Student Perception of Branding Benefits of a New Collegiate Stadium

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In recent years, a wide range of universities have undertaken expensive stadium construction or renovation projects (“2015 by the Numbers,” 2015; “College Hoops Research,” 2017). Current renovation projects include an ongoing $307-million renovation of Arizona State’s football stadium, and an upcoming $72-million renovation of the University of Dayton’s basketball arena (Garbe, 2017; Ryman, 2017). The high costs often lead to questions about the benefits of the facilities, especially when funding comes from outside the sport organization or athletic department. Proponents of large stadium projects often tout their economic impact, yet researchers have argued that argument is insufficient to justify the cost or public contribution in professional stadiums (Coates & Humphreys, 2008; Harger, Humphreys, & Ross, 2016). Maxcy and Larson (2015) also found this to be true with the impact of collegiate stadiums. As the direct economic impact of a stadium does not appear to justify the construction cost, researchers and organizations alike have offered alternative justifications for stadium projects.

Researchers have proposed a diverse set of terms to explain proposed alternative justifications of a new stadium; however, they can be generally distinguished as tangible or intangible benefits. Tangible benefits may include economic perks such as stimulation of development. An example of a tangible stadium benefit in collegiate athletics could be that the university receives higher quality student applications due to enhanced visibility of the university brought on by the stadium. Intangible benefits may include increased civic pride or social capital for the community (Kellison & Kim, 2016). Social capital is the mutually reciprocal relationships embedded within social networks that ultimately benefit a community (Misener & Mason, 2006). In collegiate athletics, an enhanced sense of campus community would represent an intangible benefit gained from a stadium (Maxcy & Larson, 2015). An alternative approach to conceptually understanding potential stadium benefits is to categorize them as internal or external (Howard & Crompton, 2014). Combining elements of the external, tangible, and intangible categorizations can be useful in conceptualizing proposed stadium benefits. External benefits relate to changes in the organization’s outward facing brand equity due to a stadium. Potential external benefits include brand awareness, brand visibility, and brand image. Potential tangible benefits of a new collegiate stadium include: academic impact, athletic impact, donations, university financial impact, community financial impact. Potential intangible benefits of a new collegiate stadium include: urban renewal, psychic income, and enhanced campus community resulting in social capital. Of the benefits, we will focus on examining the branding benefits of a new stadium as perceived by students.

There is a need to understand the perception of the branding benefits of a new stadium by students. On a college campus, the student is the focal point, the fee-paying consumer, and the future alumni member who contributes economically to the success of the institution. Students are the ones who should gain from the supposed external (brand awareness, brand visibility, brand image), tangible (academic impact, athletic impact, donations, university financial impact, and community financial impact), and intangible (enhanced campus community, urban renewal, psychic income) benefits of a new stadium. Thus, the question arises if students realize those benefits from a new stadium. Student characteristics may influence their perception of the benefits. The status of a student may influence their perception of stadium benefits. If a student is highly involved in the university, they may see the benefits of the new stadium and support funding a new stadium through university or student fees. Conversely, students who pay for school on their own may be more critical of the university’s investment in a major stadium project.

Student perceptions of stadium benefits should be studied because students are the primary stakeholders at a university. Students who are highly involved at the university, or who place greater trust in university leadership may be more likely to perceive the benefits of a new stadium. This study focuses on branding benefits as perceived by students. If students perceive an improved brand because of a new stadium, it would reflect a positive status of the...
university and the value of their degree. This may be indicative of prospective students’ views of the brand. Past research has found branding impacts applications and alumni giving, both important benefits for university administrators (Thomaselli, 2007). Thus, the purpose of this study is to determine if student status (e.g., demographics, involvement on campus, team identification) influences perception of new stadium benefits, specifically branding (awareness, visibility, image).

Method
To measure student status influence on perception of proposed branding benefits associated with a new stadium, we will employ a survey at a school with a new football stadium. IRB has approved survey collection from students at an on-campus student center over a week span that will occur in 2-3 hour time slots in the fall 2017 academic semester. The student center is an on-campus communal hub that hosts university sanctioned events, as well as a popular food court. This site should yield a large sample size and increase the likelihood that our sample is diverse on multiple levels such as academic classification, major, and other personal characteristics. An intercept approach will be used to recruit participants to complete a paper-and-pencil survey.

The survey consists of measures of students’ perceptions of branding as a benefit associated with a new stadium and student status characteristics, including involvement on campus, personal funding (e.g., scholarship, non-scholarship, student loans), football game attendance, points of attachment (Team ID, Sport ID, University ID), major, academic classification, and demographics. The branding items are based on the theoretical framework of past stadium and branding studies (Crompton, 2004; Heere et al., 2013; Kellison & Kim, 2016; Kellison & Wendling, 2015; Kim & Walker, 2012; Lee, Cornwell, & Babiak, 2012; Maxcy & Larson, 2015; Ross, Russell, & Bang, 2008; Trail, Robinson, & Gillentine, 2003). We will conduct regression analyses to determine which variables predict if a student perceives branding benefits from a new stadium.

Results and Discussion
Results are in progress, but discussion will explain the factors that predict a student’s perception of the branding benefits of a new stadium. Because college students sometimes select universities based on the brand of the school, understanding the current students’ perceptions of the new stadium on influencing branding (awareness, visibility, image) of the university because of the new stadium is an important consideration for college and university administrators. Knowing the types of students who perceive branding benefits will aid college administrators in communicating the benefits of a new stadium to the student body. The results will add to the limited research on collegiate stadiums and may inform collegiate sport practitioners.