Assessing the Anticipated Impact of a New Stadium on the Local Community

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Within professional sports, there is an ongoing trend of new facilities being constructed at high costs. From 2010–2015, seven franchises from Major League Baseball, National Football League, National Basketball Association, and National Hockey League opened new facilities. All of them received some public financing and had an average overall construction cost of $664 million (Stadiatrack, 2016). Most recently, the Minnesota Vikings opened U.S. Bank Stadium, which cost $1.087 billion, of which $498 million was publically supported (Stadiatrack, 2016). As six are scheduled to open in 2016–2017, the impact of new facilities and their communication to the media and public warrant discussion.

With each new facility, there is unavoidable debate in both public and academic circles over the validity of justifications for a new stadium. The debate may be over the need for a new facility altogether; the wisdom of using public money to finance the facility; the true extent of the economic impact of a new facility; the impact of the new facility on the surrounding communities with respect to urban development, spacing, or sustainability; and whether the economic benefits of a new facility outweigh the costs. When building a new facility, franchises communicate to the public a variety of reasons why the facility adds value to the community; additionally, the media and public often express opinions on the new building.

Franchises have pointed to the benefits of new stadiums/arenas to justify a new facility, such as increasing employment, increasing urban revitalization, improving community visibility, enhancing community image, stimulating development, or improving psychic income to the community (e.g., Coates & Humphreys, 2011a; Coates & Humphreys, 2011b; Crompton, 2004; Crompton & Howard, 2013; Rosentraub, 1997). In contrast, land use and redevelopment concerns (Chapin, 2004) or issues such as tax dollars, traffic congestion, or crime may be concerns of the public (Mondello, Schwester, & Humphreys, 2009). There is a growing interest in gaining public opinion, support, and tax dollars for new stadiums, and communicating the benefits while mitigating the negatives may be a focus of sport organizations. With potential dissent over new stadiums, a franchise’s communication strategy of a new stadium is a critical area of focus for management.

Sport franchises communicate their new stadium efforts to the local community, general public, and potential external stakeholders, including consumers, sponsors, and city officials. The degree to which an organization is committed to a given communication strategy can indicate the organization’s commitment to an objective. For instance, Ciletti, Lanasa, Ramos, Luchs, and Junying (2010) investigated teams’ commitment to sustainability based on the extent to which they emphasized communications about sustainability on their team websites. In addition to websites, press releases and social media can provide avenues for a sport organization to control their message to the public and reflect the team’s commitments (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Branvold, 2012; Pedersen, Miloch, & Laucella, 2007). Social media can create organization–public relationships (Wang & Zhou, 2013; Waters, Burke, Jackson, & Burning, 2010), as fans use social media for many reasons, including direct communication in an interactive manner (Clavio & Kian, 201). Ultimately, franchises will demonstrate a high level of commitment to a communications strategy with some endgame in mind. When building and funding a new facility, an end game for franchises is to win over the stakeholders in the local community.

Communication from the franchises is not the only message relayed to the public/community. The media creates and communicates its own content and messages in response to information from the team. Previous research has noted the role media plays in framing debates over facilities (Buist & Mason, 2010; Delany & Eckstein, 2008; Huberty, Kellison, & Mondello, 2016). Huberty et al. (2016) noted the role of the media in their assessment of the public relations strategy about the Minnesota Vikings’ new stadium to show increased community visibility, enhance
community image, stimulation of other development, and psychic income. While Huberty et al.’s (2016) research identified how a sport organization disseminated new stadium information via press releases prior to a vote by the state legislature, it did not assess how the media portrayed the information, and subsequently, how the public responded. A study by Mondello et al. (2009) assessed a newspaper blog with community responses about a potential new stadium development, as well as residents comments at a public hearing, to gain an understanding of the public view. However, they did not study the team’s messaging. We argue that a triangular approach examining the team’s view, media’s view, and public’s view will show the consistencies or disconnect between the team’s message, the media’s message, and the public’s response about a new stadium and glean a better understanding of the impact of the new facility on the community.

Purpose
The purpose of this study is to investigate the communication surrounding a professional franchise’s new stadium beginning at the time of the announcement. Specifically, three viewpoints—the professional sports franchise, the media, and the public—will be considered to understand the consistencies or disconnect between the communication and organization–media–public relationship.

Method
A professional sport franchise that recently announced a new stadium will be examined. A content analysis of communications from three different perspectives will be used: (1) team communication (i.e., official press releases and Facebook page posts), (2) media communication (i.e., local newspaper), and (3) public communication (i.e., comments to the local newspaper articles and comments to the team’s Facebook page). All communications accumulated and analyzed will be from the time of the announcement of the new facility in 2013 to 2016. The communication documents regarding the new facility will be reviewed and coded by two researchers using NVivo software to reveal key messages communicated by the team, media, and public. Themes from each of the three groups will be identified and compared to illustrate the impact the team is communicating to the media and public, the messaging relayed by the media, and the public response to the stadium.

Results
This study is in progress; however, results will detail the major themes for each of the three groups: team releases, newspaper coverage, and feedback to Facebook posts (i.e., comments). Frequencies and types of communication will be reported.

Discussion
Discussion will focus on the organizational relationship with the news and public (social followers) to provide an understanding of the three points of views. It is anticipated that the positive benefits of the stadium will be noted, as well as the negative issues that the media or public may express. With a better understanding of the benefits and challenges that the three groups are expressing, franchises can be prepared to address the pitfalls and/or increase communication about the perceived or actual benefits. Additionally, the major themes will provide the basis for scale development for follow up studies in which the public is measured on the congruence of the benefits and issues regarding the addition of a new facility.