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Love Little Rock: A Case Study of “Breaking Up” With Amazon

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When Amazon was seeking a location for a second headquarters in Fall 2017, Little Rock mayor Mark Stodola announced that the Arkansas capital city would be in the running. Three weeks later, on the day applications were due, Little Rock “broke up” with Amazon via a full-page “Dear John Letter” advertisement in the Washington Post. The resulting “Love, Little Rock” campaign garnered national and international attention. This case study examines the objectives, strategies, tactics, and impact of and reaction to the initial Love, Little Rock campaign as well as its effectiveness in the stated goal of attracting additional industry that wasn’t Amazon. Preliminary results indicate the Love, Little Rock campaign, notwithstanding pockets of in-state backlash, dominated the national coverage of the Amazon deadline.

Keywords: city branding, tourism marketing, agenda setting, public relations campaign

In early September 2017, Little Rock, Ark., through Mayor Mark Stodola, initially threw its hat into the competition ring in an effort to entice Amazon to its city, as the company announced it was searching for a second headquarters. After a few weeks, city officials realized Little Rock did not meet many of the requirements put forth by Amazon and would never be a serious contender. At that point, an unorthodox city branding campaign was born, which included a new slogan, “Love, Little Rock,” and messaging designed in the form of a “break-up” letter, as a way of bowing out of the competition for Amazon’s new headquarters. This case study uses agenda-setting

theory and visual and textual analysis to examine the *Love, Little Rock* campaign. In particular, this paper explores how the city set an agenda in today’s attention economy through non-traditional strategies and tactics through thematic analysis of news coverage of the campaign.

Cities today strive to be flourishing and functional with favorable economic development aided by a reliable and effective transportation system, an entrepreneurial mindset, an available workforce, along with community and cultural advantages. According to Hultman, Yeboah-Banin, and Formaniuk (2016), branding is arguably an organization’s most powerful asset. City branding specifically involves managing perceptions about a place and how it ties into meeting stakeholders’ needs, which is challenging given there are so many diverse stakeholders involved such as investors, visitors, and residents (Hultman et al., 2016). A place needs to be differentiated through branding if it wants to be recognized, perceived as superior to competitors and consumed in a matter commensurate with objectives of the place (Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2005).

To this end, cities often rely on branding and marketing strategies to position themselves as attractive to business and industry considering locating there (Xue, Chen, & Yu, 2012) as well as to the city’s residents themselves (Laaksonen, Laaksonen, Borisov, & Halkoaho, 2006). City branding is complex due to the multiple meanings and identities associated with the “product” and the multiple stakeholders involved. “Places do not suddenly acquire a new identity thanks to a slogan and a memorable logo” (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005, p. 508) but rather require innovation and solid strategy.

This is especially important given the limited attention span of consumers in an age of digital distraction (Davenport & Beck, 2001), a term called “attention economy.” It is difficult to capture consumers’ attention and set an agenda amidst the clutter of distractions including use of social networking sites like Instagram, WhatsApp and Twitter, email, internet browsing along with clicks, likes, and shares demanded of it, all in a world where consumers work and play on their smartphones continuously (Paasonen, 2016). The increasingly competitive media and communication landscape make strategic efforts by public relations professionals to set the media agenda increasingly difficult.

Given that attention is a limited resource, consumers must believe that efforts to gain their attention is worthwhile. Again, cities increasingly use public relations and marketing techniques to attract the attention of stakeholders (residents, investors, etc.) (Hospers, 2009). Some ways to do this are through cultivating projects and events (Xue et al., 2012). What is unique about the *Love, Little Rock* campaign is that it was a “non-event” (i.e., their decision to *not* apply to become a second headquarters for Amazon due to the likelihood of rejection) that led to the creation of a campaign regarding the city’s image. The campaign captured attention, put Little Rock in a spotlight, and raised the city to a position of importance, thereby setting an agenda for the city. What can researchers, strategic communicators, public relations professionals, and marketers learn from this unconventional approach to city branding and public relations campaigns?

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Place Branding

Place and destination branding research began to develop significantly in the late 1990s, therefore, the study of this area is still relatively young (Kasapi & Cela, 2017). The turn of the 21st

century marks an era in which city branding techniques are noticeably used in a widespread manner (Green, Grace, & Perkins, 2016). While corporate branding is accepted as the “visual, verbal and behavioral expression of an organization’s unique business model, which radiates throughout the company’s mission, core values, culture and overall design,” place branding takes those associations and applies them to a specific place in a consumer’s mind (Kasapi & Cela, 2017, p. 135).

Also referred to as “place doing,” this type of branding can often work to benefit smaller cities and towns with fewer financial resources, and may include “inclusive and immersive ways to attract people, such as live events, a new community attitude...” with a “public-private partnership, coupled with a strong PR and marketing campaign, to attract newcomers to town” (Salganik, 2018, paras. 40-42). For example, Austin, Texas’ “Keep Austin Weird” campaign moved the once unobtrusive town into a haven for festivals, music, technology, and restaurants (Salganik, 2018).

A successful place branding strategy involves local stakeholders in business and government, as well as local residents, as that internal buy-in can “promote greater synergy and pride in the city’s branding strategy” (Kemp, Childers, & Williams, 2012, p. 511). Given that competition for industries and visitors is fierce, it is more crucial than ever for cities to find ways to enhance their image and garner attention (Kasapi & Cera, 2017).

According to Vela (2013), city brands are the creation of shared, collective identities, and though such identities may already be in place, they may require “visibility and projection” (p. 471) to position themselves competitively in the marketplace. Moreover, according to Vela, cities can be differentiated from other cities and this happens through “innovation and creativity” in marketing (p. 470). Anholt (2007) discussed the importance of brand management for nations, cities, and regions and stated that often branding efforts are fragmented and stressed the need for creativity and a having a highly focused brand story in order to be noticed in today’s competitive market sphere. Rather than focusing on economic factors initially, place brands should aim for enhancing their reputation as this will set the stage for market value (Anholt, 2010).

Salganik (2018), more specifically, recommends the following steps for successful city branding: develop a clear objective, know your audience so appropriate channels may be chosen, know your city’s persona, visualize what the city’s future will look like, and create metrics to measure your success; echoing elements of the traditional public relations planning four-step process.

History of Little Rock

Little Rock, so named when Frenchman Benard de la Harpe led an exploration up the Arkansas River in 1722 and first sighted a small cliff along the banks, calling it “la petite roche” (the little rock), became an important transportation center in the 1880s as railroads grew across the United States (City of Little Rock, n.d. and Little Rock, 2016). A water system was created in 1884 and an electrical system in 1886. Steam and public transit followed in 1889 (City of Little Rock, n.d.). As of July 2016, the reported population of Little Rock is 198,541. Its economy is comprised of governmental and financial services, food processing, and some manufacturing of items such as cosmetics, telecommunications equipment and data-transmission equipment (Little Rock, 2016). Arkansas has a history of small businesses transforming into global successes under the leadership of entrepreneurs such as J.B. Hunt, Don Tyson, Bill Dillard, and Sam Walton. Companies headquartered in Little Rock include Acxiom, Dillard’s, Heifer International, Winrock International and the William J. Clinton Foundation (Little Rock Regional Chamber, n.d.).

The Campaign

On September 7, 2017, Amazon, an American electronic commerce and cloud computing company based in Seattle, Wash., announced it was taking bids for a second headquarters, which included 50,000 jobs and an investment of \$5 billion for the winning city (Oman, 2017b). At a population of around 200,000, Little Rock was an improbable candidate for “HQ2” (Newkirk, 2017). Amazon’s Request for Proposals included a metropolitan area population of more than 1 million people, a less than 45-minute drive from an international airport, and 8 million feet of office space (Pullen, 2017).

Some cities opted out of the process such as San Jose and Toronto, with a spokesman for Toronto terming it “competitive bribery” (Newkirk, 2017, para. 6). San Antonio told Amazon Founder Jeff Bezos in an open letter that “blindly giving away the farm isn’t our style” (DeMillo, 2017, para. 8). Also in Canada, New Brunswick, the Yukon Territory, and Saskatchewan said “no thanks,” and Mexico had only three applicants (Wingfield, 2017). In the United States, applicants came from all but seven states (Wingfield, 2017). In all, 238 cities applied.

Some cities took the Amazon wooing very seriously and developed creative tactics in an attempt to grab the company’s attention. The mayor of Washington, D.C. developed a video of him having a fake conversation with Amazon’s intelligence assistant, Alexa (Wingfield, 2017). Birmingham, Alabama installed giant models of Amazon’s dash buttons that sent one of 600 prepared tweets with positive facts about the city (DeMillo, 2017). Tucson sent a 21-foot-tall cactus to Amazon headquarters (Wingfield, 2017). Newspaper ads for Calgary claimed the city would “fight a bear” to get HQ2 (Wingfield, 2017, para. 9).

Little Rock Mayor Mark Stodola, posted on Facebook in early September that he believed Little Rock “fits the bill” to attract the project (5News, 2017, para. 3). City officials soon realized Amazon’s requests were more than the city could muster. Jay Chessir, president and CEO of the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce noted, “while we had most if not all of those things, we just didn’t have them at the level that Amazon was requesting as their minimum requirements” (Martin, 2017, para. 3). Stodola realized Amazon and Little Rock were not a “fit,” stating “We saw cities hocking their arms and all their economic development money in this” (DeMillo, 2017, para. 7).

The brainstorming among city officials began. They knew they couldn’t land Amazon, but could they take this opportunity to communicate to other companies that “The Rock” was a great option? (Pullen, 2017). The concept of doing something unconventional is credited to Jonathan Semans, an executive with CDI Contractors, who floated the idea to the city officials (Oman, 2017b). Millie Ward, president of Little Rock-based advertising firm Stone Ward, said her agency was engaged to lead a campaign (5News, 2017). At the initial idea-generating session, concepts were numerous and quick. Ward said, “in three hours, we probably put 200 ideas on the board that covered all the disciplines, from PR to digital to social to creative” (Nudd, 2017, para. 8). In nine days, the strategy had been developed (Pullen, 2017). The branding campaign was unveiled on October 19, the day of Amazon’s deadline for applications (Oman, 2017b).

Using both traditional and new media, part one of the *Love, Little Rock* campaign was a full-page advertisement worded like a “Dear John” break-up letter in the Bezos-owned *Washington Post* newspaper (Pullen, 2017). Headlined “Hey Amazon, We Need To Talk,” the full text of the letter stated:

It's not you, it's us.

We know, we know, when you originally sent out your offer for cities to send in proposals for your future HQ2, we were all over it.

After all, you're Amazon. You're smart, sexy, and frankly, incredibly rich. And thanks to our booming business environment, tech-savvy workforce, diverse, creative culture and flourishing downtown, there are a lot of reasons why we'd be great together.

But when we started really thinking about what our future would look like, we realized it would probably never work out between us.

You want 50,000 employees for your new campus. We have a sizable, resourceful workforce, but if we were to concentrate them here, it would be a bummer. Our lack of traffic and ease of getting around would be totally wrecked, and we can't sacrifice that for you.

You want on-site mass transit at HQ2. Here, there are many transit options that fit our city perfectly, and thanks to our compact urban footprint, many of our residents can easily get to the office on foot, on a bike or just by a quick drive. It would be cool if we could offer that, but we simply can't do that just to make you happy.

Amazon, you've got so much going for you, and you'll find what you're looking for. But it's just not us.

We're happy knowing that many great companies find our natural good looks, coupled with our brains for business, irresistible.

If another expansion opportunity comes up and you're ready to join the visionaries, dreamers, romantics and the idealists who know that bigger isn't always better, give us a call. We would love to find a way to make "us" work out.

We wish you all the success in the world.

Love, Little Rock (KIRO7, 2017, para. 12).

Such ads typically cost around \$80,000, but officials stated they were able to pay less (5News, 2017). (Even though the *Washington Post* ad was still expensive, some speculate the city may have actually saved money by opting out of the Amazon application process, thereby not having to pay for the research and analysis required for a bid (Link, 2017).

At a standing-room-only press conference, city and chamber officials, wearing **Love, Little Rock** t-shirts, announced Little Rock was opting out (5News, 2017). A banner was flown over Amazon's Seattle headquarters stating "Hey Amazon. It's not you. It's us," and included the website URL lovelittlerock.org, where curious individuals and companies could find more information about the city's amenities (Schlosser, 2017). The campaign also included outdoor messaging with donated billboard space around Little Rock and at the Clinton National Airport, Twitter hashtags (5News, 2017), and a

social video (Nudd, 2017). Local businesses posted *Love, Little Rock* on their marquee signs (5News, 2017).

Ward described the campaign as “an affectionate greeting about why we feel the way we do about our city, and about all the great companies that are here, and all the companies we’d like to come here... In the end, the point of this effort was to position Little Rock as a city ripe for economic development, for business growth as well as expansion- companies or consultants that might be interested in raising the awareness of our city, raising our profile, and frankly raising our likability. That was our primary target. All the viral stuff was icing on the cake” (Nudd, 2017, para. 10).

Senior copywriter for Stone Ward, Jay Stanley, noted “It’s a daunting task when you’re speaking for the city you grew up in and love. We took our time – well, what little time we had – to try to get it right, to walk that line between fun and cute but not negative in any way” (Nudd, 2017, para. 16). This sentiment about tone was echoed by Stone Ward’s CEO and chief creative director, Larry Stone. “It would be easy to be smart-aleck with this, but what we wanted to be was smart. We wanted to be charming and endearing and understandable and empathetic” (Nudd, 2017, para. 13).

Chessir believed the concealment of the campaign until launch was key, allowing only two cities to be mentioned on the deadline day, “The city that wins, and Little Rock” (Oman, 2017b, para. 15). Ward reported the campaign resulted in \$2 million in free media coverage and some interest from economic development site selectors. Website traffic is being tracked and companies are visiting the site who “probably wouldn’t have checked us out before” (Nudd, 2017, para. 17-18), such as Apple, Boeing, Dell, Johnson & Johnson, and General Motors (Oman, 2017b).

Agenda Setting in the “Attention Economy”

Journalism scholars Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw built upon an idea from Bernard Cohen positing the media can’t tell people what to think but are successful in telling people what to think about (1972). Agenda setting research focuses on issues that relate to the media agenda and how those issues are promoted into public consciousness and are given importance (McCombs, 2004). While social media has allowed the public to express its own agenda, research indicates the existence of a “top-down agenda-setting process in which opinion leaders alter the agenda of their followers in blogs and web forums” (Kleinnijenhuis, Schultz, Utz, & Oegema, 2015, p. 411). Traditional public relations tactics such as press conferences and news releases also have the ability to shape the agenda (Xue, et al., 2012). However, news value can drastically decrease when there is only one big event. The passion and persistency of media coverage wanes after events with news value (Xue, et al., 2012). Therefore, communicators have to find ways to keep the topic in the media agenda.

While methods and tactics may be different now than in the past, techniques and processes for public relations campaign development remain the same. This foundation of public relations planning was developed in the 1920s and 30s (Luttrel, 2013). The traditional four-step model of the public relations planning process has a variety of names using acronyms like ROPE and RACE. Both encapsulate these steps: research (collecting information to discover challenges and opportunities), planning (goal setting and objectives), communication (implementing strategies and tactics), and evaluation (measuring success or failure of campaign objectives) (Guth & Marsh, 2012).

Success from an agenda-setting perspective can be achieved by simply getting on the media’s agenda (Wilcox & Cameron, 2007). In addition to the power of events in public relations execution, research reveals there is a connection in strategic public relations practice between building both short-

and long-term relationships (Grunig & Grunig, 2000). Campaign developers' expectations for messages dispersed over a short period of time with *limited* media coverage, however, "should not expect to dramatically affect target publics" (McElreath, 1993, p. 113). Given that three to six weeks is the recommended time frame in order to measure public opinion and determine if mediated messages have been heard and understood (McElreath, 1993), findings highlight the initial responses in that time.

The purpose of this case study was to explore the impact of the *Love, Little Rock* campaign on agenda setting, both in the immediate aftermath of the "breakup" with Amazon and the ongoing efforts at city promotion and branding. Research questions include

- **RQ 1:** What strategies and tactics were utilized in the *Love, Little Rock* campaign to gain attention and set the agenda for the city?
- **RQ 2:** What themes emerged in media coverage of the *Love, Little Rock* campaign?
- **RQ 3:** What was the online response to the *Love, Little Rock* campaign?

METHODS

According to Stake (2005) a case study can be viewed as a methodology involving multiple methods. It is "an exploration of a bounded system through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of data rich in context" (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). The bounded system is the *Love, Little Rock* campaign which was chosen to describe the tactics and strategies used to give the city attention and importance.

Rather than imposing a priori codes on the data, our textual and thematic analysis involved "open coding" whereby concepts and categories emerged during analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). In order to determine what to include in the data set, the researchers used the criterion of "redundancy" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In purposeful sampling the size of the sample is determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from a new sampled unit; thus redundancy is the primary criterion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202).

For research questions 1 and 2, data collection utilized advanced Google search terms of exactly "Love, Little Rock" which resulted in more than 5,000 hits, with the most relevant being the *Love, Little Rock* campaign website. The advanced Google search was also utilized for a review of images. Data collection of national and international news coverage utilized the Lexis Nexis (now called Nexis Unis) database specifying search terms "Little Rock AND Amazon" from October 1, 2017 through February 1, 2018, which resulted in 362 items. Article headlines and summaries were sorted by both date and relevance.

To answer research question three, social media response was gauged primarily through Twitter. Data collection for Twitter relied on Google's Twitter search function, with a search of #lovelittlerock resulting in more than 400 hits and a search of @LoveLittleRock resulting in more than 300 hits. Tweets from @LoveLittleRock were analyzed beginning with posts from October 1, 2017 through February 1, 2018. For news coverage as well as social media posts and responses, text and images were both analyzed until saturation was reached. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained, saturation is reached when "no new insights are forthcoming" (p. 101).

The specific procedures used to code the data were “pawing” and cutting and sorting (Ryan and Bernard, 2003) in order find themes and categories. Researchers, first individually and then together, read the dataset multiple times—eyeballing—to become familiar with the content. In the pawing stage, the researchers “marked up” the dataset, making notes and highlighting exemplar posts. The researchers utilized cutting and sorting techniques similar to those presented by Ryan and Bernard’s (2003). Images and texts were treated with the same methodology. Because analysis methods of visuals in social media are not as well established as for textual analysis, the researchers employed procedures of visual analysis developed by a co-author (Bahn, 2016) during previous social media studies and Dada (2019). Both Bahn and Dada used detailed, rich description in order to discover themes and demonstrate how textual meaning interacts with images.

Similar to Dovelung (2015), Bahn (2016) and Dada (2019), the researchers analyzed the visuals and text in the *Love, Little Rock* case study simultaneously – including photographs, graphics. As Bahn explained, Dovelung did not treat visuals as an “add on’ with less meaning than the textual analysis” (p. 27). According to Andalibi, Ozturk, and Forte (2017), “people use both visual and textual means to communicate, and it is important to investigate both simultaneously,” (p.1492). To do otherwise would be to only analyze verbal parts of a message and ignore nonverbal components which would result in limited analysis and understanding.

Analyzing visuals and texts simultaneously assured that images were analyzed with the same rigor as text using the work of Dada (2019) and Bahn (2016). As Bahn wrote, “In other words, textual analysis methods were applied to images” (p.28). The textual and visual analysis followed a framework advocated by Bahn (2016) by looking at text and visuals of the *Love, Little Rock* campaign simultaneously and with the same rigor while also considering the relationship of the text and visuals. To ensure trustworthiness, a colleague conducted peer-debriefing techniques (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

The researchers continued analysis until saturation was reached – or as Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explained, until no new insights were found, which follows the criterion of redundancy for sampling.

In addition, after our analysis was complete, one of the researchers conducted a one-hour interview with Millie Ward, President of Stone Ward, the advertising agency which ran the *Love, Little Rock* campaign, as a type of member check. Member checking is a validation technique used in qualitative research whereby findings are discussed with participants for verification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ms. Ward was not involved in the research or in the analysis and the researchers did not explicitly share their findings with her. However, during the interview, Ms. Ward was asked open-ended questions about the strategies used in the *Love, Little Rock* campaign and her perceptions of the campaign’s success. The researchers used this information to help contextualize their findings.

FINDINGS

The purpose of this case study was to explore the impact of the *Love, Little Rock* campaign on agenda setting and the city’s attention economy, both in the immediate aftermath of the “breakup” with Amazon and the ongoing efforts at city promotion and branding.

To answer RQ 1, “What strategies and tactics were utilized in the *Love, Little Rock* campaign to gain attention and set the agenda for the city” researchers analyzed national and international news and trade publications as well as online images. The *Love, Little Rock* campaign can be considered using the

classic four-step public relations planning process – ROPE or RACE. In terms of research, the campaign manifested itself from the realization and discovery that Little Rock as a city could not compete for HQ2. The problem had to be defined: Knowing Little Rock could not realistically compete for HQ2, how could it bow out of the running, but do so in a way that did not damage Little Rock’s brand? Additional research included statistical knowledge of Little Rock’s attributes that had to be gathered, such as the median home cost, incentives, education and all points the city could collect and boast about.

Next, the planners brainstormed about what they could do to solve their problem. Out of that meeting, the concept of publicly saying no to Amazon was a creative way to respond and give a boost to the city. The campaign goal appears to be one of positioning Little Rock as an area ripe for economic development. As Mayor Stodola stated, “We (thought) about this ultimately in terms of our desire to compete. And this is what it is ultimately about, competing and letting the rest of the world know what a great place Little Rock is, and that the people who come here truly do love Little Rock” (Brown, 2017, para. 15). The break-up letter as the main strategy was meant to support that goal. (No identifiable objectives could be ascertained.)

In terms of tactics, the first salvo of the *Love, Little Rock* campaign was the full-page advertisement/break-up letter in *Washington Post* (Pullen, 2017). Another tactic included a press conference broadcasting the opt-out, attended by city and chamber officials, wearing another tactical idea, *Love, Little Rock* t-shirts (5News, 2017). Next was the banner was flown over Amazon’s Seattle headquarters (Schlosser, 2017), and outdoor messaging with donated billboard space around Little Rock and at the Clinton National Airport. In terms of social media tactics, Twitter hashtags (5News, 2017), and a social video (Nudd, 2017) were released. And finally, local businesses posted *Love, Little Rock* on their marquee signs (5News, 2017). Most materials directed people to the *Love, Little Rock* website (Nudd, 2017).

When campaign planners typically choose to evaluate a campaign, they measure to see if they met the objectives. While specific objectives are not clear for this particular campaign, some results can be elucidated. There was purportedly renewed and notable interest in economic development from consultants and others, who visited the campaign site (Nudd, 2017). Free media coverage was tallied at \$1.7 million and campaign messages were available to approximately 1 billion, according to Cision.

The *Fortune* magazine *Love, Little Rock* article was the most valuable, at an estimated \$591,534. The online version of *The Washington Post*, which had a potential audience of 43.9 million on each of the two days the letter appeared, ostensibly garnered an audience of 43.9 million. The campaign was mentioned in 725 media outlets including Reuters Online, Bloomberg News Online, Business Insider, Us Weekly Online, *Slate*, ABC News, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Salon*, National Public Radio and Market Watch. International media outlets include the *Times of India Online* and the *Irish Independent Online*. Regarding sentiment, a Cision report found both positive and negative responses, with a preliminary figure of less than 10 percent negative feedback, the majority of that originating from Arkansas (Oman, 2017a). The Cision report indicates the success of the *Love, Little Rock* campaign in its impact on the attention economy through achieving such wide-spread publicity, particularly in a positive light.

To answer RQ 2: “What themes emerged in media coverage of the *Love, Little Rock* campaign?” researchers analyzed national and international news coverage. Three distinct themes emerged from

media coverage of Little Rock’s break-up with Amazon: 1) Little Rock won, 2) State and local backlash, and 3) Pre-emptive rejection.

In terms of media coverage, one clear theme was how Little Rock won the agenda by being able to stand out through its breakup and set a media agenda while also maximizing the attention economy, at least briefly. The “Little Rock Won” theme is epitomized by an *AdWeek* article, “Thanks but No Thanks. How Little Rock Won by Saying No to Amazon.” Little Rock “won” by marketing itself – including through images, gaining attention, and creating a “launching pad.”

News coverage repeatedly gave the city credit for being able to market itself while reversing course and not submitting a bid to Amazon. Even business articles that primarily reported on tax breaks for Amazon included a reference to the campaign, such as a report by Reuters News Service that noted, “Other candidates have simply taken the opportunity market themselves,” (para. 19) before citing the advertisement in the “Bezos-owned Washington Post” (para. 20). As mentioned in research question 1, assuming an objective was to boost the city through gaining attention, the campaign again was successful. The *AdWeek* article called the strategy “clever” while crediting the campaign for receiving “more media attention than almost any other pitch” (Nudd, 2017, para. 7). Additionally, news reports cited that the city would use the campaign as a catalyst, or launching pad, to recruit industry better suited to Little Rock than Amazon. For example, the *AdWeek* article claimed the break up’s economic positioning was “already seeing results” (para. 7) but did not go into detail as to what those results were.

Images associated with the ***Love, Little Rock*** campaign were forefront in the city’s ability to gain a marketing boost from its break-up with Amazon. The full-page advertisement posted in the *Washington Post* was often included as a graphic, with the *Love, Little Rock* script signature line prominently displayed. The signature line also served as a stand-alone graphic in some coverage. Another marketing boost came from a photograph of a plane flying a black banner with all capital white block letters saying, “HEY AMAZON, IT’S NOT YOU. IT’S US” over Seattle. The red lettering at the bottom of the banner was less readable, but did not take away from the news coverage. For example, a *Geekwire* story with the headline “Banner day for Little Rock, Ark., as city flies ‘no thanks’ message to Amazon over Seattle” included a photo of the banner with a caption stating “The group Love, Little Rock flew a banner over Seattle directing people to a website with its letter to Amazon” (Schlosser, 2017, para. 1).

On the other hand, there also was some less positive coverage, resulting in a “Backlash” theme. Mainly local or statewide in origin, the backlash was reported in the *Arkansas Times*, which referred to the campaign as a “publicity stunt” while other outlets called it a gimmick. An editorial in *Arkansas Business* published just days after the ***Love, Little Rock*** announcement headlined, “We look like turkeys,” relating the campaign to a Turkey Trot festival in a rural Arkansas town that had received negative coverage for its practice of dropping live turkeys out of an airplane for festival goers to catch (Liles, 2017).

Almost so obvious as to be ignored is the third theme of “Preemptive rejection.” Media coverage repeatedly referred to Little Rock as having dumped Amazon, presumably following the agenda-setting tactics of the “break-up” letter. Even though Little Rock had not officially submitted an application and did not meet the announced criteria, media outlets still described the ***Love, Little Rock*** campaign as the city “dropping out of the running” – even in follow-up stories announcing the second round of cities remaining in consideration. By making such a high profile “break up,” Little Rock was able to both set

the media agenda and frame the narrative in its favor. Rather than simply being a city that was not selected for the next round, Little Rock framed what could be perceived as shortcomings in not meeting the criteria for the Amazon headquarters to instead be seen in a positive light.

To answer RQ 3: “What was the online response to the *Love, Little Rock* campaign?” researchers analyzed the Twitter account @Lovelittlerock and the hashtag #lovelittlerock. The themes of online responses were somewhat similar to the news coverage with slight variations. Three notable themes of social media responses include 1) the *Dear Little Rock* counter campaign, 2) credit for a clever campaign, and, 3) hijacking the #lovelittlerock hashtag.

The local online response to the *Love, Little Rock* campaign was not nearly as favorable as the national media coverage. In fact, shortly after the *Love, Little Rock* campaign was announced, a counter campaign mimicking the style of the original campaign launched. The *Dear Little Rock* campaign posted a letter to the city at the www.dearlittlerock.org beginning, “We need to talk. While the kind thing would be to say: ‘it’s not you, it’s us,’ the truth is it’s SOOOOO you.” *Arkansas Times*, which also was among local media expressing skepticism about the campaign, posted Tweets of the letter calling it an “intervention.” The counter campaign posted a website calling the city a “fixer-upper” and listing improvements needed in schools, crime, the environment, and the economy. The counter campaign was boosted by local retweets of a *Medium* article by a Little Rock native which plainly stated, “Amazon wasn’t happening folks” (Mayfield, 2017, para. 6). The *Medium* article called the city “divided” and added, “You can’t actually love Little Rock if you won’t go into half of it” (para. 9). The script of *Dear Little Rock* mimicked the style of *Love, Little Rock* and photographs highlighted a lack of diversity, segregation, and private buildings financed from public funds.

The online response also generated credit for the campaign, particularly from national industry professionals following the publication of the *AdWeek* article, as well as local businesses. For example, an investing and entrepreneurial consultant from Illinois posted an image of the *Washington Post* ad with the comment, “Here is a great example of a city that knows who they are and where they are going” (consultstraza, 2017). Similarly, a long-time communications professional with local ties shared the *Love, Little Rock* video with the comment, “Kudos to our many friends in Little Rock for this outstanding campaign. #LoveLittleRock is genius” (BrentSGambill, 2017). Common content for local businesses included photos of employees wearing black “Love Little Rock” shirts – sometimes over professional clothes. For example, a local photography studio posted a photograph of the owner wearing the shirt in an office with the Tweet, “Got the shirt, because I do #LoveLittleRock” (mposeyphoto, 2017). Clinton National Airport (2017) posted a photograph of five employees wearing the t-shirt in front of screens at the airport with the Tweet, “A friendly and helpful airport staff. Another reason to #LoveLittleRock.”

Specifically, to social media and Twitter, the #lovelittlerock hashtag took on a life of its own. The #lovelittlerock hashtag accompanied supportive, satirical, and even commercial Tweets. Some Tweeters used the hashtag to highlight stories about good things in the city. In some instances, though, the hashtag was “hijacked” for purposes not related to the campaign. For example, during the middle of a disappointing football season for the state’s flagship (not our) university, the hashtag was used to call for a break up with the team and coach (BillVickery, 2017), who was fired at the end of the season (Rapaport, 2017). Also, some enterprising downtown restaurant owners included the hashtag in a Tweet promoting soul food (SoulFish Cafe, 2017).

DISCUSSION, FOLLOW-UP, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Love, Little Rock provides a case study to examine how public relations professionals can craft a campaign in order to attract attention even in today’s cluttered media market. Following principles advocated by the Public Relations Society of America, campaign planners employed procedures based on the four-step communications planning process (Guth & Marsh, 2012). The campaign used strong visuals combined with a traditional advertising purchase and non-traditional tactics such as an airplane banner to market the city. It also demonstrates the need for city branding and communication campaigns to establish an identity beyond a marketing trick (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). In terms of agenda setting, the *Love, Little Rock* campaign demonstrates the ability of a creative campaign to set an agenda that leads to much desired publicity for a city seeking to promote itself in a cluttered, attention economy (Anholt, 2007; Hanin, 2020; Paasonen, 2016). Similarly, the images associated with *Love, Little Rock* served to provide an easily recognizable symbol that could be distributed across multiple platforms locally and nationally with lasting impact. The campaign received national recognition, and even pockets of local skepticism worked toward keeping the city in the public eye, drawing attention to it and elevating its importance, a key principle of agenda setting (McCombs, 2004). Or, in terms of agenda setting, the campaign kept people thinking about Little Rock even if not exactly telling them what to think.

The *Love, Little Rock* case study adds to the scant literature, particularly qualitative, on city branding. The present study offers an inside look at one city’s campaign to set the agenda and capture attention in today’s attention-economy, and reap benefits as a result. The message of this campaign would not work for all cities as different cities have different identities. However, the *Love, Little Rock* campaign reinforces conclusions about the need for cities to differentiate themselves in the light of growing global competition by emphasizing their uniqueness and reputation (Anholt, 2007, 2010; Green, Grace, & Perkins, 2016; Hultman et al., 2016; Kasapi & Cela, 2017; Kemp, Childers, & Williams, 2012; Salganik, 2018; Vela, 2013). In a conversation with Millie Ward (M. Ward, personal communication, April 22, 2022), President of Stone Ward, the agency who ran the *Love, Little Rock* campaign, Ms. Ward said that the campaign planners wanted to focus on what was unique about Little Rock such as the “small town feel” of the city while highlighting its positive aspects like ease of traffic, aesthetic appeal, etc. This approach is similar to the suggestions of Anholt (2010) who recommended that places build on their reputations, and economic results will flow from there. In addition, Ms. Ward’s statement comports with Vela’s (2013) assertion that the important issue for place brands is “the discovery and subsequent promotion of its identity roots” (Vela, 2013, p. 471). The *Love, Little Rock* campaign told its own story with specific messages that tapped into the identity of the city as a “big, small town” with the advantages of a large city but with the feel of a small town. Thus, this campaign could not be replicated by other cities, but demonstrates the need for city campaigns to rely on their own unique city identities (which they may already have but may need to be discovered and then promoted) and find creative ways to tell their unique story.

Moreover, in terms of methods, this case study highlights the importance of literal visual images in considering the brand image of a city, as discussed by Laaksonen, et al. (2006). The case analysis demonstrates how to analyze text simultaneously with visual images since there are few studies that employ such methods with detail. One particular recommendation is that researchers conduct textual and

visual analysis simultaneously due to the richness and context provided by applying the same rigor to text and images. Additionally, public relations communication scholars should specifically consider visual elements in studies of communication campaigns.

The study contributes to the literature on public relations campaigns by considering the impact of non-traditional techniques to cut through media clutter. Our findings show the value of following the established four-step process in communication campaign planning, while employing unconventional strategies and tactics. In addition, what is unique here is that Little Rock did not stage a large-scale event like the World Expo (Xue et al., 2012) but instead found an opportunity to gain attention and establish its agenda in a situation where there was potential to lose face (i.e., facing losing the Amazon headquarters bid). Other cities should be vigilant in finding opportunities to differentiate and showcase themselves, even turning negatives (i.e., lack/loss of opportunities) into positives. According to Ms. Mille Ward (M. Ward, personal communication, April 22, 2022), when asked about what one can learn about creating unique campaigns from the *Love, Little Rock* campaign, she stated that it is important to think differently about a situation and stated, “take an event, flip it” and give it a chance. When asked whether or not anyone was critical of the Dear John Letter approach during the planning process, she said that “there will always be naysayers” and further stated that if “you do something edgy, there will be people who love it and people who hate it” but that if you go in a “middle of the road” direction, there may not be so much criticism, but you may not wind up with anything particularly creative. She recommended campaign planners look for ways to “think outside the box.” The need for creativity and innovation in city branding is consistent with recommendations from Anholt (2007) and Vela (2013). According to Ms. Ward, once the atypical campaign idea was generated (i.e. Dear John letter approach), through brainstorming, the campaign process was typical, incorporating steps from RACE or ROPE (see also the steps provided by Salganik, 2018) with an emphasis on compelling visuals (e.g., banner being flown outside of Amazon Headquarters stating “Hey Amazon. It’s not you. It’s us.”)

Of course, there are inherent limitations in this study in that it is a case study based on one city in a given timeframe for a specific purpose, but the lessons remain for consideration by other municipal leaders and communication practitioners.

Without clear identifiable objectives, the ultimate financial effectiveness of the campaign is difficult to evaluate. Still, the campaign has been met with critical acclaim with the agency of record, Stone Ward, receiving notable national awards. *PRWeek* named Stone Ward and the Little Rock Chamber the 2019 winners of the Business to Business campaign, citing *Love, Little Rock* as “original, clever,” and “the best example of newsjacking in 2018” (*PRWeek*, 2019, para. 126.) The Public Relations Society of America recognized Stone Ward with a Bronze Anvil Award of Commendation in the Word of Mouth category to “get key audiences talking or provide an avenue for conversation using different techniques” (Stone Ward, 2018, para. 1).

An initial consideration of the study was to ascertain the lasting impact of the campaign in driving economic development. Almost five years after the launch of the campaign, *Love, Little Rock* has become the visible brand for the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce. As of April 2022, the pinned Tweet for the @LoveLittleRock Twitter Account remained the video titled “Hey, Amazon, we need to talk” dated October 17, 2017. The most recent Tweet was an August 22, 2018 reminder “to check out the new @lrchamber website today” that included #lovelittlerock. The hashtag #lovelittlerock

was actively being used by the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce and Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau as well as businesses for their own promotional purposes such as restaurants.

In terms of tourism and travel, the Little Rock region was in an upward trajectory for several years before the Covid-19 pandemic curtailed travel in 2020. In fact, the Little Rock Convention and Visitor’s Bureau reported that “2020 was on track to be a record year of leisure visitation and tax collection” until the pandemic. (Barlow, 2021, para 3). According to the *Little Rock Convention and Visitor Bureau’s 2021 Annual Report (2022)*, travel related tax collections rose from around \$11 million in 2012 to more than \$15 million in 2019 before falling in 2020. The tourism tax collections bounced back by 23% in 2021 to 14.8 million (Barlow, 2022). Total 201 tourism related revenues for the city equaled \$17.7 million according to the *LRCVB Annual Report (2022)*.

The Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce website highlights evidence of the campaign’s economic impact on a News and Announcements webpage under a **Love, Little Rock** logo. For example, announcements since 2020 resulted in almost 2,500 new jobs, including 225 that were listed as “corporate” or “high paying.” (Little Rock Regional Chamber, 2022). The news releases also tout \$176 million in investments along with more than 650,000 square feet of business facility expansion and 615 acres of port expansion to promote additional growth.

Perhaps most significant of the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce announcements is that Amazon would have a presence in the city (Amazon Announces, 2020).

In 2020, city officials announced the opening of a fulfillment center in a vacant warehouse in Little Rock (Oman) and approved the sale of land at Little Rock Port for a distribution center with the possibility of 1,000 employees (Brantley, 2020). The **Love, Little Rock** campaign was no doubt successful in achieving attention and positioning. From the original break up with Amazon to the “make up” in the fulfillment center and additional growth, there is also increasing evidence of the campaign’s economic impact. Lance Hines, Ward 5 City Director stated, “Some of us were castigated for it [the **Love, Little Rock** campaign], but as it proved out, it got a lot of traction for our small investment in it” (Herzog, 2020). Meanwhile, when asked if the **Love, Little Rock** campaign had anything to do with the plans for the new fulfillment center, Jay Chesshir, president and CEO of the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce, replied “Today’s a great day to love Little Rock” (Herzog, 2020). While the lasting impact of the campaign in driving economic development remains uncertain, the most recent Amazon initiatives bode well for the city. A full economic impact study is outside of the scope of the purpose of the current study and it would be difficult to trace economic gains directly to the campaign. However, the main goals of our research focused on the campaign strategies and tactics and responses to the initial **Love, Little Rock** announcement although we have found evidence of economic benefit. Mille Ward indicated she believed that the campaign has led to economic benefits and cited many examples such as the fact that the business spaces in the Port of Little Rock are all occupied. Again, we cannot directly trace a line from the campaign to specific economic outcomes. However, **Love, Little Rock** has now become the brand identity of the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce. Elements of the campaign, such as the logo, are used by the chamber, but the original social media account analyzed by this study is no longer being updated. Future studies could more fully investigate the economic impact of the **Love, Little Rock** branding campaign by the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce, particularly as the city recovers from effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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