



Trademark Licensing: Final Report

Student Experience and U of T's "Brand Story"
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Prepared for Trademark Licensing,
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introduction

The Innovation Hub collaborated with the University of Toronto (U of T)'s Trademark and Licensing office and design consulting firm Sovereign State to facilitate a student feedback session on the thoughts and feelings students have about their time at U of T. The event, which took place in June 2018, showed us the connections students have to U of T branding and the *image* that students associate with the university and with themselves as members of its community. We collected this information with the intention of developing an authentic *brand story* which communicates and represents the diverse experiences of the university student community.

This report details the themes that arose during the feedback session. These themes represent the most consistent and significant elements of U of T's image as understood and experienced by the student participants. They show that the student experience is one of significant personal and professional growth, in which students overcome challenges and transition into societal roles. We offer some discussion questions at the end of the report to generate ideas about the role of U of T's branding in the student experience.

theme one: Prestige

Key Insights

Students consistently commented on the international recognition of the University of Toronto and its reputation as the best university in the country. This reputation had a significant impact on many students' decisions to attend the school. A number of students described a feeling of needing to “live up to” the reputation of U of T, as well as a sense of anxiety and/or pride about being associated with its image. Though this sense of prestige was partly understood as a result of academic excellence (see themes 2 and 3), students also suggested that a sense of historical legacy was significant in their thoughts and feelings about the university's image. Using words and phrases such as “old school academia” and “Canada's Harvard,” many student participants described U of T as a “world class” institution and likened it to an Ivy League experience.

Supporting Quotations

“I usually acquire apparel to travel abroad, where someone is not familiar with the brand. Has a good reputation, but I hope that I do not misrepresent the university. U of T is considered [a] top school in the world, but am I really one of the top students in the world?”

“Top notch - spirit of U of T - strive for the best”

“Prestige - best in Canada, top 20 in the world”

“International student – reputation at U of T was equally as strong as US schools.”

“Memento - memories, accomplishments, token of prestige” [about buying merchandise]

“U of T does not need promotions since it is so reputable, and if you see an ad for a school on the subway, you should not go to that school.”

theme two: Survival and Perseverance

Key Insights

The concept of “survival” emerged in many conversations during the event and was central to many student participants’ experiences at U of T. Students expressed both positive and negative feelings about the challenge of “making it through” the U of T experience and commented on a “hunger games” mentality rife with academic challenge and competition. For some student participants, there was a sense of pride and accomplishment in being able to say that they “survived” their time at U of T, while others reported a slight sense of resentment about the demand and intensity placed on them and wondered if it was truly worth the effort. Students described U of T as a place “where all the smart people go,” which is “easy to get [into], but tough to get out [of],” showing the immense pressure they feel while completing their degrees.

Supporting Quotations

“I think the current image is positive already internationally. U of T students are brilliant, but sometimes U of T admits local students with lower academic requirements, but then they just hate the school for how hard it is.”

“Many think it’s better for grad school, and that it’s really hard, can get a better GPA and not be miserable for 4 years doing your undergrad here.”

“[It’s] harder to do well at U of T.... Is a ‘B’ at U of T better than an ‘A’ at Waterloo?”

“‘U of Tears,’ ‘It Gets Better,’ ‘Easy to get in, hard to get out’—these shirts are funny, but [I] wouldn’t buy or wear [them].”

“I survived - symbol of pride.”

“U of T students are good at managing stress. We complain about it, but we just do it. We are strong enough to manage it.”

theme three: Fragmentation

Key Insights

It was difficult to identify a single “U of T Student Identity” during the feedback event, partly due to the university’s college system. The division of undergraduate students into seven colleges provides a sense of community for many students and buffers them from the hard edge and isolative culture of the larger institution, but other students commented on the divisive nature of the college system and how difficult it is to connect with people outside of their faculties. School loyalty or pride was often filtered through the colleges rather than being attached more generally to U of T.

Supporting Quotations

“[I] like to show off school spirit—whenever I travel I take something ‘U of T,’ but [I] would like to associate more with the department [I’m] with; [I] don’t wear it all the time because [I] would stand out.”

“Strong connections within faculty, less so outside of it.”

“You build smaller connections outside of your department, but the real connections are much easier within the bubble of your own department.”

“Frosh activities (but first department-specific stuff, then general U of T)” - *Response to “Where do you wear U of T merchandise?”*

“I bought a lot when I lived in residence and was really into it, because everyone else had it, but when [I] moved off campus, [I] felt less inclined to buy merchandise; [I] like to buy departmental merchandise over main U of T merchandise.”

theme four: Seeking Support

Key Insights

While some student participants appreciated the resources available at U of T, many others were critical of gaps in formal support for students—particularly those navigating multiple barriers in their education. Emphasis was placed on the importance (and lack of) mental health services for students. The U of T “Boundless” campaign was repeatedly critiqued for being unrealistic and dismissive of the inaccessibility of opportunities to a significant number of students. Support between students, on the other hand, was reported as not only a positive aspect of students’ experience but also a vital element in their capacities to survive the competitive atmosphere. Commenting on the intense demands placed on them as students (e.g., lack of sleep, living at the library, etc.), the student participants relayed their appreciation for their friends and fellow students and the sense of being in the struggle together.

Supporting Quotations

“Mental health — opportunities... What if you can’t take initiative to reach out?”

“Scholarships to limited few rather than spread out [...] assistance.”

“U of T is NOT BOUNDLESS - lack of resources and opportunities equal to all.”

“True feeling of U of T is disconnected from things like Boundless.”

“Sleep deprivation, friends in it together.”

“Uber Eats together—chicken nugget nights.”

“Friends required for survival.”

“Big campus encourages you to open up to survive.”

theme five: Future Directions

Key Insights

When asked to identify words that come to mind at the thought of graduating, many student participants reported immense pride and accomplishment. There was particular emphasis on success, opportunity, and the sense that their accomplishment will be “worth” the struggle. Many consider a U of T education particularly valuable in “opening doors,” building connections, and providing social capital for future opportunities. Along with a sense of accomplishment, many student participants reported feelings of anxiety and doubt and wondered whether the rigorous experience actually equipped them with the tools and skills needed to succeed in the current job market.

Data Points

Pride	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Proud”• “Proud of graduating”• “Loud and Proud”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Hope to be an active alum (I love Hart House)”
Accomplishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Grateful”• “Accomplished”• “Worth it”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Feel like I’m finally smart enough to be here.”
Anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Anxiety and uncertainty”• “Unsure”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Uncertainty with job market”• “Terrified”
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Connections”• “Building new connections”• “Success”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Opportunities”• “U of T has a great name, helps open doors”

limitations

The feedback event involved twenty-five participants in a university of nearly 90 000. Thus, while it provides information on students' *general* experiences of U of T, it does not represent the full diversity of student perspectives. Nevertheless, we hope the data and analysis reported here contribute to the wider conversation about the U of T student experience and to ongoing efforts to align U of T branding with student identities.

implications & discussion questions

The themes identified here provide a useful snapshot of students' experiences at U of T. Through our analysis, it became clear that students' time at U of T is one of significant personal and professional transition. Students relayed their thoughts, feelings, and anxieties about their capacities to successfully navigate the challenges presented to them at university and the value they placed on being able to "make it through" the experience and get to the other side. Considering personal and professional transition as the overarching context in which these themes show up for students, we found it useful to ask:

What access points do the themes suggest for Trademark and Licensing to:

- 1) *Better understand the student experience?*
- 2) *Reach students as they navigate this transitional period?*

We present the following questions to spark discussion about these points of access and about the relevance of the data in developing a "brand story" for U of T:

Question #1

What tensions arise between the value placed on "prestige" versus students' doubts and anxieties about their experience being worth the reputation?

- a) How do we navigate this tension?
- b) Is it generative? If so, how?

Question #2

What implication(s) does the narrative of survival have for U of T's brand story?

Question #3

Does Trademark and Licensing and/or the U of T brand have a role in student support?

- a) If so, what does it look like?
- b) If not, what might it look like if it did?

appendix A: Brand Data

Ranking of “The Best”

Using sticky notes numbered 1-3, students ranked their top three brands from those presented on the wall.

#1	#2	#3
Tesla (4)	Apple (3)	Tesla (3)
Apple (3)	Roots (3)	Harvard (2)
Microsoft (3)	H&M (1)	H&M (2)
Harvard (2)	Microsoft (1)	Microsoft (2)
Mercedes Benz (1)	UCLA (1)	Apple (1)
Lululemon (1)	Zara (1)	Roots (1)
		Volkswagen (1)
		UCLA (1)
		Mercedes Benz (1)

Brand Exploration Exercise

Students were asked what they look for in other brand merchandise, then asked what they look for in U of T merchandise.

General Merchandise	U of T Merchandise
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reputation over design • Financial Accessibility • Usability • Approachability • Sustainability • Connection and nostalgia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplicity • Financial accessibility • Faculty specific wear • Smaller mementos (e.g., stickers, keychains, patches, etc.) • Comfort • Utility • Symbol of Pride • Prestige/Reputation • Free Swag • Loungewear • Location of Toronto • Hoodies • Classic look

Student Contributors

Liza Brechbill, 2nd Year Master of Education, Adult Education and Community Development

Brendon Burrows, 6th Year PhD, Adult Education and Community Development

Nicholas Feinig, 4th Year PhD, Anthropology

Mia Sanders, 1st Year Undergraduate, Women & Gender Studies and Diaspora & Transnational Studies

Danielle Lum, 2nd Year, Master of Information in User Experience Design

Joel West, Undergraduate, Semiotics and the Study of Religion

Irene Duah-Kessie, Master of Science, Sustainability Management

Brigid Burke, 5th Year PhD, Sociology



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For more information, or to work with the Innovation Hub, please contact Julia Smeed at julia.smeed@utoronto.ca or 416-978-8619, or visit our blog at uoft.me/innovationhub