Social Media and the Promotion of Sports Franchises within Broader Arena Districts

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Social media can be defined as “a group of Internet-based applications … [that] allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 64). In a sport context, Hambrick and Simmons (2010) investigated how the nature of communication has changed between athletes and fans using Twitter. (Abeza, O’Reilly & Seguin, 2015) reviewed research on social media in sport management, while other studies have examined fan engagement strategies (Pronschinske et al., 2012; Stavros et al., 2014; Vale & Fernandes, 2018), and branding strategies of sports teams (Brandi, 2014; Parganas & Anagnostopolous, 2015) though social networks. However, studies have yet to examine the promotional and marketing strategies of arena district websites, and how they use social media to highlight or promote the sports team that play there. This is an important consideration as the broader success of arena-anchored urban development projects is tied directly of the ability of the teams to bring fans (and their corresponding economic activity) to the districts where games are played (Mason, 2016; Rosentraub, 2009). Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify how the websites of two arena districts (Columbus, Ohio’s downtown Arena District, and Glendale (Phoenix) Arizona’s Westgate Entertainment District) promote their sports team through social media. More specifically, the following questions will be explored: which social media apps are given priority? Which teams are given priority? What is the nature of the content itself? How are the teams promoted and prioritized related to other amenities in the districts (other entertainment, shopping, dining, real estate development, etc.)?

In order to identify the patterns of communication and promotional strategies, data will be collected from seven online social media pages: twitter.com/ArenaDistrict, Instagram.com/arenadistrict, facebook.com/ArenaDistrict, twitter.com/Westgate-AZ, Instagram.com/Westgateaz, facebook.com/Westgate-AZ and youtube.com/user/WestgateEntDistrict. The current study is in progress; the period of data collection may be adjusted pending the availability of data (for example, the timeline may be expanded if the sample is deemed too small). Posts (status update, photos, videos, links, information, notes etc.) will be collected. Number of posts, number of followers of the pages, post time, the number of likes, shares and comments will be used initially to sort the data. Posts will then be analyzed for both manifest and latent content; it is anticipated that themes will emerge related to the teams and the manner through which they integrate with the broader districts.

This study is currently in progress; however, we feel that there are several important contribution the findings will make. First, arena districts and the franchises that play there are uniquely interrelated. Thus, understanding how districts are promoting teams is critical to understand how and why some districts appear to be more successful than others. Second, understanding how districts promote teams may also give insight into how the teams are valued as part of the broader urban development projects they are embedded in. Finally, the study contributes to a growing body of research examining social media and sport in a novel context.