

## ENHANCING CITY IDENTITY THROUGH DIGITAL METAPHORS

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### **Abstract**

City branding is a discipline focused on unveiling the unique character of cities and enhancing their visibility, identity, and cultural impact. In recent years, cities have been exploring new methods to promote themselves and attract more visitors. This has led stakeholders and those involved in city branding to find new pathways to create “a new identifiable image” of the city (Riza et al. 2012), making it an attractive destination (Kotler & Gertner 2002). With the rise of digital technologies and globalization, the possibilities for city branding have significantly increased. In the digital era, many cities that pivoted from traditional models of branding have succeeded in renewing their identity using digital media and the incorporation of digital metaphors in their branding campaigns. As a result, many cities have managed to rebrand and refashion their identity. This paper aims to explore how cities are represented in digital media and which digital met-

aphors are used to attract a younger, more technologically savvy audience. Through a multimodal framework, I will analyze the recent branding campaign of the city of Thessaloniki to identify how digital metaphors are used and their impact on younger audiences.

**Keywords:** city identity, city branding, digital metaphors, city break, social media

### Introduction

Since ancient times, travel has played an important role for communities and humans alike. It has enabled the discovery of new cultures and has acted as a bridge to meeting new people, thus broadening experiences. Nowadays, the need to explore has persisted, taking on different facets. One important aspect in today's era is that both cities and countries are striving to become more attractive and thus appeal to new audiences. In this respect, governance and stakeholders are engaged in increasing a city's popularity and visibility. Thus, the way in which cities are branded, becomes pivotal in attracting tourists of diverse ages and sociocultural backgrounds.

Although the question of what makes a brand has been a topic of debate, many researchers define it as having all or a combination of elements such as a name, design, and logo. Thus, the identity of the product can be deduced and differentiated from other competitive products (Kotler et al. 2015: 285, 298). Although the concept of a brand is commonly associated with business, both countries and cities can act as brands. Cities are trying to portray themselves professionally, similar to the way in which a company would, and become global players by investing more resources into consolidating their image (Taylor 2012). Nevertheless, the branding of cities takes a different approach depending on the target group, whether it be internal or external tourism. As Garrido, Estupiñán and Gómez (2016) note, "city branding seeks the recognition of different characteristics and virtues of a nation outside its borders, while internally it has a transversal approach against the scope of the image of its different regions, cities and places" (cited in Bautista 2022: 15). In the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of cities promoting their image via social media platforms such as Facebook, Tik Tok, Instagram and YouTube. The use of such sites and applications allows cities to reach new and wider audiences while also keeping up with the latest digital marketing trends.

### **City Branding and Identity**

City branding is intricately linked to place branding. One of the first to frame a definition of place branding was Anholt. Anholt (2003) claims that when a branding strategy or any marketing method is implemented in a place (regardless of its size: city, region, country, town) in order to promote greater social, political, and economic development, then it is referred to as place branding. There are three important components in the marketing process of a destination: what a tourist can visit and see (e.g. historical sites), the activities or festivities in which they can partake, and finally, the experiences they can gain, such as attending a local sporting event or shopping for traditional products (Köker et al. 2013: 55). When branding a place, three types of branding are frequently used, as noted by Kavaratzis and Asworth (2006: 190–191). The first type is geographical naming of the place, the second is product-place cooperation and the third is ground management. Place branding focuses on the reputation and image of a location and how these elements can be improved, in order to increase visibility and create a competitive identity by promoting the unique characteristics of each place. Competition in city branding is steadily growing due to economic constraints (Govers & Go 2009). Other than the commonly used term “place branding” the term “destination marketing” is key when promoting a place. Destination marketing ultimately seeks to make a destination attractive to potential visitors and increase demand. It also has the added benefit of boosting the economy and increasing investments.<sup>1</sup> Cities similarly employ specific promotional strategies to showcase not only their cultural heritage but also their natural beauty, activities, and experiences in which perspective visitors can partake. In fact, having geographical and cultural features in addition to hosting various events can positively affect the brand image of the city way (Kotler & Gertner 2002).

### **City Branding on Social Media**

In recent years, cities have sought to attract different types of consumers and tourists, taking to more modern ways of rebranding and refashioning their identity through branding campaigns and promotional videos. Information technology has become a key instrument for local tourism organizations to promote their city or town. Local authorities make use of digital technologies to promote and rebrand a city, thus attracting younger audiences. The application of targeted communication through digital media contributes to creating a city’s brand values as a tourism destination

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.revfine.com/destination-marketing/> (accessed 24 May 2024).

by cultivating awareness and credibility (Stojanovic et al. 2018). Furthermore, websites provide a platform for a city to create a visualized identity. In this digital space, local tourist organizations can promote many aspects of a city such as its history and culture, the local food, and any upcoming art exhibitions, festivities, or local events. Additionally, any environmental sustainability practices a city follows can be advertised easily to a more diverse audience. Similarly, social media channels are becoming an important and popular means for municipal managers to broadcast information and engage the public (Bennett & Manoharan 2017). Given the participatory nature and accessibility of content available on social media, an increasing number of stakeholders and local municipalities are now using these platforms to shape a more technologically savvy image of their city and attract younger visitors. The more cities adopt specific branding techniques to position themselves nationally and internationally (Lucarelli & Berg 2011), the more digital media is seen as instrumental to the improvement of public relations (Manoharan & Wu 2021) and the enhancement of tourism. As other researchers claim, social media channels are becoming an important and popular means for municipal managers to broadcast information and engage the public (Bennett & Manoharan 2017). It is not only what is communicated about a city that is important, but also the way in which the content is conveyed. The use of high-resolution and dynamic images, exciting video clips, appropriate typeface, and coloured, fast-paced subtitles are some of the features of social media that are implemented in city branding videos. *In the age of digital media convergence,<sup>2</sup> digital metaphors are becoming increasingly important in this respect.* Younger audiences are not only consumers of content but also producers and commenters. Through this engagement, the popularity of a video posted on social media can reach a large audience. The fact that city and place branding strategies have been radically transformed in past decades is also worth mentioning. Other than the use of posters, tourist offices, and commercial spots on TV, most campaigns nowadays profit from the advantages that social media and internet websites offer. In fact, Ortiz-Osprina (2019) says that YouTube is one of the fastest-growing platforms. Based on the data reported on datareportal.com, the global number of users on YouTube in April 2023 was 2.527 billion, with 2.077 billion of those users being above 18. Thus,

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<sup>2</sup> We have moved from media convergence to digital media convergence due to the use of social media. Drula (2015: 134) describes media convergence as the unification of different technologies and different content types.

without doubt, YouTube provides an opportunity for all people wishing to market their products, places, or ideas.

### **Digital Metaphors: Cities Acting as Influencers**

Cities, countries, and governments use social media as a way of connecting with their citizens. Due to the extended use of smartphones and social media applications, almost everyone, including today's youth, uses social media to communicate information and share opinions. However, it is young people in particular who use it to follow influencers who themselves use social media as part of their career (see Abidin 2017). Cities can also be considered influencers in the sense that they too use social media to reach these younger audiences. The advantage of the world-wide-web is that it stores information to be used by companies and cities which want to shape their campaign strategy and invent a campaign based on the identities and wants of their target group. Thus, cities which are not as popular as London, Paris, or Barcelona, can at least now frame a new digital identity to themselves appear more attractive than their competitors. One way of enhancing their digital identity is to promote cultural and artistic events via social media thus seeking to revitalize their sleepy downtowns (Banks 2022). But how can cities become influencers? Cities are using so-called aggressive strategies to beat the competition and to stand out. Promotional media included television in the 90s, whereas nowadays, the main medium for promotion is social media. Social media is an excellent way to promote various aspects of a city's identity ranging from history to tourist attractions to festivities. We can understand how cities act as influencers by drawing on diverse definitions of this term. As the Cambridge Dictionary notes, an influencer is "someone who affects or changes the way that other people behave" and "a person who is paid by a company to show and describe its products and services on social media, encouraging other people to buy them".<sup>3</sup> As Banks argues, cities like Austin (Young 2019a, 2019b) which made it a primary goal to "engage new audiences for Austin arts & culture" accomplished this goal in part through "utiliz[ing] public relations/publicity to inform audiences of existing assets" (Public City 2015). The skill sets needed to be an influencer on any number of social media platforms are eminently transportable to this sort of work. Indeed, in the last few years, there has been even more focus within cultural planning on concepts like

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<sup>3</sup> See: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/influencer> (accessed 24 May 2024).

reputation management (Bell 2016), thus trying to apply these concepts in the administration of neighborhood and city brands.

This paper seeks to present how cities are promoted on social media, drawing on concepts and graphics inherent in the work of influencers. Thessaloniki is presented on social media, and more specifically on the channel entitled Thessaloniki Travel, in the same way an influencer would promote their content. Various aspects of the city are promoted, with the language and graphics used making the content more accessible and interactive with the viewers, giving it a fresher look. Thus, the way the city is promoted becomes inherently linked to its identity. In my analysis, it will be delved into how emphasis is now given to the activities one can do, and the modern cultural and culinary aspects of the city rather than solely on the historical attractions.

### **Methodology**

This paper explores how cities are alternatively promoted via social media, and more specifically on YouTube. It analyzes the recent campaign of Thessaloniki, prepared by its Tourism Organization Board entitled *City Break off the beaten track*. Other recent promotional videos of the city will also be a topic touched upon.

Through a multimodal framework, the recent branding campaign of the city of Thessaloniki is described in view of identifying how the city's identity is portrayed and which aspects of the city are being promoted. A multimodal framework was used in order to analyze the cultural values that are being promoted in the campaign and to acknowledge how the use of recent cinematic language was valuable in attracting a younger audience that was more in tune with the language of social media and recent digital marketing strategies.

### ***City break off the beaten track***

The rise of Airbnb and the expansion of low-cost airlines have given rise to a new kind of tourism known as the city break. But what exactly are city breaks, who are they intended for, and what is their significance? City breaks have become popular due to the affordability of low-cost airline fares and the growth of Airbnb. They cater to tourists' desire to explore a city over a short period. Hence, they can be a unique travel experience for each traveller. Such trips are mainly a European phenomenon and can be considered as part of urban tourism (Charterina & Aparicio 2015). Each city offers distinct attractions and promotes various forms of tourism such

as “cultural tourism, business travel, entertainment tourism, hobby tourism (including passive sports or festival tourism), post-industrial tourism, religious tourism, and sightseeing” (Balinska 2020: 86). These types of tourism are essential for attracting tourists. As noted by Kruczek and Zmysłony (2010), “[u]nlike peripheral area, cities are destinations for short trips” (Balinska 2020: 86). The researchers note that city break tourists usually visit both historical sites and new, less mainstream attractions that do not fall into what would typically be considered popular city attractions. As noted, Thessaloniki’s Tourism Organization has recently been promoting the concept of short breaks, meaning a maximum of three nights away, as a way for people to get out of their routine and venture somewhere either domestically or foreign. Trew and Cockerell (2002: 86) note that this term refers to a trip to a city with no overnight stay at any other destination.

The recent campaign created by Thessaloniki’s Tourism Organization was named *City break off the beaten track*. Before moving on to the analysis of the two spots that were part of this campaign, I would like to mention some specific information concerning the role of this non-profit organization. The organization decided on the key objectives of the promotional strategy of the city aiming to make the city more popular and attractive to diverse audiences while also refashioning its digital identity. The website of Thessaloniki’s Tourism Organization notes, among other objectives, that its aims are “[p]romoting and highlighting the strategic advantages of Thessaloniki as an important touristic, commercial, economic, cultural, religious and cruise destination as well as a MICE destination” and at “[s]upporting and coordinating various events that promote the tourism profile of the Region”.<sup>4</sup>

The president of the organization is also the mayor of the city. He along with specialists who are part and members of the non-profit organization define and set the aims and the key objectives of the city’s tourist campaigns. The organization aims to promote small events which will attract diverse audiences. Such events are the Thessaloniki food festival and Comic Con. The Thessaloniki food festival is a project started by the organization in order to attract tourists, stakeholders, and everybody who wants to experience the city’s notable gastronomy. Comic Con is another annual event which attracts many tourists. As announced on their official website: “The first edition of “The Comic Con” took place from May 8 to 10, 2015 at Warehouse C of the ALTH. It was the first comic convention – in the true

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<sup>4</sup> See: <https://thessaloniki.travel/about-us/thessaloniki-tourism-organization-t-t-o/> (accessed 24 May 2024).

sense of the term – ever held in Greece. It was based on the authentic tradition of the large comic conventions abroad, such as San Diego or New York, escaping from the comic exhibitions or comic events already taking place in the country”.<sup>5</sup> This year’s 2024 event: “The Thessaloniki Comic Convention “The Comic Con” is said to be the leading event for the world of comics in Greece. Many people from all over have come to visit Thessaloniki just for this event in the last ten years and with the event growing, so too will the number of tourists coming for a city break. The event lasts a weekend and is a perfect opportunity for a fan of this event to combine a city break with meeting and interacting with well-known people in the comic industry. One of the main objectives of the recent campaign of the city of Thessaloniki is it trying to attract younger audiences via social media.

### **Analysis of the Material**

From an analysis of the campaign, the dynamic use of both images and typeface can be observed. Both the videos which were analyzed are very short, being 0:59 and 0:53 minutes. The videos follow the trends of contemporary promotional videos with rapid movement of the camera and multiple frames. The first video entitled *Thessaloniki City break off the beaten track*<sup>6</sup> showcases the main cultural values of the city, namely adventure, tradition, and Hellenicity. Its cultural heritage and modern way of living as well as the holding of concerts are also being promoted. The juxtaposition between old and new is further heightened through the typeface used. One reminds us of the ancient Greek alphabet, clearly referring to ancient Greece, whereas the other, more modern typeface is characterized by its diagonal orientation. The past can be seen to coexist harmoniously with the present.

One feature of the city that is particularly underlined in the video is the fact that it belongs to the UNESCO Gastronomy Network. This is appealing information for a visitor coming to the city for 2-3 days. The video emotionally appeals to the prospective visitors by prompting them to take part in this adventure. The phrase “Are you ready?” in bold and capital typeface suggests both an invitation and a challenge to take part in the action. The second video entitled *Thessaloniki your Christmas City Break*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See: [https://thecomicon.gr/past\\_events/tcc1/](https://thecomicon.gr/past_events/tcc1/) (accessed 19 May 2024).

<sup>6</sup> The video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTdAk2kUcxA> (accessed 24 May 2024).

<sup>7</sup> The video is available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H\\_OLiqaolx8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_OLiqaolx8) (accessed 24 May 2024).



promoted tradition through the use of the ship used in Greece as a Christmas tradition. A panoramic view of the city as if filmed by a drone is shown along with several glimpses of the city.

Another cultural value portrayed is the friendliness of the local citizens and its gastronomy. What is particularly important is the use of red subtitles which suggests the festive period of Christmas. The subtitles are like those that appear on Tik Tok but not on usual videos of YouTube in that they are shorter in length and appear and disappear more rapidly than normal subtitles. This method is clearly used to attract younger audiences familiar with the nature of videos on Tik Tok. The same strategy showcases the diverse aspects of the city and the opportunities it offers to new visitors. By also visiting the website of Thessaloniki Travel, we notice that the main slogan of the campaign is “Many stories, one heart”. These stories represent both the past and the various attractions that the city offers.

Both videos particularly appeal to younger generations who are particularly acquainted with social media platforms, especially YouTube. The rapid and ongoing movement of the camera along with the 360-degree point of view provides a holistic view of the city, unveiling different angles and aspects of its identity. Such digital cinematography allows for a more participatory and captivating experience thus engaging viewers of the video and enticing them to visit the city. Both the cultural heritage and the modern way of living which the city offers are promoted in the videos, thus differentiating this campaign from previous ones that mainly focused on cultural heritage and ancient monuments. Both the cinematic experience and the content experience are aimed at attracting younger foreign tourists who are evidently acquainted with digital media and its mechanisms. To conclude, this recent campaign of the city is a digital rebrand of the city.

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