

Positioning Conflict in Place Branding: An Assessment of Competing Musical Discourses in the Branding of Chattanooga, Tennessee

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Abstract:

This paper examines the use of music in place branding, and by using Chattanooga Tennessee as a case example, assesses problems in conflicting music-related place brand images, and follows from calls to add conceptualization to the field of place branding (Ashworth 2015). Unlike product positioning, the plentitude of potential variables in determining the nature of a place makes place branding more complex than product branding. While consumer product attribute levels may be altered to better meet targeted consumer desires, the experience of a tourist destination may vary in such uncontrollable factors as weather, local population, entrance or exit of chains or independent businesses, and overall infrastructure (Urry 2005). In contrast with most place branding, which emphasizes the ocular (Medway 2015), this paper studies the role of sound in branding place, specifically focusing on the use by Chattanooga, Tennessee of the Glenn Miller Orchestra's 1940s hit *Chattanooga Choo Choo*. The use of music in the construction of a place brand has received only scant attention from researchers (Sellars 1998, Saldanha 2002, Gibson & Davidson 2004, Gibson & Connell 2007), and this paper address the specific case of a conflict between the historic/nostalgic brand represented by the song and the newer image preferred by the city.

The idea of applying branding techniques to tourist destinations has been a focus of academic research only recently and many studies lack methodological and theoretical rigor (Gertner 2011). Often these result from the application of theory surrounding corporate brands to destination brands (e.g., Hankinson 2006) and calls have been made for development of theory unique to destination brands (Hankinson 2009). One difficulty in branding is the inability of tour operators to control many factors related to the delivery of the tour service makes it very difficult for “naturally emergent destinations” to find a unique selling proposition (Mundt 2002). Similar destinations (e.g., beaches, mountain getaways) become more similar as they increasingly use the same vendors such as hotel and restaurant chains, airlines, and museums. Easier to brand are “synthetic” destinations—those destinations that are created as tourist brands from scratch, for

example Disney World and Dollywood. Further, a common challenge with branding destinations is the typically limited budget that destinations such as small cities have available for the branding process (Clark, Clark, & Jones 2010).

Networks of associations influence the branding of place. For instance, the branding of Las Vegas includes objective elements of casinos and gambling, desert and cabaret-style performances, but it also includes a more implicit value of freedom from constraints of normal society and perhaps a nostalgic connection with riding freely in the desert. This brand is captured by the oft-repeated slogan "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." Similarly, travelers to Key West, Florida search out the local bars that were historically patronized by Ernest Hemmingway or Jimmy Buffet, listen to the Caribbean-influenced steel drums playing on street corners, and congregate en masse to watch the sunset at Mallory Square. But they also seek out to experience the excess that represents one of the island's historical associations. Excess in alcohol consumption, sexual liberty, and music captures the city's historical position as a location of 18th century pirates, a theme that is still celebrated in tourism.

A nostalgic referent (Holbrook 1993, Holbrook & Schindler 2003) helps consumers recall positive memories associated with consuming a product (e.g., Holt 1998). Some cities have strong nostalgic associations with a single song. *New York, New York*, for example, captures the aspirational desires of both artists and other immigrants to the city: "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere..."

Chattanooga's historical role as a transportation hub is captured nostalgically by the song. However, the transportation industry subsequently augmented the development of heavy manufacturing and, by 1969, unregulated transportation and manufacturing emissions resulted in Chattanooga being named the most polluted city in the United States by the U.S. EPA. Chattanooga's more recent branding attempt capitalizes on outdoor activities and publicly supported gig-speed internet; the new brand evokes Chattanooga as "Gig City." Part of this rebranding effort has involved music. A new music venue, Track 29, takes its name from a lyric in the song. The annual 8 day *Riverbend Festival* features regional and national music acts that attract 650,000 attendees over its 8 day span, and Kiplinger recently praised Chattanooga for its "thriving arts and music scene." In the case of Chattanooga, the nostalgic brand serves as a liability to the new brand that seeks to capitalize on technology and business development.

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Keywords: *place branding, destination branding, music, positioning conflict*

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners:

This study contributes to the understanding of the role of music in the process of place branding by examining a case study of a conflicting brand positioning.

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TRACK: Music, Arts, Entertainment