Co-Branding Sporting Events and Destination Brands: Gila River Arena, Westgate, and Phoenix, AZ

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Sport is the fastest growing segment within the travel industry, generating between 12 and 15 million international arrivals each year, roughly 10% of the world tourism industry (WTO, 2018). With this growth has come increased competition between cities for market share (Rein & Shields, 2007), as civic leaders position their cities as destination brands (Hankinson, 2009). Chalip & Costa (2005) discussed how sport events are being used with increasing frequency to build the brand of their host destinations. Sport events can take different roles relative to the destination brand, such as co-branding partners with the destination brand, extensions of the destination brand, or features of the destination brand (Chalip & Costa, 2005).

Researchers examining destination branding have considered destination branding a potent marketing tool (Morgan, Pritchard, Pride 2004), defined as “selecting a consistent element mix to identify and distinguish [a destination] through positive image-building” (Cai, 2002, p. 722). Further, destination branding is seen as the outcome of a multi-stakeholder, collaborative decision-making process (Prideaux and Cooper 2002). Co-branding theory suggests that pairing an event with a destination will engender some transfer of image between the event and destination brand (Xing & Chalip, 2006). Therefore, by viewing destination branding from a co-branding perspective, destination branding does not adhere to the underlying assumption that the process of creation and management of the brand is controlled by an individual organization (Low and Fullerton 1994); rather, destination branding is a highly complex and politicized activity that involves multiple stakeholders (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott, 2003).

The Phoenix Metropolitan Area encompasses nearly 2,000 square miles and more than 20 incorporated cities, including Glendale, Scottsdale, Tempe and Mesa, and offers an ideal case to examine co-branding in a sport event context. Using sport-anchored infrastructure development projects – in this case Gila River Arena and Westgate Entertainment District – this study examines the processes by whereby stakeholders in the region co-brand collaboratively to reinforce the consistency of the destination brand. This study is currently in progress; interviews will be conducted with key personnel from local tourism organizations, such as the Arizona Office of Tourism, Arizona Sport and Tourism Authority, and the office for Visit Phoenix. In addition, interviews will be undertaken with local council members, media, academics, and additional local interest groups.

In doing so, we hope to gain practical insight into how governing bodies work collaboratively when co-branding sporting events with a destination brand. Interviews will be transcribed and coded using thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns within the data, examining manifest (physically present) and latent content (implicit meaning), incorporating both inductive and deductive approaches (Mayring, 2000). This study will be of interest to tourism and management practitioners with a vested interest in the marketing of their destinations, as well as academic researchers studying branding and destination marketing. Results will provide new insights into how partnerships using co-branding can be incorporated into sporting events and how such partnerships can be reinforced into the destination branding process.