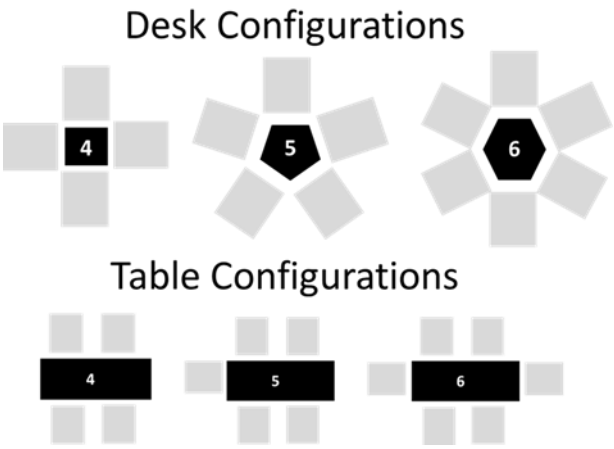

Fig. 6: Sample Group Brands

Group Name	**Blue Storm**
Affinity	Blue was favorite color of everyone.
Motto	"After the storm, comes tranquility."
Rationale	There are two parts in choosing the name. We chose the "Blue" part since it is one of our favorite colors. The "Storm" bit was made to compare us to a storm. Since storms leave a mark in their path, we wanted to create a positive, not negative (unlike a storm), mark in our path. We also settled for "Storm" because our strengths (in terms of our personalities) could make an impact on our own communities. The only difference between our "storm" and an actual storm is that while a real storm uses its strength for destruction, we would use our strength for unity within our communities.
Colors	blue and white.

Logo	

Group Name	**iDogs**
Affinity	We all have a love for dogs and our iPhone leading us to the name iDogs.
Motto	We value each other others opinion, vow to work together and be open to learn several new things about each other.
Rationale	We wanted our group name to captures our similarities leaving our differences to be discovered during our semester shared.
Colors	Pink Navy blue & Red our favorite colors
Logo	

Group Name	**City Healers**
Affinity	Nursing students
Motto	"You can't enjoy your wealth if you don't maintain your health"
Rationale	Stemming from the premise of service to the public; we intend to educate and disseminate information concerning Physical, Mental, spiritual and social health
Colors	Red and White
Logo	

Group Name	**Blooming Lines**
Affinity	All wear mascara. All women.
Motto	"Life is short, lashes don't have to be!"
Rationale	Applying mascara is the finishing touch to a woman's beauty. It makes women from all over feel confident, and inspires young girls to embrace their beauty. Having bolder lashes gives a woman a sense of control and Blooming Lines will establish that. Our Mascara lengthens and intensifies your eyelashes. It emphasizes your beauty by making your lashes look darker, longer and thicker. Blooming lines mascara creates a connection between people because it draws attention to the eyes. It brings different women together, allowing them to connect in different ways.
Colors	Black
Logo	

Group Name	**J.A.R.F.**
Affinity	All ride the Subway to school
Motto	Each individual train concludes in one ultimate direction. We all unite in one place.
Rationale	We chose trains as our logo is because we did not have much in common. However, we all came to the same school using MTA Transit. J.A.R.F. are the trains that connect us to the college campus.
Colors	colors of our train routes Blue (A Train), Brown (J Train), Orange (F Train), Yellow (R Train)
Logo	

Group Name	**Peacemakers**
Affinity	International Students.
Motto	"Peace is a journey of a thousand miles and it must be taken one step at a time". -Lyndon B Johnson
Rationale	Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing oneself. Once there is inner peace, only then can you change the world one step at a time. The first step starts with you
Colors	red, white, blue, black, green, yellow (colors of our individual flags)
Logo	