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Exploring Outdoor Lifestyle Brands within the Americana Music Festival Marketplace

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Approximately 32 million people attend at least one music festival in the United States each year, contributing to a combined total of over \$4.6 billion in festival revenues annually (Grose, 2011; Reddy, 2015). Within the panorama of different music festivals, Americana music festivals are one type of music festival currently enjoying increased popularity throughout the United States. As a form of music, Americana is a contemporary genre that reflects American culture, incorporating elements of various American music styles, including rock, folk, and blues. Most Americana music festivals are multi-day events and are held outdoors during the early spring through the late fall. These events host a variety of well-known performers such as *The Avett Brothers* and *Michael Franti* as well as regional and local performers. In addition to the music, Americana festivals offer alternative retail marketplaces that typically include vendors selling a variety of locally handcrafted products such as clothing, jewelry, and art.

Although there is a growing interest in Americana as a music genre, and indication of this interest is seen in high attendance levels at Americana music festivals, there is limited research available that examines the marketplaces at these festivals or the products available within them. Due to their fun and festive nature, festivals in general can elicit experiential consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Indeed, Larsen and O'Reilly (2009) define music festivals as unique utopian settings where market, consumption, culture, and the human spirit converge. In a similar vein, Schmitt (2009) suggests that consumers expect brands to engage their emotions and provide them with an overall brand experience. While Americana music festivals have traditionally sought to avoid corporate brand involvement in their marketplace offerings, preferring instead to support vendors offering locally-made or artisan produced products for sale, this has begun to change as more corporate brands are participating as vendors in the festival marketplace. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the Americana music festival specifically in terms of how its marketplace offers festivalgoers not just handmade products, but exposure to outdoor lifestyle brands while they are engaging in a fun and festive setting.

To address this purpose, an ethnographic approach was employed, wherein fieldwork was conducted at ten Americana music festivals throughout the southeastern US. The festivals included both single and multi-day festivals. A range of festival sizes was targeted, including small (approximately 500-5000 participants), medium (5000-12000 participants), and large-size events (12000-30000+ participants). Data collection included observations in the form of field notes as well as interviews. A total of 20 field interviews and 15 formal in-depth interviews were conducted with a variety of participants across the festivals, including festivalgoers, organizers, and festival vendors. Interviews and fieldnotes were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed for similarities and differences that emerged across the data. As a result of the analysis, two primary themes emerged to structure the interpretation.

The first theme, *Spirited Outdoor Lifestyle* illustrates the idea that a growing number of corporate brand vendors are offering a variety of outdoor products as a way to connect with the festival consumer. That is, they appear to be discovering that the Americana music festival marketplace can serve as a channel for the sales and promotion of their brands. Interpretation of the observation data suggests that doing so offers these brands a new way to create meaningful connections with their target consumers, as the festival marketplace provides access to a built-in base of consumers. Many outdoor lifestyle brand companies such as *Chaco* (footwear), *Mountain Khakis* (apparel) and *Farm to Feet* (socks) were observed to be actively involved in promoting their brands within the non-traditional retail environment of the outdoor festival. Indeed, the open-air marketplace setting appeared to encourage festivalgoers' interest in these outdoor lifestyle brands, particularly when coupled with the brand-driven experiences, such as giveaways, demonstrations, and product trials, that the vendors used to draw them in.

The second theme, *Engaged Experiential Branding* points to another distinct feature observed among corporate vendors in the study: creating a brand experience that is part of the festival experience. Kelley, a community manager for *Chaco* who is responsible for coordinating the brand's activities at festivals, provided the rationale behind venturing into the festival marketplace, "We don't spend advertising or marketing dollars in traditional ways at all. It's more about the experience of engaging the *Chaco* brand values of travel, adventure and community (with our consumers). That kind of experiential marketing is far different than traditional marketing.... Consumers expect a very personal and very heartfelt experience." These outdoor lifestyle brands have learned to use the Americana music festival marketplace to effectively promote their products by drawing on the experiential nature of the festival itself.

Findings of this study offer insight into how outdoor lifestyle brands have begun to recognize the Americana music festival marketplace as a way to incorporate the brand experience into the festival experience. As the Americana music festival phenomenon continues to flourish, the purveyors of these brands have the opportunity to market to a "captive" audience across the duration of the festival to maximize brand exposure and awareness among these target consumers. Future research could focus on the development of new outdoor brands that connect with the Americana festival ethos. Likewise, exploration of consumers' outdoor lifestyle brand preferences may assist festival marketplace organizers in determining relevant brand offerings.

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